

The Westminster System

Many countries that were once ruled by Britain, including Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, share a similar style of government. Named after the place in London where the British Parliament meets, this is called the **Westminster System**; today, more than 30 countries use this style of government.

Features of a Westminster System of government include the following.

- **Head of State:** The position is usually ceremonial – heads of state legally hold executive power but seldom use it. For New Zealand, Queen Elizabeth II is Head of State, represented by the Governor-General, but neither exercises any real power – their consent is officially required for legislation, but it is rarely withheld.
- **Prime Minister:** A leader of the government (or head of the executive), usually known as the Prime Minister or similar (e.g. premier, first minister). The leader of government is appointed by the head of state, but must have the support of a majority of parliament.
- **Cabinet:** The executive power legally held by the head of state is actually used by a Cabinet made up of ministers or senior members of the legislative branch, and led by the government leader.
- **A permanent, independent bureaucracy:** The 'civil service', which advises on, and implements, decisions of the Cabinet regardless of changes to government.
- **An official Opposition:** The largest party in parliament that is not part of government. Its main job is to hold the government accountable for its actions and to provide an alternative to the government.
- **A legislature**, usually called a Parliament, often (but not always) **bicameral** (consisting of two separate Chambers or Houses) with at least one elected house.

Twelve of the 30 countries currently using the Westminster System have **unicameral** (only one chamber) legislatures, although many (including New Zealand) once had an **upper house** as well. Traditionally, members of the legislature (Members of Parliament, MPs) are elected to represent districts under first-past-the-post elections, although Australia uses preferential voting to elect its lower house and New Zealand uses **MMP** to elect its unicameral legislature.

Where there are two houses of parliament, the **lower house** has the ability to dismiss a government by **withholding supply** or rejecting a budget. It may also pass a **motion of no confidence** in the government, or defeat a confidence motion introduced by the government. If this happens, the government can be forced to call a 'snap' election (an election held outside the normal (usually 3, 4 or 5 years) electoral cycle).



Queen Elizabeth II,
New Zealand's Head of State



Parliament buildings, Wellington

Parliamentary privilege allows members of the legislature to discuss any relevant issue without fear of consequence – they cannot be arrested by the head of state or sued for libel for comments made within the legislature’s debating chamber.

Judges who are non-partisan (do not actively belong to any political party) are completely independent of the legislature and executive.

Answers – see **RESOURCES**

Activity 7: The Westminster System

1. From the preceding first two bullet points, find two things that the head of state in a Westminster-style government is expected to do.
 - (1) _____
 - (2) _____

2. Can you think of any advantages to having a head of state who is not directly connected to political parties or the government, but acts simply as a symbol or representative of the nation?

3. Identify *two* ways in which New Zealand’s system of government differs from the Westminster System.
 - (1) _____
 - (2) _____

4. How do you think ‘parliamentary privilege’ helps Members of Parliament do their job? What is one possible disadvantage of allowing MPs the freedom to say whatever they want in Parliament?

5. Do you think it is important to have judges who are independent from the government? Explain why or why not.

6. New Zealand’s upper house was called the Legislative Council. See if you can find out how people became a member of the Legislative Council, and when and why it was abolished.
