



- The word 'parliament' comes from the French word parler, which means 'to talk'.
- A parliament is a group of elected representatives with the power to make laws.
- The fundamental concepts of meeting, representation and legislation - law-making - go back thousands of years.
- These can be seen in Parliaments across the world as well as in other systems of governance such as traditional Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander societies.

#### ORIGIN

- There is evidence citizens' assemblies were held in ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Syria & Iraq) as far back as 2500 BCE.
- Some of the first assemblies which had elements similar to those of modern parliaments were held in ancient Greece & Rome.
- Around 500 BCE the ancient Greeks established an Ecclesia - Assembly - which met on the Pnyx, a hill in central Athens, Greece.
- The Ecclesia met 40 times a year & was attended by male citizens who had completed their military training.
- Decisions were made by a show of hands, or voting with stones or pieces of pottery.
- The Roman Republic, which was founded around 509 BCE, was ruled by 2 elected Consuls, who acted on the advice of the Senate—the council of elders.
- The Senate comprised 300 members from wealthy & noble families.
- Laws were approved by various assemblies, who represented the nobles and common people.
- These assemblies did not write new laws but met to vote on laws & elect officials.

#### EARLY ASSEMBLIES IN ENGLAND

- The British Parliament has its origins in 2 early Anglo-Saxon assemblies—the Witan & the moots.
- The Witenagemot - Witan - dates back to the eighth century & advised the monarch on matters such as royal grants of land, taxation, defence & foreign policy.
- Witan comes from the Anglo-Saxon phrase Witana Gemot, which means 'meeting of the wise men'.
- The Witan did not have a permanent membership but was made up of advisors & nobles
- Although the Witan had no power to make laws, the monarch was careful to consult the assembly because they relied on the support of the nobles to rule.
- In 1066 William the Conqueror invaded Britain. William ruled with the help of a much smaller but

## CLASS NOTES EVOLUTION OF WESTMINSTER PARLIAMENT

permanent group of advisers known as the Curia Regis - King's Council.

- It consisted of noblemen & church leaders appointed by the King. They were not elected & so did not formally represent anyone.
- Curia Regis only offered advice at the King's request & he did not have to act on this advice.
- The King sometimes consulted a larger group of nobles & churchmen known as the Magnum Concilium - Great Council. Over time, the Great Council evolved into the House of Lords.
- The moots were local assemblies held in each county & shire to discuss local issues and hear legal cases.
- They were made up of local lords, bishops, the sheriff & 4 representatives from each village.
- The practice of local representatives making decisions for their community eventually led to the creation of the House of Commons.

#### MAGNA CARTA

- In the early 13th century King John of England waged a long & drawn-out war with France, which was largely funded by taxing the feudal barons.
- Under feudal law, the King granted the barons land—fiefdoms. In exchange he demanded money & troops.
- This meant the barons had to impose taxes on the people in their fiefdoms. The King's use of the justice system to suppress his opponents had also caused widespread discontent.
- In 1215 the barons rebelled, fed up with King John's demands and his failure to consult them.
- In June 1215, one month after the rebellion started, King John was forced to agree to the Magna Carta - the 'Great Charter'.
- It limited the King's power by making him subject to the law, not above it.
- It also confirmed feudal customs & the operation of the justice system, & recognised that the barons had a right to be consulted & to advise the King in the Great Council.
- While most of the Magna Carta described the division of power between the King & the barons, it also made reference to the rights of individuals.
- One of the most celebrated sections is credited with establishing the principle of a right to a fair trial.
- It states: No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land.

