

# 12

## **Pomp and Circumstance: the Living Dead of the Constitution**

In this chapter we meet the more ornate parts of the constitution, the parts visitors come to see and which are shown on the postcards they send home. These include the monarchy with its robes, jewels and golden coaches, and the Palace of Westminster housing the two chambers of Parliament – the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Here we see much flummery lovingly preserved from bygone ages, a celebration of the much-vaunted continuity of the British constitution. However, although as lifeless as the waxworks at Madame Tussaud's, like the mystic ritual of high church and courts, the ceremonial is by no means without significance. It induces respect and reverence for authority; it is the living dead of the constitution.

### **The physical setting**

Parliament formally comprises the monarchy and two legislative chambers – the House of Lords and House of Commons – with their very tangible presence as the picturesque Palace of Westminster. One of the major landmarks of London, situated grandly on the bank of the Thames at the end of Whitehall, it is a popular tourist destination, around a million visitors a year queuing to be conducted on guided tours and purchase trinkets marked with the prestigious portcullis logo (also found on its official notepaper).

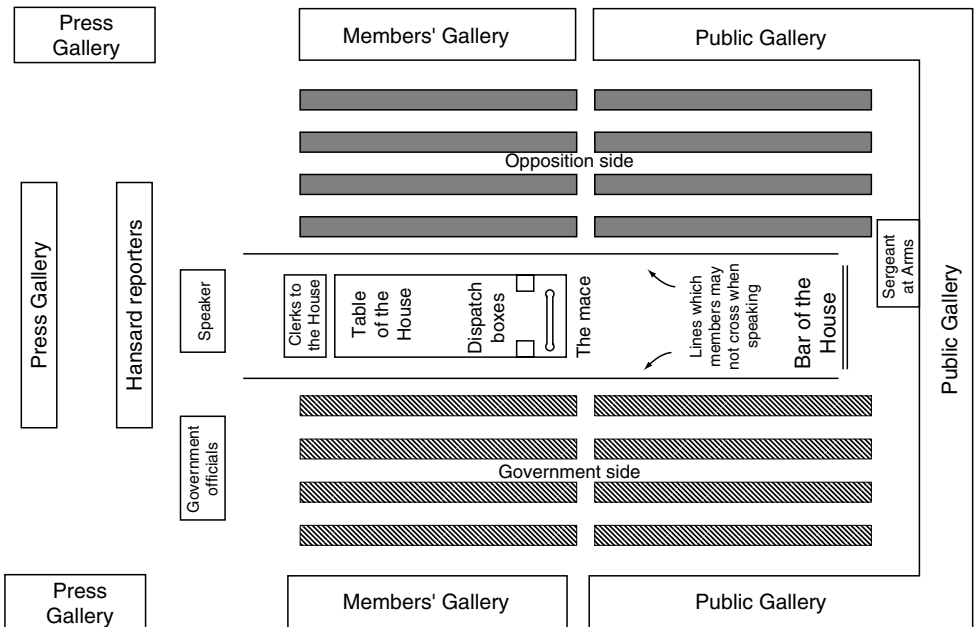
The beautiful architecture is not merely ornamental, it is deeply symbolic. Following severe damage by fire in 1834, it was restored in the Gothic

style to reflect the belief that Britain's civil liberties stemmed from medieval achievements. The two chambers have a cathedral-like aura, intimidating all but the initiated. Around them a labyrinth of corridors, quadrangles and staircases leads to offices, committee rooms, smoking-rooms, tea-rooms, and of course bars. MPs can be seen variously talking in intimate clusters, meeting groups of eager constituents, playing host to interest-group representatives or lobbyists, or lying low in places of refreshment trying to avoid such encounters.

The chambers are surprisingly small and could not seat all members if they were to descend simultaneously. This is quite deliberate; another opportunity to rebuild was presented by the German Luftwaffe in 1941 but the decision was taken to retain the sense of intimacy conducive to debate. Unlike most chambers, the benches are arrayed in a confrontational manner (figure 12.1) and, in the Commons, the front ranks are two swords lengths apart, commemorating an age when the thrust and parry of debate could be more than figurative.

### The evolution of Parliament

The three elements of Parliament represent the great estates of the realm which have fought over the centuries for control of the state: the Crown, the aristocracy and the common people. Its origins lie in the assembly of Anglo-



**Figure 12.1**  
Chamber of the House of Commons.

Saxon kings which met as the *Witangemot*. In Norman times kings governed assisted only by their officials, although the country was divided into territorial units ruled by barons whom the kings would summon as the *Magnum Concilium* for discussion, advice and to raise money. The barons demanded more control, securing this through the Magna Carta signed at Runnymede in 1215. Herein lies the origin of the House of Lords.

The House of Commons was conceived in the kingly practice, from the thirteenth century, of calling additional meetings of the less-important local representatives, the commoners (knights from the shires and burgesses from the incorporated towns), as a further source of revenue. They would assemble humbly before the monarch, who would tell them how much was required and dispatch them to find it, leaving the aristocracy to discuss important matters of state. However, the Commons, recognizing its potential power, began making demands. When expensive wars forced Edward III (1327–77) to summon frequent parliaments, they took the opportunity to attach a list of reforms when accepting the tax demands. At the beginning of the fifteenth century Henry IV agreed that grants of money would only be initiated in the Commons, recognizing the lower house as part of Parliament.

This hold over the purse-strings saw the gradual erosion of the monarch's position. Coming soon after the profligate Henry VIII (1509–47), Elizabeth I (1558–1603) recognized the reality and was careful to court Parliament. However, the Stuarts lacked the Tudors' realism and Charles I sought to govern without parliamentary consent by raising taxes directly from towns ('ship money'). By this time the Commons had become powerful enough to oppose him and events led to the Civil War (1642–6) between the Royalists (Cavaliers) and the parliamentarians (Roundheads). It resulted in Charles losing not just the Crown but a head upon which to rest it. Britain entered upon a brief period as a **republic** (1649–60) with the Puritan Oliver Cromwell supreme as 'Lord Protector'.

The Restoration in 1660 saw Charles II return in glory from exile but things were to be different. He was a *constitutional monarch*, constrained by Parliament. The anniversary of his father's execution was marked by a grizzly ceremony in which Cromwell's disinterred corpse was hung on the infamous gallows at Tyburn. Yet James II could not accept the limitations and further skirmishes culminated in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which placed William (of Orange) and Mary (daughter of James II) on the English throne, their powers clearly restricted in the 1689 Bill of Rights. It was not until the 1701 Act of Settlement that the subordinate position of the monarchy was satisfactorily established, made easier by the fact that the Hanoverian line (established in 1714) had little interest in British affairs.

The upper house had also been abolished during the republic and was reinstated at the Restoration. In the 1689 settlement the Commons concerned itself with commerce while the Lords attended to affairs of state, including foreign policy, subject to the convention that money supply was in the sole gift

I would rather  
hew wood than  
be a king under  
the condition of  
the king of  
England.

Charles X of  
France  
(1757–1836)

of the Commons. However, the Commons remained under the control of aristocratic and royal factions, both exercising a corrupt influence on elections and nominations. It was the great nineteenth-century Reform Acts that delivered the *coup de grâce*, through the moral authority given to the Commons by the popular vote.

Yet the message was not immediately clear to their lordships. In 1883 they rejected the second Irish Home Rule Bill and the reforming Liberal government of 1905 found eighteen of its bills rejected. Matters came to a head when Chancellor Lloyd George, needing £16 million in extra revenue to finance the planned social programme as well as build *Dreadnought* battleships, determined that the money should come principally from taxing the landed interests, against whom he had been conducting a campaign. His 1909 'People's Budget' was rejected by the Lords, precipitating a constitutional crisis in which a reluctant monarch, weakened by 'four gargantuan meals a day together with endless wine, brandy, whisky and cigars' (Cross 1963: 106), was told he might be forced to create sufficient new government-supporting peers to swamp their lordships' opposition. The outcome was the 1911 Parliament Act, which not only legalized the convention regarding financial legislation but reduced the Lords' veto over other legislation to a power to delay for two years (shortened to a year in 1949 by the Labour government, nearing the end of its life and fearful of the fate of its steel nationalization bill).

## The Monarchy

**Constitutional monarchy** means that although the Queen may be said to *reign*, she does not *rule*. Perhaps the monarchy's last dying gasps were heard under Victoria. Initially influenced by her consort Albert (who took his authority seriously) and later encouraged by the flattering Disraeli, she made several efforts to exert the royal prerogative. It was the lot of the austere Gladstone to school the Queen in her role and cut the modern pattern of British democratic kingship (Magnus 1963: 42–7). Today the monarch formally continues to hold hundreds of prerogative powers, the extent and scope of which are largely determined by convention. They range widely, covering appointments, legislation, emergency powers, and summoning and proroguing Parliament, but are generally exercised on advice (usually prime ministerial) and conflict has been rare since the beginning of the twentieth century.

*Why study the monarchy?* Some commentaries on British politics and sociology omit the monarchy. This may be intended to betoken a jettisoning of meaningless symbolism in order to focus on the world of reality but it is a mistake, betraying a short-sighted and superficial vision. The monarchy affects modern politics by being a significant element in political culture.

The use of the Queen, in a dignified capacity, is incalculable. Without her in England, the present English government would fail and pass away.

Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (1867: ch. 2)

## Characteristics of the monarchy today

Today Buckingham Palace, the main royal residence, stands at the end of the Mall in some 40 acres of gardens. Together with Horse Guards' Parade, Westminster Abbey and the Palace of Westminster, all within a cannon's shot of each other, it is part of a baroque Disneyland of the past, gradually becoming overgrown by a towering office-block jungle. Inside the palace, courtiers and flunkys, with titles and sometimes costumes of a bygone age, perform the tasks of running the monarchy industry. Many are themselves nobly born and treasure their families' links with the sovereign, passing the positions down through the generations. Today's monarchy is distinguished by certain characteristics.

**Hereditary** No one votes for the British Head of State. Although faltering from time to time, the succession is based on inheritance, Elizabeth II being the fortieth monarch since the Norman Conquest.

**Ceremony** While Britain is not alone as a constitutional monarchy (Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Denmark and Norway are the same), it is unique in the degree to which the pomp and ceremonial have been preserved. (The Scandinavian royals have been slightly dubbed 'bicycling monarchies' because of their exorcism of ostentation.) The British monarchy, although never able to match the French in its extravagant prime, can on great occasions in the royal life-cycle (births, weddings and funerals) reach a scale only matched in Hollywood epics.

