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*The English Levellers*

EDITED BY  
ANDREW SHARP  
*University of Auckland*



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## Introduction: the English Levellers, 1645–1649

I am sure there was no man born marked of God above another; for no man comes into the world with a saddle on his back, neither any booted and spurred to ride him. *An old Leveller, Richard Rumbold, on the scaffold in 1685 for his part in Monmouth's rebellion*

### I

The Leveller movement came together in London in 1645–6. It was the product of the civil war breakdown of authority in the English church-state. In 1642 the two houses of parliament and their king, Charles I, had gone to war against each other. Each had claimed that the other was subverting the ancient legal rights and properties of the people and the ancient, legal balance of the English constitution of king, Lords and Commons. Each had also claimed that the other was bent on the destruction of the true Protestant religion – the king (with the aid of Irish rebels and the French court) by returning it to papacy, the parliament (courting the enemy Scots) threatening its unity by encouraging a babel of separating sects. Each side had produced and printed numerous ‘remonstrances, declarations, votes, orders, ordinances, proclamations, petitions, messages and answers’ to these effects, collected and printed for parliament in an *Exact collection*, soon to be much used by the Levellers in their propaganda (text 1). Charles had deserted Westminster to recruit an army in the north. By 1643 the Scots, whose king Charles also was, and whose invasions of England (the first in 1637) had precipitated the crisis that led to civil war, had

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joined the war on the side of parliament, bound to them by the terms of the Solemn League and Covenant. On 14 June 1645 they, together with parliament's newly constituted Puritan New Model Army, defeated the main royalist armies at Naseby, and by the middle of 1646 the last of the royalist resistance had petered out with the surrender of Oxford and the flight of the king to the Scots army at Newark. Parliament, urged on by the Presbyterian leadership of the City and clergy of London, by a kirk-and-king mob and by the commissioners of the Scots in Westminster, proceeded to conclude their Presbyterian reformation of the now-defunct episcopal church and set out to reach a settlement of the constitution with the defeated king.

The king had never been easy to deal with. Over-optimistic as to his chances of political success, and obstinate in his belief in his divine right to rule his state and his church with little interference from parliament, he had proved a man with whom treaty-making was difficult. In the end he was to die for it. Matters were made more difficult for the two Houses both because of the cost of their paying for the continued presence of the Scots army on English soil, and because, although it was financially desirable to pay them off, they knew that if the Scots were allowed to dictate a settlement it would be one that preserved their own Presbyterian church and extended it into England and Wales. It would be one which made of church government a clerisy: the black-coated ministers would rule without parliamentary control. Nor would a Scots settlement be one which preserved the English from the dangers of kingly prerogative rule – of 'arbitrary government'. The Scots were indifferent to parliament's desire to bridle their king. But still, parliament had to work with them and their City allies.

It was during the last phase of what we now know as the first civil war that pamphlets by the Levellers' emerging leaders – John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn – began to echo and support each other in a way that suggests concerted action. Each with a previous history of disaffection with the religious and secular order of the realm, the three had been mutually acquainted from mid-1645 when the London sectarian congregations came together with the more radical urban politicians to defend themselves against the Presbyterian menace. And they were already among those who suspected the commitment of the more lukewarm parliamentary politicians to a victory that would bring the king to heel. It indicates a now-firm alliance among the three emerging leaders that Walwyn's *Toleration justified*, collected by George

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Thomason the bookseller on 29 January 1646 (text 2) covers much the same ground as Overton's *Divine observations upon the London ministers' letter against toleration* collected by Thomason on 24 January. Both pamphlets defend religious non-conformity against the emerging lev-iathan of the new Presbyterian church. By June, Lilburne, in his *Free-man's freedom*, was beginning, in the midst of airing his personal grievances, to hint at a widespread network of friends joining against the tyranny of the Lords, and of anyone else who would not allow a commoner to be tried by his equals. In his remarkable *Postscript* too (text 3), he set out the principles of natural equality and government by consent which were to mark the Leveller movement from all other radical movements of the time. *A remonstrance of many thousand citizens* (7 July 1646, text 4), written mainly by Overton and Walwyn, clearly marries the concerns of all three as to tyranny in church and state, makes of Overton's and Lilburne's cases the case of all freeborn Englishmen, and appeals to Leveller principles.

The movement produced its first of many petitions to parliament in March 1647 (text 6). Soon after that it extended its rather loose organisation from its base among members of the London sectarian congregations and radical urban politicians to the officers and soldiers of the New Model Army. The victorious army was by then deeply disaffected with a parliament intent on demobbing many of the men and sending the rest to Ireland, where war had continued unabated since 1638. On 29 March, parliament, intent on reaching a Presbyterian church settlement and a traditionalist constitutional settlement which would stick with both the king and the Scots, had declared its 'dislike' of the Army's petitioning it on grievances as to its future composition and deployment, as to arrears of pay, and as to indemnity for acts carried out during war. By April, Lilburne and Edward Sexby were organising the election of 'agitators' by the New Model regiments of horse. Army dissatisfaction grew. In May the London militia was taken by parliament out of sectarian control and given into more conservative hands. The New Model officers until then had done their best to channel the dissatisfaction of their men to avoid the discussion of political and religious matters; but now they themselves were unhappy not only over military but also over political matters. Lieutenant-General Oliver Cromwell and his son-in-law Commissary-General Henry Ireton in particular were ready to enter the arena of high politics and join in negotiations with king, City, Scots and parliament.



