



British government

What happens in Parliament?

- The main work of Parliament is to make laws, debate topical issues and look at how our taxes are spent to help run the country. The issues that are discussed in Parliament affect us all: health, the environment, transport, jobs, schools, crime. For instance, Parliament has recently debated and voted on how long people arrested on suspicion of terrorism can be held without being charged.

Who gets to work in Parliament?

- We live in a democratic country, which means we all have a say in how the country is run. We do this by electing Members of Parliament (MPs) to represent our views in the House of Commons. This part of Parliament has the greatest political power. The second part of Parliament is the House of Lords, whose unelected members complement the work of the House of Commons. The third and final part of Parliament is the Monarch, our Queen, who signs the laws that Parliament votes for.

Where is Parliament?

- The Houses of Parliament, also known as the Palace of Westminster, is in the centre of London. As well as the home of the UK Parliament, it is also a royal palace and former residence of great kings. The Palace comprises many famous sites including the green-coloured House of Commons Chamber and the red-coloured House of Lords Chamber where political decisions are made to this day. It also includes the famous Clock Tower, popularly known as Big Ben.

The UK Parliament

- To give the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland more say over what happens in their countries, the UK Parliament has devolved (given away) some of its powers to other national and regional bodies. In Scotland, for example, there is the Scottish Parliament which has elected members who make some decisions for Scotland. Wales and Northern Ireland have their own Assemblies and there is also a Greater London Assembly.

The house of Lords

- Is made up of 750 members often called Peers
- The House of Lords plays a key role in the work of Parliament:
 - Making laws – the lords spends about 60 percent of its time initiating, examining and revising legislation
 - Holding the Government to account – questioning Government and debating policy.
 - Providing a forum of independent expertise – the wide-ranging experience and specialist knowledge of the Members of the Lords ensures the House of lords makes a significant contribution to Parliament's work.

The lords

- Carrying out judicial work – the House of Lords is the highest Court of Appeal in the United Kingdom for both civil and criminal cases. (except criminal cases in Scotland).

House of commons chamber

- In the Chamber of the House of commons much of the business of Parliament takes place.
- Parliament is composed of three parts- The House of Commons, The House of Lords and the Monarch (Queen) who is the official Head of State. However the Monarch does not play any part in the decision making process of Parliament. Britain is a constitutional monarchy, which means that despite opening Parliament every year and laws being passed in their name, The Monarch rules only symbolically

House of Commons

- There are 646 Members of Parliament (MPs). Almost all belong to one of the ten political parties represented in Parliament. The three biggest parties at present, in order of size, are Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats
- The leader of the party with the largest number of MPs is the Prime Minister who selects Members for their party to form Her Majesty's Government .

- Some MPs become Ministers who are put in charge of Government departments.
- Each Minister will answer questions in the chamber at least once every month so that the rest of Parliament can monitor what they are doing and hold the Government to account.

What MPs do

- **The UK public elects Members of Parliament (MPs) to represent their interests and concerns in the House of Commons. MPs are involved in considering and proposing new laws, and can use their position to ask government ministers questions about current issues.**
- **MPs split their time between working in Parliament itself, working in the constituency that elected them, and working for their political party. Some MPs from the ruling party become government ministers with specific responsibilities in certain areas, such as Health or Defence.**

Working in Parliament

- When Parliament is sitting (meeting), MPs generally spend their time working in the House of Commons. This can include raising issues affecting their constituents, attending debates and voting on new laws. Most MPs are also members of committees, which look at issues in detail, from government policy and new laws, to wider topics like human rights.

Working in their constituency

- In their constituency, MPs often hold a 'surgery' in their office, where local people can come along to discuss any matters that concern them. MPs also attend functions, visit schools and businesses and generally try to meet as many people as possible. This gives MPs further insight and context into issues they may discuss when they return to Westminster.

How MPs are elected

- **The UK is divided into 646 areas called constituencies. During an election everyone eligible to cast a vote in a constituency (constituents) selects one candidate to be their MP. The candidate who gets the most votes becomes the MP for that area until the next election.**

General elections

- At a general election, all MPs stand for re-election and every constituency across the country chooses between available candidates. General elections generally happen every four to five years.
- If an MP dies or retires, an election is held in that constituency alone to find a new MP for that area.

