

### English Absolutism

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were hard times in Europe. The Reformation produced thought that began to be imagined in areas outside of religion. In particular, the Reformation doctrines of individual liberty, and the belief where everyone shared religious authority equally, spread political dissension and doubt across the face of Europe.

Political philosophers attempted to extricate themselves from these matters through two different, contradictory approaches: "natural law" or "the Divine Right of Kings." According to natural law thinkers, there were natural laws which should govern states and their relations to their citizens. According to the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, certain kings ruled because they were specifically chosen by God to be kings. Surprisingly, both of these approaches could yield the same result: the idea that the best form of government is an **autocracy**, or rule by a single person. This person was not to be questioned or disobeyed; this became known as "absolutism," since the monarch ruled with "absolute" power.

1. What is an autocracy? What is absolutism?

### England

When Elizabeth I came to power in England a whole new period in English history began. The Elizabethan Age lasted from 1558-1603, and boasted commercial expansion, exploration, and colonization in the New World. During this time the Muscovy Company was founded as the first joint stock company, and the British East India Company quickly followed suit. Sir Francis Drake circumnavigated the globe. The first English colonists settled in Roanoke, Virginia, and Shakespeare wrote his masterpieces. This time was considered a golden age.

Queen Elizabeth I strengthened England politically and internationally, giving the country a unified foundation and a name of power in European affairs. Inspiring nationalism, encouraging expansionism, and respecting the individual lives of her subjects, Elizabeth not only established herself as an effective leader, but she proved to be the greatest model for absolutism in European history.

After her death in 1607 James I took the throne. He combined the thrones of England and Scotland; he also attempted to institute reforms to accommodate both Catholics and Puritans, a form of Calvinism. The Puritans did not recognize the power of the king over religious matters, and James I claimed divine right. At this time the Puritans fled to America.

James I at one of his speeches to parliament in 1609 said: *"The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth ... Kings are justly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth...God has 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. 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 yet accountable to none but God only.*

1. How did Elizabeth change England?
2. According to James I what can kings do?

Charles I rose to power in 1625. Three years later, desperate for money from parliament, he agreed to sign the Petition of Right. This was a document limiting taxes and forbidding unlawful imprisonment. Charles however, ignored the petition after he secured the funds he needed and claimed divine right. Charles' rule was resented by Scotland and Scotland soon invaded England in 1640. Because of this Charles was forced to call parliament into session. This parliament is known as the Long Parliament because it sat for twenty years from 1640-1660.

The Long Parliament limited the power of the monarch. In 1641, parliament denied Charles' request for funds to fight against the rebellion. Charles arrested members of the parliament and it sparked a civil war. Parliament raised an army called the Roundheads under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell. They defeated the armies of Charles I who were known as Cavaliers. Charles I was tried and executed for his actions. Oliver Cromwell rose to power soon after, not as a monarch but as Lord Protector of what became the English Commonwealth.

When Cromwell ruled as Protector, he ruled with religious intolerance and violence. These actions caused resentment but Cromwell died in 1658. After his death parliament invited Charles II to take the throne. Charles II was son of Charles I, and when he arrived he reinstated a limited monarchy. This was known as the Stuart Restoration.

1. What was the petition of the Right?
2. What was the Stuart Restoration?

Charles II was a patron of the arts and less restrictive than his predecessors. Charles II was a closet Catholic. In 1679, Charles II agreed to the Habeas Corpus Act, which protects people from arrests without due process. When Charles was dying, a priest admitted him into the Catholic Church and he received the last rites. He died in 1685 and was succeeded by the Duke of York, who became James II.

James II was openly Catholic, very unpopular and he believed in the divine right of kings. He was the last Catholic to reign over England. To protect himself from rebellions, James sought to establish a large standing army. By putting Catholics in charge of the army, the King was drawn into a conflict with Parliament. Parliament was cancelled never to meet again during James's reign.

James II made substantial enemies especially when it came to religion. All of his policies led up to the Glorious Revolution in 1688. James II was driven out of power by Parliament and fled to France. He was replaced by his son-in-law and daughter, William and Mary the Protestant rulers from the Netherlands. William and Mary promptly signed the English Bill of Rights in 1689. The basic tenets of the Bill of Rights 1689 are: Englishmen, as embodied by Parliament, possessed certain civil and political rights that could not be taken away. Some included:

1. freedom from royal interference with the law
2. freedom from taxation by royal prerogative, without agreement by Parliament
3. freedom to petition the King
4. freedom from cruel and unusual punishments
5. Roman Catholics could not be king or queen of England
6. The Sovereign was required to swear a coronation oath to maintain the Protestant religion.

The Glorious Revolution ensured that England's future monarchs would be Anglican, and their powers would be limited.

1. What was the Habeas Corpus Act?
2. What was the Glorious revolution?
3. What are some points from the English Bill of Rights?

### King James I Decrees

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 are called gods. There be three principal similitudes that illustrate the state of monarchy: one taken out of the word of God; and the two other out of the grounds of policy and philosophy. In the Scriptures kings are called gods, and so their power after a certain relation compared to the divine power. Kings are also compared to fathers of families: for a king is truly the father of his people. And lastly, kings are compared to the head of this microcosm of the body of man.

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. . . .

I conclude then this point touching the power of kings with this axiom of divinity, That as to dispute what God may do is blasphemy....so is it sedition in subjects to dispute what a king may do in the height of his power. But just kings will ever be willing to declare what they will do, if they will not incur the curse of God. I will not be content that my power be disputed upon; but I shall ever be willing to make the reason appear of all my doings, and rule my actions according to my laws. . . I would wish you to be careful to avoid three things in the matter of grievances:

First, that you do not meddle with the main points of government; that is my craft . . . to meddle with that were to lesson me . . . I must not be taught my office. Secondly, I would not have you meddle with such ancient rights of mine as I have received from my predecessors . . . . All novelties are dangerous as well in a politic as in a natural body. And therefore I would be loath to be quarreled in my ancient rights and possessions, for that were to judge me unworthy of that which my predecessors had and left me. And lastly, I pray you beware to exhibit for grievance anything that is established by a settled law, and whereunto . . . you know I will never give a plausible answer; for it is an undutiful part in subjects to press their king, wherein they know beforehand he will refuse them.

From King James I, *Works*, (1609)

1. How does James justify his position?
2. What does this say about James I and his Kingship?
3. How do you think people feel about this message?