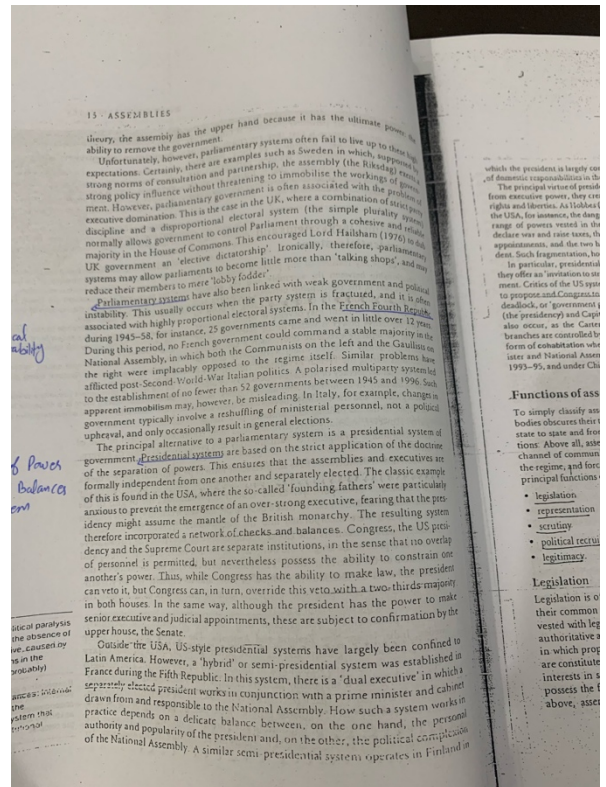
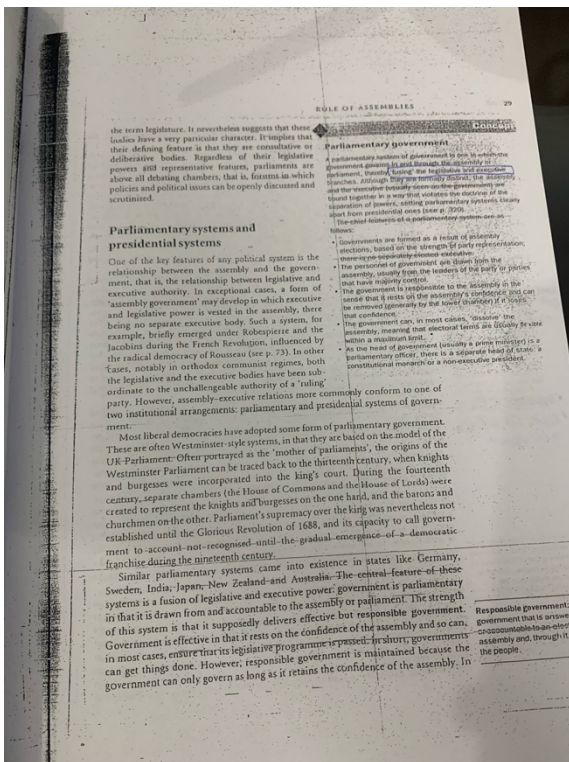
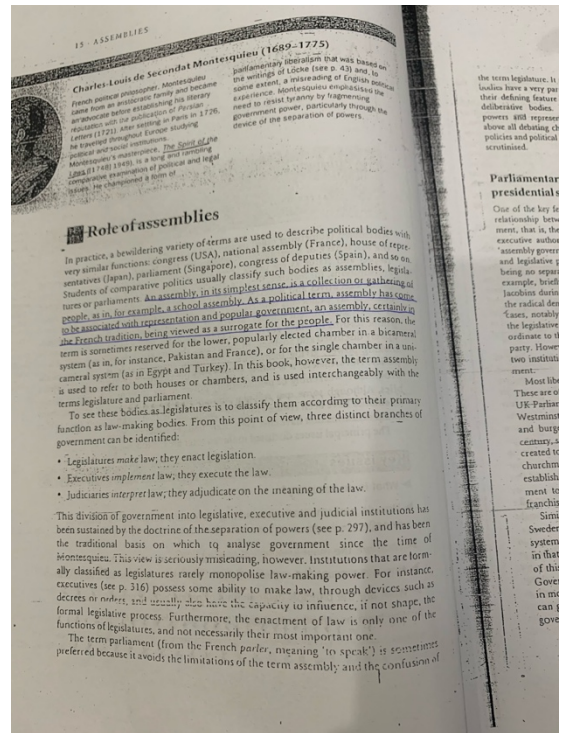
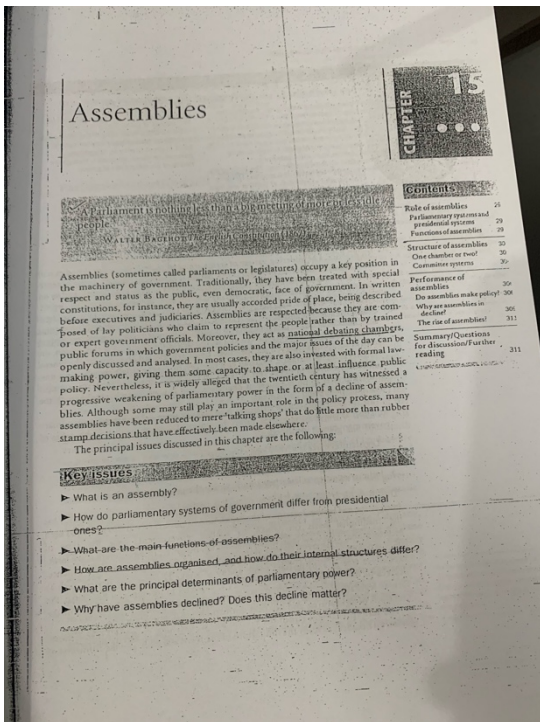


