

TOPIC 2: – THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARLIAMENTS

Part 1: From consultation and advisory assemblies to decision-making ones

Most countries around the world have now developed parliaments. Some have developed parliaments earlier and furtherer than others. At least in terms of wider citizen representation and effective law-making. Others have simply developed differently in response to different needs.

Development of parliaments has generally taken the form of greater inclusion. Over centuries, a greater cross-section of groups in society was gradually included in either the consultation or decision-making process. A modern parliament has three functions:

- making laws
- representing the electorate
- overseeing the government (using hearings and inquiries)

Three kinds of assemblies

Historically, these three functions in parliament have been done in three kinds of assemblies or meetings called:

- consultative
- deliberative
- judicial

Modern parliaments often have a number of these different assemblies or councils running at the same time but the main one is the national debating and law-making chamber variously called the 'House of representatives,' the House of Commons, or the People's Assembly.

Early developments in the history of parliament were shifts from consultative assemblies to ones with power to make decisions. Parliaments began as councils who would give advice to kings or rulers. Therefore, they usually included people of wisdom and experience. Early councils gave advice, often about how much tax could be levied, but had no real power. Others had power but were largely ignored.

Mother of all parliaments

Most parliaments worldwide are based on the one developed in the United Kingdom of Britain (UK). Called after the area of London where the main law-making assembly has been housed since 1259, the 'Westminster system' experienced more developments than anywhere else. And in a shorter time period. That is why it is called 'the mother of all parliaments.'

The usual way of tracing the development of parliamentary democracy is to divide it into time periods [see page. 20] with their breakthroughs in consultation and power-sharing:

- Early development
- representative parliaments
- modern parliaments

TOPIC 2: – THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARLIAMENTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Part 2: Today, parliaments can consult others worldwide

Learning from others

Parliament is the heart of a well-functioning democracy. Good rulers have always relied on advice from trusted experts and elders of their communities. Well run democracies, therefore, rely on advisory councils or *shura* that can give accurate information about the people's concerns and needs. They also have the power to pass laws for the good of all.

To discuss national or regional issues and pass laws to deal with them, democracies use a special assembly room or national debating chamber. For this system to work properly parliaments decide on rules, formalities and procedures that allow it to examine laws carefully and pass them by majority.

A contributor to parliamentary good practice since 1889, the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) says truly democratic parliaments are ones which are:

- representative
- transparent
- accessible
- accountable
- effective

No single model of democracy

The IPU quotes from a qualification made by the 2005 UN World summit that 'there is no single model of democracy.' But the IPU's mission is to offer a set of criteria which will enable all interested 'to recognise what a democratic parliament might look like.' There is value, IPU says, in giving a framework for and outlining a 'clear sense of direction.'

Ideally all parliamentary institutions should be expressed in language understandable by all citizens.

Good parliaments are not just democratic

Good parliaments generally include:

- a guaranteed framework of rights for all citizens
- ways to represent large numbers of citizens
- [ways to make those in power accountable](#)
- ways to inform and include citizens especially via news media and by the formation of political parties

Dimensions of democracy

The IPU also outlines what it means by 'dimensions of democracy'. They are:

- citizen rights
- institutions of representative and accountable government
- an active **civil society**
- political parties
- the communicating media.

The Union reminds countries interested in **best practice** – what they more accurately call ‘**good practice**,’ emphasising there is no single model of an effective democracy – that these roles or dimensions are what makes parliaments the central institution of democracy. The institutions set up to carry out this important role can be physical places or organised ways of doing things. In democracies both kinds of institution are required to inform citizens about their ways of operating.

Openness encourages trust

The actual practices of this decision-making body, and the way the debating chamber is organised, have been adapted over hundreds of years to meet the needs of changing societies. As physical places, parliaments are expected to be open for the public to see and listen. This encourages openness or transparency, one of the key qualities of democracy.

The 125-year old IPU, based in Geneva, has a wealth of comparisons to make from parliaments worldwide. From this experience they declare one of the most important parts of the ‘complex set of institutions and practices’ that make up modern parliament is a **civil society** or an active citizen body.

Wider roles of parliament

And as the Union points out, parliaments have other roles which include:

- promoting civil society
- upholding the rights of a free press
- making themselves accessible and accountable
- protecting the rights of the judges and court system (judiciary) which act as one of the checks on their power.

