

Politics and government

■ Political history	60
■ The political framework	65
■ Constitution and monarchy	69
■ UK Parliament: role, legislation and elections	74
■ The party-political system	81
■ UK government	85
■ UK parliamentary control of government	89
■ Attitudes to politics	90
■ <i>Exercises</i>	91
■ <i>Further reading</i>	92
■ <i>Websites</i>	92

POLITICAL HISTORY IN THE BRITISH-IRISH Isles over the past eight hundred years illustrates the developing identity of the British state and evolutionary changes in its composition. The slow weakening of non-democratic monarchical and aristocratic power led to political and legislative authority being transferred to UK parliamentary structures, a central UK government and a powerful Prime Minister. Changing social conditions resulted in a growth of political parties, the extension of the vote to all adults, the development of local government, and a twentieth-century devolution (transfer) of some political power to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. These historical processes have been accompanied by political, social and religious conflicts and constitutional compromise.

Political structures are still vigorously debated. The UK government in London is accused of being too secretive, too centralized and insufficiently responsive to the needs of the diverse peoples of the United Kingdom. It is argued that the UK Parliament has lost control over the UK government; that political power has shifted to a presidential Prime Minister and unelected bodies and advisers; that there are serious weaknesses at devolved and local levels; and that the British political system must be reformed in order to make it more efficient, accountable and adaptable to modern requirements.

However, a 1999 *British Council/MORI* poll of overseas countries reported that 65 per cent of respondents felt that Britain is a good model of democratic government. But younger people had confused and uncertain views. Respect for long traditions was mixed with more negative images such as the monarchy, judges in wigs and lords in ermine, which they felt were out of keeping with a modern democracy.

Political history

Early political history in the British-Irish Isles is the story of four geographical areas (now England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland) and their turbulent struggles for independent nationhood. But an English political and military expansionism over the centuries conditioned the development of the other three nations. Ireland was controlled by England from the twelfth century;

England and Wales were united by the 1536–42 Acts of Union; the thrones of England and Scotland were dynastically amalgamated in 1603; England/Wales and Scotland were united by the 1707 Acts of Union; and the 1801 Act of Union joined Great Britain and Ireland as the United Kingdom. In this process, English governmental systems were adopted in the modern period for all of Britain. Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, Wales and Northern Ireland regained some of their former political identities only in the twentieth century.

Decline of monarchy and the rise of Parliament

Early monarchs or political leaders in the four nations had considerable power, but generally accepted advice and feudal limitations on their authority. However, later English kings, such as King John (1199–1216), ignored these restraints and powerful French-Norman barons opposed John's dictatorial rule by forcing him to sign Magna Carta in 1215. This document protected the aristocracy rather than the ordinary citizen. It was later regarded as a cornerstone of British (not merely English) liberties; restricted the monarch's powers; forced him to take advice; increased aristocratic influence; and stipulated that citizens should have fair trials.

Such inroads into royal power encouraged embryonic parliamentary structures. An English Council was formed in 1258 by disaffected nobles under Simon de Montfort, who in 1264 summoned a broader Parliament. These aristocratic, elected and part-time initiatives were followed in 1275 by the Model Parliament of Edward I (1272–1307), which was the first representative English Parliament. Its two Houses (as now) consisted of the Lords/Bishops and the Commons (male commoners). An independent Scottish Parliament was first created in 1326 and Ireland had a similarly old Parliament, dating from medieval times.

However, the English Parliament was too large to rule the country effectively. A small Privy Council (royal government outside Parliament), comprising the monarch and court advisers, developed. It continued as a powerful influence until it lost authority to increasingly strong parliamentary structures in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

But, although the English Parliament had limited powers against the monarch, there was a return to royal dominance in Tudor England (1485–1603). The nobility had been weakened by wars and internal conflicts (such as the Wars of the Roses between Yorkists and Lancastrians). Monarchs controlled Parliament and summoned it only when they needed to raise money. Tudor monarchs (of Welsh ancestry) united England and Wales administratively, politically and legally in the sixteenth century. They also intervened forcefully in Ireland, with frequent campaigns against Irish insurgents.

Following the Tudors, James VI of Scotland became James I of England in 1603, formed a Stuart dynasty and considered himself to be king of Great Britain. But the two countries were not closely joined politically or culturally. However, the English Parliament now showed more resistance to royal rule by using its weapon of financial control. It refused royal requests for money and later forced the Stuart Charles I to sign the Petition of Rights in 1628, which prevented him from raising taxes without Parliament's consent. Charles ignored these political developments and then failed in his attempt to arrest parliamentary leaders in the House of Commons. The monarch was in future banned from the Commons.

Charles's rejection of parliamentary ideals and belief in his right to rule without opposition provoked anger against the Crown, and a Civil War broke out in 1642. The Protestant Parliamentarians under Oliver Cromwell won the military struggle against the Catholic Royalists. Charles was beheaded in 1649; the monarchy was abolished; Britain was ruled as a Protectorate by Cromwell and his son Richard (1653–60); and Parliament comprised only the House of Commons. Cromwell also asserted the Protestant and parliamentary cause in Scotland and Ireland, which provoked lasting hatred in these countries.

Cromwell's Protectorate was unpopular and most people wanted the restoration of the monarchy. The two Houses of Parliament were re-established and in 1660 they restored the Stuart Charles II to the throne. Initially Charles co-operated with Parliament, but his financial needs, belief in royal authority and support of Catholicism lost him popular and parliamentary backing. Parliament ended his expensive wars and imposed further reforms.

The growth of political parties and constitutional structures

The growing power of the English Parliament against the monarch in the seventeenth century saw the development of more organized political parties in Parliament. These derived partly from the religious and ideological conflicts of the Civil War. Two groups (Whigs and Tories) became dominant. This is a characteristic feature of British two-party politics, in which political power generally shifts between two main parties. The Whigs were mainly Cromwellian Protestants and gentry, who did not accept the Catholic James II as successor to Charles II and wanted religious freedom for all Protestants. The Tories generally supported royalist beliefs, and helped Charles II to secure James's right to succeed him.

But James's attempt to rule without Parliament and his ignoring of its laws caused a further reduction in royal influence. His manipulations forced the Tories to join the Whigs in inviting the Dutch Protestant William of Orange to intervene. William arrived in England in 1688, James fled to

France and William succeeded to the throne as England's first constitutional monarch. Since no force was involved, this event is called the Bloodless or Glorious Revolution. Royal powers were further restricted under the Declaration of Rights (1689), which strengthened Parliament. Future monarchs could not reign or act without Parliament's consent and the Act of Settlement (1701) gave religious freedom to all Protestants.

The Glorious Revolution affected the constitution and politics. It created a division of powers between an executive branch (the monarch and Privy Council); a parliamentary legislative branch (the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the monarch); and the judiciary (judges independent of monarch and Parliament). Acts of Union joining England/Wales and Scotland followed in 1707, Scotland lost its Parliament and power was now centralized in the London Parliament.

Parliamentary influence grew in the early eighteenth century, because the Hanoverian George I lacked interest in British politics. He distrusted the Tories with their Catholic sympathies and appointed Whigs such as Robert Walpole to his Privy Council. Walpole became Chief Minister in 1721 and led the Whig majority in the House of Commons, which comprised land and property owners. Walpole increased the parliamentary role and he has been called Britain's first Prime Minister.

But parliamentary authority was not absolute and later monarchs tried to restore royal power. However, George III lost much of his standing after the loss of the American colonies (1775–83). He was obliged to appoint William Pitt the Younger as his Tory Chief Minister and it was under Pitt that the office of Prime Minister really developed. Meanwhile, Ireland's Parliament achieved legislative independence in 1782. But it represented only the privileged Anglo-Irish minority and the Roman Catholic majority was excluded.