WEEK 11: Assemblies



attention they receive. This helps to explain why assemblies have been increasingly anxious for their proceedings to receive television coverage. The public impact of US congressional committees has long been enhanced by the televising of their hearings. In the case of the UK, television cameras were not allowed into the House of Commons until 1989, shortly after they were first introduced in the Soviet parliament.

Structure of assemblies

Assemblies differ in a number of respects. For example, their members may be elected, appointed or even selected by inheritance, or any combination of these methods. When members are elected, this may be on the basis of population (in the form of equal-sized constituencies), or through regions or states. The franchise may be restricted on universal, and various electoral systems may be used (see pp. 215-221). The sizes of assemblies also vary considerably. The tiny republic of Nauru in the West Central Pacific, has an assembly of 18 members, each of whom represents approximately 440 people. At the other extreme, there is the 2000 member National Peoples' Congress in China, in which one member represents over 350 000 people. However, the principal structural differences between assemblies are whether they comprise one chamber or two, and the nature and role of their committee systems.

One chamber or two?

Although Yugoslavia once experimented with a five-chamber assembly, and from 1984 to 1994 South Africa had a three-chamber assembly, the vast majority of assemblies have either one or two chambers. Single chamber, or unicameral, assemblies have been common in much of Africa, in communist states such as China, and in post-communist states that have maintained an earlier tradition of unicameralism. Indeed, there was a clear trend towards unicameralism in the post-Second-World-War period. For instance, in 1948, Israel established a single-chamber parliament (the Knesset), and second chambers were abolished in New Zealand in 1950, Denmark in 1954, and Sweden in 1970. Such developments support the view that unicameral assemblies are more streamlined and effective than bicameral ones, especially in terms of responding to the needs of small and relatively cohesive societies. In the famous remark of the Abbé Sieyès in 1789, 'if the second Chamber agrees with the first it is unnecessary; if it disagrees it is pernicious'. Nevertheless, about half the world's states retain two-chamber, or bicameral, assemblies.

In terms of strengthening checks and balances within assemblies and between executives and assemblies, bicameralism has usually been seen as a central principle of liberal constitutionalism (see p. 279). This was the case in the debates amongst the 'founding fathers' who drew up the US constitution in 1787. Whereas earlier second chambers, such as the British House of Lords, had developed as vehicles through which powerful economic and social interests could be represented in government, delegates such as James Madison (see p. 302) saw the US Senate as a means of fragmenting legislative power and as a safeguard against executive domination.

