

Political institutions of the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland comprises four countries:

- England
- Wales
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland.

It has a bicameral parliament in Westminster in London.

- The upper house of the UK parliament is the House of Lords (often abbreviated to “the Lords”). The Lords fall into two categories:
 - Lords Spiritual: the 2 archbishops and 24 bishops of the Church of England
 - Lords Temporal:
 - 92 hereditary peers, including 90 elected representatives of hereditary peers,
 - an indefinite number of life peers, who have ennobled by a non-hereditary title (baron).
- The lower house of the UK parliament is the House of Commons (often abbreviated to “the Commons”). Commoners (people who are not peers) elect members of Parliament (MPs) in 650 single-member constituencies in general elections or by-elections (when individual seats are vacated). Elections to the Commons are first-past-the-post elections: there is a single round of voting; if no candidate receives a majority of votes, the candidate with a plurality of votes is elected.
- The duration of a parliament is five years. The House of Commons can vote to call an early election.

The UK’s head of state is the king or queen, who must be a Protestant. The monarch’s powers are delegated to the government. The monarch asks the leader of the party with the most seats in the Commons to become prime minister (PM), after an election or when that party chooses a new leader.

The residence of the prime minister is No. 10 Downing Street.

Key positions in the government include:

- the Chancellor of the Exchequer: *le chancelier de l’échiquier (ministre des finances)*. The Chancellor of the Exchequer’s residence is No. 11 Downing Street.
- the Home Secretary (*ministre de l’intérieur*; the Home Office: *ministère de l’intérieur*)
- the Foreign Secretary (*ministre des affaires étrangères*; the Foreign Office: *ministère des affaires étrangères*)

In 1998, under the terms of the Belfast Agreement (or Good Friday Agreement), a devolved parliament and government was established in Northern Ireland.

In 1999, devolved parliaments and governments were established in Scotland and Wales. The heads of the devolved governments are called first ministers.

Wales was annexed by England, so that it has the same legal system as England.

England and Scotland were merged in 1707 by the Acts of Union adopted by the English and Scottish parliaments. Religion, education, and the legal system were never unified: Scotland has no established church, its own education system and legal system (Scots law).

Northern Ireland also has its own legal system.