



# The Glorious Century: Political Philosophy and the End of Divine-Right Monarchy

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I will analyze the evolution in philosophical views regarding monarchism and parliamentarianism in England from the 1640s to the late 1680s and examine how this progression contributed to constitutional changes resulting from England's Glorious Revolution. I will discuss the English Civil War, which lasted from 1642 to 1648, and compare it with the Glorious Revolution of 1688, as both aimed to negotiate the balance of sovereignty between monarch and Parliament. The analysis will begin with artwork that reflects prevailing beliefs of the time and it will dissect corresponding political philosophies. I will then track the interactions of philosophers and their support of either the monarchy or Parliament and examine how their ideas shaped the constitutional settlement reached during the Glorious Revolution, specifically referencing John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* and Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*. Lastly, I will review contemporary cases arising from this settlement; namely, the ascension of prime ministers in the 18th and 19th centuries. This paper will reveal how the evolution in legal-political philosophy paved the way for the Glorious Revolution's enduring settlement between the monarch and Parliament and how its legacy remains in England's contemporary constitution.

**Keyword:** Glorious Revolution, Parliamentary Sovereignty, Divine Right Monarchy, English Civil Wars, John Locke, Robert Filmer, Constitutionalism, Political Philosophy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict between Parliament and the monarchy gave rise to three English Civil Wars between 1642 and 1648 and the Glorious Revolution (1688-89), with Parliament's constitutional rights at the forefront.

Only eleven years after the 1649 execution of King Charles I and England's transition to a commonwealth, the second Lord Protector Richard Cromwell resigned, and Parliament restored Charles II to the throne. After his death, his Catholic brother James became king. However, due to religious and political discrepancies, Parliament requested that James's daughter Mary and her husband William (a Dutch prince) come to England to replace the now-deposed James and share sovereignty with Parliament. This constitutional switch—Parliament's selection of the monarch and a concept of shared sovereignty—is known as the Glorious Revolution.

After inviting William and Mary to the throne, Parliament advanced the Bill of Rights in 1689 and the Triennial Act in 1694, specifying Parliamentary rights and limitations on the monarchy while permanently securing the balance of power between the two. Stated simply, the Glorious Revolution brought long-term institutional change, elevating parliamentary sovereignty over divine-right monarchy.

The English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution provide a historical lens through which individuals can investigate how dramatic changes in political structures and the English constitution were influenced by legal-political philosophies. This paper will examine how ideas about the rights and powers of monarchs and Parliament evolved between the English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution and shaped the eventual constitutional settlement, with focus on parliamentary sovereignty. The impact of resulting shifts in supremacy, especially concerning the prime minister, is also explored. In section 1, artwork from the Civil War period and underlying philosophies will be discussed. Section 2 will highlight the constitutional crisis of the time, leading up to the Glorious Revolution. Section 3 contrasts Locke's and Filmer's philosophies, showing how Locke's ideas shaped the Bill of Rights and the Triennial Act. The Glorious Revolution's contemporary legacy, particularly the rise of the prime minister, will be presented.

### From *Apotheosis* to *Patriarcha*

Peter Paul Rubens painted the *Apotheosis of James I* (shown in the Appendix) approximately ten years prior to the Civil Wars. The artwork can be considered a reflection of the king's role during that period—a divine monarch with absolute control.

The term "apotheosis" means rising to heaven, which is how James I, the English and Scottish king during the early seventeenth century, is depicted in this painting. Observers are compelled to fear and worship James, who is encircled by the magnificent gold ceiling at Whitehall Palace. He is surrounded by white-winged angels, clouds unified by gentle brush strokes, and half-naked human forms as he is crowned, illuminated by golden hues. Exalted upon his celestial chariot, the king is enveloped in a divine radiance, an aura that bespeaks his transcendence from mere kingship to the echelons of the divine. His figure, regal and serene, is ensconced in swirling drapery and ethereal light, suggesting not merely his elevation but his ascent to heaven to meet God—the only being who can judge the king. Rubens orchestrates a celestial assembly that pulses with the rhythmic cadence of the heavens. Angels, sensuous and otherworldly, cascade around James in a jubilant procession. Their faces exude a beatific serenity that contrasts, yet complements, the tempestuous energy of the surrounding cherubic figures. The vivid interplay of color—the deep, rich blues of the heavens against the warm, incandescent golds and reds—imbues the scene with depth and, more importantly, holiness.

