

PART 1 ABSOLUTISM CHALLENGED: BRITAIN, 1603–1649

1 Monarchs and Parliaments, 1603–1629



In this section, we will examine the nature of English government and society under the early Stuarts. This was a period of personal monarchy in which the character traits of individual rulers determined significant aspects of the political and religious landscape, but it was also a time in which the English parliament showed itself to be a powerful representative institution capable of challenging and sometimes opposing royal policy. We will look into:

- The Political Nation and the social basis of power: the importance of land ownership; rival forms of wealth including merchants.
- James I: character and views on monarchy; court and favourites; Charles I: character and views on monarchy; court and favourites.
- The financial weakness of the Crown and attempts to reform and strengthen royal finance.
- Religion and religious divisions: Challenges to the Church of England from Catholics and Puritans and the development of Arminianism.
- Relations and disputes with parliaments: parliamentary privileges; finance; religion; foreign affairs.
- The state of relations between Crown and Parliament by 1629 and the reaction of the Political Nation; the extent of breakdown between Crown and Parliament and the Political Nation.

Introduction

Between 1603 and 1649 the British Isles experienced one of the most turbulent periods in its history. The monarchy inherited by James I in 1603 seemed wealthy and strong, infinitely more so than that of the Scotland he left behind. Yet by 1649 his son had been defeated in war by his Parliament, put on trial and executed in the name of the people of England.

Monarchy in this period was emphatically personal. As such, developments in politics, government and religion owed much to the character and personality of individual monarchs.

The reigns of James I and Charles I saw personal monarchy elevated to an unprecedented level due to the emphasis both men placed upon their ‘divine-right’ to rule. This brought them into conflict with their Parliaments, representative institutions increasingly sensitive to perceived encroachments on their privileges. These became more frequent owing to circumstances: the financial problems of the Crown forced it to resort to prerogative taxation, while the European war that broke out in 1618 brought pressure for England to intervene. While James, despite his ‘divine-right’ rhetoric, was prepared to make concessions to his Parliaments in order to restore harmonious relations, his successor, Charles, showed himself less willing to compromise. After a series of bitter confrontations, he decided to attempt to rule without Parliaments, until a war with Scotland forced him to recall the institution and the ensuing clash precipitated a Civil War, ending in defeat for Charles, whose refusal to come to terms eventually saw him deposed and executed.

Following the death of Elizabeth I in March 1603, a courtier, Robert Carey, rode non-stop north to Edinburgh to notify James VI of Scotland that he was the new king of England. Thrilled at the news, James travelled south slowly, savouring every moment of his triumphant progress. He was greeted rapturously by a people tired of Elizabeth’s rule, of war with Spain and of the accompanying high taxes. James must have felt hugely optimistic for his prospects, particularly his grand vision of a formal Union of England and Scotland. Quite quickly, however, he realised that ruling England was no easy thing: his scheme for Union failed, while both he and his son experienced financial difficulties, tensions with Parliament and the growth of religious divisions.

The Political Nation and the social basis of power

England, like the vast majority of European states in 1603, was a monarchy. Kings (and queens, for England had just seen the death of its most illustrious female monarch, Elizabeth I) stood at the top of a hierarchical political and social system. Widely current at this time was the idea that monarchs ruled by ‘divine right’.

James I (the new ruler of England in succession to Elizabeth) was a particularly keen proponent of the theory of the **divine right of kings**, having written a book, *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) in which he argued that kingship was ‘the true pattern of divinity’.¹ The implications of such an idea were clear: that obedience to the king was commanded by God, and that resistance to royal authority was a grave sin as well as being the crime of **treason**.

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Ideas of divine right combined with the older, medieval idea of ‘the king’s two bodies’ (the notion that kings were both their own individual persons and the timeless representatives and inheritors of their predecessors’ authority) to produce a highly elevated conception of royal power. This had been given even greater scope by the monarchical character of Henry VIII’s Reformation of the 1530s, a ‘top-down’ reordering of the realm and its external relations that had been characterised first and foremost by the repudiation of papal authority and had led to extravagant claims for the powers of the English Crown. The headship of the Church of England (subtly moderated to ‘supreme governorship’ under Elizabeth I) invested English monarchs with the power of their subjects’ souls as well as their bodies.