The representative advantages of bicameralism are particularly important in federal states (see p. 125), where the sharing of sovereignty creates a constant danger of irreconcilable conflict between the centre and the periphery. All of the world's 16

James Madison (1751-1836)

US statesman and political philosopher. A Virginia delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Madison was a strong proponent of US nationalism and a keen advocate of ratification. He later served as Jefferson's Secretary of State (1801-9) and was the fourth president of the USA (1809-17). Usually regarded as a supporter of liberalism and divided between bicameralism and the separation of powers.

However, when in government, he was committed to strengthening the power of national government. His best known political writings are his contributions, with Alexander Hamilton (1741-1804) and John Jay, to *The Federalist Papers* (Hamilton, Jay and Madison, 1787-89, 1961).

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Most second chambers are constitutionally and politically subordinate to first chambers, which are usually seen as the locus of popular authority. This is particularly the case in parliamentary systems, in which government is generally responsible to and drawn largely or wholly from the lower house. In Norway, the Netherlands and Fiji all bills, whether or not they are introduced in the lower house, must be introduced in the first chamber. Second chambers may also be denied veto powers. The Japanese first chamber, the House of Representatives, is thus able, by a two-thirds majority, to override the House of Councillors. The UK House of Lords only has the power to delay non-financial legislation for a single year, although it can still veto the sacking of judges and the postponement of parliamentary elections.

Not uncommonly, such weaker versions of bicameralism reflect the restricted representative basis of the upper house. Indirect elections are used in Germany, Austria and India, for example, and a combination of election and appointment is used in Belgium, Malaysia and Ireland. The Canadian Senate is still hereditary peers, and the majority of the members of the UK House of Lords are still hereditary peers. A stronger version of bicameralism is found in assemblies with two chambers that have broadly equal powers. The Italian Chamber of Deputies and the Italian Senate, for example, are both elected by universal adult suffrage, and are legislatively equal. An electoral college representing both chambers elects the president, and the prime minister and council of ministers are collectively responsible to the whole assembly. The US Congress is perhaps the only example of an assembly that has a dominant upper chamber. Although all tax legislation must be introduced in the House of Representatives, the Senate alone exercises ratification and confirmation powers.

One of the greatest drawbacks of legislative fragmentation is the possibility of conflict between the two chambers. Where the houses have broadly equal powers, a device is needed to resolve differences and prevent institutional immobilism. The most common mechanism is that used in the US congress, in which a special

Focus on

Bicameralism: strengths and weaknesses

The chief benefits of bicameralism are the following:

1. Second chambers check the power of first chambers and prevent rash legislation.
2. Bicameral assemblies more effectively check the power of the executive because there are two chambers to oppose the failure of a government.
3. Two chamber assemblies widen the basis of representation, allowing each house to articulate a different (and often more radical) view of the interests of groups of voters.
4. The existence of a second chamber can ensure that legislation is more thoroughly scrutinised, so it can release the legislative burden in the first chamber and rectify its mistakes and omissions.
5. Second chambers can act as a constitutional check on the executive, especially in the case of controversial legislation and allowing time for reflection on important decisions.

The drawbacks of bicameralism include the following:

1. Unicameral assemblies are more efficient, because the existence of a second chamber can hinder the legislative process, making government more difficult.
2. Second chambers often act as a check on democratic initiatives, particularly when their members are not elected or indirectly elected.
3. Bicameral assemblies are a recipe for institutionalised conflict, particularly as well as for government paralysis.
4. Bicameral assemblies may narrow access to policy-making and legislative decisions in the hands of non-elected members.
5. Second chambers introduce a conservative political bias by acting as a check on constitutional arrangements and, sometimes, the interests of social elites.

joint congressional committee, composed of senior figures from both chambers, is authorised to produce a compromise agreement. In Germany, although the lower chamber (the Bundestag) is in most cases legislatively dominant, the upper chamber (the Bundesrat) enjoys considerable veto powers in relation to constitutional questions and matters related to the *Länder*. When disputes occur, they are referred to a joint Bundestag-Bundesrat conciliation committee. Further criticism of bicameralism is that it tends to entrench a conservative political bias. To the extent that second chambers defend the constitutional structure by making it more difficult to pass radical or controversial measures, this tendency is usually seen as laudable. However, if second chambers are able to block or delay legislation approved by democratically elected first chambers, they may merely help to insulate political and social elites from popular pressure. Ironically, the opposite can also be the case. The US Senate is now as liberal, or more liberal, than the House of Representatives, and in the UK in the 1980s the House of Lords was a more effective check on the Thatcher government than was the House of Commons.