After Rubens finished his design, he sent it to Charles I, its commissioner and James I's son, for approval, assuring that symbols of divinity and victory were duly included. Per England's Royal Collection Trust, "the three largest central canvases include posthumous portraits of James...while the four corner ovals represent the triumph over vice of those attributes considered vital for successful rule" (Rubens, 1632, *The Apotheosis of James I* c. 1632-4). The element of apotheosis is worth noting; it symbolizes a close relationship between certain chosen individuals and God—God chose them to advance missions—in Judaism, Christianity, and even ancient paganism (Toynbee, 1947). In Ancient Greece and Rome, the idea of a divine mission was used as justification for "fulfilling some great, sometimes even superhuman, tasks". It is only in adoration of a supreme God and the relation of rulers to this all-powerful being that many religions meet. *The Apotheosis of James I* manifests this mindset's prevalence in early-seventeenth-century English politics, where the monarch is viewed as the embodiment of God's will and absolute power.

This concept is reflected in the works of many English philosophers of the time, including Robert Filmer (1588-1653). Filmer's renowned work *Patriarcha* was likely written less than fifteen years before the English Civil Wars broke out. This work defends the doctrine of absolute, divine-right monarchy with an argument steeped in theological and patriarchal principles. Filmer (1680) unequivocally states that "the king's power is derived immediately from God, and...his power is as absolute as the father's is in a family". This assertion places the king's authority on a divine pedestal, suggesting that royal power is not subject to human critique or alteration. He argues that "kings are not elected by the people, nor are their powers derived from the consent of the governed; rather, they are appointed by God". To be ruled by and obey a monarch brings the greatest liberty, as "all other shows or pretexts of liberty are but several degrees of slavery". Otherwise, the selfish nature of humans will lead to constant wars and resultant fear.

Significant is the analogy Filmer draws between the authority of a family patriarch and a king's authority over his subjects. By maintaining that "the father's power over his children is absolute and indefeasible, and so is the king's [power] over his subjects", he constructs a patriarchal model serving to naturalize and legitimize absolute monarchy. The power of a father, in English society, was a constant; therefore, this analogy aims to frame absolute rule as an inherent and fundamental aspect of social order, rather than a construct subject to human negotiation.

Although Parliament existed in Filmer's time, citizens viewed it as a council serving the king's purposes. The concept of a parliament was rooted in the Saxons' "assembly of the wise", which, to Filmer, achieved its best purpose in expressing "the majesty and supreme power of a King," where "all his people acknowledge him for sovereign lord" (Filmer, 1680). Parliament did not check or balance the monarch; it served him, at his pleasure, in a subordinate constitutional role. Having powers independent of the king seemed impossible, as Parliamentary laws could be changed at will by the monarch. As Filmer suggested, "general laws made by Parliament may, upon known respects to the King, by his authority be mitigated or suspended upon causes only known to him".

During the Civil Wars, the ruler's absolute power continued, with monarchists emphasizing the king's relation to God's mission. Filmer's *Patriarcha* anticipates this mission, lauding monarchical power and casting Parliament as a mere council subject to the king's will.

### 2. CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS AND RESTORATION

The royal government was unprepared for the consequences of rebellion and civil war that erupted in 1642—first in Scotland, then Ireland, and finally in England. Charles I, then king, "opposed armed subjects by appeals to duty and loyalty that were only partially effective" (Kishlansky, 1996). He was incapable of preventing an invasion—the first obligation of a sovereign—because of the incompetence of his poorly trained and inexperienced military commanders and the treachery of members of his Parliament. Eventually, in 1649, Parliament executed Charles I, after which England was ruled by Parliament alone.

