

The Think Tank

Up-to-date analysis of exam-relevant issues for A Level Politics

January 2026 | Issue 85

Conventions in
US Politics

Key Ideas of
Proudhon

Is China a
Superpower?

AND MORE

Will
Reform UK
Break Through
in 2026?

Springboard 1

'We will run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition... We're going to have our very large US oil companies, the biggest anywhere in the world, in, spend billions of dollars fix the badly broken infrastructure, the oil infrastructure, and start putting money for the country and we are ready to stage a second and much larger attack if we need to do so.'

▲ President Trump claims the US will run Venezuela after capturing its president, Nicolás Maduro, in a raid in which 32 Cuban soldiers who were protecting Maduro were killed.

Discussion Points

- To what extent do you think it is true that this military action is about a 'war on drugs'?
- Trump seems to claim control over Venezuela without actually having control of it. Do you think the threat of further use of force will be enough for Venezuela to acquiesce?
- According to the US Constitution, only Congress can declare war. What does this tell us about the strength of checks and balances in the US?
- Given the apparent justification of a 'war on drugs', and the pattern of attacking countries, does Trump's policy represent a real departure from the US's long-term foreign policy?

'What Venezuela needs is a government that respects the rule of law... a government with unity, with a clear political project, with a clear political framework, with a clear political law.'

▲ Acting President of Venezuela, Nicolás Rodríguez

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Springboard 2

'We regarded Maduro as an illegitimate President and we will work with the international community about the end of his regime.'

I reiterated my support for international law this morning. We will work with the international community to support the legitimate government that reflects the will of the Venezuelan people.'

▲ Prime Minister Keir Starmer's statement on the US capture of Maduro. Maduro's wife, Cilia Flores, and daughter, Corina Machado, had been banned from participating in the 2024 election – this was because the UK government believed the reasons the 2024 elections were regarded as neither free nor fair. Machado received the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize – apparently coveted by Donald Trump – for her work as the first woman to be elected to the Venezuelan National Assembly in 20 years, and for her support of democracy.

Discussion Points

- Why is it difficult for a UK prime minister to criticise the US government?
- Does a legal opinion really weaken international law?
- In the apparently unthinkable but not impossible scenario that the US tries something like this again, which as an autonomous territory of Denmark is a US ally through NATO – what would be the consequences?

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A Word from the Editor

2026 begins with a crisis as the US tries to take over Venezuela by capturing its president. We've tackled this in the springboard and I'm sure we'll be seeing more on this in the next few issues.

Surprisingly stable polling that puts Reform ahead (but not with enough support to win an election) means it's time for everyone to take a serious look at the Labour and Conservative parties' competitors. So, our focus on political parties in this issue begins with Reform UK (overleaf) and Your Party (page 8).

This also marks the start of a 2026 series on devolution – with the next big electoral markers being elections to the Scottish and Welsh parliaments in May. We're starting with an overview of the Scottish Parliament (see page 16) and will continue with more on Wales and other parties this year.

After this year's devolved votes, 2027 looks relatively quiet for planned elections (although it may feature more locals than usual with lots of reform to boundaries), while the 2028 London mayoral election will no doubt be a key one. And if the next general election is not held that year, it'll be in 2029.

But the most important vote that happens in the next year *could* be one internal to the Labour Party – if, as many predict, Starmer resigns before the end of the year. While this shouldn't be happening just looking at election results, his popularity is stubbornly low, and poor May election results could be the first trigger for either a challenge or resignation. That's something to watch in 2026!

*We welcome feedback and contributions at SamFrancis@PublishMeNow.co.uk
If you have any ideas for the magazine, or articles you'd like to write, please get in touch!*



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Reform UK: a breakthrough in politics?

Graham Goodlad asks whether the new party can build on its remarkable success in the 2024 general election

Both Edexcel and AQA require students to study minor or emerging parties, and their impact on UK politics, and the emergence of a multi-party system. Understanding the rise of Reform UK, the country's leading party of the populist right, and its prospects, is therefore worthwhile for A Level Politics students.

Reform UK achieved remarkable success in July 2024 with the election of five MPs (see Table 1). Previously it had just one, Lee Anderson, who joined Reform after being suspended from the Conservative Party over claims that London had been taken over by Islamists. The UK's first-past-the-post voting system meant that its 14.3% vote share was not translated into a proportionate number of seats, but it was still a significant achievement. In the May 2025 local elections, Reform secured 41% of the council seats that were up for election, and took control of 12 councils. In two areas – Greater Lincolnshire and Hull and East Yorkshire – a Reform UK mayor was elected.

There are signs of success for Reform UK. It averages 27% in most opinion polls – roughly 10 percentage points higher than either of the two

main parties. In Christopher Harbo's largest single donation, Reform also reported political party, with comfortably overtaking



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Table 1: Reform UK MPs

Name	Constituency	Still a Reform MP?	
Nigel Farage	Clacton, Essex	Y	Party leader
Richard Tice	Boston and Skegness, Lincolnshire	Y	Party leader, deputy
Lee Anderson	Ashfield, Nottinghamshire	Y	Left the party in 2024; now an independent
Rupert Lowe	Great Yarmouth, Norfolk	N	Suspended in 2025 following a row over right-wing policies
James McDonald	Basildon and East Thurrock, Essex	N	Left Reform UK in 2024, alleging he did not receive his election expenses
Sarah Pochin	Runcorn and Helsby, Cheshire	Y	Elected to the House of Commons in 2024
Danny Kruger	East Wiltshire	Y	Former Conservative minister, left in September 2024



Not surprisingly, the party leader, Nigel Farage, is in buoyant mood as we enter the new year, and he has told his followers to be ready for a general election before the officially expected date of 2028–29. A YouGov poll in September 2025 predicted that Reform would emerge as the largest party in a general election, falling just short of an overall majority. How secure is the progress made by the party, and what does the future hold for it?

