

The State system of the UK.





The Houses of Parliament and Big Ben.

The official head of state.

Parliament's history at a glance.

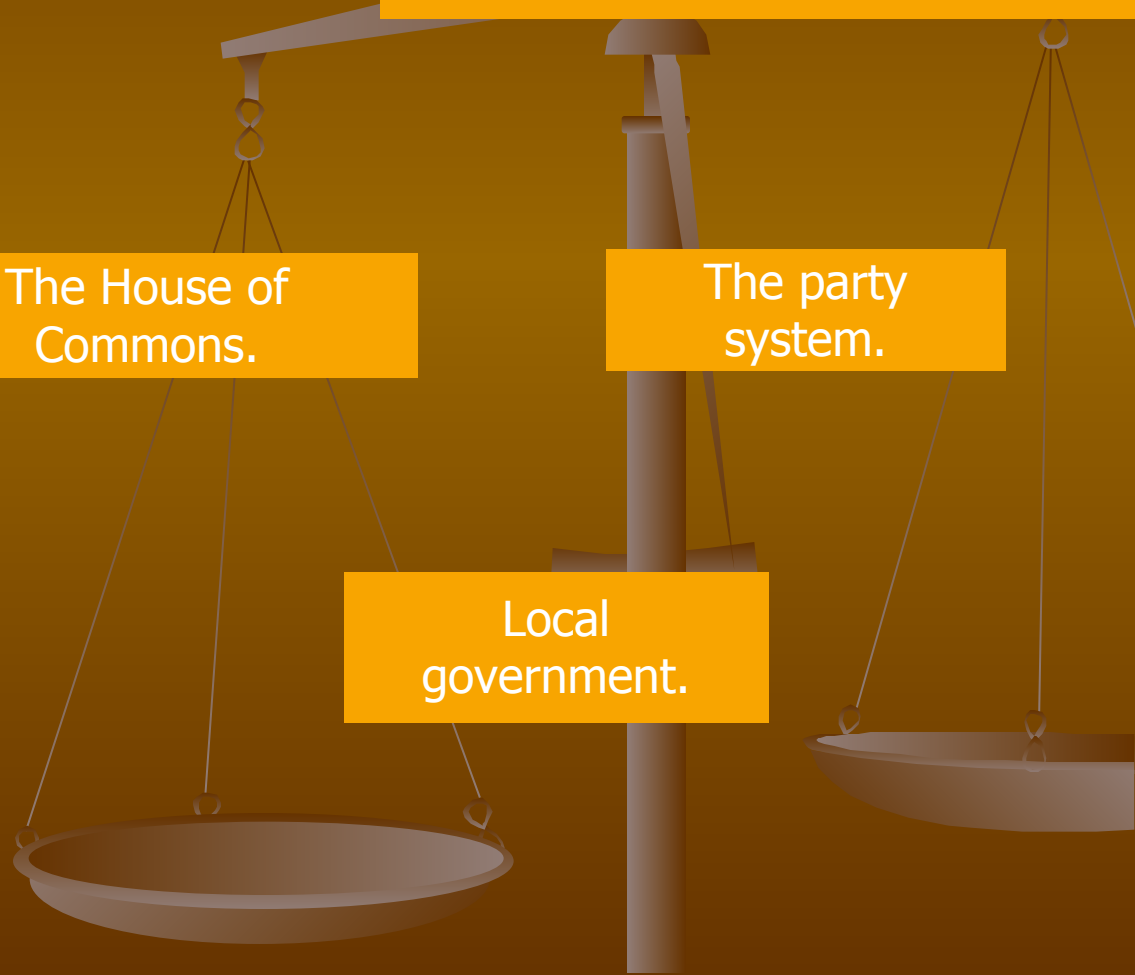
The House of
Lords.

The House of
Commons.

The party
system.

The monarchy.

