The executive

It seems appropriate to begin our study of the three branches of government with by far the most powerful of them all – the executive. British politics is dominated by the executive to a degree without equal in the democratic world. Virtually every aspect of the political system centralises power into the hands of the executive, and for its part, the executive has always taken whatever opportunities where available to retain (and gain) power.
There are three aspects of the executive we need to consider – the PM, Cabinet and the civil service. Obviously the Prime Minister is by far the most important element. Both Blair and Thatcher were dominant leaders who marginalised the role and importance of Cabinet. However this is not always the case, as John Major’s premiership graphically illustrated.

What will we cover in this Chapter?

What is the role of the Prime Minister?
What are the powers of the Prime Minister?
What are the limitations on the power of the Prime Minister?
What is Cabinet government?
What is Prime Ministerial government?
What is Presidential government?
What is the role of the Cabinet?
What is meant by individual ministerial responsibility?
What is meant by collective ministerial responsibility?
On what basis are Cabinet ministers appointed?
What is the role of the civil service?
What is the relationship between the civil service and Cabinet ministers?
To what extent has the civil service been politicised?

What are the powers of the Prime Minister?

It is self-evident that the Prime Minister is the most powerful politician in the country. He – and he alone – can perform any of the following:

Dissolve Parliament and therefore set the date of the general election.
Represent Britain as the Head of government.
Take important decisions upon the basis of crown prerogative, such as sending British troops to war.
Appoint/dismiss a variety of positions within British political life on the basis of patronage. These range from Cabinet members to life peers to heads of QUANGOs.18
Set the agenda for Cabinet meetings, decide upon the frequency and length of such meetings and decide if a vote should be taken.
Guide legislation through Parliament with the co-operation of Cabinet ministers.
Lead the governing party.

What are the limitations on the power of the Prime Minister?

Power is often limited or constrained in some way, and the PM is no exception. If we take each of the powers listed above, it is possible to identify a limitation of some kind. For example:

The demos (or people) can remove the PM on the basis of a general election. He must also call the date of an election within a five-year period.

What is the role of the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister is the head of the executive, having gained his position by virtue of being leader of the majority party in the House of Commons. All his power and authority derives from the fact that he is first among equals (as the term Prime Minister implies).

18 The acronym QUANGO stands for quasi non-governmental organisations, such as the BBC.
The PM must bargain with other nations within the international arena, some of whom are much more powerful than the United Kingdom. He must also ensure that Britain abides by international laws and obligations.

Whilst the PM has the power to take such life and-death decisions, the political stakes are sky-high. There is no clearer example than Iraq – which did more than any other issue to undermine the level of trust and confidence in Tony Blair. In stark contrast, Britain’s victory in the Falklands war helped Mrs. Thatcher win the 1983 general election.

Patronage can be a double-edged sword if handled badly. For instance the appointment of four life peers by Tony Blair in 2006 was dogged by controversy, and is now widely known as the “cash for peerages” scandal. This led to Blair being questioned by the police whilst in Number 10 Downing Street.

The legislature. One of the main roles of the legislature is to scrutinise the actions of the executive, and no PM can be absolutely sure that his government’s programme will go through Parliament. For instance the planned government’s plans to increase the period by which a terrorist suspect could be held without trial to 90 days was defeated in November 2005.

All PM’s must contend with Cabinet rivals, such as Gordon Brown during Tony Blair’s decade in office. Divisions within the executive can also limit the power of the Prime Minister, as was the case during Blair’s latter years.

The governing party does not necessarily give the PM full backing. After the 2005 general election Blair’s position was weakened due to a lack of support within the Labour party over education reforms, and the renewal of Britain’s nuclear deterrent. A more dramatic example occurred in November 1990, when the Conservatives removed Margaret Thatcher from office.

