Chapter 7: The Struggle for Constitutional Government in England

During the period of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, the English conducted an unsuccessful experiment in republican government. In 1660, the monarchy was restored. The troublesome issues of the relationship between king and Parliament and the nature of the English church had not been resolved, however, and further conflict produced the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This revolution established a constitutional monarchy and confirmed the Church of England as the country's established church. During the eighteenth century, Parliament clearly established its ascendency over the crown.

King James I (r. 1603-1625)

Queen Elizabeth I, the last of England's Tudor monarchs, died in 1603. During the final years of her reign, Elizabeth had skillfully avoided conflict over two troublesome issues: the precise nature of the relationship between the crown and Parliament, and the challenge presented by the Calvinist Puritans to the established Church of England (the Anglican Church).

Under England's new king, James I, the unresolved problems quickly came to a head. James I was the son of Mary Queen of Scots (1542-1587), a cousin of Elizabeth I, and the first. of the Stuart kings of England. He had been King James VI of Scotland and came to the English throne as a foreigner, unfamiliar with English traditions.

James I and Divine Right

James I insisted that he was king by divine right, thereby rejecting the English tradition of parliamentary government. In James's view, the king ruled by the will of God and was responsible only to God. He thus stood above the law, and his subjects had no legitimate right to question or resist his will.

James I and Parliament

Opposition to the king centered in Parliament, which consisted of two houses, the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The House of Lords, comprising the nobility and the bishops of the Church of England, generally supported the king, although opposition mounted in response to James's more extreme claims.

The House of Commons

Merchants, lawyers, and prosperous country gentlemen dominated the House of Commons. They were determined to defend what they regarded as Parliament's legitimate role in sharing in the government. In the early seventeenth century, the House of Commons was predominantly Anglican, but its membership included a growing number of Puritans who desired to "purify" the Church of England by eliminating elaborate ceremonies and establishing a representative form of church government to replace the bishops.

Conflict Between King and Parliament

In addition to being extravagant, James faced the problem of generally rising prices, which increased the cost of government. When James asked Parliament to approve new taxes, Parliament demanded that the king recognize its authority.

Rather than accede to Parliament's demands, James attempted to increase his income without seeking parliamentary approval. He imposed customs duties by proclamation and he compelled gentlemen to purchase knighthoods. Asserting its claims, Parliament adopted the Great Protestation in 1621.

James I and Religion

Although he had been king of Scotland, James I was an ardent Anglican, rather than a Presbyterian, which was the dominant religion in Scotland. The king distrusted Presbyterianism, regarding its representative system of church government as a threat to royal power. As king of England, James refused to make any concessions to the Puritans, who, like the Presbyterians, were Calvinists. Puritan opposition to the king increased, and some Puritans emigrated to New England.

The Gunpowder Plot

James also ran into trouble over the Catholic issue. At the beginning of his reign, the king relaxed restrictions on Roman Catholics.

Then, alarmed by a resurgence of Catholicism in England, he reimposed the restrictions. Several Catholic extremists, including Guy Fawkes (1570-1606), launched a plot to blow up Parliament when it met on November 5, 1605. The government uncovered the Gunpowder Plot before it could be carried out, and the plotters were executed. The plot intensified anti-Catholic feelings in England.

The King James Bible

The reign of James I provided one positive accomplishment in religion: the King James Version of the Bible, published in 1611. The magnificent language of this translation makes it one of the great works of English literature.

James I and Foreign Policy

James I sought to conduct foreign affairs without consulting Parliament and to establish an alliance with

Catholic Spain. These policies evoked widespread opposition.

King Charles I (r. 1625-1649)

Charles I proved to be even more inflexible and inept than his father had been. When the unpopular Duke of Buckingham was assassinated in 1628, the king turned to Thomas Wentworth, a staunch supporter of royal power, who subsequently became the Earl of Strafford (1593-1641).

Charles I and Parliament – The Petition of Right

The antagonism between king and Parliament became even more intense during the reign of Charles I. In 1628,Parliament passed the Petition of Right. Insisting that the king was subject to the law, the Petition of Right provided that the king could not levy taxes without the approval of Parliament, impose forced loans on his subjects, declare martial law in peacetime, imprison citizens without trial, or quarter troops in private homes. Charles was so desperate for money that he agreed to sign the Petition of Right, although he never felt obliged to observe its limitations on his power.