**Political neutrality** Although informed on a weekly basis by the prime minister, the Queen remains above the political fray. She does not vote; neither is she expected to express partisan opinions.

**Familial** Like the Mitchells of the East End or the Archers of Ambridge, the Windsors of Belgravia present to the public an extended family supported by a galaxy of bit players. Indeed, the Queen was faced with a similar challenge to that of Snow White's mother, her personal popularity (measured as 'the member of the royal family you would most like to meet') falling from 34 per cent in 1981 to 19 per cent in 1987, while the Princess of Wales became fairest of all.

*Expense* The monarchy does not come cheap. In 1761 George III agreed to surrender the income from the Crown Estate (worth some £95 million a year today) in exchange for a regular grant from Parliament – the Civil List – to cover expenditure relating to the monarch’s official duties. Although remaining constant for a considerable time, it was revised under Elizabeth II to keep pace with inflation. Other expenses include the upkeep of five palaces and the travel costs of up to 2,500 official engagements annually, which are met by Grants-in-Aid from Parliament. One of the most ostentatious sources of expenditure was the royal yacht *Britannia*, which was not replaced under New Labour government.

In addition there is the Privy Purse, primarily used to cover official expenditure not met from the Civil List. The Queen’s private expenditure is met from her own considerable personal fortune, its precise size subject to much speculation. Estimates of £100 million and upwards in 1993 were said by the Lord Chamberlain to be ‘grossly overstated’. Although her property includes two royal residences, Sandringham and Balmoral, certain ‘inalienable’ items are held not as private property but on behalf of the nation (though most of the nation will never see them). These include the internationally renowned art collection, heirlooms in the Queen’s jewellery collection and the Crown Jewels.

For long the Queen’s income was exempt from tax and death duties, giving her a touch similar to that of King Midas and enabling her to outdistance all aristocratic rivals (some of whom, even after the second world war, were actually richer than the king). While they were collecting the tickets for the exhibitions and zoos on their estates, the wealth in the royal coffers continued to grow. When part of Windsor Castle (which was not insured) was destroyed by fire in November 1992, the Conservative government’s immediate response was to shoulder the £50-million repair burden. However, this uncharacteristic generosity with taxpayers’ money provoked controversy, and from 1993 the Queen joined her subjects as clients of her tax inspectors. The money for the restoration was raised by opening Buckingham Palace to a fee-paying public. In addition, the Civil List was cut to the bone, leaving only the Queen herself, the Duke of Edinburgh and the Queen Mother. A city accountant became guardian of the royal finances. The parliamentary annuities paid to the remaining members of the royal family to enable them to carry out official duties (totalling some £1.5 million) are now repaid to the Treasury by the Queen. In 2000, she agreed that the Civil List should be frozen until 2011 at the 1990 level of £7.9 million. However, further controversy followed the Queen Mother’s death in 2002, when the contents of the will were not revealed and no death duties paid.

*Popularity* Before the second world war, shaken by the abdication crisis, the future of the monarchy was uncertain, but the war itself and the post-war era, with the coronation, weddings, many royal offspring and even dramatic marital disasters, saw the public appetite for its ‘dignified’ constitution grow to gargantuan dimensions. The period following the death of Princess Diana in

1997 led to a belief that the Queen's popularity was plummeting, but 200,000 were to file past the Queen Mother's coffin as it lay in state in Westminster Hall in April 2002, while around a million lined the streets for the funeral procession. The Golden Jubilee celebrations of 2002 saw thousands at concerts in Buckingham Palace, while millions turned out around the country as the Queen proceeded on her jubilee tour, confounding predictions that the event would prove an embarrassing flop.

If Her Majesty stood for Parliament – if the Tory Party had any sense and made her its leader instead of that grammar school twit Heath – us Tories, mate, would win every election we went in for.

Alf Garnett, in Johnny Speight's TV series *Till Death us do Part*

## The functions of the monarchy

The monarch's functions are both practical and symbolic, including the following.

- ◆ *Ceremonial.* The expectations of British kingcraft were virtually defined by Walter Bagehot in 1867. He argued that 'the masses of Englishmen are not fit for an elective government; if they knew how near they were to it, they would be surprised and almost tremble' (1963: 97). The monarchy was the keystone in the dignified facade concealing the real processes of government from the uncomprehending masses (particularly women).
- ◆ *Symbol of national unity.* As a tangible object of veneration the monarch can symbolize the unity of society in a way that a party leader cannot. Patriotism can become xenophobia and it may be prudent if it can be channelled off in support of a constitutional icon.
- ◆ *Head of the armed forces.* Members of the royal family frequently hold ceremonial military ranks and the armed forces and police are constitutionally servants of the Crown, supposedly symbolizing their independence from politics.
- ◆ *Head of the Commonwealth.* This is an area where the Queen's authority is not controlled by the prime minister. Indeed, it was widely reported in 1987 that she was displeased by Thatcher's opposition to sanctions against apartheid South Africa.
- ◆ *Head of state.* Monarchy or not, any system of government requires a large element of formality, from entertaining foreign leaders to opening hospitals and presenting awards. Without a sovereign, the role of Head of State falls on elected leaders, perhaps fattening their egos or removing them from real politics.

- ◆ *Fidei defensor*. The Reformation established the Anglican Church with the monarch at its head as ‘defender of the faith’. Many royal ceremonies have a religious nature, including the coronation itself. However, with increasing multiculturalism Prince Charles has spoken of being the defender of the *faiths* and in June 2002 the shoeless and garlanded Queen paid her first visit to a Hindu temple during her jubilee tour.
- ◆ *Virtual regality*. It can be argued that the royal family can add colour to the lives of people with otherwise drab existences, thereby helping to maintain social stability.
- ◆ *Moral leadership*. The presentation of the monarchy as a family has been seen as a basis for giving the public a moral example.

*The throne behind the power* Beyond the largely ceremonial functions is the possibility that monarchs can exert real influence. Unlike prime ministers they are not troubled by popular opinion, elections, party infighting and rivals for power. Enjoying office for as long as they remain alive, their experience can be a source of wisdom. Although believing a republic had insinuated itself beneath the folds of a monarchy, Bagehot asserted a famous trio of royal rights: to be consulted, to encourage and to warn. In 1884 even Gladstone formally thanked Queen Victoria for her ‘wise, gracious and steady exercise of influence’ (Magnus 1963). When Elizabeth II celebrated fifty years on the throne in 2002, she had worked with ten different prime ministers, giving her more experience of public life than any political figure. This influence is likely to be greatest over non-ideological issues (Bogdanor 1996a), particularly the Commonwealth, a point borne out by former prime minister James Callaghan:

the Queen’s initiative on Rhodesia [openly disapproving of Ian Smith’s declaration of UDI] was a perfect illustration of how and when the Monarch could effectively intervene to advise and encourage her Ministers . . . with complete constitutional propriety. (Callaghan 1987: 382)

Moreover, in conditions of constitutional crisis powers may go beyond Bagehot’s modest assessment. Few would deny that the monarch would be justified in intervening if events ‘subverted the democratic basis of the Constitution’ (Jennings 1959: 412). Even in less dramatic circumstances the powers to dissolve Parliament and appoint the prime minister could become real. Although no dissolution request has been refused since before the 1832 Reform Act, this could happen if, in the words of Sir Alan Lascelles (former private secretary to George VI and Elizabeth II), ‘the existing Parliament was still vital, viable and capable of doing its job’ or if the monarch ‘could rely on finding another prime minister who could [govern] . . . with a working majority’ (Hennessy 1994). Peter Hennessy (1994) suggests that since 1949 the possibility of such powers being used has loomed on at least five occasions: in the spring of 1950 when the general election cut Attlee’s majority from 146 to 6; in

July 1953 when Churchill and Eden were seriously ill; in January 1957 following Eden's post-Suez resignation; in October 1963 following Macmillan's resignation; and in March 1974 when the narrowly defeated Heath attempted to do a deal with the Liberals.

### The hollow crown

While supporters of monarchy extol its virtues and agnostics dismiss it as harmless sideshow, republicans point to more disturbing aspects.

**Out of touch** The life experience of the Queen, despite her known enthusiasm for *Coronation Street*, can hardly be said to have brought her into contact with the feelings of ordinary people. Her personal circle has remained largely within the aristocracy. According to a BBC report (25 Feb. 1998), Prince Charles apparently managed to complete a nine-day trip round Central Asia in 1996 without once saying hello to the small press party with him.

**Vulgarization** If Bagehot were to return he would have cause to rue the day he praised the virtues of royal ceremonial. Today the masses gape through the vulgarizing lens of the tabloid press. The 'Royals' have been elevated to the status of show-biz celebrities and hounded all over the world by the *paparazzi*, aptly named the 'rat-pack'. The intense scrutiny led the Queen to label 1992 her *annus horribilis*.

**Falling popularity** According to one opinion poll, less than half the population support the monarchy; the proportion thinking the country would be worse off without the royals fell from 70 per cent in 1994 to 48 per cent in 1997 (*Guardian*, 12 Aug. 1997). Indeed, November 2002 saw the Jubilee year disintegrating into yet another *annus horribilis* with the trial of Paul Burrell, former butler to Princess Diana, accused of theft after her death. In announcing that he had confided his intention to remove items, the Queen effectively ended the trial. Yet her intervention appeared bizarre and speculation in drawing rooms and tabloids talked of a ploy to prevent embarrassing disclosures of palace life.

**A dysfunctional family** The idea that the royal family could exert an uplifting moral force was to become almost risible. In an earlier era Princess Margaret had denied herself marriage to Group Captain Peter Townsend because he was divorced, yet by 1996 she and three of the Queen's children were themselves divorced. Moreover, the romance that had enchanted millions disintegrated in a moral morass in 1992 when first the 'Camillagate' and then the 'Squidgygate' tapes allowed the world to hear the fairytale couple on their mobile phones murmuring sweet nothings to others. The public who had cheered along the wedding route were to discover that the royal establishment had allowed the heir apparent to make a cynical marriage for the purpose of

Kings are not born, they are made by artificial hallucination.

George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman* (1905)

royal procreation. Charles's mistress, Camilla Parker-Bowles, had sat calmly in row three during the glittering ceremony in Westminster Abbey (Holden 1997).

Because we do not have the guts to sweep the monarchy away, we shall do the only thing we dare. We shall mock them until they wish they had never been born.