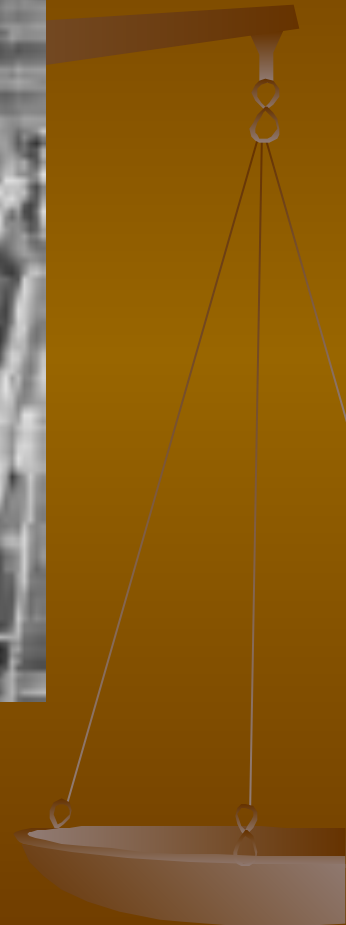
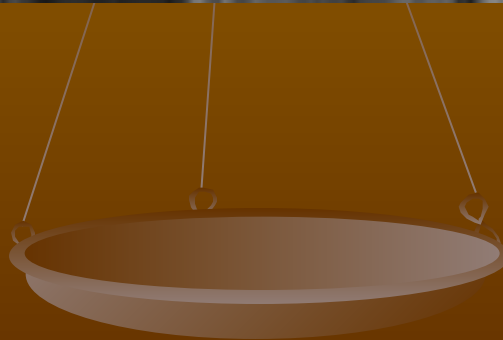
Local
government.





The United Kingdom is a constitutional monarchy. It means that the state has a monarch(a king or a queen) as its Head of State. The monarch has very little power and can only reign with the support of Parliament. Parliament consists of two chambers known as the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Parliament and the monarch have different roles in the government of the country, and they only meet together on symbolic occasions such as the coronation of a new monarch or the opening of Parliament. The UK Parliament is one of the oldest representative assemblies in the world, having its origins in the mid-13th century.





Parliament's History at a Glance.

The history of Parliament is one of long competition with the monarchy, and Parliament's eventual supremacy. Important milestones in that competition include:

- the early Commons' assertion of control over grants of revenue to the monarch;
- the English Civil war when Parliament ordered the beheading of the king;
- the Glorious Revolution of 1688, during which Parliament succeeded in establishing its sovereignty over the Crown;
- the growing dependence of the Prime Minister on Parliament in the 18th century;
- the great reforms of the 19th century, which extended suffrage to most of the adult male population and established the secret ballot;
- the Parliament Act of 1911, which abolished the veto power of the Lords;
- the Representation of the People Acts of 1918, 1928, 1948, and 1969, which extended the suffrage to women, established the principle of one person one vote, and lowered the voting age from 21 to 18.
- Major parliamentary reforms of 1999-2003 initiated by the Labour Government.

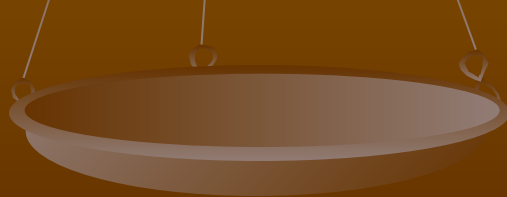




The House of Lords.

The House of Lords has more than 1,000 members, although only about 250 take an active part in the work of the House. There are 26 Anglican bishops, 950 hereditary peers, 11 judges and 185 life peers, and unlike MPs they don't receive a salary. They debate a bill after it has been passed by the House of Commons. Changes may be recommended, and agreement between the two Houses is reached by negotiation. The Lords' main power consists of being able to delay non-financial bills for a period a year, but they can also introduce certain types of bill. The House of Lords is the only non-elected second chamber among all the democracies in the world, and some people in Britain would like to abolish it.







