Politics and International Relations, 2019-20

POL9: Conceptual issues and texts in politics and international relations

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Aims and Objectives

The paper gives students an opportunity under examination conditions to show what they have learned about politics over three years of study, and to write an extended piece of work. It tests students' accumulated political understanding through the analysis of an unseen (and unattributed) text or in answer to a general question.

Paper Content

This is solely an examination paper. It is intended for those who have taken Politics and International Relations in Part IIA, and so by the time of the exam will have studied politics for at least two years, and in most cases for three. Candidates are required to answer one question from a choice of ten: five inviting discussion of an unseen and unattributed text in politics, and five inviting answers to general questions. POL9 gives candidates the opportunity to think about different kinds of general questions in politics and to use the knowledge and understanding they have acquired to reflect on these and develop arguments of their own at length. The paper is set to avoid advantaging or disadvantaging any particular choice of papers elsewhere in Part II. Some questions can be answered from a knowledge of political thought, some from a knowledge of practical or empirical politics. Most questions encourage candidates to connect critical reflection on political concepts with the analysis of features of modern politics.

The main teaching though is a series of classes in Lent term. Students will be assigned to a group for four fortnightly classes in that term, and will be notified of their group by e-mail just before the start of Lent. The classes are to discuss how to approach the paper and will take examples from previous examination papers (below). These classes should be sufficient to prepare for this paper, but you are also advised to develop your reading for this paper based on what you have studied so far, to draw out broader questions and themes that respond to your interests. Your Director of Studies has been encouraged to organise two supervisions for you after these classes are complete. The course organiser can be consulted in the event of any specific concerns.
Mode of Assessment

One three-hour examination paper, which is undivided. Candidates are asked to answer one question from a choice of ten.

Summary of advice on this paper from past examiners’ reports

General

1. This paper is challenging, and the way to perform highly on it is to be prepared to think broadly about politics and its different features, in order to develop an independent and critical answer to the question or passage selected. Essays should draw on all the understanding and knowledge developed in the previous years of your study, and substantiate their arguments through the use of examples and by supporting the claims they make with evidence. The best answers are those which understand the complexity and ambiguity of real world politics; which, in setting out their own argument, take account of the strongest arguments against it; and which succeed in combining broad conceptual analysis with careful political explanation.

2. The opportunity to think and plan your answer for an hour should be used to the full. A coherent, sustained, and well-structured argument (or set of arguments) that is focused on the question or the passage is necessary for the essay. This can only be assured if you have a clear plan before you start writing.

3. This paper invites you to draw upon material you have studied for other papers. The questions and passages though are usually general in nature, and need, at least partly, to be addressed as such. For this reason, answers for this paper cannot be simply supervision essays or exam answers for other papers; they have to remain engaged with the question or passage if they are to stay relevant. There is a formal restriction on overlap between different assessed pieces of work (exams, long essays and dissertations), in that you should not be submitting identical or near-identical passages of text for assessment of one or more paragraphs of length. It is not a prohibition on discussing the same theories, concepts, countries, historical episodes or authors across more than one examination. As long as you are addressing the question or responding closely to the passage, the account you give will necessarily differ between examinations, and so problems of overlap should not arise.

4. It is not enough to set out what different theorists might think about a question, without engaging as to whether or not these theorists’ claims are persuasive or not. The purpose of the paper is to test your ability to engage in political argument, not your accuracy in undertaking political exposition. If you want to make a point by saying that a particular theorist is right about something, then you need to explain why you think that theorist is right and deal with the strongest counter-argument that can be made against that position. Similarly, you should deploy examples to make an argument, rather than as a decorative illustration of a supposedly self-evident
abstract truth. Almost all examples from real-world politics will expose some political complexity and accordingly need to be unpacked. Using the same example both to make an argument and to deal with the counter-argument can be an effective method of both capturing that complexity and presenting a persuasive line of reasoning.

5. Avoid generalisation without evidence. It is surprisingly easy to make claims that have no empirical basis. Always seek to provide evidence for your claims.

6. In preparing for this paper you should spend some time thinking about some of the basic categories and distinctions of politics that have animated your studies hitherto. These may include time and space, power and virtue, conflict and co-operation, reason and desire, hope and fear, judgement and will, good and evil, chance and fate, the state and the international.

7. Because the paper asks you to make a detailed argument, it is very important to write at sufficient length. It is difficult to receive a mark higher than a 2.2 if your answer is shorter than eight sides of average-sized handwriting.

Passages

1. The authors of the passages are not identified and it is not necessary to know who wrote the passage.

2. You should read the text carefully, set out the distinct propositions in the text and reconstruct the reasoning of each argument. If there are parts of the text that are unclear to you or ambiguous in their meaning, it is necessary to explain how they are unclear or ambiguous, and to develop a reasoned argument for what you think the author could be saying. You should engage with the persuasiveness of those propositions in ways that goes beyond the immediate content of the passage itself, for example by drawing in evidence or examples that the author could use to develop the argument.

3. Answers need to show intellectual ambition and rise above exposition of the propositions and simple critique of them. Examples of good approaches are to develop implications of an argument that the author appears reluctant to do; to question the author’s assumptions about the past and future and attitudes to the present; and to question the alleged facts, and the interpretation of the alleged facts, on which the author’s case is based.

4. You should not rely too much on accounts of what different political theorists would have thought of the claims in the passages. Rather you should make your own arguments and use different theoretical claims and empirical evidence to that end.

5. Common failings include failing to analyse the propositions systematically, reading things into the text that are not there, and missing things that are.
Questions

1. The best answers sustain an argument or set of arguments, which display conceptual sophistication, deploy interesting and pointed examples, and arrive at a satisfying and persuasive conclusion.

2. Common failings include writing at too high a level of generality, falling back on polemic and assertion, failing to engage with the terms of the question, displaying only shallow knowledge of the empirical material that is being drawn upon for examples, and using exposition of what different theorists would have thought about the questions asked rather than developing your own argument.

Previous exam papers

In and before 2016, the exam paper contained eight questions. From 2016-17, the paper contains ten questions. The expansion was a response to the broader scope of taught papers now within POLIS. The best indicator of the structure and scope of the 2020 exam is the 2017, 2018 and 2019 exam papers, although the earlier papers contained below will also be useful to consult for examples of texts and questions.

The general instruction is that candidates must answer one question. For the texts, candidates should consider the coherence, force and where possible the truth of the argument in the text; they may wish to use arguments and evidence from outside it. For the questions, candidates are advised to use one or more examples.

The 2019 exam paper

1. Europeans may wish to opt out of the global battle for corporate domination. They may even hope that they may thus achieve a greater degree of freedom for democratic politics. But the risk is that their growing reliance on other people’s technology, the relative stagnation of the Eurozone and the consequent dependence of Europe’s growth model on exports to other people’s markets will render those pretensions to autonomy quite empty. Rather than an autonomous actor, Europe risks becoming the object of other peoples’ capitalist corporatism. Indeed, as far as international finance is concerned, the die has already been cast. In the wake of the double crisis, Europe is out of the race. The future will be decided between the survivors of the crisis in the United States and the newcomers of Asia.

2. Myth is a story that can be retold by anyone, with infinite variation, and still be recognisable as itself. The outline of surviving myth is re-recognised in the lives of each generation. It is an instrument by which people simplify, rationalise and retell social and political complexities. It’s a means to haul the abstract, the global
and the relative into the realm of the concrete, the local and the absolute. It’s a way to lay claim to faith in certain values. If those who attempt to interpret the world do so only through the prism of professional thinkers, and ignore the persistence of myth in everyday thought and speech, the interpretations will be deficient.

3. Once it is granted that populism can provide a political strategy to strengthen democracy, we can begin to envisage the importance in the current conjuncture of re-signifying this term in a positive way, so as to make it available for designating the form of counter-hegemonic politics against the neoliberal order. In a post-democratic moment, when the recovery and radicalization of democracy is on the agenda, populism, by emphasizing the *demos* as an essential dimension of democracy, is particularly suited to qualify the political logic adapted to the conjuncture. Understood as a political strategy which underlies the need to draw a political frontier between the people and the oligarchy, it challenges the post-political view that identifies democracy with consensus. Furthermore, by referring to the construction of a collective will construed as an articulation of democratic demands, it acknowledges the need to take account of a variety of heterogeneous struggles, instead of envisaging the collective political subject exclusively in terms of ‘class’.

4. Human is, in one sense, interchangeable with equality. When we invoke the language of the human, we are refusing the distinctions and hierarchies that otherwise divide us. We are asserting our equality, insisting that we are human too. But the message conveyed becomes subtly different when that common humanity is being asserted on our behalf. The task is then framed more as a matter of justice than equality: the justice that those who have and can owe to those who have not and cannot. In both cases, of course, the language is that of our (human) equality. But in the first instance, those who have been denied their equality and rights are employing it to challenge their subordination and exclusion; they are enacting their equality in the very moment of claiming it. In the second, those already securely established in the enjoyment of their equality and rights are reaching out to vulnerable others in the name of a shared humanity. Though this is not the intention, they enact their own power and privilege in the moment of officially denying it.

5. The search to uncover the political origins of democratic breakdown in the contemporary world leads inexorably to that political creature so often afflicted by autonomous militaries and incapable bureaucracies: the postcolonial state. Whenever we think of the tasks a democracy must accomplish to survive against its authoritarian rivals, we see tasks that require the existence of a capable state, not a limited one. Effectively managing a small but financially interdependent economy is all but impossible without a bureaucracy at the administrative helm. Delivering valued side-payments to broad political constituencies requires bureaucratic coherence as well as a socially embedded state apparatus. Paying
and equipping a modern military requires revenue, and there has been no greater money-earner for the modern state than direct income taxes. The best way for a fragile democratic government to survive would not seem to be by keeping its hands off of local private fortunes, but by developing the institutional capacity to stake a claim to its fair share of them on behalf of the sovereign public.

