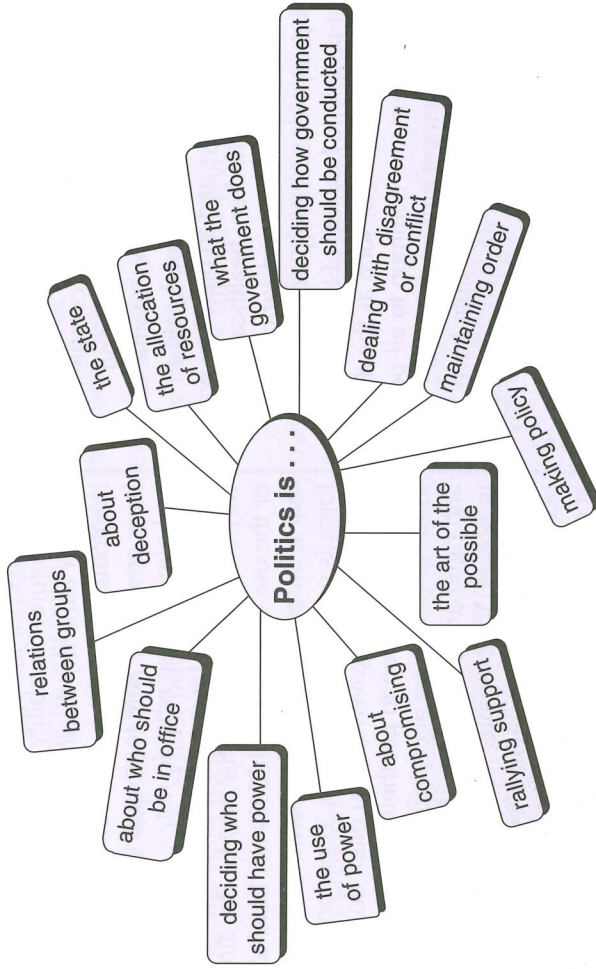


## Main points - Part 1

- Politics is the study of how decisions are made and should be made.
- Some writers claim that politics is the study of conflict resolution. They suggest that the aim of politics is to produce a consensus by resolving conflicts over interests and values in an acceptable way.
- Other writers claim that politics is about the exercise of power. There are two main ways of exercising power - by threatening or using force (coercion) or by making decisions which people regard as legitimate (authority).
- Unlike criminal acts, civil disobedience is a political act because it uses ethical grounds to question the way in which power is used.

## Activity 1.1 What is politics?

### Item A What is politics?



### Item B Weber's three types of authority

Max Weber, a German sociologist who lived in the 19th century, distinguished between three different types of authority:

#### i) Traditional authority

Traditional authority depends upon the belief in established customs and traditions. Those in authority expect obedience and loyalty on the grounds that established customs and traditions demand it. For example, the tradition of a hereditary monarchy demands that a new monarch commands as much obedience and loyalty as the previous monarch commanded.

#### ii) Charismatic authority

Charismatic authority depends upon the special qualities of a leader. People are drawn to follow the leader because of the qualities which they believe that leader to have. Charismatic authority may die with the leader or continue to work through a group of chosen disciples.

#### iii) Rational-legal authority

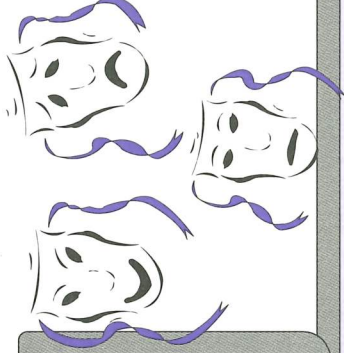
Rational-legal authority depends upon a formal set of rules which gives those who hold authority the right to direct and command others and to take decisions on their behalf. It has a moral dimension in that citizens have freely handed power over to another person (or other people). So, a democratic government can be said to exercise rational-legal authority since the electorate hands over power to it through the ballot box.

**Raw POWER becomes..**

It should be noted that Weber regarded these three categories as 'ideal types'. In the real world, authority might come from two or more of the three sources. Second, Weber believed that there was a fixed amount of power in any society. Since the amount of power is constant, power held by any individual or group is power not available to any other individual or group. And third, Weber suggested that power is always used to further the interests of those who hold it.

### Item C Lukes' three faces of power

In a book published in 1974, Steven Lukes argued that power has three faces or dimensions.



