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HIST 203

English Parliament: Democracy to Constrain a Monarch?

English Parliament may be the oldest body of governmental legislation in the history of the modern world. Although Parliament's exact initiation date is unknown, the roots of the organization trace as far back as King Henry III. Originally, the King, in need of some way to levy taxes and raise an army, would call upon Great Councils, which eventually became Parliament. Because the King possessed divine authority, but had no police body to enforce his authority, Henry III (and his advisors) established a need for a legislative governing body to enforce his rule. It is through this evolution that Parliament developed into the central governing body that it is today

Great Councils were called in the early 13th Century in order to levy taxes from the commoners. Henry, a mere child at this time, was

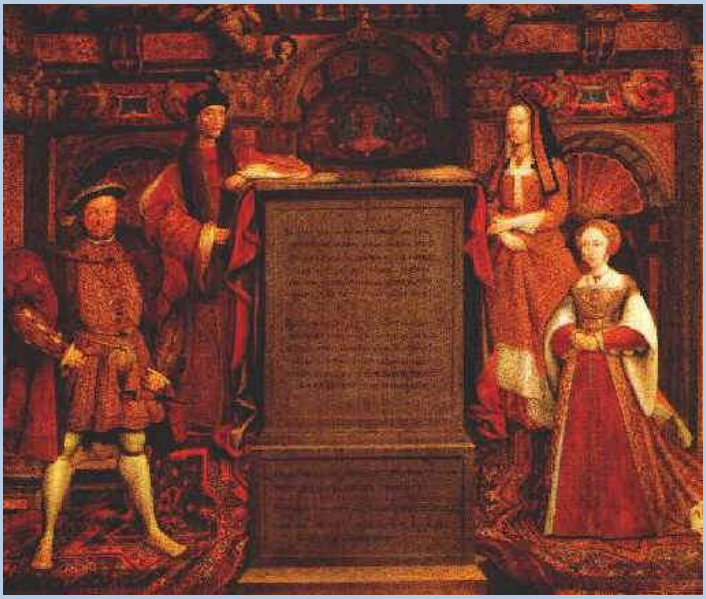
overshadowed by his many advisors and their unrelenting hold over the throne. Bound by the laws of the Magna Carta of 1215, and limited in their authority, the monarch's advisors called Parliament at will, and used these conventions to collect tax money. The advisors, keen to hold their positions of power as long as possible, ensured that the young king re-issue the Magna Carta, and curb his divine authority. Once Henry became old enough to govern without his advisors, a small war broke out between Henry and Simon de Montfort. It was Montfort, in 1264, who summoned and dismissed the first Parliament, with no monarchical authority. Along with summoning the usual crowd of barons, archbishops, earls, lords and dukes, Montfort also summoned two knights and two burgesses from each shire and borough. This became known as the summoning of "the Commons." This later inspired the 1341 division of Parliament into two houses: The House of Lords and The House of Commons, and also allowed the gentry class a place in politics.

After Henry's reign, his son Edward I followed suit, strengthening Parliament in order to strengthen and

unify the ties between England, Scotland, and Wales. Wishing to avoid a rebellion like his father faced, Edward encouraged all of his subjects to submit grievances to Parliament; a very Democratic undertaking. This solidified Parliament's importance not only in government and legislative process, but also in the everyday lives of the commoners in England. One can easily trace Parliament's power and strength by the power and strength of the ruling monarch. If the ruler was strong, he or she passed legislation through Parliament with little trouble, whereas a weak monarch would find a great adversary in Parliamentary proceedings. The greatest example of this volatile relationship follows the deposition of Edward II. Edward II, allowing others to rule in his stead, at the detriment of England, was charged with incompetence, removed from the throne, and replaced by his son Edward III.

