
14 Republican and Restoration Britain

Republican Britain · Catholicism, the Crown and the new constitutional monarchy · Scotland and Ireland · Foreign relations

Republican Britain

Several MPs had commanded the Parliamentary army. Of these, the strongest was an East Anglian gentleman farmer named Oliver Cromwell. He had created a new “model” army, the first regular force from which the British army of today developed. Instead of country people or gentry, Cromwell invited into his army educated men who wanted to fight for their beliefs.

Cromwell and his advisers had captured the king in 1645, but they did not know what to do with him. This was an entirely new situation in English history. Charles himself continued to encourage rebellion against Parliament even after he had surrendered and had been imprisoned. He was able to encourage the Scots to rebel against the Parliamentary army. After the Scots were defeated some Puritan officers of the Parliamentary army demanded the king’s death for treason.

The Parliamentary leaders now had a problem. They could either bring Charles back to the throne and allow him to rule, or remove him and create a new political system. By this time most people in both Houses of Parliament and probably in the country wanted the king back. They feared the Parliamentarians and they feared the dangerous behaviour of the army. But some army commanders were determined to get rid of the king. These men were Puritans who believed they could build God’s kingdom in England.

Two-thirds of the MPs did not want to put the king on trial. They were removed from Parliament by



It is said that Oliver Cromwell, with Puritan humility, told his painter, Samuel Cooper, to include the warts on his face. But as well as humility Cromwell also had a soldier’s belief in authority. As a result he was unpopular as Lord Protector. He failed to persuade the English that republican government was better than monarchy, mainly because people had less freedom under his authoritarian rule than they had under Charles I.

the army, and the remaining fifty-three judged him and found him guilty of making “war against his kingdom and the Parliament”. On 31 January 1649 King Charles was executed. It was a cold day and he wore two shirts so that the crowd who came to watch would not see him shiver and think him frightened.

King Charles died bravely. As his head was cut from his body the large crowd groaned. Perhaps the execution was Charles's own greatest victory, because most people now realised that they did not want Parliamentary rule, and were sorry that Charles was not still king.

From 1649–1660 Britain was a republic, but the republic was not a success. Cromwell and his friends created a government far more severe than Charles's had been. They had got rid of the monarchy, and they now got rid of the House of Lords and the Anglican Church.

The Scots were shocked by Charles's execution. They invited his son, whom they recognised as King Charles II, to join them and fight against the English Parliamentary army. But they were defeated, and young Charles himself was lucky to escape to France. Scotland was brought under English republican rule.

Cromwell took an army to Ireland to punish the Irish for the killing of Protestants in 1641, and for the continued Royalist rebellion there. He captured two towns, Drogheda and Wexford. His soldiers killed the inhabitants of both, about 6,000 people in all. These killings were probably no worse than the killings of Protestants in 1641, but they remained powerful symbols of English cruelty to the Irish.

The army remained the most powerful force in the land. Disagreements between the army and Parliament resulted in Parliament's dissolution in 1653. It was the behaviour of the army and the dissolution of Parliament that destroyed Cromwell's hopes. Many in the army held what were thought to be strange beliefs. A group called "Levellers" wanted a new equality among all men. They wanted Parliament to meet every two years, and for most men over the age of twenty-one to have the right to elect MPs to it. They also wanted complete religious freedom, which would have allowed the many new Puritan groups to follow their religion in the way they wished.

Two hundred years later, such demands were thought of as basic citizens' rights. But in the middle of the seventeenth century they had little popular support. Levellers in the army rebelled, but their rebellion was defeated.

From 1653 Britain was governed by Cromwell alone. He became "Lord Protector", with far greater powers than King Charles had had. His efforts to govern the country through the army were extremely unpopular, and the idea of using the army to maintain law and order in the kingdom has remained unpopular ever since. Cromwell's government was unpopular for other reasons. For example, people were forbidden to celebrate Christmas and Easter, or to play games on a Sunday.

When Cromwell died in 1658, the Protectorate, as his republican administration was called, collapsed. Cromwell had hoped that his son, rather than Parliament, would take over when he died. But Richard Cromwell was not a good leader and the army commanders soon started to quarrel among themselves. One of these decided to act. In 1660 he marched to London, arranged for free elections and invited Charles II to return to his kingdom. The republic was over.

When Charles II returned to England as the publicly accepted king, the laws and Acts of Cromwell's government were automatically cancelled.

Charles managed his return with skill. Although Parliament was once more as weak as it had been in the time of James I and Charles I, the new king was careful to make peace with his father's enemies. Only those who had been responsible for his father's execution were punished. Many Parliamentarians were given positions of authority or responsibility in the new monarchy. But Parliament itself remained generally weak. Charles shared his father's belief in divine right. And he greatly admired the magnificent, all-powerful, absolute ruler of France, Louis XIV.



