

10. Politics—How Britain is Run

The system

Britain—or, more accurately, the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland—is a constitutional monarchy.

It has a monarch—either a king or a queen—as its Head of State, but the monarch has very little power. The Queen reigns but she does not rule. Parliament and the existing government have the power.

The United Kingdom does not have a written constitution or printed set of rules for governing the country.

The rules have developed over the centuries. The constitution (or the present unwritten set of rules) has been formed in three ways:

1. by all the laws and decrees that have been made for centuries,
2. by the way these laws have been interpreted in the Law Courts in the past and are now re-interpreted from time to time,
3. by the way things have been done for centuries, although some of these practices have never been formally written down.

If there is enough pressure from the public for change, it is comparatively easy to change such a flexible constitution.

How the system works

Britain is a democracy; men and women over 18 years have a vote. Voting is not compulsory. They have the right to elect a representative to Parliament. The representative is their Member of Parliament or M.P. An M.P. tries to be of use to all the people living in his electoral area but he does not take orders from them.

At the opening of Parliament the Queen reads a speech from the throne in the House of Lords. Her speech has been written by the Prime Minister. It outlines the Government's plans for the new session of Parliament. M.P.s from the House of Commons are

The people → elect M.P.s → who sit in → Parliament.

Parliament = the House of Commons + the House of Lords
(elected) (not elected)

After an *election* a *Government* is formed. A Government must have a majority of supporters in the House of Commons. Therefore the *Queen* asks the leader of the largest political party in the House of Commons to form 'Her Majesty's Government'. She appoints him (or her) *Prime Minister*.

The *Prime Minister* selects his Ministers. A group of about 20 of the most important ones forms *the Cabinet*.

The Cabinet decides Government policies and laws which Parliament will agree to support or reject.

The Queen opens *Parliament*.