

# BBC Guide to Parliament

(Updated to 2021)

## There has been a parliament at Westminster since the 13th Century.

Today it remains the centre of British government, boasting a colourful history and frequently adding new chapters.

Parliament is the place where politicians meet to decide laws and make decisions on running the UK, although some issues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are now dealt with by their respective parliaments and assemblies.

Decisions on setting taxes to fund the government's policies are also made in Parliament.

The business of Parliament takes place in two "houses": the elected House of Commons and the House of Lords, whose members are mostly appointed.

Their work is similar: making laws (legislation), checking the work of the government (scrutiny), and debating current issues.


Generally, the decisions made in one house have to be approved by the other, but the Commons is by far the more powerful of the two chambers.

FACT: MPs and Lords do not refer to each other's debating chambers by name - instead they refer to "the other place".

No longer 646; now 650

Now between 700 - 800

MAKE-UP OF PARLIAMENT



Sovereign

Houses of Parliament

House of Commons – 646 MPs		House of Lords – c 700 Members	
Opposition parties	Governing party	Governing party	Opposition parties and crossbenchers
Shadow ministers Whips Backbenchers	Government		Shadow ministers Whips Backbenchers Law Lords Bishops
	Prime Minister Ministers Whips	Ministers Whips	
	Backbenchers	Backbenchers	

Term	Definition
Minister	
Backbencher	
Whip	
Crossbencher	
Law Lord	
Opposition	
Shadow	

## Government

**The government is normally formed by the leader of the party that wins the most seats in the general election.**

If the party wins an overall majority (more than half – i.e. at least 326) of the seats, the government will comprise some of the elected members belonging to that party - and possibly some of its members in the House of Lords.

If the leading party does not have an overall majority, its leader may have to approach other parties to enable it to form a minority government (Recent example: in 2017 Theresa May's minority government was supported for 2 years by the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) from N.Ireland) or form a coalition and allow the coalition partners to have representation in the government( e.g. David Cameron formed a coalition with the Liberal Democrats 2010- 2015)

Otherwise, the party leader may have to call another general election in the hope of gaining enough seats to form a new, majority government.

A government's actions - and particularly its proposals to amend or create laws - are scrutinised within parliament.

This can be by direct questioning in the Commons or Lords, by parliamentary committee, or indirectly by the public, who may lobby their representatives in Parliament on general matters or government actions that affect them.

Most government business is conducted by the relevant department of state, headed by a minister, often with the title secretary of state.

Most department heads, together with other key government figures, will also sit in the Cabinet, appointed by the prime minister, to discuss pertinent issues and decide policy.

Term	Definition
General election	
Minority government	
Tory	
Coalition	
Scrutinised	
Lobby	
Cabinet	



**“The Cabinet meets in the Cabinet Room in Downing Street.”**

Is this a current or an old picture? How do you know?

## The Commons

**The more powerful of the two Houses of Parliament, the Commons is the main debating chamber of MPs - the Members of Parliament elected by the country's voters.**

Each of the 650 MPs represents a constituency. Most are members of one of the main political parties, but there is usually a handful of independents.

Once elected, MPs will normally serve for the lifetime of the parliament before the next general election, when they can stand for re-election, in some cases subject to their reselection as a candidate by their party. General Elections are now held every five years, according to the Fixed Term Parliament Act. The change was made in 2011 by the Coalition Government.

The Commons is the most important place for discussing policies and making laws. All bills must go through both Houses before they become law, but although the Lords also scrutinises proposed legislation, MPs have the final say.

As long as a prime minister retains the support of the party's MPs and can win all the key parliamentary votes, he or she should be almost unassailable.

However, if enough MPs vote against the government to defeat it in the ultimate test of a censure motion or a no-confidence motion, that government will fall and the PM will have to resign.

That hasn't happened since 1979 when James Callaghan lost a no-confidence motion to Margaret Thatcher by a solitary vote.