David Hare, playwright and polemicist, in the *Guardian* (24 May 1993)

**Democracy as deception: panem et circenses** Bagehot's views reflected a widespread elite fear of the extending franchise but, where J. S. Mill argued for more political education, he preferred constitutional sleight of hand. Like the emperors of imperial Rome, the elite would provide bread and circuses to divert popular attention from affairs of state. However, a political culture that values deception is one that can tolerate secrecy and even lies.

**Legitimation of inequality** Unlike other constitutional monarchies, Britain's does not stand alone; it is the tip of an aristocratic iceberg of inherited wealth and titles, the survival of which is one of the political wonders of the world. This legitimates elitism and maldistribution of wealth, helping to keep the social soil fertile for capitalism.

**A neutrality myth?** Finally, the convention of political neutrality is open to question. It is partly a consequence of the two-party system in which the sovereign is not asked to exercise discretion in the choice of prime minister or the dissolution of Parliament. However, royal leanings can be discerned. Disraeli's 'one nation' Conservatism made the Crown one of its symbols. To be a patriotic member of society entailed support for the Crown, loyalty that could be expressed by voting Conservative. Indeed, the Queen is head of the Anglican Church, long described as the Conservative Party at prayer.

On the other hand, former Australian prime minister Bob Hawke disclosed that the Queen had argued with Thatcher on policy and Ben Pimlott's 1996 biography prompted tabloid headlines: 'The Queen's a Lefty'. Legend has it that, as a student at Cambridge, Prince Charles had asked the Master of Trinity if he could join the university Labour club, and in 1988 he criticized Conservative social policy. In 1997 he wrote to Blair noting their shared agenda. Indeed, a September 2002 leak revealed a long-running correspondence with the Lord Chancellor and Prime Minister expressing his views on matters of public concern, ranging from the Human Rights Act to foxhunting.

The problem has increased as the royals move into commercial life, as was revealed by the *News of the World's* publication in March 2001 of a transcript of a conversation between the Countess of Wessex (Prince Edward's wife, formerly Sophie Rees-Jones) and a reporter posing as an Arab sheikh client of her public relations company. Betraying strongly Tory sympathies, she called

Peter Mandelson:  
You're a secret Blairite.  
Prince Charles:  
I gather Mr Blair is a secret me.

*Sunday Times*  
(15 June 1997)

Gordon Brown's budget 'Pap', and mocked Blair's 'impromptu' speech after Princess Diana's death. She subsequently resigned from the company.

### How long to reign over us?

*Death of a princess* The monarchy debate was thrust to the front pages with the death of Princess Diana. She had spoken of being the 'queen of people's hearts' and her funeral became her tragic coronation, provoking an unprecedented mass outpouring of grief. Yet this was no demonstration of love of royalty. Many were offended by protocol that forbade the flying of the flag at half-mast and by the Queen remaining at Balmoral. Only after government intervention was a public rather than a private funeral agreed.

While the royal family tried to reclaim Princess Diana in death, repeats of her astonishingly frank 1995 *Panorama* interview reminded people of her unhappiness. Rejected and effectively banished on her divorce, stripped of her royal rank, she became 'a totem of protest against that ringfenced elite that has quietly run Britain from gentlemen's clubs and secret societies' (Holden 1997). Whether the monarchy should be abolished or reformed, few could imagine it remaining unchanged.

*Abolition* While abolition, and even execution, has been the principal basis for constitutional evolution (until the first world war monarchy was prevalent throughout Europe), Britain's relatively smooth transition to democracy has



A people's princess: flowers left by mourners at the gates of Buckingham Palace after the death of Princess Diana

Photo: Times Newspapers Ltd

never produced a sustained call for republicanism. Although the 1997 Labour government's wide-ranging constitutional reform programme implied republicanism, the death of Princess Diana changed the climate. There was even talk of Labour spin doctors advising the Queen and fears that she would be booed at the funeral proved unfounded.

#### **Attitudes to the monarchy following the death of Princess Diana**

Which of these options for the monarchy would you prefer?

- Continue in its present form: 12%
- Continue but be modernized: 74%
- Be replaced with a republic when Queen dies: 5%
- Be replaced with a republic immediately: 7%

*Observer/ICM poll in the Guardian (17 Sept. 1997)*

**Reform: New Labour, New Monarchy?** Princess Diana was no republican; she herself had a hereditary title and wanted her son to be king. However, she had begun to forge a new and popular style, suggesting that the institution could be modernized. What are the alternatives?

She was always trying to get across to people like us.

East London girl, on Princess Diana, quoted by Simon Jenkins in *The Times* (3 Sept. 1997)

- ◆ *A bicycling monarchy.* A scaling down to Dutch or Scandinavian proportions would entail less ostentation and less attention to 'minor Royals'. Jack Straw, as Labour's home affairs spokesman, had affirmed such a vision. Yet for many this would destroy the magic.
- ◆ *A hands-on monarchy.* Princess Diana's style was to pay more attention to meeting ordinary people while retaining the glitter. The personal frailty and humanity she displayed revealed a public longing for a more humane and caring monarchy. Although this approach did not meet with Palace approval, the Queen's eve-of-funeral broadcast declared that 'lessons would be learned'. However, such a transformation might prove difficult for a family schooled in the art of the stiff upper lip rather than the gentle touch.
- ◆ *A fresh-start monarchy.* With Prince Charles's rehabilitation by no means certain, some have seen Prince William as the great hope. With his mother's looks, he carried her imprimatur. There was considerable popular approval for such a move, 53 per cent of those polled in September 1997 feeling that the crown should pass to him (*Guardian*, 17 Sept. 1997). While this could set the republican cause back a generation, it would require a self-denying ordinance from Charles. This appeared unlikely as the royal family sought, with the aid of spin doctors, to rehabilitate itself, and Camilla Parker-Bowles was increasingly seen at royal events. In 2002, the seventy-six-year-old Queen announced that she was indeed long to reign over us; there would be no retirement.

## In defence of monarchy

There is a place for constitutional monarchy in the modern world. In a democracy, it is generally good for politicians to be kept down to size. They are supposed to represent the interests of others and should be restrained from self-aggrandizement. Thatcher's style in the late 1980s was criticized by some as inappropriately imperious and usurping the role of the real queen. Without a monarchy some other institution would be required as head of state. Certain functions could perhaps be handed to the Speaker of the House of Commons, but the Speaker is also a politician. For most abolitionists the solution lies in some form of presidency, elected either by the people or Parliament. However, this would mean battles over the succession. Thomas Hobbes (see p. 26) argued for the hereditary principle to avoid this.

The monarchy's uncertain future is tied in with a host of other variables, including the demise of press deference, the demand for a written constitution, the future of the Commonwealth and Britain's place in Europe. However, the institution has shown considerable flexibility in surviving over the centuries. There is perhaps more to the debate than constitutional logic. As Bogdanor states:

If the conjunction of monarchy and democracy may seem a contradiction, it would be well to bear in mind Freud's aphorism that it is only in logic that contradictions can not exist. (Bogdanor 1996a: 421)

We have become a grandmother.

Margaret Thatcher, sounding regal

On the whole it is wise in human affairs and in the government of men, to separate pomp from power.

Winston Churchill, speech in Ottawa (1952)

## The House of Lords

Beneath the monarchical tip of the iceberg has long floated an edifice of ancient privilege – a fully fledged aristocratic class of titled lords and ladies, sighted on special occasions and in special places such as the royal enclosure at Ascot, Cowes and, most visibly of all, in the House of Lords. It remained one of the most curious of the anomalies in British public life, defying any rule book of democratic and secular politics. The general atmosphere of the upper house has been seen as somnambulant, likened to a mausoleum or adduced as evidence of life after death.

If, like me, you are over 90, frail, on two sticks, half deaf and half blind, you stick out like a sore thumb in most places, but not in the House of Lords.

Harold Macmillan (Lord Stockton), quoted in the *Observer* (19 May 1985)

The composition of the House has been, and remains, a highly contentious issue. It has been seen as deeply undemocratic and became a principal target of New Labour's reforming programme (see pp. 362–7).

## Politics in the House of Lords

Though cryptically referred to in the Commons as ‘the other place’, the Lords is linked to the Commons by a short corridor. Despite the leisurely atmosphere, the House has come to work harder over the past fifty years (Shell 1994: 734). Sittings take place from Mondays to Thursdays for about thirty weeks a year, usually between 2.30 and 7.00 p.m. Only towards the end of the session do they meet on Fridays. The central throne is reserved for the monarch and debate is chaired by the Lord Chancellor, sitting on the traditional ‘Woolsack’, which symbolizes national prosperity through trade. In November 1998 there was agreement on some minor reductions to the pomp surrounding the office, allowing the Lord Chancellor to dispense with breeches and tights in favour of trousers at certain less ceremonial times, though traditionalists feared the office was losing its dignity.

This is a rotten argument, but it should be good enough for their lordships on a hot summer afternoon.

Civil servant's note on a ministerial brief, read out by mistake in Lords debate; quoted in Lord Home, *The Way the Wind Blows* (1976)

Debates are rarely acrimonious and the Lord Chancellor does not pretend to be independent, often leaving the Woolsack to join the cut and thrust. The party machines have been less dominant than in the Commons, around a fifth of members sitting as independent **cross-benchers**, often having renounced former allegiances (table 12.1). Of the regular attenders, Conservatives (even before reform) did not have an outrageous majority but if all had descended they would have swamped the House. These were the 400 or so ‘backwoodsmen’ and, when the trumpet sounded, they forsook their estates to answer the call, as they did in 1968 to vote against a trade ban on Rhodesia and in 1998 to defeat New Labour’s proposed closed-list system for EU elections. Peers who had never voted before, and who did not even know their own leaders, were to be found wandering in bewilderment around the precincts of Westminster.

**Table 12.1** Political allegiance in the House of Lords (November 1998) prior to the first stage of reform

Type of peer	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	Cross-bench	Other
Life	173	158	45	120	9
Hereditary	302	18	24	202	87

Source: Data from parliamentary website (accessed Nov. 1998). Excludes peers without writs of summons (68) and bishops (26).

The House of Lords is not the watchdog of the constitution; it is Mr Balfour's poodle. It fetches and carries for him. It barks for him. It bites anyone that he sets it on to.

David Lloyd George, House of Commons speech (21 Dec. 1908)

## Peer pressure: the functions of the House of Lords

The House of Peers, throughout the war,  
Did nothing in particular,  
And did it very well.

