

UNIT 1

THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT

The British Parliament consists of two chambers: **House of Lords** and **House of Commons**.

House of Lords is the upper chamber of Great Britain's bicameral legislature. Originating in the 11th century, when the Anglo-Saxon kings consulted witan (councils) composed of religious leaders and the monarch's ministers, it emerged as a distinct element of Parliament in the 13th and 14th centuries. It currently comprises the following elements: (1) the Lords Spiritual, including the archbishops of Canterbury and York and the bishops of Durham, London, and Winchester, as well as 21 other bishops holding sees in England; (2) from November 1999, 92 hereditary peers; (3) from January 1980, all life peers and peeresses created under the Life Peerages Act of 1958; and (4) the Law Lords, consisting of the judges of the Supreme Court of Judicature (the Court of Appeal and the High Court of Justice), which act as Britain's final court of appeal (except Scottish criminal cases). The total number of persons qualified to sit in the House of Lords is in excess of 670.

The powers of the modern House of Lords are extremely limited—necessarily so, since the permanent and substantial majority enjoyed there by the Conservative Party would otherwise be incompatible with the principles of representative government. The House of Lords' powers are defined in the Parliament Act of 1911 and 1949. Under the 1911 act, all bills specified by the speaker of the House of Commons as money bills (involving taxation or expenditures) become law one month after being sent for consideration to the House of Lords, with or without the consent of that house. Under the 1949 act, all other public bills (except bills to extend the maximum duration of Parliament) not receiving the

approval of the House of Lords become law provided that they are passed by two successive parliamentary sessions and that a period of one year has elapsed between the bill's second reading in the first session and its third reading in the second session. On rare occasions the 1949 act has been used to pass controversial legislation lacking the Lords' support—including the War Crimes Act of 1991, which enabled Britain to prosecute alleged war criminals who became British citizens or residents of Britain. A principal effect of the act has thus been to discourage the House of Lords from opposing bills strongly supported by the House of Commons. The Salisbury convention of 1945, which prevents the Lords from rejecting a bill at second reading (the principal stage at which parliamentary bills are debated) if it fulfills any pledge in the government's election manifesto, has further constrained the Lords' power.

Despite these limitations, the House of Lords plays a significant role in Parliament. Its most useful functions are the revision of bills that the House of Commons has not formulated in sufficient detail and the first hearing of noncontroversial bills that are then able, with a minimum of debate, to pass through the House of Commons. It is further argued by some observers that the House of Lords serves a valuable function by providing a national forum of debate free from the constraints of party discipline. Although the defeat of government legislation by the house has been relatively rare on major legislation, it sometimes does defy the government, especially Labour Party governments. For example, 230 pieces of legislation proposed by the Labour government of 1974–79 were defeated by the House of Lords.

In 1998 the Labour government of Tony Blair introduced legislation to deprive hereditary peers (by then numbering 750) of their 700-year-old right to sit and vote in the upper chamber. A compromise, however, allowed 92 of them—who were elected by their fellow peers—to remain as temporary members. The measure, which went into effect in late 1999, was seen as a prelude to wider reform, and in 2007 members of the House of Commons offered support for two separate proposals, one calling for the House of Lords

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to be 80-percent elected, the other 100-percent elected. The nonbinding vote was influential in forming the July 2008 White Paper put forward by Justice Secretary Jack Straw that outlined potential reforms. These included the reduction of the total number of lords, the complete severance of ties between the peerage and seats in Parliament, and an either 80- or 100-percent elected chamber consisting of lords serving nonrenewable 12- or 15-year terms. Future votes in both houses were required before any such restructuring of the House of Lords could occur.

House of Commons, also called Commons, is the popularly elected legislative body of the bicameral British Parliament. Although it is technically the lower house, the House of Commons is predominant over the House of Lords, and the name “Parliament” is often used to refer to the House of Commons alone.

The origins of the House of Commons date from the second half of the 13th century, when landholders and other property owners in the counties and towns began sending representatives to Parliament to present grievances and petitions to the king and to accept commitments to the payment of taxes. In the 14th century the knights and burgesses chosen as representatives (i.e., the commons) began sitting in a separate chamber, or “house,” from that used by the nobles and high clergy (i.e., the lords).

The House of Lords was initially the more powerful of the two houses, but over the centuries its powers gradually diminished. By the late 17th century, the House of Commons had gained the sole right to initiate taxation measures. The House of Lords retained its veto power over bills passed by the Commons, however, and in 1832 the only recourse of the Liberal Party government was to threaten to flood the House of Lords with new Liberal peers in order to prevent it from rejecting that government’s Reform Bill. Eighty years later the same

threat was used, again by a Liberal government, to compel the Lords to approve the Parliament Act of 1911, which enabled a majority of the House of Commons to override the Lords' rejection of a bill. Under this act, the House of Lords lost the power to delay legislation passed by the Commons for the raising and spending of revenue; it also lost the power to delay other legislation for a period beyond two years (reduced in 1949 to one year). The act also reduced the maximum duration of a parliamentary session to five years.

