What is democracy?

Why do we have a Parliament?
What is democracy?

Democracy means “rule by the people”

If we live in a democracy, it means that the people who live in the country are involved in making decisions about the running of the country.

There are different types of democracy

Absolute democracy is where every person has the same amount of say in every decision that is made. This is time consuming for the people and when you have lots of people involved, it is not practical. Imagine 5 million people in Scotland all trying to make a decision about where to spend the budget?

Representative democracy is more workable. This is where people in the country elected representatives to make decisions for them. They can still be consulted on major decisions through a referendum (a vote on a single issue). However, on a day to day basis, the running of the country is handed over to representatives. People still have their chance to be involved in decisions as they can speak to representatives to tell them how they feel about certain topics. They also vote in elections every few years to decide if the representatives are doing a good job or not.

So why do we have a parliament?

A parliament is a place where the elected representatives come together to debate and discuss the issues that are important to the country they represent and to make decisions about the running of the country.

Parliaments have been evolving since they first started. At one time, the King or Queen of Scotland would call a parliament when they wanted. The people in the parliament wouldn’t always be elected, and would usually be friends of the King or Queen. The decisions made and the laws passed reflected how the monarch wanted the country to be run – they could order taxes to be raised to pay for wars, or they could ban football so men would practice their archery instead!

Nowadays, the Queen doesn’t get involved in the running of the Parliament, but she is always keeping an eye on the decisions being made.
Why do we have a Scottish Parliament?

The first written record of a parliament in Scotland is from 1235. For many years a parliament met in various places around Scotland. In 1707, the Scottish Parliament joined with the English Parliament to make one Parliament for the United Kingdom.

In 1997, the Labour Party promised the people in Scotland a referendum on having their own Parliament with devolved powers. After the Labour Party won the 1997 general election and formed the government, they held a referendum in September 1997 where 74.3% of the people who voted agreed they would like to have a Scottish Parliament again.

Elections were held in May 1999 to choose Members of the Scottish Parliament. The Parliament was opened by Her Majesty the Queen in July 1999.

See [www.scottish.parliament.uk/timeline](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/timeline) for more details about the history of the Scottish Parliament from 1235.

Listen to a short audio programme about the history behind the Scottish Parliament. [www.scottish.parliament.uk/visitandlearn/Education/66509.aspx](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/visitandlearn/Education/66509.aspx)
Who else represents me?

In the UK, we have many people who have the job of representing us.

At a local level, there are councillors who make decisions about what happens within the Council area.

In Scotland, we have Members of the Scottish Parliament who represent a constituency or region in Scotland and who make decisions about things that affect Scotland.

As part of the UK, we also have Members of the UK Parliament to represent our views on items such as defence, immigration and the benefits system.

We then have Members of the European Parliament. These MEPs represent us in Europe by making decisions for the countries within the European Union.
The European Parliament

The European Parliament is based in Brussels and Strasbourg. It has 751 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who are elected from across the 28 member states of the European Union. The United Kingdom elects 73 MEPs; Scotland elects 6. Elections are held every 5 years and the Regional List electoral system is used. Find out more about the work of the European Parliament at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/portal/en

How does the European Parliament fit in with other bodies of the European Union?

The European Council meets four times a year to decide on the broad political priorities for the European Union. The European Commission proposes laws to carry out these political priorities. The Council of the European Union and European Parliament make decisions to pass laws. The Court of Justice ensures member states comply with EU law.

For more information: http://europa.eu/about-eu/institutions-bodies/index_en.htm
The United Kingdom Parliament

650 MPs elected; Scotland elects 59 MPs. 5 year fixed-term Parliaments introduced from 2015. First Past the Post system used at elections.

Usually, largest party after election forms the government. Leader of that party usually becomes Prime Minister.

Scotland represented in the government by the Secretary of State for Scotland

Bi-cameral (means it has two chambers) – the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

Areas the UK Parliament passes laws on include: foreign policy, defence, immigration, benefits, most taxation.

www.parliament.uk

Examples of Laws passed by the UK Parliament

Minimum wage.
Amount of unemployment benefit.
Pensions.
Armored forces – size, make up.
Elections.
Citizenship of the UK.
Banking.
European Union.
Illegal Drugs.
Passports.
The Scottish Parliament
The Scottish Parliament is a devolved parliament and makes laws on policy areas such as health, education, police, justice, culture and environment.

- 129 MSPs elected using Additional Member System.
- Elections were held every 4 years from 1999 to 2011. From 2015, elections are held every 5 years. This is to avoid a clash with the UK Parliamentary Elections).
- The largest party can form the Scottish Government.
- The leader of the government is called the First Minister.
- Due to the electoral system, a minority or coalition government is more likely.
- Unicameral – only one debating chamber.
- Committees are very important in scrutinising the government and legislation.

Examples of laws passed by the Scottish Parliament
- No smoking in public places.
- No use of sunbeds for under 18s.
- Ban on hunting with dogs.
- Disabled parking spaces.
- Crofting reform.
- A new Forth crossing.
- Register of tartans.
- Offensive behaviour at football matches.
- Gaelic language.
- School meals nutrition.
- Find out more about bills on the Parliament’s website [http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/Bills.aspx](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/Bills.aspx)
There are 32 local council areas in Scotland. The councils are responsible for carrying out legislation at a local level. Councils are responsible for refuse collection, providing schools and teachers, parks, leisure centres, registration of births, deaths and marriages, street lighting, and road maintenance, among many other local services.

1223 councillors are elected every 4 years using the Single Transferable Vote system. Councillors represent their local ward (area) and take concerns to the council. They also scrutinise the work of the council, their policies and planning and delivery of services.

Examples of Local Councils carrying out laws made by the UK or Scottish Parliaments
- Councils must provide recycling facilities to meet recycling targets set by the government.
- Councils must meet school class sizes set by the government.
- Councils must make sure new buildings meet the rules set down by the government.