Great Britain is a constitutional monarchy. This means it has a monarch as its Head of the State. The monarch reigns with the support of *Parliament.* The UK Parliament is one of the oldest representative assemblies in the world, having its ***origin*** in the mid-13th century. By the 1250s King Henry III (1216-1272) was running into difficulties with his nobility. They were angry at the cost of his schemes, such as rebuilding of Westminster Abbey and a proposed campaign to make one of his youngest sons King of Sicily. The provisions of Oxford (1258), imposed on Henry by his barons, established a permanent baronial council which took control of certain key appointments. The leader of the baronial movement was Simon de Montfort, the Earl of Leister. In 1259 the Provisions of Westminster reformed the common law. Henry eventually renounced both sets of provisions and challenged the barons. Civil war broke out in 1264, initially going well for Simon de Montfort. During the conflict he sought to boost his baronial support by summoning knights of the shires and burgesses to attend his parliament. This was the first time that commoners had been represented. De Montfort was killed at the Battle of Evesham in 1265, but his innovation of summoning the commons to attend parliaments was repeated in later years and soon became standard. Thus it is from him that the modern idea of a representative parliament derives. From the 14th century parliamentary government in the United Kingdom has been based on a two-chamber system. The House of Lords (the upper house) and the House of Commons (the lower house) sit separately and are constituted on entirely different principles. In the 14th century, under King Edward III (1327-1377) it was accepted that there should be no taxation without parliamentary consent, still a fundamental principle of today. Two distinct Houses of Parliament were emerging for the first time, with the “Commons” sitting apart from the “Upper House” form 1342. The “Good Parliament” of 1376 saw the election of the first Speaker, Thomas Hungerford, to represent the Commons. It also saw the use of “impeachment”, whereby the House of Commons as a body could accuse officials who had abused their authority and put them on trial before the Lords. In the 15th century the Commons gained equal law-making powers with the Lords, under King Henry V. The 16th century saw the legal union of Wales – which had long been subject to the English crown – with England under King Henry VIII (1509-1547). Henry’s reign also saw the Church of England break away from the Roman Catholic Church. The “Gunpowder Plot” of 1605 may have been hatched when it became clear that the new King, James I, intended to do nothing to ease the plight of the Catholics in the country. In the 17th century, tensions increased between parliament and monarch, such that in 1641 the King and Parliament could not agree on the control of troops for repression of the Irish Rebellion. Civil war broke out the following year, leading to the execution of King Charles I in January 1649. Following the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, the role of Parliament was enhanced by the events of 1668-1669 (the “Glorious Revolution” and the passage of the Bull of Rights which established the authority of Parliament over the King, the enshrined in law the principle of freedom of speech in parliamentary debates. 1707 brought the Union with Scotland and the first Parliament of Great Britain. Growing pressure for reform of parliament in the 18th and 19th centuries led to a series of Reform Acts which extended the electoral franchise to most men (over 21) in 1867 and finally to women over 21 in 1928. The legislative primacy of the House of Commons over the Lords was confirmed in the 20th century by the passing of the Parliamentary Acts of 1911 and 1949.

The legislative process involves both Houses of Parliament and the Monarch.

The main functions of Parliament are to:

* Make all UK law
* Provide, by voting for taxation, the means of carrying on the work of government
* Protect the public and safeguard the rights of individuals
* Scrutinize government policy and administration, including proposals for expenditure
* Examine European proposals before the become law
* Hear appeals in the House of Lords, the highest Court of Appeal in Britain
* Debate the major issues of the day

Parliament has a maximum duration of five years. At any time up to the end of this period, a general election can be held for a new House of Commons.

**The House of Lords.**

The House of Lords is the second chamber of the UK Houses of Parliament. Members of the House of Lords (known as “peers”) consist of Lords Spiritual (senior bishops) and Lords temporal (lay peers). Law Lords (senior judges) also sit as Lords Temporal. Members of the House of Lords are not elected. Originally they were drawn from the various groups of senior and influential nobility in Britain, who advised the monarch throughout the country’s early history.

