

**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
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**No 8**

**THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION**

1988 marked the tercentenary of the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89. This was the series of events which culminated in the exile of King James II (reigned 1685-88) and the accession to the throne of William and Mary. It has also been seen as a watershed in the development of the constitution and especially of the role of Parliament. This **Factsheet** is an attempt to explain why.

(An illustration is available in hard copy only)

*Presentation of the Declaration of Rights to William  
and Mary in the Banqueting House.*

*EVENTS OF 1685-1689*

**1685** **6 February:** Death of Charles II and succession of 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, and 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, and indeed after the invasions of Argyle and Monmouth (the Duke of Monmouth was the illegitimate son of Charles II), 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 Acts which required office holders to prove that they were not Catholics by making a declaration against transubstantiation. Between **12-19 November** Parliament declined to repeal them and refused the extra money: in their reply to the King's speech they 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, seeing that they would not agree to repealing the penal laws against his co-religionists.

**1686** **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. 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 which 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 Test Acts. On the basis of their answers, many were turned out, to be replaced with Roman Catholics and dissenters.

**1687** 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.*" 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 Declaration of Indulgence was re-issued by James on **April 27**, 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 hagiography

as the *Seven Bishops*. The petition requested the King to withdraw the order on the ground that the foundation of his declaration of indulgence was illegal, being based on his suspending power which had been often 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 **10 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 . . .*

- 1688** 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** On **22 January** a new Parliament - the *Convention Parliament* met. This, as it was summoned by William of Orange and not the King, was not strictly speaking a Parliament at all, but it 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 (**February 12**). 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 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.

## DIFFERENT VIEWS OF THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION

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, (in *Two treatises of Government* 1688-89) James II was guilty of breaking the "original contract" between sovereign and people, and had therefore suffered the just wrath of Parliament and people.

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, (eg 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" (*Constitutional History of England*, London, 1938).

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, its legalism (Perevorot 1688 [The Coup of 1688] in *The English Bourgeois Revolution of the 17th century*, Moscow 1954).

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 - a declaratory Act, reasserting ancient rights and restoring the monarchy with 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 interregnum, 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 slip towards popery or absolutism was stopped. Also the Declaration and Bill of Rights *did* restrict the King's dispensing powers and his standing army, and insisted on the rights of a free Parliament.

As it happened, 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.*" (J Western *Monarch and Revolution* 1972).

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Gillian Howarth  
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Appendix - The Declaration of Rights, February 13, 1689

**APPENDIX**

**THE DECLARATION OF RIGHTS  
FEBRUARY 13, 1689**

Whereas the late King James the Second, by the assistance of divers evil counsellors, judges, and ministers employed by him, did endeavour to subvert and extirpate the Protestant religion and the laws and liberties of the kingdom.

1. By assuming and exercising a power of dispensing with and suspending of laws, and the execution of laws, without the consent of parliament.
2. By committing and prosecuting divers worthy prelates for humbly petitioning to be excused concurring to the said assumed power.
3. By issuing and causing to be executed a commission under the Great Seal for erecting a court called the Court of Commissioners for Ecclesiastical Causes.
4. By levying money for and to the use of the Crown by pretence of prerogative, for other time and in other manner than the same was granted by parliament.
5. By raising and keeping a standing army within this kingdom in time of peace without the consent of parliament and quartering soldiers contrary to the law.
6. By causing several good subjects, being Protestants, to be disarmed at the same time when papists were both armed and employed contrary to the law.
7. By violating the freedom of election by members to serve in parliament.
8. By prosecutions in the Court of King's Bench for matters and causes cognizable only in parliament; and by divers other arbitrary and illegal courses.
9. And whereas of late years, partial, corrupt, and unqualified persons have been returned and served on juries in trials, and particularly divers jurors in trials for high treason, which were not freeholders.
10. Excessive bail hath been required of persons committed in criminal cases, to elude the benefit of laws made for the liberty of the subjects.
11. And excessive fines have been imposed; and illegal and cruel punishments inflicted.
12. And several grants and promises made of fines and forfeitures, before any conviction or judgment against the persons, upon whom the same were to be levied.

All which are utterly and directly contrary to the known laws and statutes and freedom of this realm.

And whereas the said late King James the Second having abdicated the government and the throne being thereby vacant, his Highness the Prince of Orange (whom it hath pleased Almighty God to make the glorious instrument of delivering this kingdom from popery and arbitrary power) did (by the advice of the lords spiritual and temporal, and divers principal persons of the Commons) cause letters to be written to the lords spiritual and temporal, being Protestants; and other letters to the several counties, cities, universities, boroughs, and Cinque Ports, for the choosing of such persons to represent them, as were of right to be sent to parliament, to meet and sit at Westminster upon January 22, 1689 . . .

And thereupon the said lords spiritual and temporal and Commons . . . do in the first place (as their ancestors in like case have usually done) for the vindicating and asserting their ancient rights and liberties, declare:

1. That the pretended power of suspending of laws, or the execution of laws, by regal authority, without consent of parliament, is illegal.
2. That the pretended power of dispensing with laws, or the execution of laws, by regal authority, as it hath been assumed and exercised of late, is illegal.
3. That the commission for erecting the late Courts of Commissioners for Ecclesiastical Causes and courts of like nature are illegal and pernicious.
4. That levying money for or to the use of the Crown, by pretence of prerogative, without grant of parliament, for longer time, or in other manner than the same is, or shall be granted, is illegal.
5. That it is the right of the subjects to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal.
6. That the raising or keeping a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace, unless it be with consent of parliament, is against law.
7. That the subjects which are Protestants may have arms for their defence suitable to their conditions and as allowed by law.
8. That election of members of parliament ought to be free.
9. That the freedom of speech and debates or proceedings in parliament ought not to be impeached or questioned in any court or place out of parliament.
10. That excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed; nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.
11. That jurors ought to be duly impanelled and returned, and jurors which pass upon men in trials for high treason ought to be freeholders.
12. That all grants and promises of fines and forfeitures of particular persons before conviction are illegal and void.
13. And that for redress of all grievances, and for the amending, strengthening and preserving of the laws, parliaments ought to be frequently held.

And they do claim, demand, and insist upon all and singular the premisses, as their undoubted rights and liberties; and that no declaration, judgments, doings or proceedings, to the prejudice of the people in any of the said premisses, ought in any wise to be drawn hereafter into consequent of example.

To which demands of their rights they are particularly encouraged by the declaration of His Highness the Prince of Orange, as being the only means for obtaining a full redress and remedy therein.

Having therefore an entire confidence tht his said Highness the prince of Orange will perfect the deliverance so far advanced by him, and will still preserve them from the violation of their rights, which they have here asserted, and from all other attempts upon their religion, rights and liberties.

The said Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, assembled at Westminster do resolve that William and Mary, Prince and Princess of Orange be, and be declared, King and

## Glorious Revolution 8

Queen of England, France, and Ireland, and the dominions thereunto belonging, to hold the Crown and royal dignity of the said kingdoms and dominions to them the said Prince and Princess during their lives, and the life of the survivor of them; and that the sole and full exercise of regal power be only in, and executed by the said Prince of Orange, in the names of the said Prince and Princess, during their joint lives; and after their deceases, the said Crown and royal dignity of the said Kingdoms and dominions to be to the heirs of the body of the said Princess; and for default of such issue to the Princess of Anne of Denmark and the heirs of her body; and for default of such issue to the heirs of the body of the said Prince of Orange. And the Lords Spiritual and Temporal and the Commons do pray the said Prince and Princess to accept the same accordingly.