Whilst the PM is not quite the “elected dictator” envisaged by Lord Hailsham, he undoubtedly wields a considerable amount of power. One of the most illuminating quotes over the PM’s role came from the former Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith when he proclaimed that “the office of the Prime Minister is what its holder chooses and is able to make of it.” The Tory PM Harold Macmillan’s quip was also revealing. When asked what was the greatest challenge facing the PM, he replied “events, dear boy!” – and events really do have the capacity to weaken (and sometimes strengthen) the power of the Prime Minister. It is important to note that in political life - even the most powerful can be dislodged by the unexpected. Political events often have the capacity to surprise – which is one reason why it’s an interesting subject.

**What is the true extent of the PM’s power?**

Political commentators (and students) have debated the true extent of the Prime Minister’s powers for many years. Three distinct theories have emerged, each one with a cogent explanation as to the true power of the PM. We will now consider each of these, beginning with Cabinet government.

**What is Cabinet government?**

The theory of Cabinet government offers a very traditional, if somewhat dated, view of the PM and his relationship with the rest of the Cabinet. According to this theory the cabinet is the centre of political power, and under the rules and conventions governing the British constitution the PM can only govern with the full support of...
his Cabinet. Furthermore decisions are reached on a collective basis around the Cabinet table. As such, the power of the PM derives from the basis that he is – by definition - first among equals.

Of all the theoretical explanations contesting the debate over the power of the PM, cabinet government holds the least support amongst political commentators. Whilst it may have accurately explained the power of the PM in the days when the Cabinet met for several hours to discuss important issues facing the country, it is a wholly unconvincing explanation of how Tony Blair or Margaret Thatcher operated as Prime Minister. Only in the case of John Major’s cabinet does the explanation of cabinet government hold any credence, but his period in office was atypical of recent Prime Ministers.

For many years cabinet government stood unchallenged as the interpretation of the UK system. It was only in the late-1960s that an alternative theory emerged. It derived from the Labour cabinet minister Richard Crossman (the Secretary of State for Housing and Local Government in Harold Wilson’s Cabinet), who argued that “the post-war epoch has witnessed the final transformation of cabinet government with prime ministerial government.”

What is Prime Ministerial government?

Prime Ministerial government is a more persuasive explanation than Cabinet government for one simple reason - the power of the PM has expanded significantly since the 1970s. Alongside this growth, there has been a decline in the significance of the cabinet as a collective decision-making body. It is increasingly the case that the PM (and a small group of allies and advisors) take the most important political decisions.

There are two major factors explaining the growth of Prime Ministerial power:

- The increasing focus of the media upon the PM, often at the expense of other Cabinet ministers.
- The public tends to approve of strong decisive leadership. Inevitably, this can only come from the Prime Minister – and those at the very top of what Disraeli called “the greasy pole” act as if they instinctively know this.

As the result of a general election is greatly affected by voters’ perception of the party leaders, it is undoubtedly the case that the PM is much more influential in terms of voting behaviour than the other Cabinet ministers. Inevitably this strengthens the position of the PM – particularly if he is popular and likely to win the next election. In blunt terms, ministers are unlikely to challenge or undermine the authority of a PM that is popular with the public. Secondly, it is widely accepted that the electorate dislikes divided parties. As such, it might be in the self-interest of a PM to marginalise his Cabinet in order to avoid the public becoming aware of divisions within the government, and potential rivals to his post.

It would be easy to overstate the case for prime ministerial government. In the modern era the Cabinet still has a major role to play, and can at times act as a constraint upon the power of the PM. Even during the early years of Tony Blair, Cabinet ministers had the capacity to defeat his plans – as in 1998 when Frank Field’s radical
proposals for welfare reform (strongly backed by the PM) were rejected by the Cabinet. In truth, all Prime Ministers need the support of cabinet members in order to implement the government’s manifesto. Without the support of ministers, life can become very difficult indeed for the PM – as the case of John Major during the 1990s clearly demonstrated.