Following the House of Lords Act 1999 there are only 92 peers who sit by virtue of hereditary peerage. The majority of members are now life peers and the Government has been consulting on proposals for further reform of the Lords.

There were 689 peers in total in May 2003.

In general, the functions of the House of Lords are similar to those of the House of Commons in legislating, debating and questioning the executive. There are two important exceptions: members of the Lords do not represent constituencies, and are not involved in matters of taxation and finance. The role of the Lords is generally recognized to be complementary to that of the Commons and it acts as a revising chamber for many of the more important and controversial bills.

All bills go through both Houses before becoming Acts, and start in either House. Normally, the consent of the Lords is required before Acts of Parliament can be passed, and the Lords can amend all legislation, with the exception of bills to raise taxation, long seen as the responsibility of the Commons. Amendments have to be agreed by both Houses. The House of Lords is as active as the Commons in amending bills, and spends two-thirds of its time revising legislation.

Following the Lord’s rejection of the Liberal Government’s budget of 1909, the Parliament Act of 1911 ended their power to reject legislation. A power of delay was substituted, which was further curtailed by the Parliament Act of 1949. The House of Commons can present a bill (except one to prolong the life of Parliament) for Royal Assent after one year and in a new session even if the Lords have not given their agreement. There is also a convention (known as the “Salisbury” convention) that the Government’s manifesto commitments, in the form of Government Bills, are not voted down by the House of Lords at second reading.

The House of Lords is also the final court of appeal for civil cases in the United Kingdom and for the criminal cases in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Only the Lords of Appeal (law Lords) – of whom there are 12 employed full-time – take part in judicial proceedings.

**Organization of the House of Lords.** The Speakership of the House of Lords has traditionally been performed by the *Lord Chancellor.*  The Lord Chancellor’s powers as Speaker have been very limited compared with the Speaker of the House of Commons, since the Lords themselves control the proceedings under the guidance of the Leader of the House. Lord’s business is expected to be conducted in an orderly and polite fashion without the need for an active Speaker. The Lord Chancellor sits on a special seat called the Woolsack except when the House is in Committee, but does not call upon members to speak and has no power to call the House to order.

This has been due in part to the Lord Chancellor’s constitutionally unique position: before the reforms announced on the 12th of June 2003, the Lord Chancellor had been simultaneously a Cabinet minister with department responsibilities, the Speaker of the House of Lords and the head of the judiciary in England and Wales. The government is now intent on a separation of these powers and on the abolition of the office of Lord Chancellor.

Other office holders in the House of Lords include government ministers and whips, the Leader and Chief Whip of the main opposition party, and two Chairmen of Committees. The Leader of the House occupies a special position in the House of Lords: as well as leading the party in government he has a responsibility to the House as a whole. It is to him, and not the Lord Chancellor, that members have turned for advice and leadership on points of order and procedure.

These office holders and officers, together with the Law Lords, receive salaries. All other members of the House of Lords are unpaid, but they are entitled to reimbursement of their expenses, within maximum limits for each day on which they attend the House. The Clerk of the Parliament, a role like that of a chief execute, is head of administration. The Gentlemen Usher of the Black Rod has ceremonial and royal duties and is in charge of security, access and domestic matters.

Members of the House of Lords are not elected and, with the exception of bishops who leave the House on retirement, they retain their seats for life.

**The House of Commons.**

The House of Commons is the centre of parliamentary power. It is directly responsible to the electorate, and from the 20th century the House of Lords has recognized the supremacy of the elected chamber. The House of Commons is traditionally regarded as the lower house, but it is the main parliamentary arena for political battle. A Government can only remain in office for as long as it has the support of a majority in the House of Commons. As with the House of Lords, the House of Commons debates new primary legislation as part of the process of making an Act of Parliament, but the Commons has primacy over the non-elected House of Lords. 'Money bills', concerned solely with taxation and public expenditure, are always introduced in the Commons and must be passed by the Lords promptly and without amendment. When the two houses disagree on a non-money bill, the Parliament Act can be invoked to ensure that the will of the elected chamber prevails. The House also scrutinizes the work of the Government - it does that by various means, including questioning ministers in the Chamber and through the Select Committee system.