Focus on

Committees: advantages and disadvantages

A committee is a small work group composed of members drawn from a larger body and charged with specific responsibilities. Whereas all the committees set up for a particular purpose and disbanded when that task is complete, permanent or standing committees have enduring responsibilities and an institutionalised role. Committee structures have become increasingly prominent in legislative and executive branches of government. As liberalisation and consultative forums and also as decision-making bodies. Amongst the advantages of committees are the following:

- They allow a range of views, opinions and interests to be represented.
 - They provide the opportunity for fuller, longer and more detailed debate.
 - They encourage decisions to be made more efficiently and speedily by restricting the range of opposing opinions.
 - They make possible a division of labour that encourages the accumulation of expertise and specialist knowledge.
- However, committees have been criticised for the following reasons:
- They can easily be manipulated by those who set up and staff them.
 - They encourage centralisation by allowing a chairperson to dominate proceedings behind a mask of consultation.
 - They narrow the range of views and interests that are taken into account in decision-making.
 - They choose their members from the larger body, creating a form of sham representation.

Committee systems

Almost all assemblies have a committee system of some sort. Indeed, the trend towards the use of committees, in assemblies and elsewhere, is often seen as one of the distinctive features of modern politics. Committee systems have increasingly been portrayed as the power houses of assemblies, the very hub of the legislative process; whereas parliamentary chambers are for talking, committees are for working. As Woodrow Wilson (1885) 1961) put it 'Congressional government is committee government. Congress in session is Congress on public exhibition. Congress in its committee-rooms is Congress at work'. It is therefore not surprising that assemblies are often classified according to their committees. In crude terms, strong assemblies have strong committees, and weak assemblies have weak committees.

Assembly committees usually have one of three functions. First, they may carry out detailed consideration of legislative measures and financial proposals. They thus not only help to relieve the legislative burden on chambers, but also engage in more thorough and exacting examination than is possible on the floor of a house. This task is usually carried out by standing committees, which may be broad and flexible, as in the UK and France, or permanent and highly specialised, as in Germany and

the USA. Secondly, strong and oversee the most and specialise of detailed knowledge scrutinising reports Parliament and its ministers are set up concern. Some have been found in the Un-American Act 1950s.

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the USA. Secondly, committees may be set up to outline government administration and oversee the exercise of executive powers. Such committees must be permanent and specialised, because, to be effective, they have to rival the executive in terms of detailed knowledge and expertise. In the US Congress, for example, legislative and scrutinising responsibilities are vested in standing committees, whereas, in the UK Parliament and the French National Assembly, separate select or supervisory committees are set up. Thirdly, ad hoc committees may investigate matters of public concern. Some of the most important examples of investigatory committees have been found in the USA, notably the Iran Committee on Watergate, and the House Un-American Activities Committee, which became a vehicle for McCarthyism in the 1950s.

If powerful committees mean a powerful assembly, what makes committees powerful? It is generally agreed that the US Congress has the most powerful committees found anywhere in the world, and these provide a model which many other assemblies have tried to adopt. Their power certainly stems from their specialist responsibilities, permanent membership and lavish support in terms of funding and access to advice. This allows them to match the expertise of the bureaucracy. Moreover, their role in the legislative process is crucial. Whereas in the UK, France and Japan bills reach committees having been debated and approved in principle by the floor of the house, in Congress committee scrutiny comes first. This means that many bills are completely redrafted, and others never see the light of day.

Most importantly, however, Congress has a relatively weak party system, which allows its committees considerable independence from the presidency. Where stricter party discipline operates, as in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, committees are effectively neutered by the fact that the majority of their members owe an overriding loyalty to the government of the day. Germany is an exception in this respect. Although Germany has an effective party system, it also possesses strong legislative committees, largely as a consequence of the need for coalition governments to conciliate the assembly in order to maintain the support of two or more parties.