The membership of the House of Commons stood at 658 from 1801—when Great Britain and Ireland were united by the Act of Union to form the United Kingdom—until 1885, when it was increased to 670. In 1918 it was increased to 707. It was also changed under subsequent acts. At the general election in May 2010, 650 members were returned—533 from England, 59 from Scotland, 40 from Wales, and 18 from Northern Ireland. Each constituency returns a single member.

Despite its large membership, the chamber of the House of Commons seats only 427 persons. After it was destroyed by a German bomb during World War II, there was considerable discussion about enlarging the chamber and replacing its traditional rectangular structure with a semicircular design. Among those who argued against this proposal was Winston Churchill, who maintained that a semicircular chamber appeals to political theorists, enables every individual or group to move round the centre, adopting various shades of pink according as the weather changes.... A chamber formed on the lines of the House of Commons should not be big enough to contain all its members at once without overcrowding, and there should be no question of every member having a separate seat reserved for him. If the House is big enough for all its members, nine-tenths of its debates will be conducted in the depressing atmosphere of an almost empty or half-empty Chamber.... There should be on great occasions a sense of crowd and urgency. The chamber was rebuilt in 1950 to match its original size and shape.

(Adapted from *Encyclopædia Britannica*)

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I. LANGUAGE FOCUS

1. VOCABULARY

upper: 1. in a higher position than something else; 2. to have more power than someone else, so that you are able to control a situation;

to emerge: (vb. tr.) 1. to appear or come out from somewhere; 2. to begin to be known or noticed;

to comprise: 1. to consist of particular parts, groups, etc.; 2. vb. (tr.) to form part of a larger group of people or things;

bishop: (n.) 1. a priest with a high rank in some Christian religions, who is the head of all the churches and priests in a large area;

archbishop: (n.) a priest of the highest rank, who is in charge of all the churches in a particular area;

peer: (vb. intr.) to look very carefully at something, especially because you are having difficulty seeing it; (n., countable, usually plural) 1. your peers are the people who are the same age as you, or who have the same type of job, social class; 2. a member of a British Nobility;

Peerage: (n.) (the...) all the British peers considered as a group;

(countable) the rank of a British peer;

speaker: 1.(n. someone who makes a formal speech to a group of people; 2. an official who controls discussions in a parliament; 3.the politician who controls discussions in the House of Representatives in the US Congress;

taxation: 1.(n.) the system of charging taxes; 2. money collected from taxes;

expenditures: (n.) 1.the total amount of money that a government, organization, or person spends during a particular period of time (income); 2. the action of spending or using time, money, energy, etc.;

provided that: (conj.) used to say that something will only be possible if something else happens or is done;

to elapse: vb. (intr.) if a particular period of time elapses, it passes;

to enable: (vb. tr.) to make it possible for someone to do something, or for something to happen;

to prosecute: (vb. tr. and intr.) 1. to charge someone with a crime and try to show that they are guilty of it in a court of law; 2. if a lawyer prosecutes a case, he or she tries to prove that the person charged with a crime is guilty (defend);

to allege: (vb. tr., often passive) to say that something is true or that someone has done something wrong, although it has not been proved;

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pledge: (n.) a serious promise or agreement, especially one made publicly or officially;

to constrain: (vb. tr.) 1. to stop someone from doing what they want to do; 2. to limit something;

constraint: (n.) something that limits your freedom to do what you want, (restriction);

defeat: (n.) 1. failure to win or succeed; 2. victory over someone or something;

to defy: (vb. tr.) 1. to refuse to obey a law or rule, or refuse to do what someone in authority tells you to do; 2. to not happen according to the principles you would expect;

to deprive: phrasal vb.) to prevent someone from having something, especially something that they need or should have;

to elect: (vb. tr.) 1. to choose someone for an official position by voting; 2. to choose to do something;

to outline: (vb. tr.) 1. to describe something in a general way, without any details; 2. to show the edge of something;

severance: (n.) when you end your relationship or connection with another person, because of a disagreement;

to renew: (vb. tr.) 1. to arrange for an agreement or official document to continue for a further period of time; 2. to begin doing something again after a period of not doing it;

lower: (adj.) 1. below something else, especially below something of the same type; 2. at or near the bottom of something; 3. smaller in number or amount; 4. less important than something else of the same type;

grievance: (n) a belief that you have been treated unfairly, or an unfair situation or event that affects and upsets;

commitment: (n) 1. a promise to do something or to behave in a particular way; 2. the hard work and loyalty that someone gives to an organization, activity, etc.;

to compel: (vb. tr.) 1. to force someone to do something; 2. to make people have a particular feeling or attitude;

to override: (vb. tr.) 1. to use your power or authority to change someone else's decision; 2. to be regarded as more important than something else;

to delay: (vb. intr. and tr.) 1. to wait until a later time to do something; (tr.) 2. to make someone or something late;

revenue: (n) 1. money that a business or organization receives over a period of time, especially from selling goods or services; 2. money that the government receives from tax;

constituency: (B.E.) 1. an area of a country that elects a representative to a parliament; 2. the people who live and vote in a particular area; 3. any group that supports or is likely to support a politician or a political party;