The Peers in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*

Generally speaking, second chambers can represent various interests, provide parliamentarians who are more independent of the executive, exercise a veto and share the burden of parliamentary duties (Russell 2001). The House of Lords does each of these to varying degrees and in varying ways.

**Criticism** The Lords have been able to demonstrate a freedom of expression not found in the Commons, speaking out where elected mortals favour discretion. Unlike MPs, they are less dependent upon further patronage and often beyond the age of ambition, at least in this life. Since the early 1970s the House has made greater use of select committees (see p. 403), the most significant being those on the European Communities and Science and Technology.

**Informed debate** Although the **hereditary peers** represented a narrow interest, the presence of **life peers**, appointed because of some particular expertise (from the professions, the arts, industry or academia), can at times sustain a high level of debate, while the bishops have injected a moral dimension.

**Legislation** The Lords can share the parliamentary burden by scrutinizing bills, proposing amendments and tidying up legislation passed in haste in the lower house. Bills may also be introduced in the Lords (see p. 393).

**Restraint of the executive** Although not having a full veto, the Lords can check the executive. With less party discipline, there can be more sense of a separation of powers, and over recent decades the Lords have become more assertive (see p. 394). The power to delay non-financial legislation can force a government to think again (and a full veto remains in the case of any government seeking to extend its life beyond five years). In December 2001, to the frustration of Home Secretary David Blunkett, considerable changes were made to the Anti-terrorism Bill, rushed through in the wake of the 11 September attack.

Potentially draconian powers in areas such as police snooping into private (including medical) records were curbed and the proposed crime of incitement to religious hatred was thrown out.

*Judicial decision-making* One function not common to upper chambers, but remaining central to the living constitution, is that of final court of appeal. This is not performed by the House as such but by the Law Lords headed by the Lord Chancellor (see p. 632).

### **The end of the peer show: a reluctant revolution**

One of the main problems with the Lords has been its composition. Traditionally, membership was based on hereditary right; certain people were ‘born to rule’, a distinction acquired by emerging from a particular womb following an aristocratic impregnation. To this principle was added, through the 1958 Life Peerages Act, another equally undemocratic one: life peers (who could not hand down their titles) were appointed by the prime minister, thus reviving the House with a transfusion of fresh (though not always young) blood. This system could have been purpose-built to produce maximum controversy yet it proved remarkably resistant to change. In 1998 the House contained around 760 hereditary peers (mainly Conservatives) and nearly 500 life peers. In addition, there were 26 Anglican bishops and 28 Law Lords. It was indeed a House of Lords, for they outnumbered Ladies by around 13:1.

Almost a century earlier Lloyd George, who regarded the Lords with contempt, had intended the 1911 Parliament Act to be a stop-gap, a prelude to a revolution. However, despite much huffing and puffing, for long no wolf emerged with the constitutional lung power to blow the House down. Although people looked to Labour for action, they did so in vain, the party barking in opposition but unwilling to bite in office. A 1968 white paper announced some half-hearted reforms but the subsequent Parliament (No. 2) Bill was dashed on the rocks of an unholy alliance between two unlikely bedfellows – Enoch Powell (favouring the status quo) and Michael Foot (favouring the constitutional bulldozers).

In 1988, Lord Scarman, one of the Law Lords, called for a strengthened upper house to resist encroaching prime ministerial dictatorship, and Labour’s 1989 policy review proposed an elected second chamber. This policy was also advocated by the Liberal Democrats and Charter88, which envisaged much stronger powers to initiate, revise, delay and even veto legislation. Labour’s 1997 manifesto promised reform and, once in office, Blair began to redress the Lords’ inbuilt Tory domination, his first Honours list containing thirty-one ‘working’ Labour peers. Expected to attend regularly, they included a glittering array of leading industrialists, writers and media figures. The Liberal Democrats gained eleven new working peers and the Conservatives five.

In October 1998 a two-stage timetable for real reform was announced. First, the hereditary peers would be removed, but after a deal brokered by Viscount

Cranborne, Leader of the Conservative peers, ninety-two hereditary peers, elected by their own number, were allowed to remain. Moreover, a further ten were immediately reprieved with life peerages. In the case of life peers, the prime minister's sole right of nomination was to be reduced, with an independent commission recommending some non-political appointments. The second stage of reform was to be considered by a Royal Commission under Conservative peer Lord Wakeham and a white paper suggested four options:

- 1 fixed levels of representation for interest groups and professional associations;
- 2 direct popular election;
- 3 indirect election with members seconded from the devolved institutions, including the Scottish, Welsh and Irish Assemblies, local authorities and the European Parliament;
- 4 a mixed chamber comprising elected and nominated members.

*The Wakeham report* Reporting in January 2000, Wakeham saw the role of the upper house as a 'revising and deliberative assembly – not seeking to usurp the role of the Commons'. In other words, the Lords was to be kept in the state of impotence to which its previous lack of legitimacy had consigned it. With no hereditary peers, the chamber would comprise 550 members, some elected and some nominated. However, direct election would be used for only a 'significant minority' (the majority of the Commission favoured eighty-seven), to represent the regions, with the great majority being appointed by an independent commission, selecting from all sectors of society without reference to party. Other proposals included a statutory minimum of 30 per cent women, a 'fair' representation of ethnic minorities and the broadening of the range of religious representation.

*The government's response* There was some expectation that the report would gather dust on the shelves of the Westminster libraries, allowing the ninety-two hereditary peers to avoid the chill winds of change. However, a November 2001 white paper (Lord Chancellor's Department 2001a) suggested that Wakeham's recommendations would largely be followed. However, beneath the rhetoric was one highly significant departure. Although the hereditary peers would go, and 20 per cent of the new chamber would be popularly elected, only 20 per cent would be chosen by an independent cross-party commission. The remaining 60 per cent would enter on the basis of party patronage – in effect, the life peerage system writ large, particularly as the prime minister would make the lion's share of the nominations (to reflect party strengths in the Commons).

The proposals evoked a barrage of criticism from the opposition parties, the Commons Public Administration Committee and the government's own supporters. Lord Wakeham lamented that his 'hard-fought consensus' had been abandoned (Tempest 2002). The result was a government climbdown, with Leader of the House Robin Cook announcing in May 2002 yet another review.



Photo: Charter88

A joint committee of MPs and peers would produce further proposals, to be put to a free vote in both Houses. Although critics welcomed the abandonment of the white paper proposals, there were fears that the issue had again been kicked into the long grass.

### The debate

The Lords reform debate has never been conducted in a political vacuum since party interest was never absent. Labour has enhanced its reformist credentials, and ejecting the hereditary peers eliminates a key source of Conservative opposition. The hereditary peers had indeed mounted a number of revolts since 1997.

The Conservatives might of course have been expected to support the preservation of ancient institutions. However, Iain Duncan Smith responded with an even more radical suggestion – a 300-strong Senate with 80 per cent elected. In this apparently selfless behaviour he was aiming to outflank the government in reformist zeal. However, the wind was taken out of his sails by party members, particular anger coming from those who had already been ennobled, including ex-Foreign Secretary Lord Howe and ex-Chancellor Lord Lawson (Watt and Ward 2002). The Liberal Democrat call for a predominantly elected house

chosen by STV was also self-serving, reflecting their quest for increased representation.

However, the debate goes beyond party interest. The principal alternatives – direct election, patronage, selection by independent commission and the hereditary principle – each have strengths and weaknesses.

*The people's choice: direct election* Election is the basis for populating most upper houses. This is based on democracy, the right of people to choose and remove those involved in their government. Moreover, only elected members can be said to be truly representative of the people. Election can also ensure balanced geographical representation and offer a form of participation. Hence, it bestows legitimacy, an essential condition of stable government.

Why we think that, unlike France, India, Germany... God knows where, we can't have an elected upper house that works I don't understand.

Baroness Shirley Williams, speaking on BBC TV's *Newsnight* (9 Jan. 2002)

Yet valid objections have been made to an elected Lords.

- ◆ *'Gridlock'*. Two houses of comparable legitimacy would be liable to the stalemate sometimes seen in the USA. The government shared with Wakeham the view that a largely elected house would be a recipe for 'damaging conflict' (Lord Chancellor's Department 2001a: para. 11.6).
- ◆ *Competition*. Elected members representing constituencies would compete with MPs as the people's trouble-shooters.
- ◆ *Party domination*. An elected chamber would mean the end of the cross-bencher, with candidates lining up behind manifestos. The Lord Chancellor argued before the Commons Public Administration Committee: 'If you convert it to an elected house the whips will take over'.
- ◆ *Professionalization*. Election might also bring in a new wave of professional politicians with little experience of the wider world, losing the variety of expertise and experience given by the life peerage system.
- ◆ *Unnecessary*. Being largely a talking shop and, unlike the Commons, not the source of the government's authority, the House may not require the legitimacy of election.

*Royal favourites: patronage* A strong argument for prime ministerial patronage comes from the life peerage system, which brought to Parliament knowledge and experience from the arts and media, science, sport, law, banking, industry, and so on. Moreover, the practice does not mean a neutered House; the interim reform, slashing the Conservative majority and increasing Labour's representation, did not reduce obstructionism (see p. 394). Indeed, there is no

certainty that appointees will remain loyal. The voting record after Blair's first year revealed only three-quarters of the 'working peers' to be regular supporters.

Patronage can be very useful to a government. Sitting MPs can be moved 'upstairs' to make room for a new face in the Commons, as was suspected when Labour's Roy Hughes (ennobled in August 1997) relinquished his Newport seat to Conservative defector Alan Howarth. Indeed, key figures can be brought into government without confronting the electorate at all, as when Thatcher made David Young Secretary of State for Employment and Blair brought in long-time friend Lord Falconer as Solicitor General.

However, patronage has many critics.

- ◆ *Party domination.* Some cite the case of Canada, where an appointed second chamber is generally seen as a government poodle. On the *Breakfast with Frost* programme in November 2001, Lord Wakeham lamented: 'I wanted an end of Tony's cronies'. It also allows career politicians, as opposed to those with wide experience, an undemocratic way up the greasy pole.
- ◆ *Thwarting the democratic process.* Patronage enables ministers to overcome rejection by the electorate, as when Lynda Chalker, transmogrified into Baroness, remained at Overseas Development despite the adverse judgement of her constituents in 1992.
- ◆ *Political rebirth.* Figures of yesterday receive an elixir of everlasting political life. In June 1992, Margaret Thatcher entered the chamber, along with many of her former Cabinet, although her Commons opponent, Michael Foot, true to his principles, became the first Labour leader since 1935 to spurn the honour.
- ◆ *Prime ministerial power.* For most critics the loudest complaint concerns prime ministerial power. A monarchical hangover, patronage allows them to act like kings, rewarding favourites, donors of funds and doers of favours.

