THE BRITISH POLITICAL SYSTEM (2)

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II. The political system today

1. The Monarchy and Democracy

a. The Crown

Britain is a monarchy, a country governed by a **monarch**, a King or a Queen –*as is the case*[1] today with Elisabeth II[2]; Britain celebrated the Queen's **jubilee** in June 2002, which means that she has been reigning over the country for fifty years.

Yet the **Crown**[3] has a limited political sway[4], the country is *actually*[5] governed by the Prime Minister and his or her Cabinet –please keep the word "government" or "administration" for the United States and prefer "Cabinet" for Britain.

The Queen is the head of the State –in theory- and the head of the Church of England. This is important because in republics, such as France or the United States, one of the fundamental principles[6] of the constitution is the separation of Church and State[7]. Of course the United Kingdom is not a republic.

Another political specificity of Britain is the importance of the **nobility**, especially with the **House of Lords**, which is the British Upper Chamber –the equivalent of a Senate, as opposed to the Lower House, which is the **House of Commons**.

However the House of Lords considered as an archaic legacy has been reformed by Tony Blair *as is* developed further down.

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[1] Et non pas : "as it is the case"

[2] Please write Elisabeth II, but say « Elisabeth the Second »

[3] «the Crown » : « la couronne », utilisation métaphorique pour faire référence au pouvoir royal, comme on utilise en France « l'Elysée » pour désigner une décision du président ou « Matignon » pour le premier ministre.

Additional vocabulary :

The Crown or Buckingham	la reine
10, Downing Street	le premier ministre
Whitehall	le cabinet
Westminster	le Parlement

[4] To have sway, to wield clout : exercer une influence

[5] « Actually » signifie « en fait » et non « actuellement ».

[6] Please note: "one of the + plural"

[7] Please note the absence of pronoun. The State, the Church but "the separation of Church and State"

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b. Parliament

Parliament[8] -also referred to as "**Westminster"**, after the name of the building- consists of the **House of Commons** and the **House of Lords**, *that is to say* a Lower and Upper Chamber, as in other democracies such as France and the United States. Each year, the Queen *delivers*[9] what is known as "the **Queen's Speech**", a speech written by the Government that sets out Parliament's agenda for the year; this takes place in the House of Lords.

The important difference is that in the House of Lords, the members, *namely* the Lords or the **Peers**, are not elected as in a Senate: *they used to*[10] owe their seat to either heredity or appointment by the Queen. *In other words*, a member of the House of Lords was either an **hereditary peer**- having inherited his or her seat from his or her family because he or she belonged to the nobility- or **a life peer**, meaning that he or she had been ennobled by the Queen for his or her career dedicated to serve the country. Such is the case of Margaret Thatcher, now Lady Thatcher, and thus of many former politicians or diplomats, but also of some celebrities. These **life peers** are entitled to a seat in the House of Lords but they do not pass their title on to their children, hence their name.

It is important that you *should*[11] know this former organisation of the House of Lords although it has been changed recently as I will explain further on.

Also note that the House of Lords acts as the highest Court of Appeal in the country. The last case you may have heard of was a few years ago when the Lords had to decide whether or not to allow the extradition of General Pinochet to Spain.

The House of Commons consists of 659 members, or **M.P.s** –Members of Parliament[12]- who are **elected** or **returned** – i.e. elected again- in a **general election**[13]. Each one represents a **Constituency**.

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[8] Please note, no article : « Parliament », as for the United States, «Congress » whereas THE House of Commons (GB) or THE House of Representatives (USA)

[9] to deliver a speech: prononcer un discours

[10] "I used to": cette expression n'est à utiliser que dans le strict sens suivant: "ce n'est plus le cas". Il y a nécessairement notion d'opposition avec le présent ; soyez rigoureux, elle est souvent mal utilisée.
I used to smoke = I no longer smoke
Si vous voulez exprimer un simple passé, utilisez le preterit.