That was not to say, however, that kings ruled entirely alone or without limitations in their power. A fundamental principle of early modern monarchy was that kings must be subject to ‘counsel’ (advice) from their most important subjects. In England there existed two key institutions through which the monarch sought and received this advice: the Privy Council and Parliament. These were described famously by the historian of Tudor England, Geoffrey Elton, as ‘points of contact’ between the monarch and the people. The Privy Council was a hand-picked body of advisers, whose number could vary between perhaps a dozen and 20 or more of the king’s leading subjects. These men (and they were exclusively men, even when the monarch was, as in the case of Elizabeth, female) sometimes held high offices of state. For example, the Lord Chancellor or Lord Keeper of the Great Seal (head of the judiciary and speaker of the House of Lords), the Lord Treasurer (the controller of the royal finances) and the two Secretaries of State (formerly ‘Secretaries to the Council’, roughly corresponding to the modern ‘home’ and ‘foreign’ secretaries’

**Key term**

divine right of kings: the idea that a monarch’s authority was invested in them by God, conferred on them by the religious ritual that was a royal coronation and that they consequently answered only to God for the manner in which they exercised it.

The House of Stuart

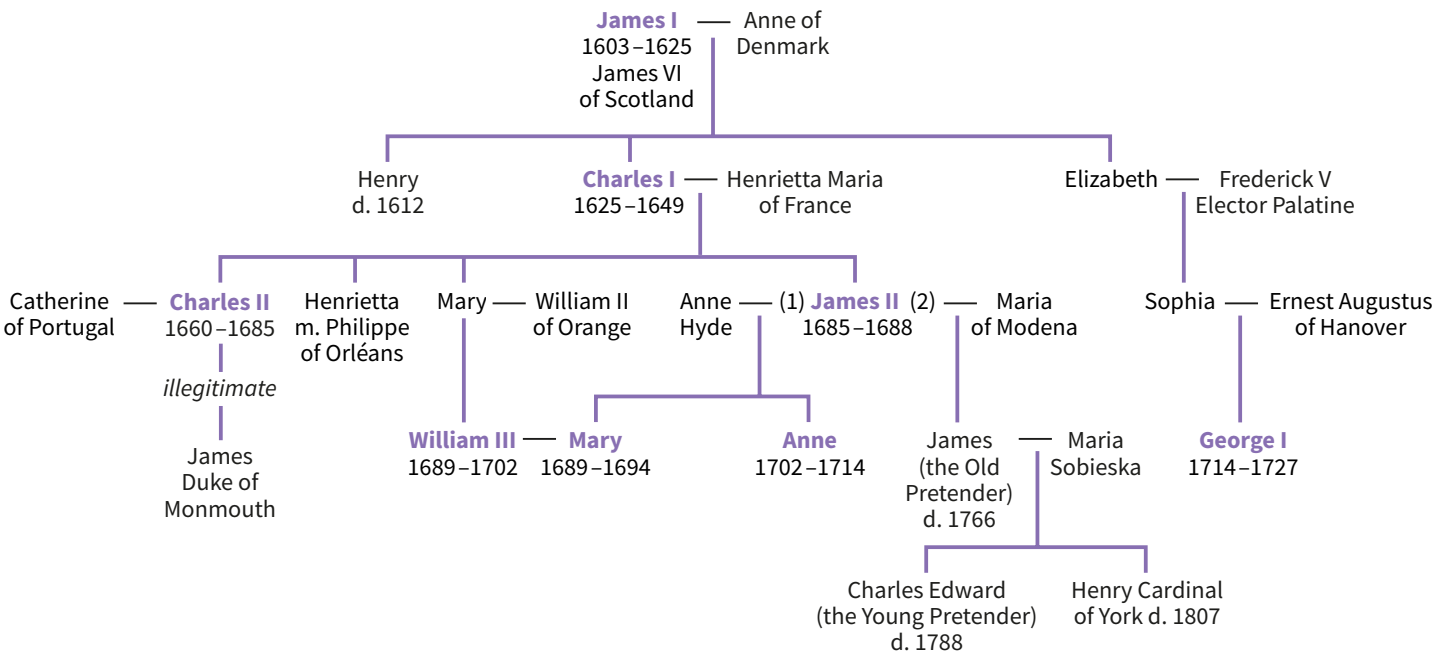


Figure 1.1: The Stuart family tree.

