



Parliament Explained 3

# Parliament & Government

Parliament is responsible for making the Government accountable for its actions.



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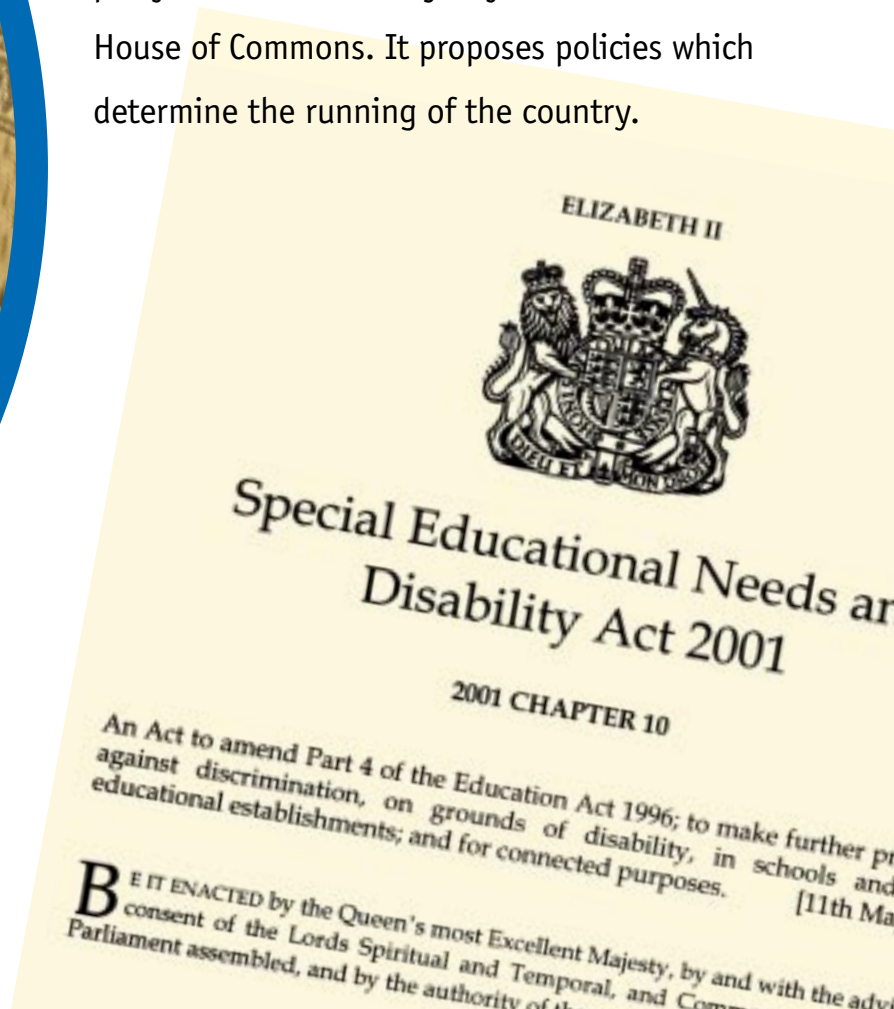
# Parliament & Government

## Introduction

The Parliament of the United Kingdom consists of:

- The Queen (our hereditary monarch)
- The House of Lords (approximately 700 unelected members known as peers)
- The House of Commons (659 elected Members of Parliament)

All three combine to carry out the work of Parliament. The Government consists of approximately 100 members of the political party which has the majority of seats in the House of Commons. It proposes policies which determine the running of the country.



## Parliament

### What do we mean by Parliament?

Parliament is the highest legislative authority in the UK – the institution responsible for making and repealing all UK law. Often it is assumed that the term Parliament refers solely to the House of Commons, when in fact the authority of Parliament is made up of three constituent parts – the Queen and the Lords as well as the elected Commons. It is true that much of the practical authority of Parliament lies with the House of Commons, as the elected representatives of the people of the UK, but the House of Lords (although unelected) also carries out valuable work on our behalf (for further information on the House of Lords see Parliament Explained booklet No 6).



