

INTRODUCTION TO THE UK

Elements of history

The Magna Carta is significant because it established the principle that everyone, including the king, is subject to the law.

1707: Act of Union => Scotland and Wales become part of Great Britain

1921: Act of Union => Scotland and Wales become part of the UK

Capital cities:

- Scotland: Edinburgh
- Wales: Cardiff
- Northern Ireland: Belfast

1926: birth of the British Commonwealth

1947: India was the first country to gain independence from Britain

1998: The Good Friday Agreement, aka the Belfast Agreement, brings an end to 30 years of violent conflict in Northern Ireland, known as the Troubles

2016: Brexit Referendum

2020: Brexit takes effect

2022: The mini-budget introduced by the Government of Boris Johnson, who faced a vote of no confidence, and the subsequent financial turmoil triggered a succession of short-lived UK Prime Ministers

Political system

The UK is:

- A parliamentary democracy
- A representative democracy
- A constitutional monarchy

Supreme legislative body of the UK: the (Westminster) Parliament

Higher chamber => The House of Lords:

- Appointed
- 800+ members
- 92 hereditary peers

- Life Peers in the House of Lords are appointed by the monarch on the advice of the Prime Minister
- Bishops in the House of Lords are Lords by right but not hold a seat for life
- The Lord Speaker presides over the debates
- Powers = scrutinize and review legislation by debating it clause by clause and propose amendments

Lower chamber => The House of Commons:

- Elected
- The Speaker of the House of Commons maintains order during debates
- 650
- Hold their seats until Parliament is dissolved

How a bill becomes law: approval by the House of Commons > approval by the House of Lords > Royal Assent

Political parties in the opposition today:

- The Conservatives led by Kemi Badenoch
- Reform UK led by Nigel Farage
- The Greens
- The Lib-Dems
- The SNP (Scottish National Party) led by John Swinney
- Sinn Féin led by Mary Lou McDonald

Main powers of the monarch:

- Influence the government only by consulting with the Prime Minister and formally appointing ministers BUT supposed to be publicly apolitical
- Can refuse to appoint of Prime Minister (PM)
- Grants Royal Assent
- Represents the UK in foreign affairs (but cannot negotiate treaties)
- Serves as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces
- Performs the State Opening of Parliament
- Troops the Colour

The Monarch reigns (head of state) while the PM rules (head of government)

Current PM = Keir Starmer (elected in July 2024)

Key responsibilities of the PM:

- Running the country and making policy decisions
- Leading the government and appointing ministers

Current Chancellor of the Exchequer = Rachel Reeves

Current Home Secretary = Shabana Mahmood

Key concepts

Great Britain = England + Scotland + Wales

The United Kingdom = England + Scotland + Wales + Northern Ireland

Commonwealth = the community of 56 countries born between Britain and the Dominions

Commonwealth Games = sports competition that is held every 4 years, also known as “the Friendly Games”

The Troubles = ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland that lasted for about 30 years from the late 1960s to 1998

Constitutional monarchy = a system where the monarch shares power with a constitutionally organized government / A parliamentary democracy with a ceremonial monarch

Devolution = process by which certain powers are transferred from the UK Parliament to regional governments, such as those in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland

MP = Member of Parliament

Private Member's Bill = a proposal for new legislation introduced by a member who is not a government minister

Crossbencher peer = a member of the House of Lords who does not belong to any political party and contributes based on their expertise

Backbenchers = MPs who do not hold government office or shadow government positions

Frontbenchers = either a Government minister or an Opposition shadow spokesperson

Select committee = group that investigates specific issues and reports their findings to the House

Opposition = Political parties not in government, holding the government accountable

First reading = initial stage of a bill's passage, where it is introduced without debate

Question time = period during which MPs can question government ministers, including the Prime Minister, about their work and policies

Whip = party official responsible for maintaining party discipline and ensuring that MPs attend and vote according to the party line

General election = periodic election, held every 5 years, in which Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected to the House of Commons

Privy Council = formal body of advisers to the monarch

King's Speech = speech that outlines the government's agenda and priorities for the forthcoming year

Cabinet = group of senior government ministers responsible for making major policy decisions

Hansard = official transcript of debates in Parliament

Green Paper = discussion document that presents proposals for new legislation

By-election = election held to fill a vacant seat between general elections

Snap election = election called earlier than the scheduled date

Tactical voting = voting for a candidate with a better chance of winning over the preferred choice

Hung Parliament = no single party has an outright majority

Mini-budget = significant economic plan introduced by the government

Vote of no confidence = vote that, if passed, indicates that the government no longer has the support of Parliament

Hard Brexit = the UK leaves the EU with no trade agreement

Soft Brexit = the UK retains close ties with the EU, potentially staying in the single market

Northern Ireland Protocol = part of the Brexit agreement to prevent a hard border with Ireland

Chancellor of the Exchequer = the UK government official responsible for economic and financial matters

The Firm = the informal title for the British royal family and its associated institutions, including the courtiers, staff and working royals that keep the business of the monarchy functioning