## REBELLION TO REPRESENTATION

- This declaration of individual rights has been seen as an important step towards the development of democracy.
- In 1236 an assembly between the English monarch & his advisors was described as a parliament for the first time.
- Despite the reforms of the Magna Carta, King John's successor, King Henry III, continued to clash with the barons.
- Many of the barons were unhappy with Henry's rule, including his failed military campaigns in France & his choice of advisers & allies.
- Townspeople resented the King's tax demands & interference in their affairs.
- In 1258 the barons forced the King to agree to rule with the advice of a 15-member council of barons & to consult with parliament more regularly.
- They wanted parliament to meet 3 times a year and to include 12 non-noble representatives chosen from the counties.
- However, King Henry did not honour the agreement and the opposing barons, led by Simon de Montfort, went to war against him.
- De Montfort was a baron who believed the King's power should be limited, with more influence given to county knights & burgesses—representatives from the cities and towns.
- In 1264 he defeated the King and became, in practice, Britain's ruler.
- The following year, de Montfort attempted to boost the support of the barons by calling knights from the countryside & burgesses from cities & towns to attend his own parliament.
- This was the first time commoners had been represented at such a meeting, although their attendance would not become permanent for another 63 years.
- The inclusion of commoners in de Montfort's parliament has meant it is seen as the forerunner of modern parliaments.
- Soon after this parliament met, de Montfort was killed in battle by Henry III's son, Edward.
- Unlike his father, King Edward I met with parliament more regularly.
- Edward's parliament included 2 elected representatives from each county, city and town, making it more representative of the people.
- This provided a model for the future House of Commons.

## EMERGENCE OF PARLIAMENTARY MODEL

- From 1327 the people's representatives sat in Parliament permanently & by 1332 were referred to as the House of Commons.
- The British Parliament now comprised 3 familiar elements: the monarch, the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

- However, it had no formal meeting schedule & continued to meet at the request of the monarch.
- At this time, the House of Lords had far more influence on the monarch than the House of Commons
- However, in 1341 the House of Commons began meeting independently of the House of Lords & its power started to increase.
- One of the main functions of the Commons was to petition the monarch & the House of Lords to resolve local & national issues by making new laws.
- These petitions often formed the basis of bills - proposed laws. It also became practice for the monarch to seek the approval of the Commons for new taxes
- King Edward III's ongoing wars with France in the fourteenth century required him to call Parliament more frequently to raise money.
- The King's need for money gave the Commons leverage - bargaining power - to request concessions in return.
- By the mid-fifteenth century, the House of Lords, the Commons had gained equal law-making powers.
- The Commons was also responsible for granting the monarch access to money raised by taxes. Today, its law-making powers are greater than those of the House of Lords.

## ACHIEVEMENTS OF HOUSE OF COMMONS

- 1362 : – Parliament must approve all taxes.
- 1376 : – Sir Peter de la Mare, a member of the House of Commons, is chosen by the Commons to act as its spokesperson before the King, making him the first unofficial Speaker.
- 1377 : – Thomas Hungerford becomes the first official Speaker of the House of Commons, responsible for running its meetings & representing its views.
- 1407 : – Proposals for taxes must come from the Commons, removing this power from the King.
- 1414 : – Parliament agrees that no bill can become law without the agreement of the House of Commons, nor can the King or the House of Lords change the wording of any bills submitted by the Commons without its approval.

## PARLIAMENTARY INDEPENDENCE

- The independence of the House of Commons from the monarch was further strengthened in January 1642 after King Charles I tried to arrest 5 members of parliament.
- The relationship between King Charles I & Parliament had been steadily deteriorating due the criticism of Parliament of the King's rule, including his taxes, the wars he fought & his refusal to call Parliament to meet.
- Some also feared Charles wanted to destroy the Protestant religion in England.

- John Pym & 4 other members of the Commons drafted the Grand Remonstrance, a list of Parliament's complaints.
- The Remonstrance was agreed to by the Commons in November 1641. It was the first time the Parliament had so openly challenged a monarch.
- Charles considered this to be treasonous. Accompanied by soldiers, the King entered the Commons chamber to arrest Pym and his 4 supporters but they had gone into hiding
- The Speaker of the House, William Lenthall, refused to reveal where the 5 members were, claiming 'I have neither eyes to see nor tongue to speak in this place but as the House is pleased to direct me, whose servant I am here'.
- The autonomy of the House of Commons from the monarch had been demonstrated. This incident started a tradition that the monarch never enters the lower house of Parliament.
- The conflict between the Commons & the King resulted in a civil war, the execution of Charles I in 1649 and Britain being declared a republic.
- The monarchy was restored in 1660 but the monarch and Parliament continued to clash.
- In 1689 King William and Queen Mary took the throne and agreed to the Declaration of Rights, which acknowledged Parliament's independence, including its right to free speech & to meet frequently.