Traditional ways of acting, deciding and carrying out decisions are often borrowed from older institutions. They are then blended with local practices and traditional forms of expression.

Many global examples of ‘good practice’

In its [annual report](#) the IPU includes the results of a good practice survey sent out each year to parliaments world-wide. The results of this reveal that parliaments need to respond to different circumstances and challenges.

Parliaments, according to the IPU, should not be seen just as buildings or offices where debating important issues happens. The most effective institutions and practices, IPU maintains, will mediate between the will of the people and decisions made for their common good.

Such parliaments will be at the heart of a responsive government, will truly be government ‘by the people, for the people, of the people’.

TOPIC 2: – THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARLIAMENTS

Part 3: Key events in parliament’s development into a decision-making assembly

The following table summarises some of the main events in the development of the ‘mother of all parliaments’ in the United Kingdom of Britain.

Act	Date	Description	Effect
	1066	William of Normandy rules over a feudal system but includes a council of advisers who as yet lack power	Advisers are tenants-in-chief (a person who holds land) and ecclesiastics (religious officials)
	1215	Magna Carta (the Great Charter)	Limits power of kings and gives some rights to men of the nobility, including the right to a fair trial
	1265	Simon de Montfort's Parliament	1st representative parliament of advisors from landowning society
	1295	Edward I's ' Model Parliament ' adopts Montfort's scheme	Also summons knights and burgesses; historically becomes known as the summoning of "the Commons"
	1341	Commons first have a meeting separate from the Kings rooms	First example of bicameral system; the emergence of parliament as an institution
	1430, 1432	Introduction of formal property ownership qualification for voting rights: the forty shilling freeholders franchise	New county franchise sets a uniform threshold for voting rights
	1547	St Stephen's Chapel , in the Palace of Westminster becomes meeting place of the House of Commons of England	

Petition of Right	1628	Asserts certain rights of Parliament & the individual	Taxation requires parliamentary consent; writ of habeas corpus is restated
	1649	Charles I executed	Commonwealth of England
Bill of Rights (England & Wales) Claim of Right (Scotland)	1689	Asserts certain rights of Parliament & the individual	Contributes to parliamentary supremacy over the monarch – therefore a landmark in the development of civil liberties in the United Kingdom
Great Reform Act , Second , and Third Reform Act	1832, 1867, 1884	Wider male franchise & more even representation	See history of elections in the United Kingdom
Ballot Act 1872	1872	Secret ballot	See voting system
Parliament Act of 1911	1911	Payment of Members of Parliament is introduced	With Parliament Act of 1949 , supremacy of the House of Commons ¹
Representation of the People Act 1918	1918	Universal male franchise and franchise is expanded to include some women (above age 30 and meeting certain conditions)	All male adults and about 40 percent of adult women gain suffrage (dependant on marital status, property ownership)
Equal Franchise Act 1928	1928	Universal male and female suffrage from age 21	Electoral equality between women and men
Representation of the People Act 1969	1969	Voting age is lowered to 18	Franchise is expanded

HISTORY OF PARLIAMENTS ANIMATIONS

- 60 SEC ANIMATION
 - <http://www.parliament.uk/education/about-your-parliament/history-of-parliament/>
- 8.23 SEC ANIMATION ON UK PARLIAMENT HISTORY AND WORKINGS
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAMblz3Y2JA>
- 60 SEC HOW PARLIAMENT WORKS
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbLTwQwXqWc>
- 6.47 SEC PARLIAMENTARY VS PRESIDENTIAL DEMOCRACY EXPLAINED
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4quK60FUvkY>

¹ In the UK, the monarch still has the right to 'warn, encourage and be consulted.'

RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT' AS PART OF ACCOUNTABILITY

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Responsible government is the term given to a form of accountability in the [Westminster system](#) of [parliamentary democracy](#).

In Westminster democracies governments (or at least [executive branch](#)) are responsible to parliament rather than to the monarch. In [bicameral](#) parliaments the government is responsible first to the parliament's [lower house](#).

The lower house is always more numerous and because it is [directly elected](#) it is more representative of the people than the [upper house](#).

This form of accountability shows itself in several ways. [Ministers](#) account to Parliament for their decisions and for the performance of their departments. For example, Ministers of police and security, of health and welfare, of education.

This requirement to answer questions in Parliament about the running of such departments, and to make announcements, means that ministers have to have the privileges of the 'floor'. These are only granted to those who are members of either house of Parliament.