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but with considerable overlap in their responsibilities) were **ex officio** members. In addition, leading noblemen were usually appointed to the Council, as were several of the bishops. From the Tudor period onwards, however, an increasing proportion of the Council comprised commoners: able men, frequently lawyers, whose importance had increased as the government of the realm became more centralised and the bureaucracy more developed. The Council met regularly wherever the king was staying and advised him on the everyday issues of government, but particularly foreign policy, as well as taxation and general administration, and had oversight of the governance of the localities.

The King's 'Great Council'

The other key institution was Parliament, officially the King's 'Great Council'. Its functions were primarily to advise the king of what was going on in the provinces, to cooperate with the Crown in passing statute laws (acts of Parliament), and to assist in raising taxes. The English Parliament was, unlike that in Scotland, **bi-cameral** and the two chambers, the House of Lords and the House of Commons, were distinct in membership. In the Lords there were two main groups: the '**lords temporal**', noblemen who had inherited their titles and who usually possessed extensive landed wealth and of whom there were only 55 eligible members in 1600, though this would eventually grow to 120 during the reign of Charles I, and 170 by end of the century; and the '**lords spiritual**', the two archbishops and 24 diocesan bishops of the Church of England, all of them appointed by the Crown and their presence a reminder of the close linkage of church and state. The Lords served as the highest court of appeal in the land, but also performed important legislative functions: it drafted bills to be presented to the Commons and also amended bills presented by them. It could kill off bills from the Commons that its members did not like, and peers were uniquely privileged compared with members of the Commons in being able to formally register their opposition to a bill that did pass by an entry in the Lords' Journal.

The House of Commons was much larger; by 1600 there were more than 450 MPs, an increase from under 300 a century previously and a reflection of the growth in its importance during the Tudor period. This would rise to over 500 by the end of the century. Around three-quarters of MPs were members of the gentry class, that is wealthy, landed, but non-noble men who were often pillars of the local communities.² Given that MPs in this period were not paid and had to fund their own transport to and residence in the capital during parliamentary sessions, often for weeks or months at a time, it was inevitable that membership of the Commons should be the preserve of the wealthy. As for the electorate, the rules as to who could vote varied substantially in towns (borough constituencies) but in the counties there was a freehold property qualification of 40 shillings (i.e. to vote a man had to own property outright and it had to be worth 40 shillings a year). While this sounds exclusive, inflation over the previous century meant that perhaps as many as 300 000 people, as much as 27% of the adult male population, were entitled to vote.³ However, in practice most members were not so much 'elected' as 'selected' by wealthy patrons, often noblemen. This meant that there were frequently close links between members of the Lords and Commons, allowing for active co-operation either in putting forward or opposing legislation. Due to its claim to be the 'representative of the people', one area in which the Commons

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ACTIVITY 1.1

Summarise the functions of the three ‘points of contact’ within the government of England.

by constitutional tradition took the leading role was in the voting of taxation. Over the course of the century there was a shift in the relative importance of the Lords and Commons and this was largely due to the centrality of debates over parliamentary taxation to the politics of the period. Conscious of the leverage this gave them, members of the Commons began increasingly to seek to use the granting or withholding of taxation as a means of extracting concessions from the Crown, the ‘redress of grievances’. However, perhaps the most important thing to remember about Parliament is that for most of the 17th century it was, in the historian Conrad Russell’s memorable phrase, ‘an event, not an institution’.⁴ Parliaments met on an ad hoc basis when summoned by the Crown, usually when kings required extraordinary grants of taxation to fund expensive foreign policy ventures (wars or the threat of war) or for a display of national unity.

