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HIST 1110

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### First Major Exam: England's Constitutional Crises

England in the seventeenth century was a trying time for both monarchs and the people. It was a defining century. James I, unsociable and arrogant, was a major change for England to accept in contrast with the personable and considerate Elizabeth, who brought the country into the seventeenth century. But, the problems Parliament and the people saw with James I were only the beginning of a difficult and trying century for England. The following will discuss how England's problems began, what the Kings and parliaments did to confront the issues and each other, and how through civil wars the nation renewed again its hope for a better future under a new constitutional monarchy.

Absolute monarchy has been some nations' prosperous blessing and damning curse. Time, circumstance and the person on the throne has determined which of either it was. For the barons of 1215, having an absolutist monarch was a curse that they wanted to modify towards a blessing. When they obliged King John I to sign the document, it set in full motion the development of an eventual constitutional monarchy. From the onset the subjects and their king would battle politically and physically for rights and power over the next couple hundred years (Woolf).

When James I inherited the throne, succeeding Elizabeth I, he also inherited a slew of problems and a parliament that would not put up with his irresponsible fiscal policies. James I was somehow under the impression that England was not a parliamentary monarchy, but that he

was *the* sovereign power of England, divinely sanctioned by God. He even wrote a book about it called *A Trew Law of Free Monarchies*. His policies reflected this belief in absolutism. He tried to institute new taxes, gave away monopolies, and did everything he could to get funds into the royal coffers. Parliament complained about his policies, but did not offer solutions either. Consequently, the nation's debt grew larger and larger, and the economy suffered as well.

Like his father, Charles I was a staunch absolutist and was irritated by parliament. But, the feelings were mutual. According to Hunt, et al. Parliament forced Charles to sign the Petition of Right, which prevented him from levying taxes without the consent of Parliament. Charles reacted by "simply refusing to call Parliament into session between 1629 and 1640" (Hunt, et al. 498). To raise taxes he relied on emergency levies and other loopholes, such as the "ship money" levy. Many subjects refused to pay what they saw as an illegal tax.

On religious matters, Charles ignored the needs of the Puritans and even went in the opposition to the desires for toleration or compromise by appealing ~~only~~ to his wife's French Catholic roots. The Puritans protested and spread pamphlets condemning elaborate ceremonies and other things that they saw as "popery", but they were met with punishments in the Court of Star Chamber, a court controlled by the king. The Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, beat and tortured the Puritans. When the Anglican church tried to institute a Book of Common Prayer, which would affect all religions in Britain, the Scots revolted and put Charles in an awkward position.

For the past decade, Charles had refused to call Parliament into session. Now, with a war on his hands, he needed to call Parliament into session in order to impose taxes to pay for the war. Because they had not been able to convene for over a decade, the House of Commons had some unfinished business that they needed to address, namely fixing a royal tyrant's power grab.

Hunt, et al., outlining their actions, said, "Parliament removed [William] Laud from office, ordered the execution of an unpopular royal commander, abolished the Court of Star Chamber, repealed recently levied taxes, and provided for a parliamentary assembly at least once every three years, thus establishing a constitutional check on royal authority" (498). Charles, unwilling to cede absolute authority, stormed parliament and soon after organized an army in order to force his way to power. Civil war broke out between Charles and Parliament, and it lasted four years (1642-1646). In the end it was, according to the Encyclopædia Britannica, Oliver Cromwell, a member of the House of Commons, that lead Parliament's New Model Army to victory over the royalists under Prince Rupert at the Battle of Naseby (Battle of Naseby).

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Throughout the first English civil war, the supporters of Parliament were divided amongst themselves over the subject of suffrage and religion. The Presbyterians wanted a Calvinist church with a degree of centralized authority, but the Independents sought for autonomous congregations, independent from any central church government. As debate raged over church organization, new doctrines emerged and with them new religions such as the Baptists, the Diggers, the Seekers, the Ranters and the Quakers. All of the emerging doctrines held that there should be complete equality before God and "greater participation in church governance" (Hunt, et al. 499). All of these new doctrines especially appealed to the middle and lower classes, but to the political elite this signaled the pathway to anarchism, disbelief and immorality.

