

Topic 3: Prime Minister and Executive

What is the Executive?

The term ‘executive’ comes from the Latin *ex sequi* meaning to ‘carry out’.

The **Core Executive** is the web of institutions, networks and relations that link the Prime Minister, Cabinet, Cabinet Committees and Senior Civil Service. The Core Executive is the day-to-day decision making (executive) hierarchy in the governance of Britain.

R.A.W Rhodes said:

“the term Core Executive refers to all those organisations and procedures which co-ordinate government policies and act as final arbiters of conflict between different parts of the government machine’

The Position of Deputy Prime Minister

Unlike in the USA, there is no ‘line of succession’ to take over if a tragedy were to befall the Prime Minister. The position of Deputy Prime Minister is not a permanent one. In fact, it is only filled at the Prime Minister’s discretion. It was vacant in the following periods:

- 1963-1979
- 1990-1195
- 2007-2010
- 2015-Present

If the Prime Minister was killed or indisposed, the next most senior Minister is the **First Secretary of State**. Currently this position is not in use, however.

The Head of the Executive is the Prime Minister.

How did the Office of Prime Minister evolve?

The position of Prime Minister is based largely on convention. It began to be defined between 1714 and 1727 when George I stopped attending **cabinet meetings**. In his place, the **First Lord of the Treasury** chaired meetings and, therefore, became the ‘Prime Minister’, as he represented the King in Cabinet.

The first Prime Minister is generally considered to be Robert Walpole (1721-1742), although the first Prime Minister in modern terms was probably Robert Peel (1841-1846).

Traditionally, the Prime Minister was seen as **Primus Inter Pares** (‘First among Equals’). However, increasingly throughout the 19th and 20th Century Prime Ministers became more dominant figures over the Government and the title *Primus Inter Pares* can no longer really be applied to them.

The primary reason that George I stopped attending cabinet was because he couldn’t speak English!

The ‘First Lord of the Treasury’ is still the Prime Minister’s official constitutional title. It is still the title that is on the door of Number 10 Downing Street.

What are the roles of the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister has many roles. As a result of Britain not having a codified constitution, this is sometimes open to debate. However, in Britain it is generally agreed that the Prime Minister has five key roles:

- **Chief Executive** – The Prime Minister is the day-to-day head of the executive and deals with any matters arising and makes decisions on behalf of the rest of the Government.

However, even in Codified Constitutions like the US, the role of the Head of the Executive is open to some debate. For example, in the USA the President of the USA is often seen as being its Chief Legislator, this is despite the fact that there is meant to be a Separation of Powers and the President is not a part of the legislature.

The Prime Minister takes charge in emergency situations. For example:

Tony Blair returned to London following the 2005 bombings in order to chair **COBRA** Meetings

Theresa May chaired COBRA Meetings after terrorist attacks in the UK, such as the attack at the Ariande Grande concert in Manchester.

The Prime Minister can order emergency military action:

For example, Theresa May ordered UK air forces to bomb Syria after chemical attacks of civilians by the Syrian Government.

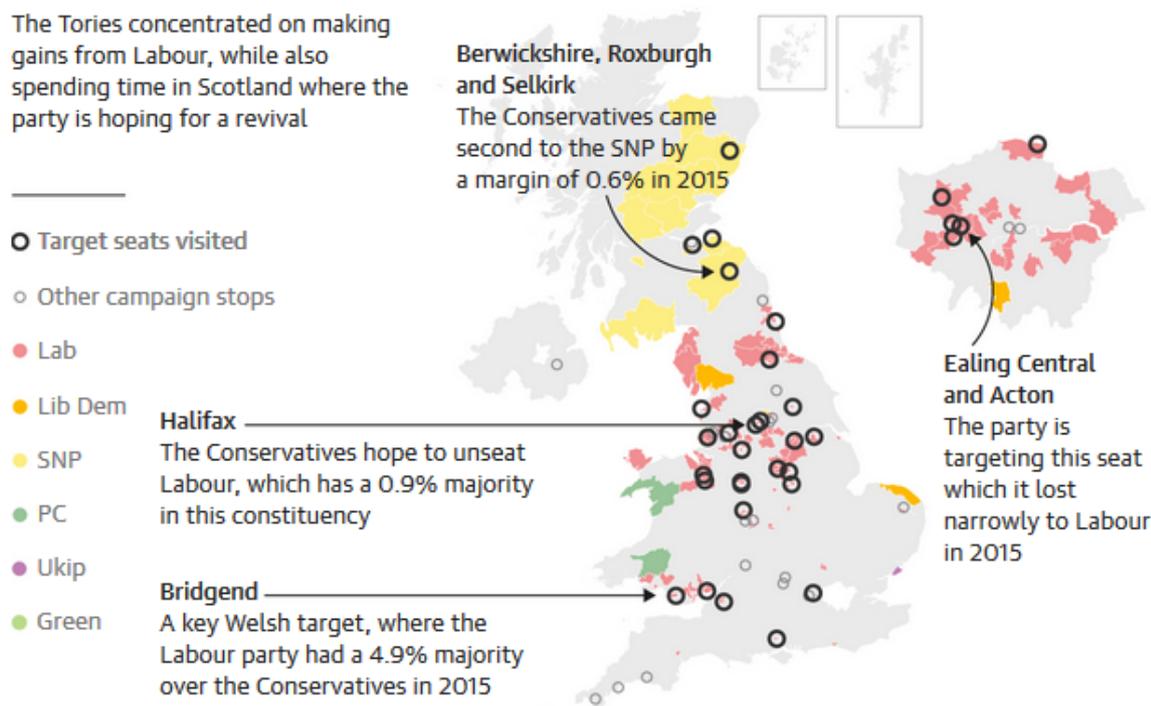
Similarly, Tony Blair committed British forces to action in Kosovo in 1998 in order to protect the Muslim population that was being persecuted there.

