

British Parliament

Parliament is the legislative body of the United Kingdom and is the primary law-making institution in Great Britain's constitutional monarchy. The history of the legislative body—which meets in the Palace of Westminster in London—shows how it evolved almost organically, partly in response to the needs of the country's reigning monarch. Parliament traces its roots back to the earliest meetings of English barons and commoners in the 8th century.

Parliament's Humble Beginnings

The present-day Parliament is a bicameral (“two chambers”) legislature with a House of Lords and a House of Commons. These two houses, however, weren't always joined, and had their earliest beginnings in the Anglo-Saxon council governments of the 8th century.

The Witan was a small council of clergymen, land-owning barons and other advisors chosen by the king to discuss matters of state, taxation and other political affairs. As it expanded to include more advisors, the Witan evolved into the *magnum concilium* or Great Council.

On a local level, “moots” were meetings of local bishops, lords, sheriffs and, importantly, commoners who were representatives of their counties or “shires.”

These institutions functioned—with varying degrees of success—as law-making bodies and law enforcement agencies throughout England during the Middle Ages.

The two bodies didn't regularly convene, but they paved the way to the bicameral legislature that exists today.

Magna Carta

The first English Parliament was convened in 1215, with the creation and signing of the Magna Carta, which established the rights of barons (wealthy landowners) to serve as consultants to the king on governmental matters in his Great Council.

As in the early Witans, these barons were not elected, but rather selected and appointed by the king. The Great Council was first referred to as "Parliament" in 1236.

By 1254, the sheriffs of the various counties in England were instructed to send elected representatives of their districts (known as "knights of the shire") to consult with the king on issues related to taxation. Four years later, at the English university town of Oxford, the noblemen who served in Parliament at the time drafted the "Provisions of Oxford," which called for regular meetings of the legislative body, composed of representatives from each of the counties.

In 1295, Parliament evolved to include nobles and bishops as well as two representatives from each of the counties and towns in England and, since 1282, Wales. This became the model for the composition of all future Parliaments.

Richard II Deposed

Over the course of the next century, the membership of Parliament was divided into the two houses it features today, with the noblemen and bishops encompassing the

House of Lords and the knights of the shire and local representatives (known as “burgesses”) making up the House of Commons.

During this time, too, Parliament began to take on more authority within the English government. In 1362, for example, it passed a statute decreeing that Parliament must approve all taxation.

Fourteen years later, the House of Commons tried and impeached a number of the king’s advisors. And, in 1399, after years of internal struggle for power between the monarchy and Parliament, the legislative body voted to depose King Richard II, enabling Henry IV to assume the throne.

Parliament’s Power Expands

During Henry IV’s time on the throne, the role of Parliament expanded beyond the determination of taxation policy to include the “redress of grievances,” which essentially enabled English citizens to petition the body to address complaints in their local towns and counties. By this time, citizens were given the power to vote to elect their representatives—the burgesses—to the House of Commons.

In 1414, Henry IV’s son, Henry V, assumed the throne and became the first monarch to acknowledge that the approval and consultation of both houses of Parliament was required to make new laws. Still, all was not perfect in England’s fledgling democracy.

More than 100 years later, in 1523, philosopher and writer Sir Thomas More, a Member of Parliament (M.P. for short), was the first to raise the issue of “freedom of

speech” for lawmakers in both houses during deliberations. A half-century hence, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in 1576, Peter Wentworth, M.P., made an impassioned speech arguing for the same right; he was sentenced to imprisonment in the Tower of London.

Wentworth, a Puritan, later clashed with Elizabeth I over issues related to freedom of religion during his time as an M.P., and he was jailed for these acts as well. It was this persecution that led the Puritans to leave England for the New World in the 1600s, helping to settle the 13 colonies that eventually became the United States.

English Civil War

For much of the 17th century, the United Kingdom experienced a great deal of change and political turmoil. Arguably, the one constant was Parliament.

From 1603 to 1660, the country was mired in a drawn-out civil war and, for a time, military leader Oliver Cromwell assumed power under the title Lord Protector. The ruling monarch at the time, Charles I, was executed in 1649.

Cromwell is best known for conquering Scotland (1649) and Ireland (1651) and bringing them, unwillingly, under the dominion of the United Kingdom. Still, those two nations had their own Parliaments, made up of Cromwell supporters.

Parliament continued to retain some power during this period of change. However, M.P.s who were thought to be loyal to Charles I were excluded from the legislature in 1648, creating the so-called “Rump Parliament.”

The Monarchy Abolished

In 1649, the House of Commons took the unprecedented step of abolishing the monarchy and declaring England a commonwealth.

Four years later, though, Cromwell disbanded the Rump Parliament and created the Nominated Assembly, a de facto legislature. Cromwell died in 1658 and was replaced by his son Richard. The son was deposed a year later, and Britain's government effectively collapsed.

Charles I's son, Charles II, was restored to the throne in 1660, reaffirming the monarchy's place in British history.

New Parliamentary elections were held. And the M.P.s elected effectively held their seats for the next 18 years, during which no general election was called.

The Stuart Kings

The so-called "Stuart Kings"—Charles II and his brother James II, who succeeded him in 1685—maintained a similar relationship with the legislature as their father had in the 1640s. However, religion was a major issue dividing English government and society.

When Parliament passed the "Test Act," which prevented Catholics from holding elected office, the legislature was at odds with King James II, himself a Catholic.

After years of political in-fighting during the Glorious Revolution, Parliament deposed James II in 1689 and his eldest daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange ascended to the throne.

During their brief rule, Parliament was once again elevated to having law-making powers. In fact, when Mary and William died (in 1694 and in 1702, respectively), the legislature established new protocols for succession, and named George of Hanover king.

Parliament in Recent History

Over course of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, Parliament and its powers evolved—just as the United Kingdom itself did.

Scotland formally became a part of the United Kingdom in 1707, and thus sent representatives to the Parliament at Westminster. By the late 1700s, Ireland was also part of the United Kingdom (the six counties in the north of the island—known collectively as Ulster—remain part of the U.K. today), and land-owners there elected their own representatives to both houses of Parliament.

Through a series of legislative acts, known as the “Reform Acts,” a number of changes were made to the composition and legislative process in Parliament. The Reform Act of 1918 gave women the right to vote, and the first woman was elected to the body that same year.

However, Countess Constance Markievicz of Ireland was a member of Sinn Fein, the political party seeking independence for the island nation, and thus refused to serve.

Meanwhile, the Parliament Acts of 1911 and 1949 established greater powers for the House of Commons, which has 650 elected members, compared to the House of

Lords, which has 90 members appointed via peerage (a system of titles for noblemen).

House of Lords

Today, the two houses of Parliament—the House of Lords and the House of Commons—meet in the Palace of Westminster in London, and are the only body in the United Kingdom’s constitutional monarchy government with the authority to create legislation and make laws.

The current monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, still serves a ceremonial role as head of state, and the country’s executive branch is headed by the Prime Minister.

While the House of Lords can debate all bills that don’t deal directly with financial matters for the country, it is the House of Commons that holds the ultimate sway when it comes to whether legislation ultimately becomes law.

However, the House of Lords does play a role in government accountability, through its questioning of cabinet ministers and the formation of special committees to address important matters of state. Its members are now mostly appointees, not peers who inherit their seats in the House of Lords.

House of Commons

Today, all legislation must be approved by the House of Commons in order for it to become law. The House of Commons also controls taxation and the government’s purse strings.

The public in the United Kingdom elects each of the 650 members of the House of Commons. And in a system somewhat different from that of the United States, government ministers (including the Prime Minister) must regularly answer questions in the House of Commons.