

Chapter 1: The British constitution and monarchy

In October 2018, the Rt Hon Lord Hain revealed Topshop owner, Philip Green, as the previously-unnamed businessman at the centre of a High Court injunction preventing the media from reporting allegations of bullying, racism, and sexual harassment made against him. Mr Green denied the allegations. A few days previously, the *Daily Telegraph* had been prevented from naming Mr Green by an injunction issued by the Court of Appeal.

You work on the politics desk of a national newspaper and have been asked to write an explainer column to make readers aware of the facts behind the day's events in the House of Lords. How is it that Lord Hain could name the individual alleged to have used a non-disclosure agreement backed up by the courts, but newspapers could not reveal the name? Although Mr Green was named, does the injunction still stand? When did parliamentary privilege come into existence, and in what way? Do MPs have the same rights as lords? Why will Lord Hain not face a defamation case in this instance?

Chapter 2: Parliamentary democracy in the UK

When eight Labour MPs and three Conservative MPs stood down as members of their respective parties to join forces as the Independent Group, Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, said the “decent and democratic thing to do” would be for the MPs to resign their seats and stand for re-election, based on the fact they had won their seats standing on a manifesto they no longer agreed to uphold (<https://twitter.com/jeremycorbyn/status/1098318064020525056>).

You are a reporter on a local paper covering a constituency represented by one of the MPs who has cut ties with the party under whose membership they were elected at the last general election. Your editor asks you to write a feature to accompany the breaking news story that your local MP is no longer a member of that party, and explain what might happen next. Questions you might want to consider include: Are MPs able to stand down from their political parties and hold on to their seats mid-term without triggering a by-election? If an MP refused to stand down, what measures could the electorate take to oust them from their seat should they wish to? You could conduct vox vops asking constituents what they think of the MP's decision and whether they would back them if a by-election were to take place.

Chapter 3: Prime minister, Cabinet, and government

On 18 March 2019, the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, ruled out allowing any further “meaningful votes” on Theresa May's withdrawal agreement, which had been rejected twice by MPs. Mr Bercow was reacting to questions from MPs about whether the same deal would be brought back to the House “ad infinitum”, a point first raised by Labour MP, Angela Eagle.

Quoting Thomas Erskine May's *Guide to Parliamentary Practice*, Mr Bercow said: “A motion or an amendment which is the same, in substance, as a question which has been decided during a session may not be brought forward again during that same session... Attempts have been made to evade this rule by raising again, with verbal alterations, the essential portions of motions which have been

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negated. Whether the second motion is substantially the same as the first is finally a matter for the judgment of the Chair.”

You are a political reporter for a Sunday broadsheet, who has been asked to produce a question and answer column on the facts of the matter to accompany a commentator’s opinion piece on the subject. How would you explain, briefly, to readers what the Erskine May rulebook is? What is the role of the Speaker, and was John Bercow within his rights to bring about this ruling?

You can read the Speaker’s full statement, which includes a short history of the rule, here: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2019-03-18/debates/AB031E78-C906-4833-9ACF-291998FAC0E1/Speaker%E2%80%99SStatement>

Chapter 4: Britain’s electoral systems

The Boundary Commission has been tasked with reducing the number of seats in the House of Commons. You are a politics reporter on a local paper in an area which is likely be affected by proposed changes and have been asked by your editor to give readers the information they need to make an informed choice about whether or not to participate in the boundary consultation. Thirty per cent of one parliamentary constituency in the local area is at risk of becoming part of a neighbouring constituency, which would mean that locals without a car would need to take three separate buses from the village centre to the neighbouring large town centre should they wish to attend an MP surgery. A campaign group has arisen on Facebook to protest against the changes.

You have been given a full page in the print edition to explain what the boundary consultation means, and how local people will be impacted by the proposed changes. What infographics could you include to bring the page to life? When was the last time the constituency boundaries were redrawn in the local area? How can people lend their support or objection to the plan? How would you create engagement with the story on your paper’s website or social media? Could you run a poll? Who would you speak with to ensure a rounded story?

