

# Parliament

## Pre-reading

a) Complete this table for your own country.

	your country	Britain
Name of place where government meets		
Number of chambers		
Head of State		
Main political parties		

b) Look up the meaning of 'Commons' and 'Lord' in a dictionary.

### THE PALACE OF WESTMINSTER

Britain is administered from the Palace of Westminster in London. This is also known as the Houses of Parliament. Parliament is made up of two chambers - the House of **Commons** and the House of **Lords**. The members of the House of Lords are not elected: they qualify to sit in the House because they are bishops of the Church of England, aristocrats who have **inherited** their '**seats**' from their fathers, people with titles, or senior judges of the legal system. There has been talk of reform this century because many Britons think that this system is undemocratic.

The House of Commons, by contrast, has 651 seats which are occupied by **Members of Parliament (MPs)** who are elected by the British public. The United Kingdom is divided into **constituencies**, each of which has an elected MP in the House of Commons.

Each of the major political parties appoints a representative (candidate) to compete for each seat. Smaller parties may have a candidate in only a few constituencies. There may be five or more parties fighting for one seat, but only one person – the candidate who gets the greatest number of **votes** - can win. Some parties win a lot of seats and some win very few, or none at all.

The Queen, who is the Head of State, opens and closes Parliament. All new laws are debated (discussed) by MPs in the Commons, then debated in the Lords, and finally signed by the Queen. All three are part of Parliament in Britain.

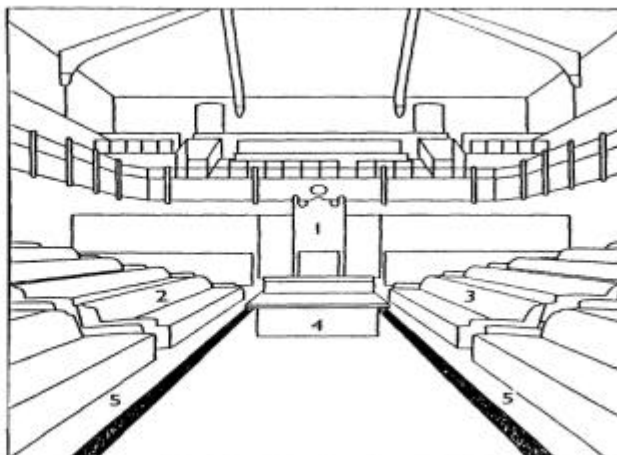
## Reading comprehension

1. What is the difference between the Commons and the Lords?
2. Why do some people think the House of Lords needs to be reformed?
3. What are the three main components of the British Parliament?
4. Which of the following people would not have a seat in the House of Lords?  
All judges, Bishops, Policemen, MPs, Dukes, The Lord Chancellor, Nuns, Sons of life peers, Barons

### Pre-reading

a) Read and find out:  
Why does the House of Commons become crowded?

b) Why are there two red lines running down the middle of the Commons chamber?



## TUE HOUSE OF COMMONS

There are 651 MPs in Britain, but the Chamber of the House of Commons is quite small; it has seats for only 437, so when there is something important to discuss it can become very crowded and MPs squeeze on to the benches or sit on the steps. The House of Commons has a chairman, called the **Speaker**, whose job is to keep the House in order, a little like a referee at a football match. He or she shouts 'Order! Order!' when MPs start shouting at each other, or when the discussion gets out of control. The Speaker sits in the centre at the back, on a high **chair**, and can see the whole Chamber from this position. The office of Speaker is neutral, i.e. he or she is not a voting member of a political party.

There are **red lines** running along each side of the Chamber. This means that the Chamber is divided in two. Since Britain traditionally has two main political parties, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, each party can have its own side! The party which is in government (i.e. has the most MPs elected) sits on the right. The two red lines on the floor must not be crossed, to prevent either side attacking the other during a debate. MPs in Britain do not normally use physical violence, but the red lines are a historical tradition: in the past, MPs used to carry swords into the Chamber and the distance between the two lines is too wide for a sword fight!

The most important MPs sit on the **front benches** and are therefore called frontbenchers. Younger and less experienced MPs sit on the back benches and are known as backbenchers. The ministers of the Government sit on the front bench to the right, whilst the **Opposition** frontbenchers sit on the left. When the Prime Minister (the leader of the party in government) or any other leading politician makes a speech, they stand at the **table** in the centre, below the Speaker's chair. These seating arrangements have existed for hundreds of years.

## Reading

Use the picture and text to identify the following:

The Opposition front bench, The Speaker's chair, The Table of the House, Red lines on the floor, The Government front bench

## Conclusion

Now complete the table in Exercise 1 for Britain. Use all the texts in this section to help you.

# The potential voters

## Reading

The teenage magazine **Rage** asked young people in Britain about their voting habits. Three main questions were asked:

- a Are you interested in politics?
- b Who would you vote for in the next election?
- c What would influence the way you vote?

Some of their replies appear opposite.

## Discussion

What would make you vote for a politician?

**Appearance** It's important that the person is well dressed.

**Family** I would vote for a politician my parents support.

**Views** It's important that the person represents the causes I believe in.

**Face** It's important that the politician looks honest.

**Friends** I would vote for a person my friends support.

Tick the statements that you agree with - you can add others if you wish. Put the Statements in order of importance for you.

