

Reading Text no. 1a, a.y. 2024/2025

D2

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



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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



The Prime Minister, John Major, and his wife

back-benchers

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 1 200 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.

[source: Hornby A.S., 1995:
*The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary
of Current English*, OUP]

Key-words and expressions:

Parliamentary sovereignty

The principle in the UK that the Westminster Parliament claims to hold legal sovereignty and no other body can claim such sovereignty.

Unitary constitution

A constitution which establishes that legal sovereignty resides in one location.

Federal constitution

A constitution where legal sovereignty is divided between the central government and regional governments.

Rule of law The principle that all citizens are equal under the law and that the government itself is subject to the same laws as the citizens. Government is not above the law.

Codified constitution A constitution which is set out in a single document and has a single source.

Entrenched constitution

An entrenched constitution has special arrangements to safeguard it from being amended by a temporary government or legislature.

Uncodified constitution

A constitution which is not contained in a single document and has a number of different sources.

Unentrenched constitution

An unentrenched constitution can be amended by an individual government or Parliament.



6 Parliament

The structure of the House of Commons

The House of Commons is known as the 'lower house' and is the elected half of **Parliament**. The structure of the House of Commons is as follows:

- **650 Members of Parliament** (soon to be reduced, probably to 600) elected from constituencies throughout the UK.
- **Candidates** for such elections are selected by committees drawn from local constituency parties.
- **Frontbench MPs** — government ministers, senior and junior, plus leading spokespersons from opposition parties (about 150).
- **Backbench MPs** — all those MPs who are not frontbenchers (about 500).
- **Select committees** — permanent committees of backbench MPs, elected by all the MPs. They have various roles, including calling government to account. Select committees have mostly between 11 and 15 members each.
- **Legislative committees** (also called bill committees) — temporary committees which scrutinise proposed legislation and propose amendments to improve the legislation. They mostly have 20–40 members.
- **Party whips** — senior MPs whose role is to keep party discipline, inform MPs about parliamentary business and occasionally discipline dissident MPs.
- **The Speaker** — he or she is elected by MPs, is neutral and keeps order in the house as well as ruling on various disputes that arise over the order and nature of business running through the House.



Government department

The business of government is divided into up to 20 departments. These manage policy and its implementation in the key areas of government responsibility such as the Treasury, education and foreign affairs.

The structure of the executive

The structure of the UK executive has the following elements:

- The prime minister and her or his close advisers.
- The cabinet: 20–25 senior ministers appointed by the prime minister.
- Various bodies that feed information and advice into the cabinet and to the prime minister.
- Government departments: of these, the Treasury holds a place of special importance as it controls government finances. Many heads of these departments are members of the cabinet. Others may not be in cabinet but are nonetheless influential.
- The senior civil servants who serve government ministers: of these, the cabinet secretary is the most senior. He or she serves both the prime minister personally and the cabinet collectively.
- Various advisers and policy-developing bodies (often called **think tanks**) that serve government departments.
- There may also be a few very senior officials of the governing party who hold no official post but who are intimately involved in policy development.

[source: Neil McNaughton,
Politics. UK Government and Politics,
London: Hodder Education, 2017]