The Independent Puritans ousted their compatriots, the Presbyterians, from Parliament and formed what came to be known as the Rump Parliament. Under this Parliament the fate of Charles I was set. He was tried and beheaded on January 30, 1649 at the hand of the headsman Richard Brandon, who ironically was the third cousin to Queen Elizabeth (Davey 231-232). The

Rump Parliament also abolished the monarchy and the House of Lords. A new English republic had been formed, and Oliver Cromwell was at the helm. He tolerated the Puritan sects to worship as they might, but persecuted the Catholics and Anglicans. After years of war and built up resentment, Cromwell died in 1658 and in 1660 the pendulum swung its blade in the opposite direction with a newly elected Anglican Parliament and a new king, Charles II.

Charles II, in exchange for his placement on the throne issued the Declaration of Breda. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, "It expressed his desire for a general amnesty, liberty of conscience, an equitable settlement of land disputes, and full payment of arrears to the army. He left the specifics to Parliament" (Declaration of Breda). But, soon after reinstatement <sup>Pavl.</sup> he booted out thousands of Puritan Ministers, and instituted strict adherence to Anglican dogma (Hunt, et al. 503).

<sup>Pavl.</sup> Charles further pushed his persecutions by purging the commonwealth of nonconformists by instituting such acts as the Corporation Act of 1661, the Act of Uniformity of 1662, the Coventicle Act of 1664, and the Five Mile Act of 1665. All aimed at dissolving any non-Anglican influences that might threaten his absolute control over the nation. But, in a political move to secure funds from Louis XIV of France he made a deathbed conversion to Catholicism and prior to that had suspended the penal code against Catholics and Protestants alike. The Cavalier Parliament retorted by refusing to give him money for war unless he signed the Test Act of 1673, which would allow only Anglicans to hold national office. He reluctantly signed the act (United Kingdom: Charles II).

Parliament continued to fight for control of the nation by attempting to legally bar Roman Catholics from ever seating the throne through the Exclusionary Acts, but Charles II dismissed parliament and called for new elections three times, twice in 1679 and then again in 1681

(United Kingdom: Charles II Par. 10). He was not getting the policies he desired and feared the loss of the throne. After an apparently fabricated plot to assassinate the king in 1683, there were no protests when he broke the Triennial Act by failing to assemble Parliament in 1684.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica in their article on Charles II, "He was now fully master of his state—financially independent of Parliament [through French subsidies and flourishing English Commerce] and politically secure, with loyal Tory servants predominating in local and national government. He died in 1685 at the height of his power" (Par. 12).

Whigs

James II succeeded his brother as king upon his death and at first strove for an equal environment for all religions. The Parliament of 1685 was very gracious towards the king, granting him customs revenues for life and money to suppress the Monmouth rebellion. James saw this turn in his favor as more than it was. He repealed the Test Act, the act requiring oaths of allegiance to Anglicism and the sort for governing officials, and gave some Catholics military positions. He grossly misinterpreted the recent events. England, in lieu of French anti-Protestantism laws and persecutions, was enraged at Catholic powers. From then on, whatever James did to calm the fury only fueled the fire of hatred and dissolution. When he tried to force Catholic integration it was met with resentment. When he showed the Quakers favor, royal ministers resigned.

After a scandalous trial of seven bishops who refused to endorse the newly reinstated Declaration of Indulgences, and all having been acquitted by a jury, and having recently produced a male heir, James was now seen as a major threat to the English public welfare. Through a crafty invitation, William of Orange was requested to invade England and seize the throne. The revolution and transfer of power was practically immediate. James fled to France and William and his wife Mary were granted the throne on condition that they accept a new bill of

rights and equal partnership in a constitutional government. The balance of powers was finally established. William and Mary, as joint rulers, established Protestant freedom of worship, agreed to have Parliament be an independent governing body, and began a period of joint Parliamentary-Monarchy rule under a written legal constitution.

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