REVOLUTION PRINCIPLES
THE FORD LECTURES 1975–6

REVOLUTION PRINCIPLES
The Politics of Party
1689–1720

J. P. KENYON

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PREFACE

This book is an extended and revised version of the Ford Lectures in English History which I delivered at Oxford in the Hilary Term of 1976. I am grateful to the Ford’s Electors and the University for conferring this distinction upon me, and to many Oxford colleagues, notably Professor H. R. Trevor-Roper, for their hospitality during my visits.

These lectures had their origin in a paper I contributed to a Festschrift for J. H. Plumb five years ago, and this constitutes not the least of the debts I owe this extraordinary man; though in this case his assistance was quite unwitting, and I want to stress that neither he nor anyone else mentioned here is responsible for the outcome. Subsequently I expanded this paper into three lectures (comprising parts of what are now chapters 2, 4, 5 and 8) which I delivered at the University of Chicago in 1972 on the invitation of the Committee on Social Thought, funded by the John U. Nef Foundation. I am grateful to the members of the committee, particularly Saul Bellow and David Grene, for making my stay in Chicago such a pleasant one, and to John M. Wallace and John Pocock for their helpful and constructive comments on the lectures. Later I had the benefit of advice and information from Dr G. V. Bennett, Dr R. A. Beddard, Professor Geoffrey Holmes, Professor Maurice Goldsmith, Miss Betty Kemp and Dr Blair Worden, as well as much general encouragement from Professors G. R. Elton and J. H. Plumb, previous Ford’s Lecturers. Dr Bennett kindly allowed me to read his new
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life of Francis Atterbury (since published) in page proofs, Professor Holmes lent me a transcript of the account of Sacheverell’s trial from the Osborn MSS. at Yale, and Miss Kemp lent me her transcript of Sir Richard Cock’s parliamentary diary. Dr Martyn P. Thompson was also generous enough to allow me to use parts of his unpublished dissertation on contract theory in the late seventeenth century, and Mr Mark Goldie showed me the first draft of his dissertation on ‘Conservative Political Thought in England 1688–1714’, as well as an unpublished article on Edmund Bohun. Some of these debts are also recorded in the notes, of course.

I owe a further debt to the staffs of the various libraries in which I have worked over the past five years: the British Library (formerly the British Museum), Cambridge University Library, the Bodleian Library, Oxford, the Houghton and Widener libraries at Harvard and the Muger Library at Boston University, the Newberry and Regenstein libraries at Chicago, York Minster Library and, not least, the Brynmor Jones Library at Hull. The Deputy Keeper of the House of Lords Record Office patiently answered several queries by correspondence, and sent me photocopies with remarkable promptitude. I am also grateful to the University of Hull for giving me six months’ leave to complete this work, and making generous research funds available. I would also like to express my gratitude to the staff of the Cambridge University Press, and especially to the subeditor.

My wife bore very patiently with a husband who was more distraint even than usual.

July 1976

J. P. K.

NOTE

The punctuation, spelling and capitalisation in all quotations have been modernised, except in a few cases where to do so would weaken the sense.
Preface to the paperback edition (1990)

The passage of twelve years has not materially affected the conclusions reached in this study, which is why I have re-issued it unchanged apart from the correction of a few minor errors.

When I wrote this book in 1976 I wish I had had by me the new diary of the Commons debate on the state of the nation on 28 January 1689 discovered and published by Lois G. Schwoerer.¹ It would have enabled me to amplify some of the arguments I used in chapter 2, though I do not think it would have altered them. Much the same can be said of Professor Schwoerer’s exhaustive study of the Declaration of Rights:² there her research was, as it were, parallel with mine, the two scarcely meeting. Similarly H. T. Dickinson’s valuable study Liberty and Property: Political Ideologies in Eighteenth-Century England (London, 1977), which appeared within a few months of my own. Since Professor Dickinson carried his exposition down to the late eighteenth century his treatment of the period 1689–1720 was necessarily briefer than mine, but it does not seem to me that we are in disagreement on any essential point.

