12. The Role of Constitutional Conventions

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Chapter: (p. 357) 12. The Role of Constitutional Conventions

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Titles in the Complete series combine extracts from a wide range of primary materials with clear explanatory text to provide readers with a complete introductory resource. This chapter discusses the nature and extent of constitutional conventions, which are political rules that are binding upon those to whom they apply. They apply to the relationships between the Crown, Parliament, the judiciary, the civil service, and the executive, and play a key role in limiting the powers granted to institutions of government by unwritten rules or sources. Constitutional conventions also regulate key parts of the relationship between the institutions of government. The doctrine of ministerial responsibility is one of the most important examples of constitutional conventions regulating the behaviour of the executive. There are two main branches of ministerial responsibility. One is individual ministerial responsibility—that is, a minister’s obligation to account to Parliament for his or her words and actions, and for those of his or her civil servants. The second branch of ministerial responsibility is collective ministerial responsibility. Amongst other things, collective ministerial responsibility prescribes that
decisions reached by the Cabinet or other ministerial committees are binding on all members of the government, regardless of whether or not the individual ministers agree with them.

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