

To what extent is the  
pm free from political  
constraints?



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There are numbers of constraints on the Prime Minister. The main constraints are constitutional, political, administrative and personal. The decision making body in Britain is collective; the Prime Minister's role is to provide leadership within a Cabinet context in which collective responsibility remains the rule. Ministerial appointments require some recognition of the need for political balance and administrative efficiency, there is also pressure from colleagues or the media to promote certain people- The popularity of a Prime Minister depends, to some extent, on the media coverage they receive. Which party the Prime Minister represents can also affect media coverage. The press in Britain is biased in its coverage and editorials- some papers are committed to certain parties. This means in practice that Cabinets contain individuals whom the Prime minister would rather be without. All Prime Ministers at least listen to advice from senior colleagues before making appointments.

The power of patronage enables a Prime Minister to hire and fire whoever he/she pleases. However, they must consider all types of party opinion when making their selection when allocating ministerial office, as it would not be wise for the prime minister offer cabinet positions to their loyal supporters. Ministers should represent a balanced team in terms of age, experience and forms of thinking within the party if they are not to become alienated from the backbenchers. Backbenchers may also be a constraint, though they risk loss of promotion prospects. Parliament as a whole should be a key constraint; and the Lords have been more active in opposing government bills since the 1980s, but their power is limited. The need to keep the cabinet balanced and to adjust its composition in the light of changing circumstances

is illustrated by the cabinet reshuffle forced upon Margaret Thatcher in 1989. Nigel Lawson, the Chancellor of the Exchequer had resigned following conflicts with the Prime Minister over economic policy and the role of her economics special advisor Alan Walters.

There are also constraints on the dismissal of ministers. If the PM sacks too many ministers too frequently it implies poor judgement and the PMs authority will be undermined an example of this would be Macmillan's 'night of the long knives' in 1962 when he sacked seven Cabinet ministers overnight. This damaged his own standing and caused resentment in the party.

A further constraint would be political e. g. John Major's government was constrained by ideological splits in his party, making it difficult to manage, especially as it had a small majority. The larger the government majority in the House of Commons, the stronger the government's position and with it the power of the Prime Minister. A minority government may be in the weakest position of all would need to compromise with parties on the floor of the house. This makes it much more difficult for the Prime Minister to take a strong line on any policy. Equally constraining, are economic factors e. g. in the early 1990s Britain suffered a bad economic recession, this led to falling popularity, which, in turn created stronger political constraints.

The Conservative party illustrates the strength a prime minister can gain from the backing of a united party, it also shows the weakness that can overtake the leader of the same party when it is divided. The thing that divides a political party most, is unpopularity and fear of electoral losses e. g.

this is true for the Major government which was seen as weak and divided. A leader's popularity is likely to depend on the state of the economy, the international importance of the country or the general mood of the country, all of which are, to a greater or lesser extent, outside the control of the prime minister.

The party may remove a sitting Prime Minister but this is quite rare, this was however the case with Thatcher in 1990. Thatcher resigned after losing the support of senior colleagues (Lawson and Howe) and a huge section of the majority parliamentary party.

Cabinet revolts limit a PM's policy-making power. Apart from drawing up the party manifesto, most Prime Ministers do not initiate policy- they have a small staff and most expertise and information and detailed information is located in individual departments. It is therefore difficult for PM's to interfere constantly in the work of a department. Consensus between PM and Cabinet over policies is normal. When revolt do occurs do occur they may suggest misjudgment or mismanagement by a Prime Minister e. g. policy toward Europe caused Major problems of party management. Major resigned the party leadership in 1995 in an attempt to put to rest persistent cabinet and party disagreement over Europe.

The Prime Minister can attempt to keep certain issues off the cabinet agenda in order to avoid difficult discussions. The period of time in which an issue may be left off a cabinet agenda depends partly on the personalities of the cabinet ministers. On occasions the Prime Minister will be defeated in cabinet. As *Primus inter pares* (first amongst equals), the Prime Minister,

unlike the American president, is not able to overrule the cabinet. Prime ministers cannot make policy without the support of cabinet colleagues because they do not have the time to control every issue. Moreover, the Prime minister cannot implement policy without the backing of ministerial departments.

A final constraint on the Prime Minister is personal constraints; the PM is limited in terms of energy, resources and time. The PM's special concerns (foreign affairs, the economy and security services) are vulnerable to setbacks e. g. Security service disasters undermined Macmillan and problems over Europe destroyed the authority of Thatcher and Major.

Overall, the constraints on the Prime Minister are very effective because they prevent the PM from being too dominant a figure. Collective responsibility makes sure there is a balance of power. It can be argued however, that even a strong Prime Minister such as Margaret Thatcher is subject to constraints both inside and outside the cabinet. The constraints that arise depend upon the state of the Economy, the size of the government majority, the character and length of tenure of the PM him/her self. The most effective constraint are those that act upon the cabinet from outside Whitehall, such as the state of the economy, as the Prime Minister has no way of controlling these. It should certainly have a great effect on the relationship between the Prime minister and the cabinet.