

# CONTENTS

|    |                         |    |                                |
|----|-------------------------|----|--------------------------------|
| 1  | HOUSE OF COMMONS        | 11 | THE CABINET                    |
| 2  | HOUSE OF LORDS          | 12 | THE OPPOSITION                 |
| 3  | THE MONARCHY            | 13 | SELECT COMMITTEES              |
| 4  | THE JUDICIARY           | 14 | PASSAGE OF A BILL              |
| 5  | THE CONSTITUTION        | 15 | TEN MINUTE RULE BILLS          |
| 6  | SELECTION OF CANDIDATES | 16 | BACKBENCHERS                   |
| 7  | THE WHIPS OFFICE        | 17 | GOVERNMENT V LOCAL AUTHORITIES |
| 8  | ELECTORAL SYSTEM        | 18 | QUANGOS                        |
| 9  | THE HONOURS LIST        | 19 | SOVEREIGNTY AND EUROPE         |
| 10 | THE PRIME MINISTER      | 20 | GOVERNMENTS SINCE 1900         |



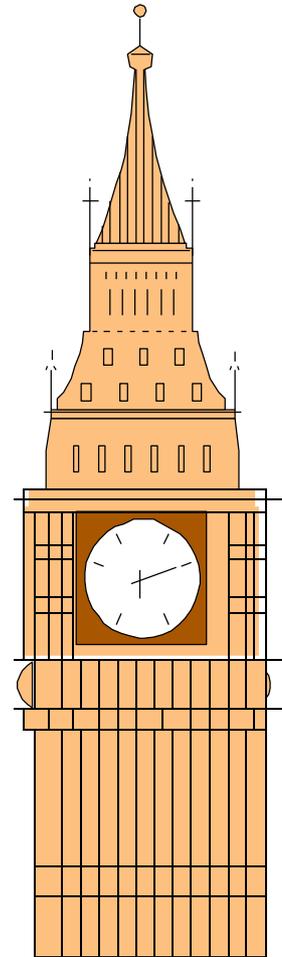
By Harry Jivenmukta



Dear Prime Minister,

Yesterday I was watching *Prime Minister's Question Time*. I have never seen so much rabble and bad behaviour. Why can't you keep things under control? Shouldn't Question Time be about serious people asking serious questions, Ministers giving serious answers? It seemed to me that you were all playing to the cameras.

Then, the other day when I was watching *Commons Business*, there were only a handful of MPs present in the chamber, and most of them seemed to be sleeping off the excesses of their lunch. What about the supposed 'Mother of Parliaments' bit? What role does the Commons actually have in the business of the government or is it just place for having slanging matches?

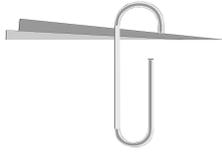


Make a list of the main types of work which is carried out by the full chamber of the House of Commons.

Is the writer correct when she suggests that the Commons is more concerned with 'playing to the cameras' rather than doing real business?

What impact has the televising of Parliament had on the way the Commons operates?

Should the television cameras be invited into more of the business of the Commons, or should the cameras be withdrawn? Why?

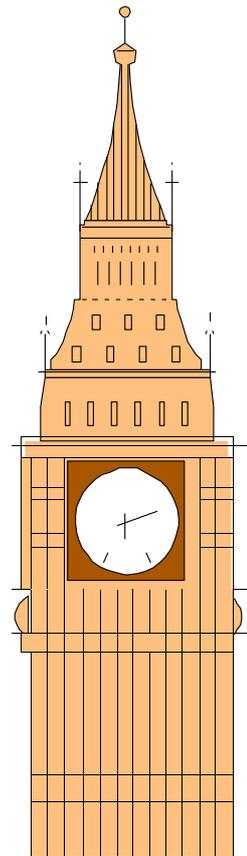


Dear Prime Minister,

Well, I thought the Commons were bad! The other day I watched the House of Lords at work, on television, and at first I thought I had turned on the wrong programme. It looked like a day in the life of an old peoples home, with most of the residents asleep!

I thought that the Lords were an indispensable part of the British political system, offering a series of balances and checks on the policy of the government and making sure that topics were fully discussed and explored before they became law. Can you write and explain to me what the Lords actually do?

