

Parliament

What is Parliament?

The United Kingdom Parliament consists of the Queen, the House of Lords and the House of Commons. All three work together to carry out the work of Parliament. Sometimes people talk about Parliament when they really mean the House of Commons. Of course, the House of Commons does carry out the bulk of the work of Parliament because the 650 MPs who sit in the House of Commons are the elected representatives of the people of Britain. It is only right that they should make the most important decisions on behalf of the public. But we must not forget the House of Lords and the Queen who, although not elected, also carry out valuable work.

Membership of the House of Commons

There are 650 Members of the House of Commons. They are commonly known as MPs - Members of Parliament. Each MP represents one of the 650 areas or constituencies into which the United Kingdom is divided. With a few exceptions, all those over 18 can vote in Parliamentary elections, provided that they are citizens of either Great Britain or Eire and that they live in the United Kingdom. Nobody can vote unless they are registered as an elector. A form is sent to each household every year so that everyone who is old enough has a chance to register. Everybody has one vote, but they are not obliged to use it.

There are two types of Parliamentary election. A general election is when there is voting in all 650 constituencies on one day. A general election can be called by the Government at any time. Normally there has to be general election within five years of the previous one. A by-election occurs when a Member dies, retires, or resigns. Voting only occurs in the one constituency without a Member (or perhaps several if they have all fallen vacant at the same time) but not in all 650 constituencies. In each constituency the candidate with the most votes wins. He/she can then take his/her seat in Parliament. A Member may, in fact, refer to his/her constituency as his/her seat. It is the duty of an MP to represent and to help all the people who live in his/her constituency, regardless of whether they voted for him/her, or support his/her party's policies. Almost all the Members of parliament belong to a political party. The party winning most seats in a general election is entitled to form a government and the party leader becomes Prime Minister.

The Leader of the Opposition is the leader of what is often known as the "Shadow Cabinet". Members of the Shadow Cabinet each "shadow" the work of a Government Minister, criticising him/her if they disagree with his/her policies and at the same time developing the knowledge and skills which will be needed, if and when they are returned to power themselves. The Opposition is extremely important for the working of our Parliamentary System. This is clearly shown by the fact that the Opposition is recognised as "Her Majesty's Opposition".

The Organisation of the parties within the House of Commons

Discipline is important in any party, and the task of maintaining discipline falls to the Whips. Although MPs in the House of Commons can vote as they wish during Divisions, they are generally expected to vote with their parties. This usually presents no problem. Most MPs belong to a party because they agree with what it stands for. Occasionally, however, "revolts" do occur. These become particularly important when the Government has only a small majority and the votes of a handful of MPs can make all the difference. Parties feel that it is, therefore, necessary to reinforce Members' natural loyalty to their parties with a tight System of party discipline. Within each of the main parties there is a Chief Whip, together with 10-12 Whips.

Before 1983, a Member who wished to be absent when an important vote was taken would "pair" with an MP from the opposing side. i.e. Members from the governing party would pair with Members from the official Opposition party (not the smaller parties). The "pairing" would be recorded by the Whips who would normally be happy to grant leave of absence (except on occasions of major importance) as both sides would be losing a vote and neither would gain any advantage. At present, because of the size of the Government majority, there are simply not enough partners to go round and the pairing system is not really operating as it has in the past.

The term "Whip" was first used in the eighteenth century. The party organisers of the time were likened to the person on the hunting field who "whipped in" the hounds in the pack to keep them all together.

The Membership of the House of Lords

At the time of writing there are 1,187 Members of the House of Lords. These can be divided into four main types of Lord: Bishops, Lords who inherit their titles, Lords who have been given titles for their own lifetime, and Law Lords who mainly hear appeal cases (as the House of Lords is the highest court of appeal for most types of legal case in this country). There are historical reasons which explain the present composition of the House. The House of Lords is directly descended from the medieval King's Council to which were summoned the great nobles and churchmen. It was also the highest court of justice in the land. There have been changes over the years but the House of Lords still has many characteristics of the medieval Council.

THE BISHOPS (ALSO KNOWN AS THE LORDS SPIRITUAL)

The two Archbishops (of Canterbury and York) are automatically Members of the House of Lords, as are the

Bishops of London, Durham and Winchester. The next twenty-one in order of seniority are also entitled to sit in the Lords. Unlike other Lords, the Bishops and Archbishops are only Members of the House for as long as they hold office. When they retire, they leave the House.

