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Module: British Civilization

Chapter One: Britain in the 18th Century, The Georgian Era

Lesson One: Political Developments

*The Georgian era was a period in British history from 1714 to c. 1830–1837, named after the Hanoverian kings George I, George II, George III and George IV. The definition of the Georgian era is also often extended to include the relatively short reign of William IV, which ended with his death in 1837. **The sub-period that is the Regency era** is defined by the regency of George IV as Prince of Wales during the illness of his father George III. Overall, the Georgian period experienced a number of political, economic, scientific, literary and social changes that were responsible for shaping the future of the country.*

1. Politics and Finance

When Queen Anne, the last of the Stuarts, died in 1714, it was not entirely certain that the Protestant ruler of Hanover, George, would become king. There were some Tories who wanted the deposed James II's son to return to Britain as James III. If he had given up Catholicism and accepted the Anglican religion he probably would have been crowned James III. But like other members of his family, James was unwilling to change his mind, and he would not give up his religion. Nor would he give up his claim to the throne, so he tried to win it by force. In 1715, he started a rebellion against George I, who had by this time arrived from Hanover. But the rebellion was a disaster, and George's army had little difficulty in defeating the English and Scottish jacobites. Because of the Tory connection with the jacobites, King George allowed the Whigs to form his government. Government power was increased because the new king spoke only German, and did not seem very interested in his new kingdom. Among the king's ministers was **Robert Walpole**, who remained the greatest political leader for over twenty years.

1.1. Robert Walpole

Walpole has often been referred to as Britain's **first prime minister**. The title had in fact been applied to certain ministers in Anne's reign and was commonly used as a synonym for first minister. During Walpole's period of dominance, it was certainly used more frequently, but it did not become an official title until the early 20th century. Some historians have also claimed that Walpole was **the architect of political stability** in Britain. There is no doubt that from 1722 to his resignation in 1742 Walpole stabilized political power in himself and a section of the Whig party. Nor can there be any doubt that his foreign and economic policies helped the Hanoverian dynasty to become securely entrenched in Britain. But it should not be forgotten that Walpole inherited a nation that was already wealthy and at peace. He built on foundations that were already very strong. And, although he was to dominate political life for 20 years, he never succeeded in stamping out political, religious, and cultural opposition entirely, nor did he expect to do so.

It is worth noting that Walpole came to power as a result of his financial ability. At the end of the seventeenth century, the government had been forced to borrow money in order to pay for the war with France. There was nothing new about this, except that because of the war the government's borrowing increased enormously. In 1694, a group of financiers who lent to the government decided to establish a bank, and the government agreed to borrow from it alone. The new bank, called the **Bank of England**, had authority to raise money by printing "**bank notes**". This was not an entirely new idea. For hundreds of years, bankers and money dealers had been able to give people "**promisory notes**" signed by them. These could be handed on as payment to a third or fourth person. This way of making trade easier had been made lawful during the reign of Henry I, six hundred years earlier. The cheques we use today developed from these promisory notes. At a time when many people had money to invest, there was popular interest in financial matters.

People wanted to invest money in some of the trading companies doing business in the West Indies, the East Indies or in other newly developing areas. The possibility of high profits, and the excitement this possibility caused, made the cost of a share in these trading adventures expensive. In 1720, the **South Sea Company** offered to pay off the government's national debt if it was given monopoly rights to trading in the **South Seas**. It raised money by selling shares which quickly rose in value with the increasing excitement. When people's confidence in the South Sea Company suddenly fell, so did the price of shares, and thousands of people who had invested their money lost everything. Robert Walpole was able to bring back public confidence. He made sure that something like the "**South Sea Bubble**" could not happen again. This was the first step in making companies responsible to the public for the

money which they borrowed by the sale of shares. In the other countries of Europe, kings and queens had absolute power. Britain was unusual, and Walpole was determined to keep the Crown under the firm control of Parliament. He knew that with the new German monarchy this was more possible than it had been before.

Walpole skillfully developed the idea that government ministers should work together in a small group, which was called the “**Cabinet**”. He introduced the idea that any minister who disagreed deeply with other Cabinet ministers was expected to resign. From this basic idea grew another important rule in British politics: that all members of the Cabinet were together responsible for policy decisions “**Collective Responsibility**”. Walpole built on the political results of the **Glorious Revolution of 1688**. It was he who made sure that the **power of the king would always be limited by the constitution**.

Monarchical power was constrained by the following conditions: the king could not be a Catholic; the king could not remove or change laws; the king was dependent on Parliament for his financial income and for his army. The king was supposed to choose his ministers. Even today the government of Britain is “Her Majesty's Government”. But in fact, the ministers belonged as much to Parliament as they did to the king.

