

Monarchy versus Parliament: England in the 17th century

Abstract

In the course of the 17th century, the political system in England changed from the absolute monarchy of the Tudors and early Stuarts to constitutional monarchy and the rule of Parliament. Whereas in France absolutism prevailed* and was symbolized by Louis XIV, the Sun King, constitutionalism irrevocably* limited the powers of the English kings and governments.

The Rise of Parliament

5 In some ways the position of a king had changed a great deal in the Middle Ages. One of the most important changes in the government was the growth of Parliament (i. e. the legislature* of the Kingdom of England).

In 1066, William of Normandy introduced a feudal system in which he sought the advice of a council of barons and bishops before making laws; this was called the “Great Council.”

10 In 1215, the barons secured a charter from King John, the “Magna Carta,”* which established that the king may not levy any taxes* without the consent of his royal council. This charter gradually developed into a “parliament” (from the French word “parler” = talk).

At first the only members of parliament were very rich nobles whose seats were hereditary*. This changed in the late thirteenth century when rich townspeople and landowners were invited. They formed the “House of Commons” (analogous* to the already existing “House of Lords”). Since their seats were not hereditary, their successors were elected to represent their counties or towns.

As a rule, Parliament only met when the King asked it to and the monarch could dismiss Parliament whenever he wanted. There was little doubt about who played the biggest part in running the country! But after 1540 there was some new thinking about the role of Parliament. There were different causes which led to Parliament becoming more important. One was that English kings were often short of money. By 1500 they needed Parliament to raise taxes to pay for fighting wars, for example the war with Spain (1585–1601), which was very costly. Between 1529 and 1536, Henry VIII argued with the Pope and set up his own Church of England. Since the King needed support, he asked Parliament to vote for his changes. For seven years the Members of Parliament met on and off*. No Parliament had ever met for so long. With rising self-confidence, the MPs* came to think of themselves as the King’s partners rather than as his subordinates*.

James I and the Divine Right of Kings

When the last Tudor monarch, Elizabeth I, died in 1603, she was succeeded by James I of the House of Stuart. James had already been King of Scotland since he was thirteen months old. Under his rule, the kingdoms of England and Scotland were dynastically united by having the same king.

30 James I based his rule on the “Divine Right of Kings”: He believed that the king’s authority came straight from God, which made him responsible to God only. Accordingly*, he expected his subjects to obey him; anyone who disobeyed the King was disobeying God.

Being a talented scholar, James elaborated* on his political ideas in two works which he wrote in 1597 and 1598: “The True Laws of Free Monarchies” and “Basilikon Doron” (Greek for “Royal

Gift”). These books established the ideological foundation of absolute monarchy. According to the “True Laws,” a king was allowed to impose new laws simply by royal prerogative* (although he had to take heed* of tradition and God’s will, who would otherwise punish him for being a wicked king).

5 “Basilikon Doron” was a practical guide to kingship, written as an instruction book for his four-year-old son. It contains James’s advice concerning parliaments: they should only be consulted “for the necessitie of new Lawes, which would be but seldome” (http://www.stoics.com/basilikon_doron.html). James I obviously disliked Parliament which he merely regarded as being the King’s head court. In his view, MPs argued too much and voiced their opinions without being asked. There can be little doubt that James would have preferred them to do just as he
10 told them.

Such beliefs notwithstanding*, James was repeatedly forced to summon the English Parliament because of his growing financial problems, which were due partly to creeping inflation but mostly to the financial incompetence of his court. Arguments between the King and Parliament became more and more severe until the fourth (and last) Parliament under his reign was dissolved following James’s
15 death on 14th March 1625.

Charles I: Ruling without Parliament

The arguments that James I had with Parliament about money did not end then but rather came to a head* three years later. In 1628 Parliament told Charles I, who had succeeded to the throne after his father’s death, that they would not give him money unless he assented to the “Petition of Right,” a document which confirmed the principle that no taxes could be raised by the King without Parlia-
20 ment’s permission. Charles saw his prerogative infringed* upon and refused to sign the petition. Instead, he dismissed the MPs and decided to rule without Parliament for the time being.

The reign of Charles I was also characterized by religious conflicts, in particular about the issue of how far the English Reformation should progress. The King wished to direct the Church of England away from Calvinism into a more traditional direction, which caused a conflict with the Puritans* (a
25 group of Protestants that wanted to ‘purify’ the church). When Charles re-introduced stained-glass* windows and made services more ceremonial, the Puritans accused him of trying to make England Catholic again. The King reacted by having Puritan books banned and Puritan leaders imprisoned.

The religious conflicts got beyond control when Charles tried to force Scottish Protestants to use the English “Book of Common Prayer” in 1638. This was resisted by many Presbyterian Scots, who
30 saw the new Prayer Book as a vehicle for introducing Anglicanism* to Scotland. In order to defend their ‘true’ Protestant religion, they went to war. Charles’s army was beaten by the Scots in 1640. After eleven years of personal rule, he was forced to call another Parliament to raise some money for a counteroffensive. But rather than rescuing the King from this difficult situation, the majority of MPs were only keen on passing laws to make sure that he could never rule without Parliament again.