Charles II, who “never said a foolish thing, nor ever did a wise one,” was a welcome change from Cromwellian rule. Charles II believed as strongly as his father and grandfather in the divine right of kings, but had the good sense to avoid an open break with Parliament. His reign was carefree and relaxed, as this portrait suggests, quite different from the mood suggested in Van Dyck’s portrait of his father (page 86).

Catholicism, the Crown and the new constitutional monarchy

Charles hoped to make peace between the different religious groups. He wanted to allow Puritans and Catholics who disliked the Anglican Church to

meet freely. But Parliament was strongly Anglican, and would not allow this. Before the Civil War, Puritans looked to Parliament for protection against the king. Now they hoped that the king would protect them against Parliament.

Charles himself was attracted to the Catholic Church. Parliament knew this and was always afraid that Charles would become a Catholic. For this reason Parliament passed the Test Act in 1673, which prevented any Catholic from holding public office. Fear of Charles’s interest in the Catholic Church and of the monarchy becoming too powerful also resulted in the first political parties in Britain.

One of these parties was a group of MPs who became known as “Whigs”, a rude name for cattle drivers. The Whigs were afraid of an absolute monarchy, and of the Catholic faith with which they connected it. They also wanted to have no regular or “standing” army. In spite of their fear of a Catholic king, the Whigs believed strongly in allowing religious freedom. Because Charles and his wife had no children, the Whigs feared that the Crown would go to Charles’s Catholic brother, James. They wanted to prevent this, but they were undecided over who they did want as king.

The Whigs were opposed by another group, nicknamed “Tories”, an Irish name for thieves. It is difficult to give a simple definition of each party, because they were loosely formed groups. Generally speaking, however, the Tories upheld the authority of the Crown and the Church, and were natural inheritors of the “Royalist” position. The Whigs were not against the Crown, but they believed that its authority depended upon the consent of Parliament. As natural inheritors of the “Parliamentarian” values of twenty years earlier, they felt tolerant towards the new Protestant sects which the Anglican Church so disliked. These two parties, the Whigs and the Tories, became the basis of Britain’s two-party parliamentary system of government.

The struggle over Catholicism and the Crown became a crisis when news was heard of a Catholic plot to murder Charles and put his brother James

on the throne. In fact the plan did not exist. The story had been spread as a clever trick to frighten people and to make sure that James and the Catholics did not come to power. The trick worked. Parliament passed an Act forbidding any Catholic to be a member of either the Commons or the Lords. It was not successful, however, in preventing James from inheriting the crown. Charles would not allow any interference with his brother's divine right to be king. Stuarts might give in on matters of policy, but never on matters of principle.

James II became king after his brother's death in 1685. The Tories and Anglicans were delighted, but not for long. James had already shown his dislike of Protestants while he had been Charles's governor in Scotland. His soldiers had killed many Presbyterian men, women and children. This period is still remembered in some parts of Scotland as the "killing times".

James then tried to remove the laws which stopped Catholics from taking positions in government and Parliament. He also tried to bring back the Catholic Church, and allow it to exist beside the Anglican Church. James almost certainly believed sincerely that this would result in many returning to the Catholic Church. But Parliament was very angry, particularly the Tories and Anglicans who had supported him against the Whigs.

James tried to get rid of the Tory gentry who most strongly opposed him. He removed three-quarters of all JPs and replaced them with men of lower social class. He tried to bring together the Catholics and the Puritans, now usually called "Nonconformists" because they would not agree with or "conform" to the Anglican Church.

In spite of their anger, Tories, Whigs and Anglicans did nothing because they could look forward to the succession of James's daughter, Mary. Mary was Protestant and married to the Protestant ruler of Holland, William of Orange. But this hope was destroyed with the news in June 1688 that James's son had been born. The Tories and Anglicans now joined the Whigs in looking for a Protestant rescue.

They invited William of Orange to invade Britain. It was a dangerous thing for William to do, but he was already at war with France and he needed the help of Britain's wealth and armed forces. At this important moment James's determination failed him. It seems he actually had some kind of mental breakdown.

William entered London, but the crown was offered only to Mary. William said he would leave Britain unless he also became king. Parliament had no choice but to offer the crown to both William and Mary.

However, while William had obtained the crown, Parliament had also won an important point. After he had fled from England, Parliament had decided that James II had lost his right to the crown. It gave as its reason that he had tried to undermine "the constitution of the kingdom by breaking the original contract between King and People." This idea of a contract between ruler and ruled was not entirely new. Since the restoration of Charles II in 1660 there had been a number of theories about the nature of government. In the 1680s two of the more important theorists, Algernon Sidney and John Locke, had argued that government was based upon the consent of the people, and that the powers of the king must be strictly limited. The logical conclusion of such ideas was that the "consent of the people" was represented by Parliament, and as a result Parliament, not the king, should be the overall power in the state. In 1688 these theories were fulfilled.