The leader of the party that wins the majority of Commons seats in a general election is called on to form the next government.

The life of a Parliament is divided into sessions. Each usually lasts for one year - normally ending in October or November when Parliament is 'prorogued', followed shortly by the State Opening of Parliament, marking the beginning of the new session. The two Houses do not normally sit at weekends, at Christmas, Easter and the late Spring Bank Holiday. In the Commons there is also a 'half-term' break of a week in February. The traditional long summer break ('recess'), starting in late July and finishing in October is set to change from the 2002-03 session, with the Houses rising earlier in July, but returning to sit for two weeks in September. Sessions may be longer if there has been an election - for example the session following the 2001 general election ran for over a year, from summer 2001 to autumn 2002.

The average number of days when Parliament sits during the year is about 155 in the House of Commons. Traditionally the schedule in the House of Lords has been not so demanding, but in some recent years the Lords has sat on more days than the Commons.

There is often a surge in the number of Bills getting Royal Assent just before the summer parliamentary recess. Not all Bills are completed then, and some are held over until Parliament starts up again in October. Remaining parliamentary business is then completed. Each session is ended by prorogation. Usually, Public Bills which have not been passed by the end of the session are lost, although changes to standing orders in the 2002-03 parliamentary session allow for more public bills to be 'carried-over' and continue their passage in the following session, as private and Hybrid Bills may.

The House has frequently considered changing the hours at which it meets. These new sitting hours are designed to make things easier for those MPs with families and those with provincial constituencies. They include earlier sitting days on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, and will mean fewer Friday sessions.

Certain business is exempt from the normal closing times. The Commons often sits later than the '*moment of interruption*' - and late night sittings will still be possible.

The House also meets for debate in Westminster Hall (in fact in a specially converted room off the main Hall). Sitting hours are: Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 9.30 to 11.30am and from 2 - 4.30pm, and Thursdays from 2.30pm continuing for up to 3 hours. These sessions are designed to give backbenchers more time to debate issues which cannot find space in the crowded schedule of the Chamber.

Parliamentary procedure is based on custom and precedent, partly codified by each House in its Standing Orders. The system of debate is similar in both Houses. Every subject starts off as a proposal or 'motion' made by a member. This may or may not be a substantive proposal on which the House will be asked to vote. Motions to 'take note' (of a report, for example), to adjourn the House, or, in the Lords, to 'move for papers', are all, in effect, opportunities for MPs and Peers to debate a matter without a concluding vote.

During debates in the House of Commons all speeches are addressed to the Speaker or one of the Deputy Speakers. MPs speak from wherever they have been sitting and not from a rostrum, although front-bench members usually stand at one of the dispatch boxes on the Table of the House. MPs may not read their speeches, although they may refresh their memories by referring to notes. In general, no MP may speak twice to the same motion, except to clarify part of a speech that has been misunderstood or 'by leave of the House'.

At the end of the debate the occupant of the Chair 'puts the question' whether to agree with the motion or not. The question may be decided without voting, or by a simple majority vote. In the Commons, voting is supervised by the Speaker who announces the result. Votes may be taken by acclamation - the norm for uncontroversial business. However, if MPs or Peers wish to 'divide the House', which generally happens on more controversial votes, then a division is held. Members have to file through one of two division lobbies, one for the Ayes to vote yes, one for the Noes to vote no. The numbers going through each lobby are counted and the result given (in the Commons) to the Speaker by the 'tellers' (MPs appointed to supervise the vote). In a tied vote the Speaker gives a casting vote, according to defined principles rather than on the merits of the question.

