

Role of ministers in the uk political system



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Case Study Report – UK Government Ministers

This case study report will be looking at the role UK ministers play within in the UK 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)

Various factors are taken into account when the Prime minister appoints Ministers, factors include party seniority and past ministerial roles (e. g. Michael Fallon), and party loyalty or someone considered a threat to the Prime Minister. E. g. rumours of a leadership challenge against Theresa May

by Boris Johnson led to his appointment as foreign secretary after she won the 2016 leadership challenge. Personal skills are also taken into account such as communication, media savviness and critical thinking. However the Prime Minister may also appoint ministers based on regional differentials and representation (e. g. Brown's cabinet ministers consisted of 5 females, David Cameron's cabinet after the 2015 general election had 7 females).

The next part of my report I'll be focussing on the issue of ministerial overload and the causes of ministerial. I will not only look at this problem presented to government ministers within in the UK, but also look at other countries ministers who may have experienced similar problems, while also discussing potential solutions to the problem.

Ministerial overload is when a minister's life is increasingly consumed towards their departmental work, (as stated by Laughrin's law that states " Ministerial diaries abhor vacuum. Ministerial business automatically expands to full every minute of a minister's day unless it is countered by a reverse irresistible force" (Foster 1999, 198)), often resulting in the deterioration of their physical and mental well being which affects both minister's and their departments resulting in a decrease in effectiveness and efficiency within their department and other departments. Over the decades there's been a significant increase in ministerial overload presenting a problem that not only affects government ministers in the UK but also in other countries.

Scholar have identified six key pressures that affects ministers physical and mental states within their department that contributes to the problem of ministerial overload, these being instability and mobilisation, novelty, unsociability, unpredictability and accountability. (Laughrin, 2009). I will

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primarily discuss the pressures of unpredictability and accountability and their contribution to ministerial overload.

Unpredictability, is when some events can escalate and develop overnight with consequences that the government minister may not be aware of or hasn't prepared a contingency plan before the event happens. Brexit is an example of an unpredictable event which has led to ministerial overload. No one in the UK expected the leave side to win the referendum in June 2016, it was taken for granted that the Remain part would win that the government didn't create a new department or have any contingency plans prepared in case leave won. After the leave party won, a completely new department was created to deal with Brexit, this contributes to ministerial overload in many ways.

First is that new department was created, that means ministers and civil servants appointed to this department has zero/little experience in how to handle the department's business. Second is that being a new department it's more likely to be underfunded than other departments, ministers and staff will likely be underpaid which could result in a reduced efficiency within the department and potentially civil servants and staff could leave the department. To ensure the necessary funding the department needs money could be cut from other departments, this would affect the efficiency of the department or departments affected. Exiting the EU department recently has been criticised for the slow progress made in negotiations with the EU, the Daily Mail has reported that the government 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 the slow progress in negotiations is due

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at least in part to underfunding of the department. The third problem is co-operation between departments and the domino effect, in order of Brexit to be successful. Exiting the EU department has to work with other departments, (e. g. development strategies and international trade department). This contributes to ministerial overload because not only does the development strategies and international trade department have tons of international paper work to prioritise, read and make decisions, now they're expected to take on extra work, working longer hours often will only a minor pay rise. This over time results in deterioration of their mental and physical wellbeing which will ultimately affect their work resulting in an increase of error/ mistakes which leads to a domino effect on other departments who are reliant on inter departmental co-operation. We can compare the above problems associated with ministerial overload to the EU countries and their handling of Brexit negotiations. The EU commission set up a department task force on article 50 negotiations with the United Kingdom, which comprises of the chief negotiator (Michael Barnier) and the deputy (Sabine Weyand) who works 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 and resources. Another problem is that most of the negotiations are carried out through this task force, the individual EU countries don't have individual government departments to handle Brexit like the UK, but often the work is shared between departments such as treasuries and foreign departments which add more work (domestic and international) onto their already time consuming work in underfunded departments. More pressure is applied to the task force because they may have to read and

compromise on both individuals countries demands, but also 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 are usually chosen based on background (such as representation of females) or based on other factors such as personal skills, e. g. media savviness. There are 2 main accountability mechanisms that affect the effectiveness of ministers, these are the ministerial code and the media. The ministerial code is a code of conduct and guidance on procedures that all ministers must uphold, which includes 7 principles of public life (selflessness, integrity, openness, leadership, objectivity and honesty), while also being accurate in their dealings with parliament disclosing any personal, financial and constituency conflicts of interest. Ministers also face individual responsibility, i. e. cabinet minister's bear the ultimate responsibility for the actions of their ministry or department. It's very rare nowadays for ministers in this event to resign from their post, a rare example of this would be Shahid Malik stepping down as Justice Minister in the revelations of the MP expenses scandal. They're also subject to collective responsibility, the duty of ministers to publicly agree with government policies, ministers that cannot conform to this are expected to resign. It also refers to the responsibility of the government as a whole to be accountable for its actions, the government must be willing to resign and have a general election if defeated in a vote of no confidence. (ministerial code, gov. uk) This limits the effectiveness of ministers in their roles within departments, because if a mistake, error occurs within the department civil servants, the cabinet minister is expected

to take responsibility and resign even though it may not be their direct fault, ministers therefore have to spend more time in their department to ensure these errors are not made especially in regards to department policies specifically flagship or policies with high importance or intense media scrutiny. Most democratic countries have their own forms of ministerial codes of conducts that bear some similarities with the UK. However Germany for example extends their code of conduct to all members of the Bundestag rather than just their ministers and this includes similarities to the UK, such as reporting any possible conflicts of interest before taking their membership.

The media is a huge mechanism that contributes towards ministerial overload. There has been an increase in scrutiny of ministers and their departments, scrutiny consisting of both the department's policies and the individual ministers within their department. The scrutiny of department's policies can add unwanted pressures onto departments especially in regards to current policies. If a department is part way into making a policy and the media leaks the policy and is found among the electorate to be unpopular this creates additional worktime for the department to either amend the policy or completely scrap the policy which may have taken months to create. E. g. media scrutiny in the UK would be the campaign to ban micro beads in products. Another example is Australia's tough immigration policies especially the story about pictures of refugees throwing children over boats into the water. While the media found this not true many ministerial staff then attempted to defend the immigration department's policies by trying to discredit the media's claims (Tieran, 2006). Another issue is the rise of personalisation politics and the scrutiny of minister's personal lives. This adds

pressure because instead of the minister being able to go home or take part in a hobby, they are constantly being investigated and scrutinised by the media for even the slightest wrongdoing, that may result in them being forced to resign or face being sacked. Ministers are being pressured into maintaining a respectable image and staffs within their department are increasingly 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

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