Readers engaged in this period will probably not need to be reminded of some recent articles which supplement or extend my own work. I am thinking of D. W. Earl’s paper on early eighteenth-century notions of feudalism,³ J. W. Gough’s work on Tyrrell, an undeservedly neglected figure,⁴ and Martyn Thompson’s further thoughts on conquest theory.⁵ J. A. Downie’s Robert Harley and the Press (Cambridge, 1979) throws important light on Harley’s relations with Defoe, which I touch on in chapter 7 below (pp. 112ff.). Also two important bibliographical guides have appeared since 1977 which will

Of making books on John Locke there seems no end, but outstanding for my purposes are Julian H. Franklin, *John Locke and the Theory of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, 1978), and Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke’s Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton, 1986), which reinforces my views on Locke’s radicalism set out below (pp. 18–19). On the other hand, Ashcraft and M. M. Goldsmith’s article on ‘Locke, Revolution Principles and the Formation of Whig Ideology’, has rendered much of my appendix on *Vox Populi Vox Dei* (pp. 209–10 below) redundant, though I have retained it as a kind of historical curiosity.

However, the only historian to challenge my interpretation of the Revolution directly was Thomas P. Slaughter, and it is as well that I should comment on his work at some length, because he raises some fundamental points, and I did not get the chance to reply at the time.

As his title indicates, Mr Slaughter challenged my interpretation of the word ‘abdicated’ as used in 1689 and my argument on the relevance of ‘contract’ theory. I must say I was surprised – and a trifle flattered – that he should regard me as the somewhat sinister proponent of a ‘revisionist interpretation’ of the Revolution, which had ‘recently crept in’. In fact, when I wrote this section of the book I felt uneasily that I was merely paraphrasing an ‘old hat’ interpretation which went back as far as Macaulay.

However, Mr Slaughter insists that my interpretation of the word ‘abdicate’ is to say the least dubious; that in common parlance it could be used transitively as a kind of synonym for ‘remove’, and on this occasion it was. So, James II did not abdicate the throne, ‘he was... forcibly abdicated’.

The trouble is with this that, ransack seventeenth-century
dictionaries as he might, Slaughter can only find two examples of this usage (one by the eccentric Robert Burton), and only one in the Convention debates, in the course of a long blunderbuss of a speech by John Somers, in which he threw in any argument he could think of. He also expounded the more usual construction of the word at great length.¹⁰

On the other hand, the evidence that the men of 1689 understood ‘abdication’ to mean a renunciation of an office by its holder is overwhelming, but Mr Slaughter willfully restricts the scope of his investigation by choosing to ignore the quite full accounts of the Commons debates, by Archibelt Grey, John Somers and Professor Schwoerer’s anonymous diarist, as well as the more exiguous record of Lords debates,¹¹ and instead leaning almost entirely on the account of the conferences between Lords and Commons. He does not seem to understand that even ‘free’ conferences were highly formal occasions, with most of the speeches written out beforehand and no doubt tidied up afterwards. Nor does it strike him as suspicious that this account, The Debate at Large, was published by the government in 1695, obviously as a propaganda weapon. But from a man who apparently thinks that Algernon Sidney was alive in 1689,¹² and that Locke’s Two Treatises were published before the Convention met, perhaps not too much is to be expected.

In fact, the evidence is abundant that what Lords and Commons had firmly in mind in 1689 was the kind of express abdication effected by the Emperor Charles V in 1555, by Queen Christina of Sweden in 1654, and by King Alfonso VI of Portugal as recently as 1668. For instance, Sir Thomas Clarges cited all three in a Commons debate on 2 February, Sir Joseph Tredenham mentioned Alfonso VI on the 5th, and Sir George Treby cited Charles V at a conference with the Lords next day.¹³ Christina had been a constant topic for salacious scandal, because of her reputed lesbian intrigues in the decadent city of Rome, and she had only died in 1688; a full account of Alfonso’s abdication had been published in London in 1677.¹⁴ No one can say that these matters were not in the public eye, and to any unbiased mind there is no doubt that parliament
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(and the public) took the word ‘abdicate’ in this sense; the only problem was, could a monarch abdicate involuntarily, without some formal act of renunciation? But so anxious is Mr Slaughter to press home his own bizarre interpretation that he is not above tampering with the evidence, as in the following quotation from Sir John Holt, where he omits the words in italics and inserts an ‘also’ into the last sentence, perhaps hoping to give the impression that his own interpretation of the word ‘abdicate’ was still on the tapis:

