



PARLIAMENTARY
EDUCATION SERVICE

Wise Up About Parliament

Introduction

Hello! I'm Erskine.
Welcome to my tour
of Parliament!



This is one of the most famous buildings
in London.

It is called the Palace of Westminster
because it was where our kings and
queens once lived.

Today it is the home of our two Houses
of Parliament: the House of Commons
and the House of Lords.





My name is Erskine. I fly over this building almost every day so I know what happens inside.

Tomorrow I am bringing my two young friends, Ollie and Mollie, with me to learn about what goes on in Parliament.

I hope that you can come with us too!



Government and Parliament

The main road leading to Parliament is called Whitehall. This is the home of our Government.

The Government is like the management of the country and it decides how things should be run. One of Parliament's most important tasks is to check that the Government is doing its job properly.





The Government is led by the Prime Minister who chooses about 100 members of the House of Commons and House of Lords to be ministers.

The most important ministers form a group called the Cabinet, which decides what the Government is going to do.

The work of the Government is divided between departments. Each one looks after a subject such as money (the Treasury) and health (the Department of Health).

Ministers are helped in their work by staff known as civil servants.



Prime Minister

Just off Whitehall is Downing Street. The Prime Minister lives at No 10. He is chosen by members of his political party to be its leader.

The leader of the party which wins the most seats in the House of Commons at a general election becomes Prime Minister and forms the Government. As head of the Government, the Prime Minister is involved in all of the important decisions about what happens in the country. Every week the Prime Minister goes to the House of Commons to answer questions about what the Government is doing.



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KNOCK
KNOCK



Let's find out
what the Prime Minister is
doing today.



Elections and MPs

Here we are over the Palace of Westminster.
Everyone is arriving ready to start work.

The country is divided up into 646 areas called constituencies. Each constituency has about 90,000 people living in it. Every 4-5 years there is a general election. This is when people aged 18 or over have the chance to vote for the person they want to represent them in the House of Commons.





Most political parties choose someone to be their candidate in each constituency. From 2007 candidates must be aged 18 or over (previously this was 21). The person who gains the most votes becomes the Member of Parliament (MP) for that constituency.

In this way everyone in the country has someone who is elected to represent them in Parliament: this is called democracy.




House of Commons


The word Parliament comes from the French word 'parler' which means to speak. In the House of Commons chamber MPs meet to talk, and sometimes to argue, about important issues. This is called debating.

MPs will debate all types of subjects including world issues such as wars and famine, national issues which affect us all like transport and schools, and local issues which might only concern one area or group of people like the closing of a local hospital.





“Order, order!
One at a time please.”



With so many MPs all wanting to speak it can become very noisy. The Speaker, who sits in the large chair in the middle, keeps MPs in order and decides who should speak next – a bit like your teacher perhaps?

At the end of a debate MPs will often vote to decide what should happen next. This is called a division.

House of Commons

MPs also have to keep a check on what the Government is doing and how it is running the country. They do this by asking ministers questions at Question Time about what is happening in their departments.

Once a week MPs have the chance to ask the Prime Minister questions. Prime Minister's Question Time takes place at noon on Wednesdays and is always very noisy.





MPs also meet in much smaller groups, called committees, to ask questions, read documents, have discussions and write reports about issues they have been investigating.

They also have meetings with local groups to find out how their decisions are affecting people and organisations in the country.



Making Laws

Laws are like school rules, except that they apply to everyone in the country. We need laws so that we all know how the country is run and what we should and should not do. Just imagine what it would be like if there were no traffic laws and cars could drive on whichever side of the road they wanted!

Most of our laws are made in Parliament. An idea for a new law is written down in a document called a Bill. Both Houses of Parliament have the chance to talk about the bill and make changes to it. At various stages called readings, members can vote on whether they agree or not with the bill.

PREPARATION

THE
HOUSE OF
COMMONS



Discussions
and votes

THE HOUSE
OF LORDS



Discussions
and votes

THE ROYAL
ASSENT



Once both Houses have agreed, the Queen has to sign the bill. It then becomes an Act of Parliament and a new law which we all have to obey.



House of Lords

Let's move on to the House of Lords.

The chamber here is very splendid with red rather than green seats. At one end is the throne where the Queen sits when she comes to open Parliament each year.

The State Opening of Parliament is when the Government outlines its plans for the coming year and all the bills it hopes to become law.





There are over 700 members of the House of Lords (often called Peers). Unlike MPs, members of the House of Lords are not elected so the House of Lords does not have as much power as the House of Commons.

Most Peers are appointed by the Queen, on the advice of the Prime Minister, for the work they have done for the country, so they bring a wide range of knowledge to Parliament. They are Lords for the rest of their lives and known as Life Peers.

Not all Peers belong to political parties. Some, called Crossbenchers, are independent. This group has nearly 200 members and there is nothing like it in the House of Commons.



House of Lords

Members of the House of Lords have a very important job in helping the Commons with their work. They spend two thirds of their time discussing bills and making suggestions as to how they might be improved.

Peers also talk about (debate) important issues. As there is always likely to be at least one Peer with expert knowledge about a subject, their debates and contributions are usually very well informed.



**of dolphins
by the Lords**

Teachers have right to reject
violent pupils, say Law Lords

**Lords test case victory could
alter status of playing fields**

**Teachers revolt halts
plan to let children
go into pubs alone**



Peers also keep a check on what the Government is doing.

A number of ministers are members of the House of Lords so that they can answer questions each day and explain the work of the Government. The Lords also has special committees which look at subjects like science and technology and Europe.



The Monarchy

Before we leave the building let's have a look at the royal rooms.

Although this is a royal palace the monarch (king or queen) does not live here and only visits on special occasions. The most important of these is the State Opening of Parliament. We have an hereditary monarch which means the title passes from one member of the royal family to another.





Many years ago kings and queens were very powerful and ruled the country. Gradually the people wanted to have a say in how the country was run, so, over hundreds of years, more and more power was transferred to Parliament.

Today, most of the powers that the monarch retains are in practice carried out by the Prime Minister and the Government.



Goodbye...

It is time for us to leave Parliament and carry on our journey to meet up with our friends. We are going to make our own parliament.

Did you know that the name for a group of owls is a parliament?

I hope Ollie and Mollie have learnt something from their visit and you have enjoyed our 'bird's eye' view of Parliament.





Perhaps one day you will be able to come here with your school or your family and friends to see Parliament for yourself.

Remember to look out for me if you do!



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