Crown, Lords and Commons, as shown on the Eton Charter of 1446.

*By permission of the Provost and Fellows of Eton College.*

## The Work of Parliament

### How does Parliament spend its time?

#### *Making laws (legislation)*

The Queen, Lords and Commons all have to agree to any new law which is passed (for details of how laws are made see Parliament Explained booklet No 4).

#### *Examining the work of Government*

Both the Lords and the Commons examine the work of the Government on behalf of the public. They do this by asking the Government questions, by debate and through committees of inquiry known as Select Committees. Parliament, therefore, challenges the Government and makes it explain its policies.

#### *Controlling finance*

Only the House of Commons can give permission for the Government to collect taxes. The House of Commons decides what taxes shall be collected and also how the money shall be spent. As Members of Parliament, the people's representatives, it is only right that they should give their consent before the people have to pay taxes.

A typical act as debated in both Houses.



### *Protecting the individual*

Parliament safeguards the interests of the public as a whole by examining the work of the Government. Members of Parliament (Members of the House of Commons) also protect the rights of the individual. Each Member of Parliament represents the people of a certain area. The United Kingdom is divided into 659 of these areas, known as constituencies. Anyone who feels he or she has been unfairly treated by central government can complain to his or her local MP, who will do his or her best to investigate the problem and find a solution.

### *Examining European proposals*

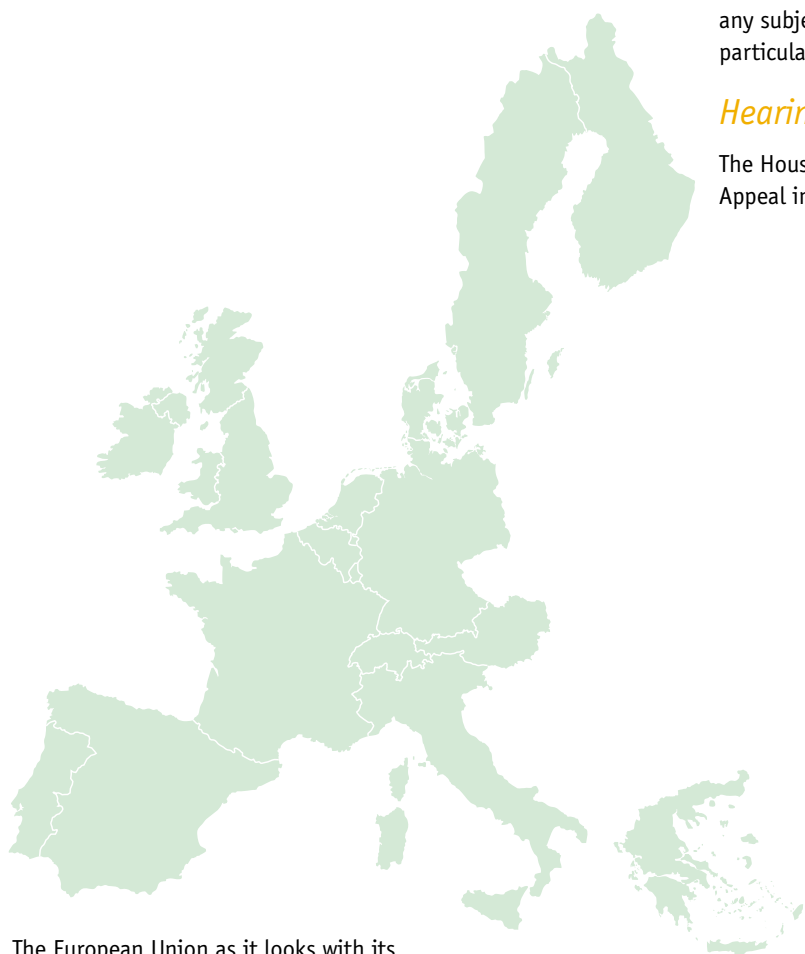
When Britain joined the EEC (European Economic Community or European Union as it is now known), it was agreed that Britain should obey EU laws. Both Houses of Parliament have committees which examine European proposals before they become law. The likely effects of European laws upon Britain are, therefore, known before they are passed. These special committees find out in advance what adjustments will be needed. The UK sometimes has to alter its laws to bring them into line with new European laws. Parliament is then able to prepare for the necessary changes.