In the most common acceptance of the civil law ‘abdication’ is a voluntary express act of renunciation. That is the general acceptance of the word, and, I think, the Commons do use the word because it hath [also] that acceptance.15

As for his views on contract, it is difficult to know quite what to make of them. He appears to reject my view that the idea of an original contract or compact was part of the common political vocabulary of the seventeenth century; acknowledged by James I, employed by Charles I’s accusers in 1649, taken up and refined – some would say perverted – by Thomas Hobbes. Above all (and this he ignores) it was acknowledged by the legal assessors to the House of Lords in January 1689, who though Whigs were most of them highly conservative and prudent citizens.16 But he does note that in a Lords–Commons conference on 6 February the Jacobite Bishop Turner of Ely accepted the idea of a contract ‘that was made at the first time, when the government was first instituted’, though he spolit himself by going on to argue that the law of hereditary succession was part of it.17 Clarendon’s clumsy intervention, denouncing contract as some new, Hobbesian invention,18 was distinctly mal à propos, and was ignored by his own leader, Nottingham. In reply, Sir John Holt reminded the Lords that they had tacitly endorsed contract theory five days before when they had passed that phrase which mentioned it in the Commons’ Resolution of 28 January, and no one contested this.19 Sir George Treby then asserted, again without contradiction, that James II had owed his title to the original contract, and subsequently it was only mentioned by the Earl of Pembroke, who took the same line as Bishop Turner.20 Mr Slaughter seems
to think that this ‘original contract’ was ‘Lockean’, but how could it be? Locke did not return from Holland until 12 February, and his Two Treatises were not published until December. There is no evidence that they were ‘leaked’ before then; in fact, Locke was very secretive about them. But Mr Slaughter seems to think that they were already in print, together with Algernon Sidney’s Discourses Concerning Government. In the face of ignorance like this there is little to be said.

At the time I composed a bellicose reply with the apt Augustan title, ‘Slaughter slaughter’d’, but I was pre-empted by Dr John Miller, who rebutted him perfectly fairly, though he took some of Slaughter’s notions more seriously than they deserved. Mr Slaughter then retreated behind a rather wispy smoke screen, still insisting that Kenyon headed ‘a new wave of Tory historians’, who had ‘distorted the meaning of the Glorious Revolution by selectively ignoring evidence which does not conform with their vision of the event’. In fact, this is an apt description of Slaughter’s method; I searched for evidence far and wide, and must have used six times as much source material as he. (He is still impenitently insisting that a true understanding of Parliament’s intentions can only be gleaned from the joint conferences between the two Houses.) He continues to insist, too, on his own eccentric definition of the word ‘abdicate’, and argues that the Revolution was ‘conciliatory’. I do not understand this at all. Conciliatory to whom? To James II? To the Lords, who had the words ‘abdicated’ and ‘vacant’ rammed down their throats willy-nilly? A ‘conciliatory’ settlement would have been a regency, for instance, which many peers desired. (I suspect that Mr Slaughter is thinking of ‘compromise’, and it is unfortunate that the word ‘compromising’ has drifted into another meaning altogether. A compromise the Revolution most certainly was.)

He is upset by my remark that ‘the architects of the Revolution had taken good care to dissociate it from contract theory’ and he even makes an ingenious attempt to enlist Miller in his support. So far as the year 1689 is concerned I stand by my words; true, the inclusion of the original contract in the Commons’ resolution of 28 January provoked considerable
debate, but Slaughter misses the blindly obvious point that it was expunged from the Declaration of Right, and from the Bill of Rights later in the year. Some time between 3 and 13 February contract died on the cutting-room floor, and this cannot have been by chance. Of course, it was revived later in the 1690s and was the subject of lively controversy down to 1710, at least, but that is another story.  

Again, I was more than ready to deal with Mr Slaughter, but this time the editor of the *Historical Journal* applied the closure. 