- **Chief Legislator** - The Government is made up of the dominant party in the House of Commons and the Prime Minister is head of that party. Therefore, legislation in Parliament mainly emanates from the Executive.
- **Chief Diplomat** – The Prime Minister represents Britain internationally, for example, attending meetings of the G7, G20 or other international bodies.

Theresa May has met other world leaders at G7 meetings to discuss global issues.

- **Chief Government Spokesman** – The Prime Minister is the person in the Government who is most visible to the general population. Therefore, the Prime Minister has an important role in selling the Government's message to the population, particularly prior to a General Election
- **Party Chief** – The Prime Minister has to remain as head of their party. For example, at each year's Party Conference the Prime Minister will give the keynote (most important) address.

This graphic shows all the places that Theresa May visited in the 2017 General Election campaign:



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What are the sources of the Prime Ministers power?

There are four key sources of the Prime Minister’s power:

- **Powers given to the Prime Minister under the Royal Prerogative**

The reigning monarch retains (in theory and law), the power to carry out the functions of the head of state, such as commanding the armed forces. In reality Britain is a representative democracy and these powers are carried out by the Prime Minister on the Queen’s behalf.

Examples of the Prime Minister’s Royal Prerogative Powers

Deploying the Armed Forces e.g Theresa May used military force in Syria.

Appointing Government Ministers e.g Sajid Javid was appointed Home Secretary after the resignation of Amber Rudd.

The Power to reorganise Government Departments e.g Theresa May created the Department for Exiting the European Union.

A key change in Royal Prerogative Powers?

In theory, a major reduction in Royal Prerogative Powers was confirmed by the Fixed Term Parliaments Act in 2011. Previous to this, the Prime Minister could decide when to call a General Election, within a five-year timeframe. In reality, Theresa May proved in April 2017 that this was not a major bar as she announced a new General Election before she had even held a vote in Parliament.

- **Powers that emerged through convention** – Many of the Prime Minister’s powers have grown and developed over a number of years. For example, the Prime Minister is treated with deference by other Ministers, even though traditionally they are Primus Inter Pares.
- **Powers based on being leader of the largest party** – The Prime Minister normally has the support of their party both within the Houses of Parliament and across the country. The fact that the party is the largest in the House of Commons also gives them a popular mandate from the people of Britain.
- **Individual personality and decisions** – Some Prime Ministers have been able to extend their power through their personalities.

Personalities of Prime Ministers

The different personalities of Prime Ministers have had an effect on their powers. For example:

Margaret Thatcher – Renowned for her strength of personality and her ability to inspire loyalty in those around her.

John Major – Was considered a weaker character than Thatcher, but someone who could be trusted as straightforward and honest.

Tony Blair – Had enormous charisma and an ability to make people feel special.

Gordon Brown – Did not have Blair’s charisma, but was deemed to be an intellectual heavyweight.

Theresa May – Considered to be stable and cautious.

What are the powers of the Prime Minister?

Key powers of the Prime Minister include:

- **The Power of Patronage**

The Prime Minister appoints Government Ministers and dismisses them. He is also in charge of Reshuffling the Cabinet, thereby being able to promote and demote his Ministers. This gives him power because they are beholden to the PM for their position.