Opportunities and challenges

Reform UK's strongest support comes from male rather than female voters, and from older rather than younger age groups – although it also attracts a significant minority of 18–30-year-old men. Polling suggests that those who opt for it do so because it is different from the two main parties, both of which have proved disappointing in office. It offers radical solutions and adopts a tone that speaks to many of these voters. Predictably, the key issue most often cited is immigration – the failure of Conservative and Labour governments to 'stop the boats'. This links to a wider concern among older, less affluent voters – many of them living in east coast constituencies now represented by Reform MPs – about the pace of social and cultural change in recent decades.

The party faces some significant challenges. One issue has been the quality of its candidates. A number ordered to step down in the run-up to the 2024 election after embarking on social media posts from them. Insiders claim that vetting and screening procedures have improved since then. However, negative stories have continued to come out. In December 2025, Farage himself was at the centre of allegations that he had indulged in racial abuse as a school pupil in the 1970s.

Farage is a 'Marmite' political figure. Support for Reform increased after he took over the party leadership from Richard Tice during the 2024 election campaign. Farage's down-to-earth, straight-talking, pub-going persona appeals to a significant audience. He has even started to gain traction in Scotland – a part of the UK where, as leader of UKIP in 2013, he once had to escape from hostile demonstrators in Edinburgh. On the other hand, a sizeable section of public opinion views him as a divisive figure. He has attracted controversy not only for his views on immigration and the EU but for his criticism of some environmental policies and his admiration of Donald Trump. His high profile has also led to accusations that Reform is a 'one-man band', with few substantial figures at the top.

Another issue is how well-prepared Reform is for government. There have been suggestions that its

economic policies row back from earlier, citing the state of the economy. It also pledged to reduce the size of the French government, but local councils have been expected to make up for the realities of running a smaller state.

Present opponents

Over the last year there have been several defectors from the Conservative Party to Reform. A serving Conservative MP defected to Reform last September. Conservative MPs have joined them, including Nadine Dorries, Sir Alan Budd and Sir David Jekyns, now Reform MPs. Reform also has one member of the upper house, Lord Fraser of Allander, in Scotland.

However, there is some concern that some of the former Conservative politicians, motivated by a desire to join a parliament that is more representative, are leaving Reform. A rebranding exercise would not be to its supporters of the party, which they see as being about immigration, taxation and the economy.

The relationship between the Conservative Party and the Conservative movement, however, is a matter of some dispute. At the December 2024 election, the Conservative Party, as Reform was then known, did well down in Conservative constituencies, but Johnson to win the election. He had to guarantee the implementation of the manifesto for which he had fought the election. This matter in the July 2025 election. In the forthcoming election, the Conservatives have cost the Conservative Party by splitting the right-wing vote.

Farage was quick to point out at the end of 2025 that the Conservative Party was not the Conservative Party. He insisted that he can't be part of a Conservative Party that has a track record in the Conservative Party. Commentators have pointed out that, in this kind of deal, it is the Conservative Party that has the power on its own.

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voting was demonstrated in two by-elections for devolved parliaments last year – at Hamilton in Scotland and Caerphilly in Wales. Labour took the former from the SNP, while Plaid Cymru won the other, hitherto a safe Labour seat. In Caerphilly, the size of the swing to Plaid (27.4%), and the unusually high turnout for a Welsh Parliament contest (50.4%), suggest that many voters supported Plaid to keep out Reform.

Where next?

Reform is timing to come in the next big electoral test for UK politics: the May 2026 local elections. The Starmer government has had a disappointing first 18 months, dogged by policy U-turns, sluggish economic growth and slow progress on improving living standards. Similarly, the Conservatives remain in the doldrums, with Kemi Badenoch's leadership widely seen as uninspiring. But it is likely that we are still three to four years away from the next general election, and a great deal can change in the interim. It is an open question whether Farage and his party can sustain their current momentum for the long haul. ■

Discussion Questions

1. How far do you think the UK depends on the first past the post system to prevent Reform from winning future general elections?
2. Will the UK's first past the post system prevent Reform from winning future general elections?

Question in the Story

■ Evaluate the view that the political parties have limited influence on the UK political system. You must consider the following view in a balanced way:

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Profile: Zohran Mamdani

Ideology: Democrat

Nationality: American

Career: Mayor of New York City

Personal Profile

Born in Uganda to a Hindu film-maker mother and a Muslim academic father in 1991, Zohran was given the middle name 'Kwame', after the first president of Ghana, an important figure in the postcolonial politics which is his father's academic focus. It was this name he used in his campus newspaper at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, writing on a range of topics in 'Kwame's Column'.

Mamdani's political activity began in earnest when his interest in radical politics was piqued by an article where one of his favourite authors discussed support for a left-wing cause. In 2015 he volunteered in a special election for New York City Council, and Mamdani was subsequently elected to the City Council.

Competing in the 2025 mayoral elections against former Democrat Eric Adams, Mamdani represented the relatively radical left of the Democratic party, calling for universal childcare, affordable homes, and a \$30 minimum wage by 2030. A self-styled democratic socialist, Mamdani was the first openly gay person to be elected to the City Council.

Mamdani became the first New York mayor to take an oath of office in the name of the Constitution and the holy book, in a ceremony in the old City Hall subway station on 1 January 2025, and was afterwards sworn in by Bernie Sanders, the left-wing independent Senator from Vermont.

'New York will remain a city of immigrants: a city built by immigrants, owned by immigrants. And, as of tonight, led by an immigrant. So hear me, President Trump, when I say this: to get to any of us, you will have to get through all of us.'

**'I don't have b
I am a democ
most of us
refuse to
any of us'**

300 Words & an Essay

The 'Your Party' Project

An exam-style 300-word extract followed by a strong essay with exam-style questions.

The formation of 'Your Party' – consisting of six MPs including former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana – was announced in July 2025. It has a socialist agenda and sits to the left of Labour. It pledged that key decisions at the organisation would be made democratically by the membership at the party's inaugural conference in November – which meant months of uncertainty and often confusion, not least about whether it would keep the name Your Party. (It did.) It seeks support from voters and MPs dissatisfied with Labour, and has had some success on this front. However, it has been beset by power struggles, infighting and the resignations of two of its MPs.

