

UNIT 4 *The cabinet*

Knowledge of this topic is required by all three examination boards, but very much as a 'follow on' from the prime minister. There is, nevertheless, a strong possibility of a direct question on the cabinet, with a particular focus on its role.

Key questions

- What is the role of the cabinet and how well does it perform it?
- What is meant by the collective responsibility of the cabinet and how important is it to the UK system of government?
- Does the cabinet still have an important role to play in the UK system of government?

The main role of the cabinet was developed in the eighteenth century.

As with the office of the prime minister, the cabinet has undergone only minor changes in its role since the early nineteenth century.

The size of the cabinet is a major reason why it is no longer the dominant part of the executive.

A Development of the cabinet

Eighteenth-century origins

Like the office of the prime minister, the cabinet developed into its present role during the eighteenth century. By 1800 it was established that the cabinet contained the prime minister and the key ministers, and that it was in the cabinet that major policy decisions were made. All members of the cabinet sat in either the House of Lords or the House of Commons, and they dominated the legislative process in parliament. It was accepted that members of the cabinet should agree on policy, support each other's ideas and resign together if the government was defeated in parliament.

Changes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

The cabinet has tended to grow in size. The main reason for this is that the role of government has expanded and the areas where the government intervenes, such as agriculture and health, have necessitated having key ministers in the central decision-making body.

In wartime, such as during the years 1914–18, the cabinet set up small key subcommittees to take control as a body made up of more than 20 was not ideal for rapid decision making. The cabinet also gained a very efficient secretariat in 1916 to ensure that proper records were kept of decisions, and that these were communicated to the relevant departments.

B Aspects of the modern cabinet

Cabinet size

Modern prime ministers have found it difficult to keep the cabinet below 22 members. Attempts have been made to reduce it in size but farmers, for example, might get offended if they were not represented in the cabinet, as no doubt would the Scots, Northern Irish and Welsh. There has been much talk among academics

The key members of the cabinet and their individual roles have to be known.

Collective responsibility is still an important and well-maintained convention under Tony Blair.

of reducing the cabinet in size and having ‘superministers’ who might look after several areas, such as defence, foreign policy and international development, or education and culture. However, it is unlikely that there will be any change in the cabinet’s overall size. As well as making sure all interests feel represented, the prime minister also needs a large number of ‘top’ jobs to reward loyal and able colleagues, and ensure that all sections of the party are represented at cabinet level.

Cabinet membership

By convention (unwritten rule), all members of the cabinet have to be members of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. Most have specific roles, such as the chancellor of the exchequer or the secretary of state for social security. Some may just have a party function, such as the chief whip or the leader of the House of Commons, who has the task of getting the government’s programme of legislation through parliament.

Cabinet members also all have to be privy councillors (an office created in the sixteenth century) and as a result have to take an important oath of secrecy about all government business. They are all governed by a very strict code of conduct, and breach of this, as in the cases of Peter Mandelson and David Mellor, leads to the prime minister requiring their resignations.

Collective responsibility

This convention applies to all members of the government, but is particularly important for members of the cabinet. It states that once a decision has been made by the cabinet — for example, to implement a tax increase — then all members of the cabinet have to support it fully, even if they argued against it in cabinet. If they cannot accept the responsibility for the decision and back it fully in parliament and outside, then they must resign.

This ‘rule’ gives the appearance of unity to a government, and it is important for members of the cabinet who have to take unpopular decisions, such as a tax increase, to know that they will be supported by all the other members of the government. Margaret Thatcher insisted on collective responsibility, and at least two very senior cabinet ministers, Michael Heseltine and Geoffrey Howe, resigned because they could not support her government’s policy.

John Major tolerated much more public disagreement among cabinet ministers, especially over Europe, with ministers like Michael Portillo and John Redwood, but the appearance of real disunity over such a major issue may have been an important factor in the Conservative defeat in the election of 1997.

Tony Blair has insisted on collective responsibility very strongly and successfully, and his cabinet of 1997–2001 was visibly united and always ‘sang from the same hymn sheet’. This may have been an important factor in his success in winning the 2001 general election. The voting public likes to see unity in its government (and shadow cabinet).