The Prime Minister also appoints:

- Senior Civil Servants.
- Senior Bishops in the Church of England.
- Peers in the House of Lords.

Therefore, the career advancement of a large group of people depends on the patronage of the Prime Minister.

- **Power over Cabinet, Government and Civil Service**

In addition to the Prime Minister's power to appoint, dismiss, promote and demote Cabinet Members, there are also significant other powers that they have over it.

- They control the number and timing of Cabinet Meetings.
- They control Cabinet Agendas and Minutes.
- The control who speaks in Cabinet.
- They decide on the make-up and structure of [Cabinet Committees](#).

Prime Ministers also decide on the broader make-up of the Government, for instance deciding how many Ministers there will be in a department.

- **Party Leadership and Parliament**

The Prime Minister is the indisputable leader of their political party. They have an authority over their party members because they have the power of Patronage over them. In addition, criticism of the party leader is likely to be seen as criticism of the party and hurt the party as a whole.

Party Leadership is particularly important for a Prime Minister during times of Coalition Government as two divergent parties have to be able to sell the same broad agenda.

- **Power over public policy and spending**

The Prime Minister, as head of the party with a majority or plurality in the House of Commons, also has power over the parliamentary agenda. The Prime Minister is responsible for drafting the Queen's Speech which is presented at the State Opening of Parliament. This is the formal announcement of the Government's legislative agenda for the year.

- **Power as a figure on the world stage**

By their position as a leader of a G7 country, the Prime Minister has an authority that other politicians do not have.

What are the limits on the powers of the Prime Minister?

Despite these powers, the powers of the Prime Minister also face many limitations:

- **Limits of the Cabinet**

There is no formal mechanism whereby the Cabinet can remove a Prime Minister, however the Cabinet is a check on the Prime Minister. One reason is that the Cabinet includes major figures from within the Prime Minister's party, who are often potential rivals to the Prime Minister. In addition, if a Prime Minister does not include a major figure in the Cabinet they may be seen as an outsider and alternative leader, who may take the government in a separate and better direction if they were to become leader.

In 1990, Michael Heseltine ran against Margaret Thatcher for the leadership of the Conservative Party. He did not win the contest, which was eventually won by John Major after Thatcher resigned. However, in 1995, Michael Heseltine was appointed Deputy Prime Minister by Major, primarily because he was a serious threat to Major's leadership.

In addition, the Prime Minister is not involved in the policy decisions within all of the Cabinet Committees he has created. This means that Government policy may be increasingly dominated by other members of the Cabinet.

- **Limits of Parliament**

Although the Prime Minister is normally able to dominate Parliament, this is not always the case. Sometimes the Prime Minister can suffer embarrassing defeats in Parliament.

Recent Government defeats in the House of Commons

Theresa May – Theresa May's most prominent defeat was in December 2017 when her Government was defeated 309-305 over the issue of Parliament having a final vote on the Brexit deal. This was her only substantive defeat in the House of Commons.

David Cameron – One of David Cameron's most prominent defeats in the House of Commons occurred in August 2013 when the House of Commons voted 286-272 against authorising the use of military force in Syria. Overall, David Cameron was defeated six times in the Commons between 2010 and 2015.

Gordon Brown – Gordon Brown's most significant defeat in the House of Commons occurred in April 2009 when the House of Commons voted 276-246 with a Liberal Democrat motion to allow more Gurkhas to stay in the UK. Overall, Gordon Brown lost three times in the Commons between 2007 and 2010.

Tony Blair – Tony Blair's most significant Commons defeat came when an attempt to be able to hold Terror Suspects for 90 days without trial was defeated by 322-291 votes. Overall, Tony Blair only lost four times in the Commons between 1997 and 2005.

In extreme examples the Prime Minister may have even be removed from their position by a Vote of No Confidence.

