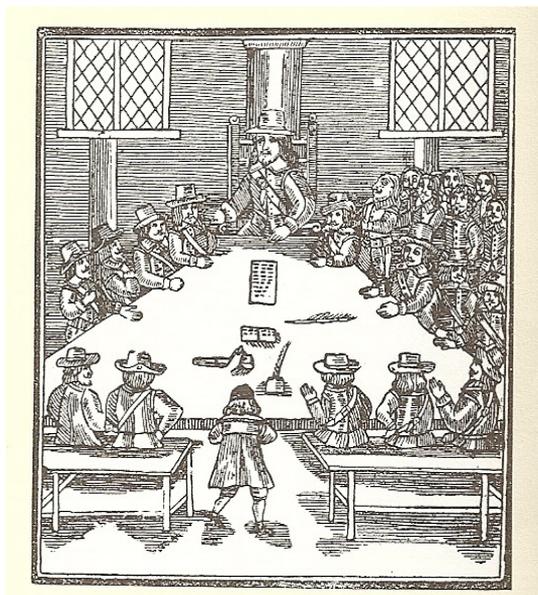


THE PUTNEY DEBATES EXHIBITION ST MARY'S CHURCH PUTNEY THE LEVELLERS



The Putney Debates are an important landmark in English political history. At St Mary's Church, Putney, in the autumn of 1647, leading members of the Army Council, which then effectively controlled England in the aftermath of Charles I's defeat in the Civil War, deliberated on proposals for a radical overhaul of the constitution. These proposals, which for their time were breathtaking in their revolutionary boldness, anticipated many of the ideological fault lines of the next three to four centuries. Should the electorate be widened to form something approaching a democracy? Should the monarchy and the House of Lords survive? And how should the condition of the people be improved?

These proposals emanated from a group of radicals, known to history as the Levellers (a term coined by opponents who believed that they envisaged a "levelling down" of social distinction.) Prominent amongst these Levellers were three prolific pamphleteers and consistent critics of autocratic governance, John Lilburne, Richard Overton, and William Walwyn. All three were men of a reasonable

social rank, driven by principle rather than personal material grievance. Lilburne, in particular, had been an active campaigner for a decade. In 1637, he had been flogged, pilloried, and imprisoned for publishing pamphlets critical of the bishops; nine years later, he was imprisoned by the House of Lords on various charges of seditious conduct (and indeed was still in the Tower at the time of the Putney Debates.) Lilburne argued that true sovereignty derived from the people. Popular sovereignty, he maintained, was an inalienable right, which had only been subverted after the Norman Conquest by the new landowning class as it developed institutions and practices which consolidated its own power. Following the Civil War, it was not enough to replace monarchical tyranny with a system which perpetuated the power of the landowners represented in parliament. As Lilburne told the Lords at his trial in 1646, "all you intended when you set us a - fighting was merely to unhorse and dismount our old riders and tyrants, so that you might get up and ride in their stead." What was needed was a system which reflected the interests of, and was directly accountable to, the people.

Lilburne and other radicals might simply have operated on the margins of political debate had it not been for three important developments. First, the breakdown of censorship, as Charles I's authority collapsed in the years immediately before the Civil War, allowed radical ideas to circulate far more freely. An increasingly literate population, especially in the urban centres, read an ever growing number of pamphlets and newspapers (722 in 1645 alone), many highlighting the Leveller agenda. Second, the country was in economic crisis. A poor

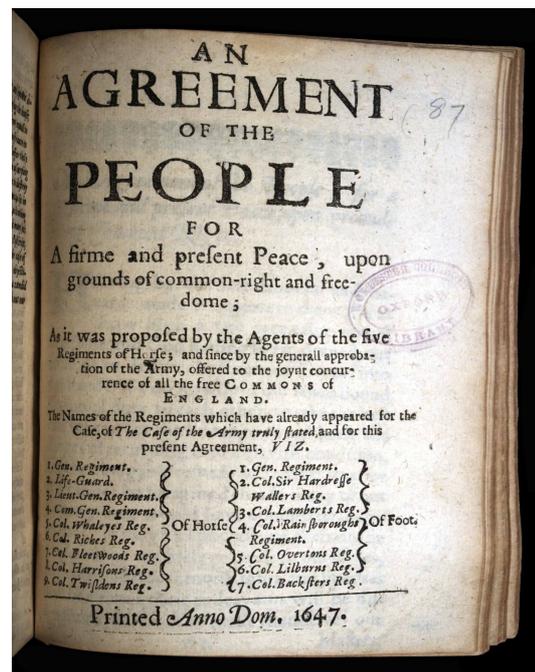
THE PUTNEY DEBATES EXHIBITION ST MARY'S CHURCH PUTNEY THE LEVELLERS

harvest in 1646 pushed grain prices up by about a quarter in a year, while wages remained depressed. When Lilburne and others talked about ending the “oppression” of the people, they had a captive audience.