The expansion of voting rights

Although parliamentary control continued to grow in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was still no widespread democracy in Britain. Political authority was in the hands of landowners, merchants and aristocrats in Parliament, and most people did not possess the vote. Bribery and corruption were common, with the buying of those votes which did exist and the giving away or sale of public offices.

The Tories were against electoral reform, as were the Whigs initially. But the country was rapidly increasing its population and developing industrially and economically. Pressures for political reform became irresistible. The Whigs extended voting rights to the expanding middle class in the First Reform Act of 1832 and later the franchise was given to men with property and a certain income. However, the majority of the working class

had no votes and were unrepresented in Parliament. All males over twenty-one received the vote only in 1918.

Women over twenty-one had to wait until 1928 for the franchise to be fully established in Britain. Previously, only women over thirty had achieved some political rights and for centuries wives and their property had been the legal possessions of their husbands. The traditional role of women of all classes had been confined to that of mother in the home, although some found employment in home industries and factories or as domestic servants, teachers and governesses.

Women's social and political position became marginally better towards the end of the nineteenth century. Elementary education was established and a few institutions of higher education began to admit women in restricted numbers. Some women's organizations had been founded in the mid nineteenth century to press for greater political, employment and social rights. But the most famous suffragette movement was that of the Pankhursts in 1903. Their Women's Social and Political Union campaigned for the women's vote and an increased female role in society. However, it is argued that a substantial change in women's status in the mid twentieth century occurred largely because of a recognition of the essential work that they performed during two World Wars.

The growth of governmental structures

In 1801, Ireland was united with Great Britain by the Act of Union to form the UK. The Irish Parliament was abolished and Irish members sat in both Houses of the London Parliament.

The elements of modern British government developed somewhat haphazardly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Government ministers were generally members of the House of Commons; became responsible to the Commons rather than the monarch; shared a collective responsibility for the policies and acts of government; and had an individual responsibility to Parliament for their own ministries. The prime ministership developed from the monarch's Chief Minister to 'first among equals' and finally the leadership of all ministers. The central force of government became the parliamentary Cabinet of senior ministers, which grew out of the Privy Council. The government was formed from the majority party in the House of Commons. The largest minority party became the Official Opposition, which attempted through its policies to become the next government chosen by the people.

Historically, the elected House of Commons gained political power from the unelected monarch and House of Lords and become the main element in Parliament. Subsequent reforms of the Lords (the Parliament Acts of 1911 and 1949) removed their political authority. Later Acts

created non-hereditary titles (life peers), in addition to the existing hereditary peerages. The House lost most of its hereditary members in 2000, has only delaying and amending power over parliamentary legislation and cannot interfere with financial bills.

The nineteenth century also saw the growth of more organized political parties. These were conditioned by changing social and economic factors and reflected the modern struggle between opposing ideologies. The Tories became known as the Conservatives around 1830. They believed in established values and the preservation of traditions; supported business and commerce; had strong links with the Church of England and the professions; and were opposed to radical ideas.

The Whigs, however, were becoming a progressive force and wanted social reform and economic freedom without government restrictions. They developed into the Liberal Party, which promoted enlightened policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But the party declined after 1918. Following an alliance with the now-defunct Social Democratic Party in the 1980s, it merged and became the Liberal Democrats. It is the third-largest party in UK politics but lacks substantial representation in the House of Commons.

The Labour Party, created in its present form in 1906, became the main opposition party to the Conservatives and continued the traditional two-party system in British politics. It was supported by the trade unions, the working class and some middle-class voters. The first Labour government was formed in 1924 under Ramsey MacDonald. But it achieved majority power only in 1945 under Clement Attlee, when it embarked on radical programmes of social and economic reform, which laid the foundations for a welfare state.

The political framework

Contemporary politics operate on UK, devolved and local government levels (see figure 3.1). The UK Parliament and government in London organize the UK as a whole. A Parliament in Scotland, Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland and a London Authority have varying degrees of devolved self-government. Local government throughout Britain organizes society at local level.

Local government

Britain has had a local government system in one form or another for centuries. It began with the Anglo-Saxon division of England into large counties and small parishes, which were organized by the monarch's local representatives.

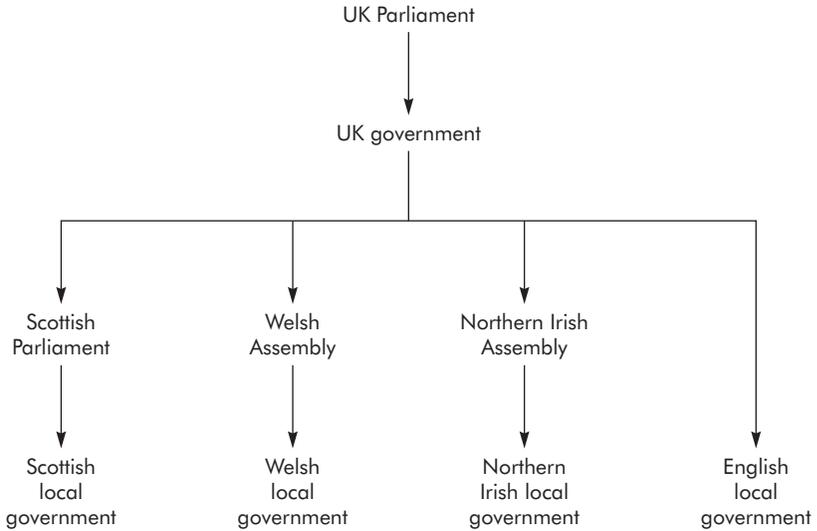


FIGURE 3.1 The political framework

Local government has grown through the centuries, particularly in the nineteenth century. It now provides local services throughout the UK, such as education, health, fire services, transport, social services, sanitation and housing, through elected councils. In England, it is administered through an elected non-professional two-tier system of county and district councils, with some single-tier (unitary) authorities, as well as by professional staff. Scotland and Wales have 29 and 22 unitary authorities respectively, while Northern Ireland has 26 district councils.

But although people count on the services of local government, the system at present is languishing, is subjected to centralized control and funding and no longer provides the full range of traditional local services. Interest in local government is low and a *MORI* poll in August 2000 suggested that dissatisfaction with local councils has increased.

Since July 2000 London has been run by a Greater London Authority with its elected Mayor and Assembly. It was hoped that similar mayors would be elected in other British cities, in an attempt to increase devolved powers.

Devolution

Devolution (self-government or transfer of some powers from the Westminster Parliament) was first adapted in Ireland. Growing nationalist feelings in the nineteenth century led to calls for Home Rule for Ireland with its own Parliament in Dublin. But early attempts failed. Hostilities



PLATE 3.1 Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London (© Popperfoto/Reuters)

continued in the twentieth century until Ireland was partitioned in 1921–22 into the Irish Free State (later the Republic of Ireland), with its own Parliament, and Northern Ireland. The latter had a devolved Parliament (1921–72), but remained part of the UK.

Political nationalism also grew in Wales and Scotland from the 1960s. After failed attempts to give them devolved political power, the Labour government created in 1999–2000 (after referendums) an elected Parliament with legislative and tax-varying powers in Scotland and an elected non-legislative, non-tax-raising elected Assembly in Wales. Northern Ireland achieved an elected Assembly in 2000, which has legislative and executive authority, except for reserved UK powers over policing, security matters, prisons and criminal justice.

Devolution provides a tier of decentralized government. It allows these countries (with their Executives and First Ministers) to decide more of their own affairs, such as education, health, transport, environment, home affairs and local government. The Westminster Parliament still has reserved powers over UK matters such as defence, foreign affairs, Social Security, taxation, broad economic policy and immigration. Roles and procedures (except sometimes for elections) in local and devolved structures are generally similar to those at the UK level.

