

W201 The Individual and the State

Study notes on Responsible Government

What is Responsible Government?

The important point to grasp is that the phrase 'responsible government' has nothing to do with the government behaving responsibly or sensibly. It is about the means by which the government or executive is answerable (or responsible) to parliament (and thereby indirectly to the electorate).

It is a phrase which sums up two constitutional conventions.

1 Collective ministerial responsibility

- Ministers are expected to support government policy in parliament and in public. If not they should resign.
- Ministers should observe Cabinet secrecy.
- if defeated in a vote of confidence or on an issue of confidence in the House of Commons the Government should resign or seek a dissolution (eg the Callaghan Labour Government in 1979 on a vote of confidence).

2 Individual ministerial responsibility

A minister is responsible to Parliament for the conduct of his department. In the event of a policy disaster the minister traditionally will resign (eg Lord Carrington as Foreign Secretary after the Argentine Invasion of the Falklands in 1982). However contrast the more recent 1995 incident of the Parkhurst Isle of Wight prison escapes when the Director of Prisons Derek Lewis lost his job and not the Home Secretary Michael Howard who claimed the escapes were an operational and not a policy matter.

Summary

The most important principle in this group is that a government resigns or seeks a dissolution on losing a vote of confidence in the Commons. It is a central convention of Britain's unwritten constitution.

Where a strict separation of powers operates as in America this situation does not arise. In the USA for example there are separate fixed term elections for the President (executive) and the Congress (legislature). In Britain the election for executive and legislature is a single election because the personnel overlap.