

The Westminster System: Reason Over Appeals to Tradition

The Westminster System of parliamentary democracy was established on the basis of reason and not traditional authority, e.g. after years of civil war (1642-51) in England the middle and upper classes forced the Crown to submit to the authority of a written constitution called the *Bill of Rights* (1688). When England became a constitutional monarchy they effectively ended the problems associated with either a king or queen changing their mind or a law at a whim. With the *Bill of Rights* in place, the Crown now had to govern with the consent of the governed. Kings could no longer arbitrarily decide to raise taxes or go to war or change laws they didn't like. The introduction of constitutional law to England introduced an era of unparalleled stability which continues to this very day. Prior to the *Bill of Rights* authority was established on an appeal to either tradition, e.g. family dynasties, etc. and an appeal to God's will, e.g. Divine Right of Kings. The problem with kings or queens is some of them aren't particularly bright or suited to rule. With the establishment of the Westminster system those that would rule were made accountable to the law. No one was above the law any longer. Not even the king.

As early as the 17th Century, democratic ideas like equality and liberty had grown in popularity and acceptance among the peoples of the Old and New Worlds. The Age of Reason (also called the Enlightenment) placed into doubt the wisdom of blindly accepting the authority of the Church or the Crown. The Enlightenment created a fertile environment for philosophers and politicians to dissent and criticize traditional authority. And with every passing year in France of the 18th century, it became harder and harder for a tiny aristocracy to justify its lavish lifestyle while tens of millions of farmers, laborers, artisans and merchants, etc. all tried to eke out an existence. Across the Channel in England (1685), King James II attempted to make himself something of an absolute monarch. He believed in and appealed to others to believe in the "Doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings." According to this superstition, God had made James II king; therefore, if the people wanted to obey God then they would have to obey James. The middle and upper classes of England were not convinced (and disliked the trend of absolute monarchs appearing on the Continent). During the Glorious Revolution (1688), the English people rose up and overthrew James II. James' successor was his nephew William of Orange (later known as William III).

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King William III accepted the Westminster System of parliamentary democracy when he acknowledged the supremacy of the English Constitution (*Bill of Rights* (1689)). Instead of an absolute monarchy, England had developed the world's first constitutional monarchy. Responsible government had arrived as the king could no longer suspend laws, levy taxes, make royal appointments, or maintain a standing army during peacetime *without* Parliament's permission. According to the Westminster System, Parliament was divided into an upper house representing the aristocracy (House of Lords) and a lower house representing the merchant class and basically everybody else (House of Commons). The wisdom behind the division was obvious: each house would represent the interests of their particular class and new laws (taxes) would have to be approved by both houses. This meant that in theory no one segment in society would have more power than another. For a new law to be passed it had to be demonstrated that it was reasonable and fair. Gone were the days when the king made up the rules as he went along. Arrived now were the days of responsible government whereby the king and Parliament could be held accountable for their actions or inaction.

Canadians living in British North America rightly believed England's political institutions to be some of the most "enlightened" on Earth; however, the colonies of British North America had the misfortune of inheriting not the Westminster but colonial system of government with the passage of the *Constitution Act* (1791). The *Constitution Act* actually increased rather than decreased the power and privilege of the aristocratic and business elite in the colonies. The power of the colonial government was so complete that the governor of Lower Canada could be said to possess more power than even the English king in Westminster. The fundamental reason responsible government was not established in Canada was to prevent another American-style revolution. Westminster reasoned that America had rebelled because it had been given too much freedom; therefore, the logical response (to the English at least) was a reduction of freedoms, a turning back of the clock so to speak to less "progressive" times.

Absolute power was therefore given to the aristocracy of Upper, e.g. Family Compact, etc. and Lower Canada, e.g. Chateau Clique. The reason the British chose to side with the aristocracy was because they were predictable: they could always be counted on to pursue their own self-interest at the expense of the masses. To the British Government they were "our kind of guys" (so to speak). The masses, unlike the aristocracy, were supposedly incapable of being reasoned with. They had to be controlled. The great mass of people, to quote the statesmen and founding father of the American Revolution Alexander Hamilton, were a "great beast needing to be tamed." Members of the upper classes argued

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the poor simply didn't know what was good for them. Whenever any segment of a society possesses privileges not enjoyed by all a condition of class struggle exists. And Canadians no less than the English (1688), Americans (1776) or French (1789) before them desired freedom in the 1830s. Politicians like Papineau, Mackenzie and Howe, though differing in their means, all wanted the same thing: they wanted the citizens of British North America to enjoy the self-same democratic rights enjoyed by the people of England itself.

In every society (regardless of the century), there is an ongoing struggle between two classes of people: there are those that "have," e.g. aristocrats, priests, wealthy businessmen, etc. and those that "have not," e.g. serfs, slaves, plebeians, and industrial workers. The 19th century political philosopher and economist Karl Marx called this condition a *class struggle*. To him class struggle was a permanent state of affairs; it could only be destroyed if you destroyed class itself. Farther still, Marx argued that it was natural for the upper class to try to maintain its privileges. If you were rich, wouldn't you seek to maintain your standard of living? And it was just as understandable for the lower classes to want to improve their situation. If you were poor, wouldn't you want a share in the wealth made possible by your hard work? Marx argued that the workers and laborers would one day rise up, cast off their chains, and overthrow the ruling class. He further argued that the working class (whom he called the Proletariat) would establish an ideal society where class no longer existed. Marx of course was completely wrong. There were Marxist or communist revolutions in the 19th and 20th centuries; however, a new ruling class always emerged following each revolution that was successful, e.g. Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution (1917).

The colonial system established through the passing of the *Constitution Act* (1791) was by its very nature unfair; that is, it placed all the decision-making power into the hands of the few (oligarchy) while completely ignoring the needs of the many. For example, the common person had the privilege of paying taxes but no say on how those taxes might be spent. In such a situation, it was inevitable that the lower classes would regard change as preferable to the *status-quo*. The rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada (1837-38) were a catalyst for such change. The rebellions woke the British up to the fact that maintaining "peace, order, and good government" in Canada did not depend upon building an alliance with the wealthy elite. Instead, good government depended upon the reverse: establishing relevant democratic political institutions that empowered and everyone—regardless of class—a voice in their own government. The English learned this very same lesson in the 1600s when they removed a

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would-be absolute monarch in James II. For some reason the British lacked the foresight to apply the same wisdom to the American colonies in the 1770s or its Canadian possessions in the 1830s.