The Welsh Assembly in practice lacks extensive powers, the London Parliament provides its primary legislation and it had initial political problems. The Northern Irish Assembly was suspended in 2000 and 2001 because of the failure of the IRA to disarm, although partial disarmament



PLATE 3.2 The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh (© Popperfoto/Reuters)

has now been achieved (2001) and the Assembly is functioning. The Scottish Parliament initially attracted criticism, being seen as parochial, ineffective and controlled by London, although it is now becoming more independent. Devolution has had a shaky start. It still needs to settle down and justify its existence. Some critics argue that the devolved structures are inadequate and that the Labour government has not thought through the implications of its devolution policies, particularly in terms of the anomalous position of England.

England has no intermediate tier. It has a network of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) which implement UK government politico-economic programmes in the regions. But these areas do not provide devolved government, although they may form the basis for a future regional devolution of power from Westminster, analogous to the devolved structures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Alternatively, England could have its own Parliament.

Devolution does not mean independence for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland nor a British federal system, although it is argued that a form of 'quasi-federalism' has been created. The Labour government says that devolution will strengthen the UK and that legal sovereignty still rests with the UK Parliament at Westminster. In this sense, Britain has a unitary political system and remains a union of the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

Some fear that devolution may lead to independence for Scotland and Wales. A *National Opinion Poll* in 1997 found that 43 per cent of respondents believed that devolution would lead to the break-up of the UK.

But *British Social Attitudes* (2000–01) reported that, while some English thought of themselves as strongly British, many have become more aware of being English rather than British in response to devolution. However, devolution is not viewed as a threat to the Union and the English have adapted to the new *status quo*.

Constitution and monarchy

The constitution

The constitutional system has experienced relatively few upheavals since 1688, despite devolution. Rather, existing principles have been pragmatically adapted to new conditions.

Britain is described either as a constitutional monarchy (with the monarch as head of state) or as a parliamentary system, which is divided into legislative, executive and judicial branches. The Westminster Parliament possesses supreme legislative power in UK matters. The executive UK government governs by passing its policies (many of which are applicable to most of Britain) through Parliament as Acts of Parliament and operates through ministries or departments headed by Ministers or Secretaries of State. The judiciary is independent of the legislative and executive branches of government. The judges of the higher courts determine the law and interpret Acts of Parliament and European Union law.

These branches of the governmental system, although distinguishable from each other, are not entirely separate. For example, the monarch is formally head of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. A Member of Parliament (MP) in the House of Commons and a peer of the House of Lords may both be in the government of the day. A Law Lord in the House of Lords also serves that House as the highest appeal court.

Britain has no written constitution contained in any one document. Instead, the constitution consists of statute law (Acts of Parliament); common law or judge-made law; conventions (principles and practices of government which are not legally binding but have the force of law); some ancient documents such as Magna Carta; and the new **addition of European Union law**.

These constitutional elements are said to be flexible enough to respond quickly to new conditions. UK law and institutions can be created or changed by the Westminster Parliament through Acts of Parliament. The common or judge-made law can be extended by the judiciary and conventions can be altered, formed or abolished by general agreement.

In constitutional theory, the British people, although subjects of the Crown, have political sovereignty to choose the UK government, while

Parliament, consisting partly of elected representatives in the Commons, has legal supremacy to make laws and is the focus of UK sovereignty.

But challenges to traditional notions of parliamentary sovereignty have arisen, and the Westminster Parliament is no longer the sole legislative body in Britain. British membership of the European Union (1973) means that EU law is now superior to British national law in certain areas and British courts must give it precedence in cases of conflict between the two systems. EU law coexists with Acts of Parliament as part of the British constitution.

Since devolution, Parliament can still legislate for the UK as a whole and for any parts of it separately. But it has undertaken not to legislate on devolved matters without the agreement of the devolved Parliament and Assemblies. The Scottish Parliament has power to legislate for devolved matters in Scotland in which Westminster has no say. Any conflicts between the two Parliaments will be resolved by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. The Welsh Assembly has no primary legislative powers, although the Northern Irish Assembly can legislate in devolved matters. Ultimately, however, the UK Parliament still has the legal right to abolish the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh and Northern Irish Assemblies and to withdraw from the EU.

Criticisms of the constitutional system

The British system has been admired in the past. It combined stability and adaptability with a balance of authority and toleration. But it has often been criticized. UK governments have become more radical in their policies and are able to implement them because of big majorities in the Commons. This means that there are few effective parliamentary restraints upon a strong government. There has also been concern at the absence of constitutional safeguards for citizens against state power, since historically there have been few legal definitions of civil liberties in Britain.

These features are seen as potentially dangerous, particularly when UK governments and administrative bodies are arguably too centralized and secretive. It is argued that Britain is ruled by small (often unelected) groups at the heart of government. There have been campaigns for more open government and more effective protection of individual liberties in the forms of a written constitution (to define and limit the powers of Parliament and government); greater judicial scrutiny of parliamentary legislation; a Freedom of Information Act (to allow the public to examine official documents held by Whitehall departments, local councils, the National Health Service and schools and universities); and the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law (allowing British citizens to pursue cases in Britain rather than having to go through the European Court of Human Rights).

The Labour government created a Freedom of Information Act in 2000 (which is criticized as lacking teeth) and has incorporated the European Convention into British law by the creation of a Human Rights Act, 1998. Both developments could improve the civil and constitutional rights of British people.

The Human Rights Act is already having a controversial effect on many levels. It allows the courts to rule in cases of alleged breaches of fundamental human rights which are brought to them. While they cannot directly overrule an Act of Parliament they can declare that such an Act is in breach of the Human Rights legislation. In effect, this could force a government to change its legislation and is seen as an encroachment upon parliamentary sovereignty. The implications of the Human Rights Act have yet to be fully worked out.

A *MORI* poll in 1997 revealed that 50 per cent of respondents thought that the British governmental system is out of date and 79 per cent said that a written constitution was needed. A *MORI* poll in 2000 reported that only 45 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the British constitution. Critics claim that the UK political system no longer works satisfactorily. They maintain that it is still too centralized and its traditional bases are inadequate for the organization of a complex society. It is felt that political policies have become too conditioned by party politics at the expense of consensus; that government is too removed from popular and regional concerns and does not reflect contemporary diversity; and that national programmes lack a democratic and representative basis. However, changes have been made to the apparatus, such as devolution and the Human Rights Act, indicating that evolutionary principles may be successfully adapted to new demands and conditions.

The monarchy

The constitutional title of the UK Parliament is the 'Queen-in-Parliament'. This means that state and government business is carried out in the name of the monarch by the politicians and officials of the system. But the Crown is only sovereign by the will of Parliament and acceptance by the people.

The monarchy is the oldest secular institution in Britain and there is hereditary succession to the throne, but only for Protestants. The eldest son of a monarch currently has priority over older daughters. The monarchy's continuity has been interrupted only by Cromwellian rule (1653–60), although there have been different lines of descent such as the Tudors, Stuarts and Hanoverians.

Royal executive power has disappeared. But the monarch still has formal constitutional roles and is head of state, head of the executive, judiciary and legislature, 'supreme governor' of the Church of England and

commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Government ministers and officials are the monarch's servants, and many public office-holders swear allegiance to the Crown. The monarchy is thus a permanent fixture in the British system, unlike temporary politicians. It still has a practical and constitutional role to play in the operation of government.

The monarch is expected to be politically neutral; is supposed to reign but not rule; and cannot make laws, impose taxes, spend public money or act unilaterally. The monarch acts only on the advice of political ministers, which cannot be ignored, and contemporary Britain is therefore governed by Her Majesty's Government in the name of the Queen.

The monarch performs important duties such as the opening and dissolving of Parliament; giving the Royal Assent (or signature) to bills which have been passed by both Houses of Parliament; appointing government ministers and public figures; granting honours; leading proceedings of the Privy Council; and fulfilling international duties as head of state.

