



**General Certificate of Education**

**Government and Politics 1151**

**GOVP2      Governing Modern Britain**

**Report on the Examination**

*2011 examination – January series*

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# **Government and Politics**

## **GOVP2 – Governing Modern Britain**

### **General**

The question paper appeared accessible with candidates using many up-to-date examples to illustrate points, including many references to the coalition government. There were no apparent problems with the new style exam booklets or question papers. There were many good quality responses although there were relatively few that were very good. The first three topics were all popular, with candidates favouring Topic 1. Topic 4 was the least popular by a considerable margin and only a very small minority tackled Question 12 which offered a choice between devolution and local government.

Candidates continue to spell political terms incorrectly ('Parliament' especially) even when the terms are in the exam paper.

### **Topic 1 – The British Constitution**

Although this was probably the most popular topic, the overall standard of responses varied.

#### **Question 01**

Surprisingly, there were some poor responses to this question. Many candidates gave general descriptions (eg reviewing legislation) while some considered judicial review to be a process that was concerned with checking the judiciary itself. Better informed candidates often referred to the judiciary reviewing the compatibility of legislation with the Human Rights Act; others referred to reviewing whether public bodies were acting unlawfully, but very few mentioned both of these aspects.

#### **Question 02**

Whilst good responses included what was meant by separation of powers, some weaker candidates focused almost entirely on this without linking it to the creation of the Supreme Court. However, better informed candidates did explain how the removal of judicial functions from the House of Lords moved the UK some way towards a separation of powers. The very best candidates also explained the changed status of the Lord Chancellor and the role of the Judicial Appointments Commission. They also explained aspects of the UK political system where a fusion of power still existed.

#### **Question 03**

This question was generally answered competently, with some responses being very impressive. The main weakness was that most answers dealt with the advantages and disadvantages of a codified UK constitution in turn, without addressing 'overwhelming'. Some answers had the appearance of 'stock' responses about codified constitutions, without much reference to key constitutional developments such as the Human Rights Act. A lot of responses made useful comparisons with the US constitution; although sometimes these dominated the answer. While accurate comparative material is welcomed, there is no expectation that this should be detailed or extensive, and candidates should always focus answers firmly on the UK.

## Topic 2 – Parliament

### Question 04

Candidates who were knowledgeable about select committees usually had little difficulty answering this question. Most candidates explained the role and composition of select committees. Some gave examples, not only of particular committees, but also names of chairpersons and in some cases of specific investigations and reports. Some stronger responses went beyond House of Commons departmental select committees by examining the Public Accounts Committee and House of Lords select committees. Unfortunately, quite a large number of candidates confused select committees with 'legislative' committees.

### Question 05

Responses to Question 05 were generally disappointing. The extract identified Opposition Days as one 'way' of challenging the government, and some candidates gave accurate supporting information about this. However, many candidates appeared unable to identify a second 'way'. Many wrote in general terms about debates or committees without focusing on the Official Opposition or the concept of 'challenge'. Some wrote about minority parties, opposition MPs, or MPs generally, rather than the 'Official Opposition'. Many answers, for example, gave detailed accounts of PMQs without any reference to the Leader of the Opposition. Some ignored not only the Official Opposition but also the House of Commons and Parliament by writing about the media and public opinion as ways of challenging the government.

### Question 06

Many candidates struggled to answer this question well. Weaker candidates wrote about the role of MPs generally rather than specifically about backbenchers. Some candidates also had difficulty in distinguishing between the different roles of opposition backbenchers and government backbenchers. There were also too many unbalanced accounts which looked at either the constituency role or parliamentary role of backbenchers but not both. Some stronger responses did offer good analysis, eg that the main role of the backbench MP was likely to vary with the issue or policy under consideration; that backbenchers in marginal seats were more likely to focus on constituency role, and that government backbenchers were less likely to rebel if government has a small majority. However, many answers did little more than recognise the potential conflict between constituency and party/parliamentary roles. Many candidates made no attempt to identify a 'main role'. Some stronger candidates included discussion of House of Commons procedure. For example, PMQ/Private Members' Bills were often used to highlight constituency concerns, but many failed to develop answers in this way.

