



PARLIAMENT AND THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

OPPOSITION DAYS

Opposition days allow the opposition parties in the House of Commons to determine the topic for debate rather than the Government. There are usually about 20 opposition days in a parliamentary session, with the Official Opposition party being allocated 17 days.

THE RIGHT TO VOTE

UK citizens over the age of 18 can vote in parliamentary elections.

Parliament and democracy

Parliament is made up of three parts: The House of Commons, the House of Lords and the Sovereign.

In the House of Commons, Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected as part of the democratic process. Following a general election, the political party with the most MPs forms the Government.

Members of the House of Lords are mostly appointed by the Sovereign on the recommendation of the Prime Minister; some are internally elected. A small number of Church of England archbishops and bishops are also Members.

The Sovereign fulfils a formal and ceremonial role, approving Royal Assent for bills and attending the State Opening of Parliament.

Parliament and Government

Parliament and Government are separate institutions. They work closely together but have distinct roles.

The Government is responsible for running the country, implementing policy and drafting laws. Parliament is responsible for checking the Government's work, making and amending laws and representing the people.

After a general election, the party leader who commands a majority in the House of Commons, is asked to form a Government by the Sovereign and is appointed Prime Minister. This MP is usually the leader of the largest political party.

The Prime Minister recommends ministers for formal appointment by the Sovereign.

Ministers run their government departments and propose new legislation by presenting bills to Parliament.

The main business for debate in Parliament is, in general, decided by the party whips (often referred to as *the usual channels*) though this is dominated in the Commons by the government whips. This ensures that the Government can implement the policies it was elected to carry out.

Roles of the House of Commons Scrutinising Government

The House of Commons scrutinises government policies to ensure that the Government is working for the benefit of those living in the UK. This scrutiny includes:

- MPs questioning government ministers, either in the House or through written parliamentary questions. This process helps to inform MPs of the work of Government and to hold ministers to account.
- Select committees which 'shadow' government departments and carry out inquiries into issues of concern. The Government is required to provide witnesses and evidence for inquiries and must respond to committee recommendations.

- MPs debating issues in the House and questioning ministers when they make statements.

Proposing and amending legislation

Parliament is responsible for making laws. Most legislation comes from the Government but proposals can originate from an MP, a Lord, a member of the public or a private group. The House of Commons and House of Lords must agree the text of any proposed legislation before it can become law.

Representing the people

The UK is divided into areas, called constituencies, each of which elects a single MP to represent them in Parliament.

All residents of a constituency can contact the local MP about issues that affect them or that are being considered by Parliament. It does not matter whether they voted for the MP or even if they are entitled to vote at all.

Taxation

As the democratically elected part of Parliament, the House of Commons has the right to raise taxes. This provides the Government with money to deliver its policies. The Chancellor of the Exchequer presents the Budget to the House annually and the House passes a Finance Act to approve the taxes.

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