A central power still possessed by the monarch is the choice and appointment of the UK Prime Minister. By convention, this person is normally the leader of the political party which has a majority in the Commons. However, if there is no clear majority or if the political situation is unclear, the monarch could in theory make a free choice. In practice, advice is given by royal advisers and leading politicians in order to present an acceptable candidate.

The monarch has a right to be informed of all aspects of national life by receiving government documents and meeting regularly with the Prime Minister. The monarch also has the right to encourage, warn and advise ministers. The impact of royal advice on formal and informal levels could be significant and raises questions about whether such influence should be held by an unelected figure who could potentially either support or undermine political leaders.

Much of the cost of the royal family's official duties is met from the Civil List (public funds which are approved by Parliament). Following concern over expense, the Civil List has now been reduced to a few members of the immediate royal family. Other costs incurred by the monarch as a private individual or as sovereign come either from the Privy Purse (finance received from the revenues of some royal estates) or from the Crown's own investments, which are very considerable and on which the monarch now pays income tax.

Critics of the monarchy argue that it lacks adaptability, is out-of-date, non-democratic, expensive, associated with aristocratic privilege and establishment thinking and reflects an English rather than a British identity. It is argued that the monarchy's distance from ordinary life sustains class divisions and hierarchy in society. It is also suggested that, if the monarch's

functions today are merely ceremonial and lack power, it would be more rational to abolish the office and replace it with a cheaper non-executive presidency.

Critics who favour the monarchy argue that it is popular, has adapted to modern requirements and is a symbol of national unity. It is a personification of the state; shows stability and continuity; has more prestige than politicians; is not subject to political manipulations; plays a worthwhile role in national institutions; is neutral; performs ambassadorial functions; and promotes the interests of Britain abroad.

But the monarchy in recent years has attracted much criticism. However, while an *ICM* poll in August 1997 showed that its support had fallen to 48 per cent, a *MORI* poll in April 2001 reported that 70 per cent of respondents favoured Britain remaining a monarchy, with 19 per cent preferring a republic. 65 per cent thought that the monarchy should be modernized to reflect changes in British life.

Traditionalists fear that a modernized monarchy would lose that aura of detachment which is described as its main strength. It would then be associated with change rather than the preservation of existing values. At present, it balances uncomfortably between tradition and modernizing trends.

The Privy Council

The ancient Privy Council is still constitutionally tied to the monarchy. Historically, it developed from a small group of royal advisers into the executive branch of the monarch's government. But its powerful position declined in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as its functions were transferred to a parliamentary Cabinet and new ministries. Today, its members (such as cabinet ministers) advise the monarch on government business which does not need to pass through Parliament and may serve on influential committees.

There are about four hundred Privy Councillors, but the body works mostly through small groups. A full council is summoned only on the death of a monarch and the accession of a new one or when there are constitutional issues at stake. Should the monarch be indisposed, counsellors of state or a regent would work through the Privy Council.

Apart from its practical duties and its role as a constitutional forum, the most important tasks of the Privy Council today are performed by its Judicial Committee. This is the final court of appeal from some Commonwealth countries and dependencies. It may be used by some bodies in Britain and overseas and its rulings can be influential. It also rules on any conflicts between Westminster and the Scottish Parliament.

UK Parliament: role, legislation and elections

Role

The UK Parliament is housed in the Palace of Westminster in London. It comprises the non-elected House of Lords, the elected House of Commons and the monarch. The two Houses contain members from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and represent people with varied backgrounds and traditions. Parliament gathers as a unified body only on ceremonial occasions, such as the State Opening of Parliament by the monarch in the House of Lords. Here it listens to the monarch's speech from the throne, which outlines the UK government's forthcoming legislative programme.

In constitutional theory, Parliament has legal sovereignty in all matters and can create, abolish or amend laws and institutions for all or any part(s) of Britain. In practice, this means the implementation of the government's policies. All three parts of Parliament must normally pass a bill before it can become an Act of Parliament and law. Parliament also votes money to government; examines government policies and administration; scrutinizes European Union legislation; and debates political issues.

Parliament is supposed to legislate according to the rule of law, precedent and tradition. Politicians are generally sensitive to these conventions and to public opinion. Formal and informal checks and balances, such as party discipline, the Official Opposition, public reaction and pressure groups, normally ensure that Parliament legislates according to its legal responsibility. While critics argue that Parliament's programmes may not reflect the will of the people, a MORI poll in 2000 showed that satisfaction with the way Parliament works had (perhaps surprisingly) increased to 43 per cent with dissatisfaction at 29 per cent.

A Parliament has a maximum duration of five years, except in emergency situations. But it is often dissolved earlier and a general election called. A dissolution of Parliament and the issue of writs for the election are ordered by the monarch on the advice of the Prime Minister. If an MP dies, resigns or is given a peerage, a by-election is called only for that member's seat, and Parliament as a whole is not dissolved.

The *House of Lords* consists of Lords Temporal and Lords Spiritual. Lords Spiritual are the Archbishops of York and Canterbury and 24 senior bishops of the Church of England. Lords Temporal comprise (1) some 92 peers and peeresses with hereditary titles elected by their fellows; (2) about 577 life peers and peeresses, who have been selected by political parties and an independent Appointments Commission; and (3) the Lords of Appeal (Law Lords). The latter serve the House of Lords as the ultimate