There was also a third forum through which the monarch could be influenced and advised, Elton’s third ‘point of contact’: the royal court. Office at court, particularly in the newly created Privy Chamber and Royal Bedchamber, had become ever more highly prized in the Tudor period as a means of gaining close and sustained access to the person of the monarch. By holding such posts, even those as menial-sounding as ‘Groom of the Stool’ (the person who attended the king when he used his closed-stool, or toilet), the holders were able to wield huge influence, offering suggestions for appointment, lobbying for favours for their friends and relations and sometimes seeking to affect the direction of royal policy. While medieval monarchs had been peripatetic, constantly travelling about their kingdom to enforce order and keep an eye on potentially over-mighty noblemen, the damage done to the military power of the nobility by the Wars of the Roses, together with the increased centralisation of government and bureaucracy under the Tudors, had allowed monarchs to base themselves largely in their palaces in and around London. Many of these had been built under the Tudors, and so whether at Greenwich, Richmond, Hampton Court or Whitehall, the court went wherever the king was.

There was of course significant overlap between these three ‘points of contact’: for example, many leading noblemen were both courtiers and Privy Councillors, as well as sitting in Parliament through their membership of the House of Lords; and commoners who were raised to conciliar rank were often members of the Commons or operated networks of clients there who would pilot government-sponsored legislation through Parliament. Monarchs therefore sought and received advice from various different quarters and the government of the realm was about more than merely the personal whim of the king.

The importance of land ownership

England in 1603 was a landed society. Contemporaries even classified themselves and their society according to their relationship to the land. The classification was usually into four distinct groups: gentlemen, yeomen, husbandmen, and cottagers and labourers.

Gentlemen, a classification that included both the titled peerage (e.g. earls and barons) and the gentry (including those with the knightly prefix ‘Sir’) were at the top of the social pyramid and were defined by their possession of enough land

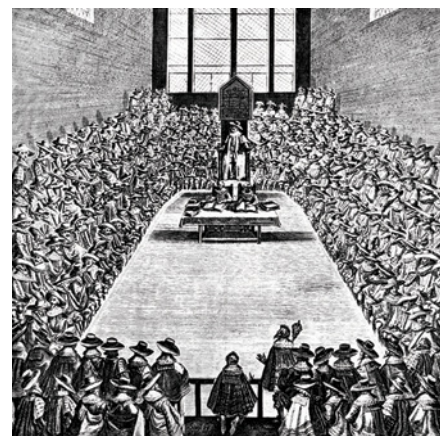


Figure 1.2: Parliament in session in the reign of James I.

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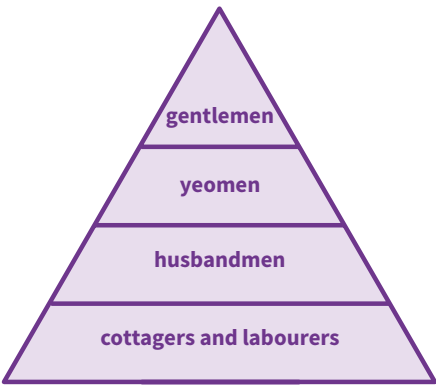


Figure 1.3: Social pyramid showing the hierarchy in Stuart society.

to give them a lifestyle of leisure and independence. They earned large sums in rent from their tenants who worked on their land, and built large houses for themselves on their estates with the proceeds.