More recent examples of ministers resigning over the issue of collective responsibility were Robin Cook and Clare Short in 2003, because of the decision to go to war in Iraq, which they opposed.



Critics of collective responsibility argue that it is wrong for ministers to have to defend policies that they (a) are known to have disagreed with and (b) had no part in drafting.

The current role of the cabinet

At present the cabinet has several key roles:

- It acts as the central clearing house for key decisions, although these may have been taken elsewhere.
- It plays a vital part in the coordination of all government activities — the heads of every major department and function in the UK (such as policing) are there.
- It is where major policies get endorsed by all members of the government.
- Any crisis — be it war or a fuel shortage — will be managed by some of its members.
- It might put a brake on a prime minister or a radical minister.
- It sets the agenda for parliament.
- It referees disputes between departments.
- It provides the vital link between party, parliament, the legal system and the government — it joins all parts of our system of government together.

Key decisions may not now be taken very often in cabinet meetings; this is because the cabinet is a large group and only meets for a short time each week, so one member of the cabinet or a small group of members will make these decisions.

Under prime ministers such as Harold Wilson (1964–70, 1974–76) and James Callaghan (1976–79), the cabinet was very much the decision-making body in the UK. However, under Margaret Thatcher its role as a decision-maker declined significantly and the role of the cabinet changed fundamentally. The key decisions were made by the prime minister in consultation with individual ministers and advisers. This process has continued under Tony Blair, who, it is argued, has adopted not only many of Margaret Thatcher's policies, but also her style of managing the cabinet. As one cabinet member said, after resigning in 2003, 'There is no real collective responsibility because there is no collective, just diktats in favour of increasingly badly thought through policy initiatives that come from on high.'

Cabinet committees

Increasingly large amounts of business that were once done in the full cabinet are now being delegated to cabinet committees. These are small groups of cabinet members, appointed by the prime minister, who deal with specific issues. There are two types:

- **Standing committees of the cabinet.** An example is the Economic Affairs Committee, which will of course have the chancellor of the exchequer on it, together with other members chosen by the prime minister. Their main role is the planning of UK economic policy. This committee will also have a key influence on public spending.
- **Ad hoc committees.** These are set up for a specific purpose and closed down when their work is finished. Examples include the ones set up by Margaret Thatcher to deal with the miners' strike of 1984–85, and by Tony Blair to plan reforms to the House of Lords.

Cabinet committees have a small membership and so are more efficient than the full cabinet. They also have more time to consult experts. It is usual for their decisions and recommendations to be accepted by the rest of the cabinet. Only in serious disputes in committee, such as over the Westland affair under Margaret Thatcher, will the matter go to the full cabinet for a decision.

There is some evidence to suggest that Tony Blair is making less use of both the full cabinet and cabinet committees, and prefers to make decisions and policy in discussion with individual ministers and policy advisers.

Changes to the cabinet committee system in 2001

After the general election victory of 2001, Tony Blair decided to make major changes in the system of cabinet committees. At the time of writing (April 2005) there are 59 cabinet committees and subcommittees — an increase on 1997–2001.

The biggest change is that one new over-arching cabinet committee on domestic affairs has been set up, chaired by the deputy prime minister, John Prescott. The objective of this committee is to oversee policy innovations and to bring more coherence to the government. In the past, the cabinet as a whole would normally have performed this function.

This committee is supported by nine subcommittees, which have specific responsibility for areas such as drugs policy, older people and social exclusion. The prime minister, of course, decides membership of these committees, and it is possible for junior ministers to be involved in them.

Some commentators argue that this new 'over-arching committee' is designed to reduce the influence that the chancellor Gordon Brown and the Treasury have over the government and its policy-making processes. However, the chancellor has a seat on this new committee and he also chairs the vital cabinet committee that decides public spending.

The Cabinet Office, which services the cabinet and its committees, has been expanded and strengthened, and a 'Progress-Chasing Unit' has been added to it to ensure that policy decisions that are made by the cabinet are followed through and put into practice.