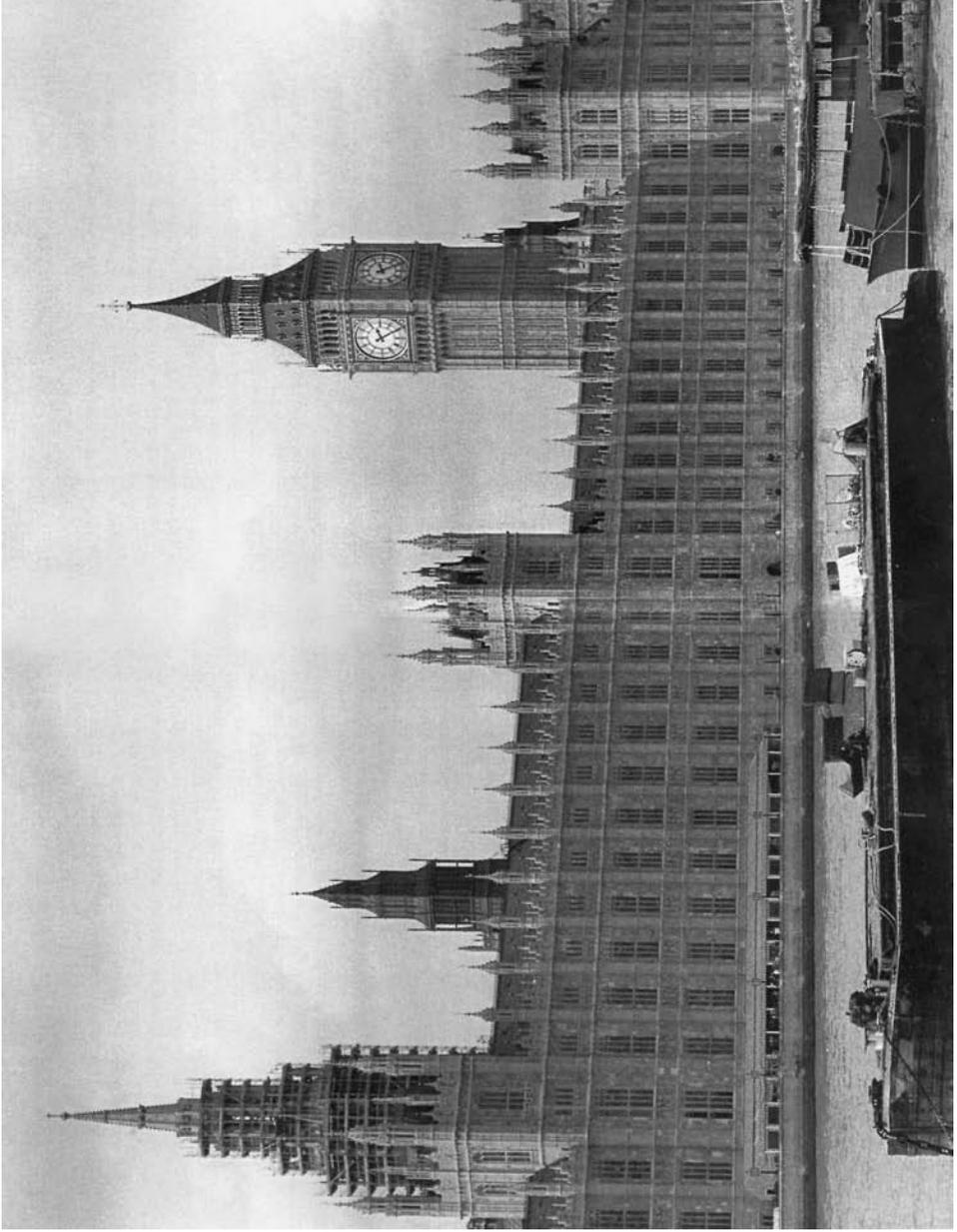


PLATE 3.3
Houses of Parliament
(Maggie Murray/
Format)

court of appeal for many purposes from most parts of Britain. This court does not consist of the whole House, but only of nine Law Lords who have held senior judicial office under the chairmanship of the Lord Chancellor.

Daily attendance varies from a handful to a few hundred. Peers receive no salary for parliamentary work, but may claim attendance and travelling expenses. The House collectively controls its own procedure, but is often guided by the Lord Chancellor, who is a political appointee of the government and who sits on the Woolsack (or stuffed woollen sofa).

There have long been demands that the unrepresentative, unelected House of Lords should be replaced. The problem lies in deciding on an alternative model. A wholly elected second chamber could threaten the powers of the House of Commons and result in conflict between the two. An appointed House could consist of unelected members chosen by political parties or an independent Appointments Commission. As a first step, the Labour government abolished the sitting and voting rights of hereditary peers, except for 92 of them. The life peers continue to be in

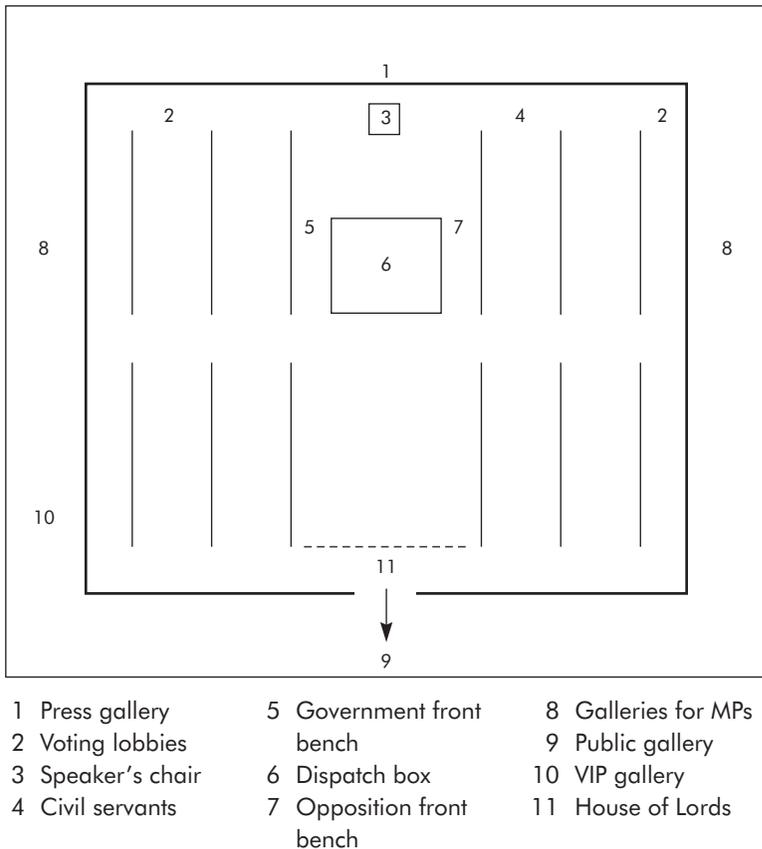


FIGURE 3.2 The House of Commons

actual practice appointed by the present independent Appointments Commission. It is likely that a future House of 750 members will be mainly appointed together with a small number (120) of elected members, no hereditary peers and a reduction (to 16) of Lords Spiritual.

The House of Lords does its job well as an experienced and less partisan forum than the House of Commons and also takes on a legislative and administrative burden. It has an amending function, which may be used to delay government legislation for up to one year (three months in future) or to persuade governments to have a second look at bills. It is a safeguard against over-hasty legislation by the Commons and is an antidote to powerful governments. This is possible because the Lords are more independently minded than MPs in the Commons and do not suffer rigid party discipline. The House is now more evenly divided in terms of party affiliation. But it has a number of crossbenchers (or Independents sitting across the back of the chamber) who do not belong to any political party. A MORI poll in 2000 showed that opinions about the Lords have hardly changed, with 32 per cent of respondents being satisfied and 29 per cent dissatisfied.

The *House of Commons* comprises 659 Members of Parliament (MPs). They are elected by voters (from age eighteen) and represent citizens in Parliament. In 2001, 118 of them were women. But women face problems in being selected as parliamentary candidates and winning seats in the Commons. There are 529 parliamentary seats for England, 40 for Wales, 72 for Scotland and 18 for Northern Ireland. MPs are paid expenses and a salary, which is relatively low for comparable jobs.

Legislation and procedure

Parliamentary procedure in both Houses of Parliament is based on custom, convention, precedent and detailed rules (standing orders). The House of Commons meets most weekday afternoons (outside lengthy vacations), although business can continue beyond midnight. Many MPs then spend the weekend in their constituencies attending to business. They may also follow their professions (such as lawyers) on a part-time basis. The organization and procedures of the Commons have been criticized. It is felt that the number of hours spent in the House should be reduced and that pay and resources should be improved. Women MPs feel that it should become a more women-friendly place instead of the traditional male club.

The Speaker is the chief officer of the House of Commons; is chosen by MPs; interprets the rules of the House; and is assisted by three deputy speakers. The Speaker is an elected MP who, on election to the Speaker's chair, ceases to be a political representative and becomes a neutral official.

The Speaker protects the House against any abuse of procedure by controlling debates and votes. Where there is a tied result, the Speaker has the casting vote, but must exercise this choice so that it reflects established conventions. The Speaker is important for the orderly running of the House. MPs can be very combative and often unruly, so that the Speaker is sometimes forced to dismiss or suspend a member from the House.

Debates in both Houses of Parliament usually begin with a motion (or proposal) which is then debated. The matter is decided by a simple majority vote at the end of discussion. In the Commons, MPs enter either the 'Yes' or 'No' lobbies (corridors running alongside the Commons chamber) to record their vote, but they may also abstain from voting.

The proceedings of both Houses are open to the public and may be viewed from the public and visitors' galleries. The transactions are published daily in *Hansard* (the parliamentary 'newspaper'); debates are televised; and radio broadcasts may be in live or recorded form. This exposure to public scrutiny has increased interest in the parliamentary process, although negative comments are made about low attendance in both Houses and the behaviour of MPs in the Commons.

Before the creation of new UK law (which may take a few days or many months) and changes to existing law a government will usually issue certain documents before the parliamentary law-making process commences. A Green Paper is a consultative document which allows interested parties to state their case before a bill is introduced into Parliament. A White Paper is not normally consultative, but is a preliminary document which details prospective legislation.