The Personal Government of Charles I

For eleven years, from 1629 to 1640, Charles I ruled England without Parliament. The king engaged in an incessant search for new sources of income, employing methods that were either illegal or of questionable legality. A particularly sharp controversy developed over the king's collection of ship money. In the past, even at the time of the Spanish Armada in 1588, ship money had been collected only in the coastal areas. Now, Charles collected ship money throughout the entire kingdom, insisting, against opposition, that it was legitimate to do so since the navy protected the whole country.

Charles I and Religion

Charles I's religious policy also evoked opposition. The king supported the efforts of William Laud (1573-1645), the archbishop of Canterbury, to enforce strict observance of Anglican doctrine, worship, and church organization and to drive the Puritans from the established church.
For their part, the Puritans continued to demand a purification of the Anglican church. In addition, they feared that Laud's policy might lead to a Catholic revival. This fear was strengthened by what the Puritans regarded as an increase of Catholic influence in the royal court. Charles I's wife, Henrietta Maria (1609-1669), the sister of King Louis XIII of France, was a Catholic, and laws against Catholics were not being strictly enforced.

Revolt in Scotland

The revolt against Charles I began in Scotland. In 1637, the English government ordered the use of the Anglican worship service in the Presbyterian churches of Scotland. In early 1638, thousands of Scots signed the Solemn League and Covenant, pledging to defend their Calvinist religion. The conflict was both religious and political, since Anglicanism was associated with the king's claims to absolute power. In 1639, the Scots rose in revolt.

The Short Parliament

Charles I desperately needed money in order to suppress the Scottish revolt, and he called Parliament into session in April 1640. This Short Parliament, which lasted only three weeks, demanded that the king make concessions. In particular, Parliament insisted that the king acknowledge that its approval was necessary for the levying of new taxes and that he agree to make the Anglican church more Protestant in character. Charles responded by dissolving Parliament in May.

The Long Parliament

In late August 1640, the Scots defeated Charles I's army at Newburn on the Tyne. In the Treaty of Ripon, signed on October 26, Charles agreed to pay the Scottish army £850 a day until a permanent settlement was reached. The king's need for money was now more desperate than ever, and he once again called Parliament into session.

This Parliament, which met for the first time. on November 3, 1640, became the Long Parliament of the English Civil War. Although periodically reduced in size, it was not dissolved until 1653.

The king's opponents dominated the Long Parliament, and they quickly moved to impeach both the Earl of Strafford and Archbishop Laud. Strafford was condemned to death and executed in May 1641, while Laud was executed in 1645, during the Civil War.

Conflict with the King

In other actions, the Long Parliament barred the king from levying taxes without parliamentary approval. It also passed acts providing that Parliament should meet at least every three years and limiting the king's right to dissolve Parliament.

In the Grand Remonstrance, passed in November 1641, the Long Parliament summarized its political and religious grievances against the king. In January 1642, the angry Charles I went to Parliament with several hundred troops, planning to arrest five of its members. The five had been warned of the king's intentions and escaped.

Outbreak of the Civil War

The king left London and went to the north of England, where he was joined by some of his parliamentary supporters. The king's opponents remained in London. The two sides began to raise troops, and the English Civil War broke out in the summer of 1642.

The Civil War: Puritans and Roundheads

During the Civil War, the king's parliamentary opponents, known as the Roundheads, dominated London and southeastern England. These opponents included the lawyers and merchants, as well as the country gentry of the region. Many were Puritans. The royalists, known as the Cavaliers, controlled the more conservative north and west. The Cavaliers drew their support from the great noble families, ardent Anglicans, and the country gentry and peasants of the area.

In 1643, the Roundhead cause was strengthened by an alliance with the Scots. But even more important for the Roundheads was the creation of an effective army. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1458) organized the New Model Army, the Ironsides, which defeated the Cavaliers, first at Marston Moor in July 1644 and then at Naseby in June 1645. The Scots took Charles I prisoner in May 1646.

As the Civil War drew to an end, a conflict developed within Parliament between its more moderate and radical elements. The radicals soon gained the upper hand and in December 1648, Colonel Thomas Pride's (d. 1658) troops excluded ninety-six moderate Presbyterians from the House of Commons. "Pride's Purge" left some sixty members to comprise what came to be known as the Rump Parliament. The Rump Parliament voted to abolish the monarchy, the House of Lords, and the Anglican Church and ordered that Charles I be tried for treason. The king was executed in January 1649.

