



Foreign &
Commonwealth Office
London

INSIGHT UK

System of Government

'No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried from time to time.'

Sir Winston Churchill
Prime Minister
1940–45, 1951–55

The UK is a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarch as Head of State.

The CONSTITUTION

The UK does not have a written constitution.

Citizens' rights are made up from a combination of:

- common law
- statutes
- conventions

Important constitutional documents that do exist:

- Magna Carta (1215) restrained the power of the Crown
- The Bill of Rights (1689) extended Parliament's powers
- Reform Act (1832) reformed political representation
- Human Rights Act (2000) defined fundamental citizens' rights

Key elements of Human Rights Act:

- a code of values placed at the heart of UK culture and administration
- 14 Articles enshrining principles such as the right to life, the right to freedom of expression, and the right to an education

The Monarchy

HM the Queen is head of the executive, part of the legislature, head of the judiciary, commander-in-chief of the armed forces and supreme governor of the Church of England. Today the monarch's political role is largely ceremonial, with the Queen acting on the advice of her ministers.



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LEGISLATURE

Parliament consists of HM the Queen, the House of Lords and the House of Commons where elected members charged with representing their constituencies engage in debate and vote on national legislation.

EXECUTIVE

The Government: prime minister, cabinet ministers, junior ministers; government departments and bodies subject to ministerial control; devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales; local authorities and public corporations.

JUDICIARY

The legal system of courts, judges and lawyers determining common law and interpreting statutes as passed by the Legislature.

The legal system is based on:

- common law and equity based on layer upon layer of case law
- parliamentary statutes
- European Community legislation.

The Home Secretary has overall responsibility for the criminal justice system in England and Wales. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, it is the responsibility of the Minister for Justice and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, respectively.

PARLIAMENT

examines **votes**
scrutinises **debates**

A parliament has a maximum five-year life.

Its life is divided into year-long sessions.

Each year, there are an average 168 'sitting' days, when MPs debate and pass new legislation.

The Houses of Parliament (Palace of Westminster)

- covers 8 acres
- has 11 courtyards; 100 staircases and two miles of passages

There are 9 parties with representatives, plus one independent member, elected to the present parliament.

MPs must declare all their financial 'interests' outside Parliament.

Women won the right to vote and stand for election in 1928.

The House of Commons	The House of Lords	The Monarch
Home: Westminster Palace	Home: Westminster Palace	Official residences: Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle & Holyroodhouse Palace
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 659 elected representatives (Members of Parliament – MPs) • Party with majority support forms the Government • Makes laws – Acts of Parliament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 92 hereditary peers (with voting rights) • Over 550 life peers • 27 Law Lords • Archbishops of Canterbury and York and 24 senior bishops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Head of State • Head of the judiciary • Political power is exercised in her name • Performs symbolic duties such as summoning Parliament



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The most a candidate can spend on an election campaign is £4,965 plus 4.2p for each elector in a borough constituency and 5.6p in a county constituency.

Anyone over 21 (with certain exceptions) can stand for Parliament after paying a £500 deposit – refundable if they get more than 5% of the vote in their constituency.

The Labour Party won the last election in 2001.

Since 1945 – the Conservative Party has won 8 elections. The Labour Party has won 8 elections.

Before the State Opening of Parliament in November the house is checked by the Yeomen of the Guard in commemoration of the search that uncovered the Gunpowder Plot of 1606.

The only MP permitted to drink alcohol in the House is the Chancellor of the Exchequer when delivering the budget speech.

Process of making a Law	
INSPIRATION & FORMULATION	Before it can be discussed, a new law must be drafted as a bill.
In the Commons, the Speaker enforces the rules of the house and controls the behaviour of MPs	
FIRST READING	Bill introduced to House of Commons.
SECOND READING	Bill debated • controversial bills voted on • the vote is called 'a division'.
COMMITTEE STAGE	Clause by clause examination of the bill by special committee • May take into account outside groups' views of the bill.
REPORT STAGE and THIRD READING	Changes made at Committee stage reported to Parliament and debated.
HOUSE OF LORDS	Bill goes to Lords and passes through stages that echo those above • If the Lords alter anything the bill has to go back to the Commons for re-consideration • The Lords can only delay a bill for one parliamentary session and can't consider money bills, e.g. the budget.
ROYAL ASSENT	The bill becomes a statute or law receiving the monarch's official blessing.
IMPLEMENTATION	The statute or law is implemented.

The GOVERNMENT

Every year some 50,000 questions are asked in the ministers' question times that are held for 55 minutes each day from Mondays to Thursdays.

There are usually 20 ministers in the Cabinet – all chosen by the Prime Minister.

All ministers must be members of the House of Commons or the House of Lords.

When ministers are changed it is called a cabinet 'reshuffle'.

The Lobby is a select group of journalists allowed access to the lobby of Parliament to talk to ministers.



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The CIVIL SERVICE

It has 460,000 members, about 2% of the working population.

It advises Government and provides public services covering everything from agriculture to standards in zoos.

The National Audit Office checks to see whether state services are value for money.

Its 2000 report shows it saved the taxpayer £1.3 billion over the last three years.

DEVOLUTION

The Northern Ireland Assembly has 98 members and has full legislative and executive authority over specific areas of responsibility including education, regional development, health, social services and the arts.

The Scottish Parliament assumed legislative power in July 1999 and has 129 elected members. It has full law-making responsibilities.

The Welsh Assembly came into being in May 1999 and has 60 elected members. Its power extends to passing secondary legislation.

Welsh and Scottish MPs will continue to be elected to Parliament in Westminster.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

These run local services raising money through Council Tax, boosted by cash from central government.

There are 387 local authorities in England. London has 32 borough councils.

The 22 local authorities in Wales spend half of the country's £8 billion service budget.

There are also 32 councils in Scotland and 26 district councils in Northern Ireland.

In July 2000 a London-wide authority with a mayor was created to take over responsibility for many of the capital's services.

Over 2 million people are employed by local authorities in the UK.

Local authority spending amounted to 25% of all public expenditure in 1999/2000 – £81.2 billion.

Sources

Human Rights Impact
 Citizenship Foundation

The No 10 Website
www.pm.gov.uk

UK Datafile 2000
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United Kingdom –
 100 Questions Answered
 Foreign & Commonwealth Office

United Kingdom's System
 of Government
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