

OTHER NATIONS

Advice and Dissent

"Parliament in the United Kingdom: Balancing Effectiveness and Consent?" by Philip Norton, in *West European Politics* (July 1990), 11 Gainsborough Rd., London E11 1RS.

After seven centuries, the British Parliament is experiencing, in typically subdued British fashion, a revolution in its ways. Over the last 20 years, says Norton, a political scientist at the University of Hull, Parliament has become more aggressive and influential. For better or for worse, it has come in some ways to resemble the U.S. Congress.

Britain's political tradition favors a strong executive, and for much of its history Parliament was a reactive body, waiting for the prime minister to submit legislation. The outcome of parliamentary votes, Norton writes, was usually predictable: Members of Parliament (MPs) rarely broke party ranks. In 1965 political scientist Samuel Beer told his peers that "party cohesion" was so consistently close to 100 percent that there was no longer any point in measuring it.

But in 1970 the House of Commons witnessed a sudden upsurge in cross-party voting among MPs, largely in reaction to the failed economic policies of Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath. Six times between 1970 and 1974 Conservative dissenters voted down Heath's proposals. In the five years that followed, the number grew to more than 100 under the Labour governments of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan. A similar upheaval has taken place in the House of Lords. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher suffered 120 defeats in the Upper House.

This new parliamentary independence has prompted other changes that have enhanced the power of individual MPs. In 1979 Parliament created a series of standing oversight committees to advise on legislation and keep an eye on the executive. Three thousand witnesses have been called to testify before them. Constituents (about a million of whom tune in to Parliamentary proceedings on television each

week) are now more likely to identify with their MP as an individual and not merely as an arm of the party, and have begun to demand more of their representatives.

Parliament as a whole may have lost the trust of the people, like the U.S. Congress, but polls show that most British citizens believe that contacting their MP is the single most effective political action they can take to redress their grievances. To handle the flood of constituent mail and phone calls, in 1986 members' secretarial and research allowances were raised by 50 percent. And, individual MPs have begun to court voters vigorously. Professional lobbyists, who previously trolled only in ministerial offices, can now be found roaming Westminster's halls in force.

Norton argues that the recent changes aren't "procedural pettifogging." Parliament, he says, is grooming itself for a leading spot in the new integrated Europe. British parliamentarians know that if they do not assert themselves, their counterparts in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, will be glad to do so.



Hardly the genteel proceedings many Americans imagine, parliamentary debates are often interrupted by raucous confrontations between rival members, as in this 1830 print.