*Appointment by commission* Like patronage, appointment by independent commission could bring in expertise and experience not available to the Commons. It could also produce a large number of independents and lessen the opportunities for corruption. However, critics question the true independence of an appointments commission.

- ◆ Who will appoint its members?
- ◆ Would their role become politicized?
- ◆ Would the chamber become populated with more of the great and the good, establishment figures with little understanding of the NHS waiting list and the dole queue?
- ◆ Despite experience in their own specialized fields, would independents lack the political antennae to survive in the febrile atmosphere of Westminster? There have been examples of outsiders being introduced only

to fail dismally, both in the chamber and in the corridors, tea-rooms and bars where the subtle ‘art of the possible’ is practised.

*Born to rule: the hereditary principle* Can anything be said in the modern age for a system based on the principle of superior genes? It is not entirely irrational to argue that a belief that one is born to rule can create a good leader. Plato advocated training the guardians from birth and Hobbes supported hereditary monarchy. Compared with the life peers, their hereditary brothers had less reason for sycophantic behaviour and their road to Westminster did not involve the compromises and backroom skulduggery required of party *apparatchiks*. Whether those prepared to fight for office are best fitted for it is indeed debatable. The ancient Greeks believed that such people were, by definition, the least trustworthy, preferring instead to draw lots for office. Today we choose juries on a similar principle. It can also be argued that those with great wealth are free from the temptations to corruption. They need not court favours and do not fear sacking.

There are, of course, arguments against the hereditary principle.

- ◆ We would not, for example, make a woman a brain surgeon merely because her father was one. Empirically it would be hard to find overwhelming evidence for aristocratic supremacy in the fields where talent and intelligence matter.
- ◆ Seen as a relic of a bygone age, the hereditary principle was rejected by the Royal Commission, the white paper, the Liberal Democrats, the reformist lobby and even the leader of the Conservative Party. Perhaps the most remarkable thing is that it was able to persist into the twenty-first century.

### **The chains of history**

Why did the preservation order remain so long on this aristocratic edifice? Perhaps establishment interests found symbolic value in one of the remaining bastions that only the select (or the selected) might enter. A key element in British political culture, Britain’s upper house symbolized hierarchy and exclusion, reminding the mass where they belonged – on the outside. As their Lordships finally shuffled from their red leather benches, reformists could claim that Britain was taking one more timid step into the modern age.

## **The House of Commons**

The third element in the parliamentary triumvirate is the only one that may be called democratic. Seating 659 members chosen by popular election, the House of Commons is also the chamber of the prime minister, the leading ministers and opposition front bench. However, although the site where Britain’s

political Titans confront each other on a daily basis, it is by no means free of flummery and ceremony.

### Parliamentary mumbo-jumbo

The Commons embraces Westminster ritual from the very beginning with the annual opening of Parliament. Black Rod, the officer responsible for maintaining order in the House of Lords, carrying an ebony cane for the purpose, summons the Commoners to hear the Queen's Speech. All is conducted in Norman French. When he approaches the lower house the doors are slammed in his face (because in 1642, the last time the Commons allowed the monarch in, he arrested five members). Undeterred, he gives three solemn knocks, the doors are opened and the MPs, led by the prime minister and opposition leader, advance in pairs like a *corps de ballet* towards the 'other place'. The flummery of the State Opening engages 'ladies of the bedchamber' in long evening dresses and officials with Ruritanian titles such as 'silver stick in waiting'. MPs are required to swear an Oath of Allegiance to the Crown. This is a problem for anyone professing republican principles and some Labour MPs do so with tongue in cheek. Two Sinn Féin MPs, elected in 1997, were denied office space at Westminster for their refusal.

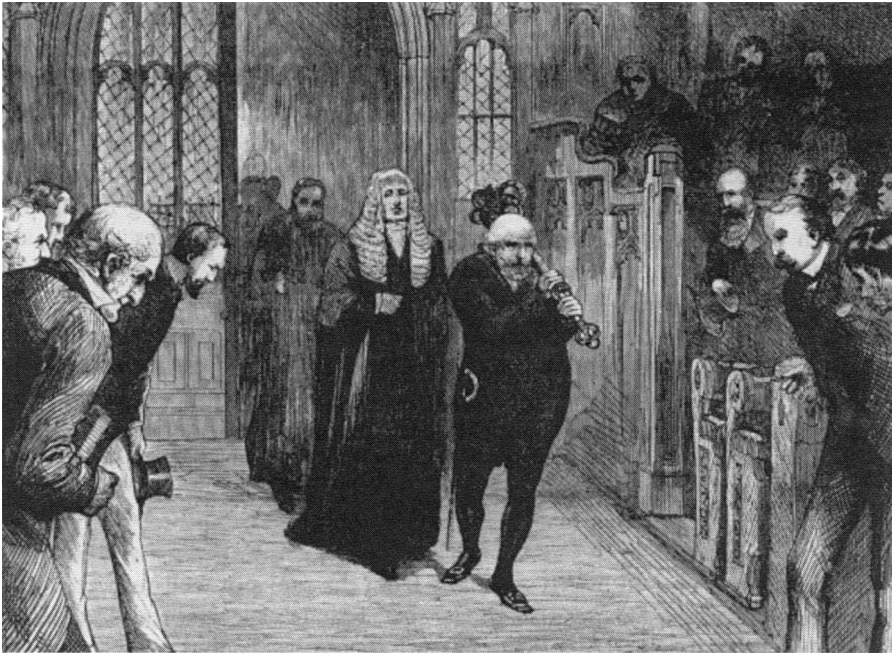
I think... that it is the best club in London.

Mr Tremlow on the House of Commons, in Charles Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5)

In understanding Commons discourse there are various arcane terms requiring translation. The 'usual channels' means consultation between party whips; in the chamber MPs should refer to each other as honourable friends or honourable members for this or that constituency, and they vote by trooping through division lobbies. Members raising a point of order in a division do so wearing an opera hat. Privy Councillors (cabinet and ex-cabinet members and leading members of the opposition parties) enjoy certain privileges: 'right honourable', rather than 'honourable', they receive precedence in debate. New Labour came to power promising to end such flummery, but past experience has seen many Young Turks seduced by the ritual of the club.

### The Speaker

At the centre of Commons life is the Speaker, who chairs debate. Yet there is more to the role than this: adorned with wig and black robes, the Speaker presides over a variety of solemn ceremonies often held in his or her official baroque residence within the Palace of Westminster. Although now considered an honour, the position was once unenviable, entailing facing the monarch on behalf of MPs; a newly elected Speaker thus makes a show of resistance before being forced into the chair by colleagues.



Source: Mary Evans Picture Library

I have neither eye to see, nor tongue to speak here, but as the House is pleased to direct me.

William Lenthall, in the House of Commons on 4 January 1642, in reply to Charles I asking if he had seen five MPs whom he wished to arrest. A classic statement of the Speaker's role

The Speaker is elected by MPs, usually from the ranks of well-respected uncontroversial figures. Mrs Thatcher, in an unprecedented move, tried to treat the office as one within her patronage. Although she did not get her way, when Bernard Weatherill was elected in 1983 his authority was weakened (Heffer 1988). The election of his successor, Betty Boothroyd, the first woman Speaker, was a landmark.

The 300-year-old procedure was no less archaic than the office and its dress. A nominee was put forward and then, if there was a rival, an amendment proposed, a debate would follow and MPs would vote. If there were further rivals the process would be repeated for each, following a list ordered by the Father of the House (p. 373). A recent convention that the office alternate between the two major parties was broken in October 2000 when Labour's Michael Martin was chosen to replace Betty Boothroyd. Conservatives felt cheated and the list became unusually long, with eleven candidates making

Piss-up in a brewery? This lot couldn't organise an orgy in a massage parlour, or a sit-in at the Parker Knoll factory.

Simon Hoggart on the election of Speaker Martin, in the *Guardian* (24 Oct. 2000)

the process tortuous, if not ludicrous. As a result the Commons agreed in March 2001 that future Speakers would be elected by secret ballot.

The Speaker is attended by the Sergeant at Arms, equipped with sword and mace. Responsible for maintaining order, he will eject the unruly, including MPs banned by the Speaker, and could imprison enemies in the clock tower of Big Ben. Each day the Speaker leads a dignified procession into the House following the Sergeant, and during debate the mace rests on the table at the centre of the chamber. Michael Heseltine etched his name in parliamentary folklore by brandishing it in the face of the Labour enemy; only by prostrating himself before the House the following day did he gain forgiveness. When Labour's Ron Brown made a similar gesture he refused to apologize and the whip was withdrawn for three months, the sternest punishment imposed for twenty-five years.

In debate, the Speaker must shed political affiliation and call members fairly, and with due weight to their expertise, interest and status. Conservatives questioned the impartiality of speaker Martin (Jones 2002) and in October 2001 he caused shock by proclaiming his personal view on policy (abandoning vouchers for asylum-seekers). The Speaker also gives rulings on points of procedure, emergency debates, money bills and **parliamentary privilege**. The latter are rights and immunities from court action granted to MPs to ensure free debate. Thus, for example, in 1987 Ken Livingstone could accuse Conservative Airey Neave (later killed by an IRA bomb in the Commons car park) of nursing knowledge of treasonable activities practised by Britain's security officers in Northern Ireland (Pienaar 1987).

The Speaker also keeps discipline. Although there are often raucous scenes, turbulence is nothing new. Conservative opposition to Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' produced uproar, giving the reaction of Labour backbenchers in 1988 to Chancellor Lawson's 'rich people's budget' the air of the proverbial vicarage tea party. Where MPs persist in bad behaviour the Speaker will 'name' them, whereupon they are banned for a prescribed period. Thus in July 1992 Dennis Skinner was ordered from the House for refusing to withdraw the unparliamentary term 'wart' as a description of Agricultural Secretary John Gummer. The Speaker is generally accorded great respect. In December 1995 Betty Boothroyd summoned the Conservative Chief Whip for a serious dressing-down after a whispering campaign against her by his MPs.

However, from his contentious beginning, Michael Martin continued to court controversy. Critics within his own party alleged that he was putting the brakes on reform. Others claimed that his strong Glaswegian accent was

difficult to understand, but defenders alleged this to be snobbery. Some thought it inverse snobbery when, in November 2001, he sacked an experienced secretary for being ‘too posh’. However, it was his role in the Filkin affair that caused most raised eyebrows (see p. 380).

