



The British System

The British system of government is the oldest parliamentary system in Europe. Britain is a **constitutional monarchy**. The British constitution, unlike those of most countries, is not set out in a single document. Instead, it is made up of a combination of laws, practices and traditions which have developed over the centuries. In the course of the last 800 years, power has gradually passed from the Monarch to the representatives of the people, that is to say, Parliament. At first, only nobles and rich and powerful men were represented in Parliament but during the 19th century, the right to vote was gradually extended to all men and then, in 1928, to women too.

The Monarch

The **Monarch** (king or queen) is the head of the state and a symbol of national unity but has no real control over the policy of the country. In practice he/she reigns, but does not rule. The country is governed in the Monarch's name by the **Government** which is responsible to **Parliament**. According to the law, the Monarch is also head of the judiciary, the commander-in-chief of all the armed forces and the 'supreme governor' of the Church of England. Although that sounds like a lot of responsibility, the Monarch has no decision-making power and acts only on the advice of his/her ministers.

Queen **Elizabeth II** was born on 21 April 1926 and died on 8 September 2022. She married Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, and acceded to the throne on 6 February 1952. On the Queen's death her eldest son – Prince Charles, Prince of Wales – became the heir to the throne and is now **King Charles III**. King Charles and the other

members of the Royal Family take part in traditional ceremonies, open new schools and hospitals, visit foreign countries and are closely involved in the work of many charities.

FACTS & FIGURES

The British Monarchy



HM Queen Elizabeth II reigned longer than Queen Victoria: **70 years** on 6 February 2022.

She was the head of state for **138 million people**.



The Queen received about **1,000 invitations** every year.

The Queen owned **30 Corgis** during the course of her reign.



The royal household is made up of **1,200 people** with 450 funded by the taxpayer.

Since 1066, a total of **17 monarchs** in the British Isles have been murdered, assassinated or executed.



parliament

Parliament, which is responsible for making the laws of the country, consists of the House of Commons, the House of Lords and, formally, the Monarch.

The **House of Commons** is the main institution of Parliament. It has 650 **Members of Parliament (MPs)** who are elected every five years by all British citizens over 18 years of age. The House of Commons debates important political matters, criticises or supports the actions of the government and decides on new laws.

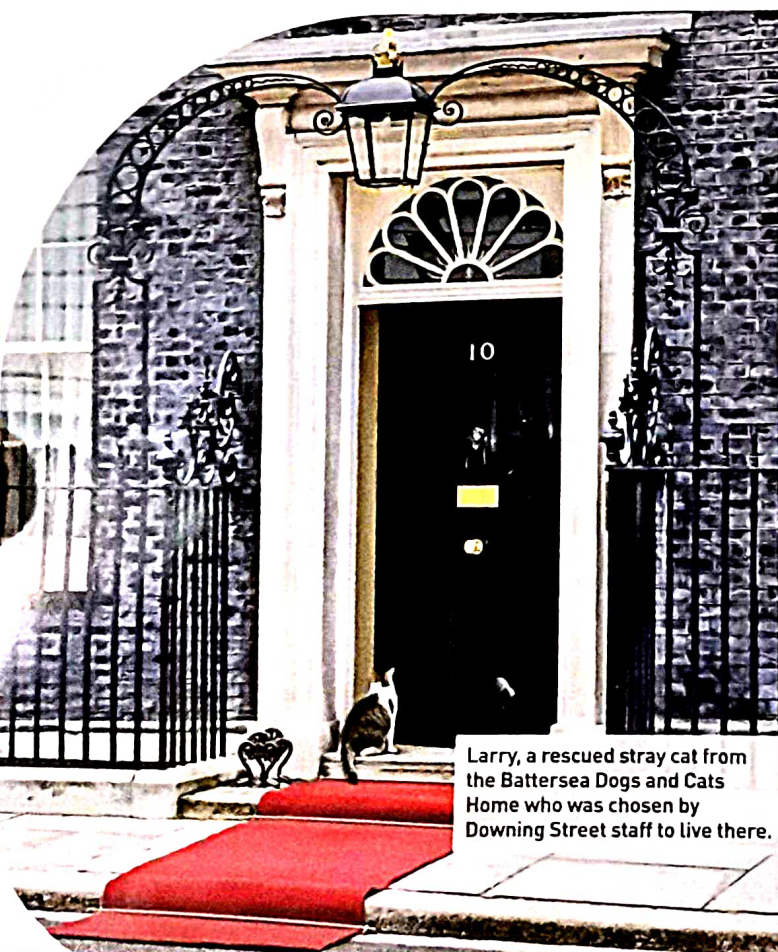
The **House of Lords** has less power than the House of Commons. Its main purpose is to reconsider bills which have been passed by the House of Commons and suggest amendments. It cannot usually reject bills which have been passed by the Commons. The House of Lords has over 700 members. They are not elected. Some of them are peers who have inherited their title while others have been given titles by the Monarch.

The Prime Minister and the Cabinet

The **Prime Minister** is usually the leader of the majority party in the House of Commons. He or she chooses the ministers from the party and appoints the **Cabinet**, an executive group of about 20 senior ministers. Together they decide government policy. The Prime Minister and the Government remain in power as long as they have the support of the majority of MPs in the House of Commons. The largest minority party forms the **Opposition** with its Shadow Prime Minister and Shadow Cabinet, which has the official job of checking and criticising government policy.



The UK Houses of Parliament (Palace of Westminster) in Central London.



Larry, a rescued stray cat from the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home who was chosen by Downing Street staff to live there.

- 1 **WARM-UP** What kind of political system does Britain have? Is it the same as the Italian one?
- 2 **SPEAKING** Read 'The British System' and answer the questions.
 - 1 What makes the British constitution different from that of most countries?
 - 2 Why does the Monarch 'reign but not rule'?
 - 3 What is the main difference between the House of Commons and the House of Lords?
 - 4 Which is more important and why?
 - 5 How are MPs chosen?
 - 6 What is the Cabinet and who appoints it?
 - 7 What do you know about the Royal Family? Can you name any members?
 - 8 Do you think King Charles will be as popular and well-loved as Queen Elisabeth II? Why/Why not?
- 3 **WATCHING** Watch the video of a short presentation of the popular TV series *The Crown* (<http://tiny.cc/3pjiuz>) and answer the questions.
 - 1 Which historical figures can you recognise?
 - 2 What aspects of Queen Elizabeth II's life does the series emphasise?
 - 3 What makes the series' representation of the Royal Family unusual?
 - 4 What does Elizabeth II's grandmother (Mary of Teck) say about the monarchy in one of the scenes?