A draft law takes the form of a bill. Most bills are 'public' because they involve state business and are introduced in either House of Parliament by the government. Other bills may be 'private' because they relate to matters such as local government, while some are 'private members' bills' introduced by MPs in their personal capacity. These latter bills are on a topic of interest to MPs, but are normally defeated for lack of parliamentary time or support. However, some important private members' bills concerning homosexuality, abortion and sexual offences have survived the obstacles and become law.

Bills must pass through both Houses and receive the Royal Assent before they become law. The Commons is normally the first step in this process. The Lords, in its turn, can delay a non-financial bill. It can also propose amendments, and if amended the bill goes back to the Commons for further consideration. This amending function is an important power and has been frequently used in recent years. But the Lords' role today is to act as a forum for revision, rather than as a rival to the elected Commons. In practice, the Lords' amendments can sometimes lead to the acceptance of changes by the government, or even a withdrawal of the bill.

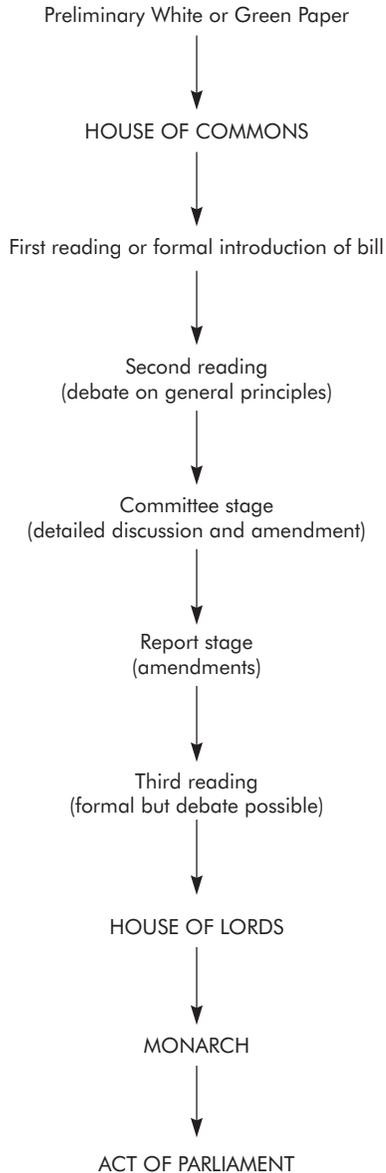


FIGURE 3.3 From bill to UK Act of Parliament

When the bill has eventually passed through the Lords, it is sent to the monarch for the Royal Assent (or signature), which has not been refused since the eighteenth century. After this, the bill becomes an Act of Parliament and enters the statute-book as representing the law of the land at that time.

UK Parliament elections

The UK is divided for Westminster parliamentary elections to the House of Commons into 659 constituencies (geographical areas of the country containing an average of about 66,000 voters – though some have many more or fewer). Each returns one MP to the House of Commons at a general election. Constituency boundaries are adjusted to ensure fair representation and to reflect population movements.

General elections are by ballot, but voting is not compulsory. British, Commonwealth and Irish Republic citizens may vote if they are resident in Britain, included on a constituency register of voters, are aged eighteen or over and not subject to any disqualification. People not entitled to vote include members of the House of Lords; mentally ill patients who are detained in hospital or prison; and persons who have been convicted of corrupt or illegal election practices.

Each elector casts one vote at a polling station set up on election day in a constituency by making a cross on a ballot paper against the name of the candidate for whom the vote is cast. Those who are unable to vote in person in their local constituency can register postal or proxy votes.

The turnout of voters has often been about 70 per cent at general elections out of an electorate of 42 million. The candidate who wins the most votes in a constituency is elected MP for that area. This system is known as the simple majority or the ‘first-past-the-post’ system. There is no voting by the various forms of proportional representation (PR), except for EU Parliament and devolved government elections, which have a mixture of first-past-the-post and party-list voting.

Some see the Westminster electoral system as undemocratic and unfair to smaller parties. The Liberal Democrats campaign for PR voting, which would create a wider selection of parties in the House of Commons and cater for minority political interests. The two big parties (Labour and Conservative) have preferred the existing system since it gives them a greater chance of achieving power. The Labour government will now examine the PR systems in Scotland and Wales to see whether they can be applied to Westminster elections.

It is argued that the British people prefer the stronger government which can result from the first-past-the-post system. PR systems are alleged to have weaknesses, such as party control of lists, coalition or minority government, frequent break-down, a lack of firm policies, power-bargaining between different parties in order to achieve government status and tension afterwards. But weak and small-majority government can also result from first-past-the-post.

The party-political system

British elections at parliamentary, devolved and local levels depend upon the party political system, which has existed since the seventeenth century. For UK parliamentary general elections, the parties present their policies in the form of manifestos to the electorate for consideration during the few weeks of campaigning. A party candidate (chosen by a specific party) in a constituency is elected to the Westminster Parliament on a combination of party manifesto and the personality of the candidate. But party-activity continues outside the election period itself, as the politicians battle for power and the ears of the electorate at all levels.

Since 1945 there have been eight Labour and eight Conservative UK governments in Britain. Some have had large majorities in the House of Commons, while others have had small ones. Some, like the Labour government in the late 1970s and the Conservatives in the 1990s, had to rely on

TABLE 3.1 British governments and Prime Ministers since 1945

<i>Date</i>	<i>Government</i>	<i>Prime Minister</i>
1945–51	Labour	Clement Attlee
1951–55	Conservative	Winston Churchill
1955–59	Conservative	Anthony Eden (1955–57) Harold Macmillan (1957–59)
1959–64	Conservative	Harold Macmillan (1959–63) Alec Douglas-Home (1963–64)
1964–66	Labour	Harold Wilson
1966–70	Labour	Harold Wilson
1970–74	Conservative	Edward Heath
1974–(Feb.)	Labour	Harold Wilson
1974–(Oct.)	Labour	Harold Wilson
1974–79	Labour	Harold Wilson (1974–76) James Callaghan (1976–79)
1979–83	Conservative	Margaret Thatcher
1983–87	Conservative	Margaret Thatcher
1987–92	Conservative	Margaret Thatcher (1987–90) John Major (1990–92)
1992–97	Conservative	John Major
1997–2001	Labour	Tony Blair
2001–	Labour	Tony Blair

the support of smaller parties, such as the Liberals and Ulster Unionists, to remain in power. Most of the MPs in the House of Commons belong to either the Conservative or the Labour Party. This continues the traditional two-party system in British politics, in which power alternates between two major parties.

The Labour Party has historically been a left-of-centre party with its own right and left wings. It emphasized social justice, equality of opportunity, economic planning and the state ownership of industries and services. It was supported by the trade unions (who had been influential in the party's development), the working class and some of the middle class. Its electoral strongholds are historically in Scotland, south Wales and the Midland and northern English industrial cities.

But traditional class-based support has changed with more social and job mobility. In the 1990s, the Labour Party tried to appeal to middle-class voters in southern England and to take account of changing economic and social conditions. Its leader (and current Prime Minister), Tony Blair, modernized the party by moving to the centre, captured some voters from the Conservatives and distanced himself from the trade unions and the party's doctrinaire past. As a result, the party had landslide victories in the 1997 and 2001 general elections.

The Conservative Party is a right-of-centre party, which also has right- and left-wing sections. It regards itself as a national party and appeals to people across class barriers. It emphasizes personal, social and economic freedom, individual ownership of property and shares and law and order. The Conservatives became more radical in their eighteen years of government power (1979–97). But splits in the party on policy (particularly Europe, the Euro and immigration) have deepened.