Its inaugural conference was relatively well-attended with around 2,500 supporters but, according to Sultana, they were not given the option of voting for a dual leadership. They voted against having a single leader and opted for a leadership committee with a chairperson who must not be an MP – which ruled out both Corbyn and Sultana. This could significantly damage the party's media and public impact.

Your Party is one of several small and emerging UK parties which have grown in number, size and significance in recent years, making UK politics more pluralist, competitive and – for better or worse – unpredictable. It hopes to redress the UK's political shift to the right, at least partially. It could potentially jeopardise Labour's place as the dominant party on the left, just as Reform UK is undermining the Conservative Party's dominance on the right. However, Your Party has to contend with a Westminster electoral system which usually disproportionately favours the larger parties, and also with a rising, left-wing Green Party under new, self-described 'eco-populist' leader Zack Polanski – as well as trying to resolve its own internal struggles.

An original commentary written for The Think Tank

Evaluate the view that the only political parties that matter in our political system are the Labour and Conservative parties.

Edexcel (25 marks)

'The United Kingdom is a multi-party system.' Analyse and evaluate this statement.

AQA-style (25 marks)

Your Party is one of several small and emerging UK parties which have grown in number, size and significance in recent years, making UK politics more pluralist, competitive and – for better or worse – unpredictable. It hopes to redress the UK's political shift to the right, at least partially. It could potentially jeopardise Labour's place as the dominant party on the left, just as Reform UK is undermining the Conservative Party's dominance on the right. However, Your Party has to contend with a Westminster electoral system which usually disproportionately favours the larger parties, and also with a rising, left-wing Green Party under new, self-described 'eco-populist' leader Zack Polanski – as well as trying to resolve its own internal struggles.

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Party fell from 18% in July to 12% in November. However, the party's mere creation does enhance pluralism and the UK's increasingly multi-party political system, which should be good for voter choice and representation.

The significance of a small party depends partly on its size – which can mean membership numbers, and/or votes. Your Party already claims 5,000 members including 28 councillors, which is quite impressive considering it was founded. However, the Green Party claims 170,000 members since Zack Polanski became leader, and Reform UK now claims to be the largest UK party with over 200,000 members. (However, Reform is not a 'party' with 'members' in the usual sense, but rather a limited company with paying subscribers and a lack of internal democracy; and they, too, have had internal disputes and have lost MPs.) Small and emerging parties are usually relatively unimportant in terms of seats at Westminster, because – as the source says – the first-past-the-post electoral system tends to under-represent them, while over-representing the main parties. For example, in the 2024 general election Reform UK won 14% of the votes but under 1% (five) of the seats, while Labour won two-thirds of the seats on one-third of the votes. This apparent unfairness may boost support for proportional representation, especially among the growing number of voters who are turning to the smaller parties. At the time of writing, Your Party is too new to have stood in any elections; the May 2026 local, regional and general elections should be its first significant tests. However, even if small parties get a few seats but sizeable voting support in the country, that may be enough to prompt the main parties to steal some of their policy ideas. In the same week as Your Party's November conference, Labour announced the abandonment of their two-child benefit cap, a move supported by Your Party and by many of Labour's own backbenchers. Indeed, Zarah Sultana lost the Labour whip in 2024 precisely for voting against Labour in the Commons on this issue. Your Party – currently with four MPs in the Commons – intends to hold the Labour government accountable in Parliament and the country, and many Labour backbenchers quietly approve of its more explicitly socialist policies – for example, nationalisation of energy, water, rail and mail, a wealth tax, a council-house building programme, denunciation of arms sales to Israel, and rigorous party grassroots democracy. Your Party is also trying to persuade some left-wing Labour MPs, e.g. in the Socialist Campaign Group, to defect and join them.

Small parties, often 'kingmakers' by ensuring a main party (e.g. the Conservative Agreement 2017–18) the Conservatives 2015). Many Conservative parties of electoral power, current party leaders, many Labour backbenchers. Your Party's proposed leadership, no Labour of pact with Your Party hinted at a desire for a deal with the Green Party, getting the keys to the House of Commons could create a more UK party politics. More donors and a clear leader limit its media attention. Its purpose label could be a Commission report on political parties' complaint that it is not clear what it stands for. However, the new political scene, and the need for voter choice and accountability – may pose potential challenges for the government. The UK party system and its important roles. ■

Examiner's Comment

There was not always a clear for/against argument, but there was occasional material – which, while it could not gain comprehensive use, did provide useful detail on some aspects of the formation of the party. The essay did explicitly mention the titles in the final paragraph.

AO1: 9

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THE KEY IDEAS PIERRE-JOSÉPH PROUDHON

A short introduction examines what the French anarchist brought to politics

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65) – a printer by trade – was a left-wing French philosopher and an advocate of mass, peaceful resistance as a strategy to bring down the state (similar to Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of 'non-violent direct action' in India). He advocated common ownership of the means of production, but did not entirely oppose personal ownership. His core idea of 'mutualism' envisaged a highly decentralised federation of cooperative workers' communities, with a national 'people's bank' to redistribute funds among them.

He is credited with coining the word 'anarchy' – literally 'no rulers' – to mean natural order, in his book *What is Property* (1840). He worked with Karl Marx and other revolutionaries to establish the First Workers' International in London in 1864; but Marx ultimately and scathingly labelled anarchists like Proudhon as 'utopian socialists' in contrast with his own objective, materialist theory of 'scientific socialism'. By this he meant that their theories were based upon emotion and moral value judgements (for example, Proudhon's famous statement that 'property is theft') rather than upon hard, factual analysis. Proudhon, however, rejected Marx's idea of a temporary state after revolution. Despite his anti-statism, Proudhon briefly became a member of the French Parliament after the revolution of 1848 (when he described himself as a 'federalist').

