Great Britain: The Development of the Early Modern State

Several components factored into the development of a constitutional monarchy in Great Britain; the three leading factors were power, money and religion. The beginning of the end for the English monarchy's supreme rule began when James I assumed the throne and eighty-five years later it ended in the form of a bill of rights and government being held accountable to ~~the people~~ through the joint leadership of the monarchy and Parliament.

The financial turmoil inherited by James I from his predecessor, Queen Elizabeth I, was at the heart of the monarchy-Parliament conflict. Parliament was unwilling to provide James with the funds necessary for the crown and refused approval for new taxes. Furthermore, Parliament failed to provide the monarchy any recourse in securing needed revenues, leaving the crown in a tight bind, which resulted in James seeking revenue from sources not sanctioned by Parliament.

The new notion of Divine Right further exacerbated the monarchy-Parliament conflict. In a book entitled *True Law of Free Monarchs*, 1598, which James I authored, it is written of Parliament's authority in regards to the monarch's, or James', power that, "it lies in the power of no parliament to make any kind of law or statute, without his scepter [that is, authority] be to it, for giving it the force of law" (Perry 20). Later, in an address to Parliament in March of 1610, James goes on to say that, "the state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth: for kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called gods…[And] I will not be content that my power be disputed upon" (Perry 20-21). From these excerpts, it is clear that James would not stand for any opposition to his authority, for he was convinced that God bestowed it on him. It is therefore not surprising that a struggle for power occurred between James and a Parliament full of disgruntled men tired of paying for the ineptitude of monarchs who flaunted their power yet neglected the people and their rights.

James' son, Charles I, also butted heads with Parliament. Finances were still tight for the monarchy, so Charles extended existing taxes into new areas, instituted the policy of *thorough*, forced loans, and insisted that landowners house troops. When Parliament forced him to sign the Petition of Right, Charles dismissed them all (from 1629-1640) in the vain hope that he could rule without further interference.

The crown's abuse of loopholes to gain revenue would have gone over better if Charles had not been so disliked by his people. Charles, paranoid, indecisive, and ineffectual in solving any of the state's problems, continued to preach to his people – who liked him even less after he dismissed Parliament – of his divine right to rule. Using such an argument ensured that religion would inevitably play a role in the continued rivalry for power between crown and Parliament, for his power could not be refuted without calling into question his claim to God's authorization. More than just claims to divine right, Charles' preference for formal and ritualistic worship in the Church of England and support of the zealous archbishop William Laud put him at greater odds with the Puritans. The heightened religious tensions between Puritans and Anglicans deepened the strain on the nation's stability. Charles, lacking money and in disagreement with Parliament, could not afford to fight a religious battle; this, however, failed to stop him and Laud from entering one.

It was the increased strain on religious relations brought on by these two men that began the final struggle between Charles and Parliament. Laud, who sat on the Courts of High Commission and the Star Chamber, mercilessly persecuted dissenters and made the mistake of taking his beliefs to Scotland. The Scots rebelled against Laud and his preaching, defeated England's forces, and invaded England. Proving that he lacked the means to effectively rule as an absolute monarch (a bureaucracy and standing army were impossible to achieve on his own

since he had lost the needed respect of the landed gentry through his botched financial policies and religious oppression), Charles was compelled to call Parliament back into session to assist in fighting off the invading Scots. Thus began the Long Parliament, 1640-1660.

Called back into session, Parliament refused to see itself as a "temporary body" and petitioned the crown to address the long-standing grievances of the people in an attempt to, "undo what they saw as the royal tyranny of the 1630s" (Hunt 498). Parliament disbanded the Court of Star Chamber, removed Laud from power, and reversed recently levied taxes. Moderate members of Parliament intended to leave reformation at that, but the actions of an increasingly frustrated and threatened Charles put an end to any such hope. Charles sent troops into Parliament seeking to destroy his opposition once and for all. Sadly for Charles, the members of Parliament had been forewarned and civil war ensued for the next four years, 1642-1646.