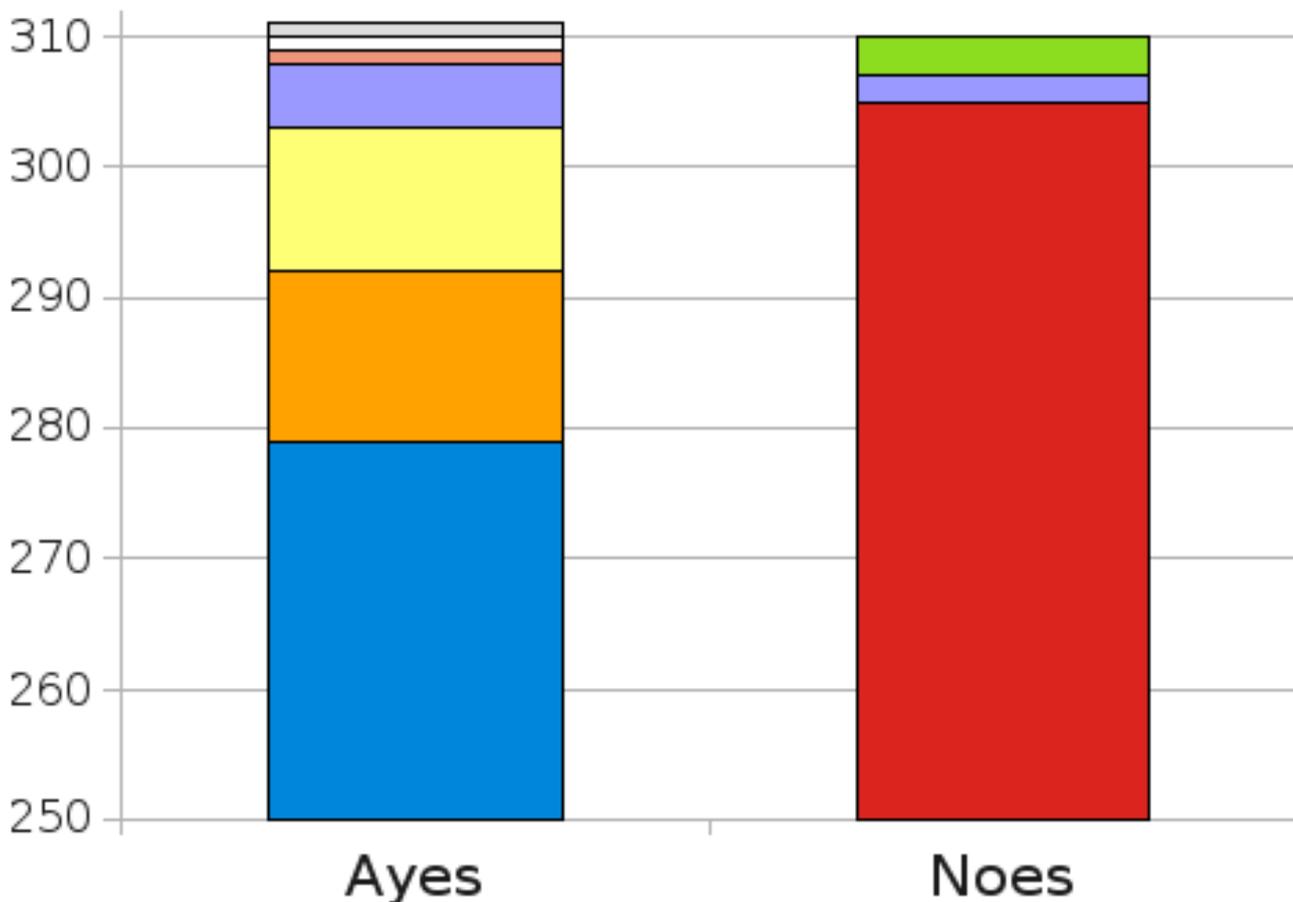
Vote of No Confidence

The last Prime Minister to lose a Vote of No Confidence was Labour's James Callaghan in 1979.

Although he started his term with a majority, this was reduced by a number of by-election losses. On the 28th March 1979 he lost a Vote of No Confidence by 311 votes to 310 votes.

As a result, Callaghan was obliged to call a General Election, which was won by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party.

The table shows the voting during the No Confidence Vote of 1979:



The voting in the 1979 vote of no confidence was entirely by party. This shows the importance to a Prime Minister of having a majority to protect their position.

The limits of being able to rely on Parliament are even starker in a Coalition Government. The growth of parties beyond Labour and the Conservatives has made the prospect of Coalition Governments more likely in the UK parliamentary system.

Alex Salmond and the SNP threatened to vote against the Conservative's Queen's Speech, if the Conservatives formed a government after the 2015 election. A vote against the Queen's Speech or any Money Bill is also taken as a Vote of No Confidence.

- **Limits of Party**

The Prime Minister has to be able to keep his party's Backbenchers onside. Rebellions by Backbench MPs weaken the Prime Minister's authority and can, sometimes, lead to their removal.

- **Limits of public opinion**

The Prime Minister, along with the whole of his party, is accountable to the electorate at General Elections. Prime Ministers who are unpopular are more likely to face leadership challenges, because their party may fear that they cannot win an election with that Prime Minister at the helm.