## FACT FILE ACTIVITIES

### 1. Politics and parties

- Write the names of political parties in your country on the chart. Have you got any parties similar to British ones? Are there more parties in your country?
- Write a list of the main policies of one party in your country.

### 2. Constituencies and parties

- How many MPs represent the city of Cardiff?
- Do all the MPs for Cardiff have to belong to the same party?

### 3. How much do you know about British politics now?

Complete the two diagrams with the words in the box.

### 4. Project work

Collect as much information as you can about Britain's politicians from your newspapers over a period of time (a month or more). Do they visit your country? What are their names? What impression do they give? Keep a check on your own politicians - have any of them been to Britain recently? Why?

### *The potential voters*

I don't think about politics. There's no point in worrying about it. It doesn't affect me. I'll decide who to vote for when the time comes. I'm sure it will be Tory (Charlotte Bale, 15, school student)

I think politics are important: They determine the kind of society we live in: I think John Major has made a difference. The Tories are more likely to win the next election now. I'd much father have a Labour government. (Annie Gumey, 14, school student)

I had politics forced on me. I can remember going on CND marches when I was four, because my parents were a bit tight on. It didn't put me off. I wouldn't go into politics because I'm too shy, but I'd vote for Labour. (Fiona Luck, 15, school student)

A lot of my college friends were really into green politics and I learnt a lot from them. The greens relate well to young people. John Major has made no difference. He's just a puppet. (Charles Fernandez, 18, window dresser)

Politics are boring. I'm more interested in fashion and boys. My familie vote Tory and I just follow them. (Antonia Runnicles, 15, school student)

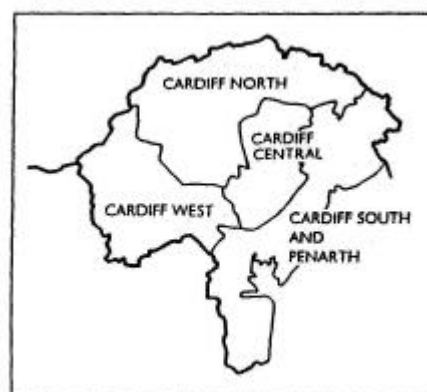
I keep abreast of the news, because you have to understand what's going on in the world to be able to change it I think people are starting to take green politics seriously but it will be a while before they become a viable alternative (Glen Wilson, 19, between jobs)

## FACT FILE

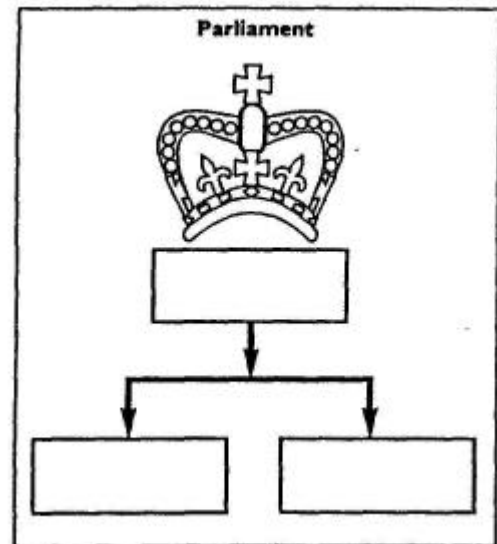
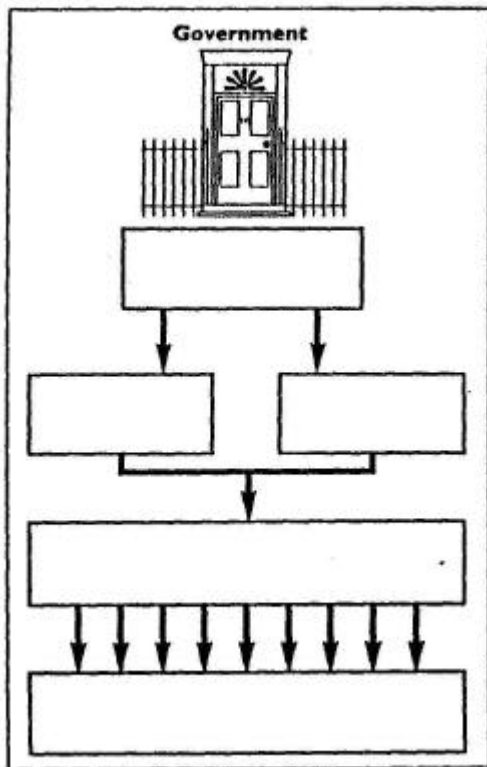
	LEFT	CENTRE	RIGHT
	Communist Party    Labour Party	Liberal Democrats	Conservative Party    National Front
Britain			
Your country			

### Cardiff's elected representatives

Here is a map of Cardiff. The city is divided into four constituencies. Each constituency is represented by one MP.  
 Cardiff North is represented by Mr Gwilym Jones (Conservative).  
 Cardiff Central is represented by Ian Grist (Conservative).  
 Cardiff South and Penarth is represented by Mr Alun Michael (Labour).  
 Cardiff West is represented by Mr Rhodri Morgan (Labour).



Source: The Parliamentary Education Unit



Senior MPs  
The Queen  
House of Lords  
Prime Minister

Members of the Lords  
House of Commons  
Government departments  
The Cabinet