

## THE UK PARLIAMENT

The UK Parliament has sometimes been referred to as the 'mother of parliaments' because some of the countries that used to be part of the British Empire have political systems modelled on it. The UK Parliament building, which is situated by the river Thames in central London, is perhaps the most famous in the world. This is mainly due to its distinctive architecture, including the impressive clock tower popularly known as 'Big Ben'. What most people don't know is that the name doesn't actually refer to the whole tower, but only to the huge bell inside the top of the tower.



The current Parliament building was constructed in the 19th century, but one of the very first English Parliaments actually met on the same site in 1265. In those days only a very small number of people had any say in how the country was run. Democracy in the modern sense of the word is a recent phenomenon; it wasn't until 1918 that all men over the age of 21 in the UK got the right to vote in elections, and it was in 1928 that the same right was given to women.

The Parliament building is usually referred to as the Houses of Parliament because it contains the two assemblies at the heart of the UK's political system: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Most of the power lies with the House of Commons, which consists of 646 democratically elected Members of Parliament or MPs, each of whom represents a small area of the UK known as a constituency. The members of the House of Lords are not elected – most of them have been appointed by the current or previous governments.

The UK Prime Minister is the leader of the political party with the most MPs in the House of Commons. The current Prime Minister is Theresa May, the leader of the Conservative party. Due to the UK voting system, the number of MPs a party has in the House of Commons is not necessarily proportional to the total number of votes the party gets in a general election. This means that one party usually gets a 'majority' in the House of Commons, meaning it has more MPs than all the other parties put together. As with most things in politics, this causes a lot of disagreement. Some people think it is good that the party that wins a general election can usually form a government without having to enter into a 'messy' coalition with any other party. However others think the system is unfair, particularly because the smaller parties end up with fewer seats in Parliament than they would have under a proportional system.

# THE UK PARLIAMENT

## A

Can you find the words in the text that mean the same as the following?

- |                              |                                  |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. unusual, individual       | 6. to be given a job or position |
| 2. centre, core              | 7. existing or happening now     |
| 3. extremely big             | 8. build, establish              |
| 4. organised political group | 9. location, place               |
| 5. untidy                    | 10. person belonging to a group  |

## B

Now decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F), or if the text doesn't say (D).

1. England was the first country in the world to have a parliament.
2. The UK Prime Minister is the leader of one of the political parties in the House of Commons.
3. The members of the House of Commons are not elected.
4. The House of Commons has more members than the House of Lords.
5. A lot of people think that 'Big Ben' is the name of the clock tower that is part of the UK Parliament building.
6. The current UK Parliament building was built in the 19th century.
7. Unlike the UK, most countries in the world have a 'proportional' voting system.
8. The Labour party currently has the most MPs in the House of Commons.

## C

Below are some excerpts from the text, but not all of them have been copied correctly. Can you identify which of them now contain mistakes, and then make the necessary corrections?

1. The members of the House of Lords are not elected ...
2. The UK Parliament has sometimes been referred as the 'mother of parliaments' ...
3. ... only a very small number of people had any sayings in how the country was run ...
4. ... the UK Parliament building ... is perhaps the most famous in the world ...
5. ... the House of Commons ... consists of 646 democratically elected Members of Parliament ...
6. Democracy ... is a recent phenomene ...
7. ... one party usually gets a 'major' in the House of Commons ...
8. ... the smaller parties end up with few seats in Parliament ...

# THE UK PARLIAMENT

## Overview

This lesson focuses on the history of the UK Parliament. The first meeting of what is widely regarded as the first English Parliament took place on the site of the current Houses of Parliament in London on 20th January 1265.

## Level

Intermediate and above.

## Procedure

- 1 Brainstorm on the subject of parliaments. Ask the students if there is a parliament in their country. If so, how does it work? What do they know about the UK Parliament and political system?
- 2 Give your students between five and ten minutes to read through Worksheet A, encouraging them to look up new vocabulary. Tell them they are going to answer a series of questions on the text, but that they shouldn't write anything down at this stage.
- 3 When the time is up, give each student a copy of Worksheet B, then divide the class into pairs and ask students to work together. In Part A they have to find synonyms, in Part B they must answer the true/false/doesn't say questions, and in Part C they have to decide whether or not the excerpts from the text have been written correctly. Whereas Parts A and B require the students to refer back to the text, ask them not to do so while completing Part C.
- 4 Check answers in open class.

## Answers

### Part A (synonyms)

1 distinctive 2 heart 3 huge 4 party 5 messy  
6 appointed 7 current 8 form 9 site 10 member

### Part B (true/false/doesn't say)

1. D 2. T 3. F 4. D 5. T 6. T 7. D 8. F

### Part C (correct/incorrect excerpts)

- 1 Correct
- 2 Incorrect. The UK Parliament has sometimes been referred to as the 'mother of parliaments' ...
- 3 Incorrect. ... only a very small number of people had any say in how the country was run
- 4 Correct
- 5 Correct
- 6 Incorrect. Democracy ... is a recent **phenomenon** ...
- 7 Incorrect. ... one party usually gets a '**majority**' in the House of Commons ...
- 8 Incorrect. ... the smaller parties end up with **fewer** seats in Parliament ..

## Related Websites

Send your students to these websites, or just take a look yourself.

<http://www.parliament.uk/>

Official website of the UK Parliament.

<http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page1.asp>

Official website of the office of the UK Prime Minister.