

# The Westminster system of government

- Britain is often regarded as “the cradle of democracy”
- The Palace of Westminster: the “Mother of all Parliaments”



- the Palace of Westminster = the seat of the Parliament of the United Kingdom.
- The Houses of Parliament at Westminster

# What is so special about the Westminster system?

- In the United Kingdom, whose Westminster system has been adopted in many countries, the executive branch is not entirely separate from the legislative branch. On the contrary, the British cabinet may be described as the leading committee of Parliament. Formerly, the British prime minister, the head of the government, could sit in either the House of Lords or the House of Commons, but contemporary convention dictates that he serve as a member of the House of Commons. The other ministers who make up the cabinet must be members of one or the other house of Parliament. If the prime minister wishes someone who is not in Parliament to serve in the cabinet, he must either appoint him to the peerage or find a vacancy in the House of Commons to which he can be elected.
- Whereas the doctrine of separation of powers in the U.S. system does not require the executive branch to hold a majority in the legislature, in Great Britain the ministers of the crown hold office only so long as they enjoy the support of a majority in the House of Commons. A cabinet that loses such support must either dissolve the Commons and call a new election—thus in effect putting the issue to the voters—or resign and permit others to form a government. Since the start of the 20th century, most changes of government in Britain have occurred as a result of the outcome of a general election.

- It follows that in the British system the prime minister and the cabinet are fully in charge of Parliament. They are responsible, as the guiding committee of Parliament, for the preparation and enactment of most legislation and of the budget. There can be no permanent or serious conflict between the House of Commons and the cabinet, for responsibility means that the government of the day must either prevail or give way to another government. Thus, the deadlocks between the chief executive and the Congress that occur from time to time in the United States cannot occur in the British system.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/134322/constitutional-law/256932/Parliamentary-systems>

# The UK political system

- The United Kingdom is a **parliamentary democracy**: government is voted into power by the people, to act in the interests of the people. Every adult has the right to vote - known as 'universal suffrage'.

Alongside this system, the UK is also a **constitutional monarchy**. This is a situation where there is an established monarch (currently Queen Elizabeth II), who remains politically impartial and with limited powers.

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/parliament-government/>

- **The British constitution** is uncodified; it is only partly written and is flexible. Its basic sources are parliamentary and European Union legislation, the European Convention on Human Rights, and decisions by courts of law. Matters for which there is no formal law, such as the resignation of office by a government, follow precedents (conventions) that are open to development or modification.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/615557/United-Kingdom/215040/Services#toc44702>

- The country's head of state is the reigning king or **queen**.
- The monarch has very little power, she is a figurehead



- The head of government is the **prime minister**, who is the leader of the majority political party in the House of Commons. All political power rests with the prime minister and the cabinet, and the monarch must act on their advice.



David Cameron

# Parliament and Government

- Parliament and government both play a part in forming the laws of the United Kingdom. They are separate institutions that work closely together, so it's easy to mix-up exactly what each one is responsible for.

## **Government**

- The government runs the country. It has responsibility for developing and implementing policy and for drafting laws. It is also known as the Executive. (végrehajtó hatalom)
- **Parliament**
- Parliament is the highest legislative authority in the UK. It has responsibility for checking the work of government and examining, debating and approving new laws. It is also known as the Legislature. (törvényhozó testület)

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/parliament-government/>



- **Houses of Parliament**, also called **Palace of Westminster**, in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the seat of the **bicameral Parliament**, including the House of Commons and the House of Lords. It is located on the left bank of the River Thames in the borough of Westminster, London.

# The Two-House System

The business of Parliament takes place in two Houses: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Their work is similar:

- **making laws (legislation) (törvényhozás),**
- **checking the work of the government (scrutiny) (alapos vizsgálat),** and
- **debating current issues.**

The House of Commons is also responsible for granting money to the government through approving Bills that raise taxes.