PROUDHON'S KEY IDEAS

MUTUALISM

Proudhon proposed his central idea of 'mutualism' as an economic and social system – to replace market capitalism – where individuals and independent, collective associations of workers, craftsmen and peasants traded and cooperated with each other in voluntary, equitable, non-exploitative and mutually beneficial ways. As such, he is often seen as a bridge between collectivist and individualist anarchism, though his ideas lean more in the direction of collectivism. His statement that 'property is theft' referred to capitalists and landowners who 'stole' the fruits of the workers who had created them through their labour. However, he contrasted private property for private profit – which was exploitative and unacceptable – with personal property including people's homes and what he called 'possessions', e.g. workers owning their own tools, hence non-exploitative. He was not, therefore, a wholesale anarcho-communist. He also advocated a national 'people's bank' to provide interest-free loans to workers and peasants.

HUMAN NATURE

Here again, Proudhon was sceptical of the selflessness – and in combination of ego and collectivism. He believed that 'the vehicle through which the capacity for moral growth in pursuit of freedom and conflicting instincts – believed, the driving force of

THE STATE

Anarchists all view the state as undesirable, even statelessness as the ideal. Until a mere six thousand stateless societies again. Proudhon saw the state as oppressive, and freedom and the natural law. *Idea of the Revolution* was watched over, inspected, regimented, closed, controlled, assessed, all by creatures that 'neither virtue nor vice'. (This is on the stream of invective against government; that is, a capitalist state, he said, for the few at the expense of the many. Proudhon believed, I think, to be almost as inherently bourgeois state and itself rather than 'with

Anarchists are often seen as destructive and nihilistic. Proudhon was one of the leaders of their opposition to the peaceful abolition of the state, reorganisation of the economy, communes and free associations of rationality. His influence acknowledged war, innovation and economic development, its state-sponsored, the sacrifice of its citizens.

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SOCIETY

Proudhon's vision of the good society (he rejected the word 'utopian') was based on free association between highly decentralised – federal – communes, with freedom 'not the daughter but the mother of order'. Anarchists favour direct democracy on the grounds that 'representative democracy' is neither representative nor democratic, because it entails people voting to surrender their personal power to self-serving elites and, in the process, colluding in their own oppression. Anarchism specifically favoured local, directly democratic communes, workers' self-management and equal rights. What anarchist political activity should not do is participate in the traditional, orthodox, ballot box and party politics, since this would be subscribing to the politics of the state. However, Proudhon briefly became a member of the French Parliament after the revolution of 1848, which he saw as an opportunity to dismantle the state from within, even as he distrusted it. His radical ideas were popular, but – or maybe therefore – he was imprisoned a year later from 1849 until 1852 for his open opposition to French President Bonaparte.

In summary, Proudhon was the first to announce proudly in 1840, 'I am an anarchist' – as an advocate of direct self-government, personal freedom and rejection of all forms of power. Anarchism is widely assumed to mean chaos and disorder, but it was also Proudhon who devised the circle-A symbol for anarchism to mean 'order in anarchy', and who wrote 'as man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy'. He is often seen as the father of anarchism, which he summarised as 'order without power' and its ultimate goal as 'beyond the state under the single law of reason'.

THE INFLUENCE OF PROUDHON'S IDEAS

Proudhon's often complex advocacy of individual liberty and collective equality has influenced many; for example: twentieth-century cooperative associations; the profusion of communes in the 1960s and 1970s; the contemporary 'fair trade' movement; and many current and diverse pressure groups which are anarchistic and anti-capitalist in their aims, e.g. Anarchist Federation, Solidarity Federation, Class War and Freedom Press (who still have a bookshop in London); or in their organisation and methods, e.g. various environmentalist, feminist, anti-nuclear and animal rights groups. He also influenced other key thinkers: Peter Kropotkin and his idea of 'mutual aid', Mikhail Bakunin and Emma Goldman – although they did not share his pacifism – and he inspired anarchist movements in Spain and the USA.

APPLYING

CASE STUDY 1: PALESTINE ACT

The 'non-violent' protest was banned by the terrorism legislation. Properties of arms companies supplying hardware to Israel. One man has since been arrested for expressing support for the protest on remand awaiting trial. A debilitating hunger strike is

WHAT WOULD Proudhon do?

Proudhon would strongly support an avowedly non-violent protest. The overreach of state power, arrests of peaceful protesters and the state's attempt to silence public protest. However, the balance between the state and the public might give him pause.

CASE STUDY 2: POPULISM

'Populism' is a label for demagogues, which are against established liberal democracies, inequality, cultural change. Critics say that it may be a threat to democracy.

WHAT WOULD Proudhon do?

Proudhon opposed nationalism. He advocated direct democracy, 'the faith' in people's autonomy and fair decisions. He believed that 'the people are sovereign' – that they have the personal power to negotiate with the state – or perhaps especially the state. Direct democracy enables an informed electorate to make decisions. He often authoritarian or anti-democratic. Cite US President Trump.

Discussion Points

1. Why do anarchists believe that the state is oppressive?
2. Does anarchism have a place in contemporary society?

Exam-style Questions

- 'The state can be oppressive. Assess and evaluate this statement, using the ideas of anarchist thinker Proudhon.'
- To what extent are anarchist ideas utopian?

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Conventions in the dog's section

Richard Levy suggests the most important constitutional norms in the

With a ~~co~~ ^{7th *Log*} ~~Education~~ Constitution, conventions are not normally so ~~Education~~ associated with how the USA operates; however, there are a number of aspects that would fit a UK-type definition of these important political norms. In the UK, conventions are numerous – an outcome of an uncodified Constitution where not all elements of the system and how it should operate are immediately clear to see. Conventions have developed over time, filling in the gaps and typically helping to ensure democracy or accountability in some way. A recent contribution to *The Think Tank* was able to quite easily offer a top ten of UK conventions. I would struggle to do the same for the US; however, there are a significant few worthy of consideration. The following seeks to outline how the three selected areas fit the definition of convention, why they have developed over time, and the significance of each.

As a starting point, my working definition of 'convention' is an 'accepted norm', often something which has been recognised and adhered to for a long period of time. Conventions are neither legally binding nor, in the US context, something which is referenced in the Constitution directly, and therefore typically go beyond it. They are one of the things that allows the US Constitution to be flexible despite being recognised as entrenched and rigid.