In 1341, the Houses of Parliament were officially established in upper and lower chambers: the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The upper chamber House of Lords was made up of the nobility and the clergy, while the lower chamber House of Commons was composed of knights and burgesses. It was during this time that it was established that no law could be made, nor any tax levied, without the consent of both Houses and the ruling monarch. Also during this time, the "Forty Shilling Freeholders" took hold, authorizing that only men who owned property worth forty shillings or more could vote in elections for the members of the House of Commons.

Parliament truly began to blossom under the reign of the Tudor monarchs. The Tudor's would seldom call Parliament, sometimes waiting years between assemblages, but they understood the need for such a legislative body's existence. At this time, and still today, the monarch was awarded a royal veto with which he or she can halt the passing of unapproved legislation. Although this one measure reflects the democratic nature of the institution, English Parliament was still a far stretch from a democratic representative government. Corruption and bribery allowed one House or the Sovereign to gain power and support over the other two. The scale of balances of this form of government could be easily tipped to favor one branch over the others. It was during this period that the Houses began to assemble at Westminster Palace and St. Stephen's Chapel; the same place they meet today.



Though the Tudor monarchs understood the importance and necessity of Parliament, the two governing bodies were sometimes at odds with one another, particularly in the 17th Century. Addressed in

Edward Rutherfurd's *London (1997)*, King Charles I was given the Petition of Right by the House of Commons, in which they addressed their grievances with the crown, and demanded their liberties. Charles accepted this petition, only to later dissolve Parliament and rule for 11 years without their aid. Only when he was facing financial ruin did he recall Parliament in 1639 at the beginning of the Bishops' Wars. From this point onward, relations between the monarch and Parliament remained tense.

Parliament was filled with dissenters also called Parliamentarians, or Roundheads. The most prominent of these dissenters was John Pym in the House of Commons. In Rutherford's London, one character defends Pym's authority, "'There are two kings now […] King Charles in his Palace, and King Pym in the Commons'" (Rutherford 732). Pym's influence was unavoidable; a strong voice among the gentry, he ruled the minds of the common men and women. Tensions mounted in 1642 at the beginning of the English Civil War. Parliament emerged, a victorious force, no longer subservient to the monarch, and "The next time Charles came to the capital would be in January 1649 for his trial in Westminster Hall and execution outside the Banqueting House at Whitehall Palace" (Johnson 2001). One character in Rutherford's book recounts the experience,

"Not even his most bitter enemies could deny that King Charles I of England went to his death with the most remarkable grace. As the axeman struck a single, clean blow, the whole crowd let out a great groan, as if suddenly they understood their awful deed. And as the executioner held up the king's severed head, perhaps Sir Julius Ducket was not alone as he murmured to himself: 'The king is dead. Long live the king'" (Rutherford 753).

After Charles' death in 1649, the House of Lords was dissolved, and a gutted House of Commons called the "Rump Parliament" ruled England jointly until the rise of Oliver Cromwell in 1653. Cromwell dissolved Parliament altogether because of disagreements over religious policies and elections, and England became a temporary Republic. Possibly the most important time in Parliament's history is the period between 1649 and 1653 with the sitting of the Rump Parliament. During this time, Parliament ruled England without a monarch and without the more powerful House of Lords. Moving toward Democracy, The House of Commons stood by itself and ruled a nation.

After the eleven-year republic bout, a few incompetent leaders, and a monarchical restoration, The Glorious Revolution took place. The Glorious

Revolution marks the time where James II of England (James VII of Scotland) was overthrown and replaced by Dutch William and Mary. James left the throne willingly with an army at his door, and William of Orange stepped in as king. Although some call the Cromwellian period a waste of time, it marked an important period in the history of Parliament. During the Republic, members of the House of Commons became affectionately known as "MPs" (Members of Parliament). Also in this time, Cromwell strengthened the powers of Parliament, although he dismissed each assembly he called.

During the reign of William and Mary, England's Constitutional monarchy became subservient to their Parliament, a change in institution that still exists today. William and Mary approved the 1689 Declaration of Rights and the 1701 Act of Settlement to secure England as a constitutional monarchy, and guarantee the monarch's subservience to English Parliament.

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