

History: Unit 2 Elizabeth  
Lesson 3 of 30

# How was Elizabethan government structured and what challenges did it pose?



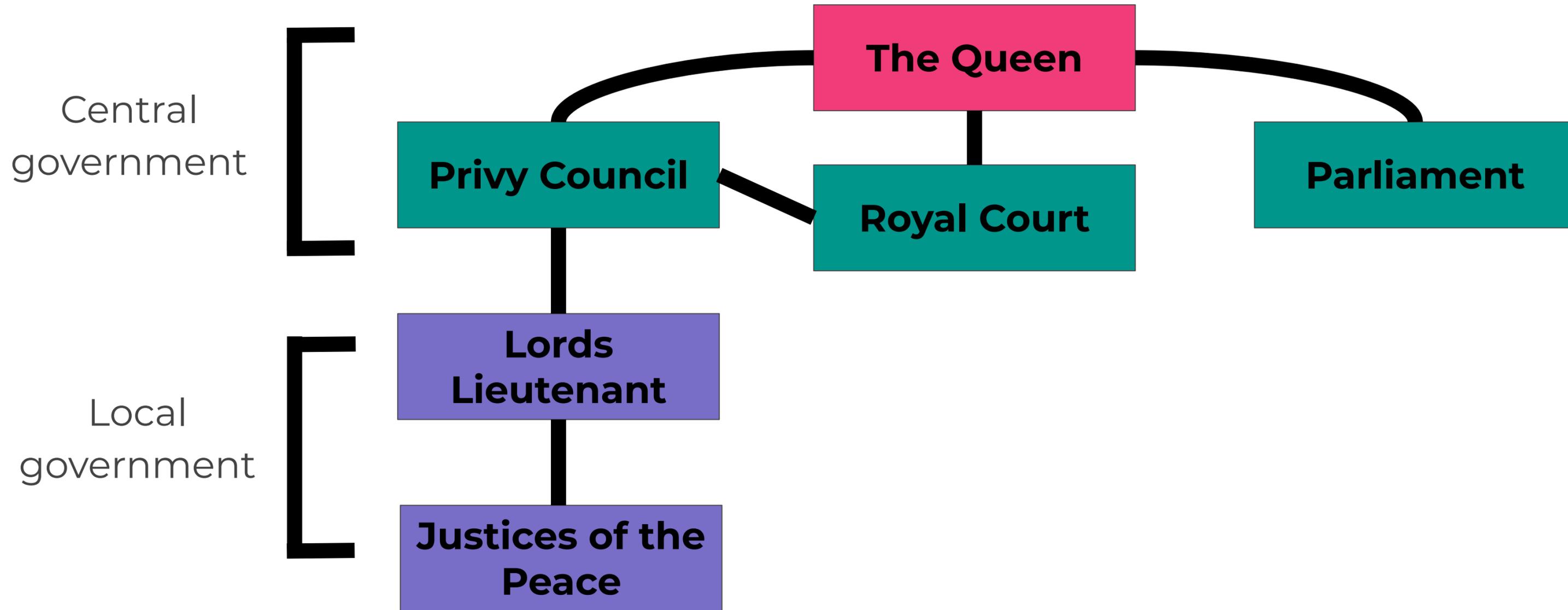
# How was Elizabeth's government structured?

Elizabethan inherited a political system that had been unchanged for many years. It was based on **personal monarchy**, which was the idea that Elizabeth herself would be responsible for choosing her advisors. Her decisions were carefully watched and always risked creating divisions within government because different councillors and courtiers would compete for a role in her government.

Elizabeth's **Court, Privy Council and Parliament** were based in London. This is known as **central or national government** and was the centre of all power. Outside of London, control was taken by **local government**. This was where various people in particular areas of the country were appointed to oversee their particular area and try to run it on the Queen's behalf. Again, being appointed in these positions of power was a form of patronage.



# How was Elizabeth's government structured?



## The Royal Court

The Royal Court was not a physical place confined to one building. It refers to the group of people that surrounded the Queen. It included her household, advisors, noble families and visitors who surrounded her and competed for her attention. It also included her servants. Anyone who was an official guest or who had a position of power was a **courtier**.



## The Privy Council

The Privy Council were a small group of Elizabeth's most trusted advisors. They would organise finance, law courts and would give instructions to **Lord Lieutenants** (see slide 11) who were part of local government.

Members of the Privy Council were made up of members of the **gentry**. The Privy Council would help Elizabeth run the country on a day-to-day basis, and their workload increased during her reign. She trusted her Privy Council to hold meetings without her, but she did monitor them.

Elizabeth did ultimately have overall control, but to be in the Privy Council gave individuals lots of power as they could issue proclamations (emergency laws) on the Queen's behalf. They were different to the Parliament (more on Parliament next lesson).