#### i) Decision making

The first face of power is its open face - the power that can be seen to be exercised when a decision is taken. Suppose the government proposed a law in Britain. This proposal would be debated in Cabinet and in Parliament. Interest groups would lobby MPs. There might be demonstrations for or against the proposal. Eventually, the proposal might pass through Parliament, gain royal assent and become law. In this decision-making process, it would be relatively straightforward to identify where power lay.

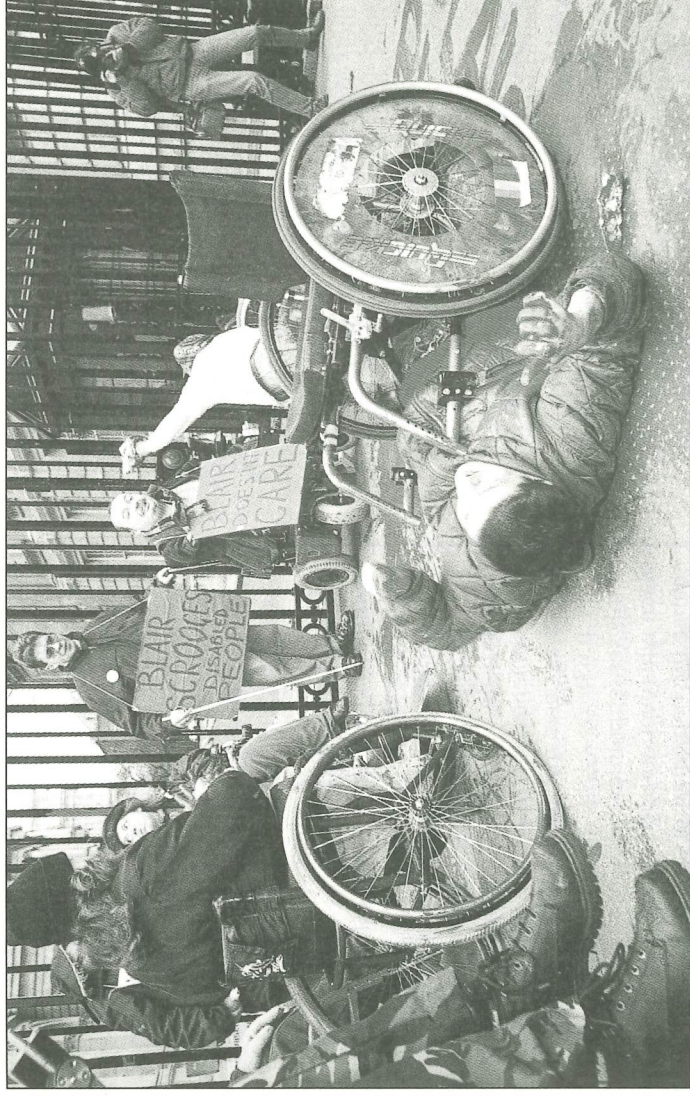
#### iii) Manipulating desires

The third face of power goes one step further. Lukes suggests that power can be exercised through manipulation. People with power can persuade others that what is being offered is what is desired. For example, some feminists would argue that men exercise power over women in contemporary Britain by persuading them that being a mother and a housewife are the most desirable roles for women. In reality, feminists claim, women who occupy these roles are exploited by, and for the benefit of, men.

#### ii) Non-decision making

The second face of power is its secretive face. Power is exercised behind closed doors. Those who have the power to set the political agenda have the power to determine not only what can be discussed, but, more important, what cannot be discussed. Power is, therefore, not just about making decisions. It is also about preventing decisions being taken or about narrowing the choices which are considered. For example, a teacher might offer students the opportunity to decide whether to do a piece of homework that week or the following week. The class appears to have been given the opportunity to reach a decision. In reality, however, power still rests with the teacher who has limited the options open to the students. The students are not free to decide whether or not they do this particular piece of work, nor can they choose to reject doing homework altogether.

### Item D Disabled protesters outside the gates of Downing Street



This photo shows disabled protesters outside the gates of Downing Street in January 1998.

### Questions

- Using Item A, write a paragraph explaining what is meant by 'politics'.
- a) Which of Weber's three types of authority in Item B best describes the British political system today? Give reasons for your answer.  
b) Can you think of examples to illustrate the other two types of authority?
- What does Item C tell us about the way in which politics works in Britain today?
- a) Explain why what is happening in Item D is political.  
b) What does this picture tell us about the British political system?