6. Is violence a legitimate tool of political protest?

7. Is there a place for truth in politics?

8. Are great powers a force for good in international politics?

9. Is the personal always political?

10. Do opinion polls help us know what ‘the people’ think?

The 2018 exam paper

1. Some take the view that deficiencies of human nature are responsible for war, for economic crises and for the destruction of the planet – think of the tendency for people to blame the latest financial crisis on ‘greed’. But if we are serious about taking a historically-informed approach to such questions, we are more likely to see these arguably universal human traits as interacting with highly variable social conditions, including political and economic institutions, which make a vast difference to the way in which those traits manifest themselves and to the sort of collective existence that is achieved. It may be convenient to pin onto human nature our more catastrophic failures to live together in a way that is minimally humanly acceptable, but it’s not terribly plausible, in the face of immense social and historical variation. The kind of pessimism that insists otherwise is not the understandable gloom or anxiety about the fate of human societies, but a mask for a misanthropy so profound as to be incompatible with any serious interest in either political philosophy or political action.

2. If we view racialized and gendered violence as one aspect of the broader undermining of moral security sustained through institutionalized racial and sexual discrimination, then combating discrimination and racialized and gendered violence should be viewed as part of the state’s duty to protect citizens’ security. Given that many accounts of security view a right to security as a fundamental human right, this suggests that the state’s duty to protect citizens’ moral security through the dismantling of discrimination is more urgent than has been acknowledged. Certainly, this suggests that accounts that prioritize security over equality are mistaken, since equality is a necessary step toward moral security. This offers a starting point from which to rethink the relationship between equality and security, and how states should prioritize security in relation to other important political goals and values, such as liberty, utility, and justice.
3. One of the great ironies of the twentieth century is that the most powerful country on earth was for the first time located outside its largest landmass. As yet this changed little about the central importance of the latter. It was almost as if Eurasia was now faced with a mirror reflecting its political and geographical realities, or as if an external observer had arrived who could acquire a more objective perspective on the course of events. Almost everything the United States did during the Cold War, at the height of its powers, was to think about Eurasia, to contemplate its future and to try to determine its final shape. Today too, in the age of Trump, Eurasia is the main question for American political life, which is discovering a world in which relations with Europe, Russia and China are being redesigned and need to be considered as a single whole.

4. There is one basic or primitive conception of freedom: this is freedom as power, action unimpeded, in particular, by other people. Some thinkers believe that this is the conception of freedom, and that it contains all that one knows or needs to know about its value. But this is to identify the seed and the plant, or the rhythm and the dance; it does not get us very far in answering questions about freedom as a political value. Primitive freedom is not in itself a political value at all, perhaps not even a social one. A social value implies a social space in which that value can be intelligibly claimed, and to claim freedom must always involve more than simply claiming power. It is no news to anyone ever that people want the means to do what they want to do. If I make a claim in the name of freedom, then I must do more than say that I want power. I must provide some reason why specifically I should be able to do some certain thing to you, or you should not be able to do some certain thing to me.

5. Humanitarianism both legitimates and mitigates violence through the codification of duties of repair and protection in the midst of violence. Violence continues not only in the failure of states to ‘do something’ in the light of systemic human rights abuses, but also in the provision of humanitarian aid. The violence of humanitarian action is interwoven with the ordering of imperium, to the point where we can consider humanitarian NGOs to be acting within a liberal assemblage of occupation. In doing so, humanitarianism acts to legitimate an unequal distribution of power through governance practices that reinforce political conditionality. The increasing activism of humanitarian organizations gives rise to concerns that the conventional humanitarian practice of neutrality has become organized ethical confusion and precedes attempts to restructure social relations which are in themselves inherently political.

6. Why have democratic politicians found it so difficult to reduce economic inequalities?

7. To what extent is a modern state’s foreign policy a reflection of its domestic politics?

8. Is political obligation an obligation of prudence?
9. Can the category of national culture ever be useful when explaining how forms of government work, or fail to do so?

10. Should aspirations for a peaceful world order governed by global institutions now be laid to rest?

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**The 2017 exam paper**

1. For democracy to function meaningfully, majorities and minorities alike must be able to recognize the fairness of political processes even when they disagree with the outcomes. What is needed is an underlying sense of collective identity: a sense that we are part of a discursive community with the inclinations and abilities to discuss our differences. Beyond sanitizing public discourse and conforming to certain rules, forging trust across divides of race, class, and culture is a matter of collectively developing habits and skills of public reason. This does not mean that minorities ought to simply assimilate their perspectives into that of a homogeneous public. Rather, perhaps the most pressing task for realizing a democracy is for majorities to better understand the distinct and legitimate perspectives of minorities.

2. In the contemporary state system, inequalities of power are veiled under an international legal system founded upon the idea of formal equal sovereignty. Equal sovereignty often provides a legitimising framework within which powerful states are capable of influencing the domestic and foreign policy of weaker ones without much cost. This makes current forms of interstate domination less visible, and more insidious, than historical ones. Nor have all institutions of global governance necessarily helped reduce domination.

3. Supranational institutions often act as channels that amplify, rather than bind, interstate power. Powerful countries have been able almost unilaterally to shape those very institutions – whose self-declared aim is to promote a more multilateral form of global governance – to their advantage. As a result, developing countries are unable to experiment with policy making, by way of trial and error, in the way that is essential to find one’s own working recipe for growth.

4. The study of politics and international relations should be approached with humility. There is no single theory that makes understanding politics easy, no magic methodological bullet that yields robust results without effort, and no search engine that provides mountains of useful and reliable data on every question that interests us. We therefore favour a diverse intellectual community where different theories and research traditions co-exist. Given how little we know, and how little we know about how to learn more, over-investing in any particular approach seems unwise. What matters most, however, is whether we create more powerful theories to explain key features of politics and international relations. Without good theories, we cannot trust our
empirical findings, whether quantitative or qualitative in nature. There are many roads to better theory, but that should be our ultimate destination.

5. The political use of culture to legitimate conflict is the outcome of two distinct processes. The first is that the ideology of violence requires rational cause, which is most easily provided by reference to notions of differences rooted in culture. Such logic is implacable: because we are different we cannot resolve our problems peacefully. The second is that we need to protect that which makes us distinct, or unique, which is our culture. Any sign of hostility towards us is, therefore, an attack on that culture. The conflation of these two processes has led political scientists to suppose that culture could be the ‘cause’ of conflict, whereas in reality it is only the language in which it is expressed. If this is true, then it can be argued that ideology is in large part the political exploitation of culture.

If you don’t like something you see in a shop you can go elsewhere, but in politics the only way to get something is to use voice – to express your concerns in concert with others – and that carries far more costs than the exit mechanism available to us in market transactions. People generally don’t like making a lot of effort for little reward. Accordingly offloading responsibility on to others, as we have seen, is a very common coping mechanism in political exchanges. But expressing your interest or opinion is only the start of a more general challenge in politics. You have not only to make your views known, you also have to listen. Politics is not about individual choice; it is about collective decision. Politics often involves a stumbling search to find a collective response to particular problems. It is not the most edifying human experience. It is rarely an experience of self-actualisation and more often an experience of accepting second-best. The results tend to be messy, contingent and inevitably create a mix of winners and losers.

6. Can we engage meaningfully with the world through the expression of political solidarities?

7. Are illiberal democracies sustainable?

8. What if anything in politics can be explained primarily through the reference to socio-economic class?

9. Do any foundational political concepts require rethinking in light of the digital revolution?

10. Does modern politics leave any space for the imagination?
The 2016 exam paper

1. 'If democracy means that social justice must not be reduced to market justice, then the main task of democratic politics should be to reverse the institutional devastation wrought by four decades of neoliberal progress, and as far as possible to defend and repair what is left of the institutions with whose help social justice might be able to modify or even replace market justice. It is only in this context that it seems meaningful to speak of democracy today, since it alone makes it possible to escape being fobbed off with the 'democratisation' of institutions that have no power to decide anything. Today democratisation should mean building institutions through which markets can be brought back under the control of society: labour markets that leave scope for social life, product markets that do not destroy nature, credit markets that do not mass-produce unsustainable promises. But before something like that can really come onto the agenda, at the least there will have to be years of political mobilisation and lasting disruption of the social order that is today taking shape before our eyes.'

2. ‘A person must have a very clouded vision, or view human society from a very misty distance, to cherish the notion that the uniform regulation of life would automatically ensure a uniform distribution of happiness. He or she must be pretty far gone in delusion if she or he imagines that equality of income, or equal opportunities for all, would have approximately the same value for
everyone. But, if he or she were a legislator, what she or he do about all those people whose greatest opportunities lie not without, but within? If he or she were just, he or she would have to give at least twice as much money to the one person as to the other, since to the one it means much, to the other little. No social legislation will ever be able to overcome the differences between human beings, this most necessary factor for generating the vital energy of a human society.’

3. ‘In the age of liberal order, revisionist struggles are a fool's errand. Indeed, China and Russia know this. They do not have grand visions of an alternative order. For them, international relations are mainly about the search for commerce and resources, the protection of their sovereignty, and, where possible, regional domination. They have shown no interest in building their own orders or even taking full responsibility for the current one and have offered no alternative visions of global economic or political progress. That's a critical shortcoming, since international orders rise and fall not simply with the power of the leading state; their success also hinges on whether they are seen as legitimate and whether their actual operation solves problems that both weak and powerful states care about. In the struggle for world order, China and Russia (and certainly Iran) are simply not in the game.’

4. ‘We cannot expect to find in our society a single set of moral concepts, a shared interpretation of the moral vocabulary. Conceptual conflict is endemic in our situation, because of the depth of our moral conflicts. Each of therefore has to choose both with whom we wish to be morally bound and by what ends, rules, and virtues we wish to be guided. These two choices are inextricably linked. In choosing to regard this end or that virtue highly, I make certain moral relationships with some other people, and other moral relationships with others impossible. Speaking from within my own moral vocabulary, I shall find myself bound by criteria embodied in it. These criteria will be shared with those who speak the same moral language. And I must adopt moral vocabulary if I am to have any social relationships. For without rules, without the cultivation of virtues, I cannot share ends with anyone else. I am doomed to social solipsism. Yet I must choose for myself with whom I am to be morally bound. I must choose between alternative forms of social and moral practice.’

