

## **POLITICAL GROUPINGS**

### **Political Parties**

Leaders of the Government and Opposition sit opposite one another on the front benches in the debating chamber of the House of Commons. Their supporters, called the 'backbenchers', sit behind them. There are similar seating arrangements for the parties in the House of Lords but those peers who do not wish to be associated with any political party choose to sit on the 'crossbenches'.

The effectiveness of the party system in Parliament relies to a large extent on the relationship between the Government and the Opposition parties. Depending on the relative strengths of the parties in the House of Commons, the Opposition may try to overthrow the Government by defeating it on a 'matter of confidence' vote.

In general, however, the Opposition aims to contribute to the formulation of policy and legislation by constructive criticism, by opposing government proposals with which it disagrees, by tabling amendments to Government Bills, and by putting forward its own policies in order to improve its chances of winning the next General Election.

Clearly the advent of a coalition government (2010) has complicated the picture but as together they have a majority the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are the government, Labour the (principal) opposition.

The Government Chief Whips in the Commons and the Lords, in consultation with their Opposition counterparts, arrange the scheduling of government business. Collectively, the Chief Whips are often referred to as 'the usual channels' when the question of finding time for a particular item of business is being discussed.

### **Hints on working with Political Parties**

Each political party will be continually reforming various policy areas, with the aim of producing a strong manifesto in the run up to a general election. In some cases the parties will run public consultations on their policies (such as the Conservative Party Policy Commissions). However, more generally it is best to approach suitable shadow ministers and influential MPs to influence their position directly. It is often useful to approach all political parties to gain cross-party support. Also it is important for charities to have a non-party political stance on an issue.

### **Committees and all party groups**

#### **Select committees**

Select committees are appointed for a particular task, generally one of enquiry, investigation and scrutiny. Select committees can question ministers and civil servants. They report their conclusions and recommendations to the House of Commons as a whole. A select committee may be appointed for a Parliament, or for a session, or for as long as it takes to complete its task. Each committee is constituted on the basis of party strength in the House.

In their examination of government policies, expenditure and administration, select committees may question ministers, civil servants, interested bodies and individuals. Through hearings and published reports they bring before Parliament and the public an extensive amount of fact and informed opinion on many issues.

Fifteen committees have been set up by the House of Commons to examine aspects of public policy, expenditure and administration across the main government departments and their associated public bodies.

Each House has a select committee to keep it informed of European Union (EU) developments and to enable it to scrutinise and debate EU policies and proposals. Three Commons standing committees debate specific European legislative proposals.

In the House of Lords, besides the Appeal and Appellate Committees in which most of the House's judicial work is carried out, there are select committees on the European Union, science and technology, the constitution, and economic affairs.

From time to time other committees may also be set up to consider particular issues or, sometimes, a particular Bill. 'Domestic' committees in the Commons cover the internal workings of the House.

### **All Party Groups (APGs)**

There are a large number of all party groups in Parliament. Some may be particular interests (e.g. sports), while others are more formal (e.g. international development or defence). Some groups have a very active membership, and involve MPs who have a strong interest in the subject of the group.

### **Hints on working with Select Committee members and APGs**

It is likely that the members of the Select Committee or APG will have a strong interest in the issues it is concerned with. However, their views on the subject may not be the same as your own and they may have a particular interest in an aspect of the subject (e.g. in 1996 some Environmental Audit Committee members joined the committee specifically to support nuclear power during an inquiry into UK energy policy). Therefore it is worth knowing the background to each member. However, in general Select Committee and APG members are a good first port of call on a subject when trying to build parliamentary support.

### **Political Advisers**

Cabinet ministers may each appoint a maximum of two special advisers. These are political advisers, as opposed to the more impartial civil servant. The Prime Minister approves all appointments and they are paid for from public funds. There are about 80 such advisers in the present administration. Their appointments come to an end when the Government's term of office finishes or when the appointing minister leaves the Government or moves to another appointment.

### **Hint on working with SPADs**

Special Advisers (SPADs) work very closely with the Minister, they often are very guarded in protecting the Minister's views and positions. They are often difficult to get near to. However, if a good relationship can be built with a SPAD, this opens up a good influencing channel. Also if there is difficulty in accessing a Minister, then a SPAD is a good source of information on why there is a blockage.

### **Government department and Civil servants**

The main role of government departments and their agencies is to implement government policy and to advise ministers. They are staffed by politically impartial civil servants and generally receive their funding from money provided by Parliament. They often work alongside local authorities, non-departmental public bodies, and other government-sponsored organisations.

The role of government departments is to implement policy and advise ministers. The structure and functions of departments are sometimes reorganised if there are major changes in government policy. A change of government, however, does not necessarily affect the functions of departments.

