

How Our Parliament Works

A Guided Tour of the UK's Democratic Engine



This guide demystifies the people, processes, and power structures at the heart of the United Kingdom's legislative system.

Parliament vs. Government: Different Jobs, Same Country

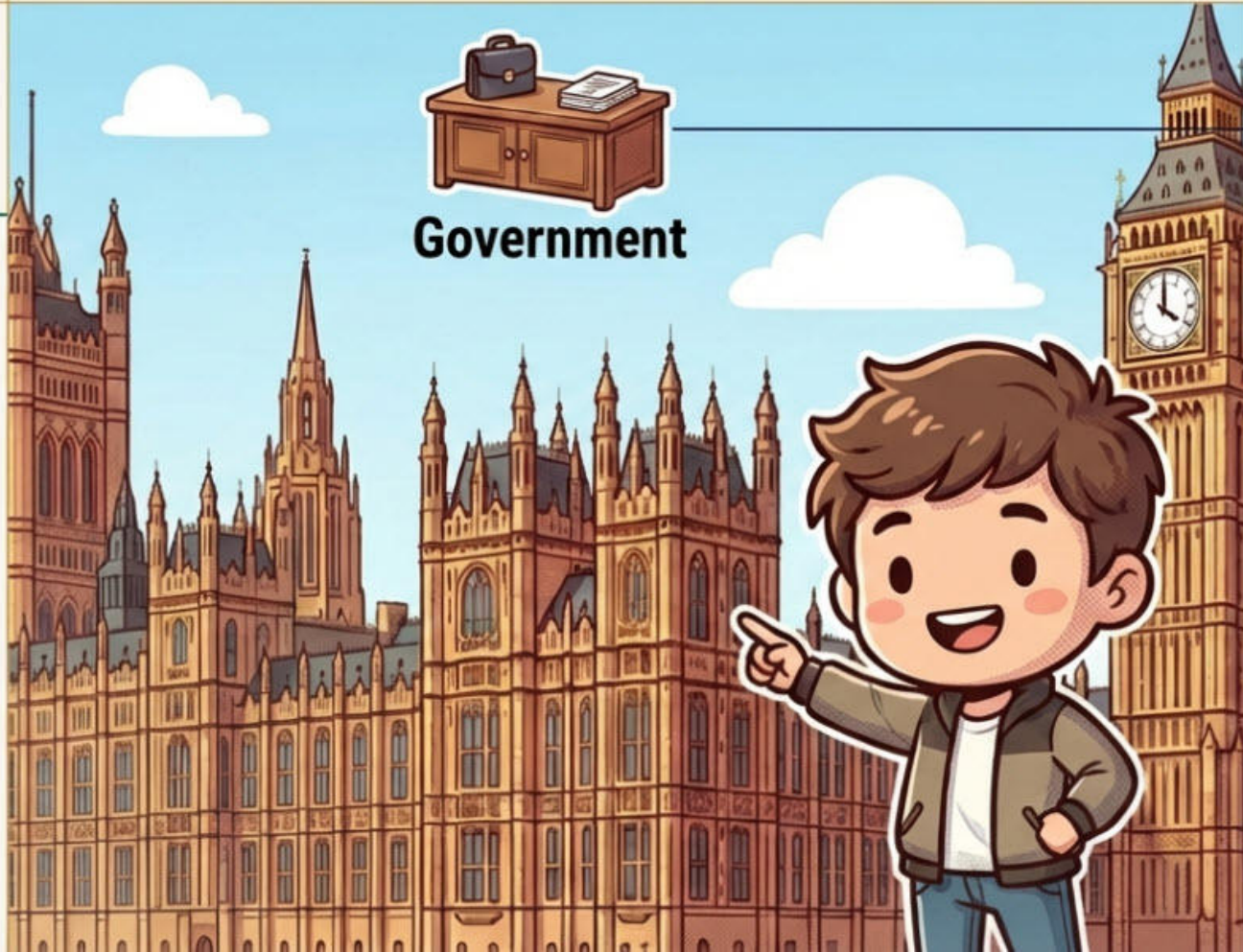


Parliament debates and scrutinises. Its job is to represent the voters, make and review laws, and hold the Government to account.

