

# [Role of ministers in the uk political system](https://assignbuster.com/role-of-ministers-in-the-uk-political-system/)

#### Case Study Report – UK Government Ministers

This case study report will be looking at the role UK ministers play within in theUK political system, background of the role of government ministers, and the problem of ministerial overload associated with government ministers, while also discussing potential solutions

Government ministers within the UK political system can be split into two categories, cabinet ministers and other ministers. Currently in 2017 there are 118 ministers, which is broken down into 1 Prime minister, 22 cabinet ministers and 95 other ministers (ministers. gov. uk). Cabinet ministers are members of parliament appointed by the prime minister (Currently Theresa May after the 2017 general election) to head up specific government departments. E. g. Michael Gove is the current cabinet minister for the department of environment, food and rural affairs. The cabinet ministers are responsible for the development of policies within their department, with help from ministers of state, parliamentary and under secretaries of state and the civil service, departments can form a policy based on external pressures such as the media and the wider electorate. A recent example is a media campaign against microbeads damaging the environment and presenting risks to human health, which lead to proposed legislation banning the sale and manufacture of microbeads in the UK (Knapton, 2017)

Variousfactors are taken into account when the Prime minister appoints Ministers, factors include party seniority and past ministerial roles (e. g. MichaelFallon), and party loyalty or someone considered a threat to the PrimeMinister. E. g. rumours of a leadership challenge against Theresa May by BorisJohnson led to his appointment as foreign secretary after she won the 2016 leadershipchallenge. Personal skills are also taken into account such as communication, media savviness and critical thinking. However the Prime Minister may alsoappoint ministers based on regional differentials and representation (e. g. Brown’s cabinet ministers consisted of 5 females, David Cameron’s cabinet afterthe 2015 general election had 7 females).

The next part of my report I’ll be focussingon the issue of ministerial overload and the causes of ministerial. I will notonly look at this problem presented to government ministers within in the UK, but also look at other countries ministers who may have experienced similarproblems, while also discussing potential solutions to the problem.

Ministerialoverload is when a minister’s life is increasingly consumed towards theirdepartmental work,(as stated by Laughrin’s law that states “ Ministerial diariesabhor vacuum. Ministerial business automatically expands to full every minuteof a minister’s day unless it is countered by a reverse irresistible force”(Foster1999, 198)), often resulting in the deterioration of their physical and mentalwell being  which affects both minister’sand their departments resulting in a decrease in effectiveness and efficiencywithin their department and other departments. Over the decades there’s been asignificant increase in ministerial overload presenting a problem that not onlyaffects government ministers in the UK but also in other countries. Scholarshave identified six key pressures that affects ministers physical and mentalstates within their department that contributes to the problem of ministerialoverload, these being instability and mobilisation, novelty, unsociability, unpredictability and accountability. ( Laughrin, 2009). I will primarilydiscuss the pressures of unpredictability and accountability and theircontribution to ministerial overload.

Unpredictability, is when some events canescalate and develop overnight with consequences that the government ministermay not be aware of or hasn’t prepared a contingency plan before the eventhappens. Brexit is an example of an unpredictable event which has ledministerial overload.  No one in the UKexpected the leave side to win the referendum in June 2016, it was taken forgranted that the Remain part would win that the government didn’t create a newdepartment or have any contingency plans prepared in case leave won. After theleave party won, a completely new department was created to deal with Brexit, this contributes to ministerial overload in many ways.

Firstis that new department was created, that means ministers and civil servantsappointed to this department has zero/little experience in how to handle thedepartment’s business. Second is that being a new department it’s more likelyto be underfunded than other departments, ministers and staff will likely beunderpaid which could result in a reduced efficiency within the department andpotentially civil servants and staff could leave the department. To ensure thenecessary funding the department needs money could be cut from otherdepartments, this would affect the efficiency of the department or departmentsaffected. Exiting the EU department recently has been criticised for the slowprogress made in negotiations with the EU, the Daily mail has reported that thegovernment is hiring 8, 000 more civil servants and an extra £662 million pounds(Scunthorpe, 2017) in the event of a no deal Brexit. This suggests that theslow progress in negotiations is due at least in part to underfunding of thedepartment. The third problem is co-operation between departments and thedomino effect, in order of Brexit to be successful. Exiting the EU departmenthas to work with other departments, (e. g. development strategies andinternational trade department). This contributes to ministerial overloadbecause not only does the development strategies and international tradedepartment have tons of international paper work to prioritise, read and makedecisions, now they’re expected to take on extra work, working longer hours oftenwill only a minor pay rise. This over time results in deterioration of theirmental and physical wellbeing which will ultimately affect their work resultingin an increase of error/ mistakes which leads to a domino effect on otherdepartments who are reliant on inter departmental co-operation. We can comparethe above problems associated with ministerial overload to the EU countries andtheir handling of Brexit negotiations. The EU commission set up a departmenttask force on article 50 negotiations with the United Kingdom, which comprisesof the chief negotiator (Michael Barnier) and the deputy (Sabine Weyand) whoworks with other departments such as the international agreements and customs. These departments not only have to carry on with previous work prior Brexit, but also new post Brexit work, putting strains on the department’s staff andresources. Another problem is that most of the negotiations are carried outthrough this task force, the individual EU countries don’t have individualgovernment departments to handle Brexit like the UK, but often the work isshared between departments such as treasuries and foreign departments which addmore work ( domestic and international) onto their already time consuming workin underfunded departments. More pressure is applied to the task force becausethey may have to read and compromise on both individuals countries demands, butalso the EU’s collective demands in the negotiations.