The Commonwealth and Protectorate – Oliver Cromwell

Following the execution of Charles I, England embarked on an eleven-year-long experiment in republican government. Under the Commonwealth, from 1649 to 1653, political power was in the hands of a one-house parliament, while the Council of State conducted the day-to-day affairs of the government.

Cromwell's Religious Policy

Led by Oliver Cromwell, the Commonwealth sought to reestablish order in England. Cromwell restricted the freedom of Anglicans and Catholics. An ardent Puritan, he enforced public morality, closing the beaters, prohibiting dancing, and requiring strict observance of the Sabbath.

Cromwell's Foreign Policy

Cromwell established English control over Scotland and crushed a revolt in Ireland. He also pursued an aggressive foreign policy designed to promote England's commercial interests. This led to war with Holland and Spain. The Dutch were defeated in 1654. In 1655, the English conquered the Spanish island of Jamaica in the West Indies.

Cromwell's Conflict with the Radicals

At home, conflict mounted as the lower classes demanded the satisfaction of their economic and social grievances. Cromwell now crushed the radicals much as he had earlier defeated the royalists. In April 1653, Cromwell dissolved both the Council of State and the Rump Parliament, replacing them with a new council arid a Parliament of 140 members, the so-called Barebone's Parliament. In late 1653, Cromwell dissolved this parliament and took the title of lord protector. In effect, the Protectorate was one-man rule supported by the army.

The End of the Protectorate

When Cromwell died in September 1658, he was succeeded by his son, Richard (1626-1712), who possessed none of his father's ability and determination. Richard resigned in May 1659, and the army took power. Recognizing the failure of the experiment in republican government, General George Monk (1608-1670) moved to restore the monarchy.

King Charles II (r. 1660-1685)

The Restoration of 1660 brought Charles II, the eldest son of Charles I, to the throne. In the wake of the tumultuous years after 1649, the Restoration proved popular. The question of the distribution of power between king and Parliament had not been resolved, however, nor had the conflicts over religion been settled. Charles wisely made no attempt to reestablish royal absolutism and generally avoided conflicts with Parliament.

Charles II and Religion

From 1661 to 1665, Parliament passed a series of laws known as the Clarendon Code, named for Charles II's chief adviser, the Earl of Clarendon (1609-1674). Reestablishing the Church of England, the Clarendon Code placed restrictions on Roman Catholics and non-Anglican Protestants, known as dissenters or Nonconformists.

Charles II and Foreign Policy

In 1666, the English suppressed a revolt in Scotland. From 1665 to 1667, Charles II fought a war against the Dutch, who inflicted a serious defeat on the English navy. When Parliament refused to vote sufficient taxes, the king accepted subsidies from King Louis XIV of France and in return supported the French in their war against the Dutch from 1672 to 1674.

The Question of the Succession

Charles II's alliance with the French increased fears of an attempt to restore Catholicism in England. These fears were already considerable, since both Charles's wife, Catherine of Braganza (1638-1709), and his brother, the

Duke of York, were Roman Catholics. In 1672, the king issued a Declaration of Indulgence, removing the restrictions imposed on both Nonconformists and Catholics. Parliament forced the king to withdraw the declaration and passed the Test Act of 1673 requiring all officeholders to take oaths of allegiance to, and receive Holy Communion in, the Anglican Church. Charles was successful, however, in opposing efforts in Parliament to bar the Duke of York from the succession to the throne. In 1678, the revelation of the Popish Plot, fabricated by Titus Oates (1649-1705), intensified English fears of the Catholics. According to Oates, Catholics had formed a conspiracy to restore Catholicism in England. The testimony of Oates and others led to the execution of thirty-five innocent people.

King James II (r. 1685-1688)

In 1685, James II succeeded his brother, Charles II. James lacked his brother's moderation and attempted both to impose royal absolutism and to promote a restoration of Roman Catholicism. In 1687 the king issued the Declaration of Liberty of Conscience, granting freedom to all religious denominations. While this benefited Nonconformists as well as Catholics, the Protestants believed the declaration favored Roman Catholics.