I think that there are a lot of other people who could also tell you a bit about the policy of the present government; how do you become a member of the Lords? We all know that the Commons is made up of elected MPs, but the Lords seem to be selected by the accident of their birth, or chosen by the government. In this day and age, shouldn't the Lords be elected? At least we could then expect some action to be taken if they sleep through the business.



Make a list of the main duties of the House of Lords.

How are people chosen to serve in the Lords?

What are the advantages of having an unelected membership of the Lords?

What difficulties would arise if the Lords were to become an elected body?



Dear Prime Minister,

I cant understand what the newspapers are on about; reform the Monarchy, abolish the Monarchy, cut the Civil List, and so on. The Queen, God bless her, doesn't do anyone any harm. She is always travelling around the world representing the country and doing a good job of it. Whenever the Queen goes to another country they always welcome her with open arms and stage a huge reception and everything. If she were bad no-one would want to lay on such receptions for her.

The critics say that we would be better off with an elected President instead. What I can't understand is, who could do a job as well as her Majesty? If we elected a President it would be a person who agrees with the government if the elections happened at the same time as the General Election. If the election was held in the mid term of a government, when the government is usually unpopular, then the President would be from the opposition and wouldn't get on with the government of the day.

And would the President take some of the powers of the Prime Minister? Would the President be more important than the Prime Minister? It is all so confusing, I think that we should keep the Monarchy as it is.



Outline the role of the Monarchy in British politics.

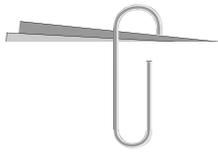
What sort of relationship does the Queen have with the Prime Minister?

What is the Queen's Speech, and who writes it?

Should the Monarchy be abolished?

What would replace the Monarchy if it was abolished?

Write a proposal of a new 'Presidential' system. Include details on how the president would be elected, how often the presidential elections should take place, and how power should be shared between the President and the Prime Minister.



Dear Home Secretary,

I'm a bit confused. I read somewhere recently that the Judiciary is a crucial part of the British political system. What I don't understand is what the Judiciary is exactly. I know it's got something to do with the Law but I can't see that the magistrates courts are 'crucial' in the same way that Parliament is.

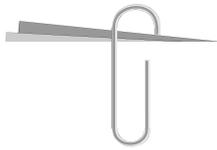
And what is the role of the Home Secretary? Besides being responsible for the passing of law and order type legislation, what else does the Home Secretary do? Does the Home Secretary have any powers to enforce the laws or decide what sort of sentence a criminal should get? Can you decide what goes on in prisons and decide what sort of work the police should do?

Recently, there was some talk of who was responsible after some prisoners escaped from a jail. Some MPs were saying you should resign, and others were saying that the prison governor should be sacked. What is the line of responsibility in this case?



Reply to the letter writer outlining:

**The role of the Judiciary;**  
**The different parts which make up the legal framework of the UK;**  
**The power of the Home Secretary to influence sentencing; Recent**  
**examples of cases.**



Dear Prime Minister,

On a recent trip to the USA I was surprised to find out that they have got a written Constitution. In the USA everyone knows exactly what the rights and duties of citizens are. In the UK, however, we don't have a written Constitution. When I asked my MP why this was he said that the UK had developed differently over time whereas the USA had established its Constitution at Independence. He said that we have a Constitution in the UK but it is unwritten.

I understand that the UK has a much longer history than the USA and that our Constitution has developed over a much longer time, but what I don't understand is why it isn't written down. I should imagine that by now the government should know what our rights and duties are and it would be easy to get someone to write it out.

Some people think it is not a good idea that we should have a written Constitution. I can't understand why this is, can you?



What is a Constitution?

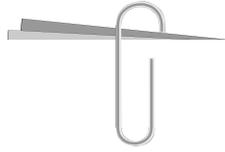
Why is the Constitution of the UK unwritten?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a written Constitution?

Do any of the main UK political parties support a written Constitution?

# SELECTION OF CANDIDATES

6



Dear MP,

I don't understand why anyone should want to stand against you as our candidate at the next election. I think you have done a good job over the last few years, although I didn't agree with the way you voted over Europe. But you voted according to your conscience and I suppose that's acceptable.

In a democracy it is possible for anyone to stand for Parliament, but most people wouldn't want to. I think that our party should have a policy where the sitting MP should be unchallenged unless he or she does something unforgivable. Then again, I suppose it depends on what you think is unforgivable.

