



At our last meeting, several members asked for more information on aspects of the UK's democracy. This document offers answers. If you have further questions about any of the concepts raised at the Assembly, please contact James Cleaver (j.cleaver@ucl.ac.uk).

An ombudsman is an independent service which investigates unresolved complaints about a certain company or organisation for free. There are two types of ombudsman:

- those covering the private sector, which are mainly involved with financial and consumer complaints
- those covering the public sector, which investigate complaints about government organisations and public services.

In addition to responding to specific cases, an ombudsman can identify issues within a sector and make recommendations on change.

If the ombudsman concludes that a complaint is justified, they will recommend a solution to the organisation in question. A public sector ombudsman can't force an organisation to follow their recommendation, but the vast majority do. A private sector ombudsman's decision can be legally binding.

In the UK, many basic rights are enshrined in law by the Human Rights Act 1998. The Act sets out rights and freedoms that everyone in the UK is entitled to. These rights include: freedom from torture; the right to a fair trial; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of expression; and freedom of assembly and association (the ability to meet and interact with other people).

The rights covered by the Human Rights Act were first established through the European Convention on Human Rights. This was created in 1950 by the Council of Europe, an international organisation of 47 members set up to uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe in the wake of the Second World War. The Council of Europe is separate from the European Union.

Some rights were already protected in law in the UK b