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In June the New Model seized the king from the Scots at Holdenby House in Northamptonshire and began a series of rendezvous, each nearer London and Westminster, and each carrying the threat of military force. As they manoeuvred, they put out a series of declarations as to their intentions, most famously in a declaration of 14 June: 'We were not a mere mercenary army, hired to serve any arbitrary power of state, but called forth and conjured by the several declarations of parliament to the defence of our own and the people's just rights and liberties. And so we took up arms in judgement and conscience to those ends, and have so continued them.' The officers needed the men, and in July the Army held its first General Council, in which officers and agitators (now elected from an increased number of regiments) discussed their common concerns. By August, with a march on London, the New Model brought to heel the more royalist and Presbyterian of the parliamentarians. The leading Presbyterian MPs went into exile. But the threat of counter-revolution, not least by the Presbyterians' opponents in parliament – the so-called 'Independents' – remained; and so therefore did the officers' need of their men. In this circumstance, the Leveller movement entered high politics, operating from organisational bases in the New Model as well as in London. 'New agents' of the Army, rather more Leveller and rather less simply disaffected soldiers than the more established 'agitators', were elected by five regiments; they met the London Levellers, and in October the combination of civilian and army Levellers produced *The case of the army truly stated*. The pamphlet was long and rambling, as bitter against the New Model officers for their prevarication and backsliding as against parliament, full of quotations of the New Model's declarations and engagements (cf. text 13) – all of them broken or twisted to the officers' corrupt interests. It nevertheless contained, along with its military complaints, the germ of *An agreement of the people* (text 7) which Cromwell and the officers, irritated as they were, showed themselves prepared to discuss in the General Council held at Putney from 28 October until 9 November (text 8).

Leveller influence was, however, already waning. Mutiny was breaking out, led, in Cromwell's view, 'by those not of the Army who drive at levelling and parity'. The mutinies were crushed, the officers ceased to listen, and the 'new agents' were heard no more. Leveller organisation nevertheless continued to flourish. Their newspaper, *The Moderate*, began publication in January 1648. They continued to petition and

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agitate in London and Westminster (text 9). But they were not again to be influential until the winter of 1648–9. Again the source of their leverage was – and could only be – the New Model. The Levellers co-operated with the Army in the second civil war of May to August 1648 against the king, the Scots and disaffected parliamentarians; and the play of politics from September to the end of January 1648–9 again made them necessary allies of the officers. But in the spring and summer of 1649 it was decided that the movement must be crushed. The officers, having carried out a revolution which began with their purging the Commons (in December 1648) and which continued with their abolishing kingship and the House of Lords (January to March 1649), were chary of going further. They were, moreover, now both angry and worried about Leveller mutiny in the ranks. In March of 1649, in the course of being questioned as to his authorship of seditious books, Lilburne heard Cromwell strike the Council table and cry ‘I tell you, you have no other way to deal with these men but to break them in pieces.’

Cromwell succeeded in doing just that, and not simply because he had the military force to put down subsequent mutinies. In fact the movement was already coming apart at the seams. The sectarian congregations deserted it, wooed by the emerging régime with a promise of religious toleration. And the men of the New Model, who had always tended to dwell on the problems generated by their military and logistical problems rather than on the ills of the commonwealth, were now becoming more professionalised: becoming soldiers rather than citizens. Except for Lilburne, the Leveller leadership saw the writing on the wall. They could not continue to act without an organisation and without a popular constituency. *The remonstrance of many thousands of the free people of England* (September 1649), the ‘death rattle of the party’ according to Joseph Frank (see bibliographical note, p. xxxiii) claimed 98,000 signatures; Lilburne continued active and elicited support from the London crowd in treason trials of 1649 and 1653; Marchamont Nedham, the brilliant Commonwealth propagandist, still found it worthwhile to attack the Levellers in *The case of the commonwealth stated* in May 1650; the odd Leveller pamphlet appeared until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660; James Harrington disapproved of them on theoretical republican grounds later in the 1650s; old Levellers re-appeared in the troubles of the 1680s; but the movement effectively died in a series of failed mutinies in 1649 (text 13). And, to exaggerate

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only slightly, it stayed dead in human memory until the 1880s when historians began to take an interest in them.

No historian has really believed that the Levellers ever stood a chance of success. Yet the curious thing is that they have been interested in them not so much as underdogs – as the voice of the inarticulate masses or of the emerging artisans, local merchants and small landholders of a pre-industrial society, doomed to defeat – though there is a bit of this. Much more often and much more emphatically they have been discussed as if they were in a way victorious: as men and women ‘before their time’ who ‘anticipated’ future developments in their writings, in their organisation and in their activity. In a word, they were ‘democrats’ – at least *some* kind of democrats. They have been called ‘radical’ democrats, ‘liberal’ democrats, ‘social’ democrats, ‘constitutional’ democrats, ‘Christian’ democrats, ‘petty bourgeois’ (and ‘bourgeois’) democrats. For English historians, they stand in line with the Wilkites of the 1760s, the radical reformers of the 1770s and 1780s and the 1820s, and with the Chartists. Historians from the USA, from Russia, central Europe, Italy and France have produced appropriately modified versions of where the Levellers stand in *their* democratic (and liberal, and constitutionalist, and republican, and socialist) traditions. And they take their place as minor figures in the canon of the history of western political thought as precursors of Locke. They may have been defeated at the time but their names and ideas live.