I'm sorry that I'm rambling a bit, but it is a difficult issue to understand. Perhaps I would understand better if you could write to me explaining the selection process in our party. Is our selection process different from that used by other parties?



Find out what the selection process for candidates who wish to stand for Parliament is in the major political parties.

How do the selection processes of the Conservative Party differ from the methods used by the Labour Party?

Write to the person above explaining why it is possible for someone in the Party to stand against a serving MP.

What effect can this sort of challenge have on the political party concerned?



Dear Prime Minister,

I thought that all the MPs in your government would understand the need to vote with you on Government policy. I can understand that there might be the odd occasion when an MP, because of his or her conscience, might not be able to support a particular Bill, but I was surprised to learn that you have a whole office which is like an internal investigations unit, called The Whips Office.

I understand that this office collects sensitive information on your MPs which can be used to threaten them if they don't toe the line. Is it really necessary to have people snooping into the lives of MPs. Surely that is exactly what you criticise the Press for doing!

I am sure that people who voted for you would be amazed that there is so much internal distrust that you have to unleash your Whips in order to 'convince' MPs to vote for the Government.

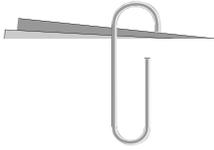
The Government is not the only party to have a Whips office. All major parties have them. What are the duties of the Whips Office exactly?

Make a list of the main duties of the Whips Office.

How are Whips chosen, and how powerful are they?

What is a Three Line Whip?

What does a busy Whips office tell us about the state of the party concerned?



Dear Prime Minister,

I'm a member of the Liberal Democrats who has had enough of our electoral system. Did you know that the Lib Dems get about half the national vote of the Labour and Conservative parties. Compared to your 10 or 11 million or so votes we get about 5 million votes nationally yet we only get a handful of seats. The 'first past the post' system is very unfair. If seats were distributed according to the national vote for each party, the Lib Dems could get more than 150 seats at every General Election.

The present system is unfair because MPs can be elected with less than 50% of the votes cast. Some candidates are elected with as few as 34% of the vote! What sort of democracy is that?

I know that other systems might not be perfect, but some of them are a lot fairer than the system we use in the UK.

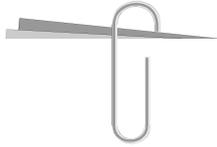
Do the Labour and Conservative parties support the present system because of the natural advantage they gain from it or do they really see it as the best system to use?

A large graphic consisting of a red checkmark followed by the word "Vote" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font.

Write a report on the 'first past the post' electoral system used in the UK. List the advantages and disadvantages of this system.

Should the UK reform its electoral system? Why?

Write a report on three alternative electoral systems. How fair and effective are they?



Dear Prime Minister,

I don't think it's fair that you should make all your friends into Lords and Knights! What sort of democracy is it when a few Government Ministers can get together and decide who should be honoured?

There are a lot of people who deserve to be recognised for the service they have given to this country. But if they happen to be from a different political party they will probably never be recognised.

Wouldn't it be fairer if someone other than the Government decided who should be honoured? Why take the blame on yourselves? If you really are being impartial then the same people who you would have nominated would be honoured in any case.

How can someone nominate a candidate to be honoured. I know that our lollipop lady deserves to be honoured for many years service in all weathers, helping everyone she meets.

Summarise the Honours system in the UK.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the Honours system in the UK?

How do other nations honour people?

Write a proposal for the reform of the Honours system.

Dear Prime Minister,

Pull yourself together man! I didn't vote for you last time so that you would let a few rebels drag you this way and that over any issue they feel like. I voted for a strong leader. Whatever people thought about the politics of Margaret Thatcher they all respected her for her unbending resolve to follow her policy through.

What I want to know is; what powers does the Prime Minister have. I can think of Edward Heath and Harold Wilson who used their role as Prime Ministers differently from Margaret Thatcher, and now you are different again. I know that all Prime Ministers have an agenda of policies which they want to get through Parliament. Why can't you push your policies through with force like some others have done?

Surely the Prime Minister as the leader of the Government should be able to call on the rest of the government to back the policies which the majority of MPs support. Why should rebels be allowed to have so much power. If they don't agree with the Government they should resign!

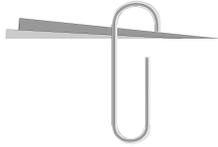
What is the role of the Prime Minister with regard to:

**The Cabinet; The  
Government; The  
Party?**

How has the role of the Prime Minister changed in recent years?