With their landed wealth came great social and political influence. A long-running debate in 17th-century English history concerns the alleged ‘crisis of the aristocracy’ and the accompanying ‘rise of the gentry’. In the immediate post-war years, Marxist historians (such as Lawrence Stone and Christopher Hill) saw economic trends as the key motors of historical change and argued that the price inflation damaged the aristocracy’s wealth irrevocably, allowing their place to be gradually usurped within the social hierarchy by the ‘rising’ gentry whose lesser dependence on rents and involvement in business or the legal profession, insulated them from the downturn. The extent of this can be exaggerated, but the gentry were increasingly significant both economically and politically.⁵

Yeomen were below the rank of gentlemen but possessed moderate wealth from large-scale farming. They were sometimes landowners themselves or tenants of gentlemen. Next came the husbandmen, who were also farmers but less well-off than yeomen and owning much less land; they were consequently much more vulnerable to economic downturns and the hardships caused by famine or crop failure. At the bottom of the social hierarchy stood cottagers and labourers: they owned little, usually a small piece of land (a ‘smallholding’) or an allotment and worked it to feed themselves while also earning a money wage from the landholder. Due to their dependence on wages and the steady rise in prices (‘inflation’), their living standards declined in the late-16th and early 17th century). Within the countryside then, land-ownership defined social status and great wealth and prosperity existed alongside relative poverty and vulnerability to changes in national economic circumstances.

Economically, Stuart England saw significant change. Much of this was rooted in demographic developments. From around 2.5 million in the 1520s the population of England had risen to around 4.1 million by 1600, and it would rise further to just over 5.2 million by 1650. The main consequence of this sustained population growth was price inflation, with food prices rising by a factor of seven between 1500 and 1640, compared with only a threefold increase in wages.⁶ The inevitable result of this was declining standards of living. In addition to this, an economy based mainly around agriculture was always vulnerable to crises of subsistence, chiefly poor harvests, famine and epidemic disease. These served as an occasional brake on population growth: there were particular agrarian crises in the late 1590s (prompting the introduction of a new Elizabethan ‘Poor Law’ to combat the widely observed vagrancy), 1607 (producing riots in the midlands) and 1629–31, but after the first two decades of the 17th century famine became much less frequent. In agriculture there were some reforms in this period that aimed to solve the problem of pressure on the food supply, chiefly in attempts to increase the efficiency with which the land was cultivated. The ‘enclosure’ of land and the introduction of new farming techniques as part of the so-called ‘agricultural revolution’ (the precise extent and timing of which is hotly debated by economic historians) helped to improve grain yields, but the process was gradual and varied hugely from region to region.

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Rival forms of wealth including merchants

Not all wealth in the 17th century was based on land. The numbers of people who made their money from trade and commerce increased as Europeans discovered more of the world and with it markets for their goods. In the towns and cities the wealthiest inhabitants were merchants and traders, while beneath them there were skilled craftsmen and smaller-scale tradesmen, and under them apprentices and journeymen labourers. Mercantile wealth brought with it social and political influence to rival that of the aristocracy and gentry: merchants dominated the government of the City of London, with most of the aldermen (members of the City's governing council) coming from this class. Of the 140 men who became aldermen between 1600 and 1624, 55 were worth over £20 000 p.a. in goods when they died, while most of the others left £10–20 000.⁷ Profits from the aforementioned trading companies produced cash-rich buyers of property who built elegant townhouses in central London.



Figure 1.4: The urban centres of England were dominated by London, whose population had grown from 40 000 in 1500 to over 200 000 a century later.

No other town came close to London in size: the next biggest towns were Bristol, Norwich, Exeter and York, each with populations of between 10 000 and 30 000. London was the centre of both government and of culture, but it was also England's premier port and commercial centre.

The cloth trade accounted for over 80% of England's exports in 1600, with woven, unfinished cloth being sent over to the Low Countries, though over the course of the century this would increasingly be superseded by lighter, 'new draperies' exported to the Mediterranean countries and further afield. In many ways London was more important for the import trade as newly founded, joint-stock companies such as the East India Company (founded in 1600) bought silks and spices in the far east and sold them for high profits in London, and the Virginia Company imported tobacco in huge quantities to feed the growing craze for pipe-smoking.

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The merchants behind these ventures played a leading role in the foundation of overseas colonies, most of which began life as trading-posts. The beginnings of permanent English settlement in North America came with the establishment of Jamestown in 1607 and subsequently dissatisfaction with official religious policy in England drove the foundation of further colonies in New England in the 1620s. While the English treasury benefited from all of this increased sources of customs revenue, there is some debate as to whether or not the volume of English overseas trade expanded overall in the first half of the 17th century. For much of the 17th century, the Dutch remained the leading trading power in Europe, and Amsterdam a more important trading centre than London.

