In the past twenty years much important work has been published on the identity, the formation and the tactics of the two major political parties under William III and Anne, but very little on their political ideas. The political thought of the age has been explained largely in relation to the writings of John Locke, supplemented occasionally by those of Hobbes, Harrington and Algernon Sidney. The political leaders of Whiggism after 1689 are assumed to have embraced a fully developed ‘Lockean’ ideology, giving the nation the right to depose kings under the terms of the Original Contract. This sophisticated and up-to-date weapon, it is assumed, gave them the initiative in a power struggle which ended only with the accession of George I. The Tories, on the other hand, were saddled with such outdated concepts as divine right and hereditary succession, which by implication denied the validity of the very Settlement under which they operated. This numbing internal contradiction in their philosophy ensured their eventual defeat.

In this case, it is difficult to see why Locke’s theories of government should have been mentioned so rarely in the early stages of the Revolution, up to 1692, and even less thereafter, unless it was to heap abuse on them. It is also hard to understand why Whig politicians who are supposed to have been his deferential disciples should have been so reluctant to use his name. His closest friend and patron amongst the Junto leaders was John Somers, but in all the various political pamphlets attributed to Somers Locke’s
name is invoked only once, and then to clinch a technical point. As for the managers at Sacheverell's trial in 1710, that grand set-piece of Whig theory, they never mentioned him at all, though they were free enough with the names of Grotius, Puffendorf and 'the judicious Hooker'. A Whig of the mid-eighteenth century like Speaker Onslow was astounded to notice that Locke did not appear at all in Burnet's *History of My Own Time*, though lesser thinkers like Filmer and Hoadly did.  

The truth is, the constitutional theories put forward by defenders of the Revolution were not really 'Lockean' at all, except for their use of the term 'contract', which in any case was part of the common vocabulary of politics long before Locke appeared on the scene. Nor is it likely that this surprised Locke himself. Shortly before his death in 1705, discussing the reading appropriate to a gentleman, he wrote: 'Politics contains two parts, very different the one from the other; the one containing the original of societies and the rise and extent of political power, the other, the art of governing men in society.' To master the first required a study of political philosophy, and apart from his own works he recommended those of Hooker, Sidney and Puffendorf; but the second was 'best learned by experience and history, especially that of a man's own country', and here he mentioned James Tyrrell's recent *General History of England* (1666–1704) and the two volumes of *State Tracts* published in 1689 and 1692.

'Experience and history' were in fact to be the keynotes of the Whigs' political philosophy after the Revolution. The problem was not whether they could establish a new, abstract model of the constitution, but whether they could offset the entrenched theories of Toryism, and at the same time live down their damaging association with political radicalism under Charles II. As late as 1714 their success in both these modest endeavours remained in doubt.

Because the establishment of British parliamentary monarchy is held to date from the Revolution of 1688, and because this kind of government is regarded by the great
majority of people as ‘right’, in general terms; because the ideas behind the Revolution are seen as Whig, or at least ‘whiggish’, and because for most of the eighteenth century Britain was governed by a series of ministers calling themselves Whigs – because of all this it is easy to assume that Whig political ideas enjoyed general support from the beginning, and that apart from a few setbacks engineered by the malice and prejudice of their opponents their success from 1689 onwards was continuous, their ultimate victory in 1714 and 1715 assured.

But this is not borne out by the record. Modern research has confirmed that the Tories enjoyed an inbuilt majority which their opponents found it very difficult to overcome. The overall results of general elections in this period are notoriously difficult to assess, but it is significant that prior to 1715 there is no parliament which can unhesitatingly be described as Whig; apart from the Convention of 1689, the nearest candidate is the parliament of 1708. On the other hand, the Tories, with their ‘Country’ allies, clearly dominated at least five parliaments (in 1698, 1700–1, 1702, 1710 and 1713), with the rest doubtful. True, neither William III nor Anne trusted the Whigs, so that the full weight of royal patronage was never behind them; but neither was it ever clearly behind the Tories, except perhaps in the election of 1702. On the other hand, in a period of continual warfare it was to the Whigs’ advantage that they were the ‘war party’ or the ‘patriotic party’, and it is noticeable how their fortunes slipped during times of peace or impending peace, from 1696 to 1702, and again after 1710. Moreover, their organisation was unparalleled. As Geoffrey Holmes remarks, ‘The Whigs of the Age of Anne achieved not only an unbroken unity of front but an underlying solidity of purpose which was not to be approached again by any political party in Great Britain until well into the eighteenth century.’