“Order! Order!” is one of the terms most associated with Parliament, conjuring up an image of the Speaker laying down the law when dealing with a host of unruly MPs. This image has become more widely known with the television of Parliament.

The Speaker, currently Rt Hon Michael Martin, MP for Glasgow, Springburn, is in fact the chief officer of the House of Commons. He is elected by the House to:

* Represent the House in its relations to the Crown, the House of Lords and other authorities;
* Preside over the House and enforce the rules which govern its conduct.

The Speaker is also a chairman of the House of Commons Commission. He has a number of duties concerning the functions of the House and is in control of the Commons part of the Palace of Westminster and its precincts. Control of Westminster Hall and the Crypt Chapel is vested jointly in the Lord Great Chamberlain (representing the Sovereign), the Lord Chancellor and the Speaker.

It has become a generally accepted principle that, once a Speaker has been elected in one Parliament, he or she is reelected in subsequent Parliaments and thus remains in office until he or she chooses to retire. On some occasions the Speaker is returned to Parliament unopposed, but this is no longer always the case. When seeking reelection at a general election, the Speaker remains aloof from party issues and stands as “the Speaker seeking reelection”.

The House of Commons selects its own Speaker. There is no requirement for the Speaker to be a member of the governing party. Speakers are elected at the beginning of each new Parliament or when the previous Speaker dies or retires.

During the Speaker’s election the House is presided by the Father of the House – an honorary title bestowed upon the member who has the longest unbroken record of service as an MP.

Following a General Election, if the Speaker from the previous parliament is still a Member, the Father of the House asks whether he or she is willing to be chosen as Speaker again. If this is the case, the Father of the House calls on one member to move the motion than the former Speaker should take the Chair as Speaker-elect.

Following the death or resignation of the previous Speaker, or if the previous Speaker does not return after a General Election, there may be more than one candidate wishing to stand. On October 23, 2000, when Speaker Martin was first elected, eleven other candidates were proposed. The House voted on each one, taking p many hours of parliamentary time.

The Speaker has full authority to enforce the rules of the House of Commons. He or she has discretion on whether to allow a motion to end discussion so that a matter can be put to the vote and has powers to put a stop to irrelevance and repetition in debate, and to save time in other ways. In cases of grave and continuous disorder, the Speaker can adjourn or suspend the sitting, but this is rarely necessary. If an alleged breach of parliamentary privilege is raised against the member, the Speaker decides whether or not the matter should be brought before the House. The Speaker may order an MP who has broken the rules of the House to leave the Chamber or can initiate their suspension for a period of days. This process is normally known as “naming” an MP. Once the MP has been named by the Speaker, if necessary the House then votes on whether the MP named should be suspended. Often it is agreed without a division. The first naming of a particular MP results in a brief suspension; subsequent offences within the same session result in longer periods.

**Prime Minister's Question Time** is an important aspect of parliamentary control of Government, when issues and grievances are raised by MPs and information sought about the Government's plans. The Prime Minister now answers questions at thenew time of 12 noon for half an hour every Wednesday when Parliament is sitting.

Prime Minister's question time usually starts with a routine question from an MP about the Prime Minister's engagements. Following the answer, the MP then raises a particular issue, often one of current political significance. The Leader of the Opposition then follows up on this or another topic. He and the Liberal Democrat leader are the only MPs allowed to come back with further questions. Exchanges may become heated, and this is often the spectacle presented on television.

Subjects raised during Prime Minister's question time vary widely and usually include the key issues of the day.

Prime Minister's question time is particularly important for the leaders of the main political parties as the way in which they handle questions is regarded as a key measure of their overall performance

**Deferred Divisions.** In November 2000 the House of Commons agreed, on an experimental basis, to allow for some divisions to be deferred until another sitting day. This means that Members can vote on a series of motions using ballot papers at a convenient time (currently from 12.30pm on Wednesdays) instead of holding divisions immediately at the end of a debate when the hour is already late.