Convention 1:

Executive orders and agreements

The power of the President to sign executive orders and agreements has become the increasingly expected and accepted norm. While the subject of such an order might be controversial and the legality of an action may be debated, the use of the instruments to begin with are not. They are now without doubt a convention, utilised by every President in modern times – acceptable it seems being justified under the vagueness of Article II which asserts 'executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States'.

Executive orders can be put into law at the moment of signing as they circumvent the checks and balances – signing unilateral agreements without any need to refer to Congress whatsoever. The president need not bargain or persuade Congress to pass a bill when executive orders can achieve something by themselves. Executive agreements, despite being a clear alternative to negotiating treaties, are also an accepted norm, completely sidestepping the Senate's power to ratify treaties as would normally be the case.

There are some safeguards from the Comptroller's absence of formal checks and balances. The Supreme Court will rule on the constitutionality of an order before it is void. The danger with this approach is that it is reactive and therefore cannot be made in the first place. The checks and balances between signing (and the Comptroller's challenge during which the order is pending) partly had an impact.

What would the presidential tools? I uncover tyranny would orders and agreements suggestions that pre-tools with which to b

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Convention 2:

Congress ignores

When it comes to foreign policy, Congress has not used its power to declare war on Japan following the immediate shows that Congress does not believe that it allows the White House to act in the centre. This is now the case.

On the face of it, the unwilling or unable significant policy area make some practical reluctant – more conservative which it is judged. A

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be tainted with a foreign policy failure of a President with the same party label. They will gain re-election or not based on issues within their congressional district. Alongside this, Congress recognises reacting to international crises requires flexibility. Sometimes the US needs to act swiftly. The very slow-moving legislative process in the US cannot respond effectively and quite obviously lends itself to individual (or very small group) control. You cannot have 535 Commanders-in-Chief.

Congress does have some checks but they are pretty weak and increasingly redundant. The power to declare war, mentioned above, has not been used since 1941 despite the fact the US has been active abroad ever since. Congress has to confirm all executive appointments and ambassadors but they are rarely not confirmed, and the National Security Advisor, a key foreign policy role, does not require Senate confirmation at all. Congress ratifies treaties but Presidents just use executive agreements instead. Congress controls the appropriation of finance but it is difficult to not fund something already instigated by the President.

This convention was tested in the 1970s by a 'resurgent congress' but to little effect – best shown with the War Powers Resolution of 1973 which stated that the President may commit US troops to hostilities only under certain specific circumstances. These were outlined as 1. if Congress has declared war, 2. Congress has passed some form of enabling legislation or 3. the US has been attacked. It also set out a timeframe during which the President must explain and during which Congress can approve or not of the action. The irony here is that the biggest domination of foreign policy in recent times – the Bush Doctrine – was supported by Congress but limited by the Resolution as the US had not been attacked. Alongside this, subsequent Presidents have largely ignored it, typically suggesting they are acting 'consistent with' rather than 'compliant to'. This is partly a result of how military action has evolved over time where military objectives are met via aerial strikes with no 'boots on the ground' required. Incidentally, this convention, like convention 1, tends to be at the centre stage of the imperial presidency idea.

Convention 3: The Cabinet meeting

The Cabinet in the US, on the face of it, looks and sounds very similar to the UK experience: it is part of the executive branch, it is made up mainly of the heads of government departments, it meets in a cabinet room, it is appointed by the head of government. Here though is where the similarities end, with codified versus uncodified Constitutions and fusion of powers versus separation of powers ensuring a very different role in each. There is an easy case to be made for regarding the UK system as 'Cabinet government' as the PM is 'first among equals', the Cabinet is appointed mainly from the House of Commons with members therefore having their own mandate, and

it performs well-established norms, conventions – both responsibility, for example.

In the US, the Cabinet meetings, is entirely the result, far weaker. The Constitution it states, opinion in writing of executive departments. 'May require', there is a decision; 'in writing', is envisaged or articulated 'principal officer'. They become the expected. President Washington a meeting with his staff (the only ones at this)

Unlike in the UK, infrequent and wide merely a photo opportunity meetings also tend to administration. Clinton in his first term, and in his second by the Lewinsky affair. He only held 49 over attempting to appear monthly and missed 16, on average 1 every held 9, 9, 4, 1. The fact allows them to be seen making in the White House of a UK PM who is just

Discussion Questions

1. Does presidential cabinet government suggest the checks and balances are too weak?
2. How far does accountability here add weight?

Exam-style Questions

1. Explain and analyse the US presidential cabinet system that can be used to analyse the US system.
2. Explain and analyse how the US Constitution can be used to analyse the US system (Conventions could be used).

Richard Lawton is a teacher and author.

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Is China a SUPERPOWER?

With one of the largest populations on Earth, and an increasing, important economic power, Angela Mogridge asks the constant question in global politics: just how powerful is China?

The question of whether China constitutes a superpower has become one of the defining debates in global politics. As global power dynamics shift away from the **unipolar** moment that followed the Cold War, scholars, policymakers, and observers increasingly view China as the most significant challenger to the long-standing dominance of the United States.

A superpower is traditionally understood as a state with the ability to project power globally across multiple domains – economic, military, political, and cultural. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union embodied this definition through their global alliances, ideological influence, and military reach. After the Soviet collapse, the United States stood alone as the world's sole superpower, with unmatched military bases, economic influence, and cultural penetration.

The position of the United States has, however, been challenged by China's rapid rise over the past four decades. Its economic transformation, military modernisation, and expanding diplomatic footprint have led many to argue that China is a rising superpower. Others contend that while China is undeniably powerful, it has not yet achieved the global reach, institutional influence, or cultural appeal necessary to match the United States. Truth lies somewhere in between: China is a superpower in some domains, a near-superpower in others, and a rising challenger overall.

China's economic ascent is one of the most dramatic in human history. Since the late 1970s, market reforms have transformed it from a largely agrarian society into the world's second-largest economy. China is now the world's leading manufacturer, the largest trading nation, and a central component in global supply chains. Its **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, spanning more than 150 countries, extends its economic influence across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Through infrastructure financing, trade agreements, and investment, China has built a network of economic relationships that enhances its global reach. Militarily, China has undergone a massive, modernisation programme. It possesses the world's largest army, a rapidly expanding, very advanced missile systems, and growing, nuclear space capabilities. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is now the world's largest by number of ships, and China's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) systems challenge US dominance in the Western Pacific. China's military ambitions are most visible in the South China Sea, where it has built artificial islands, deployed military assets, and asserted territorial claims that place it at odds with neighbouring states and the United States.

