

Britain's Political System

State form: Britain is a constitutional monarchy. There is, however, no written constitution.

Head of State: The monarch has no real political power, but she or he does have a lot of indirect influence. The sovereign acts on the advice of the prime minister when giving her or his royal assent to bills, dissolves parliament, appoints ministers or performs the duties of a head of state. The monarch is also head of the Church of England.

State structure: The United Kingdom is a unitary state, with some administrative devolution to Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland once had devolved powers, but is at present ruled directly from Westminster.

Form of government: Head of government is the prime minister (PM). She or he is normally the leader of the largest party in the House of Commons and is appointed by the sovereign. The PM then chooses a Cabinet of about 20 ministers for appointment by the monarch. The largest Opposition party is called the Official Opposition and forms a so called Shadow Cabinet, i.e. leading members of the Opposition who would probably be Cabinet ministers if their party became the government, and who act as spokespersons on matters for which they would then be responsible. The government resigns or calls a general election if defeated on important legislation or by a vote of no confidence.

Legislature: Britain has a bicameral system of legislature. The House of Commons, i.e. the lower

house of the British parliament, consists of 650 elected members of parliament (MPs): 523 for England, 72 for Scotland, 38 for Wales and 17 for Northern Ireland. The House of Lords (the upper house) consists of over 1,100 non-elected members. Legislation must be passed by both Houses and must be given royal assent. The House of Lords may delay legislation by a maximum of one year. According to constitutional theory the monarch, the House of Lords and the House of Commons form the British parliament. When the British talk about their parliament today they usually mean the House of Commons. This is because both the monarch and the House of Lords have lost a lot of their former powers over the centuries.

Electoral System: Members of the House of Commons are elected by a simple majority System of voting. In each of the 650 election areas (constituencies) the candidate with the most votes wins the seat in parliament (first-past-the-post system). With a few exceptions all men and women over 18 can vote. Elections must be held every five years, but can be held earlier if the government thinks it advantageous.

Party System: There are three main political parties with a nationwide basis - the Conservative Party, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. The Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties have regional support, as have a number of Northern Irish parties. There are also a number of parties (such as the Green Party) which have received significant support in elections but so far have failed to gain any parliamentary seats.

Federal and Unitary States

Democratic states can be differentiated according to the degree to which political power is centralised or diffused. Germany, Switzerland and the USA, for instance, have a diffused pattern of organisation and are called *federal* states, while Italy, France and the United Kingdom are *unitary* states with a more centralised form of organisation.

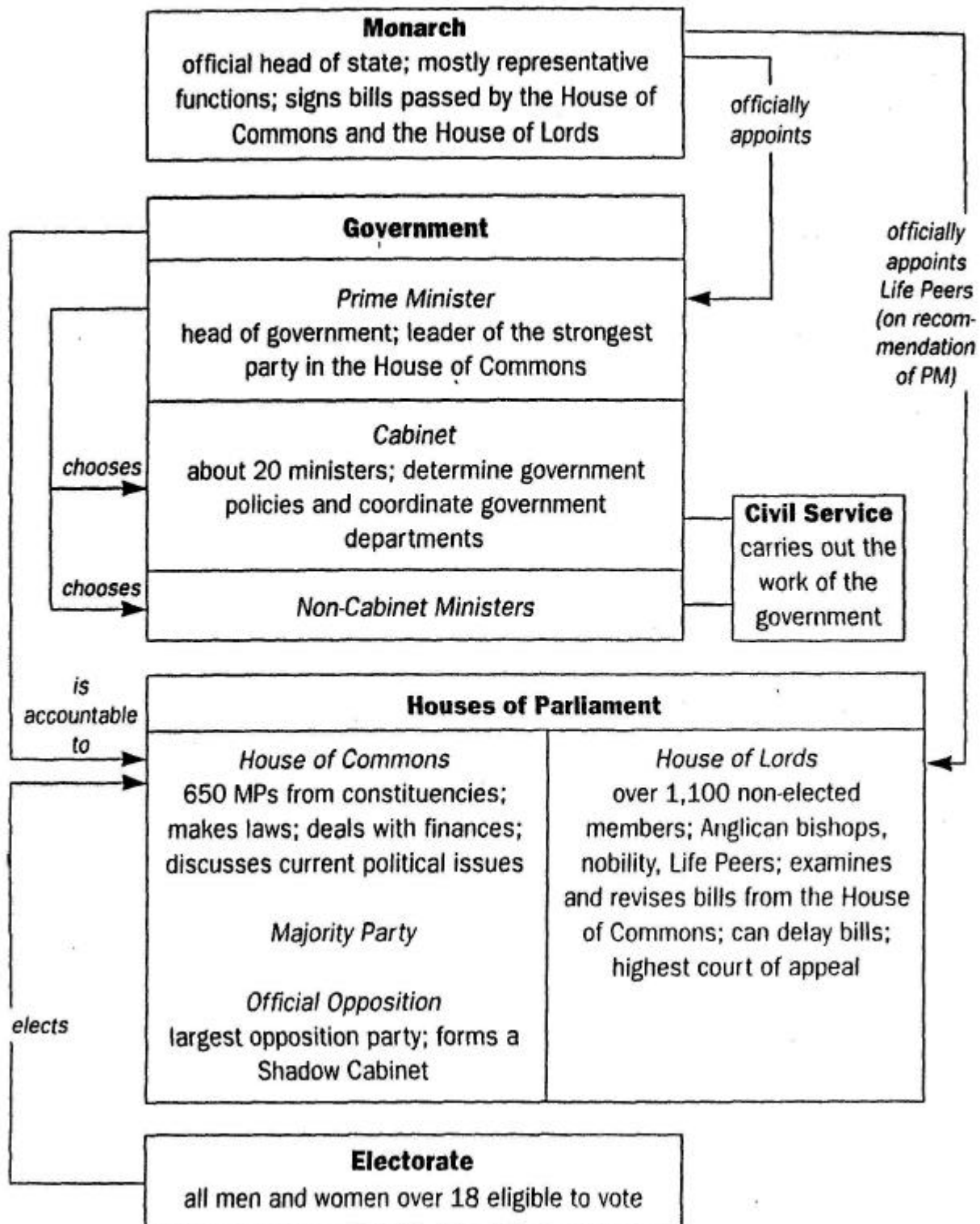
Federal states have two quite distinct levels of authority: the central, federal government and the various separate provincial governments. The powers of each level are laid down by a written constitution and some means is provided (such as a constitutional court) for settling conflicts over the competence to exercise authority. In unitary states, on the other hand, there is only one level of authority. Even if provincial, regional or local governments exist, they are always subordinated to the central government.

Federalism can cause problems which would not exist or at least would be easier to solve in a unitary System. Thus, it sometimes leads to apparently unnecessary and inefficient regional variation. But

on the other hand, because central power is delegated, local problems can be dealt with more quickly and there is a better chance of satisfying the needs of disparate regions.

It is actually surprising that the United Kingdom has not changed into a federal state. Considering the differences between the people of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the North and South of England, the case for a federal government seems to be just as strong as for countries like Germany or Austria. Yet there are several reasons why it is difficult for Britain to change its political System. Firstly, there is no written constitution to regulate federal relations, neither is there any separate legislative representation of the different regions, such as the German *Bundesrat* or the US Senate. Another difficulty is that the regions have no independent financial powers. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties there are increasing demands for a written constitution, as well as suggestions that the House of Lords should be changed into a chamber for regional representation.

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The Passage of a Bill through Parliament

Most bills are first introduced to the House of Commons. The following graph shows the stages a bill goes through before it finally becomes a law.

