

Uk government processes, actors and structure



Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) Government runs on parliamentary sovereignty, which is the doctrine that Parliament is the supreme law-making body in the United Kingdom (Jones and Norton 2014, p. 252). This essay will seek to explain and evaluate, the process, key actors and the structure which forms the UK Government, and if democracy is truly reflected in society.

Parties and Their Roles

According to Ware (1996, p. 5), a political party is an institution that seeks to influence a state. For the UK, this is done by participating in an election, whereby winning, would secure a seat in a government.

Elections and Their Roles

Elections allow citizens in the UK to participate directly in politics (Jones and Norton, 2014, p. 121) through voting for their preferred parties by area. In doing so, they select the leaders of their constituency who wins a 'seat' in the House of Commons (Education Team, Houses of Parliament, 2018).

The Parliament and Their Role

The Parliament is the supreme governing body of the country and is made up of three parts – the House of Commons, House of Lords and the Monarch (Silk and Walters, 2002).

House of Commons

The House of Commons is the elected chamber in parliament. They debates issues of at all levels of interest – local, national and international, they also propose, amend laws and challenges the governments' work (Kelso, 2016).

House of Lords

The House of Lords is the second chamber in parliament. Though unelected, they are made of mostly life peers and play a significant role in making and shaping laws and policies (Russell, 2013).

The Prime Minister and His Role

The leader of the party that has the most Members of Parliament (MPs) elected becomes Prime Minister, the supreme decision maker of the country (Kelso, Bennister and Larkin, 2016). He is the First Lord of Treasury and heads the UK government (Hennessy, 2001, p. 156). His main powers include but are not limited to, appointing ministers, chairing the cabinet, controlling the Whitehall and advising the Monarch (Jones and Norton, 2014, p. 376).

The Cabinet and Their Role

The Prime Minister chooses the Cabinet which is made of 20 senior ministers, they are collectively responsible for every decision the government makes (James, 2002, p. 6). They are in charge of approving policies, resolving disputes, restricting the powers of the Prime Minister and unifying both the government and the parliamentary party (Jones and Norton, 2014, p. 381).

The Monarch and Their Role

The British Monarchy is known as a Constitutional Monarchy, which means that while a king or queen is Head of State, legislative power still lies within the elected parliament (The Royal Household, 2018). The Sovereign has largely ceremonial duties, which includes appointing the Prime Minister, acting on his/her advice and formally approving laws (The Cabinet Office, 2011, p. 6). However, the monarch also has a symbolic role of representing the UK, maintaining British traditions, uniting the people and of course, the pledged allegiance of armed forces (Jones and Norton, 2014, p. 278).

Strengths and Weaknesses of the UK Governmental Structure

Run by the Parliament which consists of three parts, we will assess and evaluate the UK governmental structure through analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the House of Commons, House of Lords and the Monarch.

House of Commons

Running on parliamentary democracy, the House of Commons can be considered representative of the people. The House of Commons has 650 members, with one MP for every 98, 615 people (Silk and Walters, 2002, p. 18). This means that MPs have to work hard to win the votes of the electorate, and to do so, they have to listen to the needs and wants of the people. This increases the MP's focus in a constituency and thus, there is a higher chance of getting an MP's attention for different issues, which is better for the people (Silk and Walters, 2002, p. 19).

However, the sheer size can be a downside for individual members of the House of Commons. Due to limited time shared among a greater number of

people, members have to compete with colleagues to ask questions and raise issues for debate (Silk and Walters, 2002, p. 19). This means that an individual's share of influence is lower, which might cause certain important issues raised to be dismissed or postponed.

Overall, seeing that the House of Commons serves to serve the people, its strength greatly outweighs its weakness, and it is the most important house in parliament to represent the people of the UK.

House of Lords

On the other hand, the House of Lords has never been representative. The Lords were originally people who were rich and powerful, who could aid the King (Silk and Walters, 2002, p. 32) and their status could only be passed down via hereditary peerage (Silk and Walters, 2002, p. 35). In 1958, the Life Peerages Act allowed for members to be appointed from a wider range of backgrounds to facilitate greater diversity (Silk and Walters, 2002, p. 33). Despite these attempts at reform, mostly politicians and their advisors were nominated. Furthermore, as the Lords are part-time, they do not always attend to their duties, with attendance increasing only from 51% in 2000 to 64% in 2014 (Silk and Walters, 2002, p. 36). Thus, the House of Lords can be seen to be a weakness in the UK Governmental structure, as it is seen to be less representative of the people, and often wielded as a political tool by those who are rich and powerful.

