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## Revision

# The Heath government, 1970–74

*Nicholas Fellows*

Consider the following question on Edward Heath's ministry, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

## Question

How successful was the Heath government of 1970–74?

### Student answer with commentary

The Heath government of 1970–74 was largely unsuccessful, becoming the only post-war government to fail to win a second term. In 1970 Heath had won some 46 per cent of the popular vote, but by the time of the February 1974 election it had declined to 38 per cent. It appeared as if his period in office was one of continuous failure, culminating in the three-day week of 1973 and the miners' strike. The 1974 election fought under the banner of 'Who governs?' provided Heath with the answer: not you — a clear rejection of his policies.

He had come into office promising 'a new style of government' and to 'reduce the rise in prices, increase productivity and reduce unemployment'; in this the ministry was an abject failure. Perhaps the only success, after the failures of Macmillan and Wilson, was Britain's entry into the EEC, but with Britain's subsequent withdrawal even this appears to be less of an achievement. It would therefore be difficult to suggest that the government was anything but an abject failure.

*A very clear introduction with the response offering a clear view about the issue in the question, stating in the first line that the government was failure. The rest of the opening paragraph develops this and provides some evidence to support the view. The paragraph also raises some of the issues that will be discussed in the main body of the essay and even suggests that the one area of apparent success could be seen as a failure.*

This was most notable with regards to state intervention in economic and social issues. Rapid inflation meant that the government was unable to hold down prices and this only encouraged high wage demands from unions, which most employers accepted. The number of days lost to strikes also rose and this led to a decline in productivity. The government also failed to reduce unemployment with numbers in 1972 reaching their highest since the 1930s. In dealing with social issues the government was also a failure. Barber's cuts to government spending resulted in a rise in council house rents, while the withdrawal of free milk for school children was particularly unpopular and led to the chant 'Margaret Thatcher, the milk snatcher'. Even if there were economic arguments for such policies, they were a public relations disaster.

*The main body of the response begins by considering one of main issues that faced the government and argues that in social and economic issues the government was a failure. A range of issues are*

covered and supporting evidence is provided, placing the developments in context. The discussion is balanced as is seen in the final sentence when the issue of economic arguments is weighed against public relations.

The government was forced into a series of U-turns, which were further evidence of the failure of its policies. This was most evident in its shift over not supporting or bailing out 'lame ducks' or those industries which were performing badly. Having committed to this policy they were forced to abandon it in 1971 and nationalise Rolls-Royce, which was then sustained by government grants. Similarly, they granted subsidies to other private companies that were in difficulties, most notably Upper Clyde Shipbuilders who were given a subsidy of £34 million. This was a complete reversal of the government's hands-off policy and also added to their difficulties with the trade unions.

The response then discusses the issue of 'U-turns' and argues that the government soon abandoned one of the main planks on which it had been elected, the withdrawal of state intervention for lame ducks. Once again precise evidence is provided and this is linked to the difficulties the government would face in its relations with trade unions.

The issue of the trade unions was central to the success, or otherwise, of Heath's government. The Conservatives had attacked Wilson's government for their climb-down over 'In Place of Strife' and therefore saw it as a sign of political strength to succeed where Wilson had failed. However, the 1971 Industrial Relations Act failed with many unions determined to resist the government, most notably the miners. In January 1972 they went on strike, demanding a 47 per cent pay rise. Although the government appeared, at least in the short-term, to have solved the problem by agreeing to an above inflation pay settlement, it weakened the government's strategy to reduce inflation and showed the power of the miners. It also led to other workers making high wage claims. It was also only a temporary resolution as in November 1973 an oil crisis had led to higher prices and the miners starting an overtime ban. In response, the government introduced the three-day week for businesses and industry. However, although few of the public sympathised with the miners' demands, the pay rise that was agreed of 21 per cent was three times the amount originally offered and along with the strike was the most serious failure of the Heath government. The miners went on strike again in early 1974 leading to Heath calling an immediate election, the result of which was further evidence of his government's failings.

A major area of failure for the government was its relationship with trade unions and once again precise and detailed examples are provided. There is detailed discussion of the problems with the miners and the essay continues to follow a clear line of argument, with sound analysis of the issue.

The failure of the government to resolve the miner dispute was evidence for many that the government had lost control of the country. Heath failed to communicate his policy effectively and many thought the three-day week was an over-reaction and a clear indication of its failure, whilst others, even if they did not agree with the miners, were faced with rising prices and believed the government had failed to control inflation.

The issue of relations with the unions is further analysed and linked to the failings of the government in conveying its message to the general public.

Britain's entry into the EEC was certainly a triumph for the pro-European Heath, but for many in the country it was a failure. Some former Conservative voters disliked the terms of entry into the EEC, which involved losing cheap food from the commonwealth and subsidising European farmers through the Common Agricultural Policy. The Common Fisheries Policy was also unpopular as it restricted

Britain's right to fish in some of its customary grounds. The government was also forced to introduce VAT on most commodities, a further unpopular measure.

Often seen as the success of the administration, there is a balanced discussion of Britain's entry into the EEC and this is used to show that entry was far from a success, with a range of used to support such a line of argument.

The other major area of reform was in local government, but even this was unpopular as it destroyed many administrative landmarks. Newly-created regions replaced traditional organisations and familiar place names, such as Rutland, disappeared. It even caused protests among some Conservatives on the right who saw the reform as an attack on local identity.

The sense of failure is continued in discussing local government reforms and the argument for failure is further developed and supported.

It is clear that Heath's administration was far from a success. It failed to implement its progressive policies and, faced with serious economic challenges, was forced into a series of U-turns which destroyed its credibility. Attempts to establish a new type of conservatism based on less government interference would have to wait until Thatcher came to power. Even joining the EEC and local government reforms brought the government criticism from within its own party and supporters leaving many disillusioned. The government was unable to achieve its aims of reducing prices and unemployment and increasing productivity: a clear sign of failure.

The conclusion follows on from the main body of the essay with the overall judgement supporting the argument that has been forward. It is able to build on the arguments put forward in the opening sentences of each paragraph, which have provided a clear direction for the response. No new material is introduced, but the interim judgements at the end of each of the main paragraphs is used to support the argument that is present throughout, namely that the government was a failure, thus providing a coherent and logical argument which has been well-supported.

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