## The timetable

The life of a *parliament* is the period between two general elections, which must not normally exceed five years. This is divided into annual *sessions* commencing each autumn, punctuated by *recesses* (holidays) over Christmas, Easter, Whitsun and summer. A Daily Agenda (formerly the Order Paper) outlining each day’s events (see p. 399) is the responsibility of the Leader of the House, liaising with the Opposition, and is also available on the internet.

At one time debate regularly continued into the small hours as an *all-night sitting*, but recent modernization efforts have reduced their frequency. The 1994 reforms included Wednesday-morning sittings (for backbencher-initiated debates), no sittings on ten constituency Fridays, and rearrangements of business to reduce all-night sittings, and from January 2003 the normal working day has ended at 6 or 7 p.m. On Fridays, sittings usually adjourn by mid-afternoon, enabling MPs to return to their constituencies.

## ‘The best club in London’: an MP’s job

The House has for long retained the characteristics of a Victorian establishment club, with bars, smoking-rooms and leather armchairs. Most MPs are backbenchers, the name indicating where they sit on the green leather rows behind the leading figures in their parties. A useful quality is to be ‘clubbable’, to be able to mix easily and enjoy a good joke. While parties separate them, MPs can form cross-party friendships, with clubs for activities ranging from skiing and football to chess and jazz. However, the club ethos was challenged in May 1997 with the entry of a veritable regiment of women. Many changes were demanded, such as the earlier end to the working day, though calls for breastfeeding in the chamber and replacing the rifle range with a creche went unheeded.

### The times they are a-changin’

New, younger MPs of both sexes have, probably, brought more sex into Parliament.

Liberal Democrat MP Dr Evan Harris, leading calls for condom machines in the Commons, in the *Guardian* (13 March 1998)

There is no job description for an MP, each must make of it what they will. Some do much, some little. Those yearning to ascend the ‘greasy pole’ must

define their role in conformity with a culture of obedience (see chapter 13). There is little glamour in this. If they seek the limelight with a controversial article or a challenging speech they run the risk of incurring displeasure. Some may experience a sense of *ennui* and spend time in the many tea-rooms and bars, sometimes appearing ‘tired and emotional’ (MPs are never drunk) and sometimes even falling into casual adultery. Some will continue with their professional careers, but the ‘full-time’ MPs have two stages upon which to act, one in Westminster and one in their constituencies.

*Parliamentary matters* Wednesdays excepted, ‘full-time’ MPs spend their mornings dealing with correspondence, sitting on committees, meeting constituents and receiving lobby groups. They work in premises round about (the Norman Shaw Building, Abbey Yard, Parliament Street and Millbank), and in the corridors and bars of Westminster. In the afternoons and evenings they may attend debates in the main chamber, meet fellow MPs, feed information to the press, gossip and plot; Parliament is a hot-house of rumour, character assassinations, secret agreements and broken confidences.

*Constituency matters* MPs represent geographical areas, by which titles they courteously address each other, and can find much employment in dealing with their constituents’ concerns. This is an area largely free from the straightjacket of party discipline and it has increased significantly (Norton 1994) with the growth of the welfare state, MPs’ role in the ombudsman system, increased volatility amongst voters and the need to secure re-election by local parties. It has also been encouraged by the rise of the Liberal Democrats with their community politics approach, the creation of the civil service agencies and the neoliberal view of citizens as state customers. The influx of women could also be expected to give a higher priority to constituency work (Norris 1996c). MPs themselves have encouraged developments, advertising regular surgeries, developing websites and holding public meetings. While ‘to be a good constituency MP is still . . . downgraded by the ambitious’ (Mitchell 1994: 703), the careerist may find in the constituency dimension a means to attract attention and gain fuel for parliamentary questions and adjournment motions. Yet there are costs. MPs are not trained counsellors, social workers or civil rights lawyers. Moreover, the deflection from the Westminster role may be welcomed by an executive eager to swell its power. Critics impugned such a motive when, in 1998, Labour leaders produced contracts laying down the amount of constituency work expected of MPs.

Being a backbencher is really a very good job; . . . and if they’ve got intelligence and guts and a good relationship with their constituents then it’s a better job than in most parliaments of the western world.

Michael Foot, interviewed by Bill Jones in *Talking Politics* (vol. 9, no. 3)

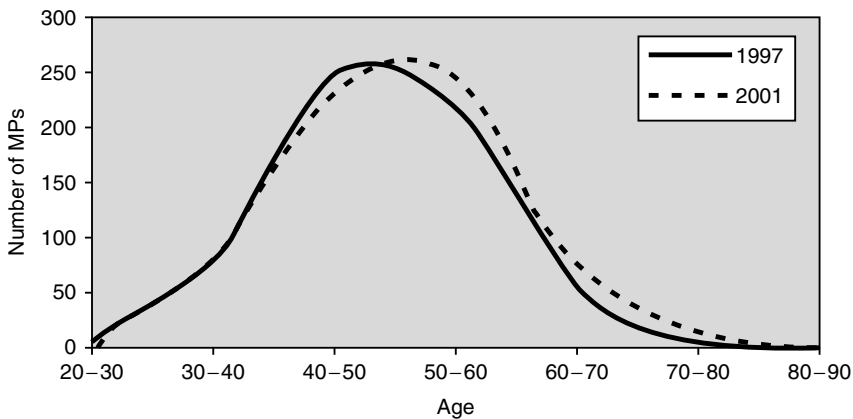
### Honourable members

Who are these people who purport to represent their fellow citizens? Placing them under the microscope we find they can differ from the general population in various ways.

A Parliament elected by the universal suffrage of voters grouped according to geographical areas is about as truly representative as a bottle of Bovril is a true representative of an ox.

Eleanor Rathbone, in the *Observer* (29 March 1931)

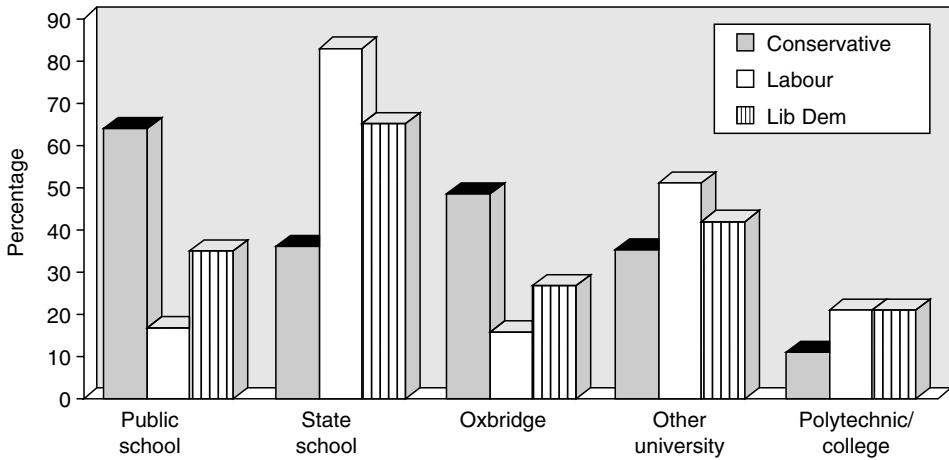
**Age** The Commons tends to mirror the mature population, the 40–60 age group being best represented and Labour tending to be the older party. The longest-serving member enjoys the title ‘Father of the House’ and, with no compulsory retirement age, there is competition for the honour. One reason for ripe age is the need to demonstrate ability (in business, the professions, academia, trade unions or local government) in order to impress a selection committee. In 1970, the local Labour oligarchs of Merthyr Tydfil decided that at eighty-three their candidate, S. O. Davies, was beyond his best. Although resisting their slight by winning handsomely as an independent, his death shortly afterwards gave them what would in other circumstances have been the last laugh. With an average age of forty-five, the class of ’97 lowered the age profile significantly, with Christopher Leslie, at twenty-four, the baby of the House. There was little change to the pattern in 2001 (figure 12.2).



**Figure 12.2**  
Age profile of MPs, 1997 and 2001.

Source: Data from Criddle (1997: 203; 2002: 199).

**Figure 12.3**  
Educational  
background of  
MPs, 2001.



Source: Data from Criddle (2002: 202).

**Education** Increasingly MPs tend to be among the better educated, some 68 per cent of the 2001 intake being graduates (Criddle 2002: 202). Labour's graduate count has more than doubled, from 32 per cent in 1945 to 67 per cent in 2001. For much of the post-war period the majority of graduates were from Oxbridge and this proportion remains high, despite an increase in those from other institutions (figure 12.3). Traditionally the public schools provided the pre-university education for the great majority of Conservatives (mainly Eton, Harrow and Winchester), but during the 1980s this began to change, with more from the meritocratic state grammar school assault course (Burch and Moran 1984). However, by the end of that decade the party had reverted to its tradition of social exclusivity (Baker and Fountain 1996). Ex-public-schoolboys have also not been absent from Labour's ranks.

**Occupation** Occupational backgrounds stretch Conservative and Labour MPs further apart (table 12.2). Since 1945 both parties have included a high proportion (around 45 per cent) classed as professional, though in the case of Labour these have mainly been teachers and academics. Despite its business-friendly image, less than 10 per cent of New Labour MPs have business backgrounds; this can be compared with around a third of Conservatives. Indeed Conservatives are not merely businessmen, they are *big* businessmen. Of the 273 company directors elected to Parliament in the first three decades following the second world war, no fewer than 245 were Conservatives. The working class is virtually unrepresented on the Conservative benches and is declining sharply in Labour's ranks (from over 40 per cent in 1945 to 12 per cent in 2001). However, unlike their Conservative siblings, Labour MPs are often first-generation middle class with working-class parents (Cowley 2001: 826). In terms of occupation, the Liberal Democrats are now the most socially representative party.

**Table 12.2** MPs' occupational backgrounds, 2001 (rounded to nearest whole percentage point)

Occupation	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
<b>Professions</b>			
Law	19	7	11
Education	4	24	23
Publishing and journalism	8	8	7
Civil service and local government	1	7	6
Armed services	7	< 1	0
Other	8	5	11
<b>Business and management</b>			
Company directors/senior executives	29	4	25
Other	7	4	2
Miscellaneous white collar <sup>a</sup>	1	18	2
Politicians/political staffers	11	11	7
Manual	1	12	2
Other	4	0	2

<sup>a</sup>Includes occupations such as trade union officials, social workers and voluntary-sector employees.