35 The arguments between Charles I and Parliament were interrupted in 1641 by some horrible news from Ireland. The Catholic Irish gentry had rebelled and killed a great number of Protestant English settlers. An army was needed to put the rebellion down. But when the King asked for funds to raise an army, many MPs feared that these forces might later be used against Parliament itself. They demanded that they should be allowed to appoint the commander-in-chief, not the King. When Charles learned

about this, he assumed that they wanted to take all his power. Desperately trying to retain control, he ordered the arrest of five leading MPs, only to find out that they had gone into hiding.

Charles felt that Parliament had gone too far. He left London and set about raising an army. When Parliament raised an army, too, England was plunged* into a civil war that lasted for nine years.

Civil War and Commonwealth

5 The outbreak of the Civil War turned England into a divided nation. People had to make up their minds whether they supported the King or Parliament. Sometimes, even friends and family members found themselves on different sides. Those who fought in support of the King were called Royalists (or “Cavaliers”); those who sided with Parliament were called Parliamentarians (or “Roundheads”).

10 There were many battles between 1642 and 1644, but neither side was able to gain a decisive victory. Then Oliver Cromwell, a Parliamentarian leader and outstanding commander, realized that only a well-trained and motivated army could beat the King’s forces. He helped form the “New Model Army,” which smashed the Royalists in its first battle at Naseby in 1645. Charles, who had in vain hoped that other European kings would come to his rescue, was captured by Parliament only a year later.

15 For some time, the MPs did not really know what to do with the King. By 1649, Cromwell and some of his friends had decided that, as long as Charles lived, there would always be the danger of retaliation by the Royalists. Therefore, they tried him for having unlawfully waged war against Parliament and the people of England. Without avail Charles claimed that Parliament had no lawful authority to put him on trial, and, in the end, the judges found him guilty of treason*, being a "tyrant, traitor, murderer and public enemy". His beheading took place on a scaffold* outside the Royal Banqueting Hall on 30th January 1649.

25 For the next four years Parliament virtually* ruled the country. The MPs passed a number of laws to abolish the monarchy and turn England into a republic, the “Commonwealth.” However, the MPs did little to satisfy any of the hopes for a better England. By 1653, Parliament had become extremely unpopular. With the help of the army, Cromwell dismissed the House by force and made himself “Lord Protector.” Although he did not call himself King, he quite interestingly behaved like a monarch, summoning Parliament and asking them to raise taxes and make laws.

30 When Cromwell died in 1658, his son Richard ruled as Protector for a short time. Unlike his father, he did not have the confidence and support of the army. When he was forced to resign on 6th May 1659, the country was left with no clear leader.

Charles II and the Restoration*

By 1660, many people in England had arrived at the conclusion that the attempt to rule without a king had failed. On the initiative of General George Monck, who was in effective control of England, Parliament sent an invitation to the son of Charles I, Charles II, to come back to England and take over. Thus invited, Charles returned from exile and landed at Dover on 25th May. When he entered London 35 four days later, he was welcomed by cheering crowds. In the view of the public, the restoration of Stuart rule was basically interpreted as a restoration of the natural order.

Charles II proved to be a clever and intuitive ruler. Despite the fact that he was secretly a Catholic, he publicly supported the Church of England; and although he occasionally tried to find ways of get-

ting round Parliament, he seemed to fully co-operate with the MPs. His reign was a time of prosperity* for most of his contemporaries. Trade improved and even disasters such as the Great Fire of London, which burnt down most of the city centre in 1666, were overcome quickly.

When Charles II died in 1685, his younger brother James II became king. Being a fervent* Catholic, he openly promoted Catholics in the army and at court, which made him run into conflict with Parliament and the leading elites* of the kingdom. When his wife Mary gave birth to a son, who was baptized* a Catholic, Parliament feared that a Catholic monarchy would try to re-establish Catholicism as the official religion of England. The conflict came to a head.

Glorious Revolution and Bill of Rights

Seven leading noblemen conspired to remove James II from the throne and replace him by the Dutch stadtholder* William of Orange, who was married to James's daughter Mary. They sent him a letter asking him to invade. When William's army landed in October 1688, it met no resistance. James's troops deserted him while he himself fled to France. Since this event was largely non-violent, it is usually referred to by historians as the "Glorious* (or "Bloodless") Revolution."

After William's arrival in London, Parliament convened and offered the throne to William and Mary as joint* rulers of England and Ireland. Before, they had to agree to an important document – the "Bill of Rights" – which made it crystal clear that no English monarch could ever hope to rule without the support of Parliament.

Officially called "An Act Declaring the Rights and Liberties of the Subject and Settling the Succession of the Crown," it is one of the basic documents of English constitutional law. By signing it, William and Mary agreed to a constitution which limited the authority of the monarch and confirmed Parliament as the only legislative power. In detail, they had to accept various political rights that could not be taken away by the crown, such as the freedom from royal interference* with the law, the freedom from taxation by royal prerogative, the freedom of speech in Parliament, the freedom to elect members of Parliament every three years, etc.

The Bill of Rights was later complemented* by the "Act of Settlement" (1701) which provided that the throne would pass to the Electress* Sophia of Hanover (a granddaughter of James I) and her Protestant descendants, thus safeguarding that Roman Catholics could not be king or queen in the future.

The Glorious Revolution and the Bill of Rights must be regarded as major steps in the evolution of British government. They effectively paved the way towards parliamentary supremacy* and, at the same time, curtailed* the rights of the monarchy for good. Thus England became a constitutional monarchy and a role model which inspired future generations, not only in Great Britain, but also abroad. (Consider, for example, the American Declaration of Independence or the French Revolution.)

André Krowke