What factors influence the power of the Prime Minister and lead to greater or lesser reliance on other members of the government?

Should Prime Ministers be strong like Margaret Thatcher was? Why?



A Commentator:

...it seems that the power of the full cabinet varies directly in relation to the power of the Prime Minister; the more powerful the Prime Minister is, the less say the Cabinet members have in policy matters.

In addition to this, it seems that in recent years there has developed a concept of a Cabinet within the Cabinet with the Prime Minister relying more on the advice of a few close Ministerial colleagues which leaves other Cabinet members out in the cold.

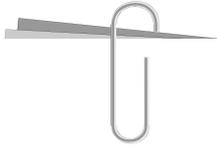
In the Cabinets of John Major this has been more clearly seen in the Europe debate. Some Ministers have been clearly left out in the cold whilst others, because of their support of the Prime Minister, or in order to keep them quiet have been included in this small inner cabinet.

Just as the power of the Prime Minister has increased in recent years, so too has the role of the Cabinet changed. Today the Cabinet bears little resemblance to the Cabinets of the pre Thatcher era.

Outline the main role of the Cabinet in the work of the Government.

Write a fuller report on the way in which the work and power of the Cabinet has changed in recent years.

Has the role of the Cabinet really changed substantially or is a natural change through time inevitable?



Dear Leader of the Opposition,

I am writing to complain to you about the way you and your party operate in the House of Commons. It seems that the Opposition always votes against the Government without considering whether the Government's policy is right or wrong. Although your job is to offer an alternative and to oppose the Government, surely your job is not to discredit policy where it resembles your own just for the sake of it.

An example of this is the way you say you are the party of Law and Order yet vote consistently against the Law and Order legislation proposed by the Government. It does nothing for your own credibility if you are seen to be merely trying to spoil the Government's legislative programme.

Can you tell me what exactly the role of the opposition is and whether your job includes rubbishing all the other parties in the Commons.

List the main objectives of a party in opposition.

What is the difference between opposing and discrediting?

Is it correct for the Opposition to vote against nearly all proposed legislation even if it might resemble what the Opposition would do if they were in government?



Dear Prime Minister,

Following my recent letter to you about what the House of Commons does I am interested to find out where the other work of the Commons is conducted.

I have seen on the television that such and such a person has been summoned to appear before a Committee of the House of Commons to explain him or herself. I thought that power lay with the House of Commons and not with Committees. What is the relationship between the Commons and its Committees and how are the members chosen for the Committees?

What type of thing do the Committees consider and how much does their report matter to the way in which the Prime Minister and Government act?

Sometimes I have read that a committee have presented reports and findings which the government then does not accept. What is the point in having committees if this is the case? In a recent gun law decision all the government members of the committee voted one way and all the opposition members voted the other way. If members are going to vote on party lines doesn't this make the committees meaningless? Why doesn't the government party just say what it is going to do, and do it?



Make a list of the different types of Committees which are used to conduct business in the House of Commons.

Write a reply to the letter, answering the points of concern.

## PASSAGE OF A BILL

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Dear Prime Minister,

Why is everything the Government does confusing. What's all this White Paper, Green Paper business? And what about First Reading, Second Reading, Committee Stage bit.

Can you list each stage that a Bill goes through, and explain what happens at each stage?

Answer the person's concerns below:



A Commentator:

The Ten Minute Rule Bill has always been seen as a useful tool for Backbenchers to highlight important matters. It seems to me, however, that this is not the case. Firstly, the way in which the MPs are chosen to present their Ten Minute Rule is more by chance rather than by the merit of their cause. Secondly, the chances of their Bill being taken seriously let alone becoming law is virtually non-existent.

The Ten Minute Rule seems to me to be just a way of keeping backbenchers quiet with a morsel thrown to them every now and then!

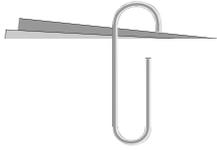
There have of course been exceptions to the rule when a Ten Minute Rule Bill has made it all the way to the Statute Book, but increasingly the way modern politics are run there is very little time to vary from the given government legislative agenda.



What is the Ten Minute Rule Bill?

List the advantages and disadvantages of this procedure.

Can you think of any Ten Minute Rule Bills which have become law?



Dear Prime Minister,

What are your MPs up to? For that matter, what are all backbenchers up to? They seem to do everything except their work!

