

Multicultural Heritage

The Concept of Bicameralism

In the waning years of the nineteenth century, political scientist and future President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, spoke to an audience and outlined his views of the American government.

Our Government, founded one hundred years ago, was no type of an experiment in advanced democracy, as we allowed Europe and even ourselves to suppose; it was simply an adaption of English constitutional government.

—WOODROW WILSON

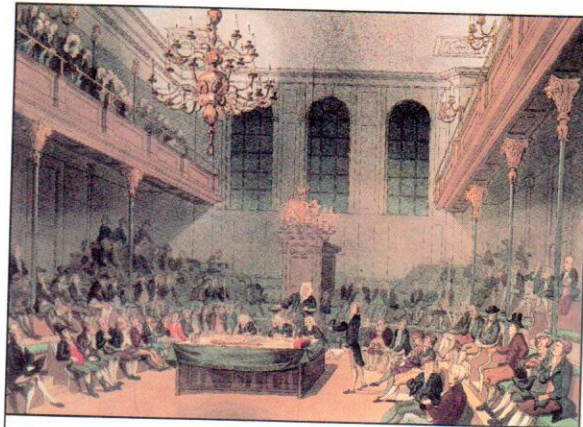
One aspect of the United States' English heritage is bicameralism. The concept of bicameralism—a two-house legislature—originated in England and came with the early English colonists to North America.

Bicameralism emerged in England's Parliament. During the 1200s the Great Council that included English nobles and bishops advised the monarch. Knights and elected representatives from towns and regions also met with the Great Council. In the 1300s the elected members and the nobility and bishops began to meet separately, and Parliament became a two-house legislature that included the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Slowly, the Commons gained strength; first by winning the right to discuss tax laws, and later by assuming the power to introduce bills.

After a civil war and the execution of Charles I, Parliament gained control of the government. Then 1660 Parliament restored the monarchy. By the 1700s nations of the Western world admired and envied Great Britain for its democracy and stability. It was the shining example of the political theory of a balanced government.

"The pure forms of government," noted historian Bernard Bailyn, "were monarchy, the rule of one; aristocracy, the rule of the few; and democracy, the rule of many or of all." He continued,

All three forms in the course of history had degenerated repeatedly into their evil counterparts: tyranny, oligarchy, and . . . mob rule. . . . But some success . . . could be achieved by mixing elements of these pure forms . . .



House of Commons

The British Parliament is divided into two houses, the House of Lords and the more powerful House of Commons, as depicted by Thomas Rowlandson.

The value of such a balance . . . came to characterize the working of the English constitution. English public institutions . . . fitted very well the pattern of mixed government: an element of monarchy in the hereditary crown; an element of aristocracy in the House of Lords; and an element of democracy in the House of Commons.

—BERNARD BAILYN

Following the Declaration of Independence, most states retained their bicameral legislatures. Although abandoned under the Articles of Confederation, bicameralism reemerged in the Constitution with the establishment of Congress.

Examining Our Multicultural Heritage

Reviewing Facts

1. **Explain** how the theory of a balanced government foresees a government free of tyranny or mob rule.
2. **Describe** the nature of a bicameral legislature.

Critical Thinking Skills

3. **Evaluating Information** Do you think a monarchy inevitably leads to tyranny or a democracy to mob rule? Explain the reasons for your answers.