Source: Data from Criddle (2002: 204).

**Political experience** Many MPs cut their political teeth in local government; of the new intake in 1997, 70 per cent of Liberal Democrats, 64 per cent of Labour and 25 per cent of Conservatives had been councillors. Another indication of increasing professionalization is early work for political parties as 'staffers' (researchers or consultants). The 2001 parliament contained 44 Labour staffers, 18 Conservatives and 4 Liberal Democrats. Labour has always relied on a considerable body of trade union grounding and has also become a home for student union ex-presidents.

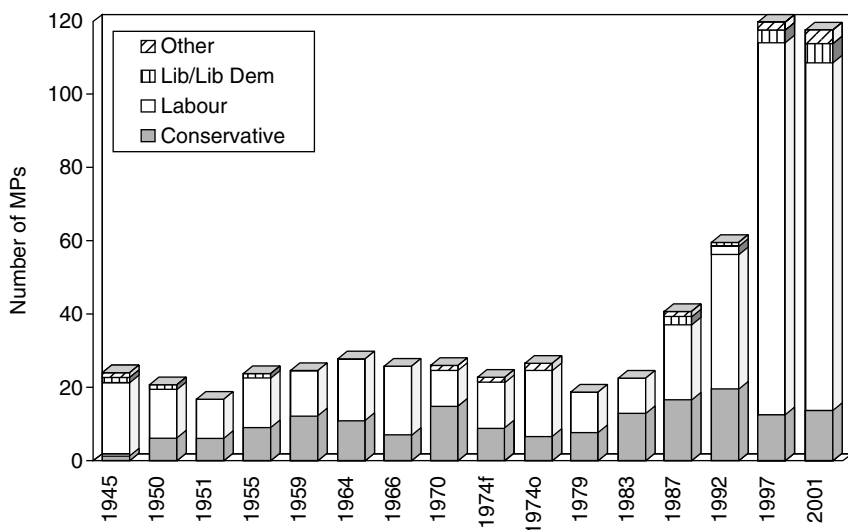
**Sexual orientation** If the House is representative of the wider population in this respect, then a number of gays and lesbians must choose life in the parliamentary closet. After the 2001 general election, the *Guardian* recorded eight openly gay or lesbian MPs, including Labour's Ben Bradshaw and Chris Smith. Generally, such admission does little to enhance a political career. Indeed, when Conservative David Ashby lost his libel case against the *Sunday Times* over allegations of homosexuality, he was removed by his constituency, complaining 'they are behaving like Smithfield meat-porters – love the Queen Mum and bash the queers' (Criddle 1997: 197). Portillo's confession of early homosexual experience may have actually cost him the Conservative leadership in 2001 (see p. 306). Homophobia is of course as inappropriate in a democratic parliament as is racism or sexism. In 1998, following the Ron

Davies Clapham Common farrago, gay journalist Matthew Parris ‘outed’ Peter Mandelson on television. Shortly afterwards, Nick Brown came out under threat of exposure by the *Sun*, which also ran the headline ‘TELL US THE TRUTH TONY – ARE WE BEING RUN BY A GAY MAFIA?’ However, a *Guardian* poll (10 Nov. 1998) revealed public attitudes becoming more relaxed about gay MPs and ministers. Of course, heterosexuals can also deviate from sexual norms, as the press, ever zealous in their democratic responsibilities, will inform us.

The House of Commons is not so much a gentleman’s club as a boy’s boarding school.

Shirley Williams (SDP politician), on Granada TV (30 July 1985)

**Gender** It is a democratic anomaly that only a small proportion of MPs have been women (figure 12.4). Not becoming eligible for election until 1918, the first three all represented seats formerly held by their husbands. The poor record leaves Britain out of step with many other western democracies. In Sweden, for example, around 40 per cent of MPs are women. In 1928, when franchise equality was gained, suffragette Millicent Garrett Fawcett declared: ‘Our cause is a long way from full success’; today the Fawcett Society continues her mission. The 300 Club has that number as its goal for women MPs, while Labour’s Emily’s List (Early Money Is Like Yeast) was launched by Barbara Follett in 1993 (who herself won Stevenage in 1997) to give women candidates independent financial resources. She was also credited with getting Labour women out of jeans and donkey jackets and into smart suits. However, although women actually join political parties in similar numbers to men, they have not tended to seek nomination and have not been favoured by selection committees.



**Figure 12.4**  
Women MPs,  
1945–2001.

Source: Data from *The Times Guide to the House of Commons* (1992: 282) and Criddle (2002: 196).

So what will your husband do for sex if you get the job?  
 How is your husband going to get his evening meal if you're at Westminster?  
 You should be wearing red. Are you wearing red knickers?

Questions asked of women at local candidate selection committees, reported in  
 R. Watson and M. Kite, 'Most unwanted', *The Times* (1 Aug. 2000)

The 1997 breakthrough, with 120 women elected, doubled the previous number. However, any applause belonged largely to Labour, the Conservatives returning only 13, the Liberal Democrats 3 and the SNP 2. This reflected Labour's short-lived policy of all-women shortlists (see p. 330). In Parliament, New Labour women began forming networks to work together (Lovenduski 1997: 719). However, although immaculately turned out, they promised little that was radical and the media were soon mocking 'Blair's Babes' and the 'Stepford Wives'.

The total number of women MPs fell by only two in the 2001 general election, Labour's complement dropping from the high of 102 to 95, while, the Liberal Democrats gained two and three Northern Irish parties gained one each. Although the main parties had fielded a total of 381 women candidates, they proved reluctant to place them in target seats. Labour had set itself a goal of 50 per cent women MPs but, realizing that this would entail large-scale male self-sacrifice, revised this down to 30 per cent in January 2002. However, the Queen's Speech in 2001 had promised a potential watershed in British politics: a pledge to legalize positive action towards the selection of women candidates (Lovenduski 2001).



Monstrous  
 regiment or Blair's  
 Babes? Tony Blair  
 with some of the  
 101 Labour women  
 MPs, May 1997

Photo: Times Newspapers Ltd

*Race* Racism has held back the representation of ethnic minorities, parties tending not to field black candidates for fear of losing votes. In 1979 the Conservatives broke an all-white tradition with two Asian candidates and the 1987 election produced four black Labour MPs. The total increased to six in 1992 (five Labour, one Conservative) when John Taylor's nomination for Cheltenham in 1992 caused much controversy in the local Conservative association; he lost the formerly safe seat. In 2001, the three major parties fielded 66 ethnic minority candidates (Labour 22, Conservatives 16 and Liberal Democrats 28). However, of the 56 who were not sitting MPs, only 3 fought winnable seats. The election produced an all-time high of 12 ethnic minority MPs, but at 2 per cent it fell some way short of the 6–7 per cent in the population at large.

*Amateurs or professionals* This issue goes to the heart of democracy, being concerned with what kind of people become MPs. Before 1911 they were expected to give their services freely, unsullied by pecuniary motivation. Reflecting an historic establishment fondness for amateurism this meant that, as on the county cricket and rugby union fields, only the wealthy were welcome. Until as recently as 1964 MPs received only the equivalent of part-time salaries, working- and lower-middle-class members often being unable to eat in the Westminster dining-rooms. In July 2001, amidst considerable criticism, MPs voted themselves substantial rises, beyond an independent review board's recommendations. A motion proposed by Chris Mullin to link their pay to that of nurses and teachers was crushingly defeated. A further 2.5 per cent rise in 2002 brought their basic pay to over £55,000 a year (table 12.3). Yet effective representation requires the participation of all classes. When rich MPs oppose higher salaries they threaten democracy (Batty and George 1985: 171). Moreover, low salaries can leave weaker MPs open to temptations.

### **Dishonourable members: private interests and public confidence**

Some MPs have not seen the work as a full-time job. Conservatives have characteristically held company directorships, worked in the professions

**Table 12.3** Parliamentary salaries, 2002

<b>Position</b>	<b>Salary (£)</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Salary (£)</b>
Prime minister	171,554	Leader of the Opposition	119,979
Cabinet ministers	124,979	Junior ministers	91,358
Speaker	124,979	Backbench MPs	55,118

Sources: Various.

(often law), or been large-scale landowners. When James Prior was ejected from the Thatcher Cabinet he soon re-emerged in public view as chairman of GEC, while Cecil Parkinson joined the boards of no fewer than nine companies after resigning in 1983. Some, often Labour, supplement their incomes by journalism. It is argued that working keeps MPs in touch with the real world, though it is debatable how many ordinary people inhabit the boardrooms of industry, the Inns of Court, or even the inns of Fleet Street and Wapping.

In addition, MPs have long been associated with interest groups, Conservatives particularly with business interests and Labour with promotional groups and trade unions. So overt is the practice that the Speaker will often choose MPs to speak not on the basis of constituencies, but because of the interests they are known to represent (Roth 1981: xxvi). However, from the late 1970s developments took a dangerous turn.

**Registering interest** There are two levels of concern over MPs' outside interests. First, there is the possibility that they will lack time for the job. Indeed, multiple interests appeared to be associated with safe seats, where members need spend less time courting their constituents (Norris 1996b). Secondly, there is a fear that they may favour sectional interests over the public interest. The Poulson affair, involving prominent Conservative Reginald Maudling, led to the establishment of a Register of Members' Interests in 1975. This revealed a growing profession termed 'parliamentary consultant'. Initially there were only twenty-eight, working for a total of thirty-three organizations, but by 1995 the Nolan Committee (see below) listed 168 MPs holding between them 356 consultancies. Although most lead to financial gain, Tony Banks registered his twelve jars of honey from the London Beekeepers Association!

The 1980s saw a new growth industry: commercial lobbying firms, existing expressly for the purpose of approaching MPs on behalf of clients, some, such as Ian Greer Associates, even advertising in *Dod's Parliamentary Companion*. These firms actually began to employ MPs, so that instead of being lobbied they would do the job themselves. Despite journalistic concern, the Commons Select Committee on Members' Interests showed no haste to adjust its rules of disclosure; MPs were not required to record payments received, give details of their own shareholdings or name the interests represented by their lobbying forms. Although the rules were tightened, allegations of widespread corruption and venality at the heart of government began to circulate during the 1990s (Wintour and Pallister 1995). The final straw came when two Conservative MPs were trapped by *Sunday Times* journalists posing as businessmen offering £1,000 for a question in Parliament. Some suspected this was only the tip of an iceberg. Further disclosures resulted in the resignation of one junior minister, Tim Smith, and the sacking of another, Neil Hamilton. Rising public concern led to the establishment in October 1994 of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, a standing body, chaired first by Lord Justice Nolan.