In an attempt to strengthen Parliament in the UK against the executive, a system of departmental select committees was established in 1979. These were consciously modelled on the US example, and the system sought to promote open government (see p. 392) by allowing for the examination of government papers and the cross-examination of ministers and senior civil servants. It was hoped that these committees would become effective watchdogs that would be capable of influencing government policy. However, the experiment has proved disappointing for a number of reasons. First, the hoped-for less partisan character of committees has failed to materialise, as the government has ensured that party disciplines intrude into the work of committees. Secondly, the select committees are inadequately resourced and have limited powers. Although they can send for 'persons, papers and records', they cannot force particular civil servants or ministers to attend, neither can they ensure that their questions are fully answered.

Thirdly, no alternative career structure has developed around the committees. MPs still look to advance their careers through jobs in government, and so tend to be more sensitive to party pressures than parliamentary ones. In fact, some critics have argued that, far from strengthening the House of Commons, select committees have weakened it, in that they draw attention away from the activity on the floor of the house, which alone has the capacity to ensure responsible government.

McCarthyism: the use of witch-hunts and unscrupulous investigations, as practised in the 1950s, against 'communists' by US Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Performance of assemblies

Do assemblies make policy?

The difficulty with assessing the performance of assemblies is that they carry out such a wide range of functions. Should they be judged on the quality of the legislation they pass, their effectiveness in mobilising consent, the degree to which they represent public opinion, or what? The greatest political concern, however, relates to the policy impact of assemblies, that is, their capacity to shape or at least influence what governments actually do. Do assemblies have power in the sense that they affect the content of public policy, or are they merely talking shops that draw attention away from where the real business of government happens? The key issue here is the nature of assembly-executive relations and the distribution of power between the two major branches of government. On this basis, the assemblies of the world can be classified into three broad categories:

- policy making assemblies, which enjoy significant autonomy and have an active impact on policy
- policy-influencing assemblies, which can transform policy but only by reacting to executive initiatives
- executive-dominated assemblies, which exert marginal influence or merely rubber-stamp executive decisions

Policy making assemblies are rare. To exert a positive influence on the policy process, an assembly has to fulfil three criteria. First, it must command significant constitutional authority and respect. Secondly, it must possess sufficient organisational coherence to undertake concerted action. As far as the UK Parliament is concerned, these conditions were perhaps only fulfilled during its so-called 'golden age', the period between the Great Reform Act of 1832 and the Second Reform Act of 1867. In this period, Parliament, its authority enhanced by the extension of the franchise but not yet hampered by the emergence of effective party discipline, changed governments, forced the removal of individual ministers, rejected government legislation, and initiated significant measures.

In the modern period, the best (and, some would argue, the only) example of a policy making assembly is the US Congress. Congress is perhaps unique in that it enjoys an unusual combination of advantages. The separation of powers invests Congress with constitutional independence and an impressive range of autonomous powers. Relatively weak party cohesion deprives the president of the usual means of exerting legislative control. A powerful committee system guarantees the organisational effectiveness of Congress. Finally, particularly since the Legislative Reorganisation Act (1946), Congress has had the stalling and informational resources to operate without depending on the executive branch for assistance.

Nevertheless, despite these advantages, Congress has lost some of its influence that matter Congress itself, has increasingly looked to the White House (the presidency) for political leadership (see p. 330). The main burden of Congress's work is therefore to examine the president's legislative programme. This has weakened Congress's role as a policy initiator, and has led to a situation in which 'the president

proposes and Congress disposes'.

imperial presidency adopted a more assertive attitude towards presidential power, and initiated a series of reforms in the committee and executive systems. These reforms have fragmented congressional power by reducing the influence of committee chairs, and strengthened party cohesion by widening party influence over appointments. The most striking example of Congress seizing control of public policy occurred after the 1994 elections, when the Republican Congress, led by the Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, pushed through a radical programme of tax and spending cuts under the slogan 'Contract with America'.

