

# Lecture 3.1

## The Political System of the United Kingdom

- 1. The United Kingdom as a Constitutional Monarchy**
- 2. Separation of Powers**
- 3. The British Parliament**
  - a) the House of Commons**
  - b) the House of Lords**
- 4. Legislative Proceedings**
- 5. The British Government**

# Preliminary Questions

1. Since what century has the country been a monarchy?
2. Has monarchy ever been interrupted in the country?
3. Does the Queen really rule the country?
4. What is unusual about British constitution?
5. The British Parliament is represented by 2 Houses. How are they called?
6. Members of which House are elected?
7. How many members are there in each House?
8. Where do the Houses sit?
9. Which House has the right to pass laws?
10. Who serves as a connection between the monarch and the Parliament?

# 1. The United Kingdom as a Constitutional Monarchy



- The UK is a constitutional monarchy.
- The monarchy goes back at least to the 9<sup>th</sup> century.
- The continuity of the monarchy has been broken only once (republic in 1649–1660).
- Monarchy is hereditary, succession passes to the oldest child.

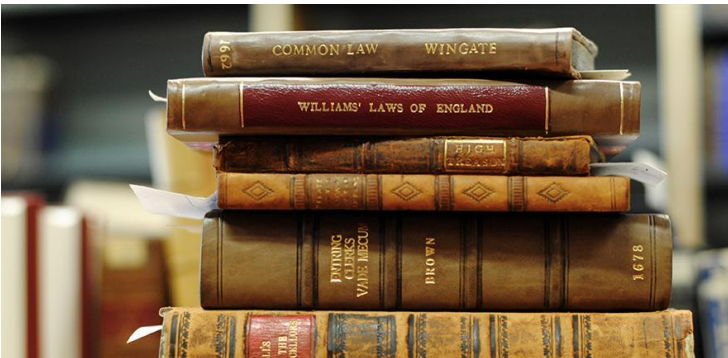


# The British Constitution

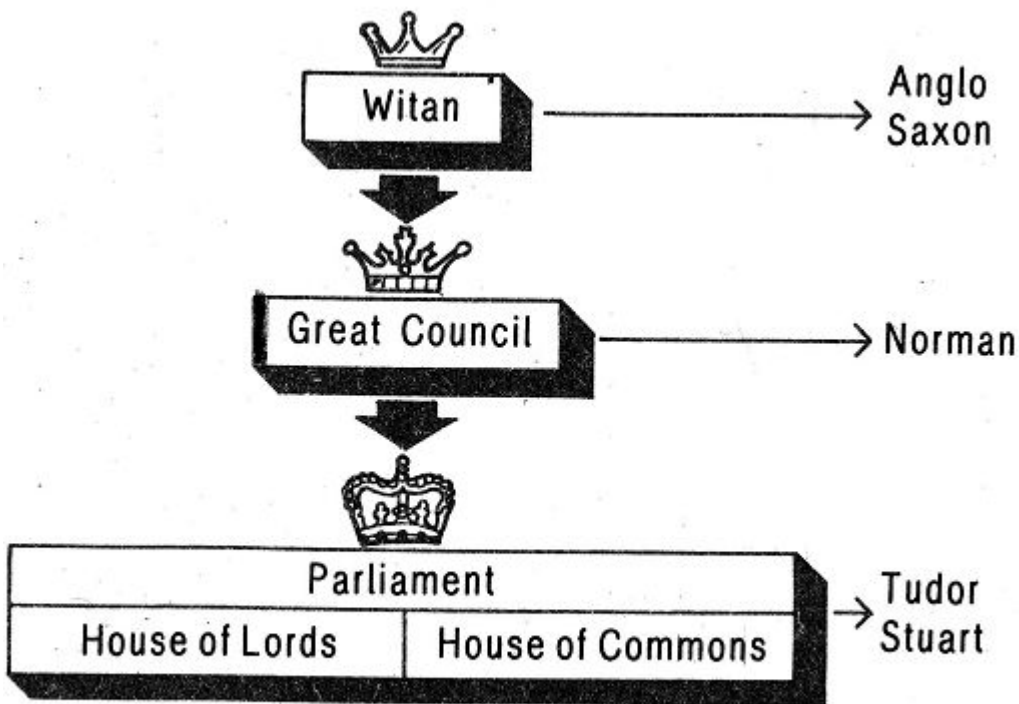


- The British Constitution is not compiled in a single document.
- The constitution comes from a variety of sources, the main ones are:

- ✓ statutes such as the Magna Carta (1215) and the Act of Settlement (1701);
- ✓ laws and customs of Parliament;
- ✓ case law (constitutional matters decided in a court of law);
- ✓ constitutional experts who have written on the subject.



