

Lecture Outline LSE GV 311
PARLIAMENT & GOVERNMENT 4 November 2014
George Jones

COMPOSITION [Oct 2014]

Two Houses:

Lords 791 (excluding 55 who don't vote because on leave of absence, or disqualified or suspended); if include, grand total is 846).

Commons 650. The latter is more powerful because it is directly elected by the people, while the former contains no directly-elected element.

Lords consists of 679 Life Peers; 86 hereditary peers, elected by their parties and groups in the Lords; and 26 bishops. Their party composition is Conservative 232, Labour 217, Liberal Democrat 105, Crossbench 177, 34 other parties and non-affiliated. And 33 on leave of absence, or suspended or jailed; and 14 disqualified as senior judges. The statistics for the Lords change frequently – update from Lords website.

Commons 650 MPs. All elected. The party composition of the Commons is: Conservative 303, Labour 257, Liberal Democrat 56, Green 1, SNP 6, PC 3, DU 8, SD&LP 3, Alliance 1, Respect 1, SF 5, Independent 3, UKIP 1, Speaker 1, & Deputy Speakers 3. Vacancy 1.
Govt Working Majority 76 = 303 Con + 56 LDs, less others, excluding Speaker[C], 3 Dep Speakers [2L & 1C] and 5 SF who don't vote.

ROLES

Lords can question, debate and inquire, and delay for one session, ie for about 13 months, legislation (only if non-money) desired by the Commons.

Commons does not:

Govern – that is for the Government often called the Executive or Crown, headed by the Cabinet. UK has separation of functions.

Legislate much, that is make laws, that is again mainly for the Government.

Control the nation's finances, again for the Government – Treasury.

But it does:

Debate, i.e. hold a *parler*, thus acting as an arena for adversarial competition;

Support the Government, and opposition to that Government;

Expose Government's actions and inactions, i.e. calls it to give an account;

Educate the nation about political issues, great and small;

Express the nation's concerns, of groups, localities and individuals, on big and small issues – the representative role;

Scrutinise the Government, its proposed legislation, policy, expenditure and administration through select and public bill committees;

Recruit, train and assess ministers of the Government.

CONCLUSION

It differs from the US Congress in that it is an “arena” assembly and not a “transformative” assembly. It holds ministers to account. It influences policy and

legislation, exercising most influence by the “rule of anticipated reactions”. Its influence derives from its power to destroy a Government by a vote of no-confidence. It can make or break Government – if it wants to. But that has become harder since the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. It fixes the date of the next General Election at 7 May 2015, and provides for five-year fixed terms. It includes provisions to allow the Prime Minister to alter the date by up to two months by Order. There are two ways in which an election could be triggered before the end of the five-year term: (a) if a motion of no confidence is passed and within 14 days no alternative government is found in which the House has expressed confidence; (b) or if a motion for an early general election is agreed either by at least two-thirds of the House or without division.

But on August 22nd 2013 the Commons did defeat the Government’s plan to attack Syria. First time since 1782 that the Commons defeated a government on a peace-and-war issue – lost the US colonies.

Further reading: Philip Norton, *Parliament in British Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2nd ed. 2013).