

# Smaller Government: What Do Ministers Do?

## Issues and Questions Paper

The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) is undertaking an inquiry into the role and effectiveness of government ministers, as part of its interest in the wider theme of smaller government. This paper outlines the key questions that those wishing to submit evidence are invited to consider.

### Reasons for the inquiry

PASC has considered many issues relating to the appointment, number and role of ministers over the years (most recently, the impact of the number of ministers on government effectiveness and the trend to appoint ministers from outside Parliament<sup>1</sup>).

Several developments since the formation of the coalition government have prompted this current examination into the role and number of ministers. These include:

- i. Proposals to reduce the number of Members of Parliament: in particular, whether this implies an associated reduction in the number of ministers;
- ii. Implications of the Government's plans to decentralise power as part of its agenda on the Big Society and the post-bureaucratic state (especially what these plans mean for the role of ministers and the concept of ministerial accountability);
- iii. Pressures on public spending as a result of the more austere fiscal climate, in the context of the cost of ministers (including ministerial salaries and cost of civil service support); and
- iv. Implications of coalition government for the number and function of ministers, both overall and in individual departments.

### Background

At present the total number of ministers is 119, 23 of whom are Cabinet ministers, with 96 ministers below Cabinet rank. Within the coalition government, 96 of the 119 ministers are Conservative and 23 are Liberal Democrat. A total of 95 ministers sit in the House of Commons, while 24 ministers sit in the House of Lords.

PASC's recent report on *Too Many Ministers* found that the total number of government ministers has grown steadily since 1900, with the rate of increase particularly marked for ministers below Cabinet level. PASC found that this trend had several potentially detrimental effects, including cost demands on the public purse and possible harm to the interests of good government (from too many ministers clogging up decision making processes and blurring lines of responsibility). Most significantly, PASC concluded that increasing the number of ministers was corrosive to the independence of the legislature, since it increased the size of the 'payroll vote'—the number of MPs who hold a government job and are therefore expected to vote with the government.

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<sup>1</sup> See Public Administration Select Committee, Ninth Report of Session 2009–10, *Too Many Ministers?*, HC 457; Eighth Report of Session 2009–10, *Goats and Tsars: Ministerial and Other Appointments from Outside Parliament*, HC 330.

PASC has also examined the recent practice of appointing people from outside Parliament as ministers through the House of Lords. These ministers became known as 'GOATs' (from 'Government Of All the Talents'), appointed for their particular expertise in areas such as health and foreign policy. The appointment of the GOATs has highlighted wider issues about the function of ministers, the experience needed to fulfil the ministerial role effectively, and the arrangements required for proper accountability.

## **Questions**

- 1. What do ministers do and is their work best done by ministers who are drawn from Parliament?**
- 2. Are there too many ministers, not enough, or is the level about right?**
  - a. Are current statutory limits on the number of ministers set at an appropriate level?**
  - b. Is there an optimal number of ministers in the interests of good government?**
- 3. If proposals to reduce the number of MPs are implemented, should the number of ministers also be reduced?**
  - a. If so, by what extent?**
  - b. How should it be done?**
- 4. What implications does coalition government have for the role of ministers and how they operate, both collectively and at the level of individual departments?**
- 5. How is the role and function of ministers likely to change if plans to decentralise power from central government to local and community level are introduced?**
- 6. What do developments such as coalition government and the decentralisation of power away from central government mean in particular for:**
  - a. The role and number of junior ministers?**
  - b. Our understanding of ministerial accountability?**
- 7. How significant are cost and affordability issues to decisions about the number of ministerial appointments, especially given the extent of spending cuts required from government departments in the foreseeable future?**
- 8. Under what circumstances is it appropriate to appoint ministers from outside Parliament? Do those circumstances apply at present?**
- 9. Does the balance between the numbers of ministers in the Commons and in the Lords need redressing?**

## **How to respond to this paper**

PASC would appreciate receiving responses to any or all of the questions in this paper. Although some of the questions could be answered by a simple yes or no, it would be helpful to have fuller responses in order for us to understand the points being made. Some respondents may wish to concentrate on those issues in which they have a special interest, rather than answering all of the questions. Respondents may also wish to suggest any proposed recommendations for action by the Government or others.

Written responses to this issues and questions paper will usually be treated as evidence to the Committee and may be published as part of a final report. **If you object to your response being made public in a volume of evidence, please make this clear when it is submitted.**

Responses should be submitted by **Monday 20 September, 2010** by email to [pasc@parliament.uk](mailto:pasc@parliament.uk) If you do not have access to email, you may send a paper copy of your response to the Clerk of the Public Administration Select Committee, Committee Office, First Floor, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA.

### **Please note**

Each submission should:

- be no more than 3,000 words in length;
- begin with a short summary in bullet point form;
- have numbered paragraphs; and
- be in Word format or a rich text format with as little use of colour or logos as possible.

The Committee expects to commence oral evidence sessions on this inquiry in autumn 2010.