Walpole wanted to avoid war and to increase taxes so that the government could pay back everything it had borrowed, and get rid of the national debt. He put taxes on luxury goods, such as tea, coffee and chocolate, all of which were drunk by the rich, and were brought to Britain from its new colonies by wealthy traders. Tea had become a national drink by 1700, when 50,000 kg were already being imported each year. Walpole raised the government's income, but this had little effect on the national debt, and he became very unpopular.

The most important of Walpole's political rivals was **William Pitt “The Elder”**, later **Lord Chatham** who wanted Britain to be economically strong in the world, and he agreed with **Daniel Defoe**, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, who had written in 1728, “Trade is the wealth of the world. Trade makes the difference between rich and poor, between one nation and another.” But trade also involved competition. Chatham had studied French trade and industry, and he was certain that Britain must beat France in the race for an overseas trade empire.

In 1733 France made an alliance with Spain. Chatham feared that this alliance would give France a trade advantage over Britain through freer trade possibilities with the Spanish Empire in South America and the Far East. England had been trying unsuccessfully to develop trade with the Spanish Empire since the days of Drake. Once Chatham was in the

government, he decided to make the British navy stronger than that of France or any other nation. He also decided to take over as many as possible of France's trading posts abroad.

Opposition to Walpole in Parliament began to develop as early as 1725. When **William Pulteney**, an ambitious and talented politician, was dismissed from state office, he and 17 other Whig MPs aligned themselves with the 150 Tory MPs remaining in the House of Commons. These dissidents (who called themselves **Patriot Whigs**) grew in number until, by the mid-1730s, more than 100 Whig MPs were collaborating with the Tories against Walpole's nominally Whig administration. Some were motivated primarily by disappointed ambition. But many Whigs and Tories genuinely believed that Walpole had arrogated too much power to himself and that he was corrupt and an enemy to liberty.

George I died in June 1727 and was buried in Hanover. He was succeeded by his eldest son, who became George II. Initially, the new king planned to dismiss Walpole and appoint his personal favourite, Spencer Compton, in his place. Closer familiarity with Walpole's gifts, however, dissuaded him from taking this step, as did his wife, Queen Caroline, who remained an important ally of the minister until her death in 1737. Walpole cemented his advantage by securing the king a **Civil List** (money allowance) from Parliament of £800,000, a considerably larger sum than previous monarchs had been able to enjoy. Royal favour, in turn, shored up Walpole's parliamentary majority. Because the monarch appointed and promoted peers, he had massive influence in the House of Lords. In addition, he appointed the 26 bishops of the Church of England, who also possessed seats in the House of Lords. He alone could promote men to high office in the army, navy, diplomatic service, and bureaucracy. Consequently, MPs who held such offices (the so-called **placemen**), and those who wanted to hold them in the future, were likely to support Walpole as the king's minister out of self-interest, if for no other reason. Walpole, however, could never take royal support for granted. George II was an irritable but by no means an insignificant figure who retained great influence in terms of patronage, military affairs, and foreign policy. He demanded respect from his minister and had to be carefully managed.

2. Whig Ascendancy

The period roughly between 1714 and 1760, the year George I's greatgrandson George III ascended to the throne, is often referred to as the Whig ascendancy. The Whigs were less popular in the country than their rivals the Tories, who could rely on the support of the influential Church of England clergy, but they seized power shortly after George I's succession. The Whigs considered themselves **the party of the Hanoverian succession**, and they supported an aggressive anti-French foreign policy, both positions highly congenial to

George I, while the Tories were compromised by their association with Jacobitism and the Peace of Utrecht that ended the War of the Spanish Succession. The acquiescence of Queen Anne's Tory government in Philip V's retaining the throne of Spain enraged many English people, who viewed it as throwing away the duke of Marlborough's victories. Whig leaders, headed by Sir Robert Walpole, continued to present themselves as the defenders of the Hanoverian claim against the Stuarts. They also had a personal ascendancy over George's son, who succeeded him on his death in 1727 as George II (1683–1760; r. 1727–60), and a good relationship with George II's wife, Queen Caroline of Anspach (1683–1737).

Despite their royal connections, Whig leaders were not court figures the way that 16th- and 17th-century governmental leaders had been. Parliament met every year and controlled taxation, so any leader was ultimately dependent on parliamentary support. Since the government—the politicians entrusted by the king with the management of public affairs—could nearly always control the House of Lords through the bishops and the elected Scottish peers, the key problem was controlling the House of Commons. Even the most successful Whig minister, Walpole, was forced to resign in 1742 when the Commons turned against him, though the king still supported him and reportedly wept when accepting his resignation.

