

THE WAY GOVERNMENT WORKS

Aside from the toy governments in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales (see “Political Geography of the U.K.”), the U.K. is governed in a similar way to most other modern constitutional monarchies. I’ll try to draw analogies with the American system, because it’s the American market that I’m broadly aiming this book at. They’ve got all the money, apparently.

History

Ages ago, Britain was split into lots of little Kingdoms. These fought with each other like normal human beings, and eventually resolved into the comparatively stable kingdoms of Scotland and England, around the year 1000. Heaven knows where Wales fitted in. I doubt anyone had noticed it yet.

Apart from having banquets and orgies, the main duty of a monarch is to produce heirs to the throne. Unfortunately Elizabeth I of England entirely forgot to do this and so, when she died in 1603, the throne of England was handed to James I of Scotland, whose great grandmother’s best friend had once done yoga with Elizabeth’s mother. England wasn’t put under the control of Scotland – they retained their own system of government and all it meant for James was being able to call himself “King of Great Britain,” lots of red-eye flights into Heathrow and interminable baggage checks.

Despite a brief foray into military dictatorship, the whole country was so pleased to have just the one king stealing their money that Scotland and England were united into a single United Kingdom in 1707, which exists to the present day.

The Royal Family

Nowadays, the Royal Family aren’t really involved in running the country. The monarch (currently Queen Elizabeth II) has a weekly audience with the Prime Minister, during which they talk about recent sporting events, or nip down to the pub for a swift half and some dominos. Whilst nominally the reigning monarch is allowed to dissolve parliament, make treaties and such like, it’s a bit doubtful as to whether they’d really be able to put any of those things into practice.

The Royal Family has three main functions in modern Britain. The first is to invoke antagonism amongst the chattering classes about what the bloody Royal Family ever does for anyone. Bloody social leeches. The second is to provide the tourist industry with ceremonial events, tea towels, commemorative spoons, postcards and other overpriced memorabilia which will be snapped up by enthusiastic tourists and displayed in homes all over the modern world. Their third is to generate C-grade scandal for the chattering classes by having sex with supermodels, smoking pot or making obliquely racist comments on television. Elizabeth II’s son, Charles, was hampered by his looks from humping any supermodels and prevented by his personality from scoring weed, although his children, Princes William and Harry, are considerably better looking and attempting to make amends. Elizabeth’s husband, Prince Philip, is a much more enthusiastic scandalmonger and is famous for asking an Australian aborigine whether they still threw spears at each other, and telling British students in China that “if you stay here much longer, you’ll get all slitty-eyed.”

Parliament

The real governing of the U.K. happens in parliament. Parliament is split into two sections: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Both of these are open proceedings, with the participants surrounded by public galleries usually full of budding terrorists trying to map the ventilation systems.

The House of Commons

The House of Commons is a bunch of six hundred or so elected Members of Parliament (M.P.s) from a mixture of political parties, each representing a particular area of the U.K. At General Elections, British citizens only get one vote, and that’s for their local M.P. Their M.P. will most likely belong to a political party, and so Brits run the risk of electing a blithering moron to represent their region just because they belonged to the party they wanted to be in power. Of course, Americans are quite capable of electing a blithering moron to be president when that was the only election going on at the time, so perhaps now’s not the time to pass judgement on the British system.

The House of Commons is essentially a mixture between the Senate and the House of Representatives. They sit on most weekdays in London’s Palace of Westminster and shout at each other about the topics of the day. There’s a lot more shouting in the British political process than there is in the American one — they even have a special employee, the Speaker, whose primary task is to shout “order, order!” when the yelling gets a bit too much.

The political party with the most M.P.s is the one that gets to be in government. The leader of that party gets to be Prime Minister. As well as representing their various regions, M.P.s from the ruling party are also allocated other positions in the government (Minister for Transport, Minister for Education, etc.). Not to be outdone, the opposition party gets to do this too

— to distinguish their pretend ones from the real ones, their titles are preceded by the term “Shadow” — Shadow Minister for the Environment, Shadow Health Minister, et cetera.

The Chamber of Commons is a long room — the intention is that the governing party sit on one side and the opposition sit on the other. Anyone from other parties has to just squeeze in where they can. The more important people are closer to the front, and so anyone with a ministerial position is known as a “front-bencher” and someone who’s just sitting around representing their local constituents is a “back-bencher.” Not all M.P.s are in Parliament every day, but parties will sometimes recall M.P.s from their constituencies if they need help with a particular upcoming vote.

The Voting Process

The purpose of the House of Commons is to discuss and pass Bills. Determining exactly what Bills may encompass involves lots of interminably dull details, but they generally cover the laws of the land, taxation and spending. Once a Bill is proposed, the House of Commons debate it for a while before having a vote. All M.P.s present in the Chamber are cued to shout a verbal “aye” or “no.” If it wasn’t entirely obvious who won that, the M.P.s then file into “aye” or “no” areas in the side of the Chamber and are counted. Sometimes MPs are directed how to vote by their party; sometimes they aren’t.

The House of Lords

The House of Lords is a motley bunch of drunken octogenarian ex-politicians, hereditary title holders, religious leaders, serial cat rapists and deranged millionaires appointed at the whim of the political parties without any sort of democratic process at all. Think of it as Britain’s Supreme Court. Unlike the Chamber of Commons, the Lords’ Chamber is ornately decorated with red leather, splendid chandeliers and a gilded relief ceiling.

The purpose of the House of Lords is to serve as a sanity check on Bills passed by the House of Commons, a task unsuited to most of its members. Although an inebriated second opinion can often be a useful wake-up call, various Acts of Parliament have served to restrict the power of the House of Lords to merely the ability to delay Commons Bills (they can no longer reject them) — and several categories of Bill are deemed important enough for them not to be allowed to even do that.

The Constitution

Britain doesn’t have a constitution. Why it’s called a Constitutional Monarchy I’ve no idea. Parliament is entirely within its rights to decide that all dogs should be painted green, anyone found washing their car on a Saturday should be hung from the neck until dead and all citizens should be allowed to buy handguns from supermarkets. The nearest thing the Brits have to an emergency-release valve on the entire Parliament is the monarch, who might at that point decide to step in and exercise some of their long-forgotten rights to dissolve Parliament and repaint dogs.