But organisation alone was not sufficient. To justify the use of party at all – something this generation was never entirely willing to allow – both sides needed a working
ideology. This was not easy for either to formulate when all previous political assumptions had been reversed by the flight of James II in 1688 and the installation of William III in his place, and when the previous political mechanism had been subtly but profoundly altered by the institution after 1689 of annual sessions of parliament and after 1695 of triennial general elections.

Moreover, the Revolution of 1688 was a traumatic shock to the English political conscience, coming so soon, as it did, after the Great Rebellion and the Interregnum. Tory thinking on the matter was confused. The traditional role of the Anglican Church as the principal adversary of popery (a role particularly stressed after 1660) made it difficult for it to mourn the removal of James II, however it was accomplished; but it was unable to accept the Revolution without setting at naught the basic doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance which had been central to its doctrine for the greater part of its comparatively short life. An English Protestant succession in perpetuity might be held to justify the sacrifice, but this concept perished with the young Duke of Gloucester in 1700.

But the Whigs' thinking was similarly confused and contradictory. Their whole-hearted approval of the Revolution was tempered by the knowledge that this was distinctly a minority view. Moreover, it was increasingly difficult to give whole-hearted approval, or whole-hearted anything, to an event whose nature was in serious dispute. The confusion of politics between 1689 and 1714 was partly structural and partly ideological, and this confusion began with the Revolution itself.
BY FORCE OR BY MIRACLE
The immediate debate on the Revolution

In the next generation it was generally assumed that the Revolution of 1688 had been an act of resistance, even rebellion. Many Whigs gloried in it; most Tories condemned it. This was so axiomatic that Robert Walpole, opening the case against Sacheverell in 1710, told the Lords: ‘It cannot now be necessary to prove resistance at the Revolution; I should as well expect that your lordships would desire me to prove, for form’s sake, the sun shines at noon day.’

Modern opinion would, I suppose, incline towards Walpole’s view. But there is in fact little evidence for it, and what there is comes mostly from James II. In two proclamations, on 28 September and 6 November 1688, James accused the Prince of Orange of mounting an unprovoked invasion, and he gave his own physical danger as the sole reason for his flight in December. This continued to be Jacobite orthodoxy right down to 1715 and beyond. William himself, in his declaration of 30 September, denied any intention even of coercing James, let alone conquering him, and swore that his army was merely intended to protect his own person against the king’s ‘evil counsellors’. When he read James’s proclamation of 28 September, which accused him of ‘purposing an absolute conquest of these kingdoms’, he published an additional declaration, protesting that his forces were ‘utterly disproportioned to that wicked design... [even] if we were capable of intending it’.2 In the brief military campaign that followed his landing the two armies never came within a hundred miles of each other,
and only a handful of casualties were sustained, in cavalry scuffles and civil commotions. As for the English magnates who rose against the king, they announced that they did so to secure the assembly of a free parliament under the terms of the prince’s declaration, almost unanimously sheltering behind such unexceptionable abstractions as ‘the Protestant religion, our laws and liberties, and the ancient constitution of England’. This included those who signed the Association at Exeter, under William’s immediate eye. Only the extremist Lord Delamere, whose father had led a premature revolt against the Protectorate in 1659, ignored such constitutional proprieties and announced: ‘I am of opinion, that when the nation is delivered, it must be by force or by miracle. It would be too great a presumption to expect the latter, and therefore our deliverance must be by force.’