The collapse of communism in the USSR and the emergence of a postcommunist regime also underlined, albeit briefly, the importance of parliamentary power. As part of his political reforms in the late 1980s, President Gorbachev replaced the bicameral Supreme Soviet with a two-tier parliament, in which a competitively elected Congress of People's Deputies elected a permanent assembly, still referred to as the Supreme Soviet. Although it was still overwhelmingly communist in orientation, liberal and reformist views could also be expressed. Following the CPSU's abandonment of its monopoly of power in 1990, similar parliaments were elected in the 15 Soviet republics, for the first time under conditions of political pluralism. When conservatives in August 1991 staged a military coup to overthrow Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin took up residence in the Russian parliament (the White House), which immediately became the focal point of resistance to the military takeover.

The failure of the coup and the collapse in the December of the USSR, however, meant that President Yeltsin was confronted by a parliament largely unsympathetic to the liberal reforms that his administration attempted to advance. Nationalists, anti-Semites and erstwhile communists in the parliament combined to force Yeltsin to sack key ministers and to slow down and even reverse major economic reforms. However, this period of genuine parliamentary government came to a spectacular end when hardliners rebelled against Yeltsin's decision to dissolve parliament. This led in October 1993 to the military seizure of the White House and the imposition of presidential rule.

In parliamentary systems, assemblies have generally played a policy-influencing, rather than a policy making, role. Where exceptions have occurred, as in the Italian assembly and the National Assembly of the Fourth French Republic, this has usually been a consequence of weak coalition government (see p. 246) and a fragmented party system. More commonly, assembly-executive relations are structured by party divisions. This is most clearly the case when majoritarian or weakly proportional electoral systems invest a single party with majority control of the assembly, as has traditionally occurred in the UK, New Zealand and Australia. In such cases, the central dynamic of the parliamentary system is an antagonistic relationship between the government and the opposition, usually termed 'adversary politics' (see p. 308). Government governs in the sense that it is responsible for formulating and later implementing a legislative programme, while the assembly plays an essentially reactive role.

The scope that the assembly has to influence policy in these circumstances largely depends on two factors: the strength in the assembly of the governing party, and the party's ability to maintain internal unity. The Thatcher government dominated the UK House of Commons in the 1980s by virtue of parliamentary majorities that were

proposes and Congress disposes'. Indeed, growing anxiety about the subordination of Congress was expressed in the 1960s in fears about the emergence of a so-called 'imperial presidency'. In the aftermath of Watergate, however, a reformed Congress adopted a more assertive attitude towards presidential power, and initiated a series of reforms in the committee and executive systems. These reforms have fragmented congressional power by reducing the influence of committee chairs, and strengthened party cohesion by widening party influence over appointments. The most striking example of Congress seizing control of public policy occurred after the 1994 elections, when the Republican Congress, led by the Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, pushed through a radical programme of tax and spending cuts under the slogan 'Contract with America'.

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Political pluralism: The existence of a range of political parties, policies, programmes and movements; in particular, a competitive party system.

Focus on

Adversary politics: for and against

Adversary politics is a style of politics characterised by an antagonistic relationship between major parties that turns political life into an ongoing 'electoral battle'. Parliamentary debate thus becomes a 'continuous polemic' before what is seen as the 'bar of public opinion'. Adversarialism has been defended on the following grounds:

- it offers voters clear alternatives, thus promoting electoral choice and democratic accountability
- it checks government power by ensuring that there is opposition
- it discourages sober and rational debate, and precludes compromise
- it fosters polarisation, which, as governments change, gives rise to political instability

large enough to insulate it from backbench pressure, and the divided and demoralised state of the Labour opposition. Nevertheless, governments in parliamentary systems must remain constantly sensitive to the morale of their backbenchers. Margaret Thatcher discovered this to her cost in November 1990 when she was abruptly removed as Conservative party leader.

The resurgence of parliamentary power in the UK was demonstrated in the 1990s by the adoption of an increasingly Eurosceptical stance by the Major government following the reduction of its majority in the 1992 election and the spread of anti-European sentiments among backbench Conservatives. According to Norton (1993), such developments are part of a trend dating back to about 1970 which has seen the transformative role of Parliament strengthened by a progressive decline in party unity. Other assemblies that exert a strong influence on policy are the German Bundestag and the Swedish Riksdag. However, in both these cases, parliamentary influence stems less from adversary politics than from ingrained habits of negotiation and compromise fostered both by the political culture and by long experience of coalition government.