This interpretative situation can be explained as a function of the success of democratic ideas over the last hundred or so years. Defeat in 1649 began to look like success when democratic ideas became a touchstone for historians’ interest and commendation. But more recently (in the 1980s and 1990s) our more fervent historicist sensibility has made the situation seem less clear. We can see why historians became interested in the Levellers. We can also, we think, further see that that interest has made the Levellers seem to us other than they were: *made* them seem democrats to us, when in historically located fact, they were not – at least not very straightforwardly. Thus David Wootton, their latest historian, having told the historiographical story and much more of the historical story than I have just related, and adding correctly that the Levellers were seldom called ‘democrats’ at the time, that the word ‘democrat’ had totally different connotations then, and that none of its modifiers as used by the historians existed, thinks that the description of the Levellers as democrats can be highly

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misleading. The best we can do is to call them 'Leveller' democrats, describe as best we can what they were like, and take care to distinguish their kind of democracy from all others.

My own view is that it is not all that misleading to describe them as liberal democrats. But they were such in conditions where to be one, for those with the temperament, was a standing temptation to rebellion and a mutiny. They exemplify the difficulties of being democratic in impossible circumstances.

## II

Much Leveller activity occurred in print. The three leaders were all by 1646 veteran pamphleteers. They were soon to become experienced petitioners as well. And they were articulate speakers, with others like John Wildman and the agitators at Putney who faced the Army officers in debate on the form the English constitution should take. In these verbal modes they continually claimed that they sought to persuade others to their views, not to impose them through force of arms: their idea was, as famously put by Walwyn, to 'get victory on the understandings of men'. They set out to persuade their contemporaries of four things: that there must be a programme of reform in the church-state; that there should be a new constitution of authority designed to carry out and preserve those reforms; that the conditions were such that this new constitution should, could and must be instituted; and (finally) that the fundamental jural facts about being human justified the reforms, the constitution and its institution.

Their programme of reform varied somewhat over time (texts 6, 7, 9, 12). It always included reform of the legal system, both criminal and civil. The law should be put into English, simplified and changed. There should (for instance) be no imprisonment for debt; the prison system should be made more humane; punishments should fit crimes and capital punishment should be reserved for murder and treason. Procedure too should be reformed. Like the substantive law, it should be put into English; there should be no commitment without a warrant specifying the crime and nominating at least two witness-accusers; there should be no answers on interrogatories; cases should be heard by juries in the localities; the hearing of cases should be speeded up; the fees of judges, magistrates, lawyers and jailers should be limited and restrained. Most of the rest of their programme entailed changing the

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law, too: matters like the dissolution of the Merchant Adventurers and similar monopoly companies which acted in restraint of trade; the removal of legal immunities and privileges from groups and corporations (including the House of Lords and its members) based on 'tenure, grant, charter, patent, degree or birth'; freedom of religious speech and worship; the abolition of tithes; the provision of 'powerful means to keep men, women and children from begging and wickedness'. And there was a whole range of pressing but obviously more transient policies that would need reforming, again using legislative means: there should be no impressment into armed forces; there should be indemnity for soldiers' acts in the exigencies of war; there should be succour from the commonwealth for the widows and orphans of soldiers; there should be no liability for political actions during the wars; and so on.

But some reforms were so fundamental, and so contradictory to existing arrangements for law-making, that to understand their programme as one calling only for acts of legislation from an enlightened parliament, even without the king, was impossible. Theirs was rather a programme for massive constitutional reform. England had at this time a 'mixed monarchy' the crucial feature of which was that no statute could be made without the mutual consent of king, Lords and Commons. Parliament when at war with the king had invented the doctrine that the two Houses could in emergency make ordinances without the king; but when in 1646 and 1647 the Levellers proposed that the 'negative voices' of the king and Lords should be abolished and the Commons declared 'the supreme power', they were clearly leaving the realm of policy dispute and entering that of fundamental constitutional reform.

In what manner and through what channels could they operate to bring about these great changes? The traditional answer was humbly and by petition to parliament. The Levellers tried that in a campaign in 1647 only to see their petitions condemned and burned by the common hangman (text 6). Their problem was partly that they chose to petition the Commons as the 'supreme authority' and refused to recognise the Lords. Neither House could stomach that insult to the ancient constitution and to the individual rights of the Lords which were sustained by it. It was also that the Levellers seemed to be *demanding* unpalatable policy changes from a body that felt itself to be the repository of traditional authority, and knew that authority did not bow to demands. It was, after all, a convention mainly of well-to-do country gentlemen,

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together with lesser numbers of prosperous international merchants, courtiers and professional men; and it felt little but contempt mixed with fear for those of the lower ranks: the apprentices, tradesmen, tub-preachers and the odd not-so-distinguished gentleman who made up the Leveller 'riots'. So in the spring of 1647, the Levellers began to argue that if parliament would not act for the people, then the New Model should.