# (1) The history of the British Parliament, Constitution and Monarchy



Witan — Great Council — Parliament.

- The Anglo-Saxon kings consulted *Witan* (comprised of the leading wisest rich men)
- After the Norman Conquest, William I held Great Councils (comprised of most influential feudal nobles)



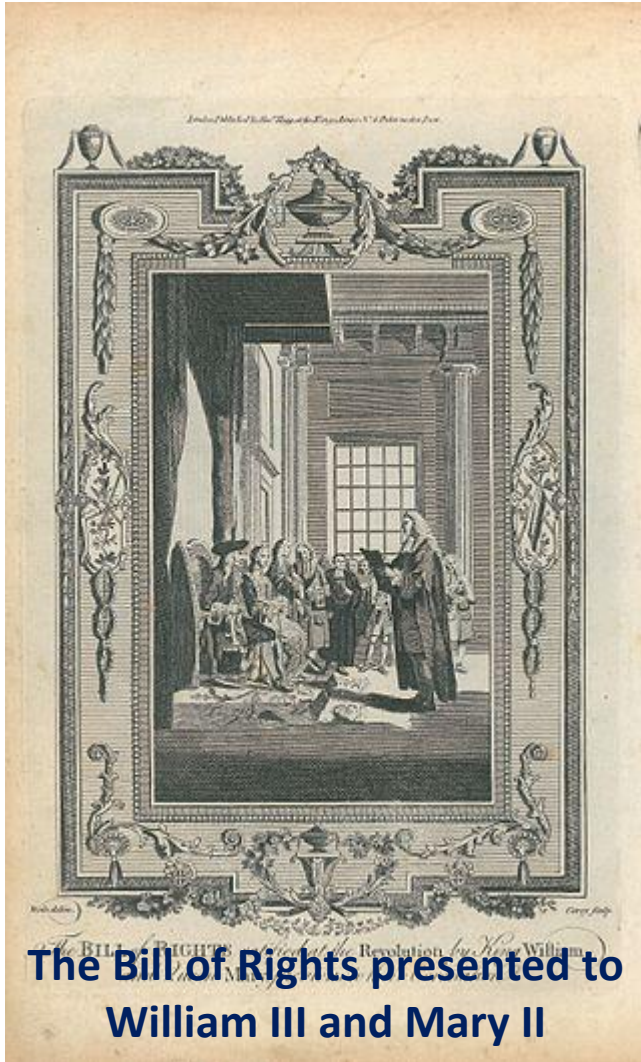
# (2) The history of the British Parliament, Constitution and Monarchy

- In 1215 King John accepted *Magna Carta* which limited the king's powers.
- 1265 *Simon de Montfort* summoned the first parliament.
- Since then the British constitution has evolved.



# (3) The history of the British Parliament, Constitution and Monarchy

- *The Bill of Rights* (1689) greatly limited the powers of monarchy
- Since 1689 the power of parliament has grown steadily, while the power of the monarch has weakened.



# The UK today



- Today the monarch reigns but does not rule.
- The “symbol of their nation’s unity”.
- The Queen has retained some formal functions:
  - ✓ summoning, proroguing and dissolving Parliament;
  - ✓ appointing the Prime Minister;
  - ✓ the power to declare war, make peace, etc.



# Buckingham Palace: the official residence of the UK sovereigns since 1837



# The Tower of London: Her Majesty's royal palace





# Windsor Castle: royal residence at Windsor



## 2. Separation of Powers

The Government functions through the following bodies:

- ❖ the **Legislature** which makes laws;
- ❖ the **Executive** which puts laws into effect and plans policy;
- ❖ the **Judiciary**, which decides on cases.

- The **legislative** branch is *Parliament* where laws are passed.
- The **executive** is the *Cabinet* of the government.
- The **judiciary** is the *Law Lords* and *the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council* who have a final say on legal issues.



# 3. The British Parliament



- the supremacy of Parliament;
- can pass, repeal and alter any of Britain's laws;
- *three elements of the British Parliament: the Queen and the two Houses of Parliament (the House of Lords and the elected House of Commons).*





- ❖ The life of a Parliament – five years (since 1911).
- ❖ The life of Parliament is divided into sessions (each begins in October or November).
- ❖ Average number of sitting days for the House of Commons – about 175.
- ❖ The House of Lords sits on about 140 days.





# The arrangement of seating in both Houses of Parliament reflects the party system





# The Houses of Parliament



# House of Lords



**The Speaker –  
Lord Chancellor**  
has no authority  
to control a  
debate.





# House of Commons

The Speaker has full authority to rule and order in the House:

- ❖ speeches are addressed to him or her;
- ❖ s/he calls upon members to speak;
- ❖ s/he must be heard in silence.



