

Competition question

‘Parliament is effective at holding the UK government to account.’ Analyse and evaluate this statement.

Student exemplary essay: 1000 words, 2 hours

The UK government is accountable to Parliament because ministers must explain their decisions, defend legislation and maintain the confidence of the House of Commons. Parliament has several methods of scrutiny, including ministerial questions, select committees, debates, votes and examination by the House of Lords. However, the government usually controls a Commons majority and therefore has considerable influence over Parliament. The real test is whether scrutiny produces meaningful consequences, rather than whether ministers are simply required to appear. Parliament is most effective at exposing mistakes and forcing ministers to justify themselves, but it is less consistently able to change government policy. Its strength depends heavily on the size and unity of the governing party's majority.

One way Parliament holds the government accountable is through questions and debates. Prime Minister's Questions gives the Leader of the Opposition and backbench MPs a regular opportunity to challenge the Prime Minister in public. Urgent questions can also force ministers to appear before the Commons when an important issue arises. These procedures create publicity and can reveal weak explanations or contradictions. Ministers know that poor performances may be reported by the media and damage the government's reputation. This makes parliamentary questioning a genuine form of political accountability. However, questioning does not necessarily produce detailed scrutiny. PMQs is often dominated by party conflict, noise and prepared exchanges between party leaders. The Prime Minister may avoid answering directly, while MPs from the governing party often ask supportive questions. Debates can expose disagreement but usually do not bind the government. As a result, questions are better at creating public pressure than at forcing a policy change. Their effectiveness depends partly on whether the media and public care about the issue.

Select committees usually provide more detailed scrutiny. Departmental committees examine government policy, spending and administration, and they can question ministers, civil servants and outside experts. Their membership includes MPs from different parties, so they can be less openly partisan than the Commons chamber. Committee hearings may uncover information that would otherwise receive little attention, while published reports allow MPs to make recommendations after considering evidence. The election of most committee chairs by MPs since 2010 has also given them a degree of independence from party leaders. Nevertheless, select committees cannot normally force the government to accept their recommendations. A minister may face difficult questioning and still continue with the same policy. Committees also have limited time and resources compared with government departments, and their members are still politicians with party loyalties. Their influence is therefore often indirect. They can shape public debate, embarrass a department or encourage later reform, but they do not act like courts and cannot usually impose a solution. This means they are effective investigators but weaker enforcers.

The House of Commons possesses stronger formal powers. It can reject legislation, amend bills and ultimately remove a government through a vote of no confidence. The clearest modern example of parliamentary strength occurred during the Brexit conflict. In January 2019, Theresa May's withdrawal agreement was defeated in the largest government defeat in modern Commons history. Her government lost because opposition parties and many Conservative MPs voted against it. This

showed that Parliament can block a major government policy when the governing party is divided and lacks a reliable majority. Yet the unusual circumstances of 2019 also reveal Parliament's normal weakness. Governments with secure majorities can normally pass their legislation because party whips encourage MPs to vote together. Many governing-party MPs hope to become ministers, while ministers themselves are bound by collective responsibility. The government also controls much of the Commons timetable and introduces most successful legislation. Therefore, the Commons' legal powers are impressive, but its willingness to use them is restricted by party discipline. A large and united majority can turn Parliament into a body that approves government decisions rather than seriously threatening them.

The House of Lords can provide a further check. Its members do not depend on re-election or promotion in the Commons, and many have specialist knowledge. The Lords spends much of its time revising bills and can ask the government to reconsider unclear, excessive or poorly drafted measures. Government defeats in the Lords are more common than in the Commons because no party has an automatic majority there. Even when the Commons later restores the original wording, Lords amendments can draw attention to a problem and sometimes persuade ministers to compromise. The Lords is still limited by its lack of democratic legitimacy. It normally accepts that the elected Commons should have the final say, particularly on manifesto commitments and financial legislation. The Parliament Acts can also allow some bills to become law without Lords consent. This means the Lords can delay and revise policy but rarely prevent a determined majority government from acting. Its unelected nature may strengthen the independence of its scrutiny, but it also weakens its authority when directly opposing elected MPs.

The 2019 prorogation dispute further demonstrates both the importance and vulnerability of parliamentary scrutiny. Boris Johnson's government advised the Queen to prorogue Parliament for several weeks during the Brexit crisis. The Supreme Court ruled the prorogation unlawful because it prevented Parliament from carrying out its constitutional functions without reasonable justification. Parliament was able to return, but only after intervention by the judiciary. This suggests that Parliament is central to accountability, yet the executive may still attempt to limit scrutiny and Parliament may require support from other constitutional institutions.

Overall, Parliament is effective at making government explain itself and at exposing failures. Questions, committees and the Lords create scrutiny that can damage ministers politically and improve legislation. However, Parliament's ability to force change is inconsistent. It is strongest when the government is divided, has a small majority or faces rebellion from its own MPs, as in 2019. It is weakest when a disciplined governing party has a comfortable Commons majority. Therefore, Parliament provides meaningful accountability, but it is usually a watchdog rather than a master of the government.