Generally, the decisions made in one House have to be approved by the other. In this **way the two-chamber system acts as a check and balance for both Houses.**

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/system/>

**House of Commons**, also called **Commons**, popularly elected legislative body of the bicameral British Parliament. Although it is technically the lower house, the House of Commons is predominant over the House of Lords, and the name “Parliament” is often used to refer to the House of Commons alone.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/128885/House-of-Commons>



# The Commons

- The Commons is publicly elected. The party with the largest number of members in the Commons forms the government.
- Members of the Commons (MPs) debate the big political issues of the day and proposals for new laws. It is one of the key places where government ministers, like the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, and the principal figures of the main political parties, work.
- The Commons alone is responsible for making decisions on financial Bills, such as proposed new taxes. **The Lords can consider these Bills but cannot block or amend them.**

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/system/>

- **House of Lords**, the upper chamber of Great Britain's bicameral legislature.
- It currently comprises the following elements: (1) the **Lords Spiritual**, including the archbishops of Canterbury and York and the bishops of Durham, London, and Winchester, as well as 21 other bishops holding sees in England; (2) from November 1999, 92 **hereditary peers**; (3) from January 1980, all **life peers and peeresses** created under the Life Peerages Act of 1958; and (4) the **Law Lords**, consisting of the judges of the Supreme Court of Judicature (the Court of Appeal and the High Court of Justice), which act as Britain's final court of appeal (except Scottish criminal cases).
- The total number of persons qualified to sit in the House of Lords is **in excess of 670**.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/348064/House-of-Lords>



# The Lords

- The House of Lords is the second chamber of the UK Parliament. It is independent from, and complements the work of, the elected House of Commons. The Lords shares the task of making and shaping laws and checking and challenging the work of the government.

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/system/>

# Legislation

**Bill:** A proposal to introduce a new law (legislation), or amend an existing law, which is debated by Parliament.

- **Parliament is responsible for approving new laws (legislation). The government introduces most plans for new laws, or changes to existing laws - but they can originate from an MP, Lord or even a member of the public or private group. Before they can become law, both the House of Commons and House of Lords must debate and vote on the proposals.**

## **Introducing legislation**

- Bills normally introduce new laws. Bills that deal with more political or controversial issues usually begin in the Commons.

## **Defeating and delaying legislation**

- To become law the text of a Bill must be agreed by both Houses. Either House can vote down a Bill in which case it will normally not become law - but there are exceptions. The Commons can pass the same Bill in two successive years, in which case it can become law without the agreement of the Lords. Bills which are only about money (raising taxes or authorising government expenditure) are not opposed in the Lords and may only be delayed for a month.

## **Royal Assent**

- The reigning monarch has to approve all new laws - called the Royal Assent - but this is a formality as in practice it is not withheld. Royal Assent was last withheld in 1708 when Queen Anne refused a Bill to settle the Militia in Scotland.
- When a Bill is given Royal Assent it becomes an Act of Parliament. It is then the responsibility of the relevant government department to implement that law (eg, the Home Office will deal with new Acts relating to immigration).

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/legislation/>

- The frontbenches are where ministers and their official Opposition spokespersons sit in the Chamber - this is where the term **frontbencher** or frontbench spokesperson comes from. It reflects the seating arrangements in both Houses as the leaders of the Government and the Opposition sit on the frontbenches, with their supporters, or **backbenchers**, sitting behind them.



# Parliament and Crown

- **Along with the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the Crown is an integral part of the institution of Parliament. The Queen plays a constitutional role in opening and dissolving Parliament and approving Bills before they become law.**

## **Parliament**

- The highest legislative authority in the United Kingdom. Made up of the House of Commons, House of Lords and the Queen (who is the UK's current hereditary monarch).

## **Crown**

- This is another way of referring to the monarchy - which is the oldest part of the system of government in this country. Time has reduced the power of the monarchy, and today it is broadly ceremonial. The current UK monarch is Queen Elizabeth II.
  - **Appointing a government**
  - **Opening and dissolving Parliament**
    - **Queen's Speech**
    - **Royal Assent**

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/parliament-crown/>

# The Crown

## **Appointing a government**

- The day after a general election the Queen invites the leader of the party that won the most seats in the House of Commons to become Prime Minister and to form a government.

## **Opening and dissolving Parliament**

- The Crown opens Parliament through the State Opening (marking the beginning of the Parliamentary year). The Crown only dissolves Parliament before a general election under conditions laid out in the Fixed Term Parliament Act 2011 (dissolution).

## **Queen's Speech**

- The Crown informs Parliament of the government's policy ideas and plans for new legislation in a speech delivered from the throne in the House of Lords. Although the Queen makes the speech the government draws up the content.

## **Royal Assent**

- When a Bill has been approved by a majority in the House of Commons and the House of Lords it is formally agreed to by the Crown. This is known as the Royal Assent. This turns a Bill into an Act of Parliament, allowing it to become law in the UK.