**General Elections.** General elections are elections of the whole House of Commons at one time: one Member of Parliament for each constituency in the United Kingdom. Each MP is elected from the various candidates through secret ballot by a simple majority system in which each elector can cast one vote. The candidates may be from one of the three major political parties, from a minor party or from any other organization that has been registered with the Electoral Commission. If a candidate does not represent a registered party or group s/he may stand as an 'Independent'. One Independent MP was returned at the 2001 General Election - Mr. Richard Taylor (Wyre Forest).

Most voting takes place in polling stations, but any citizen eligible to vote in Great Britain can apply on demand to vote by post. British citizens living abroad are also entitled to a postal vote, as long as they have been living abroad for less than 15 years.

General elections are held at intervals of up to five years. The Government can, and often does, decide to hold one at an earlier date. In times of national emergency, such as war, general elections can be postponed, but this is very rare.

A parliamentary by-election is held when a seat falls vacant in the House of Commons, because an MP dies, resigns or can no longer be an MP for some other reason, such as being made a member of the House of Lords. By tradition, the procedure for initiating a by-election (known as 'moving the writ') is usually initiated by the political party which held the seat before the vacancy.

By-elections sometimes attract a great deal of attention from the media, and voters often use the opportunity to register a protest. Partly because of this, the results are often very different from those of general elections. Also, fewer people usually turn out to vote in by-elections than in general elections - often fewer than 50% of those entitled to vote.

**Parliamentary Constituencies**

For electoral purposes, Britain is divided into parliamentary constituencies. Each returns one MP to the House of Commons. In the 1992 parliament, there were 651 constituencies, but this rose to 659 from the 1997 general election. Constituencies range considerably in area and in the number of electors. In general, the intention is to ensure that constituency electorates are kept roughly equal. However, this is not always possible, particularly for the more sparsely populated areas where it would be difficult for an MP effectively to represent a very large area. The average size of constituency electorate over the UK as a whole is around 68,000.

At the 2001 General Election, the Isle of Wight had the largest number of electors - over 104,000. The smallest number of electors - some 21,900 - was to be found in the Western Isles. The constituency of Ross, Skye and Inverness West was the largest by area at 918,319 hectares. The smallest by area was Islington North at 727 hectares.

There are four permanent Parliamentary Boundary Commissions - one each for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. They recommend any adjustments that may seem necessary in the light of population movements or other changes. Reviews are conducted every 8 to 12 years. The current (fifth) Review has to report in the period 2003-2007.

In between periodic general reviews, the Commissions hold interim reviews of small groups of parliamentary constituencies, normally to realign boundaries with altered local government boundaries. On occasion, there can be more substantial recommendations, such as the allocation of an additional seat to Milton Keynes in a review conducted in 1989.

When the Fifth Review is complete, the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions will become part of the independent Electoral Commission. Each constituent part of the UK will, as now, have its own Boundary Committee which will submit to the Electoral Commission recommendations for redistribution. The system of periodic reviews remains unchanged.

**General elections** are held at least every five years. However not all Parliaments run for the whole five years, and a general election may be held before this period is up. In the event of a government having a small majority the election may well take place much earlier. For example, the general election of February 1974 resulted in a minority Labor government. The then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, therefore called another election in October 1974, which resulted in Labor increasing its representation to just above 50% of the number of seats. Despite its small overall majority, the Labor government then remained in power for four-and-a-half years, finally calling an election in May 1979.

The last General Election was held on 7 June 2001.

In between general elections,by-electionsare held as necessary to elect a new Member of Parliament to an individual constituency.

The House of Commons currently has 659 Members of Parliament (MPs), each representing an individualconstituency. Of the 659 seats, 529 are for England, 40 for Wales, 72 for Scotland and 18 for Northern Ireland.