But apart from this, the only attempt to justify the use of force against King James was made by ‘The Nobility, Gentry and Commonalty at the Rendezvous at Nottingham’ on 22 November 1688. Delamere was there again, but he was supported now by the Earl of Devonshire, the Earl of Scarsdale and an impressive turn-out of Midlands gentry. Their published declaration roundly stated:

We assure ourselves that no rational and unbiased person will judge it rebellion to defend our laws and religion, which all our princes have sworn [to do] at their coronations… We own it rebellion to resist a king that governs by law, but he was always accounted a tyrant that made his will his law; and to resist such an one we justly esteem no rebellion, but a necessary defence.

This could stand as a succinct exposition of Whig principles under Queen Anne – what later came to be known as ‘Revolution Principles’ – and it is not surprising to find it given considerable prominence in the pamphlet warfare of that reign. It gained in piquancy from the fact that the then Princess Anne, with Henry Compton, Bishop of London, later a prominent High Churchman, joined this group at Nottingham a few days later, and could therefore be supposed to have accepted the terms of the declaration.
by implication – a fact neither was allowed to forget. Yet the very prominence given to the Nottingham declaration in later polemics only exposes its isolation; it was supported at the time only by the assertions of a few anonymous pamphleteers.

Yet if the nation had not rebelled, if it had not fought against James II, could he be said to have been deposed? And if he had not been deposed, then it was difficult to argue that contract theories of government applied to this case, since such theories assume the outright deposition of a ruler who has broken some previous agreement or other.

True, the waters of the Revolution, never very limpid, were muddied by a number of extraneous factors. In the interregnum between James’s flight and the installation of William as king the breakdown of press censorship let in a flood of pamphlets which asserted in crude terms that the deposition of an unjust or tyrannical ruler was eminently permissible. Secondly, in the Convention the Commons discussed the Original Contract, and it featured prominently in their resolution on the state of the nation, which was accepted with some demur by the Lords. Moreover, late in 1689 Locke published his Two Treatises of Government, the second of which was a detailed exposition of the theory of an Original Contract, and he avowed in his preface that his purpose was to justify the Revolution just accomplished. In view of this pronouncement by the great philosopher it was natural to suppose that the Revolution hinged on contract.

Natural, but not true. Certainly, in the famous debate on the state of the nation held on 28 January 1689 several Whig MPs warmly embraced contract theory. Sir Robert Howard boldly claimed, ‘The constitution of our government is actually grounded upon pact and covenant with the people’, and he was supported by John Somers, and by the veteran lawyer John Maynard, who said, ‘Tis no new project; our government is mixed, not monarchical and tyrannous, but has had its beginning from the people. There may be such a transgression in the prince that the
people will be no more governed by him.'
6 Sir William Pulteney added, ‘[The] crown descends not from heaven; then [it] must come from the people.’ They dismissed with contempt the idea that they should look for justification in the institutions of a free Anglo-Saxon society. Maynard remarked, ‘It has been said, we must go beyond the Conquest. [I am] puzzled to find what was law in the Saxon times; [it is] a tedious and fruitless search.’

But the general sense of the House was much more conservative, and was probably better expressed by backwoods spokesmen like Sir Christopher Musgrave, who warned MPs, ‘Have a care of deposing.’

Meanwhile the former prerogative lawyer Sir Robert Sawyer told them that they were not representative of the people anyway, and if the people’s consent was required the only proper method was a referendum, or the election of a constituent convention on a broader franchise.

Outside the House at least one anonymous pamphleteer with a similar attitude had proposed a drastic reform of the franchise and the distribution of seats; he also wanted most officials now appointed by the crown – Privy Councillors, bishops, judges, sheriffs, even army officers – to be elected, and he justified this wholesale assault on privilege and patronage with these fell words: ‘If the departure of the king amounts to such a desertion as dissolves the government, then the power must necessarily revert and vest in the people, who may erect a new one, either according to the old model, if they like it so well, or any other that they like or approve of better.’