5. Is progress inevitable?

6. Is sovereignty a necessary conditions of modern politics?

7. Is the age of party democracy over?
8. Whose interests does democracy serve?

The 2015 exam paper

1. ‘Plainly we cannot escape the maze of contemporary democracy by retracing our steps. We cannot reverse time, and very few of us wish to return to any ancien régime. We also cannot hope to remove the myriad other sources of confusion in the real political world we inhabit by recognising the route we have followed to get where we now are. What we could still reasonably hope to do is to break the hypnotic spell the term democracy now casts by recognising how it casts that spell. It is by any human standards absurd to have ended up with a single term for judging where we are in the politics of the world, and what to value and strive for within those politics, a term that carries such pretension to authority but also equivocates so uncontrollably between the official regime name for particular states as these actually are and the most appropriate basis for deciding the most important decisions that bear on the life chances of human beings across the globe.’

2. ‘The most important factor that makes a rising civilisation work is mimesis—the universal human habit by which people imitate the behaviour and attitudes of those they admire. As long as the political class of a civilisation can inspire admiration and affection from those below it, the civilisation thrives, because the shared sense of values and purpose generated by mimesis keeps the pressures of competing class interests from tearing it apart. Civilisations fail, in turn, because their political classes lose the ability to inspire mimesis, and this happens in turn because members of the elite become so fixated on maintaining their own power and privilege that they stop doing an adequate job of addressing the problems facing their society. As those problems spin further and further out of control, the political class loses the ability to inspire and settles instead for the ability to dominate. Outside the political class and its hangers-on, in turn, more and more of the population becomes an internal proletariat, an increasingly sullen underclass that still provides the political class with its cannon fodder and labour force but no longer sees anything to admire or emulate in those who order it around.’

3. ‘Again and again between these catastrophes of blood and terror the cry rises up for the reconciliation of the peoples and for peace on earth. Like as we may the wish towards all this, we must have the courage to face facts as they are. Life if it would be great, is hard; it lets us choose only between victory and ruin, not between war and peace, and to the victory belong the sacrifices of victory. For that which shuffles querulously and jealously by the side of the events is only literature – written or thought or lived literature – mere truths
that lose themselves in the moving crush of facts. History has never deigned to take notice of these propositions.’

4. ‘There seems to have been a profound contradiction between the political imperative of establishing capitalism as the only possible way to manage anything, and capitalism’s own unacknowledged need to limit its future horizons lest speculation, predictably, goes haywire. Once in 2008 it did, and the whole machine imploded, we were left in the strange situation of not being able to even imagine any other way things might be arranged. About the only thing we can imagine is catastrophe. To begin to free ourselves, the first thing we need to do is to see ourselves again as historical actors, as people who can make a difference to the course of world events.’

5. In politics is everything contingent?

6. Are modern democracy and modern technology compatible?

7. Is politics personal?

8. Do organised interests corrupt politics?

The 2014 exam paper

1. I do not see how our societies can be kept going unless people are willing to acknowledge in some way the idea of a public order that means more than is what is simply “out there”. This would mean seeing others as citizens and not just as residents or wanderers on the same patch of ground. But the sense of shared citizenship that we need does not exclude or even weaken individual rights, such as the right to privacy. On the contrary, it requires them. We have a sense of citizenship only if we think that others are like us, and one way in which we know they are like us is that they need to be protected, as we want to be, from destructive and unpredictable intrusions, whether by the state or other agencies.

2. It is widely contended that economic and social development creates pressure for democratization that an authoritarian state structure cannot contain. There is also the view that “closed societies” may be able to excel in mass manufacturing but not in the advanced stages of the information economy. The jury on these issues is still out, because the data set is incomplete. Imperial and Nazi Germany stood at the forefront of the advanced scientific and manufacturing economies of their times, but some would argue that their success no longer applies because the information economy is much more diversified. Non-democratic Singapore has a highly successful information economy, but Singapore is a city-state, not a big country. It will take a long time before China reaches the stage when the possibility of an authoritarian state with an advanced capitalist economy can be tested. All that can
be said at the moment is that there is nothing in the historical record to suggest that a transition to democracy by today’s authoritarian capitalist powers is inevitable, whereas there is a great deal to suggest that such powers have far greater economic and military potential than their communist predecessors did.

3. Free-marketeers who repose their faith in market institutions forget that they are artefacts of human actions which human action can undo. In this they forget a crucial Hobbesian truth: the very integrity of market institutions, and ultimately their very survival, depend on the efficiency of coercive authority, in the absence of which market institutions collapse or else suffer capture by exploitative predators. Market institutions depend, in other words, on Hobbesian peace for their very existence. The office of government, in this connection, is the superintendence of market institutions, with the aim of ensuring that their workings are not self-defeating or such as to endanger themselves.

4. Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it. And since when we act, we never know with any certainty the eventual consequences of what we are doing, violence can remain rational only if it pursues short-term goals. Violence does not promote causes, neither history nor revolution, neither progress nor reaction; but it can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention.

5. Is technocracy compatible with democracy?

6. What makes a good politician?

7. Can there be a global politics?

8. Why vote?

The 2013 exam paper

1. Politics is a craft or a skill, and ought not to be analysed, as Plato’s Socrates assumes, as the mastery of a set of principles or theories. This does not imply that political agents do not use theories. Rather, part of their skill depends on being able to choose skilfully which models of reality to use in a certain context, and to take account of the ways in which various theories are limited and the ways in which they are useful or fail. The successful exercise of this skill is often called “political judgment”. Political judgment means, among other things, the ability to determine which analogies are useful, which theories abstract from crucial aspects of the situation. No further theory will help you avoid the need to judge.

2. The view that states and markets are in opposition to each other is the obverse of the truth. The world needs more globalization, not less. But we will only have more and better globalization if we have better states. Above all, we must
recognise that inequality and persistent poverty are the consequences not of the still limited integration of the world’s economy but of its political fragmentation. If we wish to make our world a better place, we must look not at the failures of the market economy, but at the hypocrisy, greed and stupidity that so often mar our politics, in both developing and developed countries.

3. Democracy could be a way of giving people control and making them freer, if only human beings were not the way they are. Actual human beings are wired not to seek truth and justice but to seek consensus. They are shackled by social pressure. They are overly deferential to authority. They cower before uniform opinion. They are swayed not so much by reason as by a desire to belong, by emotional appeal, and by sex appeal. We evolved as social primates who depended on tight in-group cooperative behaviour. Unfortunately this leaves us with a deep bent towards tribalism and conformity. Too much and too frequent democracy threatens to rob us of our autonomy.

4. Institutions initially appear for what in retrospect were historically contingent reasons. But certain ones survive and spread because the meet needs that are in some sense universal. This is why there has been institutional convergence over time, and why it is possible to give a general account of political development. But the survival of institutions involves a lot of contingency as well: a political system that works well for a country whose population’s median age is in the twenties may not work so well for a stagnant society where a third of the citizenry is at retirement age. If the institution fails to adapt, the society will face crisis or collapse, and may be forced to adopt another one. This is not less true of a liberal democracy than of a nondemocratic political system.

5. Does democracy require partisanship?

6. Is the West in political decline?

7. To what extent do the rights of citizens still depend on the nation state?

8. What makes peace secure?

The 2012 exam paper

1. So long as human exchange and specialisation are allowed to thrive somewhere, then culture evolves whether leaders help it or hinder it, and the result is that prosperity spreads, technology progresses, poverty declines, disease retreats, fecundity falls, happiness increases, violence atrophies, freedom grows, knowledge flourishes, the environment improves. Human nature will not change. The same old dramas of aggression and addiction, of infatuation and indoctrination, of charm and harm, will play out but in an ever more prosperous world. The human race will continue to expand and enrich its culture, despite setbacks and despite individual
people having much the same evolved, unchanging nature. The twenty-first century will be a magnificent time to be alive.

2. A free press is not an unconditional good. Press freedom is good because and insofar as it helps the public to explore and test opinion and to judge for themselves whom and what to believe and trust. If powerful institutions are allowed to publish, circulate and promote material without indicating what is known and what is rumour, what is derived from a reputable source and what is invented, what is standard analysis and what is speculation, which sources may be knowledgeable and which are probably not, they damage our public culture and all our lives. Good public debate must not only be accessible to but also assessable by its audiences.

3. The case for reviving the state does not rest uniquely upon its contributions to modern society as a collective project; there is a more urgent consideration. We have entered an age of fear. Insecurity is once again an active ingredient of political life in Western democracies. Insecurity born of terrorism, of course; but also, and more insidiously, fear of the uncontrollable speed of change, fear of the loss of employment, fear of losing ground to others in an increasingly unequal distribution of resources, fear of losing control of the circumstances and routines of our daily life. And, perhaps above all, fear that it is not just we who can no longer shape our lives, but that those in authority have also lost control, to forces beyond their reach.

4. The search for a definitive European identity and a permanent answer to what Europe means is, in fact, a wild goose chase. Identities are not freely chosen in some history-less nirvana, but they cannot be imposed, even by mass conversion. Nor are they matters of blood and soil, or unquestioned traditions. Traditions help to make us what we are, but they are never unquestioned: they have to be interpreted and reinterpreted in the light of changing circumstances. Shared identities are always in flux. Those who lose the argument today may win it tomorrow.

5. Are the most successful societies the most equal societies?

6. Is it dangerous to have convictions in politics?

7. Does power ultimately rest on opinion?

8. Do politicians ever learn from the past?

The 2011 exam paper

1. There is nothing fanciful about the idea that people believe things about others, in particular about candidates at an election, without having any reasonable grounds for that belief. It is rare indeed for people to form their beliefs by a process of logical deduction from facts ascertained by a rigorous search for all available evidence and a judicious assessment of its probative value. In greater or in less
degree according to their temperaments, their training, their intelligence, they are swayed by prejudice, rely on intuition instead of reasoning, leap to conclusions on inadequate evidence and fail to recognise the cogency of material which might cast doubt on the validity of the conclusions they reach.

