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1 Monarchs and parliaments 1603–29

1 The Political Nation and the social basis of power

EXTRACT 1

A changing economy and social structure shaped, even if they did not cause, the political upheaval of civil war and revolution in the 1640s. The economic dominance of the great landowners diminished as the commercial sector grew in strength; similarly the landowners' political influence lessened as society diversified. London in all its transformations provided fertile ground for change, with its burgeoning suburbs and its increasingly self-confident tradesmen.

Adapted from *England in Conflict 1603–1660* Derek Hirst (Bloomsbury 1999)

The historian Hirst sees the early seventeenth century as one of growing social and economic change, particularly in the metropolis of London, and this change helped to bring about the crisis that most marks the **Stuart Age** – civil war and revolution. While England was still an agricultural economy dominated by a small elite group of landowners, the developments in trade and industry, combined with religious developments, brought tensions within the 'Political Nation' eventually to breaking point.

The Political Nation

The monarch

The term 'Political Nation' refers to those people in early modern Britain who had economic, political and social influence. Economic standing, predominantly based on land ownership, lay at the root of the Political Nation's influence, because it was their wealth that gave them their political and social power. The monarch was the head of the Political Nation.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn about:

- the definition of the Political Nation
- the importance of the monarch as head of the Political Nation
- the social basis of the Political Nation's power
- the importance of land ownership in the Political Nation's power
- rival forms of wealth, including merchants.

KEY QUESTION

As you read this chapter, consider the following Key Questions:
- How far did the monarchy change?
- To what extent and why was power more widely shared during this period?
- How important was the role of key individuals and groups and how were they affected by developments?

KEY TERM

Stuart Age: a term for the period 1603–1714, during which the Stuarts were monarchs of England, Scotland and Ireland

ACTIVITY

What arguments does Hirst put forward in Extract 1?

EXTRACT 2

The monarch was addressed as Majesty or Highness, to signify his position atop the political hierarchy. All bowed before the king, but the king bowed only before God. The most common metaphors used of the monarchy were with fathers of families and with the head of the body.

Adapted from *A Monarchy Transformed: Britain 1603–1714* by Mark Kishlansky (Penguin 1996)

The institution of monarchy remained the most important constant throughout the Stuart Age, as Kishlansky stresses, 'atop the political hierarchy'. During this period, the system of personal monarchy was customary: the characters and personalities of each monarch did much to shape the period and the monarch's relationship with the rest of the Political Nation, particularly through the institution of Parliament.

KEY PROFILE

Stuart monarchs of Great Britain

James I (reigned 1603–25) James Stuart became King James VI of Scotland in 1566. In 1603, when Elizabeth I, the last Tudor monarch, died childless, James succeeded to the English throne as King James I, having a claim through his great-grandmother, Margaret Tudor, who was the sister of Henry VIII and had married the Scottish king, James IV. A successful ruler, James I was pragmatic and practical enough to realise that he needed to work with Parliament. He did, however, dissolve Parliament several times in frustration during his reign.

Fig. 1   *James I*

Charles I (reigned 1625–49) Charles I was the younger son of James I, with whom he had a strained relationship. His older brother, Henry, was increasingly viewed by the English political elite as the model prince, partly due to increasing dissatisfaction with James I. Henry died aged 18 years, and Charles became heir to the throne at the age of 11. Charles was temperamentally unsuited to kingship and was unprepared for the role. He did not get along with Parliament.

Charles II (reigned 1660–85) Charles II was the eldest son of Charles I and spent his formative years in exile in mainland Europe after the defeat and execution of his father. Restored to the throne in 1660 as a result of the collapse of the post-Cromwell regimes, Charles II's main goal was to remain on the throne.

Fig. 2   *Charles II*

Similar to his grandfather in his sociable nature, Charles II was also, like James I, a pragmatic king.

James II (reigned 1685–88) James II was Charles II's younger brother. Like his father, Charles I, he was principled and stubborn, and this underpinned his political failings. It was James II's Catholicism, however, and his determination to establish his religious values as a dominant political force that sparked a revolution against him.

William III (reigned 1689–1701) and Mary II (reigned 1689–94) William of Orange was a Dutch Protestant whose claim to the English throne was through his wife, Mary, who was the eldest daughter of James II. The Political Nation invited William and Mary to take over from James II to protect Protestantism and the strength of its influence.

