The UK Public Administration

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Extras

The United Kingdom is a parliamentary monarchy—that is, the head of state is a monarch with limited powers. Britain’s democratic government is based on a constitution composed of various historical documents, laws, and formal customs adopted over the years. Parliament, the legislature, consists of the House of Lords, the House of Commons, and the monarch, also called the crown. The House of Commons is far more influential than the House of Lords, which in effect makes the British system unicameral, meaning the legislature has one chamber. The chief executive is the prime minister, who is a member of the House of Commons. The executive branch also includes Her Majesty’s Government, commonly referred to simply as “the government.” The government is composed of ministers in the Cabinet, most of whom are members of the House of Commons; government departments, each of which is responsible to a minister; local authorities; and public corporations. Because the House of Commons is involved in both the legislative and executive branches of the British government, there is no separation of powers between executive and legislature as there is in the United States.

A. The Constitution

The British constitution comprises multiple documents. The written part consists of the Magna Carta, written in 1215; the Petition of Right, passed by Parliament in 1628; and the Bill of Rights of 1689. It also includes the entire body of laws enacted by Parliament, precedents established by decisions made in British courts of law, and various traditions and customs. The democratically elected House of Commons can alter these laws with a majority vote. The constitution continually evolves as new laws are passed and judicial decisions are handed down.

B. The Monarchy

As the official head of state, the monarch formally summons and dismisses Parliament and the ministers of the Cabinet. The monarch also serves as head of the judiciary, commander in chief of the armed forces, and Supreme Governor of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. In reality, the government carries out the duties associated with these functions. Theoretically, the monarch appoints all judges, military officers, diplomats, and archbishops, as well as other church officers. The real work of the monarchy consists largely of signing papers. The monarch has the right, however, to be consulted on all aspects of national life and review all important government documents. The monarch may also meet with the Privy Council, a now largely ceremonial body made up of Cabinet members that serves in an advisory capacity to the monarch. Since Britain is a democracy, the monarchy could potentially be abolished if a majority of the population decides to do so.

C. The Executive.

1. The Prime Minister. The chief executive of the government is the prime minister. He or she is the leader of the party that holds the most seats in the House of Commons. The monarch goes through the ceremony of selecting as prime minister the person from the House of Commons who is head of the majority party. The prime minister presides over the Cabinet and selects the other Cabinet members, who join him or her to form the government that is part of the functioning executive. Acting through the Cabinet and in the name of the monarch, the prime minister exercises all of the theoretical powers of the crown, including
making appointments.

At times a prime minister comes from a party that does not quite have a majority of seats in the House of Commons. In such a case, that party must rely on an alliance with smaller parties, the smaller parties voting with the party in power on necessary legislation. A government formed from a party without a majority in Parliament is called a minority government.

2. The Cabinet. The Cabinet has about 20 members, or ministers, all of whom must be members of Parliament (MPs). Members of the Cabinet are leaders of the majority party in the House of Commons or, more rarely, members of the House of Lords. Cabinet ministers who head a particular government department, such as the Ministry of Defense, are known as secretaries of state. The prime minister serves as the first lord of the treasury and as minister for the civil service. In addition to the various secretaries of state, the Cabinet includes nondepartmental ministers who hold traditional offices—such as the lord president of the council, the paymaster general, and the lord privy seal—and ministers without portfolio, who do not have specific responsibilities but are assigned to specific tasks as needed. The lord chancellor holds a unique position. The lord chancellor’s executive duties as a Cabinet member include being responsible for legal affairs in the United Kingdom, but he or she is also head of the judiciary, which is a separate part of the British government. The prime minister has the power to move members of the Cabinet from post to post, or to drop individuals from the Cabinet entirely.

3. The Privy Council. The Privy Council is a large, and generally ceremonial, body of more than 450 members that developed out of the royal council that existed in the Middle Ages. By the 18th century the Privy Council had taken over all the powers of the royal council. The Privy Council comprises all current and former Cabinet members, as well as important public figures in Britain and the Commonwealth. The council advises the monarch and arranges for the formal handling of documents. It has a large number of committees, each with a specific task, such as dealing with outlying islands, universities, or legal matters. The most important committee is the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, which is the highest court of appeal for certain nations in the Commonwealth, some church-related appeals, and for disciplinary committees of some professions.

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