2. It is not only with dismay that Promethean man regards the future. It is also with a kind of anger. If after so much effort, so little has been accomplished; if before such vast challenges so little is apt to be done – then let the drama proceed to its finale, let mankind suffer the end it deserves. Such a view is by no means the expression of only a few perverse minds. On the contrary, it is the application to the future of the prevailing attitudes with which our age regards the present. When men can generally acquiesce in, even relish, the destruction of their living contemporaries, when they can regard with indifference or irritation the fate of those who live in slums, rot in prison, or starve in lands that have meaning only insofar as they are vacation resorts, why should they be expected to take the painful actions needed to prevent the destruction of future generations whose faces they will never live to see? Worst yet, will they not curse these future generations whose claims to life can be honoured only by sacrificing present enjoyments; and will they not, if it comes to a choice, condemn them to non-existence by choosing the present over the future?

3. If justice is something which might and should be done, it must be true that it actually could be done. Economic or political justice cannot be precluded in principle by economic or political causality, however unlikely it might be for the time being in particular economic or political circumstances. Justice is an intensely political subject matter – political all the way down. Modern conceptions of human good, as elaborated in the academy, do not offer a sound basis for understanding what it might be for a given society to be just. In the attempt to achieve theoretical determinacy they set out from conceptions of the individual or community that are disastrously ingenuous – insensitive to the reality of either the individual or community because so obtuse about the dense relations between the two.

4. That various cultures, or cultural attitudes, will persist is obvious enough, and their contribution to a loosely united world is a very positive thing – broad variety not being the same as mutual antipathy. But we cannot in the long run accept the supposed corollary – that rogue regimes and movements produced in these cultures can be tolerated in principle, any more than could the National Socialist equivalent produced in Western culture. On the contrary, only pluralist versions, or versions incorporating or evolving towards pluralism, can be seen as real components of a future world. None of this is to say the complex tactical problems of foreign policy can be solved by simplistic confrontations. But a long-term strategy must maintain this general aim, not dismiss it as impossible.

5. What do politicians know?
6. Does power necessarily destroy itself?
7. Are there economic limits to the possibilities of modern politics?
8. Can politicians be honest?

The 2010 exam paper

1. There never has been a society in which the public interest ruled supreme. So long as men are not angels there never will be. But it is also true that there has never been a society which was not, in some way, and to some extent, guided by this ideal, no matter how perverse its application. A democratic society, with its particular encouragement to individual ambition, private appetite, and personal concerns has a greater need than any other to keep the idea of the public interest before it. Democracy, after all, is government by public opinion. And for public opinion genuinely to exist, it must be (a) opinion, not fancy or prejudice, and (b) public – i.e. directed toward the common good rather than to private benefits.

2. In all human societies of any magnitude – states, nation, empires, federations, whatever they may be called – force is an inevitable, therefore normal and natural ingredient: inevitable both for the preservation of internal order and for defence against external threats. From a practical standpoint, everyone knows this, even liberals; a nation wouldn’t survive two hours if all its instrumentalities of force and coercion suddenly disappeared. But though liberals know this insofar as they act in practical affairs, their doctrine does not take account of it. Force is inevitable in society because there are ineradicable limits, defects, evils and irrationalities in human nature, with resultant clashes of egos and interests that cannot be wholly resolved by peaceful methods of rational discussion, education, example, negotiation and compromise.

3. No society is immortal. As Rousseau said, “If Sparta and Rome perished, what state can hope to endure forever?” Even the most successful societies are at some point threatened by internal disintegration and decay and by more vigorous and ruthless external “barbarian” forces. In the end, the United States of America, for example, will suffer the fate of Sparta, Rome, and other human communities. Historically the substance of this kind of identity has involved four key components: race, ethnicity, culture (most notably language and religion) and ideology. The racial and ethnic Americas are no more. Cultural America is under siege. And as the Soviet experience illustrates, ideology is a weak glue to hold together people otherwise lacking racial, ethnic, and cultural sources of community.

4. The twentieth century innovation has been to give new expression to fairness as the pursuit of equality of opportunity for all, unfair privileges for no one. And in this century there is an even richer vision of equality of opportunity challenging people to make the most of their potential through education, employment and in our economy,
society and culture. Charities can and do achieve great transformative changes, but no matter how benevolent, they cannot, ultimately, guarantee fairness to all. Markets can and do generate great wealth, but no matter how dynamic, they cannot guarantee fairness to all. Individuals can be and are very generous, but by its nature personal giving is sporadic and often conditional. Fairness can be guaranteed only by a government that is enabling.

5. How should the success of political leadership be judged?
6. Can war lay the foundations of peace?
7. Are politics and virtue reconcilable?
8. Do complex constitutions undermine political stability?

The 2009 exam paper

1. If citizens are regarded as potential candidates for public office, election appears to be an inegalitarian method, since, unlike lot, it does not provide every individual seeking such office with an equal chance. Election is an aristocratic or even oligarchic procedure in that it reserves public office for eminent individuals whom their fellow citizens deem superior to others. Furthermore, the elective procedure impedes the democratic desire that those in government should be ordinary persons, close to those they govern in character, way of life, and concerns. However, if citizens are no longer regarded as potential objects of electoral choice, but as those who choose, election appears in a different light. It then shows its democratic face, all citizens having an equal power to designate and dismiss their rulers. Election inevitably selects elites, but it is for ordinary citizens to define what constitutes an elite and who belongs to it.

2. Compared to the problems faced by the planet and the human species, the capacities of politics seem woefully inadequate. There are deep structural obstacles to tackling the causes of inequality and poverty, and effecting even very modest redistribution of resources and opportunities. The development of the global market has outpaced the development of the institutional forms of governance. There is no point in seeking to stop the development of the global market. But there is every reason for trying to make sure that political development catches up with it. Preserving and extending the realm of the political, creating a transnational public domain, is a condition for any prospect of improving the way in which the global market is governed. It does not ensure it. But it creates the space in which it becomes possible. Whether it is realised depends upon the emergence of newforms of political participation, and the wide dissemination of information and knowledge.

3. The categories provided by the state give people ways to respond to countless existing and new situations. Some of these will be laws, others rules, still
others norms. Although the state’s power rests in part on the symbolic abstractions with which it legitimates itself, these abstractions become real in its day-to-day work in the thousands of offices, police stations or classrooms where the state’s business is done, in things like road signs and markings governing traffic, or the civil laws governing behaviour. Strong norms have evolved to define how individuals should behave with a policeman, a teacher or a judge. In these situations, state power is rarely considered or rejected through detached reason by independent citizens applying abstract moral principles. Rather, it is made and remade in the daily situations where people assume given roles, play them out, and sometimes challenge them – for example invoking the state’s own claimed morality against its real practices. Most of the time upbringing and habit make people automatically align their beliefs and behaviour with what the state demands. For the rest of the time, inertia is enough.

4. Insecurity, conflict and war are uncontroversially destroyers of economic value, and security measures normally entail significant non-productive economic costs. But, as with preserving the value of freedom, so the prospects for economic improvement, which is itself dependent on permitting a relatively free flow of goods, services and people, require a significant degree of insecurity. The liberal doctrines of free trade, on which the dynamics of globalisation depend, are themselves arguments against the security impediments constructed by states to inhibit such trade. But it is also recognised that economic interdependence has ambiguous effects and that, as much as it benefits honest and productive businesses, it also strengthens the capacity and malign influence of global mafias and international terrorists.

5. Is violence always the result of political failure?
6. Are there plausible political alternatives to democracy?
7. Is it ever possible to escape the politics of fear?
8. How utopian is the idea of global justice?

The 2008 exam paper

1. Born in the American and French Revolutions, liberal democratic constitutionalism has struggled against the odd for two centuries – against monarchy, against Nazism, against Communism – to achieve an uncertain hegemony. No competing ideal has the same universal appeal. Only the most fervent fanatic dreams of the day when all mankind worships Christ or Allah, but the most pragmatic pragmatist cannot dismiss the possibility that, in a century or two, the entire world will be governed by variations on themes first elaborated by John Locke and Immanuel Kant. We are dealing only with a possibility, not a probability, much less a certainty. But for the first time in world history, the fate of Enlightenment
constitutionalism depends more on us than our enemies. The greatest threat is the implosion of liberal democratic values in the heartland, not the destruction by hostile forces from the periphery.

2. The paradox of globalisation is that as the world becomes more integrated so power becomes more diffuse. Thanks to the dynamics of international capitalism, all but the poorest people in the world have significantly more purchasing power than their grandfathers dared dream of. The means of production were never more productive or more widely shared. Thanks to the spread of democracy, a majority of people in the world now have markedly more political power than their grandfathers. The democratic means of election were never more widely accepted as the optimal form of government. The means of education too are accessible in most countries to much larger shares of the population than was the case two or three generations ago; more people than ever can harness their own brainpower. All these changes mean that old monopolies on which power was traditionally based – monopolies on wealth, political office and knowledge – have in large measure been broken up. Unfortunately thanks to the proliferation of modern means of destruction, the power to inflict violence has also become more evenly distributed.

3. There are indeed universal paradigms of injustice and unreason. They consist of people using power to coerce other people against their will to secure what the first people want simply because they want it, and refusing to listen to what other people say if it goes against their doing so. This is a paradigm of injustice because institutions of justice, wherever and whatever they may be, are intended to stand precisely against this. "Might is not in itself, right" is the first necessary truth, one of few, about the nature of right. Simply in this form, the universal paradigm excluded many bad things, but it is indeterminate about what it requires: it says not much more than that coercion requires legitimation and that the will of the stronger it not itself a legitimation. It is already clear, however, how long a journey the liberal would have to make to arrive at the conclusion that morality in his sense and its notion of autonomy provide the only real alternative to injustice and unreason. He would have to show that the only considerations that could count as legitimation were those of liberal consent. In fact he would have to show something stronger, that only his considerations could even decently be supposed to count as legitimation. That seems, as it surely is, a wildly ambitious or even imperialistic claim.