Parliament is made up of the House of Commons and the House of Lords.



Government



Government's Role

Government proposes and delivers!
It runs the country and is responsible for developing and implementing policy and for drafting laws.

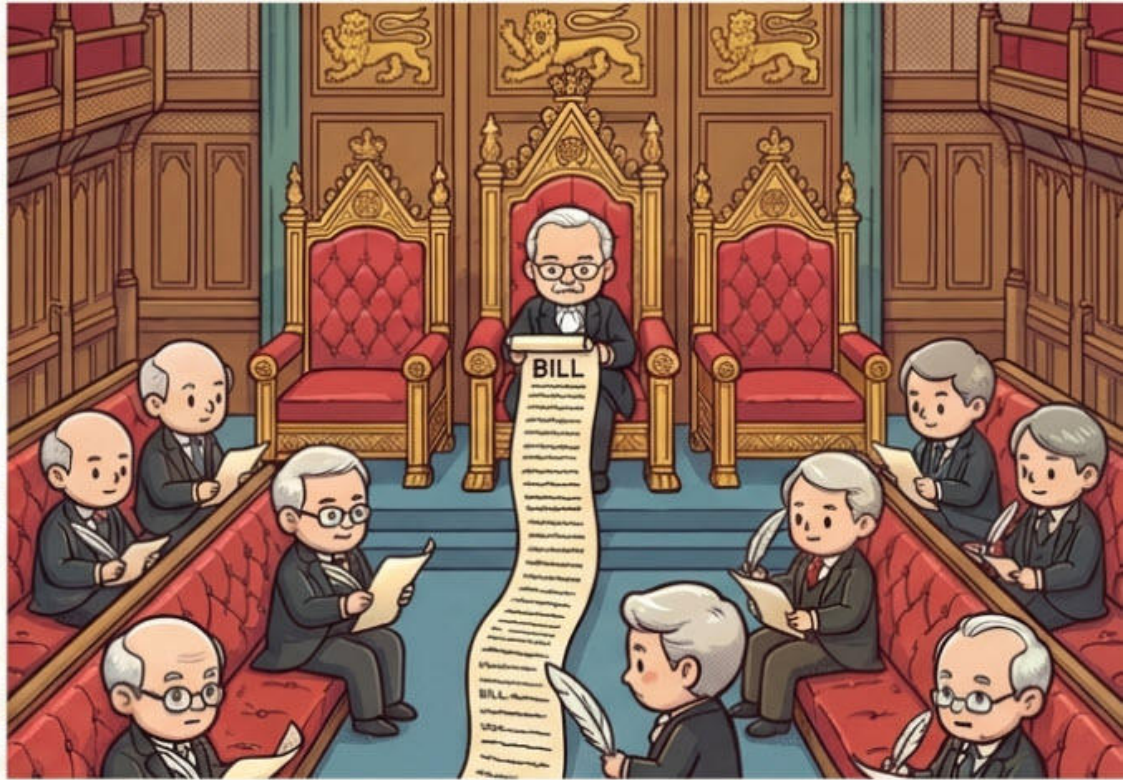
The Government is formed by the party (or parties) that can command a majority in the House of Commons.

Two Houses, One System: Commons Debates, Lords Revises



The House of Commons

- Comprised of 650 elected Members of Parliament (MPs).
- The primary chamber for debate, representing the will of the people and deciding on major issues.



The House of Lords

- Comprised of appointed, hereditary, and expert members.
- The revising chamber, using its members' expertise to scrutinise and improve legislation passed by the Commons.

Teamwork makes better laws.

The Leaders & Teams You'll See in the Commons

Insight

Seat numbers can change via by-elections & suspensions.



Sir Keir Starmer
(PM)

Kemi Badenoch
(Leader)

Sir Ed Davey
(Liberal Democrat)

Stephen Flynn
(Westminster Leader)

Nigel Farage
(Leader)

Green MPs

Organised Chaos: The Roles That Keep Parliament Running

The Speaker

The impartial referee. The Speaker keeps order during debates and is politically neutral.