Chapter 5: Political parties, party funding, and lobbying

Following increasing criticism of Prime Minister, Theresa May’s, handling of the Brexit process from voices inside her own party as well those in opposition, speculation is rife that a plan is underway to input a new leader of the Conservative Party. In January 2019, Mrs May’s government survived a vote of no confidence, tabled by Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, by 325 to 306 votes. The previous month, the Prime Minister herself had faced a vote of confidence from members of the Parliamentary Conservative Party after several members of her Cabinet resigned over their lack of support for her Brexit deal, but survived. In April 2019, reports emerged that grassroots Conservative associations were calling for an extraordinary general meeting to hold a vote of no confidence in Mrs May as party leader

(<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/apr/17/grassroots-tories-hold-no-confidence-vote-theresa-may>).

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Each political party chooses its leadership in a different way. Can you explain how the Conservative party chooses its leader? As Theresa May survived an attempt to oust her in December 2018, how long must the party wait before it is able to try again to overthrow her? What is the 1922 Committee and what powers, if any, does it have over the Tory parliamentary party membership?

Chapter 6: The National Health Service

In March 2019, NHS England announced plans to overhaul the blanket time-based target of treating all accident and emergency cases within four hours, in favour of prioritizing waiting times by those with the most urgent illnesses and injuries. The target for A&E staff to see ninety-five per cent of patients within four hours was introduced in 2004, but departments around the country have generally been unable to reach it since mid-2015 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-47485592>). Other waiting times are being changed too, including for planned operations and cancer treatments.

The BBC has an excellent target tracker on its website, here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-41483322>, which also explains how data is recorded. Choose an illness or injury type to focus on and check how your local hospital is performing for your local online newspaper. How does this compare with care for the same condition in other parts of the country? Are readers of your local newspaper concerned? Who would you speak with at the hospital, and are there any patient groups nearby that have representatives you could interview?

Chapter 7: The Treasury, industry, and the utilities

In February 2019, car manufacturer Honda announced its plans to close its factory in Swindon, Wiltshire, in 2021, which will lead to around 3,500 job losses, citing “unprecedented change in the industry on a global scale” (<https://www.businessgreen.com/bg/news/3071268/unprecedented-changes-honda-says-plant-closure-driven-by-electric-vehicle-transition>).

You are a reporter on a newspaper covering the Swindon area and have been sent to cover a protest march against the planned car plant closure. Which representatives would you choose to interview at the march? Are any marchers hopeful that the decision could be reversed? Who in central government could you contact for an insight into what pressure it might be able to put on Honda to keep the factory open? What alternative employment opportunities are available in the town? Rumours are circulating that the Brexit climate is to blame for this decision. How would you assess how much truth there is in this, and what other factors could have had an impact?

Chapter 8: Social security and home affairs

Four years after three British schoolgirls travelled from their London homes to Isis-controlled Syria, one, Shamima Begum, was interviewed by a Times journalist from a refugee camp in the country. Now aged 19, Ms Begum spoke of her hopes to return to the UK, but did renounce her support for the terrorist organization. Following a resulting public outcry, the Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, wrote to Ms Begum’s mother, to make the family aware that Ms Begum’s British citizenship had been

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revoked. The letter stated: “Please find enclosed papers that relate to a decision taken by the Home Secretary to deprive your daughter, Shamima Begum, of her British citizenship. In light of the circumstances of your daughter, the notice of the Home Secretary’s decision has been served on file today (19th February), and the order removing her British citizenship has subsequently been made,” (<https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1089584/Shamima-Begum-letter-citizenship-full-home-office-letter-isis-bride-stripped-british>). Mr Javid claimed his decision was lawful, however Ms Begum’s family claimed she had only British citizenship and so revoking it rendered her stateless.

Can you explain what powers the Home Secretary has to revoke a person’s citizenship? In what circumstances can this be done, and what must be proved in order to comply with international law? Is it possible for the Home Secretary to make a person stateless? What protocols have the Home Office and law enforcement agencies put in place to deal with British citizens who have travelled abroad to join terrorist organizations and are now returning home?