4. The glaring failure of the scientific view of human behaviour to conform with what we see life to be like is what causes suspicion of scientists when they attempt to generalise about history or politics. Their theories are condemned as foolish and doctrinaire and Utopian. What is meant is that all reforms suggested by such considerations, whether of the left or the right, fail to take into account the only method by which anything is ever achieved in practice, whether good or bad, the only method of discovery, the answer to the questions which are proper to historians, namely: What do men do and suffer, and why and how? It is the view that answers to these questions can be provided by formulating general laws, from which the past
and future of individuals and societies can be successfully predicted, that has led to misconceptions alike in theory and practice: to fanciful, pseudo-scientific histories and theories of human behaviour, abstract and formal at the expense of the facts, and to revolutions and wars and ideological campaigns conducted on the basis of dogmatic certainty about their outcome – vast misconceptions which have cost the lives, liberty and happiness of a great many innocent human beings.

5. Is everything in politics mortal?
6. What purposes does honour serve in politics?
7. Could we live without the state?
8. What wins elections?

The 2007 exam paper

1. It is hard to derive good rules for the interaction of all parts of any international political and social order. The more people are worried about inequality, the more they demand clear rules about what distribution of property is right, and the more they find the idea of mutual toleration of various and different lifestyles immoral and repulsive. The demand can produce a single ideology. It can also produce a demand for a single source of order to deal with the threats of violence, that emerge especially in the periphery. The rule-based order is strained when it has to deal with inequality, and also when it has to deal with rapid change. The two challenges are likely to come in combination with each other. Dealing with both questions requires constant regulatory and rule-making innovation, in the course of which rules are likely to become more complex, less transparent, and thus more open to the charge of masking concrete and particular interests. In reality, most attempts to produce rules for international order are messy. The result is to produce a suspicion of the international order, which increases with more international contacts.

2. There are, of course, limits to what story telling can achieve. It is best at seeing politics as a scenario of subtle interactions, and it is therefore an addition, not a substitute, for more abstract models of analysis. To establish general laws or models to explain and judge political conduct is particularly necessary for assessing the rational consistency and consequences of specific decisions or policy choices. There is, however, much ritual, display, social exchanging, and acting out in the public arena by officials and citizens, and here story telling may offer more appropriate theories. The drama is saturated with politics not only because the subject is inherently fascinating. The subject also lends itself to the stage because it is almost pre-packaged for that purpose. Especially when politics and morals, the public and the personal, meet, we can do worse than find the right character to perform and endure all the implications of any net of ideas. Active embodiment can
bring out all the improvisations, dodges, adaptations, twists, and turns of politics, and also, of course, its enormous violence.

3. The more demanding the conception of citizenship, the more intrusive the public policies needed to promote it. There is the story of the Spartan mother with five sons in the army. A helot arrives with the news that all have been slain in battle. “Vile slave”, she retorts, “was that what I asked you?” “We have won the victory,” he replied, whereupon the Spartan mother hastened to the temple to give thanks to the gods. That, it has been said, was a citizen. The example may seem far- fetched, but the point is clear. The more our conception of the good citizen requires the sacrifice of private attachments to the common good, the more vigorously the state must act (as Sparta did) to weaken those attachments in favour of devotion to the public sphere. (This point applies to other demanding concepts of citizenship based on ideals such as autonomy, critical rationality, and deliberative excellence).

4. Politics is not tragic, either in part or in whole: tragedy belongs to art, not to life. And further, the imperfectability of man is not tragic, nor even a predicament, unless and until it is contrasted with a human nature susceptible to a perfection which is, in fact, foreign to its character, and rationalism rears its ugly head once more in any arguments which assumes or asserts this contrast. To children and to romantics, but to no-one else, it may appear tragic that we cannot have Spring without Winter, eternal youth or passion always at the height of its beginning. And only a rationalistic reformer will confuse the imperfections which can be remedied with the so-called imperfections which cannot, and will think of the irremovability of the latter as a tragedy. The rest of us know that no rationalistic justice (with its project of approximating people to things) and no possible degree of human prosperity can ever remove mercy and charity from their place of first importance in the relations of human beings and know also that this situation cannot properly be considered either imperfect or a tragedy.

5. ‘All government is oligarchy. Different oligarchies tell different stories.’

6. Are constitutions necessary?

7. Is there a place in politics for hope?

8. Why are there more nations than states?

The 2006 exam paper

1. There are some flaws in the assumptions made for democracy. It is assumed that all men and woman are equal, or should be equal. Hence one-man one-vote. But is equality realistic? If it is not, to insist on equality must lead to regression. If we had a world government for this small interdependent world, will one-man-one-vote lead to progress or regression? All can immediately see that the developed and
educated peoples of the world will be swamped by the undeveloped and uneducated, and that no progress will be possible. Indeed if the UK and US had given universal suffrage to their peoples in the nineteenth century, then economic and social progress might well have been less rapid. The weakness of democracy is that the assumption that all men are equal and capable of equal contribution to the common good is flawed. This is a dilemma. Do we insist on ideals when they do not fit into the practical realities as we know them? Or do we compromise and adjust to realities?

2. Nearly five hundred years ago, Europe invented the most effective form of political organisation in history: the nation-state. Through a series of wars and conquests, this form of political organisation spread like a virus, so that by the twentieth century it was the only way of organising politics and eliminating empires, city-states, and feudal systems. Because nation-states were most comfortable dealing with other nation-states, other political systems faced a stark choice: become a nation state, or get taken over by one. In the second half of the twentieth century, Europeans started to reinvent this model. As the EU develops ever greater global clout and spreads to take over a continent, other countries have been faced with an equally stark choice: join the European Union, or develop your own union based on the same principles of international law, interfering in each other’s affairs, and peace as an ideology. By the end of the twenty-first century, in the new regional world, you will need to be part of a club to have a seat at the table. The world that emerges will be centred around neither the United States nor the United Nations, but will be a community of interdependent regional clubs. As the momentum for regional organisation picks up, great powers like the United States will inevitably be sucked into the process of integration. They might be able to slow the process, but they won’t be able to stop it. As this process continues, we will see the emergence of a ‘New European Century’. Not because Europe will run the world as an empire, but because the European way of doing things will have become the world’s.

3. It is not, however, supreme coercive power, simply as such, but supreme coercive power, exercised in certain ways and for certain ends, that makes a state; viz. exercised according to law, written or customary, and for the maintenance of rights. The abstract consideration of sovereignty has led to these qualifications being overlooked. Sovereignty = supreme coercive power, indeed, but such power as exercised in and over a state, which means with the qualification specified: but the mischief of beginning with an inquiry into sovereignty, before the idea of a State has been investigated, is that it leads us to adopt this abstract notion of sovereignty as merely supreme coercive power, and then, when we come to think of the state as distinguished by sovereignty, makes us suppose that supreme coercive power is all that is essential to a state, forgetting that it is rather the state that makes the sovereign than the sovereign that makes the state. Suppose that one man had been master of all the slaves in one of the states of the American Union, there would have been a multitude of men under one supreme coercive power, but the slaves and the
master would have formed no state, because there would have been no (recognised) rights of slave against slave enforced by the master, nor would dealings between master and slaves have been regulated by any law, and in consequence the multitude consisting of slaves and masters would not have been a state.

4. The ingredients of a politics that embraces the whole of life are exposed as they emerge from the dissociation of the spiritual and the temporal realms. The process of their dissociation has not been a process of the secularisation of politics. Rather, throughout that process, first, the spiritual apparatus has sought freedom from its dependence on the territorial rulers, in an attempt to conquer direct ascendance over the administration of society; thereafter, the territorial apparatus has retrieved, in different ways and degrees, some influence over the formation of ultimate ends. This reappropriation of the right of defining ultimate ends is more radical for those weak nations that fight to overcome their disadvantages. It meets less resistance when a weak civil society is unable to propose alternative identifications to satisfy the need for long-term certainties. Similarly, groups, classes, or movements, when they are weak, need to explicitly and forcefully propose long-term ends, to overcome their weakness. Thus at times the means of a politics that embraces the whole of life (the capacity to induce devotion, self-sacrifice, long-term commitment, hopes or illusions of transforming reality) are in the hands of movements or groups. At times they are in the hands of states or other collectivities controlling the use of force. This is a most threatening case.

5. What is it effectively to lead a democracy?

6. Is there virtue in empire?

7. Does context explain all in politics?

8. Can the political ever be moral?

The 2005 exam paper

1. One understands of course why the role of the individual in history is instinctively played down by a would-be egalitarian society. We are, quite naturally, afraid of being victimised by reckless adventurers. To avoid this we have created the myth of the ineluctable mass which governs all. Science, we are told, is not a matter of individual inquiry but of collective effort. Even the surface storminess of our elections disguises a fundamental indifference to human personality: if not this man, then that one; it's all the same; life will go on. Up to a point there is some virtue in this; and though none can deny that there is a prevailing greyness in our placid land, it is certainly better to be non-rulled by mediocrities than enslaved by Caesars. But to deny the dark nature of human personality is not only fatuous but dangerous. For in our insistence on the surrender of private will to a conception of the human race as some sort of virus in the stream of time, unaffected by individual deeds, we have
been made vulnerable not only to boredom, to that sense of meaninglessness which more than anything else is characteristic of our age, but vulnerable to the first messiah who offers the young and bored some splendid prospect, some Caesarean certainty. That is the political danger, and it is a real one.

2. Today Europe has moved on a stage further. In a global economy in which the distinction between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ has been eroded and in which our well-being depends so much on the open system of trade and investment, the costs of major military disruption are greater than ever before. This does not make peace inevitable – there are no limits to anger, greed and stupidity – but it does mean that the policy goals of the developed world are different from those of earlier ages. The strong preference for a peaceful environment is why intervention in other people’s civil wars is increasingly frequent and why troops are trained for peacekeeping as a professional skill and why today police as well as troops are often deployed abroad. That an army – a quintessential foreign policy instrument – should take on law and order duties abroad is in some sense the final triumph of the domestic over the foreign.