#### TOWARDS THE MODERN PARLIAMENT

- The late-seventeenth century in Britain saw the rise of 2 political parties—the Whigs & the Tories. These first political parties were not as formal and organised as modern political parties.
- The Whigs believed the British Parliament should have more power than the monarch.
- During the 19th century, Whigs were in favour of change and reform, and became the Liberal Party. Today, they have evolved into the Liberal Democrats.
- The Tories were more conservative. They supported the power of the monarch & the Church of England, & were unwilling to give the British Parliament more power. Today, they have evolved into the Conservative Party.

#### PARLIAMENTS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

- Many countries around the world were influenced by the British Westminster system of parliament.
- Some were originally British colonies that directly copied the Westminster system for their own parliaments; others have adapted the model for their own country.
- Canada : – It gained independence in 1867, after a history of both French & British colonisation. The British monarch is still the Canadian head of state & is represented by a Governor-General. Canada has a bicameral parliament made up of a House of Commons to which members are elected & a

Senate to which members are appointed by the Prime Minister.

- France : – In 1789 a National Assembly made up of members representing the French people was formed. In 1791 it was joined by a second chamber of assembly. The current French Parliament consists of the National Assembly & Senate.
- New Zealand : – From 1854 until 1951 the New Zealand Parliament consisted of a Governor (or Governor-General), an elected House of Representatives & a Legislative Council appointed by the government. In 1951 the Legislative Council was abolished.
- United States of America : – Since 1789 the United States (US) has been governed by a President and Congress. In the US, the people vote for the members of Congress—the House of Representatives and the Senate—and elect a President through an indirect voting system.
- India : – Since 1952 India has had a President & a parliament with 2 chambers. India's houses of parliament are the Lok Sabha, to which members are directly elected, and the Rajya Sabha to which members are elected by the legislative assemblies of India's states and territories.

#### POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN BRITAIN

- Between 1780 and 1850, Great Britain—comprised of England, Wales and Scotland
- A sweeping transformation brought about by the Industrial Revolution.
- Britain emerged as the greatest imperial power as it exploited its captive markets and resources to stay ahead in the race for industrialisation.
- Crystallisation of a 'liberal polity' in Britain which has served as a model for a number of capitalist states
- Liberal polity guarantees to its citizens rights to free speech, assembly, religious belief, the right to dissent & to equal treatment before the law
- But it also protects the inequalities based on property & the wastefulness of the 'free' market associated with artificial demands generated by profit maximising entrepreneurs.
- British history is also memorable for the growth of a new kind of politics centred on parliamentary elections & electoral competition between organised parties as well as struggles for a democratic order granting equal say to all in governance.
- While the rising middle classes & especially industrial middle classes played an important role in the development of the electoral democracy
- Politics refers to the struggle for power. Those who have power try to maintain it while those who are out of power may resist or try to capture it
- This tussle pervades all forms of social relations & institutions.

- In modern times, ideologies played very important roles –
- The notion of the 'left' has been associated more with egalitarian movements of the working classes.
- Centrist politics has been mostly ascribed to the bourgeoisie which champions individual rights but not social equality.
- Rightist' politics in recent times assumed ranging from different types of revivalist movements to secular dictatorships & fascist states.
- Modern times witnessed significant transformations in the methods by which power has been sought & resisted by factions & classes.
- The rising middle class has thus favoured the maintenance of 'law & order' through a representative state — facilitating maximum productivity & mobilisation of resources without giving up the basic inequality.
- The leftist movement, has questioned the validity of parliamentary politics within a highly unequal social order & not shied away from a violent assertion of proletarian rebellions against oppressive states which protect class divisions.
- The history of modern Britain offers an outstanding case of a stable polity which underwent liberal democratic transformation without a violent overthrow of its ruling class.
- This was in marked contrast to most countries on the European continent which saw frequent outbreaks against feudal regimes & their successor bourgeois states
- British isles (apart from Ireland) were transformed in this 'Age of Revolution' more by industrialisation than by violent political upheavals
- Radical alternatives to parliamentary politics, like socialism or communism could not gather massive support in Britain.
- As a result, by the middle of the nineteenth century, Britain's rising middle class & ruling aristocracy managed to compromise and also to contain the growing working class movements within the confines of parliamentary politics committed to the protection of private property



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