Electorally, the Whigs discouraged voter participation. **The Septennial Act of 1716**, which allowed parliaments to sit for seven years before facing a new election, meant that elections were infrequent. It replaced the system under Queen Anne, in which new elections were required every three years. The requirement of frequent elections had kept voters interested and political organizations mobilized. The Septennial Act meant that for long stretches of years, politics was in the hands of professional politicians who decreased public interest in affairs of state.

The Whig ascendancy saw also efforts to interpret the franchise in favor of fewer people being allowed to vote. Much of the Whig leadership was corrupt and known to be so, particularly during the long period when Walpole was first Lord of the Treasury, the office that eventually became known as prime minister. Accusations of corruption accentuated the inevitable struggle of Whig factions and gave a platform for those Whigs who opposed others in power. Opposition Whig factions often clustered around the heir to the throne, who in the Hanoverian period almost never got along with the king.

Toryism steadily diminished throughout this period, although it never entirely disappeared. Its main focus remained the defense of the Church of England. The fact that the episcopal church of Scotland had been replaced by Presbyterianism after the Glorious

Revolution of 1688 greatly concerned English Tories. However, Presbyterianism was not as popular a movement in England as it was in Scotland, and as it became clear that the Whigs, despite some of their differences with the leaders of the Church of England, were not going to destroy it, Toryism began to lose its point. The control the Whigs exercised over the Hanoverian kings made it unlikely that Tories would ever come back into power. The Tory party as an organized grouping was gone by mid-century, and even the word Tory was going out of use.

3. Wilkes and liberty

George III was the first Hanoverian to be born in Britain. Unlike his father and grandfather he had no interest in Hanover. He wanted to take a more active part in governing Britain, and in particular he wished to be free to choose his own ministers. As long as he worked with the small number of aristocrats from which the king's ministers were chosen, and who controlled Parliament, it did not seem as if he would have much difficulty. Parliament still represented only a very small number of people. In the eighteenth century, only house owners with a certain income had the right to vote. This was based on ownership of land worth forty shillings a year in the counties, but the amount varied from town to town. As a result, while the mid-century population of Britain was almost eight million, there were fewer than 250,000 voters, 160,000 of them in the counties and 85,000 in the towns or "boroughs". Only 55 of the 200 boroughs had more than 500 voters. The others were controlled by a small number of very rich property owners, sometimes acting together as a "**borough corporation**". Each county and each borough sent **two representatives** to Parliament.

This meant that bargains could be made between the two most powerful groups of people in each "**constituency**", allowing the chosen representative of each group to be returned to Parliament. It was not difficult for rich and powerful people either in the boroughs or in the counties to make sure that the man they wanted was elected to Parliament. In the countryside, most ordinary land owners also held land as tenants from the greater landowners. At that time, voting was not done in secret, and no tenant would vote against the wishes of his landlord in case he lost his land. Other voters were frightened into voting for the "right man", or persuaded by a gift of money. In this way, the great land owning aristocrats were able to control those who sat in Parliament, and make sure that MPs did what they wanted. Politics was a matter only for a small number of the gentry who had close connections with this political aristocracy. No one could describe Parliament in those days as democratic.

However, there was one MP, John Wilkes, who saw things differently. Wilkes was a Whig, and did not like the new government of George III. Unlike almost every other MP,

Wilkes also believed that politics should be open to free discussion by everyone. Free speech, he believed, was the basic right of every individual. When George III made peace with France in 1763 without telling his ally Frederick of Prussia, Wilkes printed a strong attack on the government in his own newspaper, *The North Briton*. The king and his ministers were extremely angry. They were unwilling to accept free speech of this kind. Wilkes was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London and all his private papers were taken from his home. Wilkes fought back when he was tried in court. The government claimed it had arrested Wilkes "of state necessity". The judge turned down this argument with the famous judgment that "public policy is not an argument in a court of law". Wilkes won his case and was released. His victory established principles of the greatest importance: that the freedom of the individual is more important than the interests of the state, and that no one could be arrested without a proper reason. Government was not free to arrest whom it chose. Government, too, was under the law. Wilkes's victory angered the king, but made Wilkes the most popular man in London.

The ruling class was not used to consider the opinions of ordinary people. Between 1750 and 1770, the number of newspapers had increased. These were read by the enormous number of literate people who could never hope to vote, but who were interested in the important matters of the time. They were mainly clerks, skilled workers and tradesmen. Improved roads meant that a newspaper printed in London could be reprinted in Liverpool two days later. Newspapers in their turn increased the amount of political discussion. Even working people read the papers and discussed politics and the royal family, as foreign visitors noticed. "Conversation clubs" met in different towns to discuss questions like "Under what conditions is a man most free?", or whether secret voting was necessary for political freedom. The fact that ordinary people who had no part to play in politics asked and discussed such questions explains why John Wilkes was so popular.

