



Foreign &
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INSIGHT UK



Passing Legislation

In the 2000–2001 Parliamentary session, 21 Government Bills became law (this session was cut short for the general election). In the session before (1999–2000), 39 Government Bills and 6 Private Member's Bills became law.

On average, each year there are 170 'sitting' days, when Members of Parliament (MPs) sit in the House of Commons. About half the time is spent debating proposed legislation; the rest is spent on statements, ministers' question times and other debates.

Laws in the UK come from various sources:

- the common law, which has developed from decisions made in law courts over hundreds of years
- case law, based on the decision of a previous judge in a similar case
- the European Union
- and statute law, laws passed by Parliament (Acts of Parliament).

This leaflet covers statute law.

Parliament's authority comes from MPs in the House of Commons being elected, and from its history as the source of law.

The unelected House of Lords recognises the primacy of the elected House of Commons and the right of the Government to get its legislation passed.

In the run-up to a general election, each political party will publish a manifesto explaining what they would do if elected, including what laws they would pass. If they win the election and form the next Government, they put these ideas as Bills to Parliament in the hope that they will become law.



TOP LEFT: Central lobby at the Houses of Parliament © Houses of Parliament Library
 TOP RIGHT: The Speaker's Chair © Houses of Parliament Library
 BOTTOM: State opening of Parliament © Patrick Tsui

A Bill is a proposed Act of Parliament. Bills are discussed in both Houses of Parliament and changes are often made before they become law.

Once the Bill has been approved by both Houses and given Royal Assent by the Queen it becomes an Act of Parliament, part of the law, that must be obeyed.

GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION

At the State Opening of Parliament, which usually happens each November, the Queen goes to the House of Lords and reads the Queen's Speech. This includes the main list of Bills that will be presented by the Government to Parliament during the coming session.

The following table shows how the British Overseas Territories Bill granting British citizenship to British overseas territories citizens, went through the Parliamentary stages that apply to all Bills and became law.

British Overseas Territories Bill	Date of procedure	What it means
House of Lords		
Introduction	21 June 2001	The Bill is read out & printed
Second Reading	10 July 2001	Main debate in the House on the Bill & if necessary a vote on its principle
Committee	24 July 2001	Detailed consideration of the Bill and debate on amendments
Report	23 October 2001	Further chance to amend the Bill
Third Reading and Passing	30 October 2001	Final chance to comment and vote on the Bill
Consideration of Commons amendment	26 February 2002	An amendment made in the Commons is considered
House of Commons		
Introduction	30 October 2001	The Bill is read out & printed
Second Reading	22 November 2001	Main debate in the House on the Bill & if necessary a vote on its principle
Committee	6 December 2001	This is normally when a group of MPs (Standing Committee) considers the Bill in detail and can make amendments. Bills can go to a Committee of the Whole House
Report	13 February 2002	Amendments and changes considered by the whole House; those not on the Committee can propose amendments
Third Reading		Final chance to debate the Bill
Royal Assent		
	26 February 2002	Queen's Assent formally notified to both Houses of Parliament



RIGHT: Parliament Green © Foreign & Commonwealth Office

Public Bills can be introduced into either the House of Commons or the House of Lords. Bills with a mainly financial purpose are always introduced in the Commons and if their main aim involves new taxation or public spending, they must be introduced by a government minister in the Commons.

The House of Lords, by convention, cannot reject legislation on matters that were in a party's manifesto, nor make changes to a Money Bill (about matters such as tax).

New laws are needed as laws go out of date, or to comply with international or European law (such as the Human Rights Act 1998), or to put Government policies into practice.

Before Bills are introduced into Parliament, there has usually been consultation and discussion with interested parties such as professional bodies, voluntary organisations and pressure groups.

VOTING

The Speaker is the chief officer of the House of Commons, and is elected by fellow MPs to preside over the House, charged with preservation of order and chairing debates.

In the House of Commons, the Speaker puts a motion to the vote by asking those in favour to say Aye (Yes) and those against to say No. If the result isn't clear from this, or MPs call for a division, the House 'divides'.

Dividing is when MPs vote Aye by walking through the division lobby (corridor) to the right of the Speaker and No by going through the lobby to the left.

In the 2000–2001 Parliamentary session, five Private Member's Bills introduced through the ballot procedures became law:

Title of Bill	Presented by	No. in Ballot
Carers and Disabled Children	Tom Pendry	2
Health Service Commissioners (Amendment)	Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith	4
Licensing (Young Persons)	Paul Truswell	3
Protection of Animals (Amendment)	Claire Curtis-Thomas	20
Warm Homes and Energy Conservation	David Amess	5

Lists are published of how each MP voted.

An MP may not vote on a matter in which he or she has a pecuniary interest.

PRIVATE MEMBERS BILLS

Individual MPs can introduce Bills to the House of Commons. The time available for debating such Bills is very limited; 13 Fridays in a Parliamentary session are set aside for them.

Every session, a ballot is held, and the MPs who come highest in the ballot have the best chance of presenting a Bill that would become law.



LEFT: The Prime Minister's residence © Foreign & Commonwealth Office
TOP RIGHT: Division Lobby © Houses of Parliament Library
BOTTOM RIGHT: The royal throne in the House of Lords
© Houses of Parliament Library

FRONT COVER IMAGES

TOP: Houses of Parliament © Foreign & Commonwealth Office
BOTTOM: The House of Lords © Houses of Parliament Library

PRIVATE LEGISLATION

Some Bills are introduced to Parliament that will only affect one area or group of people. These are Private Bills.

Private Bills are put forward by bodies such as local authorities and companies seeking special powers not available under general law. For example, the proposed scheme for a new east-west railway in London will need a Private Bill to go through Parliament before it can start.

Hybrid Bills are a cross between a Public Bill and Private Bill, and are public bills which affect the specific private rights of people or bodies. They are usually introduced by the Government, but are quite rare – the last one was in 1996 to let the Channel Tunnel Rail Link be built.

DEVOLUTION

The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Scottish Parliament can also pass legislation affecting Northern Ireland and Scotland respectively on devolved matters such as agriculture or education. They were set up under laws passed by the Houses of Parliament and have similar procedures for debate, voting and amendments to Bills.

The Welsh Assembly can pass secondary legislation on devolved matters: that is, legislation already provided for under an Act of Parliament.

Sources

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