The change in allegiance had this to commend it: the New Model was 'no mere mercenary Army'. Authority was not extinct in England; it had merely migrated. The many Army declarations had shown it to be not only authorised by parliament but to be intent on acting according to parliament's own declarations which ('in the days of its virginity') had called Englishmen to oppose their king. The Levellers, like almost all other Englishmen, were eager to depict themselves as authorised in what they did by a superior power. That is why they had at first appealed to the Commons, and that is why, when they were rejected by the Commons, they proceeded to search for allies in the New Model.

Having found those allies, it soon emerged (to their allies' dismay) that not only would they have particular reforms, together with a reform of the constitution. They would also reconstitute authority anew in England by means of an 'agreement of the people', and not rely on the authority of the New Model any more than on that of parliament. At the *Agreement's* heart would be a single, supreme legislative body, a 'representative of the people'. When the Army leaders first heard of their proposals (texts 7 and 8), the Levellers claimed that every adult male should have a vote in electing 'the Representative' and be eligible for membership of it; and they insisted that the constituencies be made more evenly relative to population size. At Putney, Cromwell, chairing a famous General Council attended by civilian as well as military Levellers in October 1647, was told by Colonel Thomas Rainborough:

really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under.

They were indeed to modify this programme of universal male suffrage and not all Levellers may have espoused it anyway, but whatever its modifications from earlier on (texts 9, 12, 13) their proposal for a

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supreme Representative of the People still meant that the franchise would be vastly extended, that there would be no (or a weakened) king and no House of Lords, and that men would be eligible to be legislators who previously had not even been allowed the vote.

This was clearly a programme that was democratic in the sense of expanding the universe of those who might make important decisions – especially taken together with the proposals that justice should be done in the localities (much of it by juries), and that magistrates like JPs should be locally elected. It was also a liberal programme, for the *Agreement* insisted that certain powers should be ‘reserved’ to ‘the people’ as matters for individual and not governmental decision. The Representative would not be empowered to proceed against anyone if there was no law forbidding them doing what the proceeding concerned; it might not grant trading monopolies; it might not raise money by excise and customs. Most importantly perhaps, the Representative might not allow tithes for the maintenance of a state church, and it might not enforce forms and expressions of religious worship.

It was in one sense less important that they had to insist, against false accusations, that they were not Levellers: ‘it shall not be in the power of any representative in any wise to . . . level men’s estates, destroy propriety or make all things common’ (texts 9, 11, 12). But underlying the accusation to which they were forced to reply in this way was the fundamental fact that their formula of governing authority was democratic. Legitimate authority, they held, could be created and sustained only by ‘the people’. It was not inherent in law or customary social and political arrangements; no man or institution could govern without the people’s original and continuous agreement. This was precisely the point of having an ‘agreement of the people’; and the point of their liberal-democratic arrangements was both to capture what they took to be what the people would currently agree to, and to protect that agreement against its undermining by self-interested rulers.

Cromwell, whose closest adviser, his son-in-law Commissary-General Henry Ireton, was to produce a rather similar *Agreement of the people* in early 1649 (see footnotes on pp. 141–5), put his finger on the problem. It was not so much the programme that was the problem for the officers: they were in fact still dealing, together with opposition, ‘independent’ MPs and lords, with Charles; and they were contemplating in some *Heads of proposals* biennial parliaments, a reformed distribution of seats, a cropping of the Lords’ powers, the removal of mon-

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opolies and excise, even control of the king's veto in a number of areas. It was rather the authority of the Levellers to *make* the proposals which was at issue:

How do we know that if whilst we are disputing these things another company of men shall gather together and they shall put out a paper as plausible perhaps as this? I do not know why it might not be done by that time you have agreed on this – or got hands to it if that be the way. And not only another, and another, but many of this kind. And if so, what do you think the consequence would be. Would it not be confusion? Would it not be utter confusion?

It *would*, according to Cromwell, be confusion. According to him (no less than to the Levellers themselves over much of their careers) there must be a constituted authority to decide what the settlement should be; but also, according to him (and here the Levellers could not agree), 'the people' had no authority in themselves to change the settled modes of proceeding. Only constituted powers could do that. The people could only petition them and abide by their decisions. This is why he supported parliament as long as he could; this is why he stood by while it was purged rather than dissolved; this is why he supported all attempts to clothe the successive interregnum regimes in the cloak of traditional authority. He 'very much cared', he said, that there should be king, Lords and Commons, and would only move against them if he saw God's clearly manifested providence pronouncing against them.