The work of some departments (for instance, the Ministry of Defence) covers the UK as a whole. Other departments, such as the Department for Work and Pensions, cover England, Wales and Scotland, but not Northern Ireland. Others again, such as the Department for Children, Schools and Families, are mainly concerned with affairs in England and Wales.

Most departments are headed by ministers. However, some are non-ministerial departments headed by a permanent office holder and ministers with other duties are accountable for them to Parliament.

### **The Civil Service**

The role of the Civil Service is to carry out the practical and administrative work of government through its civil servants. Civil servants are politically impartial and work to carry out the policies of the government department they work for under the control of elected Ministers.

The Civil Service has no separate constitutional responsibility. Civil servants are servants of the Crown. In effect, this means the Government of the United Kingdom, the Scottish Executive and the National Assembly for Wales. Executive powers are generally exercised by ministers of the Crown, who are in turn answerable to the appropriate Parliament or Assembly. The Civil Service as such has no separate constitutional personality or responsibility. The duty of the individual civil servant is first and foremost to the minister in charge of the department in which he or she is serving. A change of minister, for whatever reason, does not involve a change of staff.

### **Hints on working with civil servants**

Civil servants are employed by the Government department, and bound by the department policies. However, if you build a good relationship with a civil servant they will often be willing to give informal (off the record) information or advice. When a Minister replies to a letter, it will first be drafted by relevant civil servants. Relevant civil servants will also be present at meetings with the Minister. Therefore civil servants are often a good first port of call at any department, both to influence Ministerial responses and to gauge Ministerial mood on an issue.

### **European Commission and European Union**

The European Union (EU) is a unique supranational union and intergovernmental political body. It is composed of 27 member states, primarily located in Europe. In 1957, six European countries formed the European Economic Community (EEC) via the Treaty of Rome. Since then the EU has grown in size through the accession of new member states and has increased its powers by the addition of new policy areas to its remit. In 1993, the Maastricht Treaty established the base of the current legal framework.

With over 497 million citizens the EU's economies create an estimated nominal GDP of c. €13 trillion (\$16.5). There is a single market between member states with a common trade policy, a Common Agricultural/Fisheries Policy, and a regional development policy. It has a common currency, the euro, which has been adopted by 17 member states. Since 1993, the EU has developed a limited Common Foreign and Security Policy, and co-operation in police and judicial matters.

Important institutions of the EU include the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, the European Council, the European Court of Justice and the European Central Bank. EU citizens elect the Parliament every five years and, with restrictions on new member states, are enabled to invest, live, travel and work in all member states.

The **European Parliament** is the directly elected parliamentary body of the European Union (EU). Together with the Council of the European Union (the Council), it forms the bicameral legislative branch of the Union's institutions and has been described as one of the most powerful legislatures in the world. The Parliament and Council form the highest legislative body within the Union. However their powers as such are limited to the competencies conferred upon the European Community by member states. Hence the institution has little control over policy areas held by the states and within the other two of the three pillars of the European Union. The Parliament is composed of 754 MEPs (Member of the European Parliament) who serve the second largest democratic electorate in the world (after India) and the largest trans-national democratic electorate in the world (375 million).

It has been directly elected every five years by universal suffrage since 1979. Although the European Parliament has legislative power that such bodies as those above do not possess, it does not have legislative initiative like most national parliaments. While it is the 'first institution' of the European Union (mentioned first in the treaties, having ceremonial precedence over all authority at European level), the Council has greater powers over legislation than the Parliament where co-decision procedure (equal rights of amendment and rejection) does not apply. It has, however, had control over the EU budget since the 1970s and has a veto over the appointment of the European Commission.

The European Parliament has two meeting places, namely the Immeuble Louise Weiss in Strasbourg, France, which serves for plenary sessions and is the official seat and the Espace Léopold/Leopoldwijk complex in Brussels, Belgium, the smaller of the two, which serves for preparatory meetings and complementary, non-plenary sessions. The Secretariat of the European Parliament, the Parliament's administrative body, is based in Luxembourg.

**The European Commission** is the executive branch of the European Union. It operates in the method of cabinet government, with 27 Commissioners, one for each country of the EU, led by a Commission President who serves a five-year term. The body is responsible for proposing legislation, implementing decisions, upholding the Union's treaties and the general day-to-day running of the Union.

The term Commission can mean either the college of Commissioners mentioned above, or the larger institution; including the administrative body of about 25,000 European civil servants who are divided into departments called Directorates-General.

The **Council of the European Union** (informally, the Council of Ministers) is one of the two legislative institutions of the European Union, the other being the European Parliament. This Council should be distinguished from the European Council and the Council of Europe.