Frontbench

The leadership teams. Includes Ministers (Government) and their opposite numbers (Shadow Cabinet).

Backbench

The voice of the constituencies. MPs who are not ministers or shadow ministers. They raise local issues and scrutinise from the backbenches.

Whips

The party managers. Whips are responsible for party discipline, ensuring MPs attend and vote as the party leadership desires.



Keeping Ministers on Their Toes: The Weekly Rhythm of Accountability



Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs)

A weekly session where MPs can question the Prime Minister on any subject. It is the centrepiece of the parliamentary week.

Ministerial Questions

Daily sessions where MPs question ministers from specific government departments.

Urgent Questions

If an urgent matter arises, the Speaker can grant a question that a minister must answer on the same day.

Ministerial Statements

Ministers make important announcements to the House, which are then debated.

The illustration depicts the legislative process in three horizontal tracks. The top track shows a bill being drafted by three people at a table, then presented to a committee of three, and finally to a group of three people reviewing a large document labeled 'BILL'. The middle track shows a group of five people at a table, followed by a man speaking at a podium with two people cheering, and then a group of five people sitting around a table. The bottom track shows a group of five people in royal robes at a table, followed by a group of three people holding a large document labeled 'MP', and finally the monarch signing a large document labeled 'Act of Parliament' while a boy points at it.

room101.wtf

A Bill's Journey: The Stages in Both Houses



1. Drafting

Civil servants and lawyers draft the proposed bill based on government policy.



2. First Reading

A formal introduction. The bill's title is read out in the chamber, but no debate occurs.



3. Second Reading

The first major hurdle. The main principles of the bill are debated by all MPs. A vote is taken to decide if it should proceed.



4. Committee Stage

Deep dive. A smaller committee of MPs scrutinises the bill line-by-line, taking evidence and proposing amendments.



5. Report Stage

The amended bill is reported back to the whole House. All MPs can debate and vote on the amendments.



6. Third Reading

The final debate on the amended bill. A final vote is taken to pass or reject it.



7. Lords Stages

The entire process (from Second Reading onwards) is repeated in the House of Lords, where their expertise is used to revise and improve the bill.



8. Consideration of Amendments

If the Lords makes changes, the bill returns to the Commons to accept or reject them. This can go back and forth in a process known as 'ping pong.'



9. Royal Assent

The final formality. The Monarch's approval is granted, and the Bill becomes an Act of Parliament.

