

Introduction

The Glorious Revolution is a term used to describe the peaceful way in which Parliament asserted its rights over the monarchy in 1688. This Factsheet begins with a chronology of the events that took place between 1685 and 1689 starting with the death of Charles II and culminating in the Bill of Rights in 1689. The Factsheet then looks at some historical interpretations of these events.

Events of 1685 – 1689

1685: succession of James II

On 6 February Charles II died and was succeeded by his brother, the Catholic James II. In spite of widespread fears of Catholicism, and the previous attempts which had been made to exclude James II from the throne, the succession occurred without incident. In fact on 19 May, when James's Parliament met, it was overwhelmingly loyalist in composition. The House voted James for life the same revenues his brother had enjoyed. Indeed after the suppressed invasions by the Dukes of Argyle and Monmouth¹, the Commons voted additional grants, accompanied by fervent protestations of loyalty. However, this fervour did not last. When the House was recalled after the summer, James asked the Commons for more money for the maintenance of his standing army. He further antagonised them by asking for the repeal of the Test Acts. These were the 1673 Acts that required office holders to prove that they were not Catholics by making a declaration against transubstantiation². Between 12 and 19 November Parliament declined to repeal the Acts and refused the extra money. In their reply to the King's speech parliament made it clear that the King's employment of Catholic officers was "of the greatest concern to the rights of all your Majesty's dutiful and loyal subjects" and begged him to allay their "apprehensions and jealousies". On 20 November, James prorogued Parliament, realising that they would not agree to repeal the penal laws against Catholics.

1686: repeal of the Test Acts

In April, in a collusive law case, *Godden v Hales*, the judges ruled that James II could dispense with the Test Acts without the consent of Parliament in individual cases. The King began to introduce Roman Catholics and some dissenters into the army, universities, and even posts within the Anglican Church. On 15 July an Ecclesiastical Commission was set up, to which the King's powers as Governor of the Church of England were delegated. This Commission could deprive the clergy of their functions, and one of its first acts was to suspend Henry Compton, Bishop of London, because he had refused to suspend a London clergyman who had preached against Roman Catholicism. A papal envoy was even received with honour in Whitehall. In Scotland, the Marquis of Queensberry was dismissed as Royal Commissioner when the Scottish Parliament also failed to repeal the Test Acts: He was replaced by a largely Roman Catholic administration.

In these circumstances, it was not surprising that throughout 1686 a growing fear manifested itself among the King's subjects that James was plotting to impose his own religious views on the country. The author John Evelyn wrote in his diary, "The Lord Jesus defend his little flock and preserve this threatened Church and nation." Meanwhile, to secure a House of Commons that would support his policies, James began a campaign to appoint sympathetic electors. Deputy Lieutenants, Justices of the Peace and members of municipal corporations (who had the right to vote) were asked whether they would support candidates willing to repeal the penal laws and

¹ the Duke of Monmouth was the illegitimate son of Charles II

² The Roman Catholic belief that bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ

Test Acts. On the basis of their answers, many were turned out, to be replaced with Roman Catholics and dissenters.

1687: Declaration of Indulgence

On April 5 the King published a Declaration of Indulgence, which suspended all the religious penal laws:

"We cannot but heartily wish, as it will easily be believed, that all the people of our Dominions were members of the Catholic Church, yet we humbly thank Almighty God that it is ... our opinion that conscience ought not to be constrained nor people forced in matters of mere religion."

These were brave words, but James's heavy-handed insensitivity to the fears of the majority of his subjects, and his use of the Royal Prerogative without Parliamentary approval were causing deep unease.

In July the King received Ferdinando d'Adda as official Papal Nuncio to the Court of St James. Throughout the rest of the year, the Lord Lieutenants were instructed to call together prominent local people and ask them, if they were to be chosen as Members, whether they would approve the repeal of the penal laws, and other questions designed to the same end. Most of the existing Lord Lieutenants refused to put these questions, and in August, nine were dismissed by the King. In any case, the surviving answers to the King's questions show an almost unanimous opposition among the prominent and influential local men who had been canvassed.

1688: the Glorious Revolution

The Declaration of Indulgence was reissued by James on April 27 1688, and in an act of gross miscalculation he ordered Anglican clergy to read it from the pulpit to their congregations on two consecutive Sundays. On 18 May the Archbishop of Canterbury and six other bishops refused to read it and petitioned against the order, thus entering Whig history as the Seven Bishops. The petition requested the King to withdraw the order on the grounds that the foundation of his declaration of indulgence was illegal, being based on his suspending power, actions that had often been condemned by Parliament. On June 8 the Seven Bishops were arrested and sent to the Tower to await trial; two days after this, with very poor timing, the Queen gave birth to a son, James Francis Edward, Prince of Wales, who was baptised according to the Roman Catholic rite. The prospect of an unending Catholic dynasty ruling without Parliament gave rise to ugly rumours that the baby was no true prince but a substitute smuggled into the Queen's bed in a warming pan. When, a few days afterwards, on 30 June the Seven Bishops were acquitted by jury, huge crowds celebrated in the streets, burning effigies of the Pope, and attacking Catholic establishments. The same day, a "letter of invitation" was signed by seven prominent politicians (Shrewsbury, Devonshire, Danby, Lumley, the Bishop of London, Henry Sidney and Edward Russell). This invited William of Orange, Protestant son-in-law to James, to intervene to save both Church and State. In fact William had already made his decision to intervene, and on October 1 issued his manifesto from the Hague, listing at length the allegedly illegal actions of the last three years:

"...Therefore it is that we have thought fit to go over to England, and to carry with us a force sufficient, by the blessing of God, to defend us from the violence of those evil councillors ; and we, being desirous that our intention in this way may be rightly understood, have prepared this Declaration..."

