

## **ADVANTAGES OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY IN THE UK**

- It is a more realistic and practicable form of democracy.
- It allows for a division of labour in politics which relieves most members of the public of the burden of day to day political decision-making.
- It allows government decisions to be made by professional politicians who have greater experience and are better informed than the general public.
- It ensures a decent level of popular participation and a high level of public accountability.
- Recent electoral developments in the UK, such as the introduction of PR, have strengthened representative democracy, notably in Scotland and Wales.



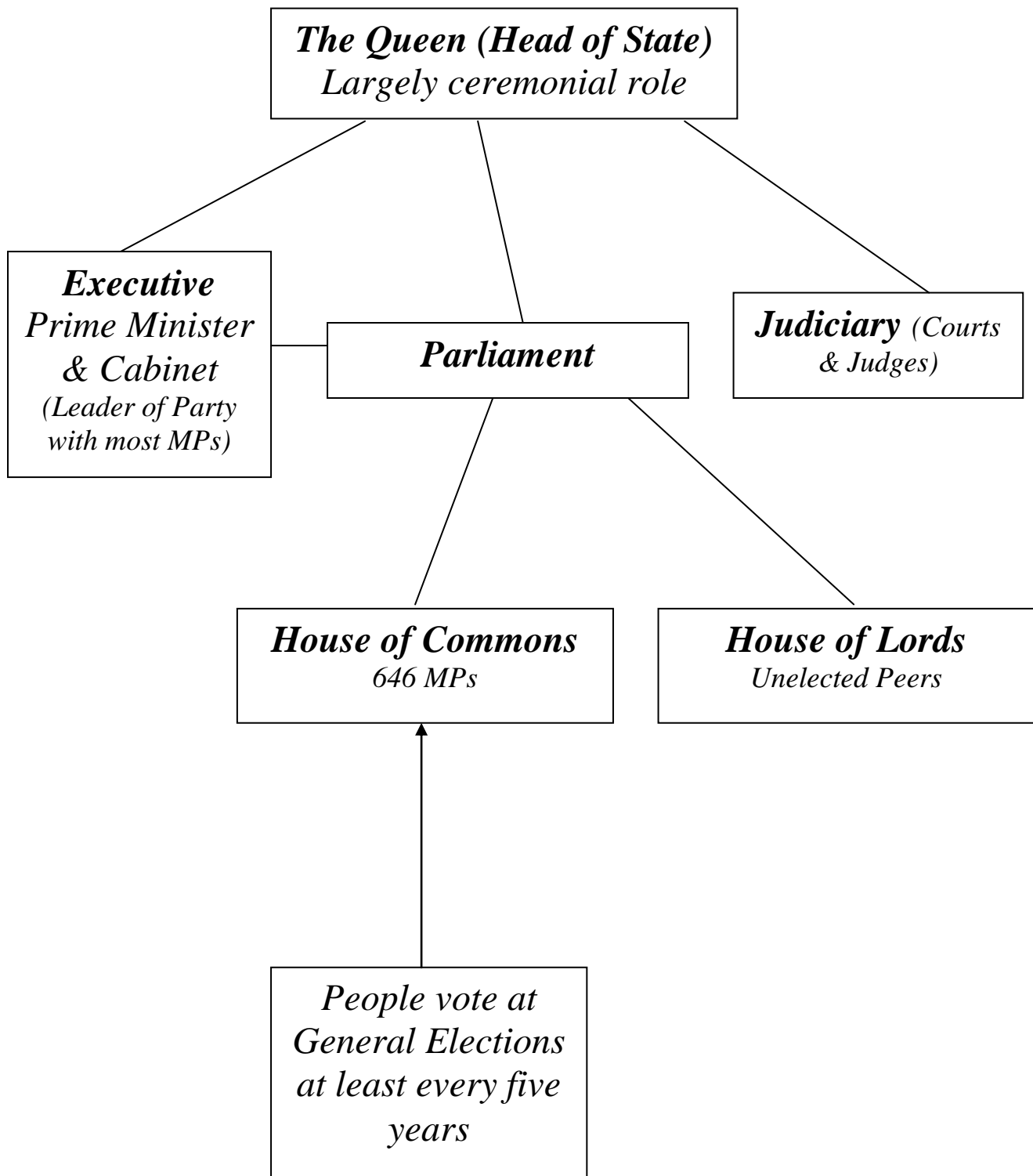
## **DISADVANTAGES OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY IN THE UK**

- It permits only indirect and irregular popular participation, i.e. once every 4/5 years.
- It can lead to politicians and governments seeming remote from the general public. This has led to declining turnout and declining party membership.
- Government often go against public opinion and fail to reflect what the majority of people want (*Rousseau's idea of the 'General Will'*).
- Women and minority groups are under-represented in representative bodies, i.e. the UK Parliament, and there is no means of enforcing governments to keep their election mandates/promises once elected.
- The UK's '*first past the post*' form of representative democracy regularly delivers disproportional outcomes, e.g. Labour elected to power on 35% of the vote in 2005.

