

## Prime Minister & Executive

WHAT DOES THE APPROVAL OF A THIRD RUNWAY AT HEATHROW TELL US ABOUT CABINET GOVERNMENT?



**Summary:** On 7th February 2025, Ed Miliband, Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, confirmed that he would not resign over the Labour Cabinet's collective decision to support the expansion of Heathrow Airport. The project, delayed for decades due to environmental concerns, is now being pursued as part of Labour's mission to boost economic growth. Miliband's acceptance of collective responsibility highlights interesting arguments around cabinet government under Labour. On one hand, it suggests that major decisions are still shaped collectively by ministers. On the other, Labour's "mission-led" approach and streamlined cabinet structure may indicate a more centralised core executive.

### What's happening at Heathrow?

Throughout January 2025, there was growing speculation that the UK Government was preparing to announce its support for the construction of a third runway at Heathrow Airport. On 26th January, Chancellor Rachel Reeves told the BBC that while she personally supported the expansion, the final decision would be made by Cabinet, "with full collective ministerial responsibility".



Three days later, Reeves delivered a speech on the Government's plans for kickstarting economic growth and driving up investment, in which she confirmed the Cabinet's support for a third runway. She said the expansion would "create over 100,000 jobs", "unlock further growth, boost investment, increase exports, and make the UK more open and more connected."

Once it was reported that the Government intended to approve a third runway, there was considerable debate as to whether Ed Miliband would resign from his position as Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. Miliband had threatened to step down from Labour PM Gordon Brown's Government over the issue in 2009, and he voted against a third runway in 2018.



After being notably absent from Reeves' growth speech, Miliband gave an interview on 7th February, in which he acknowledged his previous opposition, but confirmed that he would "abide by collective responsibility." He said, "I am part of a Government that has a collectively agreed position on this and I believe... aviation expansion can be done consistent with our carbon budgets."

# Does Miliband lack ‘positional power’?

Data compiled by the London School of Economics (LSE) suggests that power in Keir Starmer’s Government has become more centralised than in other recent administrations. The number of cabinet committees has been reduced to ten, and committee meetings are now chaired and attended by a narrower range of ministers.

To illustrate this, LSE categorises ministers into three tiers based on their ‘positional power’ - the influence they wield based on their roles within the cabinet committee system. Ministers with high positional power are those that chair or attend a larger number of committee meetings, granting them greater influence over policy decisions.

LSE argues that a ‘top elite’ of ministers plays a commanding role in coordinating the work of government, particularly close Starmer allies Pat McFadden, and Chancellor Rachel Reeves.

Role	Positional Power %
<b>Inner circle</b>	
Chancellor Duchy Lancaster (McFadden)	11.1%
PM (Starmer)	10.9%
Chancellor of the Exchequer (Reeves)	10.4%
Foreign Secretary (Lammy)	9.1%
Home Secretary (Cooper)	8.2%
SS Defence (Healey)	6.8%
Deputy PM and HCLG (Rayner)	5.4%

LSE’s data places Ed Miliband in a ‘second division’ of ministers. He is a member of only three committees - none of which relate to economic decisions, like Heathrow’s third runway.

<b>Second Division</b>	
Post Master General (Thomas-Symonds)	4.9%
SS Energy (Miliband)	3.2%
Attorney General (Hermer)	2.8%
SS Northern Ireland (Benn)	2.5%
SS Business/Trad (Reynolds)	2.2%
Lord Chancellor Justice (Mahmood)	2.1%
Leader of House of Commons (Powell)	2.0%
MoS Education/Women (Dodds)	1.8%
SS Health Social Care (Streeting)	1.8%
SS Science, Innovation & Tech (Kyle)	1.8%

LSE finds a larger number of ministers now sit in the ‘periphery’. While they can still be invited to meetings, they are only permanent members of a single committee each.

<b>Periphery</b>	
Leader of the House of Lords (Smith)	1.4%
Chief Secretary Treasury (Jones)	1.4%
SS Scotland (Murray)	1.4%
SS Wales (Stevens)	1.4%
SS Culture, Media Sport (Nandy)	1.0%
SS Environment, Rural Affairs (Reed)	1.0%
SS Education (Phillipson)	1.1%
SS Work and Pension (Kendall)	1.1%

Source: [blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/starmer-core-executive-reveals-a-centralisation-of-power/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/starmer-core-executive-reveals-a-centralisation-of-power/)

## Is Miliband limited by Labour's 'missions' & 'milestones'?

When Keir Starmer set out his vision for government in 2023, he pledged to lead a "mission-led" administration, that would focus on delivering clear, long-term national objectives. Instead of relying solely on the traditional departmental approach, where ministers have primary control over their own policy areas, Starmer introduced five key 'missions' that he said would drive government policy across departments. In December 2024, Starmer then set out six 'milestones' - specific, measurable targets for each mission, that the Government hopes to meet by the next General Election.

Mission	Milestones
1) Kickstart economic growth	1) Increase real household disposable income. 2) Build 1.5m homes & fast-track 150 major infrastructure projects.
2) Build an NHS fit for the future	End hospital backlogs and ensure 92% of patients in England wait no longer than 18 weeks for elective treatment.
3) Safer streets	Recruit 13,000 additional police officers and special constables for neighbourhood policing.
4) Break down the barriers to opportunity	Ensure 75% of children are school-ready by reception.
5) Make Britain a clean energy superpower	Ensure the UK's domestic energy system delivers at least 95% clean power by 2030, while accelerating the UK to net zero.