However, Mr Slaughter has his uses, in that he led me to re-examine every scrap of evidence at my disposal for the months of January and February 1689. From this examination two further points arise, one minor, the other major. 

The minor point is this: why was Sir Robert Howard the first speaker to introduce the term ‘original contract’ into the key Commons debate on 28 January, though of course, it was then taken up by others? Howard is usually labelled a ‘Whig’, but this is a very doubtful appellation. In the Civil Wars he was a hard-line royalist, knighted by Charles I for valour after Cropredy Bridge in 1644, and spending some time in prison in the 1650s. In the 1660s he was a conventional rakehell, dramatist and man-about-town, and like many such attracted the favour of Charles II. In Parliament he had spells in opposition, first to Clarendon, later to Danby, but so did many other royalists, notably Edward Seymour. In 1671 he was briefly appointed Secretary to the Treasury, and in 1672 he secured the lucrative sinecure post of Auditor of the Receipt of the Exchequer, for life. During the Exclusion Crisis he went back into opposition, but this seems to have been prompted by rabid anti-Catholicism. (He enjoys the distinction of being noted by Danby as ‘bad’, and by Shaftesbury as ‘vile’. ) He did not stand for Parliament in 1685, and for the rest of James’s reign kept a very low profile. After 1689 he lived out his life unostentatiously as a ‘Court Whig’, secure in his Auditorship; he died in 1698.  

In other words, he was basically a natural courtier; he could even be classed with the ‘prerogative men’ – Godolphin, Henry Guy, Sunderland – so loathed by the radical Whigs. While he was obviously an intelligent man and
nobody’s fool, it is difficult to think of him as a political theorist, still less any kind of radical. Yet he started this peculiar hare. But this is a problem we shall probably never solve.

Secondly, in the course of re-reading the evidence I came up against a problem which worried me in 1976: why did the Commons choose the awkward and controversial word ‘abdicated’ when, as the Lords argued, ‘deserted’ would have done their business? Though the evidence is difficult to interpret I have the impression that the Commons, or some of its spokesmen, believed – rightly or wrongly – that James’s abdication would extend to his son, the Prince of Wales, a figure no one wanted to discuss outright. However, this calls for a full-length exposition, which will have to await another opportunity, another day.

October 1989

J.P.K.

Lawrence, Kansas

Notes

2 The Declaration of Rights 1689 (Baltimore 1981).
6 HJ, 26 (1983), 773–800.
8 Ibid. p. 323.
9 Ibid. p. 331.
10 The Debate at Large (1695), pp. 27–8. To be fair, there is another example, by John Hampden in a Commons debate on 1 February (Grey, Debates, ix, 46), but since Mr Slaughter eschews the Commons debates he has, of course, missed it.
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12 Slaughter, “‘Abdicate’ and “Contract’”, p. 335.
13 Debate at Large, p. 75; Grey, Debates, ix. 10–12.
14 The Portugal History: or a Relation of the Troubles that happened in the Court of Portugal in the years 1667 and 1668, in which it is to be seen that great Transaction of the Renunciation of the Crown by Alfonso the Sixth, by S.P. (Attributed in the British Library catalogue to Samuel Pepys, though for no very obvious reason.)
16 See below, pp. 12, 16–18, and cf. p. 40. The lawyers’ volubility on this score contrasts sharply with their evasiveness when asked whether the throne could be vacant; House of Lords MSS 1689–90 (HMC Rept xx, pt 6), pp. 15–17. Significantly, they were not asked to rule on the word “abdicated”; the Lords simply substituted “deserted” nem. con. and passed on.
17 Debate at Large, pp. 57–8.
18 Ibid. p. 61.
20 Ibid. pp. 88, 155.
23 Ibid. p. 399.
24 Ibid. p. 400. (He cites in his defence Miller, ‘The Glorious Revolution’, pp. 546, 547, but I do not see it.)
25 See below under index entry ‘Revolution, contract’.
26 Published biographies of Howard are poor and focussed on his literary career. The best account is in The House of Commons 1660–1690, ed. B. D. Henning (London 1983), ii, 595–604.