Despite the temporary "success" of parliamentary victory, the monarch was ultimately restored. The death of Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector, offered a moment to re-evaluate the Civil Wars' achievements and failures. Problems remained in England during Parliamentary rule: "the lack of moral discipline that years of reformation had still not overcome; the failure to settle a single form of government...the arrears of pay that mounted" (Kishlansky, 1996). Eventually, in 1660, Charles I's son, Charles II, was invited back from France to restore Britain's monarchy.

### 3. THE LOCKEAN SECOND TREATISE OF GOVERNMENT: THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 stemmed from widespread dissatisfaction with King Charles II and his successor, James II. Parliament, exclusively Protestant, was alarmed by Charles's French Catholic wife and his attempts to bypass Parliament's role by issuing the Declaration of Indulgence and using royal prerogative to fund naval expansion. Charles's disregard for Parliament's concerns, along with his controversial religious policies, eroded trust. After Charles's death, James II, a Catholic, ascended the throne, exacerbating tensions by aggressively promoting Catholicism and disregarding constitutional norms.

The situation worsened when the birth of his male heir intensified fears of a Catholic monarchy. In 1688, a group of prominent Parliamentarians and nobles, concerned about preserving Protestantism and parliamentary power, invited William of Orange to intervene. William's invasion went largely unopposed, leading to James' flight to France. Parliament then offered the throne to William and his wife Mary, who accepted under conditions that preserved parliamentary sovereignty. With this, the Glorious Revolution ushered in a new constitutional settlement for England.

A consequence was the monarch's agreement to limitations of power through the Bill of Rights, whereby Parliament specified that only Parliament could levy taxes and impose laws, thus reinforcing its authority over financial and legislative matters. Parliamentary elections should be free from royal interference. Additionally, the monarch could not dispense with laws without Parliament's consent, nor could it create or enforce laws without approval.

The Triennial Act of 1694 required that Parliament meet at least once every three years. If Parliament was dissolved or prorogued, new elections had to be conducted in a timely manner. This ensured that Parliament would not be inoperative for long periods, reducing potential for monarchical overreach.

The Glorious Revolution's developments are reflected in Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. His second treatise, especially, represents a profound departure from prevalent notions of divine-right monarchy, similar to Filmer's beliefs. Although Locke did not oppose the monarchy per se, his ideas on its role, the function of Parliament, and the structure of government underscored a commitment to limiting power and ensuring accountable and representative governance.

Locke's conception of monarchy is markedly different from the divine right theories of his contemporaries. For Locke, the monarch's authority is not divinely ordained, but derived from the consent of the governed. He emphasizes that the role of government, including the monarch, is primarily to protect the natural rights of individuals, specifically life, liberty, and property. As Locke states, "the end of government is the preservation of property" (Locke, 1689). This protected property encompasses not just material goods but the fundamental individual rights. To Locke, the monarch serves not as an absolute ruler but as a guardian of these rights. Locke also argues that if a monarch breaches the trust placed in him by the people, the government is considered dissolved, and the people have the right to

establish a new government (including a new monarch, such as William of Orange). Locke explains that "whenever the legislators endeavor to take away and destroy the property of the people . . . they put themselves into a state of war with the people", highlighting Locke's view that the monarch's legitimacy is contingent upon the protection of people's rights.

In Locke's view, Parliament is pivotal in ensuring that governmental power is exercised appropriately and is remaining accountable. Locke envisions Parliament as a representative body that legislates on behalf of the people and checks the monarch's power. He asserts, "[T]he legislative cannot transfer the power of making laws to any other hands" (Locke, 1689). Locke's vision of Parliament is not merely about representation but also maintaining a system of checks and balances that prevent the concentration of power and potential abuses. He argues that "the legislative power is a trust committed to the legislators", implying that Parliament must act in the people's best interests and cannot delegate or abdicate its responsibilities.