The Council, together with the Parliament, form the highest legislative body within the Union, but only within the competencies of the European Community. It is composed of 27 national ministers (one per state), the exact minister depending upon the area being addressed; for example defence ministers meet to discuss matters regarding defence. The ministers are accountable to their national electorates. The Union's law is limited to specific policy areas, however it does override national law. As the Union operates on supranational and intergovernmental platforms, in some areas the Council is superior to the Parliament, having only to consult to get assent from the body. However in many areas now, co-decision procedure is the legislative process used which is a procedure where the two bodies are equal in power.

The Council does not have a single President in the traditional sense, but the role is rotated between each member state every 6 months (known as the 'Presidency'), with the minister from that state then able to set the agenda. Another powerful position is the Secretary-General who is also the representative of the Union's foreign policy.

The **European Council** (referred to as a European Summit) is the highest political body of the European Union which meets around four times a year. It comprises the heads of state or government of the Union's member states along with the President of the European Commission. Its meeting is chaired by the member from the member state currently holding Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

While the Council has no formal executive or legislative powers (it is a body, not an institution, of the Union), it deals with major issues and decisions taken are "a major impetus in defining the general political guidelines of the European Union." The Council meets at least twice a year; usually in the Justus Lipsius building of Brussels. This body should be distinguished from the separate bodies of Council of the European Union and the Council of Europe.

### **Assembly and Regional Assemblies**

#### **Devolution in Scotland: overview**

In a referendum held in September 1997, 74 per cent of those who voted endorsed the UK Government's proposals to set up a Scottish Parliament and Executive to administer Scottish affairs. On a second question, on whether to give the new Parliament tax-varying powers, 64 per cent were in favour.

Legislation was introduced in the Westminster Parliament in December 1997 and the following November the Scotland Act 1998 passed into law. Elections to the first Scottish Parliament for almost 300 years were held in May 1999, and it met for the first time in July of that year.

Unlike the Westminster Parliament, the Scottish Parliament does not have a second chamber to revise legislation which comes before it. Detailed scrutiny of Bills is carried out in committees or by taking evidence from outside experts. The House of Lords no longer considers Scottish legislation on devolved matters, although it remains the final court of appeal in hearing civil cases arising from the Scottish courts.

The Scottish Parliament's 129 members (MSPs) are elected for a fixed four-year term. The Additional Member System of proportional representation is used in Scottish Parliamentary elections, giving each voter two votes: one for a constituency MSP and one 'regional' vote for a registered political party or an individual independent candidate.

There are 73 single-member constituency seats and 56 seats representing eight regions (based on the European parliamentary constituencies), with each region returning seven members. These MSPs are allocated so that each party's overall share of seats in the Parliament reflects its share of the regional vote.

The Scottish Executive, the administrative arm of government in Scotland, has responsibility for all public bodies whose functions and services have been devolved to it, and is accountable to the Scottish Parliament for them.

The First Minister, normally the leader of the party with most support in the Parliament, heads the Scottish Executive. Since the first elections, the Executive has been run by a partnership between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. There are 11 Cabinet positions in all, plus the non-elected Lord Advocate, the chief law officer.

Issues on defence are currently decided at Westminster but there will be a referendum on full Scottish independence in Autumn 2014 – "Should Scotland be an independent country?".

### **National Assembly for Wales and Welsh Assembly Government**

In 1997, the Welsh people narrowly endorsed government proposals to devolve certain powers and responsibilities to a National Assembly. Of those who voted, 50.3 per cent were in favour.

The Welsh Assembly has wide-ranging powers and responsibilities. The Government of Wales Act 1998 laid down the necessary statutory framework to establish the National Assembly for Wales, which held its first elections in May 1999 and began functioning as a devolved administration two months later.

In February 2002, the National Assembly voted to make clear the difference in roles between ministers and the Assembly as a whole. The Welsh Assembly Government develops and implements policy. It is accountable to the National Assembly and is primarily located in Cathays Park, Cardiff. The National Assembly for Wales debates and approves legislation and holds the Assembly Government to account. Its debating chamber and members are located at Cardiff Bay.

Electors have two votes in Assembly elections: one for their local constituency and one for their electoral region. The Assembly comprises 60 members (AMs): 40 from local constituencies, with the same boundaries as those for Welsh seats in the House of Commons, and 20 regional members. The Assembly is elected by the Additional Member System of proportional representation.

The First Minister, who heads the Assembly Government, is supported by a Cabinet of eight Ministers in charge of economic development and transport, Assembly business, finance, local government and public services, education and lifelong learning, health and social care, social justice, housing and regeneration, environment, planning and countryside and culture, Welsh language and sport.

### **The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive**

The Northern Ireland Assembly was established as part of the Belfast Agreement and meets in Parliament Buildings. The Assembly is the prime source of authority for all devolved responsibilities and has full legislative and executive authority.

The first elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly were held in June 1998, using the single transferable vote system of proportional representation.

The 18 constituencies were the same as those for the UK Parliament, but each returned six MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly), giving the Assembly a total of 108 members.