The Deep Dive Detectives: Scrutiny Beyond the Chamber

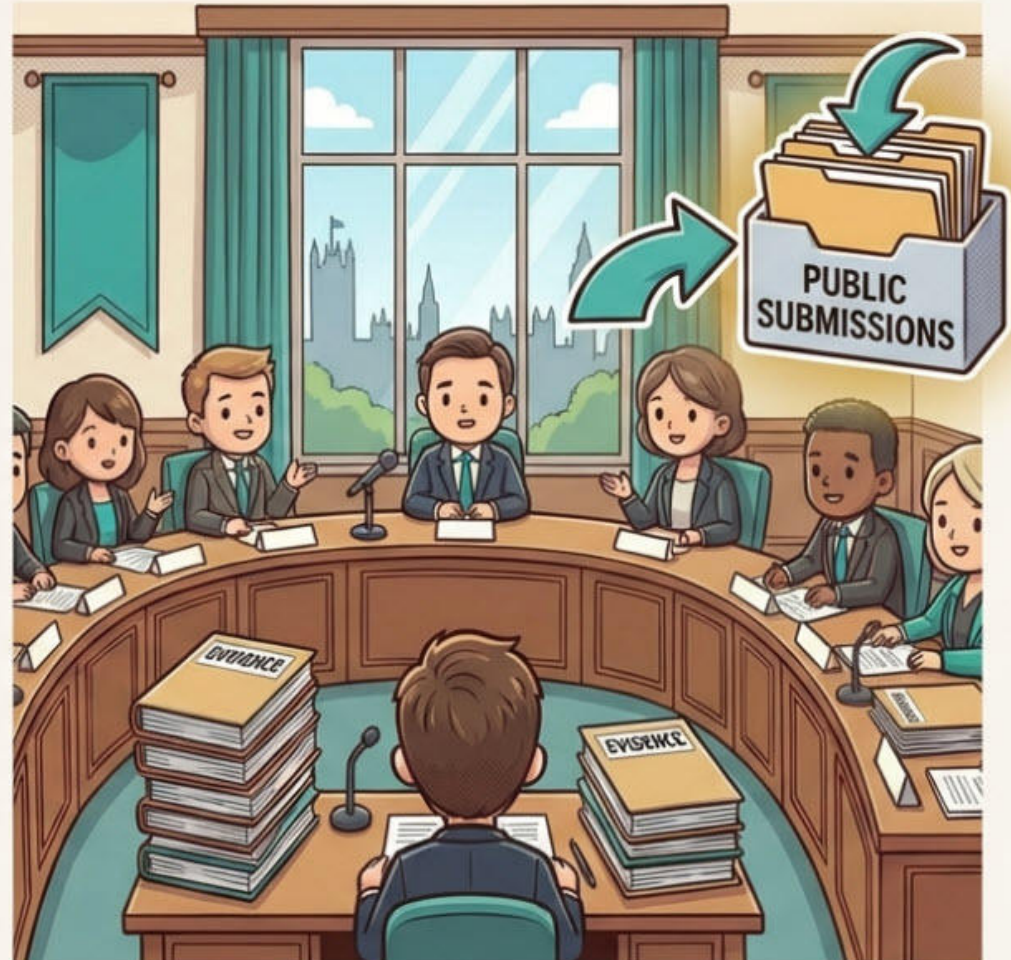
What are Select Committees?

Cross-party groups of MPs (Commons), Lords, or both (Joint) that shadow specific government departments or examine key issues. Their job is to scrutinise the work and spending of the government.

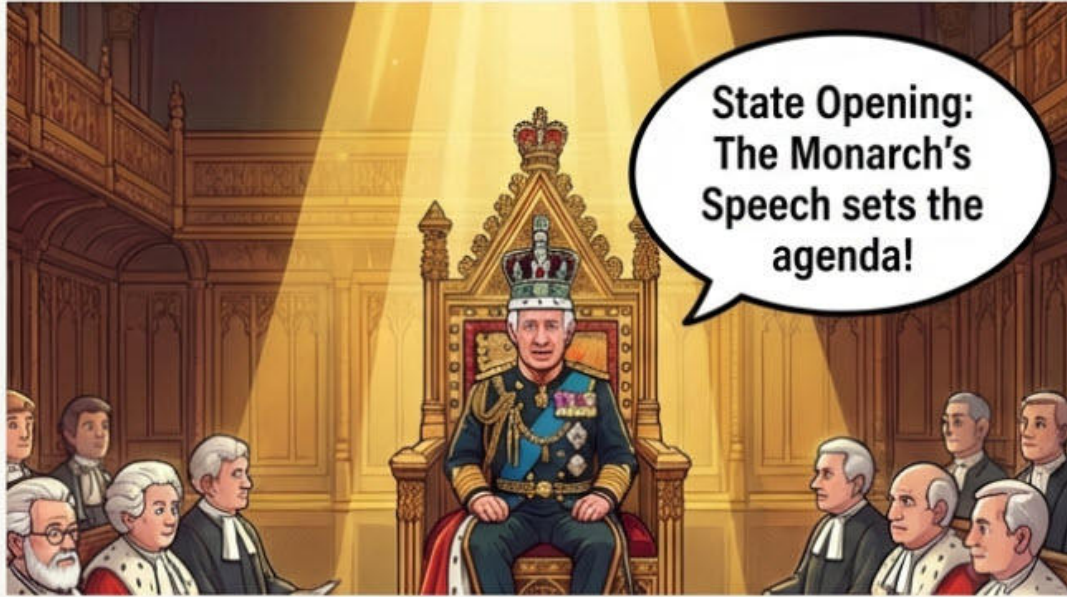
How do they work?

