

# The political system

- The United Kingdom is a constitutional (or parliamentary) monarchy. This means that it has a monarch (a king or a queen) as its Head of State, but the powers of the monarch are limited by the country's constitution.
- The British constitution, unlike that of most other countries, is unwritten, not being contained in any single legal document.

# RULES OF LAW and RULES OF CUSTOM

- . The rules of law are those set up in such historic declarations as Magna Charta (1215) and the famous acts of Parliament which mark the course of British history, e.g. the Bill of Rights of 1689. The Bill of Rights established that the king didn't rule by a "divine right" from God, but by approval of Parliament. The British sovereign can't marry a Roman catholic.

After a general election the monarch would ask anyone but the leader of the majority party to form a new government, for it is a custom to do this.

# Parliament

- Parliament consists of two chambers known as the House of Commons and the House of Lords.
- There are 650 Members of the English House of Commons. Any member may introduce a Bill, and ask permission to bring it to the notice of the House.
- The House of Lords, or the Upper House, consists of the whole body of English peers, a certain number of elected Irish and Scottish peers, and a certain number of the Bishops of the Church of England.

### First reading

This is a formal announcement only, with no debate



### Second reading

The house debates the general principles of the bill and, in most cases, takes a vote.



### Committee stage

A committee of MPs examines the details of the bill and votes on amendments (changes) to parts of it.



### Report stage

The House considers the amendments.



### Third reading

The amended bill is debated as a whole.



The bill is sent to the **House of Lords**, where it goes through the same stages. (If the Lords make new amendments, these will be considered by the Commons.)



After both Houses have reached agreement, the bill receives the **royal assent** and becomes an Act of Parliament which can be applied as part of the law.

# 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 becomes the Opposition.

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## Conservative party



### **CONSERVATIVE**

- History: developed from the group of MPs known as the Tories in the early nineteenth century and still often known informally by that name (especially in newspapers, because it takes up less space!).
- Voters: the richer sections of society, plus a large minority of the working classes.

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## Labour party



- History: formed at the beginning of the twentieth century from an alliance of trade unionists and intellectuals. First government in 1923.
- Voters: working class, plus a small middle-class intelligentsia.

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## Liberal Democratic party



- History: formed in the late 1980s from a union of the Liberals (who developed from the Whigs of the early nineteenth century) and the Social Democrats (a breakaway group of Labour politicians).
- Voters: from all classes, but more from the middle class.

- The tradition remains that an MP is first and foremost a representative of a particular locality. The result of this tradition is that the electoral system is remarkably simple. It works like this. The country is divided into a number of areas of roughly equal population (about 90,600), known as constituencies. Anybody who wants to be an MP must declare himself or herself as a candidate in one of these constituencies. On polling day (the day of the election), voters go to polling stations and are each given a single piece of paper (the ballot paper) with the names of the candidates for that constituency (only) on it. Each voter then puts a cross next to the name of one candidate. After the polls have closed, the ballot papers are counted. The

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- The Prime Minister chooses about twenty MPs to become Cabinet Ministers. Each minister is responsible for a particular area of government.
  - The cabinet meets once a week and takes decisions about new policies.
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- In many aspects of life the country has comparatively few rules and regulations.

Britain is one of the very few European countries whose citizens do not have identity cards. . British people are not obliged to carry identification with them. You do not even have to have your driving license with you in your car. If the police ask to see it, you have twenty-four hours to take it to them!

- . The duties of the individual towards the state are confined to not breaking the law and paying taxes. There is no national service {military or otherwise}; people are not obliged to vote at elections, people do not have to register their change of address with any government authority when they move house.
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- . If the government wants to make an important change in the way that the country is run – to change, for example, the electoral system or the powers of the Prime Minister – it does not have to ask the people.
  - In many countries an important constitutional change cannot be made without a referendum in which everybody in the country has the chance to vote 'yes' or 'no'. There has only been one countrywide referendum in British history (in 1975, on whether the country should stay in the European Community).
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