One of the most obvious effects of the recent growth in Prime Ministerial power is a decline in the length of cabinet meetings. This observation was prevalent during Mrs. Thatcher’s time in office, and it gathered further credence during Blair’s premiership. He preferred dealing with close allies and advisors such as Alistair Campbell rather than the Cabinet as a whole. Where the support of ministers was needed, they were often invited to Number 10 Downing Street for an informal chat - away from full Cabinet discussion. This “sofa style” of government has more in common with an American President than traditional notions of how a British Prime Minister operates – which leads neatly onto our third and final theory.

What is Presidential government?

The academic Michael Foley (2000) has claimed that the power of the Prime Minister was now analogous to that of an American President. His argument implied that the PM was as powerful as the President of the United States, although ironically the American President faces greater limitations upon what he can achieve in the domestic sphere than a Prime Minister. An American President might be forgiven for looking enviously at the extent to which a British Prime Minister wields power within Parliament.

However, Foley’s view gained support from various sources – including the late Mo Mowlam (who was once Secretary of State for Northern Ireland).

Michael Foley argued that presidential government was reflected by the willingness of the PM to appeal directly to the public via the media in a manner similar to an American President. For instance, in the case of Blair’s most controversial decision (sending troops to Iraq) he largely ignored the views of his own party (and Parliament) to address the public on television. However there are clear dangers for a PM adopting this presidential strategy, and ultimately such tactics might even weaken (rather than strengthen) his power.

Secondly, Blair often attempted to act ‘above’ party politics in a style similar to a US President over issues such as national security. Blair also preferred to consult with special advisors in a style similar to an American President. What is particularly striking about Blair’s premiership was his closeness to a small circle of trusted advisors, as opposed to working with those ministers appointed by him to the Cabinet. Blair’s power was strengthened by the use of advisors, because unlike civil servants special advisors are not permanent – and can therefore be removed if they disagree with Blair, or do not operate as Blair would have liked. Whilst advisors have been important under previous Prime Ministers (such as Thatcher), their importance undoubtedly increased under Blair. In contrast Brown has said he wants to reduce the number of special advisors. Somewhat tellingly, his first act as Prime Minister was to reverse Blair’s decision to allow advisors to give orders to civil servants.
Tony Blair also spent less time in Parliament than either Major or Thatcher. Indeed his attendance record is the worst of any Prime Minister. However unlike the President, a PM must still attend Parliament and face hostile scrutiny from the leader of the opposition during PMQs. Furthermore Gordon Brown cannot veto a piece of legislation, unlike the case with George Bush, and whilst Tony Blair certainly gave the impression of presidential government he was neither Commander-in-Chief nor Head of State. More importantly the UK has a fusion of powers (see Chapter 8 page 81). So whilst the US President is not a member of the legislature, the Prime Minister always is.

### Which theory is the most convincing?

Cabinet government was a reasonably good description of how PMs operated in the past, and still holds some resonance today. For example, if the PM fails to listen to the views of other Cabinet ministers, his/her position in Number 10 can be undermined. This was certainly the case with Mrs. Thatcher. However, cabinet government remains the least convincing explanation of how the PM operates. Moreover PMs have often made important decisions without full cabinet discussion - which implies that the PM has always been more than merely “first among equals.” For instance, in the late 1940s Clement Attlee decided to develop Britain’s nuclear capacity without consulting the Cabinet as a whole.

In terms of the style in which he operated Tony Blair was much more ‘West Wing’ than any other PM. However, there are several key differences between the UK and the US system, and Britain still operates upon the basis of Prime Ministerial government as our system is based upon parliamentary government - in which the executive governs in and through parliament. When trying to assess the true extent of the Prime Minister’s powers, it is important to keep in mind three additional factors - what is the authority of the PM? What is the size of the government’s majority?, and what is the leadership style of the PM?

