

Lesson 2

If you were the president

What is government for?

Learning objective	The students can explain the functions and responsibilities of government.
Student tasks	The students imagine that they form a government and have to decide how government money should be spent. They consider the sort of social ideals they would like to achieve.
Resources	A large piece of paper, marker pens and a prompt sheet for each group of 4-6 students.
Method	Posters, presentations, small group work and whole class discussion.

Conceptual learning

The duty of the government in a democratic society is to promote the common good. This is more than the good of the majority. It is what is of ultimate benefit to all members of the society. What this means in practice is often the subject of debate. A number of different – sometimes conflicting – social ideals have been suggested, such as welfare, security, justice, social harmony, human rights or prosperity. Prioritising these in actual spending plans can be difficult, especially as the resources available to a government are always limited.

The lesson

The teacher begins the lesson by dividing students into groups of 4-6 and giving each group a large piece of paper and marker pens.

The teacher asks the groups to imagine that they are living at some point in the future and find they have been put in charge of running the country – in other words, they are the government. As the government, they have \$6 billion to spend. The teacher may adapt this figure to the annual budget of the government of the country.

The task for the groups is to decide how they will spend this money over the coming year. Using the paper and marker pens, each group creates a poster explaining how, as the government, it will spend its money and then gives a presentation setting out its ideas to the rest of the class. At the end of each presentation, the other students are given an opportunity to question the group about its spending plans.

The teacher also questions the groups as a way of introducing new information about the economy and the way that governments function, for example:

- Have you thought about using some of the money to pay off foreign debt?
- Should you use some of that money to create jobs?
- How important is it for a government to spend money on education?

Then the teacher works with the class as a whole to draw up a list, visible to everyone, of all the things they think a government should spend money on.

Next, the teacher asks the students to return to their groups and gives each group a prompt sheet containing a list of the kind of social ideals that a government of a democratic society might be trying to achieve, for example:

- welfare;
- security;
- justice;
- social harmony;
- human rights;
- prosperity.

The groups have to try to match the ideals on the list to the areas of spending they have already outlined by considering which of the ideals are achieved by each of their spending headings.

The teacher asks the groups to present their ideas to the class as a whole and finishes the lesson by asking all the students in turn:

- What do you think is the most important responsibility a government is meant to carry out?

For homework, the teacher asks the students to find out some of the ways in which government money in their country is spent. They might do this by watching TV or looking at a newspaper. The students present what they have found out at the beginning of the next lesson and consider whether their own priorities would be the same.