- They gather written and oral evidence from experts, officials, and the public.
- They hold hearings to question ministers and other key witnesses.
- They publish reports with findings and recommendations that the government is expected to respond to.

'Committees hold the government to account!' and crucially, 'The public can submit evidence.'



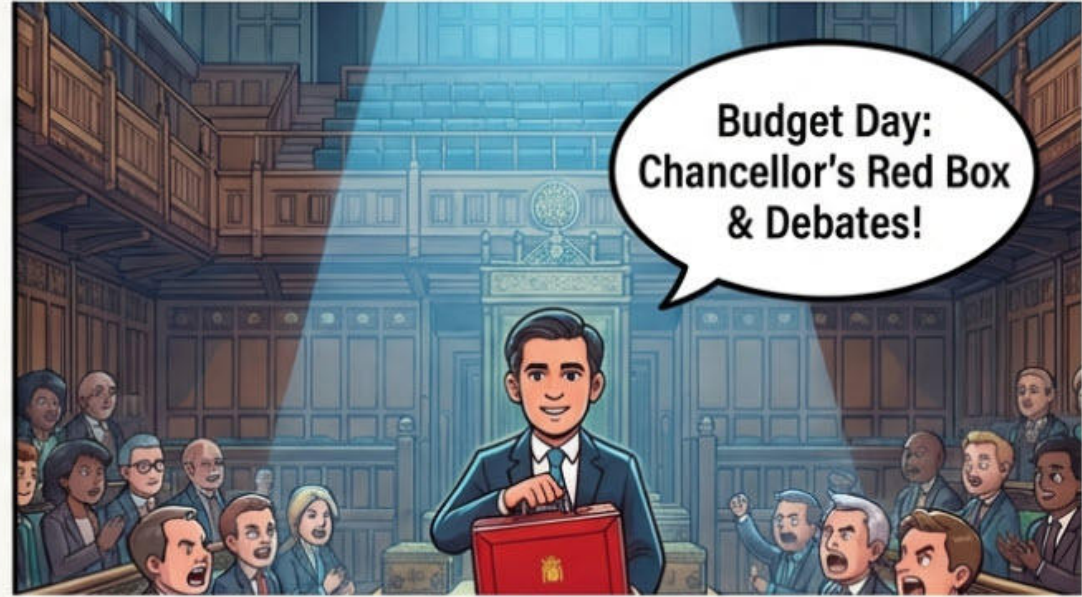
Ceremony Meets Substance: Key Moments in the Parliamentary Year



Event 1: State Opening of Parliament

What it is: The formal start of the parliamentary session.

Key Moment: The Monarch's Speech, which is written by the government and sets out its legislative agenda for the coming year.



Event 2: Budget Day

What it is: The Chancellor of the Exchequer's major annual financial statement.

Key Moment: The Chancellor outlines the government's plans for taxation and public spending, carrying the iconic Red Box. This is followed by days of debate.

Other Key Terms

The calendar is punctuated by **sessions**, which are the periods of parliamentary work, ending with **prorogation** (formal suspension). Parliament can also be **recalled** during a recess for urgent matters.

Your Voice Matters: How to Engage with Your Parliament



1. Write to Your MP

Your local MP is your direct representative. You can contact them about any issue, local or national.

Find your MP
online and
get in touch!



2. Create or Sign an e-petition

Petitions on the official Parliament website that reach 10,000 signatures get a government response. Those that reach 100,000 are considered for debate in Parliament.



3. Get Involved

Visit Parliament to watch a debate, submit evidence to a select committee, or follow proceedings online.

Find your MP and get involved!



Parliament is a Living Conversation

The debates in the chambers, the scrutiny in committees, and the laws that are made are not distant events. They are part of an ongoing national conversation about how we are governed. By understanding how it works, you can become an active part of that conversation. Your voice provides the perspective, challenge, and consent that keeps our democracy alive.