

## Government and Parliament – Weekend 3 Recap

Weekend 3 of the Assembly (23–24 October) covered the relationship between government and parliament. This document summarises some key points.

### Introducing government and parliament

Government and parliament are linked to one another, but distinct:

- Parliament represents the whole country. It debates issues and scrutinises the work of government. It also examines proposals for changing the law and makes final decisions on them.
- Government consists of the Prime Minister and other ministers. They decide the overall policy direction and programme. They make proposals to parliament. Once decisions have been made, they implement those decisions.

The UK Parliament is made up of the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

- Members of the House of Commons are elected by voters in ‘constituencies’ across the country. There are 650 constituencies, and each elects one MP. Elections take place at least once every five years.
- Most members of the House of Lords are appointed and serve for life.

The House of Commons has more powers than the House of Lords. It decides who will form the government, and its agreement is needed to change the law. The House of Lords has no say in choosing the government. It can delay new laws and ask the House of Commons to think again. But it can't block proposals.

If one political party wins a majority of the seats in the House of Commons at an election, its leader becomes Prime Minister. He or she then appoints ministers to form a government. That's what happened when the Conservative party won the general election in 2019, led by Boris Johnson.

If no party wins a majority of the seats, party leaders need to negotiate with each other to work out who can win enough support in the House of Commons to form a government. That happened in 2010, when the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed a coalition government led by David Cameron. It often happens in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Parliament.

For more on parliament and government, see the talks from weekend 3 by [Alan Renwick](#) and [Paul Silk](#).

### How laws are made

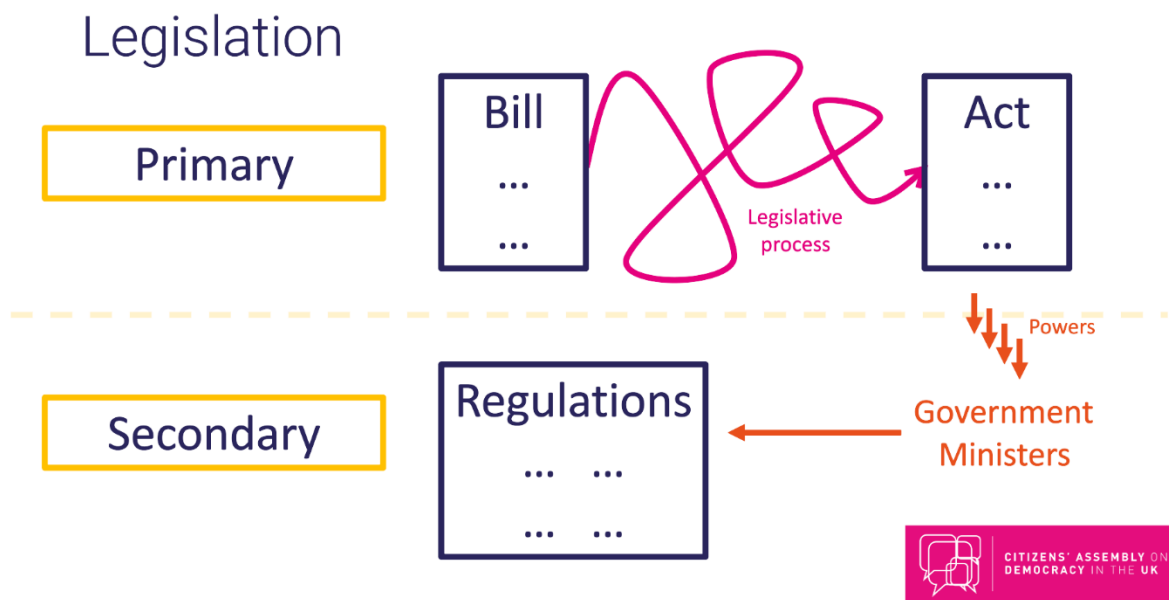
One of the main functions of government and parliament is making the law. A central principle of the constitution in the UK is ‘parliamentary sovereignty’. This means that the UK

Parliament can create or end any law. The government puts forward proposals, which become law only if Parliament approves them.

In her talk at weekend 3, [Farrah Bhatti](#) explained how laws are made. There are two types of legislation: primary and secondary legislation:

- Primary legislation refers to the main laws passed by Parliament. These are examined in several stages in Parliament. Parliament can amend them before deciding whether they should become law.
- Secondary legislation refers to generally smaller changes to the law made by government ministers or other bodies, under powers previously given to them by Parliament. These get much less scrutiny in Parliament. Parliament can block them, but can't amend them.

The image below, from Farrah's presentation, illustrates the difference between primary and secondary legislation.



### Holding the government to account

Parliament also scrutinises the work of government and holds ministers to account.

MPs and peers (members of the House of Lords) do that partly by asking ministers questions. Ministers have to attend regular session of in Parliament to answer questions. Questions can also be asked and answered in writing.

A lot of the work of scrutinising government is done in select committees. Most committees have 11 members. Each committee is responsible for monitoring a particular policy area, such as health, education, or defence. Select committees can call ministers in for questioning. They also conduct inquiries into particular issues and produce reports

containing recommendations. Ministers have to respond to these reports, though they don't have to agree with the recommendations.

### **Who controls Parliament?**

The government currently has a significant degree of power over Parliament. The government generally decides what the House of Commons discusses, and when it meets. The Prime Minister has the final say about all appointments to the House of Lords. See [Meg Russell's talk](#) from weekend 3 for more details.

There are arguments in favour of either government or parliament controlling these matters. These arguments were explored in greater detail during the afternoon session at weekend 3 by [Stephen Laws](#) and [Hannah White](#). You can watch their panel discussion [here](#).