

Edexcel Government and Politics for AS: Success in Politics Second Edition

March 2009 Update

Section 1.2 Party policies and ideas

Parties: Labour policies (page 76)

Clearly the credit crunch and recession which has followed has resulted in a major change in economic management. The Government, which was previously reluctant to intervene in the economy, has been forced to become pro-active. Nationalisation of some banks, support for banks, underwriting debts and some support for specific industries and businesses have all been undertaken. There has been tax cutting to encourage more consumer spending and government expenditure will rise in the next few years with many new capital projects to create jobs. In addition the Government is likely to strengthen regulation of financial markets, which had largely been removed in the mid 1980s. The question is: is this a long term retreat from the free market policies of neo-liberalism or only a pragmatic move which will change after the crisis is over?

Labour and constitutional reform (pages 77–78)

Despite much talk of completing House of Lords reform and a general commitment to a partially elected House by Jack Straw, the Justice Secretary, no progress is in sight.

Liberal Democrats and economic management (page 81)

The Liberal Democrats, inspired by their deputy leader, Vincent Cable, has been perhaps the most interventionist of all parties during the economic crisis. They have recommended bank nationalisations and tax cuts for low income earners.

Consensus politics (pages 84–85)

At the beginning of the credit crunch in 2007–08 there was general political consensus over what needed to be done. Towards the end of 2008, however, the consensus fractured and the Conservatives argued that there had been too much intervention and government debt was too high. They were recommending deep cuts in public expenditure to reduce public debt.

Section 1.3 Elections

Electoral reform – arguments for and against (pages 118–120)

In Scotland, where there has been a minority SNP Government since 2007, the proportional electoral system has prevented any one party winning an overall majority. This created a crisis in early 2009 when the Government could not get its annual budget approved in the Scottish Parliament because it lacked an overall majority. The Government was on the verge of resigning when the Liberal Democrats stepped in, agreeing to support the budget in return for concessions. Thus the small Liberal Democrat party was able to wield a great deal of influence. Many would see this as an example of a negative result of the use of PR. Others would say that this kind of 'consensus' politics is more desirable than single party dominance.

Section 1.4 Pressure groups

Pressure groups and direct action (pages 137–138)

A good example of direct action occurred in January 2009, when workers at the French Total oil depot in Lincolnshire walked off the job in protest at the hiring of foreign workers at the plant (unemployment in the UK has been rising substantially). This rapidly spread to other plants not directly affected. This demonstrated the speed with which direct action can spread. The workers won a compromise, with about 100 jobs being offered to British workers.

Section 2.1 The UK constitution

Freedom of Information Act (page 178)

In late 2008 an application was made under the Freedom of Information Act to view Cabinet papers relating to the decision to join the Iraq war in 2003. This was a potentially difficult situation as it is almost certain that the Cabinet was split at the time, though the rules of collective responsibility hid most of the probable dissension. The Information Commissioner, who rules on whether documents should be released, had declared that the papers should be released. However, Justice Secretary Jack Straw vetoed this decision in February 2009 (as he can recommend under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act) on the grounds that it might damage national security. He has also said that it is vital to British democracy to preserve collective cabinet responsibility, otherwise ministers will be reluctant to discuss issues in Cabinet for fear of having their opposition publicised. This demonstrates the weakness of the Act. Straw's veto was opposed by the Liberal Democrats but reluctantly supported by the Conservatives. Many backbench Labour MPs remain unhappy at the decision. Certainly it would have been a major reform if discussions which took place only six years ago were opened to scrutiny.

London mayor and Government (pages 179–181)

Ken Livingstone lost his post as London mayor in May 2008, having been defeated at the polls by Conservative Boris Johnson. Almost Johnson's first action was to ban the drinking of alcohol on London's public transport system. He also forced Sir Ian Blair out of office as Chief of the Metropolitan Police. He is currently reviewing the operation of London's congestion zone and promises to scrap 'bendy buses' and increase cycle pathways.