# a) the House of Commons



- ❖ The HC is elected at General Elections.
- ❖ Elected MPs represent 659 constituencies (=electoral districts) in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (approx. size of electoral districts – 60,000 electors).
- ❖ 2001 – 659 members in the HC; now – 646 (due to Scotland).
- ❖ Located in the Palace of Westminster.



- ❖ The two Houses of Parliament share the Palace of Westminster.
- ❖ The present buildings of the Palace were constructed between 1840 and 1852, to replace older buildings which had been destroyed.
- ❖ Parts of the Palace, including the Commons Chamber itself which were destroyed in an air-raid in 1941, have been rebuilt since 1945.
- ❖ The Commons occupy the northern part of the Palace.
- ❖ The part of the Palace of Westminster used by officials of the House of Commons includes some hundreds of rooms (restaurants, committee rooms, etc.).





- ❖ The House of Commons meets in Westminster throughout the year.
- ❖ The hours of sitting for normal business are: Mondays to Thursdays from 2.30 p.m. to 10.30 p.m. and Fridays 9.30 a.m. to 3.00 p.m.
- ❖ On ordinary occasions, MPs, who have other business to attend to, are not expected to be in constant attendance in the debating chamber. But, in case of a serious matter, they are expected to be present.

- ❖ The chief officer of the House of Commons is the Speaker. This office has been held continuously since 1377.



- ❖ A generally accepted principle: once the Speaker has been elected, he or she is re-elected and thus remains in office until he or she chooses to retire.

❖ The Speaker has *two main functions*:

- representing the House in its relations with the Crown, the House of Lords and other authorities,
- presiding over the House and enforcing the observance of all rules.



## b) the House of Lords



- ❖ Members of the House of Lords (known as *peers*) consist of **Lords Spiritual** and **Lords Temporal**.
- ❖ Members not elected.
- ❖ *1999 House of Lords Act*: removed hereditary peers with the exception of 92 remaining.  
→ 675 peers in total (2001) as compared to 1,213 peers (1999)

# the House of Lords



❖ About 2/3 of the Lords align themselves with a political party + crossbenchers who are not affiliated to any party group.



❖ Some Lords are former Members of the House of Commons who have been elevated to the Lords.



# the House of Lords



- ❖ The functions of the House of Lords are similar to those of the House of Commons.
- ❖ There are two important exceptions: the Lords do not represent constituencies, and are not involved in matters of taxation and finance.
- ❖ The role of the HL is complementary to that of the HC:
  - acts as a revising chamber;
  - all bills should go through both Houses before becoming Acts, and may start in either House.



# the House of Lords



- The Lord Chancellor sits on a special seat called **the Woolsack**.
- The seat *was introduced by King Edward III (14<sup>th</sup> c.)* and originally stuffed with English wool as *a reminder of England's traditional source of wealth (the wool trade)*.
  - Today the Woolsack is stuffed with *wool from several countries of the Commonwealth, to symbolize unity*.



# 4. Legislative Proceedings

## How a Bill becomes a Law

**Stage 1. First reading.** A formal announcement of the Bill with no debate.

**Stage 2. Second Reading.** The House debates the general principles of the bill and, in most cases, takes a vote.

***Stage 3. Committee Stage.*** A committee of MPs thoroughly studies the details of the bill and votes on amendments.

***Stage 4. Report Stage.*** The House considers the proposed amendments.

## How a Bill becomes a Law

**Stage 5. Third reading.** The amended Bill is debated as a whole.

**Stage 6.** The bill is sent to the other House (where it goes through the same stages). If the other House makes new amendments, these will be considered by the House which originated the bill.

**Stage 7.** After both have reached agreement, the bill receives the Royal Assent and becomes an Act of Parliament. The Royal Assent has not been refused since 1707.

# 5. The British Government



❖ Her Majesty's Government is the body of ministers (over a 100) responsible for the conduct of national affairs.



❖ The Prime Minister is appointed by the Queen.

❖ The Prime Minister presides over the Cabinet.





**10 Downing Street**

- ❖ **The Cabinet** is a group of chosen members of a government, which is responsible for advising and deciding on government policy.
- ❖ The Cabinet – normally composed of up to 20 senior ministers from the government .
- ❖ The Prime Minister's Office is at **10 Downing Street**.
- ❖ The Prime Minister usually sits in the Commons.

Government departments (or ministries) are the chief instruments by which government policy is implemented:

- *Foreign Office;*
- *The Ministry of Defence;*
- *The Home Office:*
- *The Department of education and Science;*
- *The Treasury.*



Most of these central departments are in London and are collectively known as **Whitehall**.

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