Local government

While the focus in any discussion of the rule of the Stuarts tends to be upon the centre of political power at Whitehall and Westminster, much of the ‘government’ experienced by ordinary men and women in Stuart England was not national, but local. Just as MPs were unpaid, so local government was largely voluntary and depended upon the co-operation of the local elites. Perhaps the most fundamental function that was delegated to the localities was defence, something of huge importance in time of rebellion or civil unrest, in the shape of the militia. It was organised by the Lord-Lieutenant of each county, usually a leading nobleman with extensive estates there (e.g. the earls of Derby in Lancashire), with several deputy-lieutenants under him, chosen from among the knights of the shire (the local gentry). The Lords Lieutenant reported to the Privy Council in London.

Justice was also, to an extent, a local concern: local magistrates (or Justices of the Peace) were voluntary servants who presided over the Quarter Sessions, the courts that tried minor crimes and in which most ordinary people encountered royal justice (more serious crimes were tried by circuit judges sent from London at the twice-yearly assizes). Other important local offices were that of sheriff (in charge of the assizes, and of empanelling juries and overseeing parliamentary elections) and, at parish level, constables and overseers of the poor (those who administered the Elizabethan Poor Law) all of whom were similarly volunteer local men (and very occasionally women). The dependence of the Stuart state on the co-operation of local people for the governance of the realm was a key part of its effective functioning.



Figure 1.5: Portrait of James I (1621) by Daniel Mytens.

James I: character and views on monarchy

For many years James enjoyed an almost universally bad press among historians. His earliest detractors included a resentful courtier, Anthony Weldon, whose disappointment at a lack of patronage and promotion led him to depict his sovereign as a slobbering, drunken and unhygienic sexual degenerate. This negative image was largely accepted by subsequent writers. It is only within the last 30 years or so that a different picture has begun to emerge, one that emphasises James’s good qualities and attributes much of the earlier criticism to a mixture of homophobia and anti-Scottish sentiment.

James was in many ways a curious mixture of qualities. Having become King of Scotland as a baby, amidst domestic turmoil and after the deposition of his Catholic mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, by a group of Protestant nobles, he had as



Speak like a historian

Jenny Wormald

An important article by Jenny Wormald, ‘James VI and I: Two Kings or One?’ argued that James had been a very successful ruler of Scotland and that the evidence available required historians to reassess James’s record as King of England in a more favourable light.

‘Distrust and alienation have an emotional reality which cannot be dispelled by the cool light of historical objectivity and distrust of a Scottish king in England is as relevant as his actions within the political world. Weldon’s buffoon, his vain pedant, are therefore important evidence. James the buffoon may more accurately be described as James the homely and casual, with a style of kingship profoundly different from that of Elizabeth. It may not be surprising that Elizabeth’s greatness – grown somewhat tedious by the 1590s – revived marvellously in the wake of the less obsessively dignified Scot who succeeded her; it is well known that James’s new subjects were almost immediately disenchanted because of his passionate dislike of the crowds who clamoured to see him. But it was more than that. Elizabeth’s common touch was in fact a dazzling display of the majesty and mystique of monarchy, and in that sense evidence of the remoteness of the late-sixteenth-century English monarchy. The Scottish monarchy was neither so remote nor so visually impressive; James simply failed to live up to the role expected of him in England.’⁸

a child and young man experienced kidnapping, betrayal and violence. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that he developed a cautious and sometimes fearful disposition, something his critics presented as timidity (a morbid fear of knives was one of his alleged hang-ups). This may have contributed to his aversion to warfare that characterised his foreign policy as king both of Scotland and of England. He was also, however, an intellectual, learned in theology and an adept Latinist who impressed those he met, especially foreign visitors, with his erudition: indeed he was once heard to say that had he not been a king he would like to have been a scholar. He was the first king since Alfred the Great (if one excludes Henry VIII’s partially ghost-written polemic against Luther) to publish books while on the throne.

