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Topic: - Composition and Powers of the British Parliament

Introduction

Nicknamed the "*Mother of Parliaments*", the British parliament is respected as the most ancient parliament in today's world. Apart from a few brief interruptions, it has carried out its business on the same spot, called the Palace of Westminster, since the year 1265. Though it has non-elected upper house named House of lords, in 1911, the Parliament formally confirmed the supremacy of the House of Commons; from then on, the Lords could not block bills made by the Government in the House of Commons, and could not even delay budget and tax measures.

Origin and Growth of Parliament

The word 'parliament' has been derived from the Latin word *parle*, which means consultation. In the beginning, the British monarch, who was the embodiment of the legislative, executive and judicial

powers, found it convenient to consult with the Lords, Barons and the Commons for raising money. Bicameralism is an accident in British constitutional history, for in the 'Model Parliament' of 1295, the Barons and clergy refused to sit with the common people. Hence, two houses were created: the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Initially, the House of Lords was more powerful, but with the extension of franchise which started with the passage of the first Reform Act of 1832, the House of Commons became a popular and powerful chamber. During the period of 1832–1971, there were several Reform Acts which gradually granted every person of eighteen years in age the right to vote, thus completing the process of democratization of Parliament

Composition of the Parliament

The Parliament of Great Britain is bicameral in structure. It consists of the following two houses:

- House of Commons
- House of Lords

House of Commons

The House of Commons is the popular chamber whose members are elected directly by the people. It has been aptly described as the 'most characteristic institution of British democracy'. It consists of elected representatives of the people who represent the nation as a whole. The House of Commons is now purely an elective body, and it has attained its present status through a long process of democratization. Free election is now an essential basis of the British democracy. The House of Commons at present consists of 650 members. These members are elected for a period of five years from single member constituencies, arranged on a geographical basis. If the House is dissolved earlier, there may be fresh election before the completion of the terms. The tenure of the House normally does not extend beyond five years, but it can be extended in great national crisis such as wars and emergencies.

House of Lords

The House of Lords is the oldest upper House in the world. As a second chamber, it has been in continuous existence for more than one thousand years. This House consists of more than one thousand Peers of Lords. The term 'peer' means an equal, and originally, it referred to the feudal tenants-in-chief of the monarch. These tenants in chief more or less enjoyed equal privileges, and they were summoned by the King to be present when a new Parliament met. It became customary that when a new Parliament met, the King used to summon the same old peers who sat in an earlier one, or if in the meantime, they had died, for their eldest sons. Thus, peer-ship became hereditary, where the eldest son has the right to inherit the father's legacy, and become a member of the House of Lords.

At present, the House of Lords consists of the following categories of peers:

- i Princes of the Royal Blood
- ii Hereditary Peers
- iii Representative Peer of Scotland
- iv Representative Peers of Ireland

- v Lords of Appeal
- vi Lords of Spiritual
- vii Life Peers

The members of the House of Lords have certain privileges and disabilities. They enjoy freedom of speech and individually meet the monarch to discuss public affairs. They are exempted from arrest when the House of Lords is in session. Eminent persons are conferred on peerage so that the country gets the chance of getting their services.

Powers and Functions of Parliament

The Parliament is a sovereign body. It has the right to make or unmake any law, and the judiciary has no right to override or set aside its act. The Parliament in general enjoys the following powers:

1. Law-making powers

The Great Britain has a unitary form of government, and hence, both Houses of Parliament have the power to make law for the whole country. It is the principal function of the Parliament. Further, in the legislative sphere, the House of Commons has more powers than the House of Lords.

2. Financial Powers

The parliament is the guardian of national finance. It may be pointed out here that it was largely on the question of money that the battle was fought between the King and Parliament. Finally, it was settled that Parliament has the supreme authority in the financial field. Here, the House of Commons is more powerful, and as per the provision of the Parliament Act 1911, the House of Lords can delay money bills for a maximum period of one month. Money bills can be first introduced only in the House of Commons.

3. Control over the executive

The responsibility of the executive to the legislature is the very basis of the parliamentary form of government. The cabinet in England is responsible to the Parliament. Here again, it is the House of Commons, and not the House of Lords that exercises effective control. The House of Commons may remove a cabinet out of power by a vote of no confidence. It may reject a bill or a budget proposal of the cabinet. Its members have a right to ask questions to the ministers. They can move the vote of no confidence or vote of censure against the government.

4. Ventilation of grievances

The Parliament is a forum for deliberation on questions of public importance and the ventilation of public grievances. It is the mirror of the nation. Whatever happens in the various parts of the country can be discussed in it.

5. Educative functions

Besides the function of exercising control over the executive, the Parliament also performs educative functions. Its debates provide valuable political education to the people and create a process of awareness among them. Newspapers, radio and televisions give maximum publicity to its debates. It helps to educate and formulate public opinion in the Great Britain. It provides an opportunity to the opposition to criticize the government.

6. Miscellaneous functions

The Parliament protects the rights and privileges of its members. It provides a training ground for the future parliamentary leaders and ministers.

Conclusion

The British Parliament is the oldest legislative institution in the world. It is one of the best representative assemblies of the world. It still upholds the theory of the supremacy of ballot. Incidentally, the parliamentary form of government of England is the oldest in the world. Many countries in today's world takes inspiration from British parliamentary system and constitutes their legislative apparatus in similar manner.