The most important single factor in the emergence of popular radicalism in 1646-7 was the politicisation of the New Model Army. The soldiers, who had delivered victory over the King, shared in the economic distress of the country, but had particular grievances of their own. Many looked on with suspicion as firstly their supposed political masters in Westminster and then their own commanders tried to forge a settlement with the King on relatively lenient terms. Was this not a betrayal of the “cause” for which they had fought? Worse, many in the parliamentary leadership wanted to ease the tax burden on the country by disbanding the troops without meeting their arrears of pay, which amounted to some 43 weeks in the case of some cavalry regiments. Was this not confirmation of Lilburne’s argument that only a more representative and fully accountable parliament, rather than one dominated by landowners, lawyers, and merchants, could enact the priorities of ordinary people? The response of many regiments was swift. Increasingly influenced by Leveller attitudes, they elected agitators to plead their case to their commanders; and, over the summer and early autumn of 1647, agitators and civilian Levellers collaborated in the publication of a series of pamphlets setting out an alternative constitutional manifesto which would deliver the sovereignty of the people.

In late October 1647, agitators presented their commanders with a document, The Agreement of the

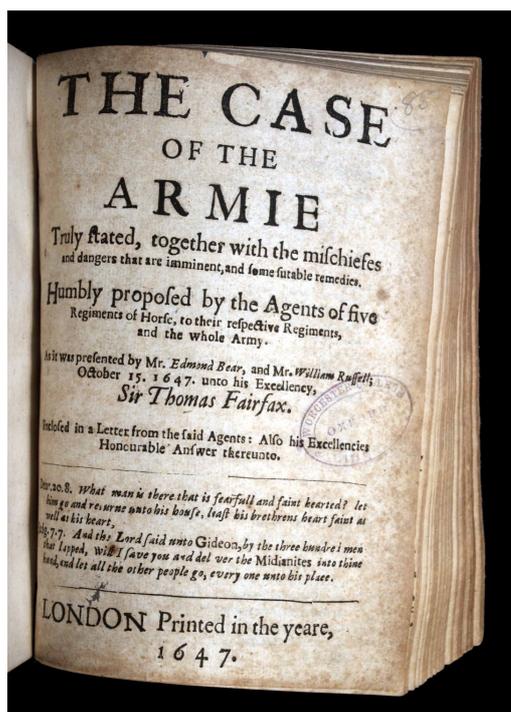
People, proposing widespread constitutional change.



Assuming the end of the monarchy, the Agreement advocated a totally elective representative assembly, itself explicitly inferior to a sovereign people, as well as elections every two years and a redistribution of seats according to population. This posed a real dilemma for the Army’s commanders, Sir Thomas Fairfax (commander-in-chief), Oliver Cromwell, and Henry Ireton. While they needed to retain the support of their radicalised rank-and-file, they could hardly endorse such a package. This was not so much because, as members of the gentry class, they were seeking to defend the political and social status quo from which they all profited. It was rather that the Agreement threatened their entire strategy. In order to achieve a political settlement with the King, an end to which they remained committed, they needed an Army united around broadly conservative objectives. They also needed to be mindful of the interests of the traditional political classes in the shires, for, if the Army

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leadership endorsed Leveller radicalism, the established “political nation” would have little option but to support the King. When the Army Council, comprising both leaders and agitators, met at Putney Church on 28 October 1647, the ideological battle lines were drawn.



From the outset, the debates revealed a great divergence of views and significant personal animosities. On the first day, the agitator Edward Sexby put forward the view of the rank and file, complaining about the King and a “rotten parliament.” In his response, Cromwell highlighted the radicalism of the Agreement (“truly this paper does contain in it very great alterations of the very government of the kingdom”) and emphasised the severe “consequences” of any alteration.

