

# Parliament

The Political System of the United Kingdom

## Intro

### The Modern House of Commons

History/Change

Members

Legislation

Control, Opposition, Dissent

### The House of Lords

## Conclusion



# Current Events

## Current Events

- ▶ ?
- ▶ Referendum: Action by the Lords & Franchise
- ▶ State Opening and Queen's Speech

# Today: Parliament

- ▶ Constitution, electoral systems → Parliament
- ▶ “The Mother of Parliaments”
- ▶ A core institution

# Parliaments: What do they do?

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2. Selecting/**supporting** members of government
3. **Controlling government**
4. Represent the people and **articulate their views**

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1. **Legislation**
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  4. Represent the people and **articulate their views**
- ▶ “**Working**” vs. “**talking**” parliaments



## The “Golden Age” – 1830s

- ▶ 1832 Reform Act brings (relative) power, accountability and transparency
- ▶ Parliament still an assembly of (relatively) independent individuals
- ▶ Parliament (i. e. House of Commons) makes and breaks governments
- ▶ Often a normative point of reference, but could parliament work like this today?

## Parliament: The broad-brush picture

1. After civil war, parliament became independent vis-a-vis the crown
2. Rise of the House of Commons
  - ▶ Commons dominant from the late 1600s, Lords cannot amend finance bills
  - ▶ Government needs support of majority in Commons since the 19th century
  - ▶ Government accountable, vote of no-confidence → *more* power for governments

# The Changing Role of MPs

- ▶ Disciplined party voting from the late 19th century on
- ▶ Two-party system / one-party governments after 1945
- ▶ Interventionist government and the EU

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- ▶ Very close link between majority in parliament/government
- ▶ Executive dominance

## Professionalisation



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## Professionalisation

- ▶ Members still not representative in socio-demographic terms (women, minorities, workers)
- ▶ Working hours still not family friendly: “2.30-10.30pm on Mondays, 11.30am-7.30pm on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 9.30am-5.30pm on Thursdays; and 9.30am-3pm on sitting Fridays”
- ▶ Payment introduced in 1911, still not attractive for some Conservatives
- ▶ Parliament still like a (white, male) club

# Professionalisation



## Individual MPs

- ▶ (Video clip)
- ▶ Frontbenchers vs. backbenchers, whips
- ▶ Modern media make it easier for some MPs to develop a profile of their own
- ▶ Parliament as a pool for recruitment (cabinet vs. junior ministers)



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# The Cook Reforms

- ▶ Working hours
- ▶ More (not all!) bills published as drafts by government
- ▶ Government bills carry over to next session
- ▶ Opportunities for specialisation

## Bills vs. Acts

- ▶ Bill: draft legislation
  - ▶ Public Bills: public policy (vast majority)
  - ▶ Private Bills: change law with respect to specific organisations or individuals
- ▶ *Private Member bills*: bills *not* introduced by the government ministers
- ▶ (Early Day Motions (EDM) *may* lead to a declaration)
- ▶ Acts of parliament = law (bills accepted by both houses, with the assent of the monarch)
- ▶ Dominance of the House of Commons

## Committees

- ▶ Vast majority of bills drafted by government
- ▶ Government controls the whole process of legislation
- ▶ Three readings in parliament plus committee stage
- ▶ Committees reflect strength of parties in parliament
  - ▶ Standing committees deal with specific bill, closely managed by government party
  - ▶ Select committees deal with specific departments, issues. PMs usually refuse to appear
  - ▶ Public Accounts Committee

## Control of the executive?

- ▶ Fusion of executive and legislature
- ▶ Procedures in parliament tightly controlled by majority = government (since late 19th century)
- ▶ Usually accepted by opposition
- ▶ Prime Minister's Questions largely a (silly and rowdy) ritual

## PM Questions . . .

- ▶ Look on youtube for more (Parliament TV)

## Role of the Opposition

- ▶ Permanent conflict between government and “Leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition” plus shadow cabinet – a show
- ▶ Relatively comfortable position of the opposition; fragmentation
- ▶ In many fields, co-operation between opposition and government (“bipartisan mode”)
- ▶ Intra-party conflicts, dialogue between PM, ministers, backbenchers
- ▶ Every now and then, backbench and cabinet rebellions

## Recent developments

- ▶ Expenses scandal: Public anger and 149 casualties, including Speaker Michael Martin in 2009
- ▶ Public Bill Committees (from 2006) aim at strengthening oversight & bring in expert knowledge
- ▶ Liaison Committee (from 2002) aims at scrutinising government policy – twice per year
- ▶ House of Lords reform – no

# The Role of the Lords

- ▶ For most of its life, almost equal powers
- ▶ Until 1902, PMs could sit in the Lords
- ▶ Latent conflict → Parliament Act of 1911
  - ▶ “Money bills” become law with or without the Lords’ assent
  - ▶ Lords can only delay legislation (further reduced in 1949)



## Composition of the Lords

- ▶ Traditionally conservative but many cross-benchers, Law Lords and Bishops
- ▶ Blair created over 250 life peers and reduced the number of hereditary peers to 10%
- ▶ Much more minority persons, new members from various backgrounds and professions
- ▶ (Now roughly as many Labour as Conservative peers)
- ▶ Still a recruitment pool for the government (Mandelson)

# Conclusion

- ▶ Parliament an old and proud institution
- ▶ One of the first democratic parliaments in the world
- ▶ Cradle of parliamentary government
- ▶ But dominated by executive
- ▶ Role/future of the Lords?

## Class questions

- ▶ How do the powers, procedures, and the role of parliament compare to the situation in
  - ▶ The US
  - ▶ Germany?
- ▶ What effect, if any, would Lords reform have on the political system?