# State Opening

- **The State Opening of Parliament marks the formal start of the parliamentary year and the Queen's Speech sets out the government's agenda for the coming session, outlining proposed policies and legislation. It is the only regular occasion when the three constituent parts of Parliament – the Sovereign, the House of Lords and the House of Commons – meet.**
- **When is State Opening?**
- State Opening happens on the first day of a new parliamentary session or shortly after a general election.
- **What happens during State Opening?**
- State Opening is the main ceremonial event of the parliamentary calendar, attracting large crowds and a significant television and online audience. It begins with the Queen's procession from Buckingham Palace to Westminster, escorted by the Household Cavalry.
- The Queen arrives at Sovereign's Entrance and proceeds to the Robing Room. Wearing the Imperial State Crown and the Robe of State, she leads the Royal Procession through the Royal Gallery, packed with 600 guests, to the chamber of the House of Lords.
- The House of Lords official known as 'Black Rod' is sent to summon the Commons. The doors to the Commons chamber are shut in his face: a practice dating back to the Civil War, symbolising the Commons' independence from the monarchy. Black Rod strikes the door three times before it is opened. Members of the House of Commons then follow Black Rod and the Commons Speaker to the Lords chamber, standing at the opposite end to the Throne, known as the Bar of the House, to listen to the speech.
- **State Opening: 2013-14 session**
- The State Opening for the 2013-14 session took place on Wednesday 8 May 2013.

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/occasions/stateopening/>

# State Opening of Parliament





# The Queen's Speech

- The Queen's Speech is delivered by the Queen from the Throne in the House of Lords. Although the Queen reads the Speech, it is written by the government. It contains an outline of its policies and proposed legislation for the new parliamentary session.

- **After the Queen's Speech**
- When the Queen leaves, a new parliamentary session starts and Parliament gets back to work. Members of both Houses debate the content of the speech and agree an 'Address in Reply to Her Majesty's Gracious Speech'. Each House continues the debate over the planned legislative programme for several days, looking at different subject areas. The Queen's Speech is voted on by the Commons, but no vote is taken in the Lords.
- **History of State Opening**
- Traditions surrounding State Opening and the delivery of a speech by the monarch can be traced back as far as the 16th century. The current ceremony dates from the opening of the rebuilt Palace of Westminster in 1852 after the fire of 1834.

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/occasions/stateopening/>

# Devolved Parliaments and Assemblies

- **UK devolution created a national Parliament in Scotland, a national Assembly in Wales and a national Assembly in Northern Ireland. This process transferred varying levels of power from the UK Parliament to the UK's nations - but kept authority over the devolved institutions in the UK Parliament itself.**
- Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all held successful referendums on devolution in the late 1990s. This led to the establishment of separate Parliaments or Assemblies and the democratic election of officials.

## **Devolved and reserved powers**

- Devolved powers are decisions that Parliament controlled in the past, but are now taken by the separate bodies, e.g., the Scottish Parliament. This could include matters like education or health. Reserved powers are those decisions that remain with Parliament in Westminster.
- In each case, the legislation establishing the separate bodies determined which powers were devolved and which were reserved.
  - **Scottish Parliament**
  - **National Assembly for Wales**
  - **Northern Ireland Assembly**

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/devolved/>

# General elections

- **When Parliament is dissolved every seat in the House of Commons becomes vacant and a general election is held. Each constituency in the UK elects one MP (Member of Parliament) to a seat in the House of Commons. The political party that wins a majority of seats in the House of Commons usually forms the Government.**

## **How often are general elections held?**

- The date of the next general election is set at 7 May 2015 after the Fixed Term Parliament Act was passed on 15 September 2011.
- The act provides for general elections to be held on the first Thursday in May every five years. Previous to this act, the duration of a Parliament was set at five years, although many were dissolved before that, at the request of the Prime Minister to the Queen.
- **How does it work? / [First-past-the-post voting](#)**
- MPs are elected from a choice of candidates by a simple majority system in which each person casts one vote. The candidate with the most votes then becomes the MP for that constituency.
- Candidates may be from a political party registered with the Electoral Commission or they may stand as an 'Independent' rather than represent a registered party.
- **Where do people vote?**
- Most voting takes place in polling stations but anyone eligible to vote can apply for a postal vote.

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/elections-and-voting/general/>