3. In self-deception, there is a kind of conspiracy between deceiver and deceived, and in those terms there can be such a thing as collective self-deception. This applies to the representation of politics in our societies now. The status of politics as represented in the media is ambiguous between entertainment and the transmission of discoverable truth, and rather as the purveyor of living myth is in league with his audience to tell a tale into which they will enter, so politicians, the media and the audience conspire to pretend that important realities are being seriously considered, that the actual world is being responsibly addressed. However, there is a difference. Those who heard the songs about Troy, when these conveyed living myths, were not at Troy, but when we are confronted with today’s politics, we are supposed to be in some real relation to today. This means that in our case, more than with living myth, the conspiracy comes closer to that of self-deception, the great enemy of truthfulness, because the wish that is expressed in these relations is subverting a real truth, that very little of the world under consideration, our present world, is in fact being responsibly addressed. We cannot after all simply forget the need for our relations to that world to be truthful, or give up asking to what extent our institutions, including the institutions of freedom, help them to be so.

4. The fact is that during the past two hundred years we have thought little about the institutional design of democracy. Since the great explosion of institutional thinking, when the present democratic institutions were invented – and they were invented – there has been almost no institutional creativity. Except for never implemented provisions for workers’ comanagement in the odd constitution, the discovery of proportional representation in the 1860s was the last major institutional invention. All democracies that have sprung up since the end of the eighteenth century, including the most recent ones, just combine in different ways, often
piecemeal, the pre-existing institutions. Hence, there is lots of room for institutional creativity.

5. Does politics always end in failure?
6. Do political parties have a future?
7. Is democracy ever not the best form of rule?
8. Who is political theory for?

The 2004 exam paper

1. To ask for a foundation for democracy is, typically, to ask for a reason why we should be inclusive in our moral and political concerns rather than exclusive—why, for example, we should try to broaden our moral and political community so as to include non-landowners, non-whites, non-males and non-straights, and so on. This request is equivalent to asking for a reason why the language of communities influenced by the Christian ethic of love is more worthy to survive than that of communities dominated by the notion of honour, or by pride in gender or in race. From a Darwinian point of view, this demand is as pointless as asking for a reason why the primitive mammals were more worthy to survive than the giant reptiles. Worthiness does not come into it, because there is no standpoint outside the accidents of evolution from which to judge worth. [Those of us opposed to the idea of foundations] think that once we give up on the answer “God wills that we love each other”, there is no good answer to the question about the worth of inclusivity and love. So we see the foundationalists’ question as a symptom of what [has been] called “supernaturalism”, defined as “the confusion of ideals and power”.

2. Faith in progressive internationalism may have become impossible to articulate in an intellectually respectable fashion. Power and law have been entangled in much more complex relationships than the conventional imagery would allow: if collective security in the League [of Nations] failed because it lacked the support of power, the United Nations seems to have suffered from its becoming indistinguishable from power. Critique of sovereignty ... is not proof of the beneficial nature of one’s proposed politics. Intervention may still emerge from solidarity and superiority and it is hard to tell which alternative provides the better framework of interpretation. As the debate on [recent interventions] has shown, there may be very little law in that direction anyway. And the doubt must remain that the abstract subject celebrated as the carrier of universal human rights is but a fabrication of the disciplinary techniques of Western ‘governmentality’ whose only reality lies in the imposition on social relations of a particular structure of domination. Universality still seems an essential part of progressive thought—but it also implies an imperial logic of identity: I will accept you, but only on the condition that I may think of you as I think of myself. But recognition of particularity may be an act of condescension, and
at worst a prelude for rejection. Between the arrogance of universality and the indifference of particularity, what else is there apart from the civilised manners of gentle spirits?

3. Most great statesmen were less distinguished by their detailed knowledge (although a certain minimum is indispensable) than by their instinctive grasp of historical currents, by an ability to discern amidst the myriad of impressions that impinge on consciousness those most likely to shape the future ... Little in the era of instantaneous communications encourages this ... The study of history and philosophy, the disciplines most relevant to perfecting the art of statesmanship, are neglected everywhere or given such utilitarian interpretations that they can be enlisted in support of whatever passes for conventional wisdom. Leaders rise to eminence by exploiting and manipulating the mood of the moment. They define their aims by consulting focus groups rather than following their own perceptions. They view the future as the projection forward of the familiar. The computer has solved the problem of storing knowledge and making a vast amount of data available. Simultaneously it exacts the price of shrinking perspective ... [Politicians] are tempted to wait on events and to be distracted by their echo in the media. Indeed, they have few other criteria by which to judge their performance. In the process, a view of the future is too often submerged in tactics. The problem is not the inadequacy of individual leaders but rather the systemic problem of their cultural preparation.

4. “Nation” and “nationalism” are no longer adequate terms with which to describe, let alone to analyse, the political entities described as such, or even the sentiments once described by these words. It is not impossible that nationalism will decline with the decline of the nation-state, without which being English or Irish or Jewish, or a combination of all these, is only one way in which people describe their identity among the many others which they use for the purpose, as occasion demands. It would be absurd to claim that this day is already near. However, I hope it can at least be envisaged ... The owl of Minerva which brings wisdom, said Hegel, flies out at dusk. It is a good sign that it is now circling round nations and nationalism.

5. Must political explanation take account of the past?

6. Can politicians know what they are doing?

7. Is there political virtue?

8. Does power corrupt?

The 2003 exam paper
1. This professional ruler is an “innocent” tool of an “innocent” anonymous power, legitimised by science, cybernetics, ideology, law, abstraction and objectivity—that is, by everything except personal responsibility to human beings as persons and neighbours. A modern politician is transparent: behind his judicious mask and affected diction there is not a trace of a human being rooted by his loves, passions, interests, personal opinions, hatred, courage or cruelty in the order of the natural world. All that he, too, locks away in his private bathroom. If we glimpse anything at all behind the mask, it will be only a more or less competent power technician. System, ideology, and apparat have deprived humans—rulers as well as the ruled—of their conscience, of their common sense and natural speech and thereby, of their actual humanity. States grow ever more machine-like, men are transformed into statistical choruses of voters, producers, consumers, patients, tourists or soldiers. In politics, good and evil, categories of the natural world and therefore obsolete remnants of the past, lose all absolute meaning; the sole method of politics is quantifiable success. Power is a priori innocent because it does not grow from a world in which words like guilt and innocence retain their meaning.

2. A moment’s reflection about, say, constitutional systems, should make it clear that there is no way of resolving “once and for all” every or even most questions of political authority. Consider only that for any existing or feasible constitutional system, it is possible to imagine all kinds of constitutional crises where no one would know what to do ... States, then, are not sovereign. Seldom does even a significant majority of the members of a particular state acknowledge one ultimate source of authority with the right to settle fundamental issues. Rather, there typically are a variety of sources of authority, many not recognised by the state in question. It is true, of course, that, given sufficient disagreement, a state or even other forms of social order cannot exist. But this is not to say that the agreement required for a state to exist be of the sort that Hobbes, Rousseau, and others have sought. What is required is merely sufficient agreement on a significant number of significant issues to permit conflicts to be resolved in an orderly manner, without bloodshed. In most situations, this agreement must include a conditional willingness to compromise and to accommodate oneself to the claims of others. Striving for “ultimate” sources of political authority is not only futile; it downplays and hides from view the cooperation and accommodation needed for social order. To build one’s political thinking around the concept of sovereignty is to encourage the strange and vicious notion that the truth of politics lies neither in joint nor in mutual accommodation but in command.

3. Debates about economic and humanitarian intervention are in many ways a continuation of arguments about colonialism and decolonisation. When scholars, policy makers, and citizens propose intervening to save failed states or to halt humanitarian disasters, they may do so because they fear the instability that can result from such crises. But interveners also often articulate a moral religious obligation to act to protect others. The impulses and arguments in favour of intervention are thus not dissimilar to colonial arguments: advocates of intervention
pose justifications that recall the civilising mission of colonialism, whilst the subjects of these interventions also often articulate uneasiness with their conduct, likening them to recolonisation.

4. After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the majority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterwards. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right.

5. Is political explanation necessarily comparative?

6. Must politics be just?

7. Must a successful politics rest on fictions?

8. ‘States are too large to address the small problems and too small to address the large ones.’

The 2002 exam paper

1. Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow feeling, especially if they read and speak different languages, the united public option, necessary to the workings of representative government, cannot exist ... Their mutual antipathies are generally much stronger than jealousy of the government ... Above all, the grand and only effectual security in the last resort against the despotism of government is in that case wanting; the sympathy of the army with the people ... Soldiers to whose feelings half or three-fourths of subjects of the same government are foreigners will have no more scruple in mowing them down, and no more desire to ask the reason why than they would have in doing the same thing against declared enemies.

2. For many years, representation appeared to be founded on a powerful and stable relationship of trust between voters and political parties, with the vast majority
of voters identifying themselves with, and remaining loyal to, a particular party. Today, however, more and more people change the way they vote from one election to the next, and opinion surveys show an increasing number of those who refuse to identify with any existing party. Differences between the parties once appeared to be a reflection of social cleavages. In our day, by contrast, one gets the impression that it is the parties imposing cleavages on society, cleavages that observers detail as “artificial”. Each party used to propose to the electorate a detailed programme of measures which it promised to implement if returned to power. Today, the electoral strategies of candidates and parties are based instead on the construction of the vague impulses, prominently featuring the personality of the leaders. Finally, those moving in political circles today are distinguished from the rest of the population by their occupation, culture and way of life. The public scene is increasingly dominated by media specialists, polling experts and journalists, in which it is hard to see a typical reflection of society. Politicians generally attain power because of their media talents, not because they resemble their constituents solely or are close to them. The gap between government and society, between representatives and represented, appears to be widening.

3. Successful foreign policy requires the management of nuances in a continuous process; domestic politics is about marshalling interests and passing laws which are subsequently enforced by an accepted judicial system. In foreign policy, achievement expresses itself in the willingness to persevere through a series of steps, each of which is inevitably incomplete in terms of the ultimate goal. Domestic politics measures its achievements in shorter time frames and more absolute terms.