THE HEREDITARY PEERS (LORDS WHO INHERIT THEIR TITLES)

All the Lords who are not Bishops are known as Peers or Lords Temporal. There are nearly 800 hereditary peers who can pass on their titles to their children. Most of their titles do not go back very far. Indeed half of the hereditary peerages have been created in the twentieth Century. By the 1960s, the idea that seats in the House of Lords should be inherited had become rather unpopular and, after 1965, no new hereditary peerages have been awarded. Those who receive new hereditary peerages are called hereditary peers of the first creation. There are now 20 of these.

THE LIFE PEERS

Since 1958 several hundred people have been made life peers and given a seat in the House of Lords for their own lifetime. They cannot pass on their titles to their children. At the time of writing, in 1991, there are 402 life peers (including the Law Lords mentioned below). They are given their titles by the Queen, but she has no say in who should be selected for a peerage. The selection is made by the Prime Minister. Generally speaking, life peerages are offered to those nearing the end of a distinguished career, perhaps in politics, business or the law.

THE LAW LORDS

The House of Lords is still the highest court of appeal for all cases except Scottish criminal cases. Only 31 Lords play any part in this work at all. Nine of them are judges who have been given a special sort of life peerage to enable them to hear cases in the House of Lords. They are called Lords of Appeal in Ordinary. When a Lord of Appeal in Ordinary retires, he keeps his seat in the House. Although he may not want to hear appeals regularly, he can still hear some cases if he wishes.

Women in the House of Lords

Before 1958, there were no women in the House of Lords. If a woman inherited a title, she was not allowed to sit in the House. When the law to allow the creation of life peers was made in 1958, it did not discriminate against women and so, for the first time, women were allowed to take a seat in the Lords. Once women life peers had been admitted it seemed odd to keep out those who inherited titles and since 1963 hereditary women peers have been allowed to sit in the Lords. There are now 20 women peers by inheritance and 46 women life peers.

A Classwork

1. Before reading any of the articles make short notes about what you have heard about British democracy. British political parties. Government, buildings, famous politicians. etc on a piece of paper. Collect all the pieces of paper and stick them onto a board. Have a look at what the others have written.
2. Order all your ideas in class like this:
 - people/political groups
 - buildings and places
 - events
 - other points.
3. Read the introduction on 13 (What is Parliament?). Compare the names of the political groups on your list with those given in the box on 13. What is the equivalent of the House of Commons in your country? What differences are there?
4. Read the other articles (Membership of the House of Commons / The organisation of the parties within the House of Commons) in pairs and write down a short summary of each article. Try to explain in your own words (by speaking or writing): elections-constituency- first past the post.
5. Explain and discuss what pairing is. What do you think about it? Does pairing exist in your country?

B Reading comprehension

1. Read the text The Membership of the House of Lords . Give a summary in your own words.
2. Try to find out who has the right to be a member of the House of Lords
3. What are the differences between the House of Lords and the House of Commons?
4. What can you say about the position of women in the House of Lords?

C Discussion

A number of people think that the House of Lords is an antiquated institution and serves no real function at all. What is your opinion?

D Letter writing

Write to the address given on 13 asking for any further information you are interested in.

Words to help you along

| | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| absent | abwesend |
| advantage | Vorteil |
| appeal cases | Berufungsverhandlung |
| awarded | verliehen |
| bulk of | größter Teil von |
| by-election | Nachwahl |
| carry out | ausführen |
| consist of | bestehen aus |
| constituency | Wahlkreis |
| court of appeal | Berufungsgericht |
| descend | abstammen |
| elected | gewählt |
| elector/election | Wähler/in / Wahl |
| entitled to | berechtigt |
| exception | Ausnahme |
| grant | erlauben |
| inherit | erben |
| liken to | vergleichen mit |
| maintain | aufrechterhalten |
| medieval | mittelalterlich |
| (be) obliged (to) | verpflichtet sein zu |
| occasion | Anlaß |
| odd | seltsam |
| pack | Meute |
| previous | vorhergehend |
| provided that | vorausgesetzt, daß |
| regardless | ungeachtet |
| reinforce | untermauern |
| resign | zurücktreten |
| retire | in Pension gehen |
| summoned | berufen |
| vacant | frei, unbesetzt |
| vote | Wahlrecht, wählen |