James’s own subjects appear to have welcomed him in 1603 as a return to the natural order after nearly half a century of rule by a woman: though Elizabeth I had presided over the re-establishment of Protestantism and the defeat of the Spanish Armada, her last decade had been a time of widespread socio-economic discontent, faction-fighting at court and a general sense of weariness at her longevity, while her refusal to marry and beget heirs left lingering anxieties about the succession. The seamless accession of an adult male with a wife and a healthy brood of children, including, in the shape of his two sons, Henry and Charles, both an heir and a spare, therefore served as a source of optimism, as attested by the enthusiastic reception James received on his route south from Edinburgh in April and May 1603. While there was considerable anti-Scottish feeling in England, a legacy of centuries of intermittent warfare as well as no little xenophobic condescension, this was mainly directed at James’s Scottish courtiers who were thought likely to dominate the new regime, rather than at the king himself. As the great-great-grandson of Henry VII on his mother’s side, James was able to emphasise his link to the Tudor past as well as pointing the way forward to a new era of dynastic stability.

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ACTIVITY 1.2

Summarise the views of James I on monarchy from his own words in *The True Law of Free Monarchies* and in his speech of March 1610.


James I’s views on monarchy

In many ways, James’s views on monarchy may be seen as a reaction to his schooling: his tutor, George Buchanan, was a convinced defender of the view that subjects had the right to overthrow their king if he behaved in ways contrary to the law of God. This ‘Resistance theory’ was widely current among both radical Protestants and some Catholics (notably the Jesuits). Buchanan sought to impart it to his pupil forcefully, accompanied by birchings and beatings, and, perhaps as a result, James grew up to loathe such ideas and came to think the exact opposite: kings were ordained by God to rule and answered only to Him, so that no matter how tyrannically or unjustly they conducted themselves towards their subjects, they had no recourse but ‘prayers and tears’. James set out these views in a book, *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, published originally in Scotland in 1598 but hastily reprinted for an English audience in London in April 1603:

‘First, it is a sure Axiom in Theology, that evil should not be done, that good may come of it: The wickedness therefore of the King can never make them that are ordained to be judged by him, to become his Judges. And be it not lawful to a private man to revenge his private injury upon his private adversary (since God hath only given the sword to the Magistrate) how much less is it lawful to the people, or any part of them (who are all but private men, the authority being always with the Magistrate, as I have already proved) to take upon them the use of the sword, whom to it belongs not, against the public Magistrate, whom to only it belongeth.’⁹

In case the message had not got home, he expressed the same thought even more bluntly in a speech to his English Parliament in March 1610 in which he likened the power of kings to that of God himself:

‘The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God’s lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God’s throne, but even by God himself they are called gods ... Kings are justly called gods for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth...they make and unmake their subjects: they have power of raising, and casting down; of life, and of death, judges over all their subjects, and in all causes, and yet accountable to none but God onely ... And to the king is due both the affection of the soul and the service of the body of his subjects ...’¹⁰

Key term

chain of being: the widespread belief in the early modern period that essentially all life was ordered in a hierarchical structure, with God at the top and descending through all forms of life. Next after God were angels and celestial beings, after them came kings and princes, with nobles next, then ordinary men and finally animals and natural life.

As mentioned earlier, this kind of view about monarchy is sometimes referred to as ‘divine right’ or ‘absolute’. Most contemporaries accepted that kings were placed on their thrones by God, a key part of the ‘**chain of being**’ that underpinned social and political order.

This did not mean that James felt that he could ride roughshod over the laws of the kingdom; indeed, James accepted that there were obligations upon kings, for instance to ‘minister Justice and Judgement to the people’, to ‘advance the good, and punish the evill’, to ‘establish good Lawes’ and ‘produce obedience to the same’.¹¹ James’s views on monarchy were thus more balanced than some of his critics would allege, though the context and manner in which he expressed them sometimes caused his subjects, unused to such frequent statements, no little disquiet.