In terms of authority, there is no better contrast between a weak PM and a strong PM than between John Major and Tony Blair. The former was repeatedly undermined by divisions within his own cabinet over Europe between 1992 and 1997, whereas Blair was in an extremely dominant position from 1997 to 2005 (which was in part strengthened by the size of Labour’s majority). It was only after Blair announced his decision to stand down as Prime Minister did his authority come under a sustained attack. Thirdly, the style of leadership adopted by the PM must be taken into account. Both Blair and Thatcher were conviction politicians who aimed to dominate and marginalise their cabinets. In contrast, John Major adopted a more cabinet style of government. Gordon Brown has spoken publicly over his preference for cabinet government, and has promised to end "sofa-style" government.
What is the role of the Cabinet?

Whichever way we assess the true extent of the PM’s power, there are essentially six functions performed by the Cabinet;

- To implement government policy.
- To discuss various issues and arrive at a shared position. This function enables its members to uphold collective ministerial responsibility.
- To resolve potential disputes within the government.
- To co-ordinate the government’s response to events such as the race riots of 2001.
- To set the government’s agenda, although this role is primarily driven by the Prime Minister.
- To facilitate a flow of information amongst the three branches of government (the legislature, the judiciary and the executive). This is a reflection of Britain’s fusion of powers. For example, the Lord Chancellor and Attorney General can provide legal advice to the government, and put forward the views of the judiciary to the executive.

What is meant by individual ministerial responsibility?

Britain’s uncodified constitution relies a great deal upon conventions – unwritten codes of behaviour that regulate the activity of politicians, particularly those members of the executive. In relation to Cabinet ministers there are two different conventions to consider:

- Individual ministerial responsibility (IMR).
- Collective ministerial responsibility (CMR).

IMR can be defined as a convention by which ministers are held to account for their own actions, and/or the actions of their own department. As you might recall from Chapter 1, accountability is an important concept within a representative democracy such as the UK.

Conventions can, of course, be ignored – and politicians often try to wriggle out of what is essentially an obligation. For example in January 2006, the Education Secretary Ruth Kelly refused to resign over the paedophiles in schools scandal. Having said this, IMR can apply in certain cases. To take another recent example, the then Home Secretary David Blunkett resigned in December 2004 over the provision of a visa for his lover’s nanny. This raises an obvious question – why do some ministers ignore IMR, whilst others abide by it?

One of the reasons why a minister ignores IMR is obvious. After gaining promotion they are understandably reluctant to give up their post, particularly as it means a return to the back-benches. It is revealing to note that in the above example Blunkett’s ministerial career was probably over, whilst Kelly’s was not. He could therefore do the honourable thing, unlike Kelly who remained in the Cabinet.

On this issue, a great deal depends upon the political capital of the minister in question, and if he/she has the support of the PM. Due to their low political capital, some badly-performing ministers are forced to resign by the PM – such as the then Home Secretary Charles Clarke in May 2006. However when a minister retains the PM’s backing, he/she can often ignore IMR – as the case of Ruth Kelly aptly demonstrates. As IMR is merely a convention, it is extremely difficult for the media/opposition parties to force a minister to resign if he/she has the PM’s backing and a high level of political capital.
In recent years the trend has been towards ministers ignoring IMR. Several members of John Major’s Cabinet refused to resign over sexual/financial wrongdoings, and for all Blair’s initial talk of being “whiter than white” – his ministers have acted in a very similar way to those of the last Conservative government. It would appear that when a government has been in power for a lengthy period of time, there is a tendency for ministers to become a tad arrogant. One implication of that arrogance is a minister ignoring the convention of IMR.

IMR is applicable to a wide variety of ministerial resignations, and there is often a considerable overlap as to the reasons why a minister resigns from their post. However, they are all relevant to the convention of IMR. They include the following:

- Ministers have a great fondness for saying that they “wish to spend more time with their family.” This is invariably a cover for other reasons. Most ministers accept a post knowing full well that certain sacrifices have to be made, and spending time with their family is undoubtedly one of them. One such example was Alan Milburn in June 2003. 19

- An error of judgement, such as Lord Carrington who resigned in 1982 over his failure to prevent the Falklands war with Argentina. A resignation on this basis is often the result of considerable pressure from the media (and the opposition), as was the case with Stephen Byers in 2002 over his mishandling of Railtrack.

