

The Glorious Revolution and the English Bill of Rights

With a Protestant majority and a developing democratic tradition, England did not take kindly the rule of James II. The king's absolutist tendencies and promotion of Catholicism alienated key elements within English society. Many looked forward to James' death and to what they hoped would be more moderate Protestant rule under his daughter Mary. In addition to being Protestant, Mary was married to Prince William of Orange, the ruler of the Netherlands and the most powerful Protestant opponent of the militantly Catholic King of France, Louis XIV. Hopes of a smooth transition to Protestant rule under Mary were dashed, however, when in 1688 James' wife gave birth to a male heir who was promptly baptized as a Catholic. Fearing the continuation of Catholic absolutist rule, seven English lords invited William and Mary to England. The offer was for both William and Mary to rule as dual monarchs, but it was understood that William would have the real authority. William, whose primary concern was defeating Louis XIV, accepted the offer with the hope of using England's strength against France.

Although the small group of leaders that invited William by no means represented all of England, war did not break out when William's armada landed in 1688. Civil war was a real possibility, however, and could have erupted as it did under James' father Charles I. Louis XIV, in fact, counted on William getting bogged down in an English war. However, due in part to favorable winds that carried William to England while simultaneously keeping James' fleet stuck in port and also to the unexpected flight of the typically strong-willed James, William's forces met no resistance when they landed in 1688 and marched into London. The Whig political party in England, which had been very critical of James II throughout his reign, readily welcomed the change in government. The rival Tory party, on the other hand, had been more loyal to James II and his Stuart royal family. The Tories were believers in strong royal authority, the right of hereditary succession, and the divine right of kings. All of those beliefs would lead them to be loyal to James and resist a claim to the throne by William. The Tories were also, however, staunch supporters of the Protestant Anglican Church of England, and the pro-Catholic policies of James II undoubtedly weakened Tory loyalty for him. Whether a result of resentment over James' religious policies or dismay at James' inability to mount an effective defensive campaign, the Tories decided to join the Whigs in supporting the accession to the throne of William and Mary. With both Whig and Tory support, the transfer of power was surprisingly smooth. Since the revolution was relatively bloodless and widely supported, it came to be known in England as "glorious."

In Ireland, however, the revolution had a far less glorious reputation with the Catholic majority. With support from Louis XIV, James II went to Ireland in 1689 to stage a comeback. He was supported enthusiastically by the Irish Catholic majority but was eventually defeated by the forces of William III. This episode sowed the seeds of Irish conflict for generations. Catholics resented their defeat and what they felt was their continued subjugation, while Protestant Unionists continued to take inspiration from the events of 1688-89 as shown by the adoption of orange as their official color in honor of William of Orange. In some ways, the conflict in Ireland between these two groups continues to this day.

Since William III's armies conquered Ireland by force and England without a fight, it has been argued that the Glorious Revolution was more of an invasion than a real

internal revolution. The role played by the English Parliament, however, makes the event more than a mere invasion or palace coup. The real significance of the Glorious Revolution stems from the fact that when William and Mary accepted the throne in 1689, they also officially accepted the Declaration of Rights: a document drawn up by the emergency Convention Parliament that, with a few amendments, was later written into law as the Bill of Rights. When the new king William III signed the Bill of Rights into law, it was not because he was a champion of limited government or a defender of English liberty. His primary concern was maintaining political support in Parliament for his war against France. William III's acceptance of the Bill of Rights, however, is what makes the Glorious Revolution a revolution.

In addition to declaring certain individual rights, the Bill of Rights defined the relationship between Parliament and the monarchy, giving Parliament the decisive edge. No longer threatened by the type of royal absolutism personified by Louis XIV and on the rise throughout Europe in the seventeenth century, England would be from this point forward a constitutional monarchy. Unlike the US Constitution, which is one amendable document, the English Constitution is a combination of legal traditions, court rulings, and parliamentary statutes. Written into law as one such parliamentary statute, The Bill of Rights is considered to be the cornerstone of the English Constitution. According to the new arrangement, the monarch would serve as head of state and possess a limited degree of authority, while Parliament would maintain the ultimate power. In other words, Parliament would be sovereign. The Bill of Rights also guaranteed certain individual rights. For example, article ten declares that English subjects were to be free from excessive bail, fines, or "cruel and unusual punishments." The language of this article and others reveals how influential the English Bill of Rights was to the writers of the US Bill of Rights a century later. The English Bill of Rights, however, did not go nearly as far in identifying individual rights as did its American successor, but instead focused on the monarchy, the Parliament, and the relationship between the two.

Outside of the British Isles, the philosophical legacy of the Glorious Revolution—especially as it was described in the writings of the contemporary observer John Locke—had a major impact, helping to inspire both the American and French Revolutions. Locke praised the Glorious Revolution in his famous *Two Treatises on Government* and possibly published the work when he did in 1689 in order to promote the passage of the Bill of Rights, then working its way through Parliament. Locke argues in this work that the people, as represented by the Convention Parliament, were right to replace the tyrannical James II and to declare their rights, through the Declaration of Rights, before anointing a new king. According to Locke, if a government does not protect the natural rights of the people—defined specifically as life, liberty, and property—than the people have the right to rebel and replace the government with one that more effectively protects those rights. In *The Two Treatises on Government*, Locke presents the Glorious Revolution as his philosophy of government in action. In reality, the Declaration of Rights fell far short of protecting natural rights as Locke had defined them, and Parliament at that time represented only the rich, not the people as a whole. Nevertheless, Locke's idealistic interpretation of the Glorious Revolution lived on, helping to spark far bloodier and more earth-shattering revolutions in America and France in the eighteenth century, and helping to inspire beliefs that are widely held today about individual rights, limited government, and popular sovereignty.