1 The Speaker's chair – he keeps order during debates.

2 The Government sit here. Cabinet Ministers sit on the Front Bench.

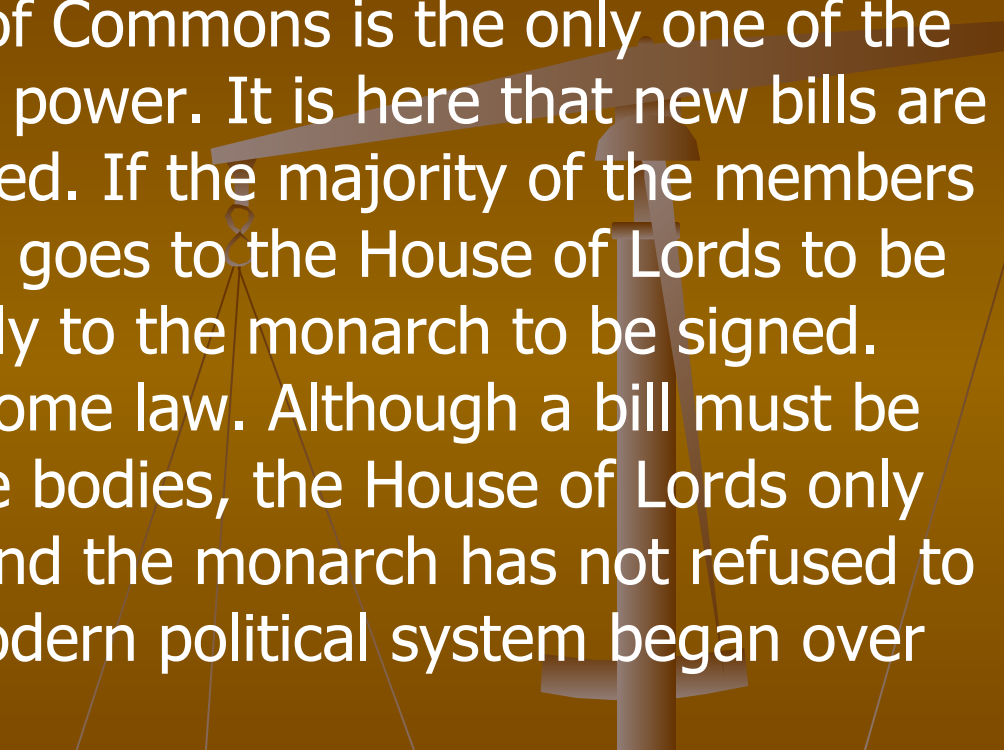
3 The Opposition sit on this side. The Shadow Cabinet face the Cabinet.

4 Other MPs sit here according to their party.

The debating chamber of the House of Commons.

The House of Commons and the electoral system.

In reality, the House of Commons is the only one of the three which has true power. It is here that new bills are introduced and debated. If the majority of the members are in favor of a bill it goes to the House of Lords to be debated and the finally to the monarch to be signed. Only then does it become law. Although a bill must be supported by all three bodies, the House of Lords only has limited powers, and the monarch has not refused to sign one since the modern political system began over 200 years ago.