Parliamentary systems that have become accustomed to prolonged domination by a single party often have assemblies that are weak or executive-dominated. A deliberate attempt was made in the Fifth French Republic to weaken parliamentary power so as to avoid the conflict and obstructionism that had undermined the Fourth Republic. A system of rationalised parliamentarism came into existence. This allowed the French president to dominate government largely through party control, but also through his power to dissolve the National Assembly in order to gain a new majority, as de Gaulle did in 1962 and 1968, and Mitterrand did in 1981. De Gaulle also reduced the National Assembly's powers of political control, and limited its legislative competence by creating the Conseil Constitutionnel to ensure that its laws conform to the constitution. However, the end of Gaullist domination in 1981 created opportunities for a greater degree of parliamentary influence, particularly when the Socialist lost control of the assembly and Mitterrand was forced into cohabitation with a Gaullist government under Jacques Chirac

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PERFORMANCE OF ASSEMBLIES

The Japanese Diet (Kokkai) is another example of a traditionally subordinate assembly. Until the 1920s the Diet was required to do little more than ratify the decisions of the executive; this was a consequence of the unbroken domination of the Liberal Democratic Party after 1953. Rival parties were eternal outsiders, and factional divisions within the LDP were generally played out away from the Diet. However, the progressive decline in the sizes of LDP majorities led by the 1970s to a less adversarial and more conciliatory attitude towards parliamentary opposition. For instance, the membership of standing committees was broadened to include minority parties as the LDP started to relax its grip on the parliamentary process. A full system of parliamentary scrutiny and oversight finally emerged in Japan following the LDP's defeat in the 1993 election.

Less ambiguous examples of marginal assemblies have been found in communist regimes and developing states. In the former, tight control by 'ruling' communist parties and the practice of non-competitive elections ensured that assemblies did little more than provide formal approval for the government's programme. When this control was relaxed, the consequences were often devastating for the regime. The sweeping victories for Solidarity in the 1989 parliamentary elections in Poland, for example, led directly to the fall of a communist government that had been in power since 1945. In the developing states of Africa and Asia, assemblies have played a largely integrative, rather than policy-influencing, role. Their central function has been to strengthen legitimacy and to assist in the process of nation building. It is a backhanded compliment to assemblies that the establishment of military rule has usually been accompanied by their suspension or abolition. This occurred in Chile, Pakistan and the Philippines in the 1970s, and in Turkey and Nigeria in the 1980s.

Why are assemblies in decline?

There is nothing new about the 'decline of assemblies' debate. Since the late nineteenth century, anxiety has been expressed about the strengthening of executives, and particularly bureaucracies, at the expense of assemblies. This anxiety has been heightened by the fact that, since the days of Locke and Montesquieu, assemblies have been seen as the principal vehicles for delivering responsible and representative government. The notion that good government requires a strong assembly is questionable, however. Assembly power can certainly become 'excessive', especially when it leads to immobilism and policy stagnation. The model of the US Congress, for instance, has as many critics as it has admirers. There is nevertheless general agreement that, during the twentieth century, the power and status of assemblies has changed, and usually for the worse. Whether this amounts to a general 'decline of assemblies', or rather a shift in their purpose or function, is another matter. The principal factors that have brought about these changes are the following:

- the emergence of disciplined political parties
- the growth in the role of government
- the organisational weaknesses of assemblies
- the rise of interest-group power.

Disciplined political parties

The emergence from the late nineteenth century onwards of mass-membership parties weakened assemblies in a number of respects. In the first place, the transition

15 ASSEMBLIES

from loose party groupings undermined the ability of individual members to represent constituents as trustees by exercising their own judgement and conscience. Parties rather than assemblies thus became the principal agents of representation, operating through the doctrine of the mandate. Party loyalty also weakened assemblies in terms of their function as debating chambers. However articulate, impassioned or persuasive parliamentary orators may be, it has little or no impact on voting in party-dominated assemblies, which means that debate becomes sterile or ritualised. As Richard Cobden (1804-65) commented about the UK House of Commons, 'In this House I have heard many a speech that moved men to tears—but never one that turned a vote'. More important, however, is the tendency of party unity to facilitate executive domination. In parliamentary systems in particular, loyalty to party means, for the majority of parliamentarians, loyalty to the government of the day, which comprises, after all, the leading members of their own party. Far from checking or even embarrassing the executive, many assemblies have therefore come to function as its willing accomplices or doughty defenders.

