

Q: "It is easier to know what the British Cabinet was than what it is now."
Elucidate.

Philosopher in this colorful phrase depicts that British has gone through a revolution process. It is easy to understand the cabinet system of ancient Great Britain than the present system. Now, the cabinet enjoys a pivotal position in the machinery of government. Lowell calls it the key stone of political arch. Now it controls both legislation and administration (executive) of the great Britain. But the complex cabinet system is formed a long process of evolution in its structure, powers and functions.

"The British cabinet is the most curious formation in the political

world of modern times"

(Gladstone)

Tracing the Growth of Cabinet System in England

The cabinet system has been regarded as the greatest contribution of English people to the art of government.

In Bagehot's opinion: It is a hyphen, which joins the bucket that fastens the legislative part of the state to the executive part.

Initially, the cabinet was a body of King's advisers who assist king in performing his functions.

But through a long process of evolution the formation of cabinet and the powers or functions exercised by cabinet became complex. This evolution process took place in

following way:

Norman rule: During Norman rule in England, the body of king's advisers and administrators was known as 'Curia Regis' or 'Royal Council'. It performed miscellaneous functions. It assisted king in his administrative affairs.

Transition from 'Royal Council' to 'Privy Council': During the reign of Edward VI its name was changed to Privy Council. Up to the reign of Charles I, cabinet was only the name of advisers' body. It was irregularly chosen by king.

Formal shape of cabinet: In the reign of Charles II, the cabinet acquired a formal shape. He appointed body of advisers known as cabal.

Establishment of Ministerial responsibility
 Cabal was not a cabinet in any sense of the term. The cabinet grew out of Privy council as a special committee. Several times its members were impeached that established the principle of ministerial responsibility.

Establishment of Party system
 At the same time, party system which is an essential feature for proper working of cabinet was developed in period of Charles II.

Further development of Cabinet System
 The cabinet system further developed during period of William III and Queen Anne. The glorious revolution had firmly established the

- Principle of sovereignty of Parliament

+ The Whigs and Tories were two parties where policies and forms acquired a clear shape.

1... Both these factors played a key role in the development of cabinet system.

+ Homogeneity in Cabinet:

William III was compelled, in ¹⁶⁹⁵ 1689, to call upon the Whig Party to form the cabinet. Thus was established the convention that the members of cabinet should belong to the party having majority in House of Commons.

Post of Prime Minister in Cabinet:

The cabinet system received its final shape in Hanoverian rule. The post of prime minister came into existence during this period.

Concept of Vote of 'No Confidence' motion:—

A person from the cabinet took the chair of PM. Sir Robert Walpole, in 1742, by resigning from his office, after his defeat in House of Commons, established the convention that the cabinet should resign as soon as it lost the confidence of House. With the establishment of this convention, the growth of the cabinet system became complete.

Cabinet - the Keystone of Political Arch

Through a complex process of evolution which took several centuries, cabinet system has become so much complex that it exercises all the powers and functions that are even entitled to King of England. In the past,

King was exercising all the powers but currently it is cabinet that is even controlling the king. In past, king was the ruler of the state and cabinet was ^{merely} a body of advisers but now it is the cabinet that is actually driving the whole political ship of England.

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King or Queen can do no wrong. Even they have to sign the death warrant prepared by the cabinet?"

Ramsay Muir explains the authority of cabinet over King (the ^{ancient} monarch) in following words:

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The cabinet is the steering wheel of the ship of the state."

Functions of Modern Cabinet System

i) Policy-determining functions:

When the cabinet has determined on a policy, an appropriate Department of government carries it out by administrative functions.

In the past, legislation was the authority of king but now it is the handmaid of administration and cabinet is the instrument.

In past, the cabinet ministers were chosen by king and these advisers were meant to defend the king. But now king has mere authority to give his assent to death warrant approved the cabinet ministers. Now, it is the duty of king to defend the cabinet.

ii) Legislative functions:-

In the past king has the authority to make any sort of civil laws for the state. But now this authority lies in the hands of the cabinet.

In past king's cabinet advisors assist him in calling the session of parliament.

But now the king is only a figurehead who calls the session of Parliament of England on the advice of cabinet. It is actually cabinet that is calling the session of parliament. Even the king presents the speech in the session that is prepared by the cabinet.

In the past, there was no concept of vote of no confidence motion against cabinet because cabinet was not so much important at that time. But in modern cabinet system, whenever a bill gets approved by House of Commons

without consent of cabinet, it is a clear situation of vote of no confidence motion.

iii) Executive functions:

In past, all important functions of executive mainly:

- Appointment of higher officials
- Foreign Policy

These functions were exercised by king. But today, king of England has to appoint the ambassadors of state on advice of Foreign minister (Cabinet minister).

And it is cabinet which is actually responsible for the foreign policy or all important treaties of the state. Danby case of 1679 clearly depicts this fact that king is not responsible for the wrong decisions regarding state.

iv) Judicial Functions:

In the past, King can do pardon to anyone and cabinet advisers have nothing to do with that. But now

- king appoints judges of Supreme Court on the advice of cabinet
- king gives pardon to anyone on the advice of cabinet.

Concluding Thoughts

In the past although the powers and functions of cabinet were simple but today cabinet exercises these complex functions letting itself accountable towards vigilant public. Because the whole cabinet is elected by the people of England while in past the cabinet's advisers were simply selected by the monarch (the king). So unlikely to the ancient king, the cabinet exercises its functions in coordination with House of Commons.

So, despite the complexity of modern cabinet system of England, it is the perfect symbol of democracy for the whole world.