Like the Civil War of 1642, the Glorious Revolution, as the political results of the events of 1688 were called, was completely unplanned and unprepared for. It was hardly a revolution, more a *coup d'état* by the ruling class. But the fact that Parliament made William king, not by inheritance but by their choice, was revolutionary. Parliament was now beyond question more powerful than the king, and would remain so. Its power over the monarch was written into the Bill of Rights in 1689. The king was now unable to raise taxes or keep an army without the agreement of Parliament, or to act against any MP for what he said or did in Parliament.

In 1701 Parliament finally passed the Act of Settlement, to make sure only a Protestant could inherit the crown. It stated that if Mary had no children the crown would pass to her sister Anne. If she also died without children, it would go to a granddaughter of James I, who had married the German elector of Hanover, and her children. The Act of Settlement was important, and has remained in force ever since, although the Stuarts tried three times to regain the crown. Even today, if a son or daughter of the monarch becomes a Catholic, he or she cannot inherit the throne.

Scotland and Ireland

Neither Scotland, nor Ireland accepted the English removal of James peacefully. In Scotland supporters of the Stuarts rebelled, but although they successfully defeated a government army, their rebellion ended after the death of their leader. Most of the rebels were Highlanders, many of them still Catholic.

Scotland was still a separate kingdom, although it shared a king with England (James II had been James VII of Scotland). The English wanted Scotland and England to be united. But the English Act of Settlement was not law in Scotland. While Scotland remained legally free to choose its own king there was a danger that this might be used to put a Stuart back on the throne. Scotland might renew its Auld Alliance with France, which was now England's most dangerous European enemy.

On the other hand, Scotland needed to remove the limits on trade with England from which it suffered economically. The English Parliament offered to remove these limits if the Scots agreed to union with England. The Scots knew that if they did not agree there was a real danger that an English army would once again march into Scotland. In 1707 the union of Scotland and England was completed by Act of Parliament. From that moment both countries no longer had separate parliaments, and a new parliament of Great Britain, the new name of the state, met for the first time. Scotland, however, kept its own separate legal and judicial system, and its own separate Church.



"No surrender", the motto of the Londonderry Protestants under siege in 1690 by the Catholic Irish, has remained the motto of the Ulster Protestants to this day. This Protestant home displays the crossed flags of the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Ulster.

In Ireland the Catholicism of James II had raised the hopes of those who had lost their lands to the Protestant settlers. When he lost his throne in England, James naturally thought that Ireland would make a strong base from which to take back his throne. In 1689 he landed in Ireland, with French support.

In Dublin a Catholic parliament immediately passed an Act taking away all the property of Protestants in Ireland. But it was not so easy to carry this out. Thirty thousand Protestants locked themselves in the city of Londonderry (or "Derry" as the Catholics continued to call it). James encircled the city but the defenders refused to surrender. After fifteen weeks, English ships arrived bringing fresh supplies and the struggle for Londonderry was over. The battlecry of the Protestants of Londonderry "No Surrender!" has remained to this day the cry of Ulster Protestantism.

King William landed in Ireland in 1690, and defeated James's army at the River Boyne. James left Ireland for France a few days later, and never returned to any of his kingdoms. With the battle of the Boyne the Protestant victory was complete.

Foreign relations

During the seventeenth century Britain's main enemies were Spain, Holland and France. War with Holland resulted from competition in trade. After three wars in the middle of the century, when Britain had achieved the trade position it wanted, peace was agreed, and Holland and Britain co-operated against France.

At the end of the century Britain went to war against France. This was partly because William of Orange brought Britain into the Dutch struggle with the French. But Britain also wanted to limit French power, which had been growing under Louis XIV. Under the duke of Marlborough, the British army won several important victories over the French at Blenheim (on the Danube), Ramillies, Oudenarde and Malplaquet (in the Netherlands).

By the treaty of Utrecht in 1713 France accepted limits on its expansion, as well as a political settlement for Europe. It accepted Queen Anne instead of James II's son as the true monarch of Britain. In the war Britain had also won the rock of Gibraltar, and could now control the entrance to the Mediterranean.

The capture of foreign land was important for Europe's economic development. At this stage Britain had a smaller empire abroad than either Spain or Holland. But it had greater variety. On the east coast of America, Britain controlled about twelve colonies. Of far greater interest were the new possessions in the West Indies, where sugar was grown. Sugar became a craze from which Britain has not yet recovered.

The growing sugar economy of the West Indies increased the demand for slaves. By 1645, for example, there were 40,000 white settlers and 6,000 negro slaves in Barbados. By 1685 the balance had changed, with only 20,000 white settlers but 46,000 slaves. The sugar importers used their great influence to make sure that the government did not stop slavery.

During this time Britain also established its first trading settlements in India, on both the west and east coasts. The East India Company did not interfere in Indian politics. Its interest was only in trade. A hundred years later, however, competition with France resulted in direct efforts to control Indian politics, either by alliance or by the conquest of Indian princely states.