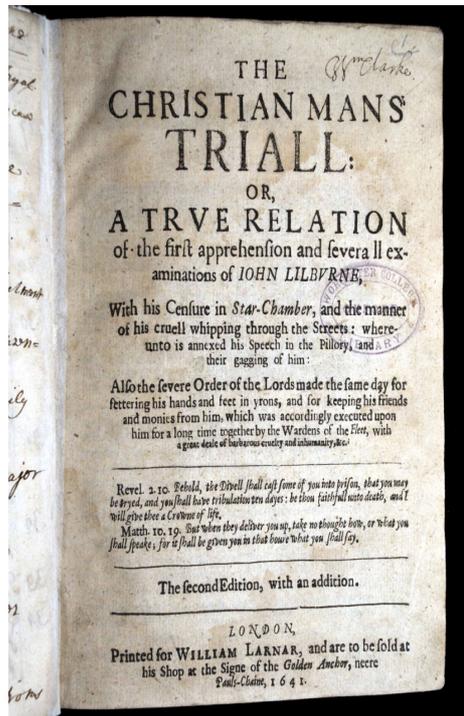
On the second day, the issue of suffrage was discussed. At this point, it is important to recognise exactly what

the agitators were proposing. They were not advocating universal suffrage, for, despite the important role played by many women in the Leveller cause, there was no suggestion that women should have the vote. Nor was it clear that they wanted full adult male suffrage. But a vast extension of the electorate was nevertheless envisaged. As Colonel Thomas Rainsborough put it: “Sir, I think it’s clear that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not a voice to put himself under.” In response, Ireton, the commander most at ease in discussing political ideas, endorsed the status quo: “No person hath a right to a share in the disposing of the affairs of the kingdom that hath not a permanent fixed interest.” In other words, participation in the political process had to be left to the property owners. Cromwell backed him up, observing that manhood suffrage must end in anarchy because “all bounds and limits” are taken away if men who had “no interest but the interest of breathing” vote. In his reply, Sexby pointed out that men without interest had been “the means of the preservation of the kingdom.”

Over the next week, the ideological chasm between the two sides remained huge. The commanders tried different tactics to break the Leveller inspired resistance. Ireton maintained his principled defence of the propertied franchise, while Cromwell, a far more political animal, tried a variety of stratagems – giving the appearance of compromise to divide the opposition (he was “not wedded and glued to forms of government”), then calling for unity (“let us be doing, but let us be

THE PUTNEY DEBATES EXHIBITION ST MARY'S CHURCH PUTNEY THE LEVELLERS

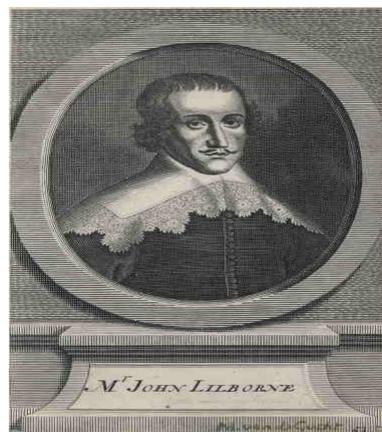
united in our doing"), then recommending that a committee look



into the problem, and finally summoning a prayer meeting. None of this had any effect. On 4 November, the Army Council voted, in defiance of Cromwell and Ireton, in favour of extending the franchise to all except servants. The following day, it passed a resolution for a general rendezvous of the Army, where "things (would be) settled." This was clearly a situation which the commanders could not tolerate; and so the tactics switched from discussion to suppression. Cromwell put the agitators to the sword at their rendezvous at Ware (15 November), and subsequent mutinies, as at Burford in 1649, were crushed with equal severity.

The Levellers and their allies in the Army were the first modern democratic pressure group; and, while they may have failed in the short term, the doctrines they espoused were to have a continuing potency, over

subsequent centuries and beyond these shores. In England, most of their objectives gradually came to fruition, albeit slowly. Regular, though not biennial, elections became the norm in the eighteenth century; more equal constituencies were established in 1885; universal suffrage was finally conceded in 1928 after a century of agitation; and the powers of the monarchy and the House of Lords have been steadily trimmed. Their ultimate goal, the sovereignty of the people, remains, however, a more elusive concept.



Richard Allnatt teaches History at Westminster School and is a member of the Cromwell Association.

Illustrations: Fairfax and the Council of War; An Agreement of the People, The Christian Mans Triall, A Word for the Armie: Worcester College Oxford, John Lilburne, Cromwell Museum

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