China's technological superpower status, infrastructure, artificial and electric vehicles, Tencent have become investments in quantum signal long-term ambitions. Geopolitically, China's multilateral institutions, strategic partnerships with the UN Security Council, peacekeeping, and Infrastructure Investment emphasises sovereignty and cooperation, appealing

Yet China's global political system, human rights, foreign policy have improved, particularly in Western countries, cultural appeal, global attractiveness – lags

To evaluate China's status as a superpower, the United States' enduring霸权, the world's largest economy, the dominant global currency, the world's most influential cultural industries. It has hundreds of bases around the world, projecting power and influence through the Quad, and AUKUS.

Unipolar: A single superpower, the United States, holds a dominant position in economic, military, and political spheres around the globe.

Multipolar: When multiple powers hold significant influence, challenging the dominant superpower, such as the United States.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): The One Belt One Road initiative aims to increase economic relations through infrastructure investment and trade.

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CATEGORY	UNITED STATES	
Economic size (GDP)	Largest in the world	Second largest
Economic influence	Global financial dominance; US dollar is an international currency	Major influence
Military strength	Most powerful globally; extensive overseas bases; regular involvement in foreign conflict	Largest army
Global alliances	Extensive alliances, e.g. NATO	Limited influence
Technological leadership	Leaders in biotech, semiconductors and aerospace technology	Leaders in vehicle technology
Demographics	Strong cultural influence; dominant media globally	Limited; poor record in human rights
Political system	Stable population	Adapted to democracy

The US also possesses unmatched soft power. American culture – movies, music, technology, fashion, and higher education – shapes global tastes and values. English remains the dominant language of business, science, and diplomacy. The US political model, despite its flaws, continues to inspire democratic movements worldwide.

As can be seen from the table above, China does face structural challenges to any ascent to superpower status. China's population is ageing rapidly, with a shrinking workforce and declining birth rates. This trend threatens long-term economic growth and increases the burden on social welfare systems and high local government debt. And while China is investing heavily in infrastructure and overseas image, its political system of one-party rule and human rights record limit its global influence – especially in the West. In parts of Asia, the US has managed to strengthen its influence due to China's unwelcome activity in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and along the Indian border.

Having said that, China is undeniably a major global power with significant economic, military, and technological capabilities. It has reshaped global trade, challenged US dominance in key regions, and positioned itself as a central actor in international affairs. In many respects, China already functions as a superpower – particularly in Asia and across the Global South. However, whether China has achieved *full* superpower status remains debated. Its global military reach is limited compared to the United States, its alliance network is thin, and its soft power remains constrained. The United States continues to hold a unique combination of economic scale, military dominance, cultural influence, and institutional leadership that China has not yet matched.

Thus, the most accurate assessment is that an emerging or potential superpower's capacity to shape the international system equals the United States. The coming decades will see China overcomes its internal challenges, increase its global influence, and ultimately transform the international system into a multipolar world.

Discussion Questions

1. How far do modern superpowers differ from traditional superpowers?
2. To what extent is China a dominant superpower?
3. Can China now be considered a superpower?

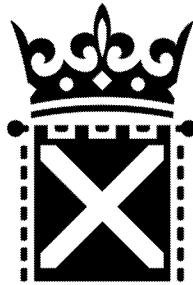
Essay Questions

1. Assess the view that economic power is the greatest challenge to US global influence.
2. Assess the importance of military power in determining superpower status.
3. 'Superpowers are more than military force'. Do you agree?

Angela Mogridge is a retired teacher of Politics and Government in the East Midlands. She has taught A Level Politics and Government and Politics. She is also a long-standing member of the Association for A Level Politics.

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A
short
history
of

Holyroo

With the next big elections in the UK to include those of Scotland's Parliament, Moyra Graham

The Scottish Parliament was founded in 1999 following a referendum – only in Scotland – on devolution. PM Tony Blair's 'new' Labour government held the devolution referendums (also in Wales and Northern Ireland) partly out of a genuine reforming zeal, but also to shore up their own party's support against rising nationalist sentiment in what were then Labour strongholds in Scotland and Wales, and especially to head off growing calls for complete Scottish independence. The 1997 Scottish referendum comprised two questions; on a 60% turnout, support for a Scottish Parliament won 72% against 26%, and support for it having varying powers was 64% to 36%.

The Conservative party opposed devolution until it had happened, fearing that it could be a slippery slope to the break-up of the UK. Nigel Farage's UKIP argued for the abolition of all the devolved assemblies as 'glorified forms of local government' and the return of their powers to Westminster. However, Farage has now accepted that 'devolution is here to stay'.

The Parliament is housed in an impressive new building in the Holyrood area of Edinburgh; it was prize-winning but controversial as its cost spiralled from an estimated £40 million to over £400 million. Unlike the Commons' laborious voting system, Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) cast their votes via electronic consoles on their desks, so results are known within seconds. Other Holyrood procedures such as whipping, committee passing of bills and scrutiny of government are similar to Westminster's.

Elections and parties

The 'hybrid' Additional Member System (AMS) was chosen by the UK Labour government to elect the 129 MSPs; 73 are constituency representatives elected through first-past-the-post, and 56 are regional MSPs elected by the proportional party list system – where eight regions each contain seven 'additional members' – to make the overall results more proportional.

As Blair had hoped, since then the Scottish government party which came through civic nation government in 2011 electoral system was therefore, the Westminster's UK government to hold a referendum side won by 55% to 45%. The leader and Scottish leader resigned and was replaced by Nicola Sturgeon.

Holyrood elections (changed from four to five (Reform) Act 2020). The SNP were still riding high with a party balance of MSPs.

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- SNP: 60
- Conservatives: 2
- Labour: 21
- Greens: 7
- Liberal Democrats: 1

Since 2021, the whole of Scotland has been in a state of exceptional flux, so the SNP's majority has significantly reduced in Holyrood.