Secondly, although ministers are officially appointed by the [head of state](#) (president/king) and can theoretically be dismissed by that sovereign authority, they concurrently retain their office subject to their holding the confidence of the lower house of Parliament.

When the lower house has passed a [motion of no confidence](#) in the government, the government must immediately resign or submit itself to the will of the electorate in a new general election to be held as soon as practicable.

Lastly, the sovereign is in turn required to effect their sovereignty only through these responsible ministers. He or she must never attempt to set up a "shadow" government of executives or advisors and attempt to use them as instruments of government, or to rely upon their "unofficial" advice.

In effect the sovereign is an impasse breaker, putting decisions back to the people.' His/her ministers are required to counsel him/her (i.e., explain to him/her and be sure s/he understands any issue that s/he will be called upon to decide for the good of the entire nation, but generally these are issues which affect the whole nation and usually in times of emergency.

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Inter-Parliamentary Union
For democracy. For everyone.

'Parliament is the heart of a well-functioning democracy.' - IPU

Parliament: no single model is best but good practice can be shared

Parliament in a democracy is the name given to the place where a nation debates and decides how best to run itself, rule itself and use its resources. But as the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU), a facilitator of parliamentary good practice since 1889, reminds its readers 'there is no single model of democracy.' However, according to IPU, there is value in providing a framework outlining a clear sense of direction and a set of criteria. Its website includes results of a good-practice survey sent out each year to parliaments worldwide to show not only that parliaments are diverse and constantly evolving but also that they need to respond to different circumstances and challenges. That is, if parliaments are to be at the heart of a responsive government.

Parliaments have developed to meet changing needs

The way the debating chamber is organised and the actual practices of Parliaments, have been adapted over many hundreds of years to meet the needs of various and changing societies.

Although parliaments are at the heart of democracy, IPU points out that whenever members of any group decide what sort of policies and rules will govern them – and insist on being treated as equals in doing so – they are practising democracy. (*Demos* means 'people' in Greek, and *kratein* means 'rule').

Parliament's workings should be open, trustworthy and understandable to all

To ensure good decision-making parliaments decide on formalities and procedures to help them run smoothly. The IPU emphasises the physical places used by Parliaments should be accessible for public scrutiny – and that their workings should be open to all. This inspires trust and recognises the importance of honesty.

And the traditional ways of acting, deciding and carrying out decisions – which are part of the procedures or 'institutions' of Parliament – should be expressed in language understandable by all citizens.

Good parliaments institute inclusive practices – and guarantee rights

Good institutions or ways of organising government include:

- a guaranteed framework of rights for all citizens (most often in a constitution)
- ways to represent large numbers of citizens
- ways to make those in power accountable;
- ways to inform and include citizens, especially by the use of the news media and through the formation of political parties.

The 120-year old Inter-Parliamentary Union says **civil society** or an active citizen body is one of most important parts of parliaments' complex set of institutions and practices. These have evolved over time and will continue to do so.

Parliaments are more than buildings – and have many roles

Parliaments, then, are not just the buildings or offices where the debating and deciding of important issues takes place. Parliaments are also a set of practices and institutions that mediate between the will of the people and decisions made for their common good.

And as the IPU points out, Parliaments have other roles or dimensions which include:

- promoting civil society
- upholding the rights of a free press
- making themselves accessible and accountable
- protecting the rights of the judges and court system (the judiciary) which acts as one of the checks on their own power.

The IPU reminds us these roles or dimensions are what makes parliament the central institution of democracy. They offer examples of good practice submitted regularly to it from parliaments worldwide.

Good parliaments can be judged by these features – and activities

The IPU sums up the characteristics of truly democratic parliaments in five words. Such parliaments will be:

- representative
- transparent
- accessible
- accountable
- effective

And to be effective, the IPU says, good democracies should include:

- citizen rights
- institutions of representative government
- institutions of accountable government
- an active civil society
- active political parties
- active communicating media.

<http://www.ipu.org/dem-e/guide.htm>

- [Setting standards and guidelines](#)
- [Strengthening representative institutions](#)
- [Promoting inclusive parliaments](#)
- [Promoting and defending human rights](#)
- [Partnership between men and women](#)
- [Promoting knowledge of parliaments](#)
- [International Day of Democracy](#)
- [Global Parliamentary Report Guide on parliament and democracy](#)
- [Key documents](#)
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