An Electoral Commission was established in November 2000 as an independent body to oversee new controls on donations to and campaign spending by political parties and others. It also has a remit to keep under review electoral law and practice and to promote public awareness of the electoral process. Its functions and powers are set out in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. A *backbencher* is a Member of the House of Commons who is neither in the cabinet, nor is an opposition party critic. The main job of Backbenchers is to support the leadership of their respective parties in the House of Commons. They are subject to the constraints of party discipline. Many Backbenchers find roles for themselves on committees or through introducing Private Members bills. Most independent concerns of backbenchers are vented in party caucus meetings. Calls of Parliamentary reformers have often called for the weakening of party discipline to allow backbenchers a more individual or constituency focused role.

**State Opening of Parliament**

The State Opening of Parliament marks the start of the parliamentary session. It occurs when Parliament reassembles after a general election, and each subsequent year; it is normally in November.

It is the main ceremonial event of the parliamentary year, attracting large crowds, both in person and watching on television. The Queen drives in state from Buckingham Palace to Westminster.

The **Queen's Speech** is delivered by the Queen from the Throne in the House of Lords. The speech is given in the presence of members of both Houses, the Commons being summoned to hear the speech by an official known as 'Black Rod'. In a symbol of the Commons' independence, the door to their chamber is slammed in his face and not opened until he has knocked on the door with his staff of office.

Although the speech is made by the Queen, the content of the speech is entirely drawn up by the Government and approved by the Cabinet. It contains an outline of the Government's policies and proposed legislative programme for the new parliamentary session. Following the State Opening, the government's programme is debated by both Houses. In the Commons the motion is that the House sends an address to the Queen thanking her for the speech, but the debate, which lasts several days, is in fact a chance for MPs to speak on any matter of government policy.

Before the State Opening, the cellars of the Palace of Westminster are to this day searched by the Yeomen of the Guard - a precaution dating back to the Gunpowder Plot of November 1605.

Prorogation. A parliamentary session is usually ended by prorogation, although it may be terminated when Parliament is dissolved and a general election called.

Prorogation usually takes the form of an announcement on behalf of the Queen made in the House of Lords. As with the State Opening, it is made to both Houses. Unlike the Queen's Speech, the prorogation announcement receives relatively little media coverage.

The prorogation announcement sets out the major Bills which have been passed during that parliamentary session and also describes other measures which have been taken by the Government.

Prorogation brings to an end nearly all parliamentary business. Following a recommendation of the House Modernization Committee it was agreed that, in certain circumstances, Public Bills should be able to be carried over from one session to the next, in the same way that private and hybrid Bills may be.

***Budget day*** is one of the key dates in the parliamentary year. The Budget covers both the Government's taxation plans for the coming financial year and its assessment for the economy and public finances over the next few years. The Budget is announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the House of Commons and details are published in the Financial Statement and Budget Report (the 'red book').

Great secrecy surrounds the Budget, and there is intense speculation in the run up to Budget day. There is considerable anticipation of the contents of the speech, which is broadcast live on television and radio.

The announcement of the contents of the Budget signals the release of a flood of information by the Government. News releases giving further details of the Chancellor's measures are put out by the major government departments. Information, including the Chancellor's Budget speech, news releases and the Financial Statement and Budget Report, is made available on the Internet (see below).

The Chancellor's speech is then followed by debate in Parliament on the measures which he has announced. The initial response is not by the Shadow Chancellor, but by the Leader of the Opposition. The Shadow Chancellor speaks later in the debate which continues over a period of days.

The shadow cabinet is a specific group of critics in each opposition party, especially for those in the Official Opposition party. Traditionally the shadow cabinet of the Official Opposition was viewed as a body likely to form the actual cabinet should the party win power. Each member of the shadow cabinet is the critic of a specific government department or portfolio, thus holding the government to account on matters concerned with that area. In smaller opposition parties, members of a shadow cabinet may carry several areas as critic. Members of the shadow cabinet in the Official Opposition receive an increase in pay from the Government of Canada. Critics in other opposition parties still receive an increase in pay but not to the same extent as their counterparts in the Official Opposition. Each member of the shadow cabinet is allocated responsibility for `shadowing' the work of one of the members of the real cabinet. The Party Leader assigns specific portfolios according to the ability, seniority and popularity of the shadow cabinet's members.