Wilkes' struggle showed that public opinion was now a new and powerful influence on politics. Wilkes's victory was important because he had shown that Parliament did not represent the ordinary people, and that the individual freedom was not assured. As a result of his victory people began to organise political activity outside Parliament in order to win their basic rights. Politics were no longer a monopoly of the landowning gentry. Newspapers were allowed to send their own reporters to listen to Parliament and write about its discussions in the newspapers. The age of public opinion had arrived.

4. Ireland and Scotland

James II's defeat by William of Orange in 1690 had severe and long-term effects on the Irish people. Over the next half century the Protestant parliament in Dublin passed laws to prevent the Catholics from taking any part in national life. Catholics could not become members of the Dublin parliament, and could not vote in parliamentary elections. No Catholic could become a lawyer, go to university, join the navy or accept any public post. Catholics were not even allowed to own a horse worth more than £5. It was impossible for Catholics to have their children educated according to their religion, because Catholic schools were forbidden. Although there were still far more Catholics than Protestants, they had now become second-class citizens in their own land. New laws were passed which divided Catholic families. The son of Catholic parents who became Protestant could take over his parents' property and use it as he wanted.

These actions put the Irish Catholic population in the same position as other colonized peoples later on. Hatred between the ruling Protestant settlers and the ruled Catholic Irish was unavoidable. By the 1770s, however, life had become easier and some of the worst laws against Catholics were removed. But not everyone wanted to give the Catholics more freedom. In Ulster, the northern part of Ireland, Protestants formed the first “**Orange Lodges**”, societies which were against any freedom for the Catholics. In order to increase British control, Ireland was united with Britain in **1801**, and the Dublin parliament closed. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland lasted for 120 years. Politicians had promised Irish leaders that when Ireland became part of Britain the Catholics would get equal voting opportunities. But George III, supported by most Tories and by many Protestant Irish landlords, refused to let this happen.

Scotland also suffered from the efforts of the Stuarts to win back the throne. The first “Jacobite” revolt to win the crown for James II's son, in 1715, had been unsuccessful. The Stuarts tried again in 1745, when James II's grandson, **Prince Charles Edward Stuart**, better known as “**Bonny Prince Charlie**”, landed on the west coast of Scotland. He persuaded some clan chiefs to join him. Many of these chiefs had great difficulty persuading the men in their clans to join the revolt. Some were told their homes would be burnt if they did not fight. Most clans did not join the rebellion, and nor did the men of the Scottish Lowlands. Bonny Prince Charlie was more successful at first than anyone could have imagined. His army of

Highlanders entered Edinburgh and defeated an English army in a surprise attack. Then he marched south.

Panic spread through England, because much of the British army was in Europe fighting the French. But success for Bonny Prince Charlie depended on Englishmen also joining his army. When the Highland army was over halfway to London, however, it was clear that few of the English would join him, and the Highlanders themselves were unhappy at being so far from home. The rebels moved back to Scotland. Early in 1746, they were defeated by the British army at **Culloden**, near Inverness. The rebellion was finished. The English army behaved with cruelty. Many Highlanders were killed, even those who had not joined the rebellion. Others were sent to work in America. Their homes were destroyed, and their farm animals killed. The fear of the Highland danger was so great that a law was passed forbidding Highlanders to wear their traditional skirt, the kilt. The old patterns of the kilt, called tartans, and the Scottish musical instrument, the bagpipe, were also forbidden. Some did not obey this law, and were shot.

5. Radicalism and the loss of the American Colonies

In 1764, there was a serious quarrel over taxation between the British government and its colonies in America. It was a perfect example of the kind of freedom for which Wilkes had been fighting. The British government continued to think of the colonists as British subjects. In 1700, there had been only 200, 000 colonists, but by 1770 there were 2.5 million. Such large numbers needed to be dealt with carefully. Some American colonists decided that it was not lawful for the British to tax them without their agreement. Political opinion in Britain was divided. Some felt that the tax was fair because the money would be used to pay for the defense of the American colonies against French attack. But several important politicians, including Wilkes and Chatham, agreed with the colonists that there should be **“no taxation without representation.”**

In 1773, a group of colonists at the port of Boston threw a shipload of tea into the sea rather than pay tax on it. The event became known as **“the Boston Tea party”**. The British government answered by closing the port. But the colonists then decided to prevent British goods from entering America until the port was opened again. This was rebellion, and the government decided to defeat it by force. The American War of Independence had begun. The war in America lasted from 1775 until 1783. The government had no respect for the politics

of the colonists, and the British army had no respect for their fighting ability. The result was a disastrous defeat for the British government. It lost everything except for Canada.