Monarch

The unique strength of the Monarch is that The Sovereign is seen to be someone who is above politics, and stands at political neutrality (Silk and

Walters, 2002, p. 39). This means that regardless of who rises to power as the Prime Minister, he/she is able to consult someone who has no inclinations to any party or ideology and therefore fair and impartial, and also consult someone of immense political experience (Silk and Walters, 2002, p. 41). This benefits society as a whole, as the Queen would be able to identify and represent anyone with any ideology or political inclination.

However, this very strength may also be a weakness, especially in the case of a hung parliament. To have to decide who will be the Prime Minister, or finding common ground for the possible formation of a coalition government would go against the symbolism of being politically neutral (Silk and Walters, 2002, p. 40).

Overall, the Monarch is key to the UK's identity as a nation and serves as a symbol to unite the people regardless of their political stand, and that in itself, is a great strength.

Democracy reflected through UK Government compared to Other Countries

UK

After the passing of the Representation of the People Acts in 1918 and 1928, allowing both women and men to vote (Rossiter, Johnston and Pattie, 2009, p. 62), Britain has been considered a democracy. Through the years, democracy and the special nature of British parliament structure have created a stable political environment, which has in turn enhanced economic growth in UK (Jones and Kavanagh, 2003, p. 27). Even after the Brexit Referendum which incited some political instability, the UK still has a

relatively high political stability index at 0.38 (ranging from -2.5 to 2.5) in 2016 (The Global Economy, 2018), and in terms of political rights, the UK has had an extremely consistent index at 1.0 (strong) since 1972 (The Global Economy, 2018). Over the years, however, the UK has seen a fall in voters turn out, and there are trends in terms of age and income which could contribute to electoral inequality (Birch, Gottfried and Lodge, 2013) and in turn affect democracy in UK.

Singapore

Infused with Asian values, yet with its roots in the Westminster Model, Singapore too operates on a parliamentary democracy (Berna, 2013, p. 24). Ironically, since the beginning of its independence in 1965 till date, the People's Action Party (PAP) has dominated Singapore's political scene despite many viewing the PAP as having a socialist, even authoritarian ideology (Berna, 2013, p. 25). Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong himself said that there are risks to democratic system (Channel News Asia, 2011). Despite all these, the PAP has proven able successfully delivers public goods to the population and has much support from the Singaporean population (Barr, 2012, p. 31). With voting being compulsory in Singapore (Elections Department of Singapore, 2018), this could be a consideration for the UK government to look into. As voter participation has been falling in the UK (Knight, 2015), making voting compulsory by law might produce results that are more representative of the electorate, in turn enhancing democracy.

More or Less Referenda to Improve Process

To improve the process of formation of the UK Government would mean that, the selection process would be both more efficient and effective in reflecting the needs and wants of the people in a democracy. To say whether having more or less referenda would improve the process of forming the government would be too sweeping. It is ultimately dependent on the issue in question and the parliament's stand on the issue.

Having more referendum can be said to enhance democracy as it enables individual citizens to be directly involved in decision making, and is more reflective of society as a whole rather than solely the political class (Caramani, 2017, p. 175). This is especially so when the parliament is split on an issue strongly concerning the people and there is a need to call for a referendum to get the people's opinion. Though having more referenda might would compromise on efficiency, but it might be more effective in terms of gathering people's opinion on issues, where the parliament is unable to decide. For example, on 18 September 2014, a referendum on whether Scotland should become an independent country was called. The electorate voted 55% to 45% in favour of Scotland remaining within the UK (Education Team, Houses of Parliament, 2018). In this case, a referendum was needed in order to ensure that the parliament is certain of what the people want.

However, there are arguments against referendum, where elected politicians are considered to have much greater expertise and understanding of the political situation and impact to make decisions compared to the common man (Caramani, 2017, p. 175). For example in the 2016 Brexit referendum, the citizens of the UK are still split on whether a referendum should have

been called for and if a second referendum should be called. Many felt that a significant number of citizens who voted were not sufficiently well-informed about the issue and the impact it would have on the UK (Richards, Heath and Carl, 2018). According to the Post-Election Wave 6, 53% of Britons expressed a degree of uncertainty ranging from 'Somewhat Certain', 'Not At All Certain' and 'Don't Know' (Vasilopoulou, 2016). In the case of controversial issues, it is still difficult to decide whether referendums should be called.

Generally, as long as the parliament is united on an issue that clearly reflects the people's needs and wants, fewer referenda would improve the process of the formation of the UK government, in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the UK government has had a long standing history of over 900 years following the Westminster model (Education Team, Houses of Parliament, 2018) and is one of the most highly respected democracy with many of Britain's ex-overseas territories in Southeast Asia, such as India and Singapore, modelling after the UK (Kumarasingham, 2016). Though there are reforms that can be undertaken, the many traditions that are withheld in the system are considered key to the identity of the UK and its citizens, who are proud to identify themselves as UK citizens.

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