The result of the elections to the Greater London assembly were as follows:

Party	seats	% vote
Conservative	11	34
Labour	8	27
Liberal Democrat	3	11
Green	2	8
BNP	1	1
Others	0	15

The major shock here was the winning of one seat by the British National Party. This was a result of London's proportional Additional Member System (AMS) of voting.

Northern Ireland Government (page 193)

The Government of Northern Ireland has survived despite a number of crises. The new DUP leader, Peter Robinson, took over as First Minister from Ian Paisley in June 2008. He was considered a 'hard line' Unionist, but has demonstrated a willingness to work with Republicans.

Section 2.2 Parliament

Parliamentary select committees (pages 206–209)

Anyone who doubted the influence of the House of Commons select committees should look at accounts of the Treasury Select Committee's two day interrogation of nine prominent bankers in early February 2009. The dramatic effect of the televised hearings was to throw into focus the issues of bank salaries and bonuses, putting more pressure on government to curb such excesses. Gordon Brown immediately announced he would severely reduce bonuses in banks controlled by government.

House of Lords (pages 228–229)

When four Labour Party peers were investigated in January 2009 for allegedly asking for money from businesses to promote 'friendly' amendments to legislation, it provoked one important reaction. This was that it demonstrated the potential influence of the Lords, especially in terms of legislative amendments. If the Lords has little or no influence, why would any outside interest offer money for such favour? The investigation continues.

House of Lords reform (pages 234–236)

No further progress has been made to complete the reform. However, Justice Secretary Jack Straw has declared himself committed to either a fully elected second house or one where 80% are elected and 20% appointed.

Section 2.3 The prime minister and cabinet

Prime minister and cabinet (pages 245–246)

One of the most interesting appointments to Cabinet in recent times was that of Lord (Peter) Mandelson as Industry Secretary in October 2008. Mandelson, twice disgraced and removed from office, had been EU Trade Commissioner since 2004. Mandelson has long been a political enemy of Gordon Brown and the two men dislike each other personally too. Brown put aside his own prejudices in order to add 'weight' to the Cabinet at a time of economic crisis. It demonstrates the prime minister's willingness to be pragmatic over such appointments.

Prime ministerial power (pages 249-50, 258-66)

The current economic problems demonstrate how dominant a prime minister can become during a crisis. Brown seems to be handling economic affairs almost single-handedly.

Collective Responsibility (pages 255-257)

See above under Freedom of Information.

Open Government (page 271)

See above under Freedom of Information.

Section 2.4 The judiciary and civil liberties

Judiciary – cases of political importance (page 281)

The Abu Qatada Case – International terrorist suspect Abu Qatada had won an appeal in 2008 against extradition to Jordan to face terrorist charges on the grounds that evidence against him in Jordan had been obtained under torture. But in February 2009 this decision was overturned unanimously by five Law Lords and he will be deported unless he can successfully appeal to the European Court of Human Rights. This was a rare recent example of senior judges backing the government against the claims of human rights activists that terrorist suspects must have their rights respected.

The Davis Case - Iain Davis was a convicted murderer who appealed against his conviction on the grounds that evidence against him had been given anonymously in court (to protect witnesses from possible intimidation). The case went to the House of Lords who overturned the conviction as anonymous witnesses took away an ancient right for an accused person to see and question those who testify against him. The Government was alarmed by this decision as many other serious criminals had been, or were due to be, tried on the basis of such evidence. It feared that many serious criminals would go free if anonymous evidence were disallowed. The Government has announced it will seek legislation to allow anonymous witnesses to testify. As Parliament is sovereign such a law would prevent the courts blocking any more such cases. As yet no legislation has been passed.

The Max Mosley case – In July 2008 Max Mosley, boss of Formula One racing, won a libel action against the News of the World who had accused him of attending a 'Nazi-style' sex party. The High Court ruled that his privacy had been invaded. This judgment re-asserted the right to privacy. Even though Mosley was considered a 'public figure', he did have a right to privacy, said the court. This may have important implications for other so-called 'celebrities'.