● elected by the country at large, the president rises above the squabbles between local interests represented in the assembly;

● a president provides a natural symbol of national unity, offering a familiar face for domestic and international audiences alike;

● since a presidential system necessarily involves a separation of powers, it should also encourage limited government and thereby protect liberty.

But presidential government also carries inherent risks. Only one party can win the presidency; everyone else loses. All-or-nothing politics can lead to political instability, especially in new regimes. In addition, fixed terms of office are too inelastic; ‘everything is rigid, specified, dated’, wrote Bagehot (1867). As experience in the USA periodically reveals, the deadlock arising when executive and legislature disagree means that the political system may be unable to address pressing problems.

There is a danger, too, that presidents will grow too big for their boots. In the past, Latin American presidents have frequently amended the constitution so as to continue in office beyond their one- or two-term limits.

Even worse, a frustrated or ambitious president can turn into a dictator; presidential democracies are more likely than parliamentary democracies to disintegrate (Cheibub, 2002). The USA remains the world’s only case of stable presidential government over the long term – an exception to admire but not, it seems, a model that can easily be replicated. Here, the judgement is to decide whether the presidential system’s overall instability is inherent or simply an accident of geography; many presidential systems are found in historically volatile Latin America.

Parliamentary government

Unlike presidential systems, in which the chief executive is separate from the legislature and independently elected, the executive in parliamentary government is organically linked to the assembly (Figure 16.2). The government emerges from parliament and can be brought down by a vote of no confidence. Usually, ministers are drawn from the assembly’s ranks but, in some countries, there is no such convention and, in a few (such as Sweden), ministers must resign their seat in parliament (Box 16.3).

In nearly all cases, the executive can dissolve parliament and call fresh elections. If the paradox of presidentialism is executive weakness amid the appearance of strength, the puzzle of parliamentary government is to explain why effective government can still emerge from this mutual vulnerability of assembly and executive.

**Figure 16.2 Parliamentary government**

In parliamentary government, the executive emerges from the assembly (most often in the form of a coalition) and remains accountable to it.