The Glorious Revolution: William and Mary

In 1688, the birth of a son to James's Catholic second wife, Mary of Este (1658-1718), created a crisis, since the king would presumably have a Catholic successor. The leaders of the major political factions in Parliament, the Whigs and the Tories, joined in the Glorious Revolution to drive James from the throne. The Tories were, for the most part, royalists, landowners, and Anglicans and generally opposed the Whigs, who were largely supporters of parliamentary power, merchants, and Nonconformists. While the Tories did not share the Whigs' belief in parliamentary supremacy, they strongly supported the Anglican Church and opposed Catholicism. Some Tories remained loyal to James II and became known as Jacobites. The king's opponents offered the crown to the Dutch ruler, William of Orange, the Protestant son-in-law of James II. William accepted the offer and invaded southwestern England in November 1688. The country demonstrated its support for William, and James fled to France in December without abdicating the throne, which Parliament then declared vacant.

The Revolution Settlement

Parliament awarded the English crown jointly to William of Orange, who now became William III (r. 1689-1702), and his wife Mary (r. 1689-1694), the daughter of James I by his first wife, a Protestant.

The Bill of Rights

In 1689, Parliament required William and Mary to accept the Bill of Rights, which established the claims that Parliament had set forth in its long conflict with the Stuarts. The Bill of Rights guaranteed members of Parliament freedom of speech and immunity from prosecution for statements made in parliamentary debate. The king was barred from levying taxes without Parliament's approval, maintaining a standing army in peacetime, and interfering in parliamentary elections. The right to trial by jury was guaranteed, and the king was barred from interfering with jurors. In addition, the Bill of Rights required frequent meetings of Parliament.

The Toleration Act

The Toleration Act, also adopted in 1689, granted some freedom of worship to Nonconformists, but the restrictions on office-holding imposed by the Test Act of 1673 technically remained in effect. After 1689, however, the Test Act was abrogated by Parliament's adoption of legislation legalizing the acts of officials who had not fulfilled the requirements of the Test Act. These officials were usually Nonconformists rather than Roman Catholics.

Provision for the Succession

Following Queen Mary's death in 1694, William II1 ruled alone until his death in 1702. The crown then passed to Anne (r. 1702-1714), another daughter of James II. Even before Anne's accession to the throne, it was evident that she would have no heirs. The Act of Settlement of 1701 excluded Catholics from the succession to the throne and provided that, on Anne's death, the crown would pass to Sophia, the electress of the German state of Hanover, and her heirs. Sophia was a Protestant granddaughter of James I. Under the terms of the Act of Succession, George I, the first of the Hanoverians, became England's king in 1714.

The Development of Parliamentary Government

Under the terms of the Act of Union of 1707, England and Scotland were joined in a political union known as Great Britain. The act provided Scotland with substantial representation in the British Parliament, as well as guarantees for the established Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

The Cabinet

During most of the eighteenth century, the monarch ruled jointly with Parliament, although gradually the power of the crown declined. Following the Glorious Revolution, it was necessary for the crown to win parliamentary support for its policies. The monarchs thus began to depend increasingly on ministers who could command support in

Parliament. Queen Anne and the first two Hanoverians, George I (r. 1714-1727) and George II (r. 1727-1760), relied on their ministers for developing policies and directing the conduct of government affairs.

The Prime Minister

Gradually, one member of the cabinet, the prime minister, emerged as its leader. Robert Walpole (1676-1745), who served under both George I and George II,was Britain's first real prime minister. A Whig member of Parliament, he became a member of George I's cabinet in 1721 and dominated the government until 1742.

The Cabinet's Responsibility to Parliament

Later in the eighteenth century, George III (r. 1760-1820) attempted to rule in association with ministers of his own choosing, who did not have the support of a parliamentary majority. George III ultimately failed in this effort, and by the end of the century, the principle of cabinet responsibility to the Parliament was clearly established in British political practice.

During the seventeenth century, England experienced a long conflict between Parliament and the Stuart monarchs. Following the Civil War of the 1640s and the execution of Charles I, England embarked on an abortive experiment in republican government. The Restoration of 1660, which returned the Stuarts to the throne in the person of Charles I, did not provide a resolution of the political and religious differences between king and Parliament. These issues quickly came to a head during the reign of James II, resulting in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

The revolutionary settlement reaffirmed the established Church of England and placed restrictions on the power of the crown. During the eighteenth century, the power of Parliament continued to increase, while that of the crown declined. At the same time, the British constitutional monarchy became a model that reformers on the continent of Europe wished to emulate.