



PARLIAMENT: THE INSTITUTION

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Parliament's evolution

Parliament, as a political institution, has developed over hundreds of years. During this period, the two distinct Houses, Commons and Lords, have emerged and the balance of power between Parliament and the monarchy has changed dramatically.

Origins of Parliament – King's councils

The origins of Parliament go back to the 12th century, when King's councils were held involving barons and archbishops. They discussed politics and were involved in taxation and judgments. The balance of power lying with the monarch.

Over time, these councils took a more formal role and saw knights representing each county. This was the beginning of a Commons element in Parliament. The first known official use of the term 'Parliament' was in 1236. The word Parliament derives from the French word parler, meaning to talk and discuss things.

Two Houses

By the 14th century two distinct Houses, the Commons and the Lords, had developed. The Commons involved representatives from counties, towns and cities. The first spokesman to be termed Speaker in the official record was Thomas Hungerford. The Lords membership was made up of the nobility and clergy, known as the Lords Temporal and the Lords Spiritual.

The rise of the Commons

In 1414, it was agreed that the King and the Lords should not change the wording of any bills submitted by the Commons without its agreement and that no bill should become an Act without Commons assent.

By the mid-15th century, the Commons was in control of granting funds to the King and was on an equal footing with the Lords regarding the creation and amendment of statutes.

The Reformation Parliament

Parliament was still subject to being summoned by the King. During Henry VIII's reign, Parliament passed laws which transferred religious authority from the Pope to the King with the formation of the Church of England. Henry VIII realised that royal power was at its strongest when it was expressed through parliamentary statute.

Civil war and the Restoration

The reign of Charles I, beginning in 1625, saw civil war break out between supporters of Parliament and the monarchy. In 1649, Charles I was tried in Westminster Hall and executed. A Commonwealth led by Oliver Cromwell was established and a series of Parliaments were elected using different constitutional rules. In 1660, the monarchy was restored under King Charles II.

Parliament's position was strengthened when the Bill of Rights was agreed in 1689. This established Parliament's authority over the monarch. From this date, Parliament would be responsible for passing or repealing all laws.

Parliament and the home nations

The 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland saw the nations' individual Parliaments replaced by the new Parliament of Great Britain. After the 1800 Act of Union with Ireland, the Dublin Parliament was abolished and Irish MPs and Lords were represented in the Westminster Parliament.

Extending the vote

In the 19th century, the Reform Acts of 1832, 1867 and 1884 extended the number of men eligible to vote creating a more democratic, representative Parliament. However, women were still excluded from voting and did not gain the right to vote until 1918 after the suffragette campaigns and the impact of the First World War.

Parliament Acts - 1911 and 1949

The Parliament Acts of 1911 and 1949 increased the authority of the Commons over the Lords when passing new laws. The Acts removed the powers of the Lords to amend any Bills concerning money and reduced the amount of time they could delay a bill.

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