Backbench Rebellions

Theresa May – In the defeat over Parliament having a final say on the Brexit Deal 11 Conservative backbenchers voted against Theresa May's government.

David Cameron – David Cameron's biggest Backbench Rebellion came in October 2012. 53 Tory MPs, led by Mark Reckless, joined with Labour to demand a real-terms cut in the EU budget. This was a major embarrassment to David Cameron.

Gordon Brown – Towards the end of his premiership Gordon Brown suffered a number of damaging rebellions. Over the course of two and half years as Prime Minister 137 Labour MPs voted against him at least once. The most famous example was a loss on the rights of Gurkhas to settle in the UK.

Tony Blair – The biggest rebellion that Tony Blair faced during his ten years in office was over the Iraq War. In February 2003 122 Labour MPs said that the UK did not have a case for war in Iraq. Despite this, the House of Commons overall voted in favour of military action.

John Major – John Major faced a number of Backbench Rebellions, most notably over the issue of Britain's relationship with the EU. In 1995 he even resigned as Leader of the Conservative Party and ran in a leadership contest. He famously said "now put up, or shut up" to his rivals. The biggest rebels came over the Maastricht Treaty that saw the European Union formed out of the E.E.C. John Major famously had the whip withdrawn from 9 MPs.

This has increasingly been the case in recent years. The advent of Leaders' Television Debates at the 2010 General Election has added to this, as more focus is placed solely on the Prime Minister than on the rest of their party.

- **Limits from their own abilities and performance**

Some Prime Ministers are limited by their own inabilities. For example, Gordon Brown struggled to engage effectively with the media, especially when compared with his predecessor Tony Blair.

- **Limits by events**

Events are also an important limit on Prime Ministers. There are many factors that a Prime Minister cannot control. When Harold Macmillan was asked what he most feared by an advisor, he famously responded “events dear boy, events”.

What is meant by the ‘Downing Street Machine’?

Throughout the 20th and 21st Century there has been a significant growth in the size and scope of the ‘[Downing Street Machine](#)’. This is a term given for the resources available to the Prime Minister in doing their job, most of which are not available to the Leader of the Opposition.

Elements of the Downing Street Machine include:

- **A huge number of Special Advisors** - A 171% growth in the Government since 1997.
- **A Director of Communications** – A figure responsible solely for how the Government appears and how it is portrayed in the media.
- **A Policy Unit** – This was founded by Harold Wilson in 1974 and has grown in size and scope since.
- **A dedicated team of Civil Servants** – These include the Cabinet Secretary and the Permanent Secretary. The Cabinet Office has over 2,000 staff.

What is the Cabinet and how did it evolve?

The Cabinet is the committee of the most senior ministers, [Secretaries of State](#), who are in charge of government departments and overall Government policy.

The Cabinet originally developed from the [Privy Council](#). This was the body that directly advised the Monarch. From the 18th century onwards the position of the Monarch was increasingly ceremonial and the Cabinet broke free from effective control of the Monarch.

How is the Cabinet Organised?

The Cabinet is made up of 23 members, including the Prime Minister:

Prime Minister – Theresa May

Minister for the Cabinet Office – David Lidington

Chancellor of the Exchequer – Philip Hammond

Home Secretary – Sajid Javid

Foreign Secretary – Boris Johnson

Brexit Secretary – David Davis

Defence Secretary – Gavin Williamson

Justice Secretary – David Gauke

Health Secretary – Jeremy Hunt

Education Secretary – Damian Hinds

Secretary of State for International Trade – Liam Fox

Business Secretary – Greg Clark

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – Michael Gove

Transport Secretary – Chris Grayling

Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government – James Brokenshire

Leader of the House of Lords – Baroness Evans

Scotland Secretary – David Mundell

Welsh Secretary – Alun Cairns

Northern Ireland Secretary – Karen Bradley

International Development Secretary – Penny Mordaunt

Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport – Matthew Hancock

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions – Esther McVey

Chairman of the Conservative Party – Brandon Lewis

The following people also attend Cabinet Meetings:

Leader of the House of Commons – Andrea Leadsom

Chief Secretary to the Treasury – Liz Truss

Government Chief Whip – Julian Smith

Attorney-General – Jeremy Wright

Minister for Immigration – Caroline Noakes

Minister for Climate Change and Industry – Claire Perry

Members of Cabinet can be drawn from either House of Parliament. Currently, every Cabinet Member apart from Baroness Evans, the Leader of the House of Lords, is from the House of Commons.