He then compounded his blasphemy by urging that William be made sole monarch, ‘absolute and arbitrary’, on grounds of efficiency and common sense, and for reasons of gratitude. He was perhaps not entirely serious, but another pamphleteer certainly was when he put the radical view that to instal William alone, without his wife, would be ‘a clear asserting of the people’s right, firm evidence of a contract broken, and a sure precedent to all ages’.

Other authors even advocated the establishment of a republic.
Remote as such a prospect might be, the Commons’ hysterical reaction to the news that the notorious republican and regicide Edmund Ludlow had suddenly returned to London from abroad is significant. It is easy to forget that in 1689 the deeds of men like Algernon Sidney and the Duke of Monmouth came fresh to mind. Sidney’s conviction for high treason was quashed in 1689, but only on a technicality; few regarded him as anything but a dangerous incendiary, his Discourses concerning Government remained unpublished, and the Whigs were ill-served by pamphleteers who hastened to recall his theories and beliefs in the hope of making a martyr of him. Monmouth’s attainder was never reversed, and his Taunton declaration of 1685, with its violently radical reform programme drafted by Robert Ferguson, remained the last public statement of Shaftesbury’s Whigs.

Fear that James’s deposition, especially if it were made to hinge on the sanction of the people, would open the way to a republic or a radically weakened monarchy obviously dictated the nature of the compromise which eventually emerged from the Convention. But the sense of the Commons is difficult to assess in the absence of a vote. Considering its great constitutional significance, the debate in a Committee of the Whole House was brief:

They were by nine o’clock got upon such a large subject, about the nature of government, and of our constitution in particular, and about the nature of the crimes of a king that warrant a deposition, etc., that many thought they would never have disentangled themselves, nor have got to a question, but might have pursued these debates weeks or months; but these apprehensions were soon over, for not long after two o’clock the Committee came to resolve.

The whole business was over by three. The accounts we have of the debate are remarkably restrained, though of course they are not complete, and the stern warnings of Musgrave and Heneage Finch against deposition suggest that they must have had some provocation. On the other hand, according to Roger Morrice, ‘None did plead for calling back the king, nor did [they]
affirm we had a king in being’, and if the Tories were able to admit the possibility of an interregnum, a hiatus in the even flow of kingship, then it was a short step to agreeing that James had relinquished the crown in some way.

John Maynard suggested a compromise when he said, ‘It is not the question whether subjects can depose their king, but whether the king can depose himself.’ This point was taken up by Sir Thomas Clarges, Hugh Boscawen, Sir George Treby and John Somers, the two last carrying the greatest weight. Treby quoted with approval a phrase used by his Tory opposite number, Dolben, that the king had ‘fallen from the crown’, and declared that the question posed by many anxious Members, whether or not they could depose a king, was fortunately irrelevant. ‘We have found the throne vacant’, he assured them, ‘and are to supply the defect; we found it so, we have not made it so.’ Sawyer was clear on this point, too. ‘To refuse to govern according to the constitution’, he said, ‘is absolutely to disclaim the government, and he who withdraws on such account abdicates.’ A third lawyer, Sir William Williams, testily agreed. ‘Should you go into the beginning of government’, he said, ‘we should be much in the dark; every man in town and country can agree in fact on the state of things.’

So the Convention saddled itself and its successors with the unreal fiction of an abdication. The supporters of contract were strong enough to insert it into the final resolution of the House, but they could not give it teeth. The resolution ran:

That King James the Second, having endeavoured to subvert the constitution of the kingdom, by breaking the Original Contract between king and people, and by the advice of Jesuits, and other wicked persons, having violated the fundamental laws, and having withdrawn himself out of this kingdom, has abdicated the government, and that the throne is thereby become vacant.

The key word, of course, is ‘abdicated’. At first sight it might seem that ‘breaking the Original Contract’ was one of the three facts from which James’s abdication could be