Civil war divided the people into two groups; those on the side of the monarchy were known as Cavaliers and those on Parliament's side, the Roundheads. Despite religious differences among the Roundheads, they united under the military command of Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell organized the forces into the New Model Army and defeated the Cavaliers in 1645. Charles finally surrendered the following year. With the threats of the Cavaliers and crown conquered, the religious disputes that had been put aside came to the forefront. Presbyterians, desiring a Calvinist church with some central authority, controlled Parliament, while Independents, desiring self-ruling congregations free from other church government, controlled the army. Despite the end of civil war, religious conflict further delayed peace.

In 1648, Independents in the army performed a coup of Parliament, disposing of the Presbyterians, and leaving a "rump" Parliament of approximately seventy men. It was under this

Rump Parliament that Charles I was tried and sentenced to death. The monarchy was abolished, along with the upper house of Parliament (the House of Lords). The Puritan Republic, with Cromwell as the chairman of the Council of State, was put into place. Similar to the monarchy's claims of divine right, Cromwell believed himself to be "God's agent" (Hunt 502). Cromwell followed in the pattern of those that led before him by enacting laws based on his own prejudices concerning the various religions and sects in England. While granting limited freedom to Puritan sects and Jews, Cromwell continued to oppress Catholics by refusing them the right to public worship and outlawed the use of the Book of Common Prayer for Anglicans. Cromwell also continued in the tradition of expansion, engaging in wars abroad to expand England's and, by extension, his power. This course of action only led to conflicts on the home front. War meant more money and more money meant increasingly resentful landowners and merchants suffering from increased property taxes and customs duties. In 1653 when Parliament attempted to disband the army, Cromwell disbanded the Rump and named himself Lord Protector. Shutting down newspapers that criticized him and employing spies to keep tabs on his enemies, it is no surprise that Cromwell's death in 1658 went unmourned.

The newly elected and predominately Anglican Parliament of 1660 started with an invitation to Charles II to take back the throne. The return of Charles II initiated the brief return to absolute monarchy in England. It was religious conflict that brought it to a rapid end once more. The conflict between Catholic and Puritan that had been predominately in the background of the development of the modern state had existed since before the reign of James I. Therefore, for any resolution to be truly successful between monarchy and Parliament, it must also include a resolution for the religious conflicts.

Charles II attempted to create a religiously tolerant state by enacting the Declaration of Indulgence in 1673 that would suspend laws against Catholic and Protestant dissenters. Parliament retaliated with the passing of the Test Act, 1673, that required government officials to pledge allegiance to the Church of England. Parliament's urgency to ensure that Catholics never gained power was fueled by Charles' named successor, James II, a recent and open convert to Catholicism. But once again, Parliament found itself divided into two factions, the Tories, who supported a monarchy and were devoted Anglicans, and the Whigs, who sought a constitutional monarchy and strongly opposed any Catholic gaining the throne. In the end, as had occurred before, the two factions united over a common foe, this time coming in the form of a newborn babe. When it was announced that James II had fathered a male Catholic heir, Tories and Whigs combined forces in calling on William of Orange and his wife Mary, the Protestant daughter of James II, to take the throne. In a remarkably bloodless coup, William and Mary took the throne and James II fled.

William and Mary were jointly awarded the throne after agreeing to the condition placed before them by Parliament. William and Mary had to sign the Bill of Rights, 1689, which stipulated that: "William and Mary [could] not…raise a standing army or…levy taxes without Parliament's consent. They also agreed to call meetings of Parliament at least every three years, to guarantee free elections to parliamentary seats, and to abide by Parliament's decisions and not suspend duly passed laws" (Hunt 504). The Bill of Rights was a legal basis upon which Parliament could convene as an independent body that shared authority with the rulers (Hunt 504). While the Bill of Rights ended political turmoil, the Toleration Act of 1689 suppressed religious turmoil. The act, "granted all Protestants freedom of worship, though non-Anglicans

were still excluded from the universities; Catholics got no rights but were more often left alone to worship privately" (Hunt 504). It was far from perfect, but it was a step in the right direction.

The development of the early modern state in Great Britain was fraught with constant struggles for power, both externally, between monarchy and Parliament, and internally, among the factions in Parliament. Religious intolerance played an important role in many confrontations between the two sides, in particular as the catalyst between the last true absolute monarch, James II, and Parliament. Without such religious dissensions the creation of a constitutional monarchy in England might not have come to fruition until much later.

Works Citied

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