Political parties

- Most MPs are members of one of the three main political parties in the UK - Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat. Other MPs represent smaller parties or are independent of a political party.
- To become an MP representing a main political group, a candidate must be authorized to do so by the parties nominating officer. They must then win the most votes in the constituency.

UK-wide representation and devolved Parliaments and Assemblies

- The UK Parliament has MPs from areas across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In addition, there is a Parliament in Scotland, a National Assembly in Wales and a National Assembly in Northern Ireland.
- Separate elections are held for these devolved political bodies (which have been granted powers on a regional level that the UK Parliament was responsible for) - candidates who win seats in these elections do not become MPs in the UK Parliament.

The party system

- **Nearly all MPs represent political parties. The party with the most MPs after a general election usually forms the Government. The next largest party becomes the official Opposition. If an MP does not have a political party, they are known as an 'Independent'.**

Members of the House of Lords are organized on a party basis in much the same way as the House of Commons but with important differences: Members of the Lords do not represent constituencies and many are not members of a political party.

- Lords who do not support one of the three main parties are known as Crossbenchers or Independent Peers. There is also a small number who are not affiliated to any of the main groups.

History of the party system

- The system of political parties, which has existed in one form or another since at least the 18th century, is an essential element in the working of the constitution. Since the Second World War, all the Governments in the UK have been formed by either the Labour Party or the Conservative Party.

Opposition parties

- The effectiveness of the party system in Parliament depends on the relationship between the Government and the Opposition parties. In general, Opposition parties aim to:
 - contribute to the creation of policy and legislation through constructive criticism
 - oppose government proposals they disagree with
 - put forward their own policies in order to improve their chances of winning the next general election.

Where do MPs sit in the Commons?

- MPs from the same party tend to sit together in the House of Commons Chamber. Because the Chamber is a rectangular shape, the Government and the Opposition can face each other. The Government sits on the benches to the right of the Speaker. The official Opposition and MPs from other parties sit on the benches to the left of the Speaker.

Where do Members of the Lords sit in the Lords?

- As in the Commons, the Government and the Opposition face each other. The Government and the Bishops sit on the right of the Lord Speaker. The Opposition parties sit on the benches to the left of the Lord Speaker while the Crossbench Peers sit mostly on benches that cross the Chamber of the House of Lords behind the clerks' table.

Frontbenchers and backbenchers

- In both the Commons and the Lords, Government ministers and Opposition shadow ministers sit on the front benches and are known as 'frontbenchers'.
- MPs and Members of the Lords who do not hold ministerial positions sit towards the back of the Chamber and are known as 'backbenchers'.

Crossing the floor

- Members of either the House of Commons or House of Lords can change political party at any time - known as 'crossing the floor'. The term comes from the fact that, traditionally, Members of Parliament from opposing parties sit on opposite sides of the Chamber.
- Therefore, a Member who changes party usually has to cross the floor of the House to sit on the other side of the Chamber. The term is used to signify the changing of allegiance.

How do you become a Member of the House of Lords?

- Two events have changed the way Members of the House of Lords are appointed: the 1999 House of Lords Act, which ended hereditary Peers' right to pass membership down through family, and the introduction of the House of Lords Appointments Commission. There are now a number of routes to becoming a Member of the House of Lords.

House of Lords Appointments Commission

- Set up in May 2000, this independent, public body recommends non-political Lords appointments to the Queen and checks the suitability of all nominations to the House, including those made by political parties.

The Great Clock of Westminster

- Was first started on 31 May 1859. It has become a national symbol of great importance and is renowned the world over for its accuracy, always being within two seconds of GMT.
- Big Ben ran out triumphantly to announce the end of the First World War as people celebrated in the streets. Its voice, communicated via radio during the Second World War, offered reassurance as bombs fell and sirens sounded. Along with the Clock Tower, it has become a national symbol of pride, stability and strength for millions.