### *Debating current affairs*

Both Houses of Parliament hold general debates on matters of national and international importance. These debates can be on any subject, for example education, trade, or our relations with a particular foreign country.

### *Hearing appeals*

The House of Lords is also a Court of Justice, the highest Court of Appeal in Britain (see Parliament Explained booklet No 6).



The European Union as it looks with its current membership, in early 2002.

2001	Tony Blair	LAB	○
1997	Tony Blair	LAB	○
1992	John Major	CON	○
1987	Margaret Thatcher	CON	○
1983	Margaret Thatcher	CON	○
1979	Margaret Thatcher	CON	○
1974	James Callaghan	LAB	○
1974	Harold Wilson	LAB	○
1970	Edward Heath	CON	○
1966	Harold Wilson	LAB	○
1964	Sir Alec Douglas-Home	CON	○
1959	Harold Macmillan	CON	○
1955	Sir Anthony Eden	CON	○
1951	Sir Winston Churchill	CON	○
1950	Clement Atlee	LAB	○
1945	Winston Churchill	CON	○
1940	Winston Churchill	COA	○
1937	Neville Chamberlain	COA	○
1935	Stanley Baldwin	COA	○
1931	J.Ramsey MacDonald	COA	○
1929	J.Ramsey MacDonald	LAB	○
1924	Stanley Baldwin	CON	○
1924	J.Ramsey MacDonald	LAB	○
1923	Stanley Baldwin	CON	○
1922	A. Bonar Law	CON	○
1918	D. Lloyd-George	COA	○
1910	H.H. Asquith	COA	○
1910	H.H. Asquith	LIB	○
1910	Sir H. Campbell-Bannerman	LIB	○
1906	A.J. Balfour	CON	○
1900	Marquess of Salisbury	CON	○



# The Government

## What is the Government?

The Government is like the management of the country. It makes the important decisions, e.g. about foreign policy, education, or health, but many of these decisions have to be approved by Parliament. The Government can however decide to go to war without consulting Parliament as this is done on behalf of the Queen. If Parliament thinks that a particular Government policy is against the public interest, then it can force the Government to change its mind. A proposal might then be altered, or perhaps withdrawn altogether. In April 1986, for example, the House of Commons voted against the Government's Shops Bill. A majority in the House at that time opposed the Government's plans for Sunday trading.

So what exactly is the Government and how is it different from Parliament? Over 1,000 people are entitled to sit in the two Houses of Parliament, but only about 100 of these belong to the Government. Members of the Government are usually members of either the House of Commons or the House of Lords, to enable Parliament to keep a check on their work by asking questions, debating, etc.



## What is the Cabinet?

The most senior members of the Government are known as the Cabinet.

## Who chooses the Cabinet?

Members of the Cabinet are chosen by the Prime Minister. As in other modern Cabinets, the majority of the members of Tony Blair's Cabinet are drawn from the House of Commons. Nevertheless there are always a few members from the House of Lords. At the start of 2002 there were two Lords in Tony Blair's Cabinet. All the members of Tony Blair's Cabinet belong to the Labour Party. The Labour Party gained the right to form a Government by winning the general election in May 1997 and again in June 2001. Tony Blair, the leader of the Labour Party, became Prime Minister. He then selected a team of ministers to serve in his Government. Previously, the Conservative Party had formed the Government because it won the general elections of 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992. Margaret Thatcher made many changes to her Government team during her time as Prime Minister. John Major succeeded Margaret Thatcher as leader of the Conservative Party and as Prime Minister in November 1990. One of his first tasks was to reorganise the Cabinet and he made several changes during his time in Government. His first Cabinet to be selected after the Conservative Party's fourth consecutive general election victory in April 1992 included, for the first time since 1979, two women MPs as Cabinet ministers. (Tony Blair's first Cabinet included five women Members, and that in early 2002 includes seven).