Many British politicians openly supported the colonists. They were called "**radicals**". For the first time British politicians supported the rights of the king's subjects abroad to govern themselves and to fight for their rights against the king. The war in America gave strength to the new ideas of democracy and of independence. Two of the more important radicals were **Edmund Burke and Tom Pain** who was the first to suggest that the American colonists should become independent of Britain. Burke, who himself held a mixture of both radical and conservative views, argued that the king and his advisers were once again too powerful, and that Parliament needed to get back proper control of policy.

Conclusion

The Georgian period was pivotal in establishing parliamentary supremacy in Britain. The transition to a limited monarchy, the rise of the Prime Minister, and the assertion of parliamentary sovereignty all contributed to a political environment where Parliament became the central authority in governance. This evolution laid the groundwork for the modern British political system, where the monarchy's role became largely ceremonial, and parliamentary democracy flourished. The most prominent political developments that happened in the 18th Century can be summarized in the following points:

- **Parliamentary Supremacy**

During the Georgian period (1714-1830), parliamentary supremacy became increasingly established in British politics, marking a significant evolution in the relationship between the monarchy and Parliament. This era saw the rise of a limited monarchy, where the power of the Crown was increasingly dependent on parliamentary support. However, it is worth noting that while parliamentary supremacy was a dominant trend during the Georgian period, it was not always absolute. The monarchy still retained some influence, particularly in foreign policy and personal matters. However, the overall trajectory was towards a more parliamentary system of government, which laid the foundation for the modern British democracy.

- **Transition of Power**

The Hanoverian Succession began with George I, whose accession marked a turning point. The political landscape shifted dramatically as the Tory government collapsed, leading to the rise of the Whigs, who dominated British politics for much of the 18th century. This transition was facilitated by the need for the new Hanoverian kings to rely on parliamentary support to govern effectively, given their foreign origins and the challenges they faced from Jacobite uprisings aimed at restoring the Stuart line.

- **Role of Prime Ministers**

The period saw the emergence of the role of the Prime Minister as a central figure in governance. Robert Walpole, often regarded as the first Prime Minister, served from 1722 to 1742 and exemplified the growing power of the office. His administration was marked by relative stability and economic prosperity, which helped to reinforce the authority of Parliament. This stability was crucial as it allowed Parliament to function effectively and assert its influence over the monarchy.

- **The Emergence and Evolution of Political Parties in the Georgian Era**

The Georgian era witnessed the formalization of Britain's political landscape, dominated by the rivalry between the Whigs and Tories. These factions gradually evolved into organized political parties, shaping governance and laying the foundations for modern parliamentary democracy. The consolidation of party power during this period marked a significant shift from a system dominated by individual aristocratic influence to one characterized by organized political factions, which competed for public support and parliamentary control.

Whigs and Tories: Britain's Main Political Factions

The Whigs, rooted in the aristocracy and mercantile class, championed a constitutional government and parliamentary supremacy, opposing the monarchy's absolute power and the Jacobite cause. They were characterized by their advocacy for religious toleration for

dissenters and their strong support for the Hanoverian succession. The period of Whig Supremacy, particularly from 1714 to 1760, allowed them to dominate British politics, with figures like Robert Walpole, often regarded as the first Prime Minister, effectively leading the government.

In contrast, the Tory Party represented the rural gentry and was closely aligned with the Anglican Church and traditional monarchy. Tories generally supported the legitimacy of the Stuart claimants and were often seen as more conservative, resistant to change, and sympathetic to Jacobite efforts to restore the Stuart monarchy. Following the Hanoverian succession and the failure of the Jacobite risings, many Tories were discredited, leading to their marginalization while the Whigs gained ascendancy.

The Whig-Tory rivalry defined Georgian politics, with each party representing opposing economic and social interests. The Whigs championed policies that favored trade and commerce, aligning with the emerging industrial and mercantile classes, while the Tories prioritized agrarian interests and the landed gentry.

As the century progressed, both parties began formalizing their structures, and the political landscape evolved. The Whigs increasingly advocated for reformist agendas, including expanded suffrage and rights for religious dissenters. Meanwhile, the Tories, under figures like William Pitt the Younger, sought to broaden their appeal to include merchants and the country gentry, forming a wider coalition. This competition catalyzed the formation of a more organized party system, where **party loyalty** and the ability to command majorities in Parliament became crucial.

The End