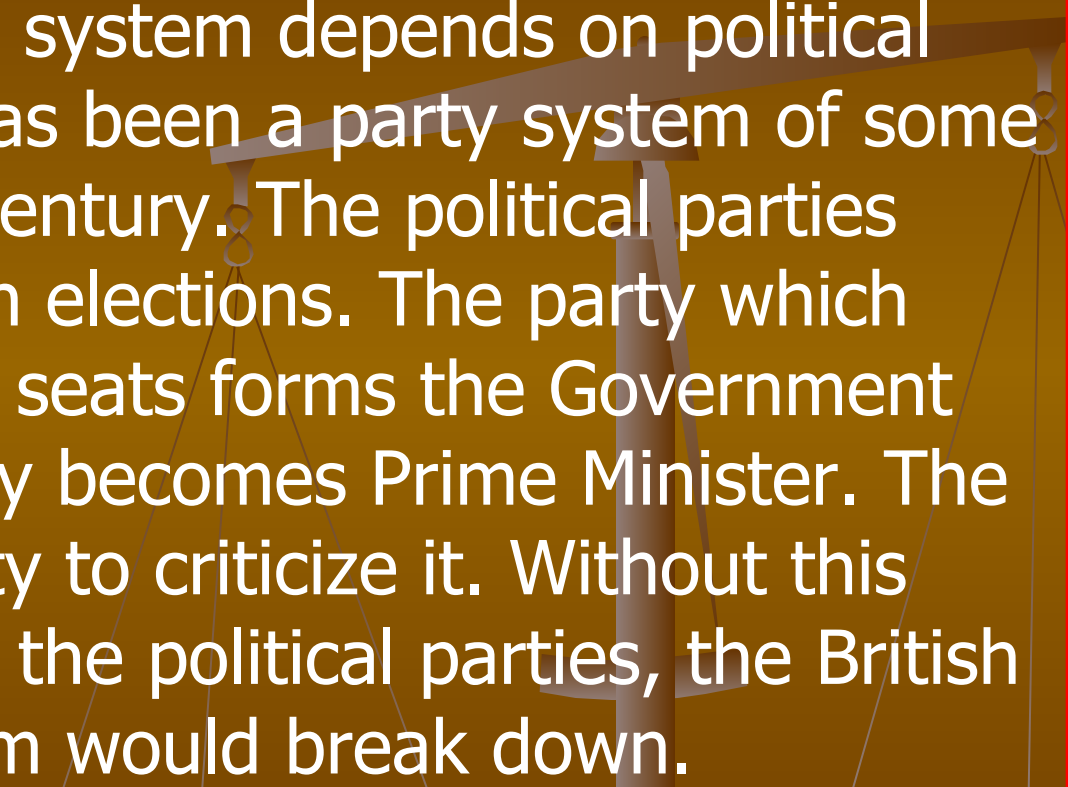


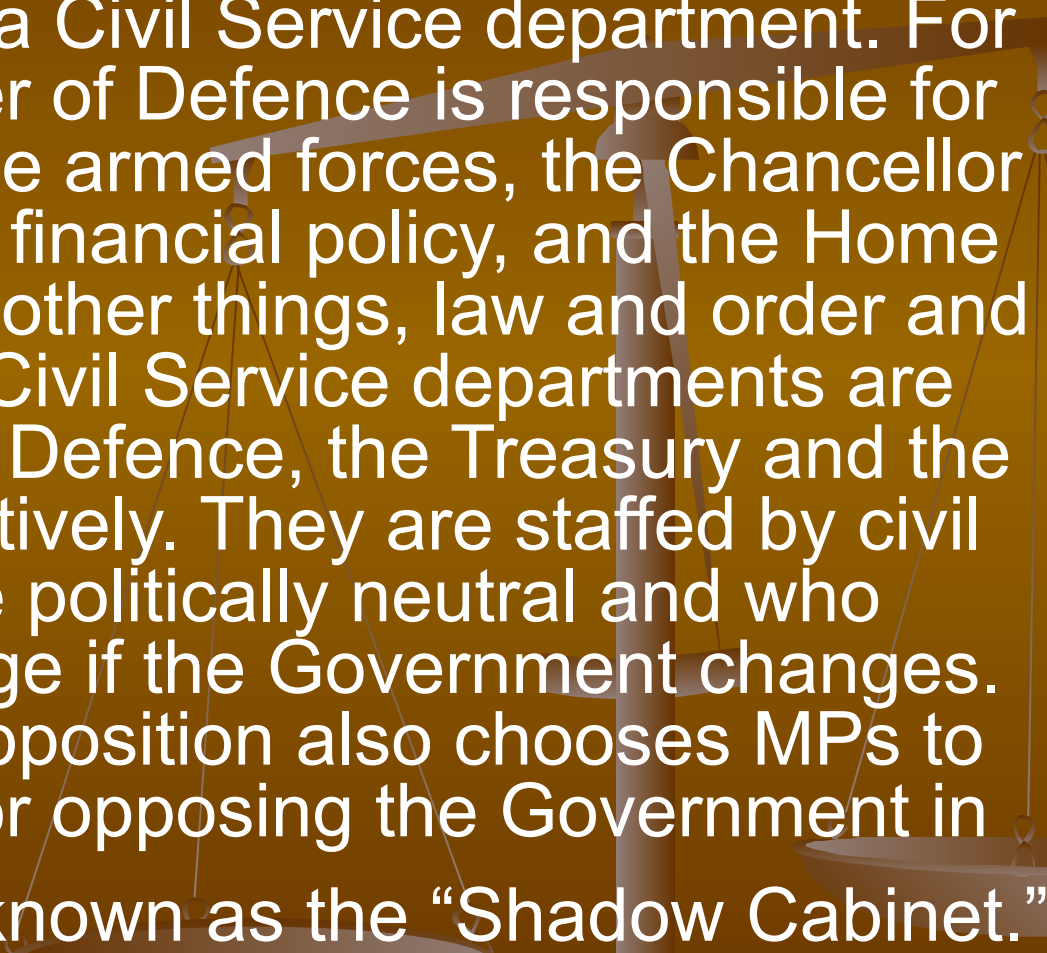
The House of Commons is made up of 650 elected members, known as Members of Parliament, each of whom represents an area of the UK. They are elected either at a general election, or at a by-election following the death or retirement of an MP. The election campaign usually lasts about three weeks. Everyone over the age of 18 can vote in an election, which is decided on a simple majority – the candidate with the most votes wins. Under this system, an MP who wins by a small number of votes may have more votes against him than for him. This is a very simple system, but many people think that it is unfair because the wishes of those who voted for the unsuccessful candidates are not represented at all. Parliamentary elections must be held every five years at the latest, but the Prime Minister can decide on the exact date within those five years.



