

# English Absolutism



## Absolutism vs. Constitutionalism

- Absolutism: a form of government in which a monarch has unlimited power
  - Many other governments have absolutism
  - France, Prussia, Russia, Austria
- Constitutionalism: governmental authority is limited by laws
  - laws can be written or unwritten
  - balance between government power & people's rights
  - England & Holland move toward constitutionalism
- The English monarchy and Parliament struggle between these two views



# The English Parliament

From 1544, Parliament included:

House of Lords  
upper class of aristocracy

House of Commons  
lower class of commoners





# Changes in the House of Commons

The “commoners” were becoming wealthy

New agricultural techniques improved agricultural yield

Old common lands enclosed (enclosure movement) and turned into sheep runs

Rented out lands

Invested in commercial ventures: cloth production, joint stock companies

Made good marriages



It is said that members of the House of Commons were so wealthy they could “Buy the House of Lords three times over!”

More \$ = better education

Willing to pay taxes but now they wanted to be sure they had a say

## From Tudors to Stuarts



1603: Queen Elizabeth dies (childless)

Tudor dynasty extinct

Her cousin James Stuart becomes King James I of England

(King James VI of Scotland)  
Son of Mary Queen of Scots

Stuart Dynasty Begins



### The Gunpowder Plot of 1605



a failed assassination attempt against King James I of England and VI of Scotland by a group of English Catholics

The plan was to blow up the House of Lords as the prelude to a revolt in which James's Catholic daughter would be installed as the head of state.

The plot was revealed to the authorities in an anonymous letter and during a search of the House of Lords at midnight conspirator Guy Fawkes was discovered guarding 36 barrels of gunpowder and arrested. Eight men, including Fawkes, were convicted and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered.

# James I

ruled from 1603-1625



Doesn't understand many English laws or customs  
(nor does he really care)

When urged to wave at crowds he states that he is tired  
and threatened to drop his pants  
“so they can cheer at my arse”

Believed in total jurisdiction over the people as outlined  
by the Divine Right of Kings:

As part of the Great Chain of Being, kings receive their  
power directly from God and are therefore responsible to  
no one except God

“The Trew Law of Free Monarchy”

his essay that discusses his ideas about divine right

*Kings are justly called gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth: for if you will consider the attributes to God, you shall see how they agree in the person of a king. God hath power to create or destroy, make or unmake at his pleasure, to give life or send death, to judge all and to be judged nor accountable to none; to raise low things and to make high things low at his pleasure, and to God are both souls and body due. And the like power have kings: they make and unmake their subjects, they have power of raising and casting down, of life and of death, judges over all their subjects and in all causes and yet accountable to none but God only. . . .*



## Puritans



English Protestants inspired by Calvin who wanted to  
purify the Anglican church of all Catholic elements, such  
as removing elaborate ceremonies, using wedding rings,  
where the altar is located in the church, etc.

many of England's gentry (wealthy landowners officially  
below the level of nobles - often also held local jobs like  
justice of the peace and sheriff) had become Puritan and  
as such became a major part of the House of Commons



wanted James I to remove the Episcopal system of church organization in England in  
which bishops, appointed by the king and in return, supported the king's authority,  
played a major administrative role

wanted the Presbyterian model in which ministers and elders (presbyters) played an  
important governing role

James refused, “No Bishop, No King”



# Conflict

Parliament was used to ruling *with* the king

Property was never taken without due process of law

To show their anger they used their “power of the purse,” refusing to appropriate funds to run the government



James was in a hard place

He had a lot of debt

He liked to squander money on a lavish court full of courtiers

(he flaunted male lovers in public)

All of this weakened respect for the monarchy



James dies in 1625 and is succeeded by his son, Charles I

only two years later in 1628 Parliament passed the

## **Petition of Right**

prohibiting:

taxes without Parliament's consent

arbitrary imprisonment

quartering of soldiers in private homes

declaring martial law in times of peace

# Charles I

accepts the Petition of Right at first, but later reneges (it limits his power)



decides that since he can't work with Parliament, he wouldn't summon it to meet

had “personal rule” from 1629-1640 (11 years!)

created ways to collect taxes without Parliament's cooperation

collected the Ship Money Tax (tax on seacoast towns to pay for coastal defense) from coastal AND inland towns, then used these funds for other government operations as well

middle class merchants and gentry opposed this, accusing the king of taxing without parliament's consent

# Disastrous Religious Policy



married Henrietta Maria, the Catholic sister of French King Louis XIII

this made the public suspicious of his own religious inclinations

was close with his Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud



both wanted to introduce more elaborate ceremonies to the Anglican church  
tried to impose the Anglican Book of Prayer AND bishoprics upon the Scottish Presbyterian Church

Scots rise up in rebellion against the king - Charles can't defend himself  
no money = no troops

forced to call a Parliament to appropriate funds for defense

## Long Parliament



called the Long Parliament because it lasts in some form from 1640 to 1660

abolished arbitrary courts

abolished taxes collected without Parliament's consent (esp. Ship Money)

passed the Triennial Act:

Parliament must meet at least once every three years with or without the king's consent

impeached Archbishop Laud

some wanted to eliminate bishops in Anglican church (this doesn't pass)

Charles, desperate for funds, accepts their decisions



# The English Civil War

1642-1651

Charles tries to widen a division in Parliament by arresting some radicals  
other radicals are outraged and civil war begins

