Reading Summary: “The Idea of Parliament in British Political Culture, Bolingbroke to Brown” by Paul Seaward

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Reading Summary Template

Three Sentence Summary: In the eighteenth century, the British Parliament was an aristocratic institution that relied on independence from the crown, its own executive administration, and public opinion to formulate change that was responsive to public interests. After reforms in the nineteenth century, Parliament saw a rise in government by party, where parties defined how members voted, and reformed parliamentary rules about debate and legislation which allowed parties to push through change at a faster rate. In the twentieth century, members became more responsive to the media and to the wishes of the electorate.

Research Question: How have the concepts of independence, moderation, responsiveness, and formality evolved within the British Parliament, and what effect do these changes have on the British Parliament’s place in British political culture?

Hypotheses tested, if any: No claims tested.

Type of evidence: Seaward repeatedly uses primary evidence and quotes throughout his article. These come from members of Parliament, political commentators, and other figures who give their perspectives on the presence of Parliament in political culture.

Main Findings:

1. Despite the historical independence of members of Parliament from the crown and the voters, the House of Commons was open and responsive to outside interests, influences, and the concerns of their constituents.
2. In the second half of the nineteenth century, political parties and their caucuses increased the efficiency of the Parliament in passing electorally mandated legislation while also resulting in a decrease in the independence of members from the voters.
3. The rise of the media’s influence moved debate and decision-making in the House from the chamber into closed rooms containing party leaders, increased the need of MPs to respond to electoral pressures, and yielded a higher need for members to vote with their party.
4. The establishment of committees in the second half of the twentieth century returned some aspects of parliamentary scrutiny and independence that had been missing since the increase of government by party.

Three questions you have about the article:

1. If Parliament only contained aristocratic members from the upper classes in British society, then would its responsiveness only be towards interests of the wealthy and businesses?
2. Were parliamentary reforms enacted through measures to reform their constitution? Is Parliament even defined by a constitution?
3. Is the makeup of Parliament today still primarily from the wealthiest members of British society?

On a scale of 1 to 10 (one being totally easy/readable – 10 being completely incomprehensible), how difficult to read and understand did you find this article?

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