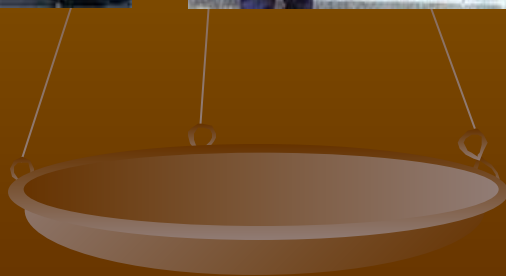
The party system.

The British democratic system depends on political parties, and there has been a party system of some kind since the 17th century. The political parties choose candidates in elections. The party which wins the majority of seats forms the Government and its leader usually becomes Prime Minister. The largest minority party criticizes it. Without this agreement between the political parties, the British parliamentary system would break down.





The Prime Minister chooses about twenty MPs from his or her party to become Cabinet Ministers. Each minister is responsible for a particular area of government, and for a Civil Service department. For example, the Minister of Defence is responsible for defence policy and the armed forces, the Chancellor of the Exchequer for financial policy, and the Home Secretary for, among other things, law and order and immigration. Their Civil Service departments are called the Ministry of Defence, the Treasury and the Home Office respectively. They are staffed by civil servants who are politically neutral and who therefore don't change if the Government changes. The leader of the Opposition also chooses MPs to take responsibility for opposing the Government in this areas. They are known as the "Shadow Cabinet."



Politicians in Britain don't have a good reputation. To describe someone who is not a professional politician as 'a politician' is to criticize him or her, suggesting a lack of trustworthiness. It is not that people hate their politicians. They just regard them with a high degree of suspicion. They don't expect them to be corrupt or to use their position to amass personal wealth, but they do expect them to be frequently dishonest. People are not really shocked when the government is caught lying. On the other hand, they would be very shocked indeed if it was discovered that the government was doing anything actually illegal. A scandal such as the Watergate affair in the USA in the early 1970s would endanger the stability of the whole of political life.





The monarchy.

The powers of the monarch are not defined precisely. Theoretically every act of government is done in the Queen's name -every letter sent out by a government department is marked "On Her Majesty's Service" - and she appoints all the Ministers, including the Prime Minister. In reality, everything is done on the advice of the elected Government, and the monarch takes no part in the decision-making process.



Local government.

Parliament in London is responsible for deciding national policy, but many public services are provided by local government. The United Kingdom is divided into administrative areas known as 'countries' and each country has a 'country town' where the offices of the local government are located. Local government is responsible for organising such services as education, libraries, police and fire services, road-building and many others.