4. Politics everywhere, in its essentials, is much the same. People do not greatly differ. They want security, wealth and the power through which to get them. They have particular interests and ambitions which they try to achieve, and which in some ways conflict, in others coincide, with the interests and ambitions of others. They band together with other people, either as a matter of convenience or as part of more permanent groups to which they acknowledge some kind of loyalty or obligation. Other groups, similarly formed, they regard with indifference, suspicion or downright hostility. And in seeking these interests, and forming these groups, they gain power over others and are subjected to power themselves, either directly through the imposition of physical force, or indirectly through the organisation of their surroundings in ways which reduce, and perhaps almost entirely remove, their capacity for individual choice. Any form of organisation, essential though it may be for the achievement of group and individual goals, and the management of conflict between competing interests, itself produces inequalities of power, and thus further differences of interest between those who have more power and those who have less.

5. Are there general political truths?
6. Are states in the modern world to be identified with their governments or their peoples?

7. Can politics ever escape from the past?

8. If politics is 'the art of the possible', can one know in advance what is possible?

*The 2001 exam paper*

1. For democracy means much more than popular government and majority rule, much more than a system of political techniques to flatter or deceive powerful blocks of voters. The true democracy, living, growing and inspiring, puts its faith in the people—faith that the people will not simply elect men who will represent their views ably and faithfully, but also elect men who will exercise their conscientious judgement—faith that the people will not condemn those whose devotion to principle lead them to unpopular courses, but will reward courage, respect honour and ultimately recognise right.

2. There is now, more than ever, some need for utopia, in the sense that men need—as they have always needed—some vision of their potential, some manner of fusing passion with intelligence. Yet the ladder to the City of Heaven can no longer be a “faith ladder”, but an empirical one: a utopia has to specify where one wants to go, how to get there, the costs of the enterprise, and some realisation of, and justification for the determination of who is to pay.

3. It is as difficult [now] as it would have been to predict the Westphalian system before it took shape. What feels clear is that something profound is underway, since the sovereign-state system does not work in important ways for the majority of the world's population. The latter's opinion may not yet (or ever) be decisive; more importantly, the ideological underpinnings of state sovereignty and independence are being daily subverted by globalisation, independence and regionalisation, while the material conditions of world politics will, short of amazing discoveries, become characterised by the growth of limits. Something profound is taking place, but the post-Westphalian pattern of global governance has yet to be worked out. Whether what evolves produces the cosy image of a global village, or a global Johannesburg (a tense city held together, and apart, by razor wire), or any other urban metaphor for our future remains to be seen. But what seems beyond doubt is the verdict that the rationality of statism—the belief that all decision-making power and loyalty should be focused on the sovereign (for the most part multi-nation) state—has reached its culminating point, and that future patterns of global governance will involve complex decentralisation below the state level, functional organisations above the state level, and a growing network of economic, social and cultural interdependencies at the level of transnational civil society outside the effective control of governments.
4. If the whole of the community had the same interests, so that the interests of each and every portion would be so affected by the action of the government that the laws which oppressed or impoverished one portion would necessarily oppress and impoverish all others—or the reverse—then the right of suffrage, of itself, would be all-sufficient to counteract the powers, and of course, would form, of itself, a perfect constitutional government. The interest of all being the same, by supposition, as far as the action of the government was concerned, all would have like interests as to what laws should be made and how they should be executed. All strife and struggle would cease as to who should be elected to make and execute them. The only question would be, who was most fit, who the wisest and most capable of understanding the common interest of the whole. ... But such is not the case. On the contrary, nothing is more difficult than to equalise the action of the government in reference to the various and diversified interests of the community; and nothing more easy than to pervert its powers into instruments to aggrandise and enrich one or more interests by oppressing and impoverishing the others; and this, too, under the operations of laws couched in general terms and which, on their face, appear fair and equal.

5. Are states legal fictions?

6. Can political leaders transcend the context in which they lead?

7. Is political thought unavoidably historical?

8. What in politics remains inexplicable?

Examiners’ reports

These are reports for seven recent examinations, chosen because they make different and complementary points. It is strongly recommended that students consult these.

2017

There were 103 candidates for the paper this year. 16 candidates were awarded a first class mark, 55 candidates an upper second, 29 a lower second, and 3 a third. The average mark was 62. There were more answers on the passages than the general questions.

In general, the scripts this year were disappointing with the caveat that there were significantly fewer short answers than in recent years. In the case of the passages, a significant number of students appeared to misread at least one of the claims in the text, attribute arguments to the authors that were not actually there, or were confused about the meaning of individual words. Others showed a good understanding of a passage in the preliminary part of the essay and then developed
an argument at a tangent to the relevant claims. Most candidates who tackled the passage on the explanatory value of theory in empirical analysis treated the passage as a set of arguments about normative political theory.

In the case of the general questions, a significant number of candidates struggled with the terms of the questions, in particular with ‘foundational political concepts’ and ‘engage meaningfully with the world’. Others spent too much time setting up the question before embarking upon an argument directed at answering question. Candidates should indeed engage with the terms of the questions but this task can be done considerably more economically than some candidates have come to do so.

For the most part there was considerable uniformity in the material used in developing arguments. In particular, a large number of candidates used examples about conflict in post-colonial countries, especially African ones. Some candidates deployed this material effectively. But others chose to use it in ways that were not well-suited to the passage or question answered.

Across the board there was much less intellectual variety in the answers than there has often been. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this issue was least pervasive on the question about imagination. For the most part seemed determined to use pre-prepared arguments without much thought as to how those arguments pertained to the text or question. There was also a striking unwillingness to subject some ideological arguments to sceptical reflection. Some candidates seemed to assume that the arguments they endorse are self-evidently true and that those they oppose are a priori incoherent.

Many candidates also struggled to use examples effectively. Most examples were deployed quickly without depth or nuance. Only a few candidates were willing to engage with an example in both making an argument and dealing with counter-arguments to that position.

Overall, there were enough good answers to suggest that candidates can perform well on this paper, but there may be some need for reflection on why a not insignificant number of students either struggle or perform significantly less well than on other papers. The fact that there has been progress on issues like length suggests that the classes are performing their role of establishing the expectations for the paper. What is less clear, however, is how well POL9 is working in conjunction with other papers, particularly given the rather narrow range of material candidates used this year.

2015

56 candidates took the paper in 2015. There were 8 agreed firsts and 2 more candidates where a candidate received one first class mark. There were also 8 agreed lower seconds and 2 more candidates received one lower second mark. This year there were no third class scripts.
The scripts in aggregate showed a significant improvement on 2014. There were proportionately fewer short answers although a number of the lower seconds were still awarded to candidates who wrote less than five pages. Within the upper second range, proportionately more candidates received a mark of 65 or above.

This year far more candidates answered a text question than in 2014. Generally, the text questions were also answered better at least at the top end. All the agreed firsts came on a passage question. Candidates seemed to focus their answers more clearly and precisely on passages than on the general questions. In part this disparity arose because many candidates did not answer the general questions very directly. For example, only one candidate on the question about contingency really got to grips with the contingency versus necessity antithesis on which the notion of contingency relies. No candidate made a clear distinction between that which could or could not be otherwise by virtue of political agency and that which could have been otherwise by virtue of chance in the material world. Similarly, most answers on the compatibility of modern democracy and modern technology paid rather little attention to modern technology itself. Here nobody got much beyond the internet, and several candidates tried to answer the question as if technology were itself the fundamental issue in democracy’s ability to adapt to crisis.

Certainly the best answers, especially on the passages, showed a considerable analytical flair and engaged directly and intelligently with specific material. Otherwise promising answers of both kinds, however, were rather let down by an apparent unwillingness to make arguments through a command of detail about something of substance. Many examples were under-developed, and too many candidates still fell back at least in part of their essays on rehearsing various political theorists’ approaches to the issue at hand. Candidates need to think harder about the way they make arguments so that their essays both use evidence through cases more effectively and have a sharper analytical structure. On this paper this requires candidates to reflect more on the pertinence of the material they bring to bear on either the propositions on the passage or the analytical terms of the general questions.

2014

80 students took the exam this year. The division between texts and questions was more unbalanced than in previous years, with 64 opting for questions and 16 for the texts. The most popular questions were no. 6 and no. 7 (on what makes a good politician and whether there can be a global politics). The question that produced the highest average mark was no. 5 on democracy and technocracy. The question that produced the lowest average mark, by some distance, was no. 8: ‘Why vote?’ Too many answers to this question showed no knowledge of any relevant literature and seemed to be based solely on its topicality, leading to thin and insubstantial answers. I’ll return to this below.
The overall spread of marks showed that this paper continues to stretch students at both ends of the scale. There were not any of the truly outstanding scripts that we have sometimes seen in previous years but there were still a good number of very strong scripts and fourteen agreed firsts were awarded. However, there were also a significant number of scripts that received agreed 2.2 marks or 3rds. The weaker scripts almost all tended to fall down on two fronts:

(i) **Length**: too many answers were too short, often only 6-8 sides of handwritten text and sometimes as few as 4. This is insufficient for a three hour exam that is designed to give students the opportunity to show the range and depth of their knowledge after three years of studying politics. We expect answers to contain detailed analysis and to back up the case being made with substantive discussions of relevant examples. Too many answers lacked this detail and consisted simply of generalisations coupled with very brief or sketchy examples.

(ii) **Choice of question**: too many students chose questions that they were not equipped to answer. This was especially true of q. 8 (‘Why vote?’). Questions should be chosen that allow the student to develop an argument in some detail that relates to an area in which they have particular knowledge and interest. General questions are not intended to produce only general answers or answers based on a recapitulation of material covered in the first year course. For that reason, some students this year might have been better choosing a passage to write about, since the passages require a greater attention to detail and the development of a range of different points. Students should avoid questions that appeal simply because they seem topical or relevant to current events (many of the answers to q. 8 were focussed on UKIP’s electoral success the previous week). Topicality can be an asset in a well-grounded essay but topicality on its own is no substitute for broad knowledge and detailed analysis.