These Lockean ideas requiring popular consent influenced the development of the prime minister's role in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The process of further moving away from the legislative and executive power of the king is a continuation of Locke's philosophy.

#### 4. CONTEMPORARY CASE: THE RISE OF THE PRIME MINISTER

The 1689 Bill of Rights was pivotal in translating Locke's principles into practical governance. By limiting monarchical powers—prohibiting actions such as suspension of laws or levying taxes without parliamentary consent—it effectively dismantled the apparatus of absolute monarchy and fortified the role of Parliament as the supreme legislative body. This legal transformation was not merely symbolic but a concrete reconfiguration of political power, laying the groundwork for the changing role of the executive branch.

The emergence of the prime ministerial role as distinct from the traditional role of the monarch was a direct consequence of this reconfiguration. Early in the eighteenth century, the idea of a prime minister as leader of the majority party in the House of Commons began to take shape. This development reflected the philosophical shift towards parliamentary sovereignty rooted in the Glorious Revolution and the practical necessity for cohesive leadership within the executive branch. The prime minister's role became more defined as it became evident that effective governance required a leader who could command the confidence of the House and coordinate executive functions of government.

This evolution was marked by a gradual shift in power dynamics. Initially, the prime minister was first among equals within the cabinet, but as parliamentary democracy matured, the position became more central to the functioning of government. For example, Sir Robert Walpole, England's prime minister from 1721 to 1742, exercised power to grow exports and lower land taxes. He was simultaneously the First Lord of Treasury and the Chancellor of Exchequer. This non-royal position's increasing influence was a manifestation of the Lockean principle that governance should reflect the will of the majority.

Concomitantly, the constitutional role of the monarch became increasingly symbolic, evolving to embody national unity rather than engaging directly in political or legislative affairs. This figurative role was a direct result of the Glorious Revolution's focus on limiting royal prerogatives and ensuring that real political power resided with elected representatives. This arrangement reflects Locke's ideal of a government that operates within the bounds of law and is accountable to the people.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution were transformative periods that fundamentally reshaped the balance of power between the monarchy and Parliament, significantly influencing the evolution of constitutional governance in England. The transition from the absolute monarchy depicted in Rubens' *Apotheosis of James I* to the constitutional monarchy established by the Bill of Rights and the Triennial Act marks a profound shift in political philosophy and institutional structure.

Initially, the notion of divine right monarchy, as illustrated by Rubens, justified the king's absolute authority as ordained by God. This divine sanction was echoed in Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, which supported an unchallengeable royal power. The Civil Wars erupted partly in response to these absolutist claims, fueled by Parliament's increasing resistance to monarchical overreach. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 further challenged these traditional notions by introducing a political paradigm embodied in Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*. The invitation extended to William of Orange, and his

subsequent ascension to the throne alongside Mary, reflected a consensus within Parliament to replace an increasingly autocratic regime with a governance model that preserved parliamentary sovereignty. This pivotal moment culminated in the 1689 enactment of the Bill of Rights, which explicitly curtailed royal powers and enhanced parliamentary authority. The Triennial Act of 1694 further entrenched this shift by mandating regular parliamentary sessions, thus ensuring continuous parliamentary oversight.

The legacy of the Glorious Revolution is evident in the evolution of the prime ministerial role during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Parliament gained supremacy, the prime minister emerged as a central figure in British governance, reflecting the practical application of parliamentary sovereignty and Lockean principles. The minister became the majority party leader in the House of Commons, coordinating executive functions of government while the monarch's role remained largely ceremonial. This transition underscores the enduring impact of the Glorious Revolution on British political institutions, illustrating a shift from absolute monarchical power to a system that balances governance between elected representatives and the crown.

The Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution were vital in establishing a constitutional framework that redefined the relationship between monarchs and Parliament. The resulting legal and philosophical advancements, embodied in the Bill of Rights and the evolving role of the prime minister, have had lasting influence on the principles of democratic governance and the balance of power in the United Kingdom.

### APPENDIX



*The Apotheosis of James I, 1632.*

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