The party's support comes mainly from business interests and the middle and upper classes, but a sizeable number of skilled workers and women vote Conservative. The party's strongholds are in southern England, with scattered support elsewhere in the country. However, at the 2001 general election, it gained no seats in Wales, only one in Scotland and did not greatly increase its support in England. The party's defeat led to the resignation of its previous leader, William Hague, and the election of Iain Duncan Smith. The party, which has been accused of a right-wing move, needs to reorganize, strive for unity, cultivate an image which is more attractive to voters and develop policies which are more in tune with the changing face of British society.

The Liberal Democrats were formed in 1988 when the old Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party merged into one party. Under their present leader, Charles Kennedy, they see themselves as an alternative political force to the Conservative and Labour Parties, based on the centre-left of British politics. Their strengths are in local government, constitutional

reform and civil liberties, and opinion polls suggest that they are the most effective opposition to the Labour government at present.

They are relatively strong in south-west England, Wales and Scotland and increased their number of MPs at the 2001 general election to become the biggest third party in Parliament since 1929. But they lack a clearly defined identity. The Liberal Democrats have won some dramatic by-elections and have success in local government elections. But they have not made a large breakthrough into the Commons or the EU Parliament. Electoral reform to a form of PR might increase the number of their MPs.

Smaller parties are also represented in the House of Commons, such as the Scottish National Party; Plaid Cymru (the Welsh National Party); the Ulster Unionists and the Democratic Unionists (Protestant Northern Irish parties); the Social Democratic and Labour Party (moderate Roman Catholic Northern Irish Party); and Sinn Fein (Republican Northern Irish party). Other small parties, such as the Greens and fringe groups, may also contest a general election. A party which falls below a certain number of votes in the election loses its deposit (the sum paid when parties register for elections).

Social class and class loyalty used to be important factors in British voting behaviour. But these have now been replaced by property- and share-owning, job status and other considerations. A more volatile political situation exists as voters switch between Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats and employ 'tactical voting' in constituencies to prevent specific party candidates from being elected. The changing character of the electorate has moved political parties to the centre ground and forced them to adopt policies which are more representative of people's wishes and needs.

The party which wins most seats in the House of Commons at a general election usually forms the new government, even if it has not obtained a majority of the popular vote (the votes actually cast at an election). A party will have to gather more than 33 per cent of the popular vote before winning a large number of seats, and 40 per cent in order to expand that representation and form a government with an overall majority (a majority over all the other parties counted together). This majority enables it to carry out its election manifesto policies (the mandate theory).

Election success often depends on whether support is concentrated in geographical areas, for a party gains seats by its local strength. Smaller parties, which do not reach the percentages above and whose support is scattered, do not gain many seats in the Commons. It is this system of representation that PR supporters wish to change, in order to reflect the popular vote and the appeal of minority parties.

The situation may be illustrated by the 2001 general election results (see table 3.2). On a very low turnout of voters of 59 per cent (the lowest since 1918) Labour became the government with 41 per cent of the popular

TABLE 3.2 General election results, 2001

<i>Party</i>	<i>Popular vote (%)</i>	<i>Members elected</i>
Labour (including speaker)	41.0	413
Conservative	31.9	166
Liberal Democrat	18.4	52
Scottish National Party	1.8	5
Plaid Cymru	0.7	4
Ulster Unionists	6.2	6
Social Democratic and Labour		3
Sinn Fein		4
Democratic Unionists		5
Independent (Richard Taylor)		1
Total	100	659
Turnout of voters:	59%	
Overall Labour majority:	167	
Non-Labour vote:	59%	

vote, while the opposition parties together obtained 59 per cent. Labour gained 413 seats with its share of the popular vote, the Conservatives received 166 seats with 31.9 per cent, while the Liberal Democrats with 18.4 per cent received 52 seats. Labour had a large 167-seat overall majority in the House of Commons. But only 25 per cent of the total electorate voted for Labour

The main reasons for this result were the low turnout; the 'first-past-the-post' system; the Liberal Democrats' popular support being spread widely (and thinly) over the country, resulting in them coming second in many constituencies; the Labour and Conservative Parties traditionally having specific geographical areas in which most of their votes are concentrated; the Conservatives being unable to improve their position from the 1997 election; and some 'tactical voting' to defeat Conservative candidates.

The result of a general election may be a 'hung Parliament', where no one party has an overall majority. A minority or coalition government would have to be formed, in which the largest party would be able to govern only by relying on the support of smaller parties in the Commons.

The largest minority party becomes the Official Opposition with its own leader and 'shadow government'. It plays an important role in the parliamentary system, which is based on adversarial politics and the two-party tradition of government. Seating arrangements in the House of

Commons reflect this system. Leaders of the government and opposition parties sit on facing ‘front benches’, with their supporting MPs, or ‘back-benchers’, sitting behind them. Some parties, such as the Liberal Democrats, dislike this confrontational style and advocate more consensus politics. Traditionally, the effectiveness of parliamentary democracy is supposed to rest on the relationship between the government and opposition parties and the observance of procedural conventions.

The opposition parties may try to overthrow the government by defeating it in a vote. But this is not usually successful if the government has a majority and can count on the support of its MPs. The opposition parties consequently attempt to influence the formation of national policies by their criticism of pending legislation; by trying to obtain concessions on bills by proposing amendments to them; and by increasing support for their policies outside the Commons. They take advantage of any publicity and opportunity which might improve their chances at the next general election.

Inside Parliament, party discipline rests with the Whips, who are chosen from party MPs by the party leaders and who are under the direction of a Chief Whip. Their duties include informing members of forthcoming parliamentary business and maintaining the party’s voting strength in the Commons by seeing that their members attend all important debates. MPs receive notice from the Whips’ office of how important a particular vote is and the information will be underlined up to three times. A ‘three-line whip’ signifies a crucial vote and failure to attend or comply with party instructions is regarded as a revolt against the party’s policy.

The Whips also convey backbench opinion to the party leadership. This is important if rebellion and disquiet are to be avoided. Party discipline is very strong in the Commons and less so in the Lords. A government with a large majority (like Labour at present) should not become complacent, nor antagonize its backbenchers. If it does so, a successful rebellion against the government or abstention from voting by its own side may destroy the majority and the party’s policy.

Outside Parliament, control rests with the national and local party organizations, which can be influential. They promote the party at every opportunity, but especially at election time, when constituencies select the party candidates and are in charge of electioneering on behalf of their party.

UK government

The UK government is elected by and serves the whole of Britain. It is centred on Whitehall in London where its ministries and the Prime Minister’s official residence (10 Downing Street) are located. It consists of

some hundred ministers who can be chosen from both Houses of Parliament and who are appointed by the monarch on the advice of the Prime Minister. They belong to the majority party in the Commons, from which they derive their authority and are collectively responsible for the administration of national affairs.

The *Prime Minister* is appointed by the monarch and is usually the leader of the majority party in the Commons. His or her power stems from majority support in Parliament; the authority to choose and dismiss ministers; the leadership of the party in the country; and control over policy-making. The Prime Minister sits in the Commons, as do most ministers, where they may be questioned and held accountable for government actions. The Prime Minister was historically the connection between the monarch and Parliament. This convention continues in the weekly audience with the monarch, at which the policies and business of the government are discussed.

The Prime Minister has great power within the British system of government and it is suggested that the office has become like an all-powerful executive presidency, which bypasses Parliament and government departments. But there are checks on this power, inside and outside the party and Parliament. However, there is a greater emphasis upon prime ministerial government today, rather than the traditional constitutional notions of Cabinet government.

The *Cabinet* is a small executive body in the government and usually comprises twenty-one senior ministers, who are chosen and presided over by the Prime Minister. Examples are the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Finance Minister), the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Education and Skills. The Cabinet originated in meetings that the monarch had with ministers in a royal Cabinet. As the monarch withdrew from active politics with the growth of party politics and Parliament, this developed into a parliamentary body.