- An abuse of power, such as Peter Mandelson’s resignation in 2001 over his financial dealings with the Hinduja brothers. It was the second time he had resigned from the Cabinet, an inglorious feat he shares with David Blunkett.

- Sexual/personal misconduct such as Ron Davies “moment of madness” at Clapham Common in October 1998. Sexual/personal misconduct is quite a common occurrence in British political life, and is parodied in the TV show ‘Little Britain’ by the Sir Norman Fry character (played by David Walliams). His character always contorts an amusing excuse to explain his wrongdoings, with his obligatory loving ‘wife’ and smiling children by his side. Because the minister has lost the confidence of the Prime Minister. This often implies a loss of confidence from within the governing party, and even Parliament.

- A clash of interests, often due to a business contact of some description. For example, in December 1998 it was revealed that Peter Mandelson had bought a home with the assistance of an interest-free loan of £373,000 from the millionaire Labour MP Geoffrey Robinson - who was also in the Government but was subject to an inquiry into his business dealings by Mandelson’s department. Mandelson had little alternative but to resign over the affair.

- For misleading the House of Commons. This is rare but not unknown. One of the few ministers to resign on this basis was Jonathon Aitken from the Tory Cabinet led by John Major. In more recent times, the then Transport Secretary Stephen Byers was also accused of misleading the House.

19 Ironically, Alan Milburn later returned to the Cabinet. It is not reported what his family thought about the move back to his high-powered, high-paid post.
What is meant by collective ministerial responsibility?

Collective ministerial responsibility (CMR) is also a convention, and can be defined as an obligation that Cabinet ministers should maintain the government’s collective position, at least in public. If a minister cannot accept collective ministerial responsibility, they should resign. CMR therefore has some similarities with IMR.

CMR is an unwritten code of behaviour, although it does have some influence over the behaviour of Cabinet ministers. In some cases ministers do resign on a point of principle. The clearest examples in recent years derive from Blair’s decision to go to war in Iraq. The decision was controversial from the start, and several ministers felt uneasy with the commitment of British troops to what they saw as a US-led invasion of a sovereign country. John Denham, Clare Short and Robin Cook all resigned over the issue of Iraq.

The extent to which CMR exists depends greatly upon the power and authority of the PM. For example Gordon Brown may find it difficult to maintain unity within the Cabinet due to tensions between his supporters (such as Harriet Harman) and the so-called Blairites (such as David Miliband). When the Conservatives were last in power, John Major faced considerable difficulty in maintaining a united Cabinet, particularly over the issue of Europe.

The PM is always keen to hold the Cabinet together as it helps to present a united image to the voters. It also tends to strengthen the power of the PM. It is a universal truth of politics that the public will tend to punish divided parties at the ballot box. This was certainly the case in 1997, when the Conservatives were engaged in a serious bout of inter-party conflict over Europe. However, since 1997 the Labour government has maintained a relatively united stance. Whilst there have been tensions between the Blairites and the Brownites, the differences between each camp were never of an ideological nature. This has allowed each side to compromise where necessary, as in the autumn of 2006 when Gordon Brown effectively called off his troops and backed away from an attempt to remove Blair from office. CMR has thus been less of an issue under Labour than it was under the latter years of Tory government.

Before we move on from CMR there is one historical anomaly that requires a mention. In 1975 the Labour government was divided over the issue of Europe. The Prime Minister Harold Wilson decided to suspend CMR and allow each side to debate their case in public. The voters therefore witnessed pro-Europe ministers such as Roy Jenkins debate the issues in public with anti-European ministers such as Tony Benn. It was a unique illustration of how CMR can be ignored by the government of the day.

On what basis are Cabinet ministers appointed?