## Key Privy Councillors

### Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley

- A member of the Gentry born in 1520.
- Moderate Protestant who studied Law at Cambridge University.
- Very intelligent and hard working.
- Had worked in Edward VI's Privy Council.
- He wanted to avoid war and unite the nation through **moderate** policies that appealed to everyone.
- He was given the title Lord Burghley in 1571.
- Died in 1598 and was replaced by his son, Robert Cecil, as Elizabeth's chief minister.



## Key Privy Councillors

### Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester

- Born 1533
- His father had been executed by Mary I (bloody Mary)
- Elizabeth's childhood friend and favourite of Elizabeth
- Rumours of romance between Elizabeth and Dudley
- Radical **Puritan** (strict Protestant)
- He argued with William Cecil about the succession, religion and foreign policy
- Titled Earl of Leicester in 1564
- Died in 1588



# Key Privy Councillors

## Sir Francis Walsingham

- Born 1562 - a member of the Gentry
- Attended Cambridge University and studied law
- **Puritan** (strict Protestant)
- Became a member of Parliament in 1558
- Became a Privy Councillor in 1573 and was knighted in 1577.
- He regularly clashed with Cecil but had a good relationship with Dudley
- Was Elizabeth's chief 'spymaster' and uncovered numerous plots against Elizabeth
- Died 1590



# Key Privy Councillors

## Sir Christopher Hatton

- Born 1540 - a member of the Gentry
- Studied Law at Oxford University
- Elizabeth was impressed by his dancing at court and so promoted him!
- Became Gentleman of the Privy Chamber
- Moderate Protestant (not very strict)
- Elected to Parliament and helped to secure the loyalty of other MPs
- Died 1591



## How did Elizabeth control her Privy Council?

The Privy Council was filled with ambitious men whose positions gave them a lot of power. Elizabeth was careful to control them. She used a 'divide and rule' strategy in order to ensure that the men in the council competed for her attention and for power. She would exclude members of the council when they displeased her, and rewarded them for their work. This created separate **factions** which were rival groups of men who would compete together for control. Many of them had their own personal ambitions, so she listened to the different advice that they gave and used this to make a measured judgement. This meant that they could not all turn against her at once, because there would always be one faction who was favoured. This generally worked well and ensured their loyalty until the very last years of her reign, when there was a rebellion against her by Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex. He was executed as a result of his betrayal.



# How was local government structured?

## Lords lieutenant

Each county (area of England) had a Lord Lieutenant chosen by the monarch. They would usually be a member of the nobility and would take their instructions from the Privy Council. They were in charge of training local **militia** (soldiers who could form an army) and enforced the law.

## Justices of the Peace

There were 30-60 per county who kept law and order in their local area. The position was unpaid, but gave them status in their community so it was a popular role. They listened to county court cases to ensure that **justice** (fairness) was served at court trials. They were also responsible for administering poor relief.



# What challenges did government pose to Elizabeth?

## Central government

The Privy Council was full of ambitious men. This was positive for Elizabeth, because they competed for her favour. However, the Privy Council did have a lot of power, so there was potential for disagreeing with her and there are examples of this in her reign. Privy Councillors could have roles as Lord Lieutenants, who controlled local areas of England. It was therefore important for Elizabeth to listen to her councillors and ensure she had their loyalty. She had to be very careful who she trusted.

## Local government

Elizabeth relied heavily on local government to enforce law and order in local areas of England. These were high status positions, so it was likely that they would use this form of patronage to show loyalty to the Queen as their position could be removed. Equally, the amount of power that local government actually had can be questioned. There was a lot of regional variation in terms of the amount of control. In the north of England for example as there were rebellions in Elizabeth's reign that were not stopped, for example, the Rising of the Northern Earls in 1569.



# Glossary

**Personal monarchy** - where politics and government revolve around the monarch and advisors are chosen, not elected.

**Prerogative powers** - the special rights of the monarch to rule and have final authority

**Privy Council** - The small group of advisors chosen by the monarch to support her in the running of government on a day-to-day basis

**Parliament** - Made up of the House of Commons and Lords and containing about 450 MPs, they passed Acts of Parliament (Laws) and raised taxes

**Lord Lieutenant** - a wealthy landowner or member of the nobility who was appointed to oversee a particular county of England and maintain law and order

**Factions** - groups of courtiers who would side with each other against other rival factions and compete for the attention of the monarch



# Questions - let's test your understanding!

1. What was the difference between 'central' and 'local' government?
2. Who were the key Privy Councillors and what was their role?
3. How did Elizabeth keep control of her Privy Council?
4. How did local government function? What challenges did this pose for Elizabeth?

Challenge yourself: Do you think the structure of Elizabethan government was more useful or problematic for Elizabeth's control of England?