Chapter 9: The European Union and other international institutions

As debate over the terms on which the United Kingdom should leave the European Union rumbles on, one particular impasse has arisen: the issue over a potential border between the EU and UK should the UK leave, dubbed ‘the backstop’. When negotiators on both sides agreed the withdrawal agreement – a set of rules by which both sides would adhere for a period of time immediately after the UK leaves the jurisdiction of the EU, and whilst future agreements are sought – they were united in their belief that efforts should be made to ensure no hard border on the island of Ireland. In December 2018, the European Commission issued a press release with the following statement: “The Commission has today reiterated its commitment to ensuring the current programmes between the border counties of Ireland and Northern Ireland can continue in all scenarios. Given its importance, the Commission has today made a proposal for a Regulation to continue the PEACE programme in Northern Ireland until the end of 2020, in the event of a no deal scenario.” (http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-6851_en.htm)

Your editor has asked you to write an explainer feature on the backstop which will sit alongside two opinion pieces from columnists, with one arguing Brexit should plough ahead without a deal and the other arguing for a second referendum, or ‘people’s vote’. Outline the current situation for the movement of people, goods and services between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Bearing in mind the history of the Irish and British states, explain why there is a significant need to ensure this issue is considered carefully. Which campaign groups, if any, included the border situation in their referendum campaigning? How would you humanize the story?

Chapter 10: The origins and structure of local government

Local elections have been scheduled in your area for six weeks’ time. You are a local politics reporter in an area with a two-tier structure of local authority, where a district council provides some services whilst the county council provides the remainder. In an era of cuts by central government to council funding, the electorate is frustrated. You have noticed your readers have taken to social media to vent collectively and publicly about a charge for parking on common land that the county council

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brought in the previous year, despite a groundswell of opposition to the idea. The county council had argued that whilst council tax revenue had, up until that point, covered costs of maintaining the car parks and the common land, cuts had meant new ways of funding needed to be sought. With council tax increasing and an extra charge imposed for the same service, constituents are angry.

The local elections are for district councillors only, and not at county level, however you notice many readers citing on social media that the reason they are considering not voting at all in the district elections is because of the common car parking issue. How would you address this misunderstanding in your coverage of the upcoming election? What are the thoughts of those standing for district election who are of the same party as the one who brought in the county council charges? Do the district candidates have anything to say on the car park funding issue, and how might they work with their equivalents at county level if elected?

Chapter 11: Financing local government

Below is a link to the agenda for Kent County Council's full council meeting for February 14 2019, which saw councillors debate the budget for the next three years. Up for discussion was which services could be cut to fund a £73 million funding gap, on top of £640 million of cuts which had already been made in the previous eight years. One of the biggest pressures, the council said, was the necessary ten per cent increase in social workers' wages to meet the living wage. Leader of the council, Paul Carter, said: "The local government cake needs to become bigger to reflect the rising demands, reflecting changing demography that supports a growing elderly population, particularly in counties, and take account of inflationary costs both on staff pay and prices for commissioned, bought-in services." (<https://kccmediahub.net/kcc-rises-to-latest-budget-challenge745>)

The council approved council tax rises of 4.99 per cent to continue to fund remaining services. A petition against library changes, which would see opening hours across Kent reduced by twenty per cent, had reached over 6,000 signatures (<https://www.kentlive.news/news/kent-news/kent-libraries-facing-cut-opening-2260765>). Liberal Democrat councillors proposed an amendment that would have seen the council taking out a £1 million loan in order to plug funding gaps for libraries.

What are the clear story angles and lines of enquiry from the agenda? Who would you interview to follow up any feature ideas? What would the council have had to do if they had needed to increase council tax by five per cent or more?

Kent County Council budget meeting agenda and minutes:
<https://democracy.kent.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=113&MId=7893>

Chapter 12: Local government decision-making

In March 2018, the government released a 'best value' inspection report into the duty of Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) to provide best value in the delivery of services, and found it had failed
(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/fil

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[e/690731/Best Value Inspection NCC.pdf](http://690731/Best_Value_Inspection_NCC.pdf)). The report described the council's budgetary control as "weak" (3.53) and that there appeared to be "no one officer who has clear responsibility for setting professional standards for finance staff" (3.56). The report blamed the council's financial woes on its decision to outsource all public services, which NCC called its "Next Generation" model (<http://leadingnorthamptonshire.com/next-generation-council/>).

