

NOT ORIGINALLY A LEGISLATIVE BODY

What is, however, not so well known is, that this new Parliament, or at least the representative part of it, was not originally intended, by the King or his advisers, to act as a legislative or ruling body at all, but to fulfil the much humbler task of granting money for the King's needs, which were then heavy. The very words of the original 'writs' of summons to this Parliament of 1295 survive; and from them we see that the lay representatives, at any rate (the case of the clerical proctors is a little doubtful) were simply summoned 'to do what then of common counsel shall be ordained in the premises.' This was in marked contrast to the writs of the peers or magnates, who were summoned 'to discuss, ordain, and do'; and King Edward was careful to omit from the writs for the humble representatives of shires and towns that specious admission that 'what touches all shall be approved of all,' with which he prefaced the summons to the peers. In fact King Edward, wise and far-seeing as he was, would probably have been profoundly astonished, and not altogether pleased, could he have foreseen that he was creating an institution which would rapidly rise to dispute the power and claims of his own successors, and ultimately to bend and break their wills.

But, as has been before observed, it is one thing to create an institution, and quite another to set bounds to it; and the English Parliament soon proved the truth of this maxim. For the King, in the excess of his caution, and to prevent any excuses about want of authority from their constituents, had, in the writs of summons, bidden the sheriffs return representatives 'having full and sufficient power from their communities'; and thus the English Parliament, from the very first, was distinguished from some at least