It emerged that neither he nor the senior officers nor the bulk of the Army would adopt the Levellers' platform, at least not at the Levellers' instigation. The General Council was dissolved. Cromwell and Ireton continued to work to reach a settlement for as long as they could with parliament – and worse (though the Levellers from time to time were monarchists) – the king. Mutiny at Ware followed on 15 November 1647 and the Leveller movement had its first martyr, Richard Arnold. Leveller propaganda now held the officers in turn to be 'vile apostates', who had, like parliament, 'betrayed their trusts' and broken those solemn engagements, which, taken with the common soldiers and promulgated to the people, constituted the only bonds of political authority that existed once the kingdom had been deserted by king and parliament. Lilburne now held that 'all magistracy in England was broke by the Army, who . . . by their swords reduced us into the original state of chaos and confusion wherein every man's lusts become his



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law, and his depraved will and forcible power his judge and controller'. In *The bloody project* of August 1648, even the mild-mannered and silken-tongued Walwyn is to be observed appealing to the 'soldiers and the people' against 'king, parliament, great men in the City and Army' – those who 'have made you the stairs by which they have mounted to honour, wealth and power. . . But the people's safety is the supreme law; and if a people may not be left without a means to preserve itself against the king, by the same rule they may preserve themselves against the parliament and Army too.'

The Levellers were to work with the officers again, and they were to moderate their claim that England was now reduced to a state of nature. But in 1649, after the Army had finally decided it could not work with the king and an unpurged parliament – after it had executed the king and set up a commonwealth on the basis that 'the people are, under God, the original of all just power' – Lilburne told the judge at his trial for treason in 1649 that there was 'no magistracy in England either upon principles of law or reason'. He was asking of Cromwell what Cromwell had asked of them in 1647: what gave a few men the right to constitute authority in England? It certainly could not be simply that they had swords in their hands, though subsequent Leveller activity and doctrine (text 13), while it denied that proposition in so far as the New Model officers held the sword, did not deny its use to an armed common soldiery.

At this point we must ask who the Levellers thought had the right not only to speak about and complain about the organisation of magistracy, but also to constitute, to be members of, to oversee, even to overpower governments, and why. Their answer throughout their careers was clear enough but in no way capable of being institutionalised. They believed that God ordained, and God's creation – nature – displayed, the existential equality of authority among human beings, their natural right to sustain and defend themselves and their natural duty to defend and succour others. Such creatures were duty-bound to God, and through God to others, to erect and sustain political society. The only way they could constitute authority was by their consent; and the only proper authority – the only authority which they could constitute and subsequently obey – would be one which they in fact continually consented to and which acted as the trustee of each and every one of them for the purpose of attaining the common weal. The men who held magistracy could be only those committed to those ends. This is

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a highly abstract summary of what appears throughout their pamphlets, most notably in the Postscript to Lilburne's *Freeman's freedom* (text 2) and in the first pages of Overton's *Arrow against all tyrants* (text 5). As for Walwyn, his writings breathe the doctrine not only of toleration but of practical Christianity demanded by God's love: 'love makes you no longer your own but God's servants'. One has a duty to defend the 'truth' – which is the monopoly of no man or set of men – and a duty to defend one's 'brother and neighbour from oppression and tyranny'. One's right – and the Levellers' right – to speak as one did, derived from one's Christian duty to seek and speak God's truth. One's individual right to act derived from one's individual duty to God, and through him to all one's fellow creatures. (As Milton put it in *Areopagitica* (1644), some duties to God were simply not 'dividual'.) The constitution of magistracy and the policies of magistracy must express those rights.

### III

But no-one was capable of putting these ideals into practice. 'I did not dream', wrote one of the MPs who had in fact begun parliament's practice of appealing to 'the people' in 1640, 'that we should remonstrate downwards, tell stories to the people'. And at the restoration of kingship in 1660, Harrington, author of *Oceana* (1656) and other republican writings, was under threat of his life because of 'some . . . saying that I, being a private man, had been so mad as to meddle with politics', and asking 'what a private man had to do with government?' It had indeed emerged in 1640 that 'private men' could speak: from then onwards, pamphlets and newsbooks poured from the presses in unprecedented numbers. But it was impossible that 'the people' should exert significant political, let alone constitutive power. It was not that there was not a 'people': the English knew who they were and the geographical boundaries of their realm. It was rather that too few believed like the Levellers in a God-ordained equality which had political implications. Most, and not just royalists, believed in inequality. (Not even the Levellers, among whose number there were very active women, could imagine women with political rights of any kind.) Too few believed that God's law, natural law or equity intimated any other arrangements than the traditional legal arrangements which defined and sustained not only the constitution of authority, but the liberties and

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properties of the people. In a time of civil war and unsettlement too, the ideal of a permanent, unchallengeable order was displayed by all sorts. By 1647, and with stronger reason in 1649, the country was predominantly restorationist. Those who held out against a restoration of kingship and the traditional ways did so largely on the negative grounds that they could not trust Charles to keep his word and not reintroduce prerogative rule. So the fact was that it would have been impossible to base a settlement on an Agreement of the People.

The whole social order in the church-state – imitated throughout the counties, towns, boroughs and hamlets, as at the political centre at Westminster – was buttressed by belief in a divinely ordained series of gradations between all things that existed: from God through the ranks of angels, humans, animate and inanimate creation. Anglican catechismal teaching had reminded the congregations of the parishes of England that the Fifth Commandment, ‘honour thy father and thy mother’, provided (‘honour’ being translated into ‘obey’ at the appropriate points) a pattern of subordination throughout society. It commanded subordination not only to parents, but to social superiors in general: to teachers, ministers, elders – and above all to ruling magistrates. Romans 13, ‘Obey the powers that be, for they that resist shall bring unto themselves damnation’, was a prescribed Anglican text for times of trouble. And the Presbyterian successor to the old episcopal church thought no differently. ‘What’, asked the *Larger catechism*, put out by the Westminster Assembly of Divines in 1648 as part of a reformation of church government ordered by parliament, ‘is the honour inferiors owe to superiors?’