You are a reporter on a local newspaper covering one town in Northamptonshire. How would you explain to readers what the duties of councils are? How much of the responsibility for running public services lies with the officers, and how much with councillors? Whose responsibility is it to ensure that companies to whom public services have been outsourced are providing the level of service required? Are private companies that are being paid with public money accountable for their services in practice? What opportunities does the electorate have to voice disquiet, and overthrow elected members if they have not performed their duties?

Chapter 13: Local government accountability and elections

As has been the trend in recent years, voter turnout at the 2019 local elections was low at around thirty-six per cent. Considering rising council tax and cuts to local services, it could be expected that voters would want their say on the direct impact this has on their neighbourhood, but apathy remains.

What steps does your local council take to ensure it is transparent and involves the electorate as far as it can? You are a reporter for a local newspaper in a community situated on the coast. Flytipping on the beaches is a common sight and several people have called the newsdesk asking your editor to report on the problem. It has worsened in recent months following charges introduced at waste centres, when it previously the costs were covered entirely by council tax. On the back of this, your newspaper has decided to launch a campaign on tidying up the area's beaches. You have been tasked with getting as much support as possible, so you need to write a feature letting people know how they can lobby their councillor(s) on the issue. What powers and duties does the council have to keep the local beaches clean? How have funding cuts in the local area impacted on flytipping in the area? Do residents feel there is a link between cuts to services and rubbish dumped in local beauty spots?

Chapter 14: Education

In June 2017, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) took out billboard advertising on Birmingham's "Spaghetti Junction" interchange, warning of school funding cuts and the impact they will have in the local area. In a press release about the campaign at the time, Kevin Courtney, General Secretary of the NUT, states: "In places like Birmingham we anticipate almost £100 million being taken out of the schools budget. This is a staggering figure. Schools already cannot afford to provide the education which children and young people deserve. Begging letters for money and resources are commonplace, class sizes are increasing, staff are being cut, and buildings are going unrepaired," (<https://www.teachers.org.uk/news-events/press-releases-england/birmingham-schools-set-to-lose-nearly-%C2%A395m>).

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Now, in 2019, schools in Birmingham have begun to announce that as of the next academic year, they will be open for fewer hours each week. You work for a Birmingham newspaper and have seen on Twitter that local MP, Jess Phillips, has launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise funds to keep schools open full-time, after receiving a letter from her son's head teacher revealing that the school day will end at 1pm on Fridays, (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/12/jess-phillips-raising-funds-for-education-cuts-stunt>). Two years ago, your colleagues covered the NUT's billboard campaign that warned of the impacts of these cuts, and now they are coming to fruition. What are the clear story angles here? Who would you speak to in order to write a story showing the impact of these closures on the community your newspaper writes for?

Chapter 15: Planning policy and environmental protection

The Localism Act 2011 placed a duty on local authorities to hold a referendum in order to introduce a neighbourhood plan. Neighbourhood development plans and orders can be created by parish councils and community groups and, following confirmation by referendum, allow locals a voice in shaping planning and development within an area. Now, many areas across the country are introducing these plans.

Your patch covers an area in the greenbelt area of the south-east of England where there is a lack of truly affordable housing. Planning permission has just been given to a developer to build new homes, including a percentage of "affordable housing" on a greenfield site, despite fierce opposition from environmental groups due to a badger population. A referendum on a neighbourhood plan is due to take place shortly, which states brownfield sites should be favoured over greenfield sites. If the neighbourhood plan is adopted, will it prevent the already-approved development from going ahead? Who would you speak to in the area to voice the opinions of those with concerns about the environmental impact and those who are struggling to afford to live in the area in which they grew up?