William landed at Torbay in Devon with about 15,000 (mostly Dutch) troops on November 5; the only successful large-scale landing in England since 1485. James still had his standing army, but the enthusiasm with which William was welcomed and the defections from James's

army strengthened William's hand. He entered London on December 19, and a few days later James II was allowed to escape for France.

1689: Bill of Rights

On 22 January a new Parliament first met. This was known as the Convention Parliament although as it was summoned by William of Orange and not the King, was not strictly speaking a Parliament at all. On February 12, the Convention Parliament issued a Declaration of Rights (see Appendix) which sharply condemned the actions of James II and asserted what it described as "certain ancient rights and liberties". The same day, Princess Mary, William's wife and James's elder daughter, arrived in London. Lord Halifax, the leader of the Lords, read the Declaration to both William and Mary on the next day, and then offered them the crown. The declaration was later embodied in the Bill of Rights passed by Parliament in December 1689: this further stipulated that the throne be occupied by a Protestant only and that the succession was to rest with (1) the heirs of Mary (2) the heirs of her sister Anne.

Historical Interpretations

The traditional Whig view of the Glorious Revolution is embodied in Thomas Babington Macaulay's *The History of England from the accession of James the second, 1849-61*. For Macaulay the revolution was "a vindication of our ancient rights" in which it was "finally decided ... whether the popular element, which had, ever since the age of Fitzwalter and de Montfort, been found in English polity, should be destroyed by the monarchical element, or should be suffered to develop itself freely and to become dominant." Macaulay's view was that because England had had a preserving revolution in the seventeenth century she had been spared a destroying revolution in the nineteenth. As the contemporary philosopher John Locke had written, James II was guilty of breaking the "original contract" between sovereign and people, and had therefore suffered the just wrath of Parliament and people.³

The Whig view of the Glorious Revolution is therefore simply that it was a triumph for the purity of constitutional law over an outrageous attempt at its perversion, a reaffirmation of the liberties of the English people.

However, this interpretation of the Glorious Revolution has not gone unchallenged. To some twentieth century historians it has appeared as a respectable revolution, (e.g. Lucile Pinkham, *William and the Respectable Revolution*, 1954), involving just the ruling classes and leaving the monarchy in most respects unaltered, hardly a proper revolution at all. For example, the constitutional historian Mark Thompson wrote that apart from determining the succession, the Bill of Rights (which contained the clauses submitted for acceptance by William and Mary) did "little more than set forth certain points of existing laws and simply secured to Englishmen the rights of which they were already legally possessed".⁴ Others have been even more dismissive: the Russian historian, Viktor F Semenov, regarded it as a mere coup d'etat in its conservatism, its bloodlessness and its legalism⁵.

This Marxist interpretation is given some weight by the fact that (for example) a point-by-point analysis of the Bill of Rights does reveal that in several aspects it is indeed a rather conservative document. It is a declaratory Act, reasserting ancient rights and restoring the monarchy with

³ in *Two Treatises of Government* 1688-89

⁴ *Constitutional History of England*, London, 1938

⁵ *Perevorot 1688 [The Coup of 1688] in The English Bourgeois Revolution of the 17th century*, Moscow, 1954

limitations which (it is possible to argue) differed in no major or significant way from the traditional ones. It is quite tempting to see the events of 1688 as a mere codicil to the interregnum⁶, of no major importance in themselves. However, this is misleading. The civil wars cannot be regarded as finally settling England's political future as a parliamentary monarchy. Neither, of course, can the Glorious Revolution of 1688. However, before 1688 it is possible to see England as beginning to move towards absolutism on the French model. After 1688 this is stopped. The obvious cause of the Glorious Revolution was the stupidity and impatience of James II, who not only frightened the Anglican Church and laity by his moves towards a restoration of Popery, but managed to unite a wide variety of interests in opposition to his clumsy policies. However, it must be remembered that the Prince called in to save the situation had no desire for a weakened monarchy: the agreements of 1688-89 are not, therefore, obviously radical documents. But the fact they exist at all is of great importance. Any move towards popery or absolutism was stopped. Also the Declaration and Bill of Rights restricted the King's dispensing powers and his standing army, and insisted on the rights of a free Parliament.

One development which did result from the Glorious Revolution was the transformation by William III of England's place in Europe and the wars that this involved, which led to a crucial loss of royal power and establishment of parliamentary supremacy. For instance the Triennial Act of 1694 required Parliaments to be summoned every three years, and thus prevented future monarchs from ruling without a parliament, a favourite practice of the Stuarts - but this is a development seen with hindsight. "Constitutional government has endured because it became a habit in the eighteenth century, not because it was established by revolution (great or small) in the seventeenth."⁷

⁶ A period between monarchs, i.e. Charles II and William III

⁷ J Western, *Monarch and Revolution*, 1972