**The Accountability of Government.** The parliamentary system contains many checks to ensure that a government remains accountable and does not abuse its powers. Ultimately, the Government can only remain in office for as long as it has the support of a majority in the House of Commons. Parliamentary questions (PQs) are often regarded as the best means of seeking information about the Government’s intentions. They are also seen as an effective way of raising, and perhaps resolving, grievances brought to MP’s attention by their constituents. There are two main types: oral and written questions. About 50000 PQs are raised each year – most are replied to through written answers. Questions and answers are published in Hansard, the official record of proceedings. Oral questions are answered by ministers at question time in the House of Commons. An MP may ask up to two oral questions and any number of written questions a day, although he or she may ask one oral question of a particular minister on any day. An MP is entitled, at the Speaker’s discretion, to ask a supplementary question. This is followed by a further answer by the minister, and there may then be further supplementary questions other MPs.

House of Lords. Question time in the Lords is much briefer than in the Commons and follows a different procedure. Up to four “starred” questions – which appear on the order paper with an asterisk against them – may be asked at the beginning of business each day, but not more than one by any Lord. Starred questions are asked in order to obtain specific information, rather than with a view to making speech or raising a debate. “Unstarred” questions in the Lords are in fact opportunities for short debates. These are taken at the end of the day’s business or occasionally at lunchtime. Any Lord may put down questions to the Government for written answer, up to six for each peer on any day. Private notice questions may also be asked.

**Making New Law.**

A draft law takes the form of a parliamentary bill. It must go through the necessary stages in both Houses of Parliament. The Queen must signify her approval, which is a formality. The Bill then becomes an Act and enters into force on the day the Bill receives the Royal Assent, unless the Act provides for the dates.

The law undergoes constant reform in the courts as established principles are interrupted, clarified or reapplied to meet new circumstances. Occasionally old laws become outdated, and there is pressure on the Government to update the law. Sometimes new laws are needed to ensure that the UK complies with the International or European Law.

Before Bills are introduced into the Parliament, there has often been consultation or discussion with interested parties such as professional bodies, voluntary organizations and pressure groups. Proposals for legislative changes may be contained in government White Papers. These may be preceded by consultation papers, sometimes called Green Papers which set out government proposals that are still taking shape and seek comments from the public. There is no requirement for there to be a White or Green Paper before a bill is introduced into Parliament.

The Government have acted on the recommendations of the Modernization Committee, by introducing a new way of “timetabling” bills known as “programming motion”. Previously there were two ways in which the House of Commons could timetable bills:

* Allocation of time motions (commonly called “guillotine motions”) which were used to curtail debate after a considerable time had already been spent on a bill, and
* The “usual channels” – voluntary, informal and unpublished agreements between the government and opposition Whips.

The “programming motion” is intended to be used earlier in the bill’s progress than was the case with the “guillotine motion”.

**Pressure groups** are the organizations which aim to influence Parliament and government in the way that decisions are made and carried out. They have become much more important in politics in recent years, with many people no longer choosing to involve themselves in the traditional political parties and instead to work through single-issue groups. There is huge range of pressure groups, campaigning on issues including animal welfare, education, the environment, equality for ethnic minorities, health, housing, rural affairs and welfare rights. Some pressure groups work through radical protest; others seek influence in more traditional ways.

**Types of Bills.** Most Bills are Public Bills which change the general law. The majority of public bills that become Acts of Parliament are introduced by a government minister and are known as government bills. Bills brought in by other members of Parliament are known as Private Member’s Bill.