Big government

The growth in the role of government, especially in the areas of social welfare and economic management, has usually been associated with a redistribution of power from assemblies to executives. This occurs for three reasons. First, it leads to an increase in the size and status of bureaucracies, which are responsible for administering government policy and overseeing an ever-widening range of public services. Secondly, it places greater emphasis on the process of policy initiation and formulation. Although individual assembly members can initiate policy in specific areas, the task of developing broad and coherent government programmes is quite beyond them. During the twentieth century, most assemblies therefore adjusted to the loss of positive legislative power by accepting that their central role was to scrutinise and criticise, rather than to make policy. Thirdly, 'big' government has meant that government policy is increasingly complex and intricate. This, in turn, has placed a higher premium on expertise, a quality more abundantly possessed by 'professional' bureaucrats than by 'amateur' politicians.

Lack of leadership

By virtue of their function as representative forums and debating chambers, assemblies suffer from a number of organisational weaknesses. In particular, they usually comprise several hundred members who enjoy formal equality in the sense that they can all vote and contribute to debates. Although advantageous in other respects, the egalitarian and fragmented character of assemblies weakens their capacity to provide leadership and take concerted action. This problem has become more acute in an age of national affairs and global politics. Party-organised assemblies are certainly better equipped to adopt clear and coherent domestic and foreign policies, but in these cases leadership tends to be provided by parties and only through assemblies. In general, it has been political executives rather than assemblies that have been able to respond to this need for leadership, by virtue of their greater organisational coherence and the fact that they are headed by a single individual, usually a president or prime minister.

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SUMMARY

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Interest group power

Not only have power and public attention shifted from assemblies to executives, but they have also been lost to interests and groups external to government. The rise of interest groups has threatened assemblies in two important respects. The first is that the groups have provided the public with an alternative mechanism of representation. Often set up specifically for this purpose, interest groups tend to be more effective than assemblies in taking up popular grievances and giving expression to the concerns and aspirations of particular groups. Single-issue groups, for instance, now engage in, and promote, the kind of public debate that previously only took place in parliamentary chambers. The second factor is that, while assemblies have increasingly been excluded from the process of policy formulation, organised interests have become more prominent both as representatives of 'affected groups' and as sources of expert advice and information. Policy analysis and discussion in assemblies is therefore often little more than a formality, meaningful debate taking place elsewhere.

The rise of assemblies?

Many argue that the above analysis paints an over-gloomy picture. To some extent, the 'decline of assemblies' is too sweeping a notion, since it conceals the perhaps more important fact that the role of assemblies in the political process has fundamentally changed. Whereas their decline as legislatures and as policy-shaping bodies can hardly be doubted, many agree with Blondel (1973) that, if anything, they have become more important as 'communicating mechanisms'. The willingness of a growing number of assemblies to open up their proceedings to television cameras has certainly helped to raise their public profiles and strengthen them as arenas of debate and agencies of oversight. Similarly, there is a trend towards the professionalisation of assembly work. Following the example of the US Congress, this has seen the adoption and strengthening of specialised committees and an improvement in the staff and resources available to individual assembly members.

More broadly, there is evidence in the UK and elsewhere of assemblies becoming more critical and independent as a result of the decline of parties as tightly disciplined blocs. Not only may better-educated and better-resourced members may be less willing to defer to a party line and act as 'lobby fodder'. If nothing else, general recognition that the legitimacy and stability of a political system is linked to the perceived effectiveness of its assembly guarantees that, whenever assembly power is weakened, voices will be raised in protest. Ultimately, however, the desirable balance between the assembly and the executive boils down to a normative judgement about the need for representation and accountability on the one hand, and for leadership and strong government on the other.

Summary

◆ The terms assembly, legislature and parliament are usually used interchangeably. The term assembly suggests that the body is a surrogate for the people as it is composed of lay politicians who claim to represent the people rather than of trained