

George Nicholas Speech in the Virginia Convention, 4 June 1788

I now consider their weight and power, and whether they will be sufficient to give them, as the Representatives of the people, their due weight in the government. By the Constitution, they are one entire branch of the Legislature, without whose consent no law can be passed;—all money bills are to originate in their House;—they are to have the sole power of impeachment;—their consent is necessary to all acts or resolutions for the appropriation of the public money;—to all acts for laying and collecting duties, imposts, and excises;—for borrowing money on the credit of the United States;—for creating all officers and fixing their salaries;—for coining money;—for raising and supporting armies;—for raising and maintaining a navy;—and, for establishing rules for the government of the land and naval forces: These are the powers which will be fixed in the House of Representatives. Hence it appears our Representatives have more comparative power in the scale of government, than the Commons of England, and yet in that country, the Commons possessing less powers, opposed with success much greater powers than our Representatives have to encounter. In that country the King is one entire branch of the Legislature, and an hereditary Monarch—can prorogue or dissolve, call or dismiss, the two Houses at his pleasure—besides his judicial influence, he is head of the church, fountain of honor, Generalissimo of the forces by sea and land, may raise what fleets and armies he pleases—is rendered personally sacred, by the constitutional maxim, that he can do no wrong—and besides several other great powers, has a grand revenue settled on him, sufficient to answer the ordinary ends of government; it being established as a custom, at the accession of every new King to settle such a revenue on him for life—and can increase the House of Lords at any time, and thereby extend his legislative influence. Notwithstanding the enormity of these powers it has been found, that the House of Commons, with powers greatly inferior to those of our Representatives, is a match for both the King and the Nobles. This superiority resulted from their having the power of granting or withholding supplies.—What will put this in a still clearer point of view is, that the House of Commons was not originally possessed of these powers: The history of the English Parliament will shew, that the great degree of power which they now possess, was acquired from beginnings so small that nothing but the innate weight of the power of the people, when lodged with their Representatives, could have effected it. In the reign of Edward the first, in the year 1295, the House of Commons were first called by legal authority: They were then confined to giving their assent barely to supplies to the Crown. In the reign of Edward the second, they first annexed petitions to the bills by which they granted subsidies. Under Edward the third, they declared they would not in future acknowledge any law to which they had not consented: In the same reign they impeached and brought to punishment, some of the Ministers of the Crown. Under Henry the fourth, they refused supplies until an answer had been given to their petitions; and have increased their powers in succeeding reigns to such a degree, that they entirely controul the operation of government, even in those cases where the King's prerogative gave him nominally the sole direction. Let us here consider the causes to which this uncommon weight and influence may be assigned. The government being divided into branches, Executive, and Legislative, in all contests between them, the people have divided into the favorers of one or the other; from their dread of the Executive and affection to their Representatives, they have always sided with the Legislature:

This has rendered the Legislature successful. The House of Commons have succeeded also by withholding supplies—they can by this power put a stop to the operations of government, which they have been able to direct as they pleased. This power has enabled them to triumph over all obstacles; it is so important, that it will in the end swallow up all others. Any branch of government that depends on the will of another for supplies of money, must be in a state of subordinate dependence, let it have what other powers it may. Our Representatives, in this case, will be perfectly independant, being vested with this power fully. Another source of superiority is the power of impeachment. In England very few Ministers have dared to bring on themselves an accusation by the Representatives of the people, by pursuing means contrary to their rights and liberties. Few Ministers will ever run the risk of being impeached, when they know the King cannot protect them by a pardon. This power must have much greater force in America, where the President himself is personally amenable for his mal-administration; the power of impeachment must be a sufficient check on the President's power of pardoning before conviction. I think we may fairly conclude, that if the House of Commons in England have been able to oppose with success a powerful hereditary Nobility, and an hereditary Monarch, with all the appendages of royalty, and immense powers and revenue; our Federal House of Representatives will be able to oppose with success, all attempts by a President only chosen for four years, by the people, with a small revenue and with limited powers, sufficient only for his own support; and a Senate chosen only for six years, one third of whom vacate their seats every two years, accountable to the State Legislatures, and have no separate interest from them or the people.

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