Holyrood's powers

The Scottish Parliament can pass primary legislation on devolved issues such as health, education, justice and policing, the environment, energy, transport, planning and some aspects of taxation. It cannot make laws on powers 'reserved' to Westminster, notably the UK constitution, defence and national security, foreign affairs, trade and industry, immigration, asylum and citizenship, equality, employment law, broadcasting and data protection.

UK PM Tony Blair in the 1990s chose the words of former Labour leader, Tony Blair – perhaps more in hope than expectation – that devolution arrangements were ‘the settled will of the Scottish people’. However, the desire of many Scottish voters for total independence was not extinguished with devolution. Scotland voted decisively against leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum by 62% to 38%, and ongoing resentment at being ‘dragged out of Europe against their will’ has helped to sustain calls for a second independence referendum. In efforts to appease nationalist sentiment and undermine SNP dominance at Holyrood, UK Conservative governments granted more powers to the Scottish Parliament, mainly through the Scotland Acts 2012 and 2016. Westminster has retained control over things like defence and macroeconomics, but the Scottish Parliament now decides Scottish income tax, has partial control over VAT, increased control over borrowing, more say over welfare laws and control of Scottish parliamentary and local government electoral arrangements. So, for example, 16–18-year-olds in Scotland were given the vote in the 2011 elections, and in 2015 this right was extended to young people in all Scottish elections (though voters must still be over 18). Holyrood is now a powerful legislature, leading some commentators to describe the current UK arrangement as ‘devo-max’ or even ‘quasi-federalism’.

Policies

Significant examples of policy differences between Scotland and England include:

- Income tax – high earners pay more in Scotland (48% in Scotland and more income tax bands, compared with 45% in England)
- Free university tuition in Scotland, unlike England
- Universal free personal and nursing care for all adults in Scotland, unlike England
- Free medical prescriptions in Scotland, unlike England
- Different social welfare systems, e.g. Best Start Food policy in Scotland
- Distinct laws on issues like alcohol pricing (minimum unit pricing) and smoking bans

Westminst

However, disputes between the two countries have repeatedly demonstrated the disputed nature of the islands' sovereignty. Examples include:

In every case, it is the right to set limits to the confirming Westminster

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Conclusion

If Scottish devolution was intended to end calls for independence in Scotland, it has failed: a recent NatCen survey in Scotland showed 47% favouring independence against 41% preferring devolution; and 'asymmetric' devolution across the four countries of the UK has caused some ongoing resentments and conflicts. However, a survey on attitudes in Scotland to the Scottish Parliament was conducted by the Scottish Centre for Social Research in 2025. It found that – while Scots may not always like their government's performance on some policy areas – over 60% consistently said since the Scottish Parliament's creation that it should have the most influence over how Scotland is run, compared with under 20% expressing a preference for either the UK government or local government. ■



Discussion Points

1. Has Scottish devolution gone far enough?
2. Why is there no

Exam-style Quest

- Evaluate the extent to which the enhanced representation of the Westminister Party in the House of Commons has been successful in this statement.
- 'Devolution threat' to the Westminster Parliament. Explain this statement.

Moyra Grant is an experienced textbook author.

20 Questions

Twenty hints to test a friend's knowledge or to play 'twenty questions' with a classmate. (Answer at the back.)



1. I am a woman.
2. I grew up in a left-wing family.
3. I grew up in Scotland as a child, and Leeds as a teenager.
4. I attended Oxford University.
5. I was President of the Oxford University Liberal Democrats.
6. I studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics.
7. After university, I worked in management for Shell.
8. I was elected as a Conservative MP in 2010 at my third attempt.
9. I was a junior minister in the Education Department during the coalition.
10. I am strongly associated with the Thatcherite/Libertarian wing of my party.
11. I entered Cabinet as Environment Secretary in 2014. I made a famously bad speech.
12. I endorsed the Remain side in the 2016 EU referendum.
13. I was appointed the first female Justice Secretary by Theresa May in 2016.
14. I supported Boris Johnson's leadership campaign in 2019.
15. I was Secretary of State for International Trade from 2019.
16. I became the Foreign Secretary in 2021.
17. I became Home Minister on 5th September 2022 after winning the Conservative leadership election.
18. Queen Elizabeth II died on 6th September 2022, the second day of my time as Prime Minister.
19. My Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, announced an infamous tax-cutting 'mini-budget' in October 2022, spooking the markets and leading to a crisis.
20. I resigned as Prime Minister after 49 days in the post.

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TOP 10

Most Controversial Uses of US Presidential War Powers

Angela Mogridge looks at past Presidents' use of their limited war powers.

Tensions between the United States and Venezuela rose sharply towards the end of 2019, with the US carrying out a series of military strikes on civilian boats in Venezuelan waters. Since the beginning of the year these tensions have escalated into the US forces removal of the Venezuelan president, with him and his wife being arrested and flown to New York for court proceedings. While a new president has been sworn in, the United States has made it clear that the US government intends to be fully involved in how the country proceeds. President Trump has even met with US oil executives to plot what some fear will be an American takeover of the Venezuelan oil industry. President Trump has even met with US oil executives to plot what some fear will be an American take over of the Venezuelan oil industry. President Trump claimed that this military action was aimed at disrupting drug trafficking which he accuses the South American country of turning a blind eye to.

This military action against Venezuela was not approved by the US Congress and has highlighted the question of which branch of government has the authority to send American troops into armed conflict.

Under the US Constitution (Article 1, Section 8) Congress has the power to declare war and to raise and finance the armed forces. Article 1, section 2 stipulates that the President is the 'Commander-in-Chief' and thus leads the armed forces in defence of the United States. The President has the right to sign or veto a Congressional declaration of war, while Congress has the power to override any presidential veto. As with most of the Constitution, this ensures that no one branch of government can take unilateral action. This dual structure was designed to prevent unilateral military action, ensuring that decisions of war would reflect both democratic deliberation and executive leadership. American presidents, however, have routinely stretched their war powers, often bypassing Congress completely. These actions have sparked fierce criticism within Congress and in wider society, with debates about constitutional limits, democratic accountability, and the balance of power.