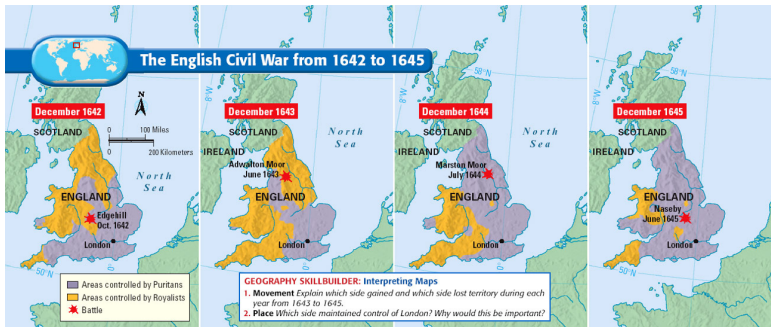
Charles = Royalists (“Cavaliers”)

Nobility, cavalry staff, rural gentry, merchants

V.

Parliament = Parliamentarians (“Roundheads”)

Militia of the city of London, country squires with business connections, men  
with the belief in the spiritual duty of serving



dedicated Puritan Oliver Cromwell created the New Model Army comprised of  
extreme Puritans who believed they were doing battle for the Lord  
Ends with Cromwell’s victory and capture of the king

# The Rump Parliament



Cromwell purges the Presbyterian  
members of Parliament

Rump Parliament of  
only 53 members remains

Tried and convicted Charles I of treason

*“He, the said Charles Stuart,  
as a tyrant, traitor, murder,  
and public enemy to the good  
people of his nation, shall be  
put to death by the severing of  
his head from his body.”*

Charles I is beheaded  
on January 30, 1649  
(VERY unusual in 1600’s)



# Cromwell Rules

Oliver Cromwell becomes Commander-In-Chief of the army,  
military dictator, and head the Rump Parliament



abolishes the Monarchy and the House of Lords  
brutally crushes Catholic uprising in Ireland  
kills 3,500 in one city and 2,000 soldiers and 1500  
civilians in another  
kills (direct/starvation) 1/3 of Irish people  
confiscates 2/3 of land and sells it to English  
landlords to pay off soldiers  
eternal hatred of the Irish toward the English  
1650 Scottish crown Charles II King of Scotland  
Cromwell squelches uprising - Charles II escapes

“Levellers” wanted freedom of speech, religious toleration, and a democratic republic  
accused of trying to bring everyone to the lowest common level

Cromwell executes their leaders to break their power

# Military Dictatorship



Cromwell is named “Lord Protector” and  
creates a 15-member Council of State

triennial parliaments still required and they  
had the sole power to raise taxes

Cromwell found it difficult to work with  
Parliament

members debated his authority and wanted  
to create a Presbyterian State Church

1655 Cromwell dissolves Parliament  
divides the country into 11 military  
districts,  
each ruled by a major general

effectively destroys both the king and the  
Parliament



# Cromwell's Rules

gave all but Catholics the right to practice their religion

censored the press and closed theaters

changed feast days to fast days (celebrate the saints)



banned Christmas celebrations

forbade the use of makeup,  
colorful dress, and the playing of  
sports

punishments included  
whippings, being put in the  
stocks, fines, and/or jail terms

# Cromwell Dies



Cromwell dies in 1658

malaria? kidney infection? poisoning?

(his daughter had mysteriously died a month earlier)

Coffin escorted by 30,000 soldiers

*"It was the joyfulest funeral I ever saw;  
for there were none that cried but dogs"*

John Evelyn

Cromwell's son Richard tries to succeed him –  
doesn't work

after only 18 months the military government  
decides they aren't effective

Charles' 19 yr old son Charles II comes out of  
exile and is restored to the throne

monarchy reestablished  
called "The Restoration"



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after the monarchy was re-established Royalists desecrated Cromwell's body

on January 30, 1661 (anniversary of Charles I's execution 12 years earlier)

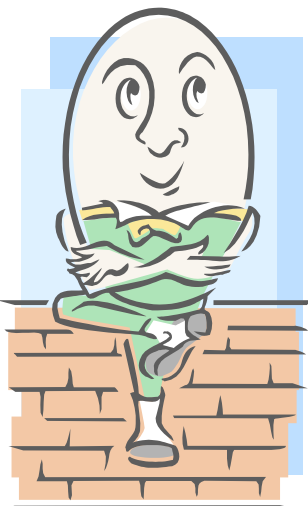
exhumed, hanged, and drawn and quartered

his head was placed on a pole outside Westminster Abbey for 24 years

(the traditional punishment for treason at the time)



## Is Humpty Dumpty about the English Civil War?



"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.  
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.  
All the king's horses and all the king's men  
Couldn't put Humpty together again."

"According to an insert taken from the East Anglia Tourist Board in England, Humpty Dumpty was a powerful cannon used in the Siege of Colchester during the English Civil War. It was mounted on top of the church in Colchester, a Royalist stronghold against a Roundheads siege in the summer of 1648. The church tower was hit by enemy cannon fire and the top of the tower was blown off, sending 'Humpty' tumbling to the ground. Naturally all the King's horses and all the King's men (royalist cavalry and infantry respectively) tried to mend 'him' but in vain."

*Professor David Daube in The Oxford Magazine of February 16, 1956*