Fig. 3   *William III and Mary II*

Through their **prerogative,** monarchs led the Political Nation in shaping the politics, economics and social life of the country. The monarchs' prerogative gave them powers over the following key areas:
- foreign diplomacy, as Head of State
- declaration of war, as commander-in-chief of the military
- legislation, through the right to call and dissolve Parliament
- religion, as the Supreme Governor (head) of the Church of England.

Such was the extent of the powers held by monarchs that they were almost absolutist, which meant they could rule almost freely with unrestricted political power.

However, finances lay at the root of the monarch's power, and the limits on the monarchs' income prevented them from becoming truly absolutist. A century of inflation, or a general rise in prices, meant that English monarchs increasingly found that their income could not meet their expenses, especially in relation to foreign policies such as warfare and international diplomacy. Substantial funds could only be raised through parliamentary **subsidies**.

Parliament was normally reluctant to vote for subsidies, however, because the money would have to be raised by taxing the Political Nation. Although in theory members of Parliament represented all people in the area in which they had been selected, in reality they tended to represent only the concerns of the voters who had selected them – generally, the landed aristocracy and gentry, as well as wealthy lawyers and merchants. Because only the wealthy had to pay a parliamentary subsidy, they (and by extension their MPs) had a vested interest in not granting subsidies to the monarch.

The limited availability of parliamentary subsidies therefore forced monarchs to exploit their prerogative income, which was money they received due to their position as monarch.

KEY TERMS

prerogative: the power of the Crown, derived from the idea that the divine right to rule is given by God to monarchs. Prerogative powers of the early modern British monarchs included the right to call and dissolve Parliament. The monarch could also declare war. Theoretically, the monarch still holds such powers today

subsidy: a form of economic support for a particular undertaking; in this case, a sum of money to promote or aid Crown policies, such as warfare. The Crown subsidy came in the form of parliamentary taxation, with a tax on land and other forms of property

Main forms of Crown income

Types of income	Definition
Crown lands	The crown had sold much land or rented it out on long leases at a fixed rent, thus their income was reduced because they couldn't update rents in line with inflation.
Customs duties	Taxes from goods imported into the country. The crown could also temporarily sell the right to collect such taxes to raise funds quickly.
Feudal dues	The crown had the right to control an estate that was inherited, by ancient right, by an heir under the age of 21.
Parliamentary subsidy	Funds approved by Parliament for emergencies such as war.

Prerogative income also raised concerns in Parliament, because if a monarch became financially self-sufficient, then that monarch could establish themselves as absolute, meaning they did not need Parliament at all. The issue of finance could thus be said to be at the centre of most tensions between the Crown and Parliament (and thus within the Political Nation) across the whole of the Stuart Age. Parliament's control of significant financial resources was the key limit on the development of an absolute monarchy in England.

Another limit on the development of absolutism was that the monarch needed the Political Nation to help control the general population. The Crown did not possess the force or civil service to impose its will independently: it had fewer than 2000 paid officials. Instead, the monarch relied on members of the Political Nation to ensure that both central and local government could function. For example, the monarch relied on Justices of the Peace, who were chosen from ranks of the nobility and gentry, to enforce the Crown's will in the localities. The Political Nation was responsible for collecting taxes, training the militia, enforcing laws and conducting trials. Holding office in the name of the Crown gave members of the Political Nation status and further contributed to their power.

A CLOSER LOOK

The unwritten constitution

Part of the reason for the blurred nature of the English political system during the Stuart Age was the nature of the country's constitution. England historically has had no written constitution that documented the rules by which the state was run. Instead, the country had an unwritten constitution that was a mixture of parliamentary laws, the common law, and documents such as Magna Carta, as well as tradition and custom. The disadvantage of an unwritten constitution was that it was open to interpretation, but this was also its advantage. In a society that valued consensus, the ability to interpret the constitution in different ways enabled compromise.

ACTIVITY

Using what you have learned in this chapter so far, construct a chart listing the monarch's powers and the limitations they had to their powers.

Powers of the monarch	Limitations to the power of the monarch

KEY QUESTION

To what extent and why was power more widely shared during this period?