Since the Second World War, all Governments have been formed either by the Labour Party or the Conservative Party. Members of the same party are more likely to agree on a programme of policies. Having won the election, they will also have the support of the majority of MPs in the House of Commons. This will enable them to put their policies into practice.

## Which positions are included in the Cabinet?

The Prime Minister decides which positions will be included in his or her Cabinet. Heads of Government Departments will usually all be Cabinet ministers as well as senior figures such as the Lord Chancellor. A Cabinet must be large enough to include senior ministers whilst small enough to allow for constructive discussion. There is no limit on the size of the Cabinet but the number of salaried Secretaries of State is limited to 21 by the 1975 Ministerial and Other Salaries Act. The Cabinet chosen by Tony Blair in June 2001 consisted of:

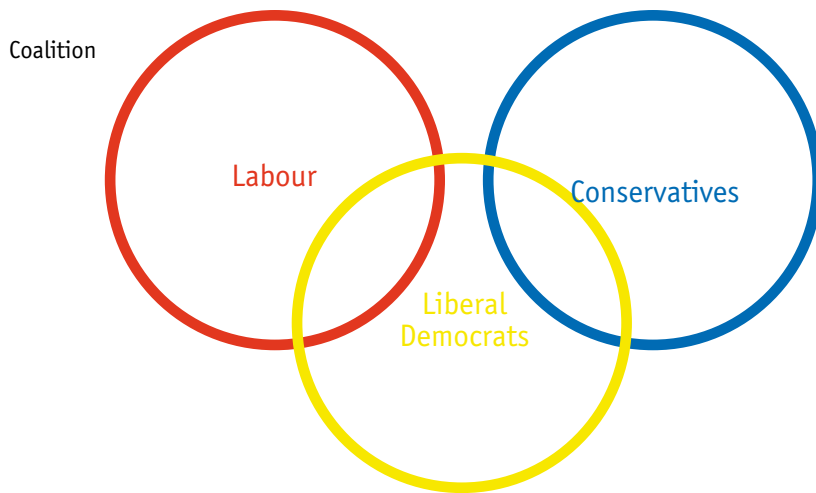
## When and where does the Cabinet meet?

Cabinet meetings are usually held on a Thursday morning in the Cabinet room at 10 Downing Street. The Prime Minister can summon the Cabinet to meet at any time and meetings will be more frequent when the political situation requires.

The front door of 10 Downing Street, the residence of the Prime Minister. The Chancellor of the Exchequer resides at 11 Downing Street.



<b>Prime Minister, First Lord of The Treasury and Minister for The Civil Service</b>	<b>Secretary of State for Health</b>
<b>Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State</b>	<b>Secretary of State for Northern Ireland</b>
<b>Chancellor of The Exchequer</b>	<b>Secretary of State for Wales</b>
<b>President of The Council and Leader of The House of Commons</b>	<b>Secretary of State for Defence</b>
<b>Lord Chancellor</b>	<b>Chief Secretary to The Treasury</b>
<b>Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs</b>	<b>Secretary of State for Scotland</b>
<b>Secretary of State for The Home Department</b>	<b>Lord Privy Seal and Leader of The House of Lords</b>
<b>Secretary of State for The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs</b>	<b>Secretary of State for Trade and Industry</b>
<b>Secretary of State for International Development</b>	<b>Secretary of State for Education and Skills</b>
<b>Secretary of State for Work and Pensions</b>	<b>Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport</b>
<b>Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and The Regions</b>	<b>Parliamentary Secretary to The Treasury (Chief Whip)</b>
	<b>Minister Without Portfolio and Party Chair</b>



## Can Governments include members of more than one party?

Before 1945 there were several Governments whose members were drawn from a variety of different parties. This is known as coalition government. Coalitions have, in the past, usually been formed in times of national crisis, for example during war time, in periods of economic difficulty or if no party has a majority. Party differences were laid aside while the crisis lasted and the parties agreed on a programme which could be supported by as many MPs as possible.

