

6.9 British Levellers Demand Greater Democracy (1649)

Sources (accessed December 12, 2018): <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/stuart-england/the-levellers/>; http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/benn_levellers_01.shtml; <https://spartacus-educational.com/STUlevellers.htm>; <https://www.marxists.org/history/england/english-revolution/may-day.htm>

Background: In the 1640s England was torn between religious factions and a battle between Parliament and the King over supreme authority in the nation. Their disagreements finally led to civil war and the formation by Parliament of the New Model Army. Oliver Cromwell was a major landholder, a radical Protestant Puritan, and a leader of the Parliamentary group. What Cromwell and other anti-monarchists did not initially recognize is that once earlier restraints were lifted, new, even more radical forces and spokespeople would emerge and demand greater democracy. Advocates of greater democracy, especially in the New Model Army, were known as “Levellers.” In “An Agreement of the People,” published in 1649, they called for a new, fairer, constitution for England. The passage below is from the “Agreement.” Cromwell eventually quashed democratic opposition, executed leading “Levellers,” and established himself with dictatorial power as Lord Protector of England, Scotland and Ireland. Cromwell’s response to the Agreement was “What is the purport of the levelling principle but to make the tenant as liberal a fortune as the landlord. I was by birth a gentleman. You must cut these people in pieces or they will cut you in pieces.”

Questions

1. What were the major demands of the “Levellers”?
2. What was Cromwell’s response to the “Agreement”?
3. In what other historical documents do you see similar principles?
4. In your opinion, why did the removal of political restraint lead to even greater calls for reform and democracy?

Excerpts from An Agreement of the People (1649)

A) If afflictions make men wise, and wisdom direct to happiness, then certainly this Nation is not far from such a degree thereof, as may compare if not far exceed, any part of the world: having for some year's by-past, drunk deep of the Cup of misery and sorrow.

B) We the free People of England, to whom God hath given hearts, means and opportunity to effect the same, do with submission to his wisdom, in his name, and desiring the equity thereof may be to his praise and glory; Agree to ascertain our Government, to abolish all arbitrary Power, and to set bounds and limits both to our Supreme, and all Subordinate Authority, and remove all known Grievances. And accordingly do declare and publish to all the world, that we are agreed as followeth:

C) That the Supreme Authority of England and the Territories therewith incorporate, shall be and reside henceforward in a Representative of the People consisting of four hundred persons, but no more; in the choice of whom (according to natural right) all men of the age of one and twenty years and upwards (not being servants, or receiving alms, or having served in the late King in Arms or voluntary Contributions) shall have their voices; and be capable of being elected to that Supreme Trust.

D) That we do not empower or entrust our said representatives to continue in force, or to make any Lawes, Oaths, or Covenants, whereby to compel by penalties or otherwise any person to any thing in or about matters of faith, Religion or Gods worship or to restrain any person from the profession of his faith, or to exercise of Religion according to his Conscience.

E) We do not empower them to impress or constraint any person to serve in war by Sea or Land every mans’ Conscience being to be satisfied in the justness of that cause wherein he hazards his own life, or may destroy any others.

F) That all privileges or exemptions of any persons from the Lawes, or from the ordinary course of Legal proceedings, by virtue of any Tenure, Grant, Charter, Patent, Degree, or Birth, or of any place of residence, or refuge, or privilege of Parliament, shall be henceforth void and null; and the like not to be made nor revived again.