Accountability, the second issue ministers face that contributes towards ministerial overload. Cabinet ministers are appointed by the PM to head up a department and areusually chosen based on background (such as representation of females) or basedon other factors such as personal skills, e. g. media savviness. There are 2main accountability mechanisms that affect the effectiveness of ministers, these are the ministerial code and the media. The ministerial code is a code ofconduct and guidance on procedures that all ministers must uphold, whichincludes 7 principles of public life (selflessness, integrity, openness, leadership, objectivity and honesty), while also being accurate in theirdealings with parliament disclosing any personal, financial and constituencyconflicts of interest. Ministers also face individual responsibility, i. e. cabinet minister’s bear the ultimate responsibility for the actions of theirministry or department. It’s very rare nowadays for ministers in this event toresign from their post, a rare example of this would be Shahid Malik steppingdown as Justice Minister in the revelations of the MP expenses scandal.  They’re also subject to collectiveresponsibility, the duty of ministers to publicly agree with governmentpolicies, ministers that cannot conform to this are expected to resign. It alsorefers to the responsibility of the government as a whole to be accountable forits actions, the government must be willing to resign and have a generalelection if defeated in a vote of no confidence.(ministerial code, gov. uk) Thislimits the effectiveness of ministers in their roles within departments, because if a mistake, error occurs within the department civil servants, thecabinet minister is expected to take responsibility and resign even though itmay not be their direct fault, ministers therefore have to spend more time intheir department to ensure these errors are not made especially in regards todepartment policies specifically flagship or policies with high importance orintense media scrutiny. Most democratic countries have their own forms ofministerial codes of conducts that bear some similarities with the UK. HoweverGermany for example extends their code of conduct to all members of theBundestag rather than just their ministers and this includes similarities tothe UK, such reporting any possible conflicts of interest before taking theirmembership.

Themedia is a huge mechanism that contributes towards ministerial overload. Therehas been an increase in scrutiny of ministers and their departments, scrutinyconsisting of both the department’s policies and the individual ministerswithin their department. The scrutiny of department’s policies can add unwantedpressures onto departments especially in regards to current policies. If adepartment is part way into making a policy and the media leaks the policy andis found among the electorate to be unpopular this creates add worktime for thedepartment to either amend the policy or completely scrap the policy which mayhave taken months to create. E. g. media scrutiny in the UK would be thecampaign to ban micro beads in products. Another example is Australia’s toughimmigration policies especially the story about pictures of refugees throwingchildren over boats into the water. While the media found this not true manyministerial staff then attempted to defend the immigration department’spolicies by trying to discredit the media’s claims (Tieran, 2006). Anotherissue is the rise of personalisation politics and the scrutiny of minister’spersonal lives. This adds pressure because instead of the minister being ableto go home or take part in a hobby, they are constantly being investigated andscrutinised by the media for even the slightest wrongdoing, that may result inthem being forced to resign or face being sacked. Ministers are being pressuredinto maintaining a respectable image and staffs within their department areincreasingly focussing on handling the media rather than departmental work.

Pressures of ministerial overload have become an increasing problem not only affecting the efficiency of ministers, departments and whole governments both in the UK and other countries. Uncertainty pressure is hard to offer a solution to because some events are out of minister’s control. However in cases such as Brexit before the referendum the current government could have created contingency plans, by creating a department, hiring extra staff, appointing extra ministers and setting aside money in preparation of the referendum result. The government can’t get rid of the ministerial code and it’s restraints on ministers, this would be highly controversial and subject to intense scrutiny as ministerial power grabbing. In terms of the media the government could pass tighter laws against the media to ensure departmental work isn’t leaked before policies are ready and pass laws restricting the media’s ability to scrutinise individual Ministers personal lives. However this would face intense scrutiny from the media with arguments ranging from freedom of information to accusations of ministers attempting to grab power while silencing critics. Ministerial overload continues to be a problem, however it’s a problem with currently very limited solutions, especially with the current fragile government only holding a slim majority, solutions need to be found and quickly to ensure future governments can work effectively and efficiently

## References

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