[11] Après certaines expressions figées comme « It is important that », « It is incredible / unbelievable », « It is necessary that », il faut utiliser l'auxiliaire SHOULD. En effet œs expressions, tout comme certains verbes (I demand –j'exige- , I order) renvoient au domaine de l'irréel i.e. il s'agit d'actions projetées, souhaitées, voulues mais non encore avérées d'où l'usage d'une marque de l'irréel avec SHOULD, comme équivalent d'un subjonctif français.
J'exige que tu fasses ton travail = rien ne dit que tu as fait / vas faire ce travail, l'action est « irréelle »
I demand that you should do your homework.

[12] The terms are similarly confusing both in United Kingdom and in the United States
Parliament (GB) and Congress (US) = both Chambers
BUT a "Member of Parliament", or MP (GB) is a member of the Lower House. This term is not used to refer to the members of the Upper Chamber. Likewise in the US, a "Representative", a member of the House of Representatives, can also be called a "Congressman". A Congressman does not therefore only mean "member of Congress"; it is more precise, it means "member of the House of Representatives".

[13] Traduction : élections législatives. Notez le singulier en anglais. A by-election : une élection partielle

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Constituents –do not use the word "citizen"- vote –or **go to the polls**- on **polling day** – always a Thursday; more specifically, they go to the polling station. The electoral system is *that of*[14] a **single uninominal ballot**; the system is also called "**first-past-the-post**". Therefore a candidate does not need 50% of the votes to be elected, the one who comes first is elected. This system is *currently* under controversy and might be reformed to introduce some degree of proportion in the House of Commons; indeed small parties tend to be little represented. The system was almost reformed in 1998 after the publication of the Jenkins Report, but such a move has been abandoned by Labour.

To read more on this electoral system and the debates it *triggers*, with an interesting perspective on the French last presidential election:

http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,690833,00.html

The **sittings** of the House of Commons are presided over by the **Speaker**; there is also a Speaker in the House of Lords, he is the Lord Chancellor[15] – this is consistent with the fact that the House of Lords is also a Court of Appeal. A **bill** is usually proposed by an M.P. or by the Cabinet –the proposition is called a "**White Paper**"[16]-, it must pass the two Houses, and is then signed by the Monarch – in theory, the Queen has the right to veto it, it is the **Royal Assent**, but, by tradition, she always respects Parliament's decisions. At that point, a bill becomes an **Act of Parliament**[17].

You may know that the House of Commons is not circular but square. The two parties, namely **the Labour Party**, now in power, and **the Conservative Party** – whose members are also called the **Tories**- sit opposite to each other. The most important members sit in the front row –they are the **frontbenchers**- , and the hierarchy has the less and less important members of each party sit in the following rows; this is why these anonymous M.P.s, who are nonetheless numerous and can pressure on their party leaders are called the "**backbenchers**".

The M.P.s *are to*[18] vote according to the party line; this is ensured by the presence of party **whips**. There is also a Speaker who rules over the debates; he currently is the Rt Hon Michael Martin, M.P.[19]

I strongly recommend that you take a look at the British Parliament's webpage. There you may visit the building, and it is quite necessary that you should know how the debates are organized if you don't know it yet. You also find explanations on how Bills are passed –and thus become Acts-, and of course, news on the current issues *tackled*[20] by the two Houses.

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[14] that of = celui de. Please do not use "the one of" in that case.
[15] Ministre de la Justice
[16] Traduction usuelle : un livre blanc
[17] Attention donc à la traduction. A bill= un projet de loi. An act = une loi.
[18] You are to obey = you must obey.
[19] All British Secretaries of States and Ministers bear the title « the Rt Hon » which stands for « the Reverent Honorable » ; their name is followed by «M.P. » because they are all elected members of the House of Commons.
[20] Terme des plus utiles pour vos propres rédactions et oraux : « This text / article tackles the issue of …» = aborde

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