**Key Question- Could we use a more representative form of democracy in the UK?**

**BRITISH GOVERNMENT AND DEMOCRACY**

**How our 'representative' system works**



## **KEY FEATURES OF A LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

### **1. Regular competitive elections:**

- Secret ballot
- One person, one vote (one value)
- Effective choice

### **2. Constitutional checks and balances:**

- Separation of powers
- Division of powers (territorial)
- Open government
- Consultation with interested parties

### **3. Limited Government:**

- Government does not seek to control all aspects of life/society
- Decision-making is shared with private, voluntary, local, regional and international bodies
- Government is subject to the Rule of Law interpreted by an independent judiciary

### **4. Freedom of Opinion/Expression:**

- Conscience/Belief/Religion
- Speech
- Media
- Assembly
- Association

### **5. Freedom from Arbitrary Arrest and Detention**

- Habeas Corpus 1679
- Due Process of Law
- Free movement within the state and between the state and others

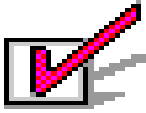
### **6. Equality before the law:**

- Treatment by the law
- Access to the law



\* The above is not necessarily a comprehensive list, neither does it imply that all of the above features exist in all Liberal democratic states, nor that all Liberal democratic states give equal weighting to each of the principles. However, as a starting point for assessing whether any society can legitimately describe itself as democratic it is more than adequate.

## IS BRITAIN STILL A LIBERAL DEMOCRACY?



### Yes- Britain is still a liberal democracy because:

1. The UK has regular, competitive elections- at least once every five years for a government and more frequently for regional elections. There is a wide range of political parties from which to choose from and voting is a secret process.

2. There are effective checks on the government by Parliament, the judiciary and increasingly in recent years, by the media and public opinion. There are many examples in recent years of these bodies preventing the government from getting its own way, e.g. Parliament rejecting the 90-day terror bill in 2005, the judiciary blocking limits on benefits for asylum seekers, etc.

3. Government is limited and does not seek to control every aspect of our lives in a '*totalitarian*' way. As citizens we have civil rights that are supported by the Human Rights Act which was introduced in 2000. Even the government is subject to the rule of law, e.g. Tony Blair was questioned by the Police about so-called '*Cash for Honours*' in 2006.

4. Britain still has freedom of speech, association and expression and is generally viewed as one of the most liberal countries in the world, e.g.





Britain allows dissidents from other countries to settle and express their views here. Many views which are hostile to mainstream opinion, e.g. extreme Islam or policies of the BNP are tolerated, despite being opposed by the majority of the population.

5. British citizens cannot be arrested for arbitrary reasons and the Police need to have grounds of suspicion for an arrest to be made. Police actions are accountable to both politicians and the wider public.

6. Everyone is entitled to a fair trial under the British legal system, even those against whom the evidence appears to be overwhelming and very strong. No-one is above the law, and even senior politicians can be arrested and questioned by the Police, *see Tony Blair example above*. In 2008, Cabinet Minister Peter Hain had to resign from the ministerial office after the Police announced they were investigating how his deputy leadership campaign was funded.

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**No- Britain is not a liberal democracy because:**

1. The British electoral system is flawed and produces disproportional and unfair results. In 2005, Labour were elected to power after receiving only 35% of the popular vote, and only the Conservatives or Labour have a realistic chance of winning power. Many non-voters therefore complain that it is a waste to vote for the smaller parties who cannot win and the mainstream parties are far too similar and have almost identical policies, so there is no point voting for any of them.
2. While there are ostensible checks on the power of the government, in effect any government with a decent-sized parliamentary majority can force through most, if not all, of the policies it wishes to introduce. There is no clear separation of powers within the British political system, and the all-powerful Executive is both drawn from and controls the legislature.
3. In recent years, concern has been expressed about the growing levels of Police and state control over the wider population. New Labour have created over 3,000 new criminal offences since 1997, and since the terror attacks of *September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001* and *July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005*, the government has sought to impose draconian measures on the wider public including house arrest, control orders, CCTV and Internet surveillance and phone-tapping. Pressure Groups like *Liberty* complain that Britain is rapidly becoming a '*surveillance society*' with alarming levels of state control.
 
4. Linked to concerns about growing state control has been the limitations on freedom of speech and expression in the heightened risk of terror attacks post-September 11<sup>th</sup>. Examples of the government and Police cracking down on forms of dissent have included the right to protest near Parliament (*Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005*), and the right to criticise and question government policy (*detention of Labour delegate Walter Wolfgang for heckling Labour ministers at the 2005 Labour conference under the 2000 Terrorism Act*).
 
5. Given the increased powers of the Police and of the state post-1997 in particular, the Police in Britain now have far greater powers than ever before and have potentially far more crimes which they are able to prosecute. Liberal critics claim we are subsequently living in a '*Police State*'.
6. Although everyone is entitled to a fair trial, suspicions still remain that money and wealth offer advantages in dealing with legal/judicial matters.