

Modern political institutions in the United Kingdom

Power in the United Kingdom is not constitutionally structured into three separate branches as in the United States, for example. The interactions between the powers are numerous, such as those between Parliament and the Executive. The presence of the monarch, however symbolic and limited, also still pervades the institutions. Recent constitutional reforms, however, have emphasized the need to establish a clearer division between the judicial and the legislative power, especially by creating a Supreme Court of the United Kingdom and by reviewing the functions of the Lord Chancellor.

The British monarchy

The British monarch or sovereign is the Head of State of the United Kingdom and British territories and some Commonwealth countries. Known as royal prerogatives, the power of the monarchy are essentially symbolic and are not usually exercised by the monarch but by ministers acting on his or her behalf. Some major powers, like the power to dissolve Parliament, are exercised personally by the monarch, albeit on the advice of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, according to the constitutional convention.

Political power is exercised by the Parliament of the United Kingdom, of which the sovereign is a non-partisan component, and by the Prime Minister and Cabinet. In the modern British constitutional monarchy, the sovereign's role is limited in practice to ceremonial functions.

Functions of the monarchy

The present sovereign is Queen Elizabeth II, who has reigned since 1952. The sovereign has to remain politically impartial and it is his or her duty to ask the leader of the majority party in the House of Commons to become Prime Minister and to form a government. The monarch delivers a speech known as the King's or Queen's Speech and he or she summons Parliament for each new session and prorogues it at the end of a session. Another aspect of the monarch's legislative role is the Royal Assent whereby a bill becomes an Act of Parliament. It is given at the end of the law-making process. As Head of State, the monarch symbolises the sovereignty of the State. He or she is Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and grants civilian and military honours on the advice of the Prime Minister. The Sovereign is also the Supreme Governor of the established Church of England, but in practice, the spiritual leadership in the Church is the responsibility of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The sovereign's official expenditure is controlled by Parliament through the Civil list, which establishes a budget.

The executive branch

The Government performs the executive functions of the United Kingdom and defines the policies that determine how the country is run. The Prime Minister establishes the number and the nature of governments and selects the Ministers from among Members of the House of Commons and House of Lords pursuant to constitutional convention.

The Cabinet

The key decision-making body in government is the Cabinet. The Prime Minister exercises his or her power of patronage to appoint and dismiss members of the Cabinet, although each new appointment requires the monarch's formal approval. The Cabinet relies on the work of various specialised committees to efficiently handle the current political issues. The Cabinet have collective responsibility to Parliament. The Opposition organises its highest-ranking members into a Shadow Cabinet.

Government departments

A Secretary of State heads ministerial departments. The Civil Service constitutes a major part of the Government. Government departments are supplemented by various executive agencies to which specific tasks are delegated, such as Her Majesty's Court Service.

Parliament

The Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is one of the oldest representative assemblies in the world. It is the supreme legislative institution in the UK. It is bicameral legislature, which includes an upper house, called the House of Lords, and a lower house, called the House of Commons. Members of the House of Lords are at present not elected by universal suffrage whereas Members of the House of Commons are democratically elected. The supremacy of the House of Commons was clearly established during the 20th century through various Acts of Parliament, which deprived the upper house of much of its power.

Composition

The British sovereign plays an essentially ceremonial role at the head of Parliament. The Lords Spiritual are clergymen of the Church of England and the Lords Temporal are Peers of the Realm. In the past, the Lords Spiritual included all of the senior clergymen of the Church of England. The Lords Spiritual and Temporal sit, debate, and vote together. The House of Commons consist of 646 members. Each MP represents a single constituency. MPs are elected according to the First-Past-The-Post electoral system. Universal adult suffrage exists for all citizens aged 18 and over.

Speakers

Each of the two Houses of Parliament is presided over by a Speaker. The Lord Chancellor was formerly the ex officio Speaker in the House of Lords in addition to being the judiciary in England and Wales and a Cabinet minister. The House of Commons elects its own Speaker whose powers are far broader than those of the Lord Speaker.

Legislative functions:

Laws are generally introduced by a Minister of the Crown in draft form known as bills. Most bills involving the general public are called "Public Bills". A bill aiming at granting special rights to an individual or small group of individuals is called a "Private Bill". "Hybrid Bills" are Private Bills, which deal with larger issues. Bill go through several stages in both Houses. The first stage, or first reading, is a formality. During the second reading, the general principles of the bill are debated and the House at that stage may vote to reject the bill. After the second reading, the bill is sent to a committee. The third reading follows the committee stage. The power of the House of Lords to reject bills passed by the House of Commons has been restricted by Parliament Acts 1911 and 1949, the Salisbury convention, ... The last stage of a bill involves the granting of the Royal Assent.