They are seen with outside interests which make them too busy to attend the Commons. What if I didn't turn up to work because I wanted to do something else? Would my employer still pay me?

Some are seen on programmes telling everyone that the policy of their party is wrong. Why then are they members of the party in the first place?

My own MP is, however, very conscientious. He turns up every two weeks to hold a surgery for anyone who might have a problem. I always have something or other to tell him. He replies to letters from constituents and sits on a few Committees in the Commons, although I don't know which ones.

My MP compared his job with a long road into the sunset. He said he spent a lot of time on the road, down to London and up to his constituency.



What are the main duties of a typical back-bench MP?

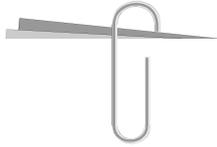
How does the work of a backbencher differ from a frontbencher?

Should MPs have outside interests, or should they be full time MPs?

Write 'A day in the life of...' commentary of how you think your MP works and lives.

# GOVERNMENT V LOCAL AUTHORITIES

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Dear Prime Minister,

I went to my local Councillor the other day to find out whether I could get help with the damp problem in my house. She said that the local council could do nothing about it because the Government in London had reduced the money available for councils to provide the services as they would like. She also told me that the council had Millions available from the sales of council houses but the government wouldn't let them spend the money.

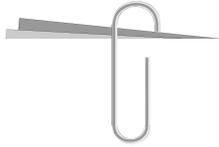
The council houses belonged to the local authority before they were privatised so why can't they spend the money they got for their sale on repairing houses or building new ones? After all it is money which belongs to the local council and not to the Government.

What say does the Government have in the way local councils operate, especially since many local councils elect members from other political parties than the party in government?

What is the relationship between local authorities and central Government?

What relationship do you think should exist? Why?

Is it true that local authorities are the best judge of local need? Should there be a clear 'federal' type distinction whereby it is clearly understood which level of government was responsible for a particular service? Does this already happen?



Dear Prime Minister,

What on earth is a Quango? At first I thought it was Mango spelt wrong!

On the news I saw a report that the government has set up more Quangos than there have ever been before. Apparently they are groups of people who are chosen by the government to decide matters for the rest of us. They have powers to investigate and recommend the level of provision of certain services.

Can you tell me exactly what Quangos are? In particular I want to know who chooses the members and why they aren't elected. I would have thought that if people were going to be given responsibility to decide on matters which affect ordinary people they should be accountable. I can't see how they can be accountable if they are not elected. Perhaps you are accountable on their behalf?

I wonder whether I could be considered for one of your Quangos, because I could do with more money and I have heard they get paid very highly for their services.



Find out what a Quango is.

What areas of service provision do Quangos operate in?

How are members of these bodies chosen?

Should Members of Quangos be elected? How are they presently accountable?



Dear Prime Minister,

There seems to be a lot of talk that we in the UK are losing our sovereignty by being members of the European Community. I want to know from you if this is true and if so, what effect this might have on British citizens. In particular the argument seems to be most vociferous regarding the adoption of a single European currency. Personally I am not bothered what currency we have as long as our money buys as many goods in the shops as it does now.

The other point of debate seems to be keeping the Union Jack flag and our identity intact. What concerns me most, though, is the silly European rules which come out of Brussels from time to time like the shape of bananas and the curve on cucumbers.

Some people say that closer union with Europe is inevitable. If we do not take a full part in it then we will still be affected by it but without having had our say.

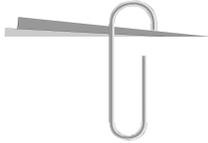
Please clarify this whole matter of Europe to me so that I can separate the truth about it from the hype we keep getting in the newspapers.



In less than 200 words summarise the European Union debate.

Write a defence for closer ties with Europe.

Imagine you are a Euro-sceptic MP. Write a letter to a newspaper outlining the dangers of closer ties with Europe and the 'threat' to national sovereignty.



Dear Prime Minister,

The other day I found out that the Liberal Democrats weren't always the third party in politics. I was also surprised to find out that the Labour Party has only been in power a few times in total. I was always under the impression that the Conservatives and Labour Parties had largely shared power in turn between them during this century, except for the last 18 years or so when the Conservatives have held power on their own.

Can you tell me which parties have held power in the Twentieth Century, and which ones have formed most governments?

**Make a list of British Governments since 1900.**