Constitutional theory has traditionally argued that government rule is Cabinet rule because the Cabinet collectively initiates and decides government policy at its weekly meetings in 10 Downing Street. But this notion has weakened. Since the Prime Minister is responsible for Cabinet agendas and controls Cabinet proceedings, the Cabinet can become a 'rubber-stamp' for policies which have already been decided by the Prime Minister or smaller groups.

Much depends upon the personality of Prime Ministers and the way in which they avoid potential Cabinet friction. Some are strong and like to take the lead. Others work within the Cabinet structure, allowing ministers to exercise responsibility within their own ministerial fields. Much of our information about the operation of the Cabinet comes from 'leaks' or information divulged by Cabinet ministers. Although the Cabinet



PLATE 3.4 Prime Minister Tony Blair meets with his new cabinet for the first time since the June 2001 General Election (© Popperfoto/Reuters)

meets in private and its discussions are meant to be secret, the public is usually and reliably informed of Cabinet deliberations and disputes by the media.

The mass and complexity of government business and ministers' concern with their own departments suggest that full debate in Cabinet on every issue is impossible. But it is felt that broad policies should be more vigorously debated. The present system arguably concentrates too much power in the hands of the Prime Minister; overloads ministers with work; allows crucial decisions to be taken outside the Cabinet; and reduces the notion of collective responsibility.

Collective responsibility is that which all ministers, but mainly those in the Cabinet, share for government actions and policy. All must support a government decision in public, even though some may oppose it during private deliberations. If a minister cannot do this, he or she may feel obliged to resign.

A minister also has an individual responsibility for the work of his or her government department. The minister is answerable for any mistakes, wrongdoing or bad administration, whether personally responsible for them or not. In such cases, the minister may resign, although this is not as common today as in the past. This responsibility also enables Parliament to maintain some control over executive actions because the minister is answerable to Parliament.

Government departments (or ministries) are the chief instruments by which the government implements its policy. A change of government does not necessarily alter the number or functions of departments. Examples of government departments are the Foreign Office, Ministry of Defence, Home Office and the Treasury (headed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer).

UK government departments are staffed by the *Civil Service*, consisting of career administrators (civil servants). They work in London and throughout Britain in government activities and are responsible to the minister of their department for the implementation of government policies. A change of minister or government does not require new civil servants, since they are expected to be politically neutral and to serve the government impartially. Restrictions on political activities and publication are imposed upon them in order to ensure neutrality.

There are some five hundred thousand civil servants in Britain today. Nearly half of these are women, but few of them achieve top ranks in the service. Many aspects of departmental work have now been transferred to executive agencies in London and throughout the country, which have administrative rather than policy-making roles, such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Cardiff and Social Security offices.

The heart of the Civil Service is the Cabinet Office, whose Secretary is the head of the Civil Service. The latter is responsible for the whole Civil Service, organizes Cabinet business and co-ordinates high-level policy. In each ministry or department the senior official (Permanent Secretary) and his or her assistants are responsible for assisting their minister in the implementation of government policy.

There have been accusations about the efficiency and effectiveness of the Service, and civil servants do not have a good public image. There have been attempts to make the system more cost-effective and to allow a wider category of applicants than the traditional entry of Oxford and Cambridge University graduates. Departments have been broken down into executive agencies and posts may be advertised in order to attract older people from industry, commerce and the professions.

It is alleged that the Civil Service imposes a certain mentality upon its members, which affects implementation of government policies and which ministers are unable to combat. There is supposed to be a Civil Service way of doing things and a bias towards the *status quo*. But much depends upon ministers and the way in which they manage departments. There may be some areas of concern, of which the latest is the alleged politicization of the Service by ministers and unelected advisers. But the stereotyped image of civil servants is not reflected in the many who serve their political masters and work with ministers for departmental interests. The Civil Service is highly regarded in other countries for its efficiency and impartiality.

UK parliamentary control of government

Most British governments in the past governed pragmatically. The emphasis was on whether policies worked and were generally acceptable. Governments were conscious of how far they could go before displeasing their supporters and the electorate, to whom they were accountable at general elections. The combination of the two-party system, Cabinet government and party discipline in the Commons seemed to provide a balance between efficient government and public accountability. But both Conservative and Labour governments have become more intent on pushing their policies through Parliament.

Constitutional theory suggested that Parliament should control the executive government. But unless there is small-majority government, rebellion by government MPs or public protest, a government with an overall majority in the Commons (such as Labour since 1997) can carry its policies through Parliament, irrespective of Parliament's attempts to restrain it. Critics argue for stronger parliamentary control over the executive, which has been described as an elective dictatorship. But there seems little chance of this without, for example, moving to a PR electoral system, more consensus politics, a strengthening of Parliament's constraining role and much more independent stances from MPs themselves.

Opposition parties can only oppose in the Commons and hope to persuade the electorate to dismiss the government at the next election. Formal devices such as votes of censure and no confidence are normally inadequate when confronting a government with a large majority. Even rebellious government MPs will usually support the party on such occasions, out of a self-interested desire to preserve their jobs and a need to prevent the collapse of the government.

Examinations of government programmes can be employed at Question Time in the Commons (30 minutes on Wednesdays), when the Prime Minister is subjected to oral questions from MPs. But the government can prevaricate in its answers and, while reputations can be made and lost at Question Time, it is a rhetorical and political occasion rather than an in-depth analysis of government policy. However, it does have a function in holding the executive's performance up to public scrutiny. The opposition parties can also choose their own topics for debate on a limited number of days each session, which can be used to attack the government.

A 1967 attempt to restrain the executive was the creation of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (Ombudsman), who can investigate alleged bad administration by ministers and civil servants. But the office does not have strong watchdog powers and the public have no direct access to it, although its existence does serve as a warning.

In an attempt to improve the situation, standing committees of MPs were established, which examine bills during procedural stages. Such committees have little influence on actual policy. But in 1979 a new select committee system was created, which now has fourteen committees. They comprise MPs from most parties, who monitor the administration and policy of the main government departments and investigate proposed legislation. MPs previously had problems in scrutinizing government activity adequately, and party discipline made it difficult for them to act independently of party policy.

It is often argued that the real work of the House and parliamentary control of the executive is done in the select committees. Their members are now proving to be more independent in questioning civil servants and ministers who are called to give evidence before them (but who may refuse to attend). Select committees can be effective in examining proposed legislation and expenditure, and their reports can be damaging to a government's reputation. Although opinions differ about their role, it does seem that they have strengthened Parliament's authority against government and critics would like to see their power enhanced. Nevertheless, although parliamentary scrutiny is important, a government is elected (or mandated) to carry out its declared policies.

Attitudes to politics

Polls reveal that British politicians, political parties and Parliament do not rate highly in people's esteem. A *National Opinion Poll (NOP)* in 1997 found that politicians were the least admired group and a *MORI* poll in June 2001 found that 75 per cent of respondents agreed with the proposition that politicians never answer the questions people put to them. They are criticized and satirized in the media and allegations of sleaze, corruption and unethical behaviour in both Labour and Conservative Parties have led to stricter controls on politicians and their outside interests. The Labour government has faced accusations of 'cronyism' (favouring political supporters for public and official positions) since 1997.

A *MORI* poll in May 1997 showed an increase in political apathy, particularly among the young, and a distrust in politicians to rectify social ills. This partly resulted in a 59 per cent turnout at the 2001 general election, the lowest in any general election since 1918. A *MORI* poll in July 2001 found that 47 per cent of respondents were dissatisfied with the Labour government's performance (42 per cent satisfied).

But *MORI* opinion research in 2001 showed that in fact interest in politics has remained stable in Britain for thirty years; civic duty and habit are key motivators to voting (less so for the young); and people have