Relationship with the Government

Governments can exercise a tremendous influence on Parliament by using their inbuilt majority in the House of Commons, and by appointing supportive life peers in the Lords. Parliament controls the Executive. It passes or rejects its bills and obliges Ministers of the Crown to answer for their actions, at Question Time or during meetings of the parliamentary committees. Important bills that form part of the Government's agenda and are stated in the Speech from the Throne are generally considered matters of confidence. If such a bill is defeated in the House of Commons, the Government has lost the confidence of that House and the Prime Minister has either to resign or ask for the dissolution of Parliament. A new general election is then held but the Sovereign can theoretically reject the dissolution, forcing the PM's resignation and allowing the Leader of the Opposition to be asked to form a new government.

Sovereignty

Parliament's power has often been undermined by its own Acts. Its sovereignty has been restricted by the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. European law is enforceable in each member of state. Parliament has also created national devolved assemblies, which have legislative authority in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Privileges

Each House of Parliament preserves various ancient privileges. The most notable is that of freedom of speech in debate. Freedom from arrest except in case of high treason, felony or breach of the peace constitutes another privilege.

Devolution

The United Kingdom is said to have a unitary state with a devolved system of government. This contrast with a federal system, in which sub-parliaments or state legislature have a clearly defined constitutional right to exist, to exercise certain constitutionally defined functions, and cannot be unilaterally abolished by acts of a central parliament.

In addition to the House of Commons, Scotland now has its own unicameral parliament established by the Scotland Act 1998. Some members of the devolved bodies are elected by a form of proportional representation. The new devolved parliament and assemblies have limited powers, substantially fewer than those of UK Parliament. It is to note that as devolved system of government, they have no constitutional right to exist and can have their powers broadened, narrowed or changed by an Act of the UK Parliament. The present policy of the government is to increase national and regional devolution.

Local Government

The UK is divided into a variety of different types of local authorities. Local authorities are responsible for such matters as administering education, public transport and managing public spaces. They are often engaged in community politics. There are two common systems of local government in the UK: the old-style two-tier and the newer single-tier system.

The politics of the United Kingdom

Electoral system

The UK is divided into 646 parliamentary constituencies, each of which elects a Member of Parliament to the House of Commons. Since 1964, all Prime Minister and leaders of the Opposition have been drawn from the Commons, not the Lords. The system used for general elections and local government elections in England and Wales is a relative majority system called First-Past-The-Post. No Government has won an absolute majority of the popular vote since the National government of Stanley Baldwin in 1935. Other systems are also in use for different types of ballots.

Low turnout has become a major concern, as the percentage of the electorate who votes in the 2005 general election was only 61%.

Political parties in the UK

1. Small parties and independents

The Green Party and the United Kingdom Independence Party have no seats in Parliament but are represented in the European Parliament. Yet, some regionally-based parties, advocating independence for their country or region, are represented in Parliament. There are a few independent politicians with no party allegiance in Parliament.

2. The Liberal Democratic Party

The Liberal Party was founded in 1859, although liberal political thought in England goes back further. In 1981, the Social Democratic Party was formed to “get away from the politics of out-dated dogmatism and class confrontation”. After alliances with the Liberal Party failed yield satisfactory results, the two parties merged. In recent times, the Liberal Democrats have given gained momentum and in the 2005 General Election the “Lib Dems” obtained 62 seats in the Commons.

3. The Conservative Party

It is the oldest party in the world and dates back to the Tory Party of the 18th and 19th centuries. It dominated the political scene during the World War I with Winston Churchill as Prime Minister. With M. Thatcher in 1983 and 1987 as leader, the Party adopted a free market policy, embarked on a vigorous privatisation of the public sector. J. Major replaced Mrs Thatcher in 1992 but his government was defeated and Howard succeeded him. In 2005, Cameron replaces M. Howard. As a general rule, Conservative Party policies support reduced government intervention, particularly in the economic domain. Tories are generally known to be “euroseptics”; they do not defend devolution and defend traditional family and restrictions on immigration.

4. The labour party

It is the main left-wing party in the UK since the beginning of the 20th century. Labour formed its first government in 1924 with R. MacDonald as Prime Minister. Labour on the 1997, 2001 and 2005 elections with Tony Blair as party leader. Its promises to restrict spending plans, especially on the Health service and education.