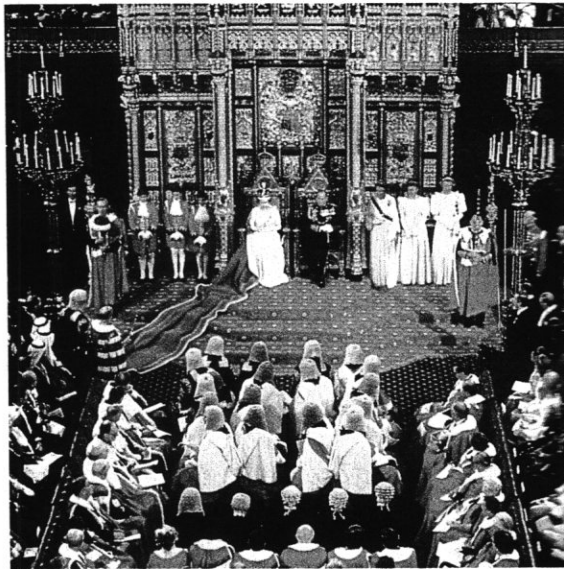


United Kingdom constitution and government

The Constitution of the United Kingdom developed over time and is not written down in one place. It consists of various elements, including **statutes** (laws made by Parliament), important court cases and established practices. The key principles of the constitution are the **rule of law** (everyone is subject to the laws of the land) and the **sovereignty of Parliament** (there are no restrictions on the laws that Parliament can pass).

The Monarch The process of transferring power from the monarch (the Queen or King) to the people began in the thirteenth century when King John was forced to restrict his power by signing the Magna Carta. Today, the monarch represents the people as **Head of State** but the real power lies in Parliament with the elected representatives of the people.

King John's seal



The Queen's speech

Parliament is made up of two chambers, the **House of Commons** and the **House of Lords**. Each autumn the monarch goes to **Westminster** for the **State Opening of Parliament** and reads out a speech which sets out the Government's plans for the year ahead.

The Houses of Parliament



Government front bench

Speaker

Opposition front bench



The House of Commons

The House of Commons has 650 **Members of Parliament (MPs)** who each represent a particular part of the country, a **constituency**. **General Elections** are held every five years, though the Prime Minister may **call** one earlier, and if an MP dies or retires a **by-election** is held in her or his constituency. MPs win their **seats** in parliament by a **majority vote** (or **first-past-the-post** system), that is, the **candidate** who wins the most votes becomes the MP for that constituency.

After a general election, the leader of the party which has the most seats in the House of Commons becomes **Prime Minister** and chooses ministers to be responsible for individual departments. These include the **Chancellor of the Exchequer**, who is responsible for the **Treasury** (finance ministry), the **Foreign Secretary**, responsible for the **Foreign and Commonwealth Office**, and the **Home Secretary**, responsible for domestic affairs. They, and a number of other important ministers, form the **Cabinet**, which advises the Prime Minister. In the **House of Commons** they sit on the **front bench**, and other MPs from their party sit behind them (**back-benchers**). The main



back-benchers

The Prime Minister, John Major, and his wife

Opposition party sits in a similar arrangement facing them in the House, with their Leader and her or his **Shadow Cabinet** on the front benches. MPs from smaller parties also sit on the opposition benches. In the centre is the **Speaker**, who keeps order during debates.

The House of Lords has around 1200 members, made up of the two Archbishops and twenty-four bishops, **hereditary peers and peeresses**, who have inherited their title, and **life peers**, whose title is only for their lifetime and will not pass to their children.

A. S. Hornby, 1995: "Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary", fifth ed., Oxford, OUP.