Since 1973, the US President's power to send a country to war has been checked by the War Powers Resolution Act. The President must report to Congress within 48 hours of committing the US to military action. Any such military action cannot exceed 60 days without congressional authorisation for use of military force (AUMF). Every President since has challenged the resolution's constitutionality, arguing that it infringes on the Commander-in-Chief's powers. The ongoing dispute reflects the unresolved tension between executive flexibility and legislative oversight.

Here are 10 examples of presidential war power.

1 The Korean War

President Truman sent US troops into Korea without congressional authorisation. The intervention was justified by the urgency of repelling the North Korean invasion and swift action.

By bypassing Congress, Presidents to engage in military conflict without formal authorisation have cost over 36,000 American lives. The use of unilateral presidential power has been justified by the need to act quickly.

This episode also revealed the limits of presidential power, such as UN resolutions and congressional authorisation. The Korean War shaped the Cold War, and Presidents could act outside of Congress even at the expense of international law.

2 The Vietnam War Resolution (1964)

The Vietnam War was authorised by a presidential executive order, congressional authorisation, and international organisations in the Gulf of Tonkin. President Lyndon B. Johnson claimed President Kennedy had authorised necessary measures to defend US forces.

Johnson used this resolution to expand the conflict dramatically, committing over 500,000 US troops. Critics later argued that the resolution was misrepresented, and Congress handed over its constitutional powers.

The war dragged on for nearly a decade, costing over 58,000 US lives, and fuelling distrust of the US government. The Resolution became a symbol of the limits of presidential power, as authorisations can be used to support military campaigns far beyond the original intent.

3 Cambodia Bombing

President Richard Nixon authorised the secret bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War without congressional authorisation. Nixon argued that the Cambodian government was using its territory as a sanctuary for North Vietnamese rebels. This outraged lawmakers and led to a constitutional crisis.

This episode highlights the limits of presidential power, executive secrecy in foreign policy, and the use of military force by attempting to bypass Congress. Presidents could circumvent Congress by using executive power to support military operations, but Nixon's actions were unconstitutional.

The Cambodia bombing was a key factor in the fall of the US government, contributing to the subsequent atrocities of the Vietnam War. The use of unilateral presidential power had global consequences.

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4 Grenada Invasion (1983)

President Ronald Reagan ordered US forces to invade Grenada to protect American medical students and restore order after a coup. The operation was swift and successful, but Congress was not consulted beforehand.

Critics argued that Reagan violated the War Powers Resolution by failing to seek authorisation. Supporters countered that the urgency of the situation justified immediate action.

The Grenada invasion demonstrated how Presidents often justify unilateral military action by invoking humanitarian or emergency rationales. It also showed how quick, decisive victories can mute criticism, even when constitutional questions remain unresolved.

5 Panama Invasion (1989)

President George H.W. Bush launched Operation Just Cause to remove Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega. The invasion involved over 20,000 US troops and resulted in significant casualties.

Bush did not seek congressional authorisation, arguing that protecting American lives and combating drug trafficking required decisive action. Critics questioned whether the scale of the operation was proportionate and whether bypassing Congress undermined democratic accountability.

The Panama invasion reinforced the pattern of presidents using broad justifications to expand US influence. It also highlighted how military interventions could be framed as law enforcement actions, blurring the line between war and policing.

6 Kosovo Air Campaign (1999)

President Bill Clinton ordered NATO bombing of Serbia during the Kosovo crisis without congressional approval. While Congress debated the issue, it never formally authorised the campaign.

Several members of Congress sued Clinton, arguing that he violated the War Powers Resolution. Courts dismissed the lawsuits, citing 'lack of standing' – insufficient proof that harm was caused by the action – leaving the constitutional question unresolved.

The Kosovo campaign highlighted the difficulty of enforcing war powers limits when courts avoid direct intervention. It also underscored how humanitarian crises can be used to justify military action without congressional authorisation.

7 The Afghanistan War (2001)

After the September 11 attacks, Congress passed the Authorization of Use of Military Force (AUMF), granting President George W. Bush authority to use 'all necessary and appropriate force' against those responsible. Ever since, the AUMF's broad language has been interpreted by successive Presidents to justify military operations worldwide against terrorist groups, even those not directly

linked to 9/11. Critics argue that it is a blank cheque for endless war.

Supporters contend that the AUMF is necessary for combating global terrorism. They argue that America's longest war has been justified by the AUMF, and that its authorisations can lead to a more effective and efficient military.

8 The Iraq War (2003)

President George W. Bush claimed that Congress had authorised him to invade Iraq. He argued that Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, possessed weapons of mass destruction and had links to Al Qaeda. Congress approved, but did not authorise war.

The Iraq War became one of the most controversial in modern history, raising questions about whether the US was misled and whether intelligence was used to justify the war.

The war's long-term impact on the Middle East, thousands of deaths, and trillions in costs – remains unclear. However, the war's decisions. It remains a reminder that presidential claims can shape foreign policy and have a significant global impact.

9 Libya (2011)

President Barack Obama authorised military action in Libya, arguing that the US had a responsibility to protect civilians. Critics accused Obama of bypassing Congress and failing to provide sufficient congressional oversight.

10 Syria Strikes (2014)

President Donald Trump authorised military strikes against Syria without congressional authorisation. He cited the use of chemical weapons as an example by launching a series of strikes against 70 targets, including chemical weapons facilities and infrastructure.

In the words of the US Secretary of State, 'This is not the beginning of a war of vengeance. The United States is acting in self-defense under Trump's leadership, with the aim of defending our people.'

This action resulted in a resolution from the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the House of Representatives, which provided authorisation from Congress.

With the military action in Syria, the constitutional question of who is ultimately responsible for authorising US military into conflict remains unanswered.

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Angela Mogridge is a retired teacher and author from the East Midlands. She has a degree in Politics and International Studies, and a PGCE in Government and Politics, with a specialism in Politics. She is also a long-serving member of the Association for Citizenship Studies and a Level Politics teacher.