Reporting in May 1995, Nolan concluded that the Register was inadequate. To combat the deadly sins available to MPs he set out seven Principles of Public Life and a draft code of conduct. While outside interests were to be permitted,

**Nolan's seven  
Principles of  
Public Life**

Selflessness  
Integrity  
Objectivity  
Accountability  
Openness  
Honesty  
Leadership

their financial value was to be declared and paid parliamentary work for lobbyists should cease. An independent Parliamentary Commissioner should police the system, though with final judgements remaining with Parliament.

As prime minister, Major immediately accepted the report's broad thrust though some bitter debates ensued. In November 1995, with votes split 322 to 271, MPs grudgingly agreed to reveal outside earnings. In addition, all paid advocacy would be banned and a Select Committee on Standards and Privileges established. Sir Gordon Downey (ex-Comptroller and Auditor General) took up the position of Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, to advise and investigate complaints from MPs and the public.

However, the commissioner has fewer powers than the Ombudsman or the Comptroller and Auditor General with respect to sending for persons and papers, taking oral evidence, publishing findings and imposing sanctions; these powers lie with the Standards and Privileges Committee. Hence, the commissioner operates within the framework of the 'Westminster club' and a government can control the committee through its majority (Woodhouse 1998). An example of how the system could be subverted came when John Major prorogued Parliament in time to prevent publication of the 'cash-for-questions' report before the 1997 election.

The system's weaknesses were starkly exposed when Elizabeth Filkin took over from Downey. Frustrated at every turn, she was accused of 'nit-picking' and her complaints were often disregarded by the Standards and Privileges Committee. She felt she was the victim of 'unchecked whispering campaigns and hostile press briefings'. Most surprisingly, Speaker Martin, the figure responsible for good conduct, was accused of bullying. He criticized her publicly and forbade publication of a letter she had sent him about MPs' obstructive behaviour (Cracknell 2001). A particularly controversial case concerned Labour minister Keith Vaz, accused, amongst other things, of misleading Filkin over payments to his wife by the millionaire Hinduja brothers over immigration issues. Some MPs even accused Filkin of racism. The final insult came when her three-year term expired; the Commons commission chaired by the Speaker decided that rather than renew her contract she should reapply – effectively a sacking. She was replaced by Philip Mawer, an ex-civil servant and leading lay figure in the Church of England; critics alleged that he would prove more of a poodle than a watchdog.

Those in favour of stronger controls were not holding their breath. The June 2000 white paper, *Raising standards and upholding integrity: the prevention of corruption* (Home Office 2000), had included a draft Corruption Bill prepared by the Law Commission. This would close a legal loophole dating from the 1689 Bill of Rights that gave MPs immunity from public prosecution. However, finding time for it in the legislative programme did not appear to be a top priority.

In this chapter we have introduced the three great estates of the realm. To different degrees they are all parts of the dignified constitution, serving to legitimate the exercise of power. The extent to which they do this is under question; each has reached a state of crisis marked by profound public dissatisfaction and calls for reform abound. However, there is more to the life of Parliament than representing the three estates. The reality today can only be understood by reference to its processes and internal power structure. We turn to these in the following chapter.

### Key points

- All polities contain ceremonial elements, though Britain is particularly rich in this respect.
- Bagehot took an exceedingly elitist view of such ceremony, believing its purpose to be that of keeping ordinary people in the dark about the real process of government.
- Britain has a constitutional monarchy but the idea that the monarchy is above politics can be questioned.
- The death of Diana, Princess of Wales created a crisis for the monarchy.
- The House of Lords, with its composition based on breeding and prime ministerial favour, is a relic of an undemocratic age.
- Any reform of the Lords runs the risk of constitutional turbulence.
- Any idea that the Commons is a microcosm of society is questionable. The working class, women and racial minorities have been long under-represented.
- The 1990s saw the prestige of the Commons plunge, with widespread perceptions of venality.

### Review your understanding of the following terms and concepts

appointments commission	life peer	Privy Councillor
backbencher	Lord Chancellor	Register of Members'
bicameral	mace	Interests
Black Rod	Magnum Concilium	republicanism
ceremonial	mumbo-jumbo	Restoration
Civil List	Order Paper	right honourable member
constitutional monarchy	'other place'	Select Committee on
cross-bencher	parliamentary privilege	Standards and Privileges
division lobby	Parliamentary	Speaker
hereditary peer	Commissioner for	usual channels
honourable member	Standards	
Leader of the House	patronage	

### Assignment

Study the extract from the *Independent* and answer the following questions.

	Mark (%)
1 What inference do you draw from the publication date of this article?	5
2 What advantages might there be from a chamber selected on the same principle as a jury?	15
3 What alternative methods for selecting members of the upper house can you suggest?	20
4 Why does an elected, or partly elected, upper house threaten the Commons?	30
5 What are the dangers of appointing members to the upper house on the basis of patronage?	30

### Questions for discussion

- 1 Consider the consequences for British politics if the monarchy were to be abolished?
- 2 In what sense was the death of the Princess of Wales a crisis for the monarchy?
- 3 'Without the attentions of the media the British monarchy would die.' Discuss.
- 4 Why do you think the process of government is surrounded by ceremony and display?
- 5 What changes in Parliament and policy can be expected from the 1997 influx of women MPs?
- 6 'Parliament cannot be described as a representative assembly if its composition is not a microcosm of British society.' Discuss.
- 7 Examine the pros and cons of MPs having outside jobs.
- 8 Has Parliament adequately protected itself against sleaze?
- 9 'The development of the MP's constituency role detracts from the constitutional role of the Commons.' Discuss.
- 10 Evaluate reform proposals for the House of Lords.

### Topic for debate

This house believes that the abolition of the House of Lords is a prerequisite for social reform.

# 'People's Lords' to replace hereditary peers

## Exclusive

By Charles Suter,  
Constitutional Affairs  
Correspondent

A CABINET committee drawing up plans for the abolition of hereditary peerages has proposed their replacement with temporary "People's Lords", according to documents leaked to *The Independent*.

Under the changes, existing hereditary Lords will stay in place until they die. Their seats will then be taken by "ordinary citizens" chosen at random in a system similar to jury service.

The new "People's Lords" will serve for fixed terms of one, five or fifteen years. It is expected that the first citizens to be elevated in this way will take their seats in time for the Millennium celebrations at the end of next year. There will be no change to the system of life peerages.

The committee, chaired by the Prime Minister and including Peter Mandelson, Lord Irvine and constitutional experts – was established soon after last May's Labour landslide.

Confidential minutes seen by *The Independent* reveal the committee examined the possibility of replacing the House of Lords with an

elected second chamber, similar to the US Senate.

The idea was rejected because the committee was worried that "even a partly elected Upper House would challenge the democratic legitimacy" of the Labour-dominated Commons.

There were also fears that outright abolition of the Lords would bring renewed and direct pressure on the Monarchy itself – something which new Labour is keen to avoid.

The document details discussion of the "middle way" which Labour hopes will "preserve the stability and continuity" provided by the inherited peerage.

By allocating seats in the second chamber by lottery, appointments to the Lords will "remain beyond the political fashions of the day".

At the same time, the removal of the hereditary element will get rid of an "out-of-date principle which is an affront to the sensibilities of a modern inclusive and increasingly classless democracy".

According to the plan, the "Lottery Lords" will be chosen by computers using the electoral roll. Citizens selected to serve in the Lords will be paid a salary "commensurate with their current earnings with an additional element of compensation"

for their period of office. Attendance will be mandatory, though as with jury service it will be possible to seek exemption.

Systems will be introduced to ensure that equal numbers of men and women are elevated to the peerage. The young, together with members of ethnic minorities "and the just plain average" would have an equal chance of gaining a seat in the second chamber and thus an opportunity to scrutinise legislation, suggest changes and draft new clauses and amendments.

Opponents of the plan were quick to register their protest. Professor Pamela Benlott of London University, an influential new Labour intellectual, said: "The British constitution is fragile. Hereditary peers have centuries of inbreeding in their blood. The fact that many Lords are congenital idiots is a subtle and unique part of the constitutional settlement with which Tony will tinker at his peril."

Henry Masingbird-DeMontfort, who as 27th Earl of Thanet can trace his ancestors back to Harold Haffacanute, warned of a "mass uprising along the lines of the Country-side March... but more violent" if new Labour took his seat away.

*Independent*, 1 April 1998

### Further reading

Bagehot, W. (1963) *The English Constitution* (first published 1867). Highly elitist and disdainful of the masses, but contains enduring truths about the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, and the place of symbolism in politics.

Bogdanor, V. (1997) *The Monarchy and the Constitution*. Accessible academic analysis of the monarchy in politics. Ultimately a defence of the institution.

Cannadine, D. (1992) *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*. Title tells all.

Judge, D. (ed.) (1983) *The Politics of Parliamentary Reform*. A varied collection. Opening chapter takes a neo-Marxist view, noting that reforms that succeed are those legitimating the rule of the economically powerful.

Norris, J. and Lovenduski, J. (1994) *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament*.

Examines relative dearth of women, black and working-class MPs and discusses whether the social bias in the political elite matters.

Pimlott, B. (1996) *The Queen: A Biography of Elizabeth II*. Divides long reign into key periods: from fairytale to nightmare.

Russell, M. (2000) *Reforming the House of Lords: Lessons from Overseas*. A comparative examination of upper chambers.

Shell, D. (1992) *The House of Lords*. Perceptive overview.

### For light relief

Julian Critchley, *Palace of Varieties*. An entertaining insight into an MP's role by one of its mavericks.

Edwina Currie, *A Parliamentary Affair*. Obsessive ambition, eroticism and political intrigue.

Frances Edmonds, *Members Only*. A sharp and witty analysis of the Commons as seen by a feminist.

Anthony Holden, *The Tarnished Crown*. *Express* columnist and keen monarchy watcher with paradoxically republican sympathies.

Andrew Morton, *Diana: Her True Story*. Book which put the cat among the corgis on the break-up of the fairytale marriage.

Sue Townsend, *The Queen and I*. Life for the royal family on a council estate.

**On the net**

<http://www.royal.gov.uk>

The monarchy's website.

<http://www.parliament.uk>

Parliament's home page has links to the Commons and Lords and an enormous amount of information on parliamentary history, customs and procedure.