## What are Government Departments?

Most of the ministers of the Cabinet are heads of Government Departments. Governing in the 21st century is a very complicated business. The work of Government is, therefore, divided among Departments which each specialise in a particular subject, e.g. defence, education, trade and industry. The number and responsibilities of Government Departments can be changed by the Prime Minister according to the needs of the country. The Department of National Heritage was created by John Major after his election in April 1992 and in July 1997 was re-named the Department of Culture, Media and Sport by Tony Blair when he became Prime Minister following the May 1997 election. Following the general election in June 2001 the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, made a number of changes to Government Departments including disbanding the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and setting up the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

(environmental matters had previously been dealt with by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions). The Department for Education and Employment was re-named the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Social Security became the Department for Work and Pensions.

The minister in charge of a Department is usually of Cabinet rank. He or she may have been chosen for his or her special interest in, or knowledge of, the subjects handled by the Department and will make all the important decisions affecting the Department. He or she is usually assisted by one or more junior ministers who are not in the Cabinet. These non-Cabinet ministers have a variety of titles. Some of the more senior are known as Ministers of State, others are called Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State or Parliamentary Secretaries. The majority of members of the Government belong to the House of Commons, but major Departments often have at least one minister who is a Lord. He or she will then be able to answer any Questions which are asked and speak on behalf of his or her Department in the House of Lords. Within each Department, the ministers each specialise in different aspects of the Department's work. The five ministers in the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs share out their work as follows:



HM Treasury, one of the Government Departments situated in Whitehall.

### Foot and Mouth

**Mr. Henry Bellingham** (North-West Norfolk): When she next plans to meet representatives of the National Farmers Union to discuss the foot and mouth outbreak; and if she will make a statement

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** (Margaret Beckett): I met the president of the National Farmers Union to discuss the foot and mouth outbreak on 30 October. Members of my ministerial team and departmental officials keep the NFU fully informed of developments at regular Stakeholder meetings which cover a wide range of foot and mouth disease related issues.

### Landfill Sites

**Judy Mallaber** (Amber Valley): What her policy is on the siting of landfill sites.

**The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher)**: Any new landfill site must comply with the location requirements of the EC landfill directive. It must also be in accordance with the development plan for the area unless material considerations indicate otherwise

### Bee Diseases

**Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): If she will make a statement about measures to prevent the spread of bee diseases

**The Minister for Rural Affairs (Alun Michael)**: The Department takes very seriously the threat to honeybees from pests diseases and funds a range of measures to protect bee health, costing around £1.3 million annually. Under those measures, the National Bee Unit, part of the Central Science Laboratory, provides a free diagnostic and inspection service to the beekeeping sector as well as training and education to help beekeepers become more self-reliant through improved bee husbandry.

### Flooding (Cambridgeshire)

**Mr. Andrew Lansley** (South Cambridgeshire): If she will meet with the chairman of the Environment Agency to discuss recent flooding in Cambridgeshire; and if she will make a statement.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** (Mr. Elliot Morley): I express the Government's sympathy for all those affected by the recent flooding in Cambridgeshire and elsewhere. I have received a report from the Environment Agency on the flooding\* which followed exceptional rainfall in that area. The agency is undertaking follow up investigations into the sources of the flooding. If those reveal additional flood defence needs, I will consider them with the agency's chairman, with whom I have regular meetings.

## Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

### 1. Secretary of State

*(Cabinet Minister, Head of Department, sits in the House of Commons)*

Has overall responsibility for the work of the Department.

Normally represents the UK at the European Union Agricultural Council.

### 2. Ministers of State

*(Non-Cabinet Ministers, sit in the House of Commons)*

#### • Minister for the Environment

Responsibilities include sustainable development, climate change, environmental protection and water issues, wildlife and conservation and energy efficiency.

#### • Minister for Rural Affairs

Responsibilities include rural affairs and countryside issues, hunting, regional issues, national parks and the England Rural Development Plan.

### 3. Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State

*(Junior Ministers)*

#### • Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Commons)

Responsibilities include animal health and welfare, fisheries, forestry, floods and coastal defence.

#### • Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Lords)

Answers questions and speaks on all aspects of the Departments' work in the House of Lords.

Responsibilities include food and farming, departmental science, Rural Payments Agency, inland waterways and euro preparation.

The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has three non-Cabinet ministers in the House of Commons, together with the Secretary of State, will all answer Questions on their areas of responsibility during the Departments' Question Time which will take place once every four weeks. The Junior Minister in the Lords will take responsibility for all of his Departments' issues whenever they arrive in the House of Lords.

## What happens when there is a change in Government?

During the last 31 years there have been nine general elections. Four of these resulted in a change of Government:

**1970**

*Conservatives took over from Labour*

**1974 (February)**

*Labour took over from Conservatives*

**1979**

*Conservatives took over from Labour*

**1997**

*Labour took over from Conservatives*

On each of these occasions the ministers in each Department changed. Ministers of the winning party took over from those of the losing party. The two main parties often have very different ideas – for example, about education, housing and industry.

## How do Departments function when Governments change?

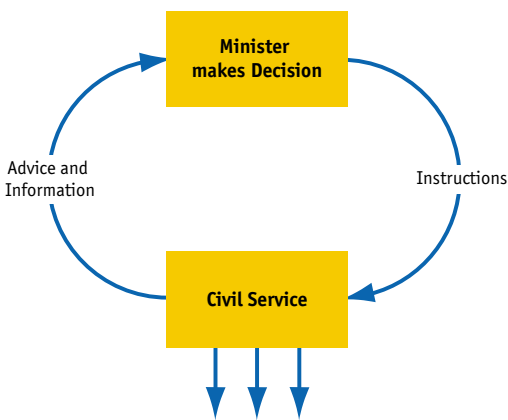
In order to maintain continuity within the Departments, each Department is staffed by permanent officials, known as civil servants. Civil servants are politically neutral and serve each Government, regardless of which party is in power. Some ministers stay in a post for only a short time before moving elsewhere. Civil servants, on the other hand, may spend many years in one Department, and they therefore have the time to become experts in the work of their Department. In fact, they may know far more about it than the Minister does, although they will look to him or her for political direction.



## How do civil servants help Ministers?

Ministers have to rely on civil servants for advice and information. When, for example, a minister is required to answer Questions in the House on the work of his or her Department, he or she will rely heavily on the information supplied by the Department's civil servants.

The extracts on page 7 from Question Time in the House of Commons on 15th November 2001 show the type of Questions which might be directed at the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and his/her junior ministers, and the sort of answer which they would supply.



Obviously no member of the Government can be expected to carry around this kind of information in his or her head. He or she will therefore rely on the Civil Service to do the background research which will provide the information to answer such Questions. Of course, the research work done by the Civil Service is not only designed to help the minister during Question Time. Civil servants will also provide information which will help the minister to work out his or her policies. They present the minister with the full facts of a situation to enable him or her to make a decision. Page 7 shows extracts from Question Time. Complete records of Ministers' answers are kept for public record by being published by Hansard.

## What else do civil servants do?

Only a small proportion of civil servants are involved in research work however. Many civil servants have professional and technical skills. They may for example be scientists, computer experts or librarians. Others staff offices throughout the country and run services such as the benefits system. Nowadays, many work in agencies at one step removed from, but still under the control of, the main Department. The Civil Service employs people with a wide range of skills because it is not only concerned with offering advice and information to ministers. A minister also relies on the Civil Service to carry out his or her instructions.

As these instructions will involve a variety of tasks, you can see why a variety of skills and abilities are required in order to carry them out. This diagram illustrates the relationship between a minister and his civil servants.

