

Reforming the Crown-in-Parliament

By Atle L. Wold

Centre of authority. Constitutional reform was brought firmly and – it would seem – irrevocably onto the political agenda by the New Labour government which took office in 1997, and has been much debated since. Reform of the British political system has, however, also been hotly debated in the past, and demands for changes go further back in time than many realise. The year 1760 came in many ways to form the starting point for political reform movements in Britain, and it did so for a particular reason.



Atle L. Wold is a Senior Lecturer at the Dept of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages, University of Oslo and vice president of British Politics Society, Norway.

The British political system is officially known as “Crown-in-Parliament”, and it can be argued that the fundamental features of this system were established over the course of the first half of the eighteenth century. By the time of George III’s accession to the throne in 1760, the general perception was that Britain enjoyed a “mixed and balanced constitution” unlike that of any other country, and contemporaries referred to this as “King-in-Parliament”. The British constitution was *mixed* because it combined all the three known “simple” forms of government, monarchy, aristocracy and democracy in the shape of the King, the House of Lords and the House of Commons; and it was *balanced* because all three were necessary and indispensable parts of the same sovereign legislature, and held each other in check.

This was vital to avoid the dangers of an arbitrary government, or a breakdown of the social order, it was believed: An unrestricted monarchy could become tyrannical, an all-powerful aristocracy could develop into a self-serving oligarchy and, worst of all, a democratic form of government spelled the way to mob-rule and anarchy.

Great unease therefore took hold of the political elite in the 1760s, when it became increasingly clear that the new young king George III seemed intent on reinforcing the

position of the crown. In George’s view, the crown had been unduly weakened during the reigns of his two predecessors of the Hanoverian line, George I and George II, both of whom (and unlike George III himself) spoke little or no English, had limited knowledge and understanding of British affairs and, in the case of George I, were often absent in their native Hanover.* Now was the time to put things right again.

The political elite, however, thought differently and, in particular the English elite, were alarmed by the choice of a Scotsman – the Earl of Bute – as the king’s first minister. What better sign could there be of a king with authoritarian tendencies and scant regard for dearly-held English liberties, than the choice of a Scot to head the government? No-one took the (mis)conception that George III was a tyrant-to-be further than the American colonists, who based much of their argument for independence on the idea that the king was a despot in disguise, but also in Britain, concern about the influence of the crown and

* The Hanoverian succession

The House of Hanover came onto the British throne in 1714 when Queen Anne Stuart died without leaving an heir (despite giving birth to 14 children and suffering four miscarriages). Many candidates had a better claim to the throne than the somewhat unlikely choice of George of Hanover, but all those claimants who were ahead of George in the line were Catholics, and they were prevented from acceding through the Act of Settlement of 1701. George was thus offered the throne on the basis of his Protestant religion.

It was during the reigns of George I and George II that a crafty politician by the name of Robert Walpole took use of the situation to carve out a strong position for himself as first minister and head of the Treasury. Walpole made sure to negotiate the support of both Houses of Parliament for his policies, as well as the king’s court, thereby providing the basis for another two central features of the British constitution – *the office of prime minister*, and *the parliamentary system of government*. The official title of the British prime minister is still the First Lord of the Treasury.

the court lingered and eventually led the MP John Dunning to put forward his famous motion in 1780: “the influence of the crown has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished”. The carefully constructed balance of the constitution was under threat.

The accession of George III thus gave rise to a whole new discussion about the British Constitution, what it was, what it ought to be, whether it had become “corrupted” and, if so, by whom, and whether reforms were needed to restore its purity. Increasingly, the focus shifted from the king to representation in the House of Commons, and most of the reform movements which developed in the latter half of the eighteenth century were concerned with this.

But despite impressive petition campaigns and strenuous efforts in general – particularly in the turbulent 1790s – no attempts to achieve reform were successful until finally, a measure of electoral reform was carried through in the shape of the Great Reform Act of 1832.

This breakthrough initiated over a century of reforms which would eventually turn the British Constitution into a modern democracy. The “balance” of the mixed and balanced constitution had clearly been disrupted in favour of the House of Commons but – perhaps because of the piecemeal fashion in which it was done – the anarchy predicted by eighteenth century thinkers never materialised.



The Speaker of the House leading a procession of MPs, the democratic element of the British constitution.
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