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Liebe Schülerinnen und Schüler,

„Warum darf eigentlich das britische Staatsoberhaupt, die Königin oder der König, das Unterhaus nicht betreten, wo dort doch die Regierung und die gewählten Volksvertreter sitzen?“ „Warum heißt jeder britische Thronerbe eigentlich immer ‚Prince of Wales‘?“


Übrigens, die Antworten zu den beiden Eingangsfragen finden Sie in den Kapiteln über die Monarchie bzw. über Wales.

Viel Spaß auf Ihrer landeskundlichen Entdeckungsreise wünscht Ihnen

Rainer Jacob
Monarchy

Great Britain – a Constitutional Monarchy

The monarchy has a tradition which dates back to the 9th century and as such is the oldest institution of government in Britain. Queen Elizabeth II, whose complete title in the United Kingdom is “Elizabeth II by the Grace of God of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Her other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith”, seems to have unlimited power. She is the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, the Source of Justice, the Supreme Governor of the Church and, above all, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet members are her servants and all government actions are carried out in her name. However, in contrast to a monarchy where the monarch is the absolute ruler, Queen Elizabeth’s powers are limited by the constitution. “The Queen reigns, but she does not govern”. Her predecessor of the same name, Elizabeth I, who reigned in the 16th century during the lifetime of William Shakespeare, did have unlimited powers: She reigned and governed. She personally formulated the country’s policy and saw to it that it was carried out according to her wishes and intentions. It was dangerous to get in her way; anyone who dared to contradict her had to fear for his life. As an absolute monarch she was above the law; today’s Elizabeth, Queen Elizabeth II, is a constitutional monarch and therefore subject to the provisions of the constitution and the Acts of Parliament. This change is the result of a long struggle between the monarchy and Parliament which was determined to limit monarchical power.

The Fight between Monarch and Parliament

Originally, the powers of the British monarch were great, but they were restricted by a series of constitutional documents. A first step to limit the powers of the monarch was taken as early as 1215, when the barons forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. Clause 39 of this document stated that “no free man shall be […] imprisoned or dispossessed […] except by the lawful judgement of his peers or by the law of the land.” This document ensured that the power of the law was supreme and prevented the King from abusing his own power.
It took another 500 years before the constitutional monarchy as we know it today developed. The 17th and 18th centuries brought a period of fierce struggle between Crown and Parliament, e.g. the Civil War in which Oliver Cromwell, a Puritan, had King Charles beheaded. Charles, a Catholic, believed he was “King by divine right”. This culminated in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the passing of the Bill of Rights (1689). This statute determined the limits within which the King could take decisions, thus abolishing the absolute power of the monarchy.

Resistance to monarchy reached a climax at the beginning of the 13th century when rebellious barons forced the English King John “Lackland” (1167–1216) to sign a document which granted them more rights. This document became known as “Magna Carta”, the Great Charter of liberties. It was sealed at Runnymede on June 15, 1215.

**The Monarch’s Political Functions**

The monarchy was not abolished; its powers were reduced, however, and it was given a different role. In fact, one is reminded everywhere that the monarchy is an integral part of Britain’s political system. For example, Britain’s Parliament, the legislature, today consists of the House of Lords, the House of Commons and the Sovereign. Its formal title is “Queen in Parliament”. The House of Commons has the dominant political power and the Prime Minister and his/her Cabinet carry out day-to-day politics – in which the monarch has an important role to play. The Prime Minister and the Cabinet depend on the monarch’s consent to every action. They can only “advise” the Sovereign, never command, only recommend. The Royal Assent, that is, consenting to a measure becoming law, is required on the advice of ministers. In practice,
however, the monarch never vetoes a legislation. It was Queen Anne in 1707, who last refused assent. This means, the role of the Sovereign in the enactment of legislation is today purely formal.

The Queen also dissolves and opens Parliament – the Houses cannot start their public business until the Queen’s Speech has been read –, she appoints the Prime Minister, and appoints and dismisses ministers on the advice of the Prime Minister. As there is no written constitution in Britain it is hard to define exactly what the monarch can do. But it is generally agreed that the Queen has the right to be consulted, to encourage and to warn.

**State Opening of Parliament**

A remarkable example of how the system works and in which way the monarch takes part in governing the country is the ceremony called State Opening of Parliament.

Every year the Queen opens the new session of Parliament in person. Until 2011, this used to take place in November or December or when Parliament first assembled after general elections. Since 2012, the ceremony takes place in May or June. Since the 17th century when Charles I tried to arrest a few MPs the monarch is not allowed in the House of Commons, which is why the ceremony takes place in the House of Lords where the Queen addresses the members of both Houses. The speech she delivers at this occasion is called the Queen’s Speech. But the term is misleading as it is not the speech of the Queen at all, as it was not written by her but by the Prime Minister, who is outlining the government’s policy for the coming session of Parliament and indicating forthcoming legislation.

Acting as a mouthpiece of the current Prime Minister the Queen reads what the government of the day intends to do. She has no influence whatsoever on the political contents of the speech. So it may happen that one year she reads a speech with a basically socialist leaning, and in the next year – after an election victory of the Tories – the Queen’s speech has a completely different, that is to say, a Conservative tendency. One thing is for sure, parliamentary sessions cannot begin before the Queen’s speech has been delivered.
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