## What is the relationship between Parliament and the Government?

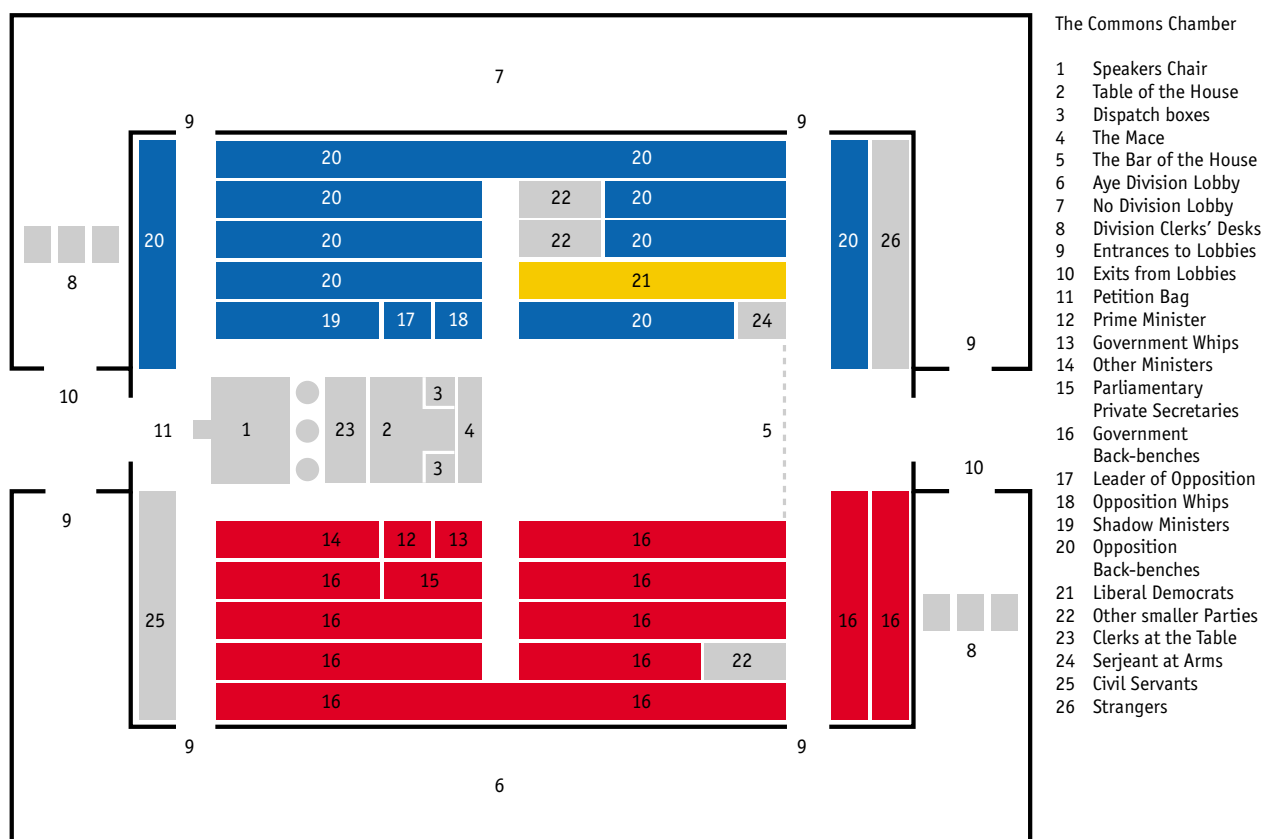
It has already been seen how Members of both Houses can challenge the Government in committees, in debates and by questioning it about its work. Parliament has to ensure that the Government is working properly and that its decisions are in the public interest. Every Member, no matter what party he or she belongs to, has the duty of examining the work of the Government but it is the Opposition which plays the leading part in this.

## Who are the Opposition?

The Opposition consists of all those parties which, as a result of the last general election, are not part of the Government. It is made up of the Official Opposition, the Opposition party with the largest number of members, and a number of smaller parties.

A Government minister stands at the despatch box in the House of Commons.





## Parliament & Government

### Where do the Government and Opposition sit in both Houses of Parliament?

In both Chambers the two sides, Government and Opposition, sit facing one another. If, for example, you were to sit in the Public Gallery of the House of Commons, you would see the Government sitting to the left of the Table. The Opposition parties would be seated on the right.