Overall, students taking this paper need to make sure that they select a question that gives them the best opportunity to show the range of their knowledge and understanding acquired over three years, and particularly during the two years of their degree when they have been specialising in politics. They should be prepared to write at some length and to develop their arguments in detail. This means choosing to write on a topic about which they have some detailed knowledge. There should be sufficient scope across the eight questions for this paper to give all candidates the opportunity to do that.

**2013**

There were 77 candidates for this paper. The distribution of answers was fairly even between passages (33 in total) and essay questions (44 in total). There was also a relatively even mix between answers that focussed on political theory and those that
drew primarily on comparative/empirical studies. The most popular passage was no. 3 on democracy and the most popular question was no. 6 on the decline of the West. Overall there was a pleasing number of first-class scripts, with 12 agreed firsts being awarded. A number of these were extremely impressive and the very best answers showed an excellent mix of knowledge, insight and analytical precision. This exam remains a good test of the ability of students to sustain and develop an argument over an extended time period. Many showed that they were able to do this but a number of answers seemed to run out of steam quite early. There were a surprising number of relatively short scripts (6-8 sides) for a three hour exam (though having said that a couple of the very best answers were of that length). Students should be reminded that this exam is an opportunity to show the range of their reading and interests and it is disappointing when answers become repetitive or simply tail off. It should be possible for all politics finalists to draw on a wide range of material when writing for this paper.

The answers to text passages were sometimes a little formulaic: these essays would break the passage down into its component claims but said too little about how and why these claims went together. The best answers were alive to the structural tensions and ambiguities in the passage as a whole. Some answers also neglected aspects of the passage in question: for instance, too many answers to question 3 neglected the implications of the final sentence about ‘too much’ democracy; in the case of question 4 answers tended to ignore the demographic claim at the heart of the passage or decide that it was incidental to the main point. It is important when writing about these passages to be alive to the full range of what is being said and to explore how and why particular illustrations or iterations of the argument might be there.

The essay answers on the whole made good use of examples though these were sometimes a little general and lacking in detail. The best examples don't simply reinforce the case being made but develop and when necessary complicate it. Students should not be afraid of using complex examples to show the limits of general answers to the question being asked. In some cases there was also a tendency to spend too much time focussing on the terms of the question. For instance, with question 6, a number of essays devoted an excessive amount of space to inconclusive definitions of ‘political’, ‘decline’ and ‘West’; likewise, with question 8 too many answers circled around the problem of defining peace without pursuing a particular line on it. Essays for this paper do not need extended definitional or scene-setting introductions. It is better to get on with answering the question in a forthright way and then developing variations or complications on that theme.

2011

There were 63 candidates for this paper. There was one starred first, 8 firsts, 41 upper seconds and thirteen lower seconds. There were 17 answers on the passages
and 46 answers on the general questions. The average mark on the passages was 61.8 and on the general questions 63.6. Question 1 was answered least well and question 8 most effectively. Around 60 per cent of candidates performed in the same class on this paper as their overall class, around 30 per cent performed one class below, and around 6 per cent one class above. One candidate performed two classes below his/her overall class but the mark for this paper did not determine his/her class because there were compensating marks on other papers. Of the 2.2 scripts, 12 were significantly short answers and one contained a significant amount of discussion that was irrelevant to the question.

The length of answers on this paper has proved a significant weakness for some candidates over the past few years. Candidates are expected to produce at least eight pages of single-spaced average-sized handwriting. Candidates have three hours for one question and cannot expect to receive upper second marks for answers that are significantly shorter than that. Candidates also must offer conclusions to their essays to achieve upper second marks or above.

The relatively weak answers on the first passage stemmed from an almost uniform failure to read the passage accurately. All but one answer attributed a normative argument about the problem of democracy and/or the common good to the author that is not there in the text and failed to set out the individual propositions of the argument that is in the text. These answers generally read as though they were prepared answers on democracy that had been put on to this question rather than direct engagement with the argument in the passage.

Across the passages and questions there was a general weakness in dealing with the relationship between the question asked, the argument made, and the examples used in the making that argument. Too many candidates moved to their examples too quickly, particularly on the general questions. Candidates need to offer some general discussion of the question in setting up and then to reflect on the relevance of the examples they wish to use in engaging with that question. This requires some discussion of the limitations and issues created by using particular examples. Candidates need to think hard about what the terms of particular questions require in this respect. ‘Can politicians be honest’ is not the same question as ‘Should politicians be honest?’ And ‘Does power necessarily destroy itself’ is not the same question as ‘Does power destroy itself?’. Examples need to be directed at the question as asked and to be reflected on as examples in that context. Candidates need to return in the conclusion of the essays to the issues raised by the examples they have used in relation to the question.

More generally, a significant number of candidates struggled in setting questions up and missed some obvious distinctions. Rather few candidates distinguished between the power of states internationally and domestically in discussing the nature of the power of the state. A number of candidates got into a muddle trying to define ‘economic’ in a way that could be used in answering question well.
Finally, there is still a tendency among some candidates to offer answers that lack the architecture and language of an argument. Some candidates describe arguments rather than make them by presenting a particular author’s argument as evidence itself that the claims in it are persuasive. Some candidates also use the words through which arguments are made – thus, therefore, however, nonetheless, yet, but, consequently – in incorrect ways. In particular there was a tendency among some candidates to use ‘therefore’ ‘thus’ and ‘however’ as conjunctions and undermine their own arguments in doing so.

2009

There were 60 candidates for the paper. The examiners gave nine agreed firsts, 36 agreed upper seconds, and 10 agreed lower seconds. Three candidates received a first class mark paired with an upper second. Generally, the scripts were very encouraging compared to recent years. There were more firsts, fewer lower seconds, and no thirds. More than half the candidates who got agreed firsts for this paper achieved an overall first in the Tripos because of their performance on Pol13.

Candidates directed their answers to the questions and used a broader and more imaginative range of examples than they have for some time. Candidates were also more willing to tackle the general questions than they were last year, and most of the first class answers came from this part of the paper. Whilst it is crucial that candidates set out the propositions in the text in answering the passage questions, they also should be willing to engage with the persuasiveness of those propositions in ways that goes beyond the immediate content of the passage. Examples can be deployed as effectively here as on general questions. It was striking that the question about fear was so much better answered than the question about hope in 2007 when substantively they were exactly the same question. Here candidates did engage with the nature of fear before embarking upon an answer and generally reasoned their way to a set of conclusions that answered the question. The contrast with the previous answers on hope suggests that candidates help themselves when they contain any urge they may have to use Pol13 as a space to polemicise.

Despite the improvement in quality in this year, there are some long-standing failings that remain. Setting out what different theorists would think about a question, without engaging as to whether or not these theorists’ claims are persuasive or not, is not making an argument but offering exposition and will not suffice. If candidates want to make a point by saying that a particular theorist is right about something, then they need to explain why they think that theorist is right and deal with the strongest counter-argument that can be made against that position. Similarly, candidates need to deploy examples to make an argument, not as decorative illustration of some supposedly self-evident truth. They also need to remember that virtually all examples from real-world politics will expose some political complexity and accordingly need to be unpacked. Using the same example both to make an argument and to deal with the counterargument can be an effective method of both capturing that complexity
and presenting a persuasive line of reasoning. Finally, candidates are still sometimes too willing to generalise. This was particularly true this year when discussing globalisation, development, and the international economy and it led some candidates into some claims that are entirely empirically untenable. Pol13 gives candidates enough time to think hard about each claim made in an essay and candidates need to use that time profitably to ask themselves about the persuasiveness of everything that they want to say.

2007

There were fifty candidates for the paper. The examiners gave one agreed starred first, 2 agreed firsts, 17 agreed upper seconds, 17 agreed lower seconds, 4 agreed thirds. Three candidates received a first class mark paired with an upper second, and 6 an upper second paired with a lower second.

For the first time since this paper began the answers were very unevenly distributed between texts and general questions. 14 candidates answered a text question and 36 a general question, with 24 of those taking a general question writing about hope. Given that the answers on hope were of a variable quality and that the majority of the candidates failed to establish any real analytical purchase on what hope might mean, the disposition to this question did not on balance do a service to candidates. The average mark for text questions was higher than for general questions. Whilst there was no mark lower than 52 on the texts, there were 4 thirds for general questions. The question on constitutions was particularly poorly answered with no script receiving two marks above lower-second quality.

The two best scripts showed once again just what candidates can achieve on this paper when they pursue the question or text with vigour and rigour and use the time available to think through their answer before beginning to write. That one of these scripts was on a question (oligarchy) that nobody else answered also suggests that the apparently obvious or easy question to answer might not always be the wisest choice.

The questions on hope and constitutions produced virtually all the weakest answers. On both several candidates dumped what were clearly supervision essays or exam answers for other papers. The examiners cannot emphasise strongly enough that such answers on Pol13 will meet low marks. This almost invariably has deleterious consequences. At least five candidates dropped a class in Part IIB because of their performance in Pol13. The risk is not simply a pair of third class marks, which cannot be compensated for an upper second degree, but of low lower second mark which reduces a candidate’s overall average below the 59 threshold required for an upper second. Of the better lower-second answers, too many candidates wrote at too high a level of generality, fell back on polemic and assertion, or failed to engage with the terms of the question. This was particularly striking on the answers on hope, which was taken to mean a multitude of different things, some of which bore little relation to
any definition of hope as the wish for something in the face uncertainty. No candidate stopped to distinguish between hope as a reasoned belief and hope as an emotion, or between the relationship between hope and politics in the context of the hope-possessing agent having power and in a context in which that agent is without power. Some fairly simple distinctions would get answers to general questions off to a good start and provide a clearer analytical structure to answers than many candidates are deploying. Too many candidates this year gave the impression that they had embarked on answers before getting their general thoughts under control, or having worked out how to use specific empirical and theoretical points to make their arguments. As the examiners said last year, the opportunity to think for an hour should be used to the full.