The latter type should not be confused with Private Bills. These are proposals for legislation affecting the powers of particular bodies, such as local authorities, or the rights of individuals. These are subjects to a special form of parliamentary procedure. Hybrid Bills are a cross between a Public Bill and a Private Bill. They are generally introduced by the Government but are fairly rare.

**“Report Stage” of a Bill.**

*House of Commons.*

A fortnight after a standing committee has examined a bill it then reports its decisions for consideration by the House as a whole. The report stage is an opportunity for members not serving on the standing committee to propose further amendments or new clauses to a bill. All members may speak and vote and for lengthy or complex bills the debate may be spread over several days. Bills which have had their committee stage entirely on the floor of the House do not normally receive a full report stage debate. In the House of Commons the report stage is usually followed immediately by the bill’s third reading debate.

*House of Lords.*

Although most bills have their committee stage on the floor of the House of Lords, a report stage, similar to that in the Commons, still follows two weeks later for bills of considerable length and complexity.

**“Third Reading” of a Bill.**

At the bill’s third reading it is reviewed in its final form including amendments made at earlier stages.

In the Commons substantive amendments cannot be made to a bill at this stage and the third reading debate is usually short.

In the Lords, amendments can be made at third reading provided the issue has not been voted on at an early stage.

After passing its third reading in one House a bill is sent to the other House where it passes through all the stages once more. Financial legislation is not scrutinized in detail by the Lords. The passage through the second House is not a formality, and bills can be further amended. Amendments made by the second House must be agreed by the first, or a compromise agreement reached, such that both Houses have agreed the same text, before a bill can receive Royal Assent. Bills with contentious amendments pass back and forth between the Houses before agreement is reached. If each House insists on its amendments a bill may be lost.

*Limitations on the power of the Lords.* Most government bills introduced and passed in the Lords pass through the Commons without difficulty, but a bill from the Lords which proved unacceptable to the Commons would not become a law. The Lords do not generally prevent bills from Commons becoming law, although they will often amend them and return them for further consideration by the Commons. The assent of the Lords is not essential, subject to certain conditions, in the case of “money bills”. Bills dealing solely with taxation or expenditure must become law within one month of being sent to the Lords.

If, after the process of considering amendments, it proves impossible to reach agreement on non-financial bill, then the bill may be lost. Alternatively, the Commons can use its power to present a bill originating in the House of Commons for Royal Assent after one year and in a new session, even if the Lords’ objections are maintained.

These limits to the power of the Lords are contained in the Parliament Acts of 1911 and 1949. They are based on the belief that the main legislative function of the non-elected House is to act as a chamber of revision, complementing, but not rivaling the elected House.

**“Royal Assent”**

When a bill has completed all its parliamentary stages, it receives Royal Assent from the Queen. Royal Assent nowadays is generally declared to both Houses by their Speakers and is listed in Hansard, the official record of proceeding in Parliament. After this a bill becomes part of the law of the land and is known as an ***Act of Parliament***. Royal Assent was last given in person by the Sovereign in 1854. The Royal Assent has not been refused since 1707 when Queen Anna refused it for a Bill for setting militia in Scotland.

“Queen in Parliament” is the formal title of the British legislature, which consists of the Sovereign, the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The Commons, a majority of whom normally support the elected government of the day, has the dominant political power. As constitutional monarch, the Sovereign is required, on the advice of Ministers, to assent to all Bills. The role of the Sovereign is the enactment of legislation is today purely formal, although The Queen has the right to be consulted, to encourage and to warn. The Queen in Parliament is most clearly demonstrated in the annual State Opening of Parliament, when The Queen opens Parliament in person and addresses both Houses in The Queen’s Speech. This speech drafted by the Government and not by The Queen outlines the Government’s policy for the coming session of Parliament and indicates forthcoming legislation. Each session therefore begins with The Queen’s Speech and the Houses cannot start their public business until the Speech has been read.

Literature used:

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