Cabinet ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister. Each member of the Cabinet derives from the legislature and the governing party (although these are merely conventions). The only exception to this is during a coalition government, when certain posts are awarded to members of the junior partner.
The appointment of Cabinet ministers is one of the most significant powers of patronage available to the PM. In performing this task, he must consider several factors:

- In order to ensure a degree of party unity the Cabinet must reflect different shades of opinion within the party. For instance, during Thatcher’s early years as PM she appointed several one-nation Conservatives to her Cabinet, many of whom did not fully support her policies.
- It is in the PM’s own interest to have allies such as Ed Balls and Alistair Darling in the Cabinet. Whilst the UK system operates on the basis of Prime Ministerial government, all PM’s must have some level of support within the Cabinet.
- To promote talented MPs from within their ranks, particularly the next generation of leaders – such as David Miliband.
- In some cases it is better for a PM to have potential rivals in the Cabinet, rather than having them cause problems from outside the Cabinet.
- All PM’s need a fixer – someone who can get things done the way the PM would like. The leading example from the Blair era was John Reid, the archetypal political bruiser.
- Some politicians have so much backing from within the party that they cannot possibly be left out of the Cabinet. The obvious example during Blair’s premiership was Gordon Brown.
- In the case of the Labour party the PM has to choose from the National Executive Committee when he comes to power (as in 1997). A Conservative Tory PM faces no such restriction, although if he were to win the next election David Cameron would almost certainly appoint members from his shadow Cabinet.

For their part a minister must be able to cope with long hours, be a competent public speaker, accept the conventions governing the behaviour of Cabinet ministers, and have a positive media image. As modern politics is so much about presentation and spin, this latter point is of particular significance.

**What is the role of the civil service?**

The civil service is the third (and least important) part of the executive. It consists of bureaucrats that assist the government of the day in the task of implementing policy. In the UK civil servants work on the basis of neutrality, in contrast to the United States where civil servants are appointed on the basis of political affiliation. Civil servants in the UK must therefore avoid showing any bias towards a political party.

Members of the civil service are appointed on a permanent rather than temporary basis. Therefore when a new government takes office, civil servants remain in their jobs. Once again, this is in contrast to the situation in the United States. In the UK civil servants also operate on the basis of anonymity. This is a convention whereby a civil servant will not be named (and blamed) for an action taken in the course of their duties. Ultimately it is ministers who are held to account, even if the mistake is the fault of the civil service.

**What is the relationship between the civil service and Cabinet ministers?**

There are four aspects we need to consider in the relationship between the civil service and Cabinet ministers:
A Cabinet minister is appointed (and can be dismissed) by the PM. He/she might therefore have a relatively short career within the executive. However a civil servant is not beholden to the patronage of the PM, as his/her position is on a permanent basis.

“Civil servants advise, but ministers decide” is an important dictum governing the relationship within the executive. Advice offered by the civil service is based upon neutrality, and their own expertise. It is also provided on the basis of anonymity. In other words, the advice given by a civil servant should never be made public by a minister.

In a party political sense civil servants are impartial, whereas a Cabinet minister is inherently biased towards the policy and ideology of his/her political party.

Ministers should abide by the conventions of individual ministerial responsibility and collective ministerial responsibility. A civil servant faces no such obligation. So whereas a minister is held to account by the public and Parliament, a civil servant is not.

There are several implications of these four factors. In regards to the first point, there are times when a conflict can arise between the perspective of a Cabinet minister and a civil servant. For understandable reasons, a minister is much more concerned with the potential electoral impact of decisions taken and implemented. In contrast a civil servant is unelected and can therefore take an aloof attitude towards public opinion. He/she can also take a more long-term view of a situation.

Secondly, it has been claimed that the civil service can exert an undue degree of influence upon Cabinet ministers. This is more likely in the case of a relatively inexperienced minister. Civil servants can also have their own agenda - which is usually depicted as conservative with a small ‘c.’ In other words, civil servants tend to oppose radical change, which is clearly opposite to what a minister might want to implement. It could even be said that the civil service acts in much the same way as an insider pressure group.

