

Answering Examination Questions – The Power of the Prime Minister

‘What limits are there on the power of the Prime Minister?’ (20 marks)

‘Since the 1950s commentators have described an increase in the power of the Prime Minister, particularly Crossman in 1962 and Benn, who in 1979 referred to “a system of personal rule in the very heart of our Parliamentary democracy”. It is certainly true that the role of the executive as a whole has increased a great deal since the end of World War II, but the apparent dangers of a more personal power attached to the Prime Minister should not be overestimated, despite the recent examples of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, whose styles of leadership have each been described as presidential.

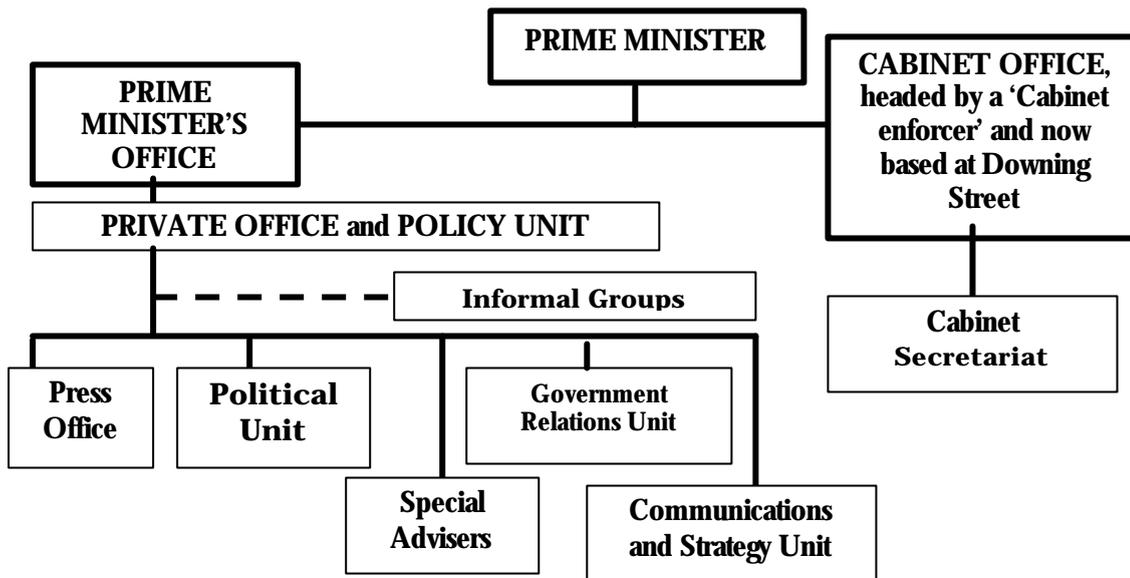
There are important constraints on Prime Ministerial power, the most significant of which is the influence of the Cabinet. Although Prime Ministers have tended to reduce the formal role of the Cabinet in policy making, it remains true that the Prime Minister will have important constraints when appointing, dismissing or running the Cabinet. The PM’s powers of appointment are limited by the need to provide a balance of party views, as Major found when he was forced to include those who disagreed with his policies, such as Portillo and Lilley. Even Blair’s Cabinet has included ministers whose “old” Labour views are well attested, such as Prescott, and Beckett, and an important reason for this is the need for the PM to retain support from the backbenchers in the party. Margaret Thatcher discovered this to her cost when a rift developed between herself and prominent ministers such as Howe and Lawson. She was forced to concede to the Cabinet on the decision to join the ERM in 1990, and to their advice to stand down from the leadership contests in the same year. Certainly Tony Blair has shown himself to be aware of this by strengthening the role of the Cabinet coordinator, part of whose job it is to create effective links between the Prime Minister’s office and the Cabinet office.