ANSWER. The honour which inferiors owe to their superiors is all due reverence in heart, word, and behaviour; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels; fidelity to [and] defence and maintenance of their persons and authority according to their several ranks and the nature of their places; bearing with their infirmities, and covering them with love; that so they may be an honour to them and their government.

QUESTION. What are the sins of inferiors against their superiors?

ANSWER. The sins of inferiors against their superiors are all neglect of duties toward them; envying at, contempt of, and rebellion

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against their persons and places and their lawful counsels, commands and corrections; cursing, mocking, and all such refractory and scandalous carriage as proves a shame and dishonour to them and their government.

It was this set of injunctions, expressing so eloquently the practical beliefs of all but a few pockets of dissidents, that the Levellers challenged. Of England's five million or so people, perhaps only 2½ per cent were members of families among the directive minority. The rest were born to be ruled. To attack the existing powers was to be an anarchist.

As to the traditional constitution of authority and rights, both royalist and parliamentarian had similarly claimed to be fighting for it. Before the first civil war, parliament's *Protestation* of May 1641 had required an oath not only to 'maintain and defend, as far as I lawfully may with my life, power and estate . . . the true reformed Protestant religion expressed in the doctrine of the Church of England against all popery and popish innovation within this realm', but also to 'maintain and defend his majesty's royal person and estate, as also the power of and privilege of parliaments [and] the lawful rights and liberties of the subjects'. Charles's *Answer to the nineteen propositions* (June 1642) was uncontradicted by the parliamentarians in speaking of the constitution as 'ancient, equal, happy, well-poised', one in which the separate and shared powers of king, Lords and Commons, were balanced in such a way as to protect the subjects' liberty and property. The Solemn League and Covenant bound the parliamentarians and the Scots to fight not only for a 'reformed Protestant religion', but 'to preserve the rights and privileges of parliaments, and the liberties of the kingdoms, and to preserve and defend the king's majesty's person and authority'. And the Long Parliament – 'long' because it had first met in November 1640 and was not to finally be dissolved until 1660 – was to keep saying the same thing, even during the second war, when it fought now not only against Charles and old royalists, but against its old allies the Scots, and against many of the directive minority in the deeply disaffected counties. On 28 April 1648 the parliament roundly declared that it would not alter 'the fundamental government of the kingdom by king, Lords and Commons'.

It was for challenging this God-ordained order, worked out in its legal detail in long tradition, that the Levellers were given their name – according to Lilburne, at Putney by Henry Ireton. Ireton's idea in

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'christening' them 'Levellers' (an idea also fathered on Cromwell and on Charles I) was doubtless to call up images of Watt Tyler and Jack Cade, of a peasantry that would destroy enclosures. They would level everything. There would be no government, no property, no family. All would be held in common. Though it was an unfair description, the name stuck, and the tendency of the insults was anyway not new. They had been reviled, like Paul and Silas in Acts 17, as among those who 'have turned the world upside down'. They were compared with the 'false teachers' of 2 Timothy 3: 'lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful . . . without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded'. They were men who led the congregations full of 'itching ears' away from 'sound doctrine'.

They could not reply by calling themselves democrats any more than they could call themselves Levellers: to call themselves that would be to join in insulting themselves. The vocabulary was available but the connotations – anarchy and liberty – would not have helped them. *We* are, it has recently been said, 'all democrats now'. *They* had no series of shibboleths to which to appeal and had to content themselves with making specific proposals and calling themselves such names as 'the Godly', the 'well-affected', 'many thousands earnestly desiring the glory of God, the freedom of the commonwealth and the peace of all men', 'ingenuous well-minded people', 'divers well-effected citizens', the 'honest non-substantive soldiers' and so on. They could not call themselves democrats, and they could not call up that strength of public opinion necessary to constitute an armed force.

So when will democracy not work, if the Levellers' fate is an example to us? Leaving aside cases where it is doubtful whether a 'people' exists at all, democracy will not work when, if it is to be a viable option, it requires a breakdown of traditional, unequal, authority; and when that option (as it will be) is so foreign to the imaginations of the political community at large that it will be rejected out of hand. We in the West might well take the fate of the Levellers as seriously as we have taken their shining example.

