

An Evolution in British Rights

Magna Charta, 1215

Magna Carta or *Magna Charta* [Lat., = great charter], the most famous document of British constitutional history, issued by **King John** at Runnymede under compulsion from the barons and the church in June, 1215.

The charter definitely implies that there are laws protecting the rights of subjects and communities that the king is bound to observe or, if he fails to do so, will be compelled to observe. For example, the English King agreed that nobles and landowners would be entitled to trial by jury and could not be punished by the King directly. The King also would need to discuss taxes and other important matters with a council of nobles and church representatives before acting.

Petition of Rights, 1628

The **Petition of Rights** changed the way the King did business as well. Parliament is today the governing body of Great Britain, though Kings back then did not always recognize or respect its power to represent the English people. King Charles wanted to rule England as he saw fit. As a result, the people protested in such a strong voice and forced King Charles to accept this new document.

The Petition of Rights stated the King could not tax the people of Great Britain or her colonies without the consent of the English government, Parliament. Keep in mind, the Mayflower Compact was written in North America just eight years earlier.

English Bill of Rights, 1689

When King James II ignored parliament and abused the rights of the English people, he was forced out of the country by the people. The new monarchs, William and Mary accepted a document known as the English Bill of Rights. Its purpose was to strengthen the rights of the citizens by stating that elections for parliament had to occur often. It also permitted citizens to bear arms, it forbid cruel and unusual punishment, and protected a citizen's rights to a trial by jury.

What is the significance of these documents?

English colonists brought these ideals with them to the New World. Colonists created legislatures (governmental bodies) and elected representatives to pass laws within the borders of their colonies. Colonists practiced law and governed themselves in the same manner their brothers did back home. Do you see any potential problems with this? What can you tell me about the two types of colonial governments shown below? How could you use any of this information in the debate with Lord Grenville?

Two Types of English Colonial Government

DIAGRAM A

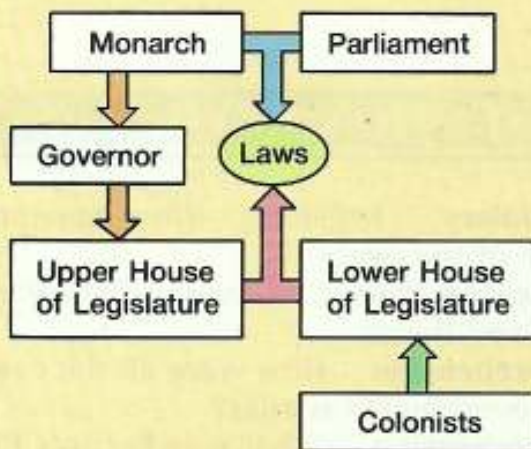
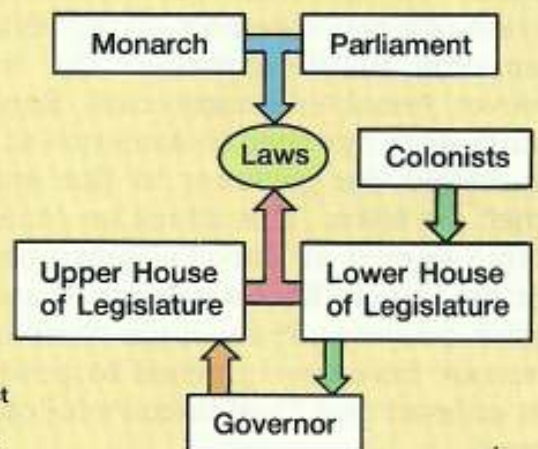


DIAGRAM B



- Appoint
- Elect
- Pass laws
- Pass laws and reject laws passed by colonial legislatures