England's Parliament

Parliament, as England’s national legislature, has developed over hundreds of years. After the Magna Carta was signed in 1215, the lords of England were called together to approve the actions of the king. This all changed in 1295, when King Edward I needed money to pay for a war. He called together not only the lords, but some leading members of the towns (called burgesses). He justified this action by stating, “what affects all, by all should be approved.” This famous gathering became known as the Model Parliament because it established a standard for later parliaments. The Model Parliament voted on taxes and helped King Edward I make reforms and enact the laws.

By the mid 1300s, the burgesses had gained an official role in the government. They had formed their own house in parliament, called the House of Commons, which was considered the lower house. Nobles and bishops met separately in the upper house, the House of Lords. This new separation of the bodies of parliament was revolutionary for its time and became the standard for future democratic societies.

Over the next few centuries, Parliament’s right to approve expenses gave it strong influence in governing the country. The House of Commons gradually increased their power to be equal with that of the House of Lords. Together, with the monarch, parliament was supposed to advise royal policies, vote on taxes, and pass laws for the general good of society.

The struggle to limit the power of the monarchy continued over the centuries. In the 1600s, monarchs on the European continent were asserting greater authority over the lords and nobles than had ever been done before. These kings claimed not only divine right, but the right to rule with absolute power. They argued that because they were chosen by God to rule; only God could limit their power. The members of the English parliament truly feared a monarch with absolute authority and took great steps to ensure they were still involved with the country’s decision making process.

The last Tudor queen, Elizabeth I, died in 1603, without a child. She was succeeded by a new line of monarchs, the Stuarts, who were distant cousins from Scotland. The Stuarts were strong believers in divine right. King James I became the first Stuart King of England. Because he was from Scotland and knew little of English law, he clashed often with Parliament over the rights of the people and the power that Parliament should be allowed to have over him.

Three issues caused conflict between King James I and Parliament. First, religious reformers known as the Puritans were trying to change the Church of England, or Anglican Church, through legislation. They wanted to simplify, or purify, church doctrines and ceremonies. They felt the Church of England was still too much like the Catholic Church from which it had separated. The Puritans entered an ongoing battle with James I, the head of the Church of England.

Second, James used a very harsh royal court of law to administer justice. He ignored parliamentary courts, which used common law. The people accused James I of taking the law into his own hands and becoming a tyrant.

Third, and most important, was the issue of money. Elizabeth had left James a large debt which needed to be paid off. James I also wanted to wage overseas wars and needed even more money. Parliament declined to grant him any money, and eventually James ignored parliament and began looking of alternate methods to getting the money he wanted. One of James’ methods of making money was the selling imperial titles to commoners. The king believed he was not bound by the decisions of Parliament and viewed them with a great lack of respect.
Name ________________________________________  Period ____

Questions in Complete Sentences:

1. What is the name of the two houses of Parliament and who makes them up.

   ____________________________________  ____________________________________
   Who is in this house?  Who is in this house?

2. Explain the meaning behind “what affects all, by all should be approved.”

3. How come England’s royal family changed from Tudor to Stuart?

4. What is the role of the monarch in England and how is it different than other European nations at the time?

5. Summarize James I’s problems with Parliament. Who do you agree with in these issues?

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