Together, the monarch and rest of the Political Nation had power over the majority of the population. Despite disagreements between the Crown, Parliament, and other elements of the Political Nation, all who were involved shared an interest in cooperating in order to maintain power over the population at large.
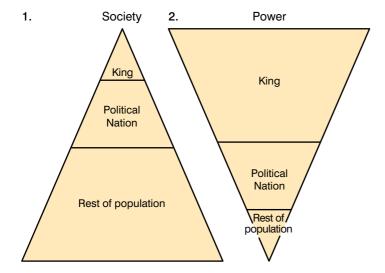

Fig. 4 *This diagram illustrates the size of sections of society compared to the power they held*

Other groups that formed the Political Nation

For the historian Keith Wrightson, the Political Nation was composed of 'an elite of wealth, status and power, internally differentiated and yet united by their shared interests as substantial landowners and agents of government'. The Political Nation covered a range of social groups:

- the aristocracy
- the lesser gentry whose status was based on land ownership
- newer groups, including lawyers and merchants, whose wealth was based on income not derived from land ownership. Some historians refer to this group as the pseudo-gentry because of the non-land-based nature of their wealth.

There were approximately 4,110,000 people living in England in 1603. By 1640 there were approximately 120 peers and 20,000 gentry; therefore, the whole Political Nation could be said to constitute about 1 in 200 of the adult male population. The vast majority of the population did not belong to the Political Nation.

ACTIVITY

Copy the first of the two triangles in Fig. 4. Beside each section of society add further details to explain the position and power of the person or group.

The minimum requirement for being seen as part of the Political Nation is generally said to have been an annual income of 40 shillings (£2), as this was needed to qualify to vote for one's local member of Parliament. In most cases, however, MPs were simply selected (rather than actually 'elected') by agreement among the members of the Political Nation, particularly by those families who, because of their wealth, headed the Political Nation in a local area.

The political power of this group also stemmed from the positions of authority they held in their local areas, such as Justice of the Peace. Men towards the top of the Political Nation were more likely to hold positions of national importance, such as being in the House of Lords or being a Member of Parliament.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **patriarchal:** a society controlled by men. The concept is related to **patriarchalism**, a popular seventeenth-century belief that God gave power to fathers and that male monarchs could be seen as fathers of their people. This concept was used to reinforce obedience to the king

A CLOSER LOOK

Seventeenth-century Britain was very much a **patriarchal** society. Some women did have social, economic and political influence, depending on their economic standing, but although women could be part of the Political Nation, there were limits on how they could wield their power. Women could not hold any of the formal offices through which the Political Nation exercised their control. Despite the historically recent example of Queen Elizabeth I, who reigned from 1558 to 1603, women had to exercise their power in less overt political forums. Personal interaction with other people at court was the key way in which women, and many men, could assert their influence.
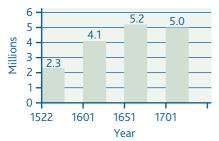

Fig. 5 *Growth in English population*

> **KEY TERMS**
>
> **Great Chain of Being:** contemporary phrase for the idea of an ordered society set in place by God; the idea held that everyone was linked to each other and must accept their place in society, whether they were born a poor peasant, a wealthy aristocrat, or somewhere in between
>
> **paternalist:** the idea that it is a fatherly duty of those above others in society to look after the interests of those beneath them, especially in times of hardship

Social basis of the Political Nation's power

Even though the seventeenth-century Political Nation had no police force or real army to impose control, its dominance was generally accepted by those beneath them in the social hierarchy. This remained the case even in the face of enormous pressure resulting from a sharp increase in population. Between 1500 and 1650, the population of England nearly doubled.

This growth led to several negative consequences, including:

- price inflation (particularly with regard to food)
- food shortage
- land shortage
- unemployment
- greater reliance on the state for poor relief.

All of these consequences strained the hierarchical society. A subclass of the poorest of the poor developed and, as agricultural production could not meet the increased demand for food, some died from famine during harvest failures in the 1620s. At the other end of society, however, the rich got richer. Landowners and landlords could charge higher prices because of the increased population's growing demands. And yet there remained little challenge to the social order. The concept of the '**Great Chain of Being**' maintained that it was for the benefit of all to accept the social position in which God had placed them.

During this period society was seen as a greater whole with inter-dependent parts that created a sense of order. Part of the elites' **paternalist** duty in participating in the Political Nation and the great chain of being was to ensure that, in times of hardship, those at the bottom of society were looked after (though some members of the nobility and gentry took their responsibilities more seriously than others).