Chapter 16: Housing

According to figures from the Local Government Association (LGA), since 2013 42,130 housing units have been converted from offices to flats in England without having to go through the planning system. Across the country this amounts to seven per cent of new home, but in the areas of Islington, Welwyn Hatfield, Mole Valley, Croydon and Derby, this type of conversion accounted for 40 per cent of new homes in 2017/18, (<https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/10000-affordable-homes-potentially-lost-through-office-conversions>). The LGA said six out of ten local authorities it surveyed were worried about safety since rules have been relaxed. Cllr Martin Tett, LGA Housing spokesman, said: "Councils... must be given back their ability to oversee all local developments to ensure they are good quality and help build prosperous places."

Concerned residents of an office-to-flats conversion have contacted your local newspaper to voice fears that families are suffering due to substandard housing, with many flats in the block having no windows, and only a minority of flats in the block meeting the requirements for space that would have been in place had developers followed usual planning regulations. What powers does the local authority have, if any, to ensure developers of office-to-home flats conform to building regulations?

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If these buildings had to meet usual planning regulations, what would be the minimum size permitted for habitable accommodation according to national space standards? What options are open to residents of the substandard block of flats? Are there any other requirements usually put on developers of residential accommodation that the permitted development rules allow housing companies to ignore?

Chapter 17: Children’s services and adult social care

A January 2019 report published by Ofsted into Blackpool Council has rated the children’s social care service as “inadequate” for the second time in six years. The report found “serious failures leave some children at risk of significant harm” and “young people who present as homeless are not systematically offered the opportunity to become looked after following an assessment of their need for support. A small number of 16- and 17-year-olds experience unsuitable accommodation, such as bed and breakfast and sofa-surfing.”

How would you write a sensitive feature to accompany a news story on the release of this report for your local newspaper? Who would you interview? What services are available to vulnerable young people in the Blackpool area? Are there any help groups or charities in the area that you could interview? What pressures are they under? Do they agree with the findings of the report? What suggestions do they have to improve the situation locally? Are there any plans to increase funding for children’s social care in the area? What provisions, if any, should be made by local authorities for homeless children by law?

Ofsted’s report can be read here: <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/44/80431>

Chapter 18: Transport, environmental, leisure, and culture

In May 2019, campaigners lost their High Court bid to prevent a third runway being built at Heathrow airport. The controversial proposal had received the backing of MPs in June 2018, but anti-expansions protestors claimed the government’s plans failed to deal with the impact on climate change, air quality, noise, road congestion and habitats. The case against Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling, was brought by four London boroughs, Windsor and Maidenhead council, the Mayor of London, and environment charities including Greenpeace.

You are a local reporter at the *Hillingdon and Uxbridge Times*, covering an area in which Heathrow airport is situated and which will be affected by the additional airport traffic. Some readers in your area stand to have their homes demolished to allow for the third runway construction. How would you cover the court’s decision, bearing in mind that your readership is likely to be extremely against the planned rail line? Which councillors would you speak to for comment? Could you attend the next meeting of an anti-Heathrow expansion campaign group? What is the next step for campaigners? Do locals wish council tax revenue to continue to be spent on protesting airport expansion?

You can read the High Court’s judgement here: <https://www.judiciary.uk/judgments/neil-richard-spurrier-othrs-v-the-secretary-of-state-for-transport-heathrow-judgments/>

Chapter 19: Freedom of information

In April 2019, the Information Commissioner's Office upheld a complaint made against Halton Borough Council due to its failure to provide requested information under the Freedom of Information Act within the statutory 20 working-days period. The complainant had contacted the council requesting answers to seven queries relating to stray dogs, and the council provided information pertaining to four of these queries some weeks later, and outside of the statutory period. The council had initially declined to respond to one of the queries due to the concern that revealing the answer would "endanger the safety of an individual." After investigation, the ICO obliged the council to release the information, and it transpired that another council had disclosed the information.

You can read the ICO's decision ruling on this case, here: <https://ico.org.uk/media/action-weve-taken/decision-notice/2019/2614830/fs50792193.pdf>

What would have been the consequences for Halton Borough Council had it continued to leave the request unfulfilled after the ICO's ruling? For what reasons are public authorities able to legitimately deny freedom of information requests? How efficient is the council usually at responding on time? Can you outline the process for submitting a freedom of information request?