To ensure these missions remain at the heart of government, Labour has established five 'Mission Boards' - each led by a relevant Cabinet Secretary - to complement the work of existing cabinet committees. A new Mission Delivery Unit has also been created within the Cabinet Office, staffed by around 25 officials, to provide further centralised coordination and to track progress towards the six 'milestones'. This mission-led approach is designed to streamline decision-making and ensure cross-departmental collaboration, but it can lead to cabinet tensions when missions conflict.

As Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, Ed Miliband chairs the Energy Mission Board, whose goal it is to accelerate the UK's path to net zero - where the amount of greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere is balanced by the amount removed. Critics argue that expanding Heathrow undermines this goal, because planes burn fossil fuels, releasing carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) and other greenhouse gases. They argue that a third runway would enable more flights, leading to greater fuel consumption, and higher emissions, making net zero harder to achieve.

However, Chancellor Rachel Reeves, who holds considerably more 'positional power' within Cabinet, chairs the new 'Growth Mission Board' which has the aim of securing the highest sustained economic growth in the G7, and sees major infrastructure projects - such as Heathrow's expansion - as essential to achieving this goal. Reeves and the Treasury have framed the third runway as an economic necessity, arguing that it will create over 100,000 jobs, and boost investment.

# Exam focus: Has there been a return to cabinet government under Labour?

EDEXCEL: 3.2 THE CONCEPT OF MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY  
AQA 3.1.1.3 THE PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET



## Yes: Labour's 'mission-led' approach reinforces cabinet government and collective decision-making

One longstanding debate surrounding the UK executive is whether power lies primarily with the cabinet - with ministers collectively shaping and approving key decisions - or with a PM who dominates policymaking from No. 10 and treats cabinet as a 'rubber stamp' for decisions that have already been made elsewhere. Labour's 'mission-led' approach arguably supports 'cabinet government', as it encourages ministers to work across departments and collectively agree a path to delivering the 'milestones' their collective survival in office could well depend upon.

The collective decision to back a third runway at Heathrow can be said to show cabinet government in action. The Growth Mission Board, chaired by Rachel Reeves, saw the expansion as an economic priority but first had to persuade several Cabinet ministers who had previously opposed it - including the PM, who voted against the project in 2018, citing climate concerns. While the Chancellor made no secret of her support for the project, she still ultimately had to secure Cabinet approval. With GDP growth slowing to just 0.9% in 2024, ministers were persuaded to prioritise the Government's 'growth' milestone & accept collective responsibility.



## No: The Heathrow decision is a better example of 'Prime Ministerial Government' or the core executive theory

Firstly, Labour's mission-led approach arguably strengthens 'prime ministerial government' by allowing the Prime Minister to coordinate policy more centrally from No. 10. By setting 'missions' and 'milestones', streamlining cabinet committees, and leaving most 'positional power' in the hands of a small group of close allies, Starmer has expanded No. 10's influence over government strategy. Ministers can shape policy within their department, but the PM may find it easier to block ideas that he claims clash with his 'missions', keeping more policy under central control.

Alternatively, rather than seeing executive power as a contest between cabinet and the prime minister, the core executive model suggests that power and resources are dispersed much more widely, including actors - such as the Treasury, cabinet committees, special advisors and civil servants - who are all *interdependent*, and rely on each other to achieve their goals. While Starmer has shaped Labour's milestones, he lacks the time, information, and departmental control to unilaterally deliver them. Policy-making remains a collaborative process involving multiple actors within the core executive. The Treasury and Growth Mission Board played a decisive role in making Heathrow a government priority, but the Chancellor still needed to negotiate within the broader core executive - first securing No. 10's backing, and then ensuring the Cabinet collectively agreed to the policy.



## Synoptic Links - How can we link this case study to other parts of the specification?



### Prime Minister & Executive

#### Is the convention of collective responsibility still important?

Collective ministerial responsibility is a constitutional convention that requires all ministers to support, and take responsibility for, the cabinet's decisions, even if they do not personally agree with them. If a minister does not want to be held collectively responsible for a decision, then the convention expects them to resign and challenge it from the back benches. The convention does not expect ministers to agree on every issue, but it does expect them to keep discussions secret - so that cabinet ministers can talk freely while publicly appearing unified.

In recent years, collective responsibility has been strained by numerous instances of disgruntled ministers attempting to oppose and undermine cabinet decisions without resigning, by anonymously leaking their opposition and revealing embarrassing details of cabinet discussions to the media. However, in this case, despite several cabinet ministers having previously criticised and voted against a third runway, all have now accepted collective responsibility. Miliband, who once threatened to resign over the issue, has instead defended the decision publicly.



### Political Parties

#### How similar are the key ideas & policies of the main parties?

Until recently, both Labour and the Conservatives played a key role in establishing net zero targets and opposing Heathrow expansion. The Climate Change Act 2008 was passed under Labour, while the Conservatives strengthened commitments by setting the 2050 net zero target in 2019. Leaders of both parties have also previously opposed a third runway - Starmer voted against expansion in 2018, while former PM Boris Johnson was also a vocal opponent of the project.

However, as economic conditions have worsened, both parties have shifted towards prioritising growth over strict environmental targets. Under PM Rishi Sunak, the Conservatives delayed key net zero policies (e.g. in Sep 2023 Sunak announced a 5-year delay to a ban on the sale of petrol and diesel cars), citing economic concerns. Under Starmer, Labour has now backed Heathrow expansion, arguing that it is necessary for investment and jobs. While both parties still support net zero in principle, they now appear to be more willing to compromise on environmental goals when they perceive economic growth to be at stake.