In each chamber, Government ministers sit on the front bench on the Government side. They are therefore known as Government front-benchers. Members of either House who belong to the same party as the Government but who do not hold a Government post are known as Government back-benchers. The Official Opposition is divided in the same way. On the Opposition front bench sit the Official Opposition spokespeople, e.g. on education, health or defence. Each of these spokespeople concentrates on studying the work of a particular Government Department. The senior spokespeople from the Official Opposition are often referred to as the 'Shadow Cabinet' because they shadow the work of the Government. By keeping themselves up to date in their own subject areas both they and the spokespeople from the other Opposition parties are able to mount challenges to the Government, criticising its policies and questioning the wisdom of ministers' decisions. Opposition spokespeople must keep themselves properly informed, not only to enable them to challenge the Government but also because one day, after an election, they might become Government ministers themselves.

## What role does the Opposition play?

The Opposition can thus challenge the Government, during Question Time, in committee and by debate. In addition the Opposition may oppose the Government's attempts to make new laws. When a Government comes to power, it usually plans to make certain changes, particularly if it has just taken over from another party. Many of these changes will be brought about through the passing of new laws and the Opposition will usually put forward arguments against these. Most MPs tend to be loyal to their own party. After all, they would not belong to a party if they did not agree with what it stood for. Nevertheless all MPs are technically free to vote as they wish. Perhaps an MP from the governing party will agree with what the Opposition have said on a certain matter. After all an MP may agree with the broad outline of Government policy while disagreeing with some of the details. If he or she feels that a Government proposal is not in the public interest, he or she can vote with the Opposition, or not vote at all. The strength of the Opposition in Parliament helps to protect the public. The Government cannot always push through exactly what it chooses. As each proposed law has to go through several stages in both Houses of Parliament, there are plenty of opportunities for changes (amendments) to be made, and perhaps for some proposals to be withdrawn.



The Opposition front-bench in the House of Commons.

## Who has power: Parliament or Government?

If a Government performed particularly badly, its own supporters might desert it. If it lost a Vote of Confidence in the House of Commons, the Government would then call a general election which it might lose, as happened to the Labour Government in 1979. Parliament is the supreme authority and can therefore play an important part in bringing down a Government. The power of Parliament could also be used to check a Government which tried to dictate to the people – in other words, a Government which had become too powerful. Because of this tradition of a strong Parliament it would be much harder for a dictator to take over in Britain, than in certain other countries.

Let us finish by reviewing the ways in which Parliament can limit the power of Government:

- By voting against its proposed laws
- By restricting the funds which the Government has to spend
- By asking Questions which test the Government
- By challenging the Government in debates
- By examining Government work in committees

In the end, therefore, the power of the Government depends on the support of the House of Commons which, in turn, depends on the support of the electorate.

## Find Out More

### Archives

Archives from 1497, including original Acts of Parliament, are kept in the House of Lords' Record Office (The Parliamentary Archives) which is open to the public, to view records on request tel: 020 7219 3074.

### Hansard

The day's proceedings are printed in the Official Report, (separate volumes are produced for the Commons and Lords) referred to as Hansard after its original printer. It is also available at [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) by 9.00 the following morning.

### Television

The televising of Parliament was pioneered by the House of Lords in 1985, followed by the House of Commons in 1989. The proceedings of both Houses can be seen on the BBC's parliamentary channel when the House is sitting.

### Website

Go to [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) for general information on the role and function of both Houses, or details of membership, future business, legislation and Select Committee activity. For an experimental period it is possible to view a live **webcast** of House proceedings at the same address.

A website for young people can be found at [www.explore.parliament.uk](http://www.explore.parliament.uk)

### Education enquiries

Applications for Gallery tickets for students and educational groups and further information about the work of Parliament can be obtained from:

Parliamentary Education Unit  
Room 604  
Norman Shaw Building (North)  
London SW1A 2TT

Tel: 020 7219 2105  
Fax: 020 7219 0818  
E-mail: [edunit@parliament.uk](mailto:edunit@parliament.uk)

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Chris Weeds  
Education Officer

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