Much of the PM’s authority stems from the support of the Parliamentary party, and the ability to ensure support for government policies in Parliament is crucial to the PM’s own position as leader. By early 2003, Blair was becoming well aware of the threat to his own position when two major backbench revolts accompanied rumours of a leadership challenge. In addition, modern PMs must retain the confidence of the public, even if they personally become unpopular, for the effect of the media as a long-term constraint on a PM has become far more important. Although Margaret Thatcher never achieved popularity ratings higher than 50%, the long-term support of much of the press proved crucial in maintaining her position. Major discovered the restraining effects of public opinion turning against him as early as 1992. He also discovered the limitations imposed on a PM by circumstances such as a small majority in Parliament, a party split over issues such as Europe, and unfavourable comparisons made in the press between his style of leadership and that of Margaret Thatcher.

While it is true that the PM has far less formal constitutional constraints than the President of the USA, it is crucial for the PM to remain aware of the more informal limits on power as outlined above.’

It’s difficult to cover a question like this in great detail because of the time limit, but the example does manage to include important points. Notice that using **quotations** is best handled by picking out the **significant part** of the quote and weaving it into your own writing. Don’t learn a lengthy quote just for the sake of it. Additionally, make sure you show the **relevance** of the quote to the point you are making. It counts for much more that way. Another point mentions the **Prime Minister’s Office** and the **Cabinet Office**, and these can cause difficulty for students. They have changed significantly in recent years, and we ought to say something more about them. **Look carefully at the diagram.**

The central power base of the Prime Minister



There is a major question about where the power really lies in Government. The constitutional position is that the Prime Minister works with the full Cabinet in governing the UK, but the reality is different in many ways. The **Prime Minister's office** is based at **10 Downing Street**, and contains over **150 staff**. Prime Ministers use these units to develop policy, and **special advisers** are appointed to provide further support and advice. Some ministers and advisers will meet **informally** with the Prime Minister, and a minister will be appointed as a **'Cabinet coordinator'** to make sure that the **Cabinet office** and the **Prime Minister's office** work together properly. This is one of the reasons for the fears that the Prime Minister is becoming too powerful. The Cabinet as a whole takes far less part in policy decisions, but that doesn't mean that it has no power. We'll look at that in the next section, and try to discover **where the power really lies**.

Have you noticed that we're using the abbreviation **'PM'** even in the answers? An abbreviation as frequently used as this can be perfectly acceptable, although it's still a good idea to write it in full the first time. The next question hasn't got a plan, but it should have. Work out your own and see how close it comes to the answer below.

Answering Examination Questions – The Power of the Prime Minister **'Is the Prime Minister becoming too "presidential"?' (30 marks)**

'In 1993, Foley described what he called the rise of the British presidency, in which he drew attention to the similarities that were growing between the approach of the Prime Minister and that of a president, such as the President of the USA. His work came not long after the governments of Margaret Thatcher, who had been accused by many of adopting a more personal authoritarian style of leadership. The present government of Tony Blair has reopened the whole issue of "presidential" leadership in the UK, following a quieter period under the more collegiate style of John Major. In many ways, the debate loses much of its point if we remember the different systems of government in the UK and the USA, although there is evidence that the style of recent Prime Ministers has indeed shown some of the characteristics of USA Presidents.

If we return to Foley's thesis, he identifies a tendency to "spatial leadership" among some British Prime Ministers, including Margaret Thatcher and John Major. This partly means that Prime Ministers have presented themselves as "outsiders" to the main thrust of government, Thatcher reminding us that she was a grocer's daughter, and Major emphasising his more humble background and limited formal education. Major also used the idea of "the Citizen's Charter" in 1991 to show his distrust in government itself, and to provide citizens with means by which they can keep officialdom in check. Direct appeal to the people through the media was said to be another part of the drift towards presidential-style government, as is the recent emphasis on the personality of the Prime Minister, and, indeed, of the Prime Minister's spouse. Just as in Presidential elections in the USA, the 1997 and 2001 elections showed how important the public image of the party leaders has become.