On the issue of neutrality, there have been claims from both left-wing and right-wing cabinet ministers that civil servants have “pigeonholed” controversial proposals due to their conservative mindset. During the 1970s, the Labour Cabinet minister Tony Benn argued that the civil service acted as a barrier towards the establishment of a socialist Britain, and during the 1980s the Tory minister Norman Tebbit claimed that the civil service opposed Thatcherite policies they considered too ‘radical.’ At the very least, the appointment of civil servants on the basis of neutrality rather than party affiliation can result in a clash of mindsets between the civil service and government ministers.

On the final point, the fact that ministers are in effect held to account for the actions of civil servants can once again lead to tensions within the relationship. This might result in undue influence from Cabinet ministers over civil servants, a charge that came to the fore during the Thatcher years – and has gained in credibility since Labour came to power. It is an argument that leads onto our final point – the alleged ‘politicisation’ of the civil service.

To what extent has the civil service been politicised?

The British system of government concentrates an enormous amount of power into the hands of the Prime Minister. We have already discussed how a PM can use that power to marginalise the Cabinet, and in later Chapters we will discuss
how a PM can exert huge influence over the legislature (Chapter 8) and the judiciary (Chapter 9). In the context of the civil service, both Blair and Thatcher have been accused of exerting too much influence over the civil service. This has led to the charge that the neutrality and impartiality of the civil service has been compromised, and that civil servants have become politicised into pursuing a party political agenda on behalf of the government.

In politics one must always distinguish between theory and reality – none more so than in this case study. In theory, civil servants are servants of the Crown (and not the governing party), and therefore free from undue interference from the government of the day. As such, they conduct their activities on the basis of impartiality. Moreover their position is of a permanent, rather than temporary, nature. However in practise, the civil service are an integral part of the executive and as such, they are vulnerable to being politicised by the government of the day. This is more likely to arise if a PM takes a particularly forceful approach to the implementation of government policy – such as Mrs. Thatcher and Tony Blair.

In the context of the present government, some political commentators argue that the impartiality of the service has been undermined by the new Labour project, and there is no hiding the fact that relations between the civil service and the Labour government have been fractious. Soon after Labour gained power the party's leading 'spin doctor' - Alistair Campbell – went public with his scathing criticism over the performance of the civil service, and as early as 1998 the Permanent Secretary at the Treasury, Sir Terry Burns, resigned from his post on the grounds that he felt “marginalised” by special advisors to Gordon Brown. In addition, the former head of the civil service Lord Turnbull once claimed that Gordon Brown possessed a “Stalinist ruthlessness” (Guardian, 21/3/07, p.1). For his part, Blair never really developed a positive working relationship with the civil service.

The causes of such tension are numerous. The massive increase in the number (and influence) of special advisors has undoubtedly caused friction between the government and the civil service. From the perspective of the civil service, the role of advisors has usurped their traditional role and blurred the line of distinction between ministers, and civil servants. Secondly, the permanence of the civil service has been undermined by a proliferation of short-term contracts. Moreover, the neutrality of the civil service has at times been compromised. For example in 2001, it was revealed that the Trade and Industry Minister Richard Caborn had asked civil servants to ‘dig up dirt’ on the left-wing comedian Mark Thomas (Grant, 2005, p.122).

In summary, the degree to which civil servants may become politicised by the government of the day depends to a great extent upon the PM, and other cabinet ministers. Ultimately the PM and Cabinet ministers have democratic legitimacy, and are therefore in the dominant position. It is perhaps inevitable that such power could be used to exert undue influence upon what is (in theory) a group of impartial bureaucrats. However, it is true to say that the civil service has an excellent reputation for offering impartial advice, and conducting its activities in a highly professional manner. Most Cabinet ministers leave their post with appreciation and admiration for the manner in which the civil service operates – and in comparison to other democracies, the British civil service has managed to maintain a degree of impartiality and independence from the governing party.