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## Chronological table

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|--|--|
| 1625 Charles I succeeds to the throne  |  |
| 1628 The Petition of Right   |  |
| 1629–40 Charles rules without parliaments  | 1630 Lilburne apprenticed in London  |
| 1635 Ship-money levy extended to all counties  |  |
| 1637–40 Imposition of English prayer book on Scotland unites the Scots in two Bishops' wars against their neighbour  | 1638 Lilburne tried, whipped and imprisoned by Star Chamber. He begins to publish anti-episcopal tracts describing his sufferings  |
| <b>1640–2 A period of reform and drift to civil war</b>  |  |
| 1640 The Short Parliament (April–May)  |  |
| 1640 The Long Parliament called (November)   | 1640–1 Attacks on bishops and the established church   |
| 1640–1 Impeachment and attainder of Stafford   |  |
| 1641 <i>The protestation</i> (May); Acts against dissolving the Long Parliament; for the Abolition of Star Chamber, High Commission, ship-money and other prerogative taxes; against | 1641 The 'paper war' between king and parliament begins in December. Religious controversy continues. Walwyn's first (and tolerationist) tract: <i>A new petition for papists</i> (1641) |

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ecclesiastical innovations (May–September). *The Grand remonstrance* (December)

1642 King's attempted arrest of 5 MPs and a lord (Jan.); bishops removed from Lords (Feb.). The Militia Ordinance (March) makes possible the calling of a parliamentary army

July 1642 Parliament votes to raise an army

**August 1642–6** First civil war

August 1642 Charles raises his war standard at Nottingham

October 1642 Edgehill. The first pitched battle

1643 The Westminster Assembly of Divines meets (July); The Solemn League and Covenant (September). The English and Scots allied

1644 Parliamentary victory at Marston Moor (July) not pushed home politically or militarily. Cromwell quarrels with earl of Manchester.

Emergence of Independents and Presbyterians in parliament

1645 The Self-denying Ordinance (April). Military command and membership of parliament to be incompatible. The New Model takes the field (May). New Model victory at Naseby (June)

1642 A controversy as to control of the militias of England and Wales widens into a royalist parliamentary controversy as to the location and nature of a subject's obedience. Edward Coke's *Second part of the institutes of the laws of England* published

June 1642 Henry Parker, *Observations upon some of his majesties late answers and expresses*

March 1643 Husband's *Exact collection of all remonstrances* published. (Parliament's *Book of declarations*)

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	August 1645 Lilburne, <i>'On the 150th page'</i>
November 1645 Presbyterian alliance among Westminster Assembly, City clergy and municipal government	
1646–8 A period of negotiation between Charles, the Army, parliament and City	January 1646 Walwyn, <i>Toleration justified</i> March 1646 London independents and sectaries begin an alliance
June 1646 Charles surrenders Oxford and proceeds to surrender to the Scots at Newark	June 1646 Lilburne, <i>Freeman's freedom</i>
	July 1646 Overton and Walwyn, <i>A remonstrance of many thousand citizens.</i>
December 1646 London returns a Presbyterian Common Council	
January 1647 The Scots depart from English soil, leaving the king in parliament's hands	
March 1647 Parliament begins to move to reduce the size of the New Model and to send men to Ireland	10–14 March 1647 The levellers' <i>Large petition</i> subscribed 26 March Army petitions come to the eyes of parliament
29 March 1647 Parliament's 'Declaration of dislike' of the New Model's proceedings	April 1647 Lilburne and Sexby co-operating in election of agitators in the New Model regiments. April–May A series of declarations from agitators
May 1647 London given control of its own militia	
June 1647 Cornet Joyce removes Charles from parliament's hands at Holdenby House, and brings him near the Army, to Hampton Court	June 1647 Army begins series of rendezvous, ever nearer London 5 June The Army's <i>Solemn Engagement</i> not to disband 14 June The Army's <i>Declaration</i> charges 11 Presbyterian MPs and London



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July–August 1647 The New Model threatens London and parliament. Fairfax made Commander-in-Chief of all armies; trained bands removed from corporation control; counter-revolutionary petitions and violence in London and Westminster; parliament resolves to bring king to London and restore trained bands to the municipality. 27 July Speaker of Lords, together with 57 MPs and 8 Lords, seeks refuge with the New Model at Bedford. Army marches on London, enters at Southwark on 4 August. Restores MPs. 11 MPs withdraw from parliament

treasurers. Lilburne and Overton attack army officers  
 16–28 July 1647 First General Council of the Army

September–October 1647 Cromwell makes overtures to Lilburne in the Tower. New agents of the Army meet levellers at the Mouth (Aldersgate) and the Windmill (Coleman Street); Wildman and Petty emerge as intermediaries between the agents and the London Levellers. The meetings continue throughout November  
 21 October 1647 *Case of the army* is brought to the General Council at Putney  
 23 October Robert Lilburne's regiment refuses to march to

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- Newcastle and proceeds by degrees to march to Ware under Capt. Lieutenant William Bray  
 28 October 1647 *An agreement of the people*  
 28 October–9 November General Council of the Army meets at Putney  
 15 November 1647 Mutiny suppressed at Corkbush Field near Ware  
 25 November 1647 A Leveller petition of the same day results in 5 Levellers being imprisoned. In the Commons Cromwell attacks those ‘not of the Army’ who ‘drive at levelling and parity’  
 15 December *Rapprochement* between Army grandees and agents. Approaches to the king by the grandees will cease. But Walwyn publishes *Putney projects* later on 30 December, attacking Cromwell and Ireton  
 1648 January–February Leveller London organisation flourishes – outliers in Bucks., Oxford, Cambs. and Rutland. *The Moderate*, a Leveller newspaper, begins publication  
 January–April 1648 Parliament’s ‘vote of no addresses’ to the king. Royalist rioting in London and the provinces. New Model reduced from 44,000 to 24,000 men. Independents attempt to negotiate with Charles  
 25 April 1648 In the midst of London unrest, stirrings in Wales and Essex, and hearing that Scots are about to raise an army, the officers of the New Model resolve to bring Charles Stuart, ‘that man of blood’, to account