Proceedings in the Commons are controlled by the Speaker - an MP chosen by MPs to chair debates in an even-handed way. For that reason, once chosen, he or she must no longer represent a party.

FACT: MPs do not address colleagues directly or by name in the Commons - they talk to the Speaker and refer to Honourable and Right Honourable friends, gentlemen and ladies



The current Speaker. Name: Sir Lindsay Hoyle.

Three interesting facts:

- 
- 
-

## The Lords

**Members of Parliament's second chamber, who are known as peers, are not publicly elected.**

Most are appointed. A fixed number are elected internally, and a limited number of Church of England archbishops and bishops also sit in the House.

Their main job is to "double-check" and revise proposed new laws to make sure they are fair and will work.

However, although they can delay legislation - possibly long enough to get it withdrawn by the government - peers do not have the final veto over proposed laws, and they cannot approve government taxation or spending.



The Lords is usually regarded as a more independent chamber than the Commons, with wider specialist expertise.

Peers are less likely to be aligned to a particular political party, although many still are.

However, even these are generally less likely to feel constrained by the party whip, which is used to ensure they vote along party lines.

Many members of the Lords are independents or crossbenchers, who belong to no particular party.

**FACT:** Colleagues refer to each other in the chamber as noble lords or ladies.

The so-called "upper house" has been around since the 14th Century and politicians are still trying to modernise it.

The House of Lords used to be the highest court in the land: the supreme court of appeal. This function has now been taken on by "The Supreme Court". Set up in 2005, it is completely separate from Government and Parliament.

Other Lords may be life peers (the majority), who are either appointed by a special commission or nominated by parties; hereditary peers, who inherit family titles, or bishops.

The number of hereditary peers is limited to 92 ; the number of "Lords spiritual" (archbishops, bishops) to 26 ; and the number of life peers are currently 687.

**Do you think it is right that the Lords can only delay, and not veto (reject) legislation?** Give at least one argument on each side.

## Law-making

**All proposed government laws (called bills), except those involving taxation, must be passed in an identical form by the House of Lords as well as the elected House of Commons.**

The monarch has the final say on whether a bill becomes law, although this power is rarely used - Queen Anne was the last to do so, in 1707.

Most commonly, the government will propose legislation, possibly via a consultation document called a Green Paper, having outlined its legislative programme in the Queen's Speech during the annual State Opening of Parliament.

Once responses to the paper have been assessed, a modified, firmer proposal called a White Paper is published.

A government bill is then drafted and submitted to Parliament for approval.

The so-called First Reading is just the formal publication of the bill. A Second Reading follows, in which MPs debate the principles in detail before voting.

The proposals then go through a committee stage, where a small "standing" committee of MPs, established specifically to consider the bill, wades through it in minute detail, and can vote on proposed amendments.

It returns to the Commons in its modified, report stage, when MPs - sometimes members of the governing party - may propose further amendments.

MPs finally vote on the amended bill at its Third Reading, when it may be approved or rejected but not modified, before the same procedure takes place in parliament's other chamber, the House of Lords.

Further amendments may be made, although it is the Commons that finally approves the bill before it is submitted to the Queen for Royal Assent.

At this stage the bill becomes an Act and is on the Statute Book as a piece of parliamentary legislation until or unless it is amended - via the same process.

The entire procedure normally takes months, although urgent legislation can be passed in days or, in certain circumstances, hours.

There is also limited opportunity to propose new laws through private members' bills, where back-bench MPs try to persuade Parliament to adopt causes close to their own hearts - although these rarely result in anything more than publicity for their causes - or private bills, which tend to relate to a specific organisation or corporation.



The Queen outlines the legislative programme set by government

**Draw a flow chart to show the passage of a bill into law. Start with the State Opening of Parliament (Queen's Speech) and finish with Royal Assent.** If you need help, go to [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk) > About Parliament > How Parliament Works > Making Laws.