



# Constitutional change: timeline from 1911: House of Commons Background Paper

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This note contains a short and highly selective chronology of constitutional change over the past century. Prominent themes include parliamentary reform, devolution and changes to the franchise.

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## 1 Introduction

The UK does not have a codified constitution and therefore there is no clear definition of what precisely constitutes a change in its constitution. This issue was examined by the House of Lords Constitution Committee in its report on the process of constitutional change.<sup>1</sup> The Committee had offered its own working definition of the UK's constitution in its first report, published in 2001, and it concluded that this formula had stood the test of time. But it also pointed to a checklist drawn up by Professor Sir John Baker which, while neither exhaustive nor closed, represented "a useful guide to the principal measures which would fall under the rubric of significant constitutional change." The list was as follows:

- any alteration to the structure and composition of Parliament;
- any alteration to the powers of Parliament, or any transfer of power, as by devolution or international treaty, which would in practice be difficult to reverse;
- any alteration to the succession to the Crown or the functions of the monarch;
- any substantial alteration to the balance of power between Parliament and government, including the conferment of unduly broad or ill-defined powers to legislate by order;
- any substantial alteration to the balance of power between central government and local authorities;
- any substantial alteration to the establishment and jurisdiction of the courts of law, including any measure that would place the exercise of power beyond the purview of the courts, or which would affect the independence of the judiciary;
- any substantial alteration to the establishment of the Church of England;
- any substantial alteration to the liberties of the subject, including the right to habeas corpus and trial by jury.<sup>2</sup>

The table of constitutional changes in this note contains a highly selective list of changes in the UK's constitutional arrangements. It omits, for example, a good deal of local government, civil liberties and data protection legislation, and also leaves out the question of European treaties. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the list will serve as a useful basic chronology.

## 2 Other sources

A number of sources have been used including the following:

- Elizabeth Wicks, *The evolution of the constitution: eight key moments in British constitutional history*, 2006. This seeks to investigate the evolution of the UK constitution since 1688 by means of consideration of the key moments during that period which have developed the constitution in a significant way.
- Vernon Bogdanor, *The British constitution in the twentieth century*, 2003. This is a series of essays on various areas of the constitution and includes a useful chronology of events of major constitutional significance (Appendix 4, pp729-49).

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<sup>1</sup> House of Lords Constitution Committee, *The process of constitutional change*, HL 177 2010-12, July 2011

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, para 11

- House of Lords Library Note: [House of Lords Reform: Chronology 1900-2010](#). This summarises the context and outcome of significant proposals for reform of the composition and powers of the House over the past century.
- House of Commons Information Office Factsheet G3, *A brief chronology of the House of Commons* (now archived). This was a selective list of some of the important dates in the history of the development of the House of Commons.

### 3 Timeline of constitutional changes

1911	<i>Parliament Act 1911</i> removes the right of veto from the Lords except on bills to extend the life of Parliament. Lords permitted delaying powers of one month for money bills and two years for other legislation. Duration of Parliament reduced to five years.
1918	<i>Representation of the People Act 1918</i> gives the vote to men over 21 fulfilling 6 months residence qualification, and to women over 30 meeting occupancy requirement. The <i>Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act 1918</i> allows women to become Members of Parliament
1920	<i>Government of Ireland Act 1920</i> provides for the creation of two home rule parliaments in Ireland. Implemented in Northern Ireland only whose Parliament opens in 1921
1922	Anglo-Irish Treaty. Irish Free State comes into being; withdrawal of Irish MPs from Westminster except 12 from Northern Ireland
1928	<i>Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928</i> lowers voting age for women to 21
1936	Abdication crisis. <i>His Majesty's Abdication Act 1936</i> provides for the abdication of Edward VIII
1948	<i>Representation of the People Act 1948</i> abolishes the remaining double-member constituencies and university seats
1949	<i>Parliament Act 1949</i> further reduces the powers of the House of Lords to delay bills
1958	<i>Life Peerages Act 1958</i> provides for the appointment of Life Peers and Peeresses, giving women the right to sit and vote in the House of Lords
1963	<i>Peerage Act 1963</i> enables peers to disclaim their peerages (in order to stand for election to the House of Commons). All female hereditary peers admitted to the House of Lords.
1967	<i>Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967</i> creates office of Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (or Ombudsman) to investigate administrative action taken on behalf of the Crown
1969	<i>Representation of the People Act 1969</i> reduces the voting age to 18

1972	Treaty of Accession signed and <i>European Communities Act 1972</i> passed. The UK becomes a member of the EEC from 1 January 1973
1972	<i>Local Government Act 1972</i> provides for full scale reorganisation of local government in England and Wales
1972	Suspension of Stormont and imposition of direct rule in Northern Ireland
1975	Membership of EEC endorsed in a referendum
1978	<i>Scotland Act 1978</i> and <i>Wales Act 1978</i> provide for directly elected assemblies in Scotland and Wales but incorporate a requirement that 40% of the registered electorate, in addition to a majority, vote "yes" in referendums. Referendums held in 1979: Wales votes "no"; Scotland votes "yes" by a narrow majority but falls short of a 40% majority. Both Acts repealed
1985	<i>Local Government Act 1985</i> provides for the abolition of the metropolitan counties and the Greater London Council as from 1986
1985	<i>Representation of the People Act 1985</i> extends the franchise to British citizens residing abroad
1997	Referendums in Scotland and Wales pave the way for devolved assemblies. The <i>Scotland Act 1998</i> provides for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament; the <i>Government of Wales Act 1998</i> for a National Assembly. First elections to both bodies held in 1999
1998	Good Friday Agreement, and subsequent <i>Northern Ireland Act 1998</i> , include provision for a devolved assembly. Agreement endorsed by the electorate and first elections held 1998. Powers devolved from December 1999 but, after subsequent suspensions, devolution finally restored 2007
1998	Electors in the Greater London area vote in favour of a Greater London Authority with directly-elected mayor and assembly. Implemented through the <i>Greater London Authority Act 1999</i> . First elections held in 2000
1998	<i>Human Rights Act 1998</i> incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law. Fully implemented in 2000
1999	<i>House of Lords Act 1999</i> removes right of all but 92 hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords
2000	<i>Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000</i> provides for the regulation of party funding and campaign expenditure as well as the creation of an Electoral Commission to supervise electoral processes
2000	<i>Freedom of Information Act 2000</i> passed. This followed reform of data protection legislation in 1998. FOI Act implemented in 2005
2005	<i>Constitutional Reform Act 2005</i> enacts a number of changes including: (1) Reform of the role of Lord Chancellor (2) Establishment of a Lord Speaker in the House of Lords (3) Creation of a Supreme Court

2006	<i>Government of Wales Act 2006</i> makes provision for further devolution to Wales
2011	Referendum in Wales votes in favour of extending the law-making powers of the National Assembly. Assembly may now pass primary legislation on devolved matters without seeking permission from Westminster
2011	UK-wide referendum on whether to replace the first-past-the-post voting system for Parliament with an Alternative Vote method. The proposal was rejected.
2011	<i>Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011</i> sets the date of the next general election as 7 May 2015 and on the first Thursday in May in every fifth year thereafter.