## Topic 3 – The Core Executive

This was the second most popular topic after Topic 1.

### Question 07

Question 07 was generally well answered. While some candidates gave incomplete explanations (eg majority party in Parliament) most went further by identifying particular components of government such as Prime Minister, Cabinet and ministers. Relatively few, however, mentioned junior ministers, although quite a number wrote about government departments and civil servants. There were numerous references to the coalition government. A few candidates wrote of the various branches of government such as legislative, executive and judicial, which was not the context in which the term was used in the extract and these responses received only limited credit.

### **Question 08**

Most candidates recognised that a prime minister's patronage extended to appointing and dismissing Cabinet ministers. Many offered information about specific Cabinet reshuffles, some going back to Macmillan's Night of the long Knives'. Too often, however, the focus was the act of reshuffles, or their wider political significance – such as rewarding party faithful - rather than their impact on prime ministerial authority. The best answers pointed to a PM's ability to strengthen their position by appointing like-minded individuals, removing potential rivals, securing a more favourable ideological balance etc. Stronger candidates also argued that reshuffles sometimes backfired and weakened authority. A small number confused Cabinet reshuffles with ministerial resignations such as those of Robin Cook and Clare Short over Iraq.

### **Question 09**

This was probably the best answered question. Many candidates showed impressive awareness of the relative powers of the cabinet and Prime Minister and gave examples from recent premierships. There was often some historical perspective which proved useful for contextualising 'modern times'. It was also pleasing to see frequent references to kitchen cabinets, bilaterals, sofa government, democracy etc as well as contrasts with US presidents. There was much discussion of Cameron's government, and obstacles to prime ministerial dominance in a coalition.

If this question had been about prime ministerial versus cabinet government many answers would have been excellent. The question was instead about whether the Prime Minister or cabinet dominates the core executive, and it was this latter aspect – the core executive – that many candidates ignored. Few candidates dealt with important aspects of the core executive such as the Cabinet Office, government departments or senior civil service. Many candidates discussed the influence, or lack of it, of the Cabinet, but failed to explain the influence of Cabinet ministers in shaping their department's policy. There was equally little recognition that Prime Ministers, however powerful, could not decide and implement all government policy single-handedly. It continues to be important to emphasise that answers should focus firmly on the actual question.

## **Topic 4 – Multi-level Governance**

This was not a very popular topic, with very few responses.

### **Question 10**

Most candidates explained that MEP stood for Member of the European Parliament. Some gave further information about numbers, electoral systems, role etc, while stronger candidates also explained the wider context of MEPs' influence within the EU and/or UK politics. Some offered comparison with Westminster MPs or named an individual MEP, often Nick Griffin. Too many candidates, however, offered little of their own knowledge.

### **Question 11**

Many candidates used the extract by mentioning that the Commission was unelected and to that extent the EU was 'outside effective democratic control'. This was sometimes, but not always, followed by expanding on the point in the extract that the Commission 'largely dominates policy making'. Of these responses, many claimed that Lord Mandelson was still a member of the Commission. The question asked for two reasons why the European Union might be seen as 'outside effective democratic control' and while some candidates identified and explained a second reason (usually the European Parliament's limited powers), many did not give a second reason. Some candidates mentioned the EU law's precedence over Westminster's as a second reason; others discussed the lack of a UK Lisbon treaty referendum.

While examiners gave some credit for these it left the impression that candidates had only a very general knowledge about EU institutions. Very few candidates addressed the reference in the question as to whether democratic control was 'effective' or not.

### **Question 12**

Question 12 was generally well answered although so few candidates dealt with local government that it is not possible to give comprehensive feedback. Candidates invariably discussed advantages followed by disadvantages of devolution, sometimes without deciding whether the former 'clearly outweighed' the latter. A few weaker candidates answered as if the question was about devolution versus parliamentary sovereignty. Generally candidates had reasonable knowledge about devolved bodies, although some were vague about specific powers and most focused on Scottish devolution. The 'West Lothian Question' featured strongly in many answers. This was usually offered as a disadvantage of devolution and was often the main feature of the answer. However, it was gratifying that candidates now appear to understand the different status and roles of Scottish MPs and MSPs when discussing this issue.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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