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<p><b>May–August 1648 Second civil war</b></p> <p>July–August Polarisation between war and peace parties in London. Scots defeated at Preston 17 August. Colchester falls to Fairfax 27 August</p> <p><b>1648–9 The Army settles a Commonwealth</b></p> <p>September Radical petitioning against a personal treaty with the king</p> <p>November Parliament refuses to debate Army's <i>Remonstrance</i></p> <p>6 December Pride's Purge. Rule of the Rump Parliament begins</p> <p>26 December 1648 Commons begin to discuss whether Charles should be tried</p> <p>4 January Parliament declares: 'the people are, under God, the original of all just power'</p>	<p>Levellers co-operate with Army during second civil war</p> <p>11 September 1648 Leveller <i>Humble petition of divers well-affected persons</i>. Signed by 40,000</p> <p>October–December 1648. At least 17 petitions to Fairfax supporting petition of 11 September</p> <p>29 October 1648 Thomas Rainborough assassinated</p> <p>16 November Ireton's Army <i>Remonstrance</i> calling for justice on the king, supporting <i>Agreement and Petition</i> of 11 September</p> <p>November–December 1648 Negotiations among Levellers, City Independents, army officers and 'gentleman Independents' at the Nag's Head (London), at Windsor, and in early December at Whitehall</p> <p>Mid-December Walwyn withdraws from Leveller activity, though he will write defences of himself until June or July 1649, and will join in the <i>Agreement</i> of May. London Leveller organisation in disarray</p> <p>8–11 January 1649 Freedom of conscience debated in General Council at Whitehall. Lilburne and Wildman present, until a disgusted Lilburne leaves for Durham</p>
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- 20 January 1649 The 'officers agreement' presented to parliament. Never discussed
- 20–27 January 1649 Trial of Charles I. Executed 30 January 1649–53 **The Commonwealth**
- 6 February 1649 House of Lords voted 'useless and dangerous'
- February Lilburne returns to London from Durham
- 29 February Lilburne, *England's new chains discovered*
- 3–6 March Eight troopers tried for petitioning; made to ride the wooden horse in the Palace Yard. Now the Levellers' military friends begin to desert them
- 28 March Arrest of Lilburne, Overton, Prince and Walwyn for *The second part of England's new chains discovered*. Levellers deserted by independent congregations, notably the Baptists. Cromwell swears he will 'break them'
- 14 April Lilburne, Overton, Prince and Walwyn, *A manifestation*
- Late April–May Army unrest and mutiny in London. Robert Lockyer executed. Unrest in provinces, especially around Bristol and between Banbury and Oxford
- 1 May *An agreement of the free people of England*
- 14–15 May Mutiny crushed at Burford
- 7 June 1649 Day of thanksgiving for Leveller defeat. Levellers' sea-green colours are no longer radical chic

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	July 1649 Overton's last known publication: <i>A picture of the Council of State</i>
	29 August <i>The young men's and apprentices' outcry</i>
	21 September <i>The remonstrance of many thousands of free people of England</i> claims 98,000 signatures
	24–28 October Lilburne's first trial for treason
	8 November Lilburne, Overton, Prince and Walwyn released. Walwyn returns to his trade as a merchant and takes no more part in Leveller activity
	December 1651 Walwyn, <i>Juries justified</i>
	January 1652 Lilburne banished
	May 1652 Walwyn argues free trade to the Committee for Trade and Foreign Affairs
April 1653 Rump Parliament dissolved by Cromwell. 'Barebone's' parliament	May–August 1653 Lilburne returns, condemned for treason, imprisoned (27 August) on the Isle of Jersey and later at Dover
1654–8 The Protectorates of Oliver Cromwell and his son, Richard	1650s Walwyn's interests turn to medicine
	1655 Lilburne becomes a quietist Quaker
	1657 Lilburne dies
1660 Restoration of monarchy	1681 Walwyn dies

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### 1 Introductory reading

The Levellers' many writings were not systematic treatises on politics; they were very much reactions to, and interventions in, the highly complex politics of the time; and they combined arguments from many sources. This means that an approach to the study of Leveller 'political thought' is not easy, because often what it is *about*, and its tone and approach vary with the times. But good summaries of the Levellers' writings and careers, which take into account the events and attitudes of the time, and attempt to make their ideas seem coherent in the light of them, are David Wootton, 'Leveller democracy' in J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie (eds), *The Cambridge history of political thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 1991); and chapters in John Sanderson, *'But the people's creatures': the philosophical basis of the English civil war* (Manchester and New York, 1989) and Perez Zagorin, *A history of political thought in the English revolution* (London 1954, repr. 1965). An interesting recent attempt to make Leveller thought seem coherent is Alan Craig Houston, 'A way of settlement': the Levellers, monopolies and the public interest', *History of Political Thought*, 9 (1993), pp. 381–419.

### 2 Commentaries on particular themes

Despite the eclecticism and occasionalism of Leveller writings, there are in them certain recurrent moves in argument and expressions of opinion, and there are commentaries which deal with these (not always easily separable) moves and expressions: