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An introduction to Parliament

BY ROBIN ASHBY, MANAGING PARTNER, BERGMANS

The British Parliament – or at least the House of Commons – has become a bit of a cult following for those around the world with an interest in politics. But the bear pit that is the weekly Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) obscures some of the unique – and sometimes quirky - features of British democracy. This article describes some of them; in a future edition we will describe how outsiders can interact with and seek to influence its processes.

So here goes with British constitution 101. First thing – there isn’t one! There’s a body of laws, precedents and common law reaching back over a thousand years. There is no written constitution. Secondly, the sovereign (Queen Elizabeth II) is the head of state and the country is governed in her name. She has to agree to every Act of Parliament – by pronouncing over it

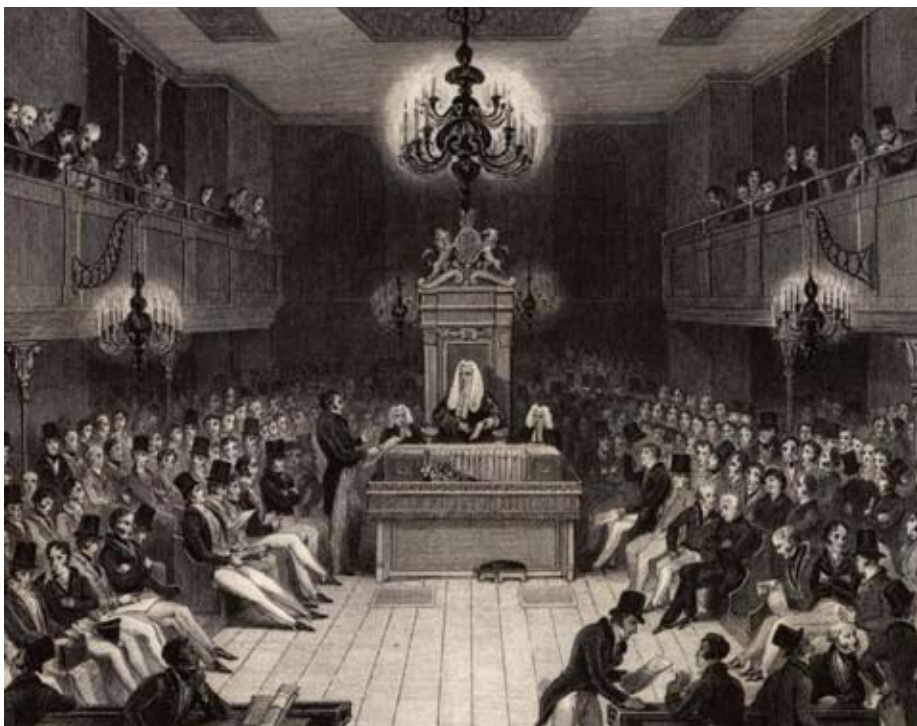
in Norman French. But under the conventions she cannot refuse to agree – there’s no veto here.

In fact the Queen has very few rights. She has the right to be consulted, the right to encourage and the right to warn the prime minister.

Strange? Yes, but the sovereign is never wrong – only wrongly advised. The advising

is the job of the prime minister (PM), (currently Gordon Brown, previously Tony Blair). If the advice proves to be wrong, the prime minister – the head of government – may have to resign, and certainly could be thrown out at the next General Election by the voters.

The PM isn’t directly elected. He or she is generally the head of the largest political party in parliament – the Majority Leader if you will. But it is the party itself that choose who will be its leader, not the public. There are no primaries or direct elections. The largest party however, must be able to command a majority on its own or in conjunction with other parties – not all the time, but usually when there is a vote of no confidence. Lose that and you’re out and there will be a general election. That is the situation that brought Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party to power in 1979. And that’s why you see PMQs. The PM is head of both the executive and the legislature – PMQs is parliament holding him or her to account – for half an hour every week, on any subject legislators care to raise, eyeball to eyeball. It’s not just about being held to account, it’s about keeping up morale on your own side, putting down the opposition (technically known as Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition, who try to show that the “advice” is poor, wrong, misguided etc) and appealing over their heads to the electorate.



PARLIAMENT IN HISTORY



THE AUTHOR IN WHITEHALL

It's all played out in a gladiatorial arena that's too small for the total number of legislators (Winston Churchill had it rebuilt that way after World War II bombing destroyed it, because he loved the sense of theatre from a packed house). There's no assigned seating. The government party and their allies on one side, the opposition parties on the other. And the two sides are just over two sword lengths apart to keep them from killing each other.

To mix it up a bit further, there aren't two parties, there are several. At the moment the Labour Party (slightly left of the political centre) forms the government; the Conservatives (slightly right of centre) are the main



THE CHAMBER TODAY

opposition. Tony Blair won three landslide majorities by convincing the voters that he was the closest to the centre and the Conservatives were too right wing. Third biggest is the Liberal Democrats (a bit more to the left of centre) and a clutch of nationalist parties (Scottish, Welsh and northern Irish) make up the rest.

If current public opinion turns into real votes in real ballot boxes (pieces of paper – no voting machines or hanging chads here!) there will be a Conservative Government whenever the next general election is held. And there's another anomaly. Each parliament last for a maximum of five years – but the PM can request the sovereign to dissolve parliament before then, if needed (say if he or she feels its most favourable to their party retaining power).

It's 90% certain the next General Election will be held on Thursday 5th May 2010 – the same day as local authority (municipal) elections already slated. Some candidates are already in place and fighting. Some MPs are retiring; some are facing certain defeat. So

the atmosphere in Parliament is a cross between waiting for the Super Bowl kick off and the bell on the last day of High School. Money can't buy you love, and it's difficult to spend enough in a British election to change the outcome. There are caps on spending – for an individual candidate, under \$45,000; the biggest parties nationwide, \$30 million. There is some national help too – free TV adverts for the main parties, and free delivery of a piece of election literature to every door. This means there is less scope for fundraisers and political action committees, and no tradition of political donations from the mass of ordinary people. So UK lobbyists have to rely more on the power of persuasion derived from ideas and information rather than the power of the donation. How they can succeed in their task will be the topic explored in a future article.

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