Naturally, however, such an unequal society would have tensions. There were riots, particularly during times of hardship, but those in authority tended to treat the rioters relatively leniently, partly in recognition of the economic pressures the rioters were under. In general, the riots were only minor disturbances, and the participants' demands were usually for the enforcement of laws to protect their positions, rather than calls for an overturning of the established order.
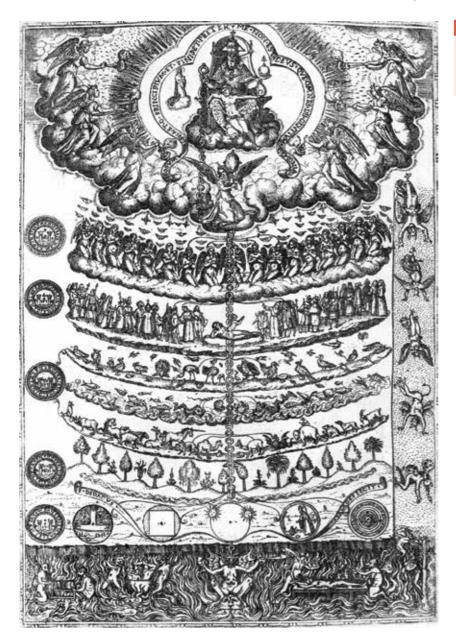
Fig. 6   *A contemporary representation of the Great Chain of Being*

KEY QUESTION

How important were ideas and ideology?

EXTRACT 3

When order seemed truly threatened, England's rulers were ready enough to maintain it by repression. What is more significant, however, is that they preferred not to, and that such exercise of naked power was rarely required. In the light of the frequently expressed fears of members of the governing class, it is indeed ironic that when a serious breakdown of authority in the state occurred in 1642, it was the result of a struggle for power among England's rulers themselves. Riots posed no lasting threat in a society in which few men imagined any alternative social order.

Adapted from *English Society 1580–1680*, by Keith Wrightson (Routledge, 2002)

The importance of land ownership and other rival forms of wealth

Land remained central to power and wealth across the century as the economy remained predominantly agrarian. Ownership of land during a time of increasing population enabled landowners to benefit from the increasing price of food.

Other professionals who could be considered non-landed elite, or pseudo-gentry, worked in the Church, medicine, music, surveying, architecture or the visual arts. Many of these professionals, over time, used their acquired wealth to purchase land for their families to become part of the landed gentry. While in general those of higher status in the different levels of the Political Nation were the most wealthy, it was not always the case that the aristocracy had more income than merchants. Some London merchants could have annual incomes of £100,000, while some of the aristocracy could have as little as £200 a year.

Summary

As Derek Hirst argued in Extract 1, the gentry and merchant class grew in importance and became a significant force within the Political Nation during this period. Central to this process was the growth of trade which led to the development of towns and the explosion of London as a metropolis across the century. Urban growth saw the development of non-landed forms of wealth and some of the people entered the 'Political Nation'.

STUDY TIP

Before writing an answer to this type of question you should begin by looking at the chart you compiled in the Activity on page 4. Decide whether you wish to agree with the view of the quotation or adopt an alternative thesis (or argument) in your essay. Ensure you look at both the strengths and limitations of the powers of the monarch in your answer whilst upholding your own judgement, which should appear at the beginning and again in the conclusion.

A LEVEL · PRACTICE QUESTION

Early seventeenth-century monarchs had very limited powers. Assess the validity of this view.

ACTIVITY

Based on what you have read in this chapter, write two paragraphs on what you understand by the 'Political Nation' in the seventeenth century.

STUDY TIP

It is crucial to distinguish between different types of wealth when answering this type of question. You might consider whether it was 'wealth' or 'land' which was more important and how the two were often combined. You could, for example, balance your answer around the word 'only' and give points that both agree and disagree with the statement, whilst making your own judgement clear.

AS LEVEL · PRACTICE QUESTION

'Only landed wealth provided political power in the early seventeenth century.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

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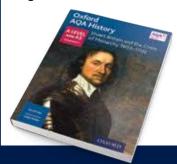
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Sally Waller is a respected author, enthusiastic History teacher, and she has many years of examining experience. She is currently teaching History at Cheltenham Ladies' College.

What's on the cover?

Oliver Cromwell was a divisive figure in Stuart Britain. He was a New Model Army commander during the First English Civil War, and later became Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland.

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