

To what extent can the outbreak of civil war in 1642 be blamed on Charles I?

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4 July 2013

The causes of the English Revolution have long been a subject of historiographical debate. One of the central questions has been that of the existence of a “high road to civil war”; that is, whether the causes of revolution can be traced back to the reigns of James, Elizabeth, or even earlier, or whether the causes were more immediate, surfacing during Charles’ reign. This essay will therefore address the question of the extent to which it was caused by the actions of Charles — which is to say, whether the causes originated after 1625 and, furthermore, whether Charles could reasonably be said to be responsible, or whether the events were out of his control.

The early Stuarts had in common with one another a number of conflicts with Parliament, among them constitutional issues, religion and finance. Not all of these were new problems but a number of factors increased the tendency towards conflict.

The question of constitutional issues can be addressed first, as it exacerbated the others. According to a traditional, “Whig” point of view, the roots of the revolution are traced back to the increasing absolutism introduced to the English monarchy by James and developed further by Charles. In this view, James ‘sowed the seeds of revolution and disaster’¹ and Charles continued on this path; the early Stuarts were, therefore, both at fault, with Charles inheriting an already-restless kingdom. However, more recently, it has been pointed out that this interpretation was ‘utterly at odds with James’s widely praised performance as king of Scotland’;² by

¹Samuel R. Gardiner, *History of England from the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of the Civil War* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1883), v, p. 316.

²David Lawrence Smith, ‘Politics in Early Stuart Britain, 1603-1640’, in *A Companion to Stuart Britain*, ed. by Barry Coward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 233-52.

the time he inherited the English throne he had successfully managed the various hostile factions of Scotland for sixteen years.

To establish the truth of this claim (that there was a distinct change in the mode of government between Elizabeth and James) we can look at several facts. Firstly, there is the number of Parliamentary sessions held: James' reign saw nine sessions in 22 years. Elizabeth's reign, on the other hand, had 13 sessions in forty-four years,³ sitting for a total of only two and a half years compared to three and a half under James. It has further been argued that when James wrote *Basilikon Doron* in 1599, arguing for the absolute power of the monarch, he was inspired by, and perhaps envious of, his cousin's ability to rule her kingdom with so little interference.⁴ Thus, the roots of absolutism in England predated both Charles and James; in fact, according to Smith, despite James' problems 'his style of kingship generally fostered stability',⁵ but he quotes Reeve's description of Charles as 'fundamentally unsuited for kingship'.⁶

James' outspoken views on the role of the monarch in relation to Parliament undoubtedly made contemporaries uncomfortable; he showed particular lack of tact in lecturing Parliament (on several occasions) on the limitations of its rights, sparking fears that 'we are not like to leave to our successors that freedom we received from our forefathers'.⁷ Nevertheless, he was also an experienced ruler; Smith refers to his 'shrewd political realism', citing his abandonment of his plans for a union of the two kingdoms as an example of this.⁸ He regularly showed discretion in this manner, seeming well-aware of how his words and actions were perceived; countless examples are given by Smith and others of his diplomatic withdrawals. This can be contrasted strongly with Charles.

Charles inherited his father's belief in a divine right to rule (indeed, *Basilikon Doron*, in which those beliefs were set out, had been written specifi-

³R. E. Foster, 'Conflicts and Loyalties: The Parliaments of Elizabeth I', *History Review*, 56, 2006 <<https://www.historytoday.com/archive/conflicts-and-loyalties-parliaments-elizabeth-i>>.

⁴I read this during the research for this essay, but have since been unable to find the reference again.

⁵Smith.

⁶L. J. Reeve, *Charles I and the Road to Personal Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 173.

⁷Megan Mondy, 'The Speeches and Self-Fashioning of King James VI and I to the English Parliament, 1604-1624', *Constructing the Past*, 8.1 (2007), 139-82 <<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=constructing>>.

⁸Smith.

cally by James to teach his sons). However, he did not inherit James' tact and diplomacy; unlike his father, he was unwilling to bend or negotiate unless forced — a failing which increased the perception of weakness, 'encouraging his subjects to believe that ...he would retreat further'.⁹ However, even this was not inevitable; his earliest dealings with Parliament, during the last years of his father's reign, were successful, and it was a short time into his own reign before the problems began to manifest.

It has long been argued that by the early seventeenth century the finances of the crown were wholly inadequate; not simply in their magnitude, but structurally flawed as well. Morton describes them as 'medieval in character' and requiring on Elizabeth's part 'the most extreme parsimony'¹⁰ to make ends meet. Inflation had driven prices up significantly during the sixteenth century, but Crown revenues, based primarily on rents and fines, had not risen in proportion.¹¹ Early in James' reign a major restructuring of Crown finances was proposed, whereby the Crown would give up certain of its revenue sources in return for a guaranteed grant. However, this plan fell through and questions have been raised as to whether it would have been a success — Woolrych argues that it would have required greater frugality than James generally displayed. The inability of King and Parliament to agree on financial reform (according to Morton, due to the lack of economic understanding at the time) led to repeated conflicts over subsidies to the Crown, and to James' increasing use of other sources of income — for example, the sale of titles and Crown lands.

The financial difficulties for Charles began in his first Parliament, which refused to grant Tonnage and Poundage to the King for life as was traditional, instead granting it for just a year with the intention of revisiting the royal financial arrangements. A clash of personalities ensued, with Charles inclined to see disagreement as a sign of a conspiracy against him.¹² His grievances were not unfounded, as England was currently engaged in a war against France, with the vocal support of Parliament, yet with the King expected to pay for it; Parliament attempted to use this as leverage to have the unpopular Duke of Buckingham removed from office. The dispute remained unresolved until an attempted impeachment of Buckingham led to

⁹Conrad Russell, 'The British Problem and the English Civil War', *History*, 72, 1987, 395 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-229X.1987.tb01469.x>>.

¹⁰Arthur Leslie Morton, *A People's History of England*, 3rd edn (Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), p. 179.

¹¹Austin Herbert Woolrych, *Britain in Revolution: 1625-1660* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 16-17.

¹²Smith.

Charles dissolving Parliament, and so Charles augmented his income with a 'forced loan' instead.

This set the scene for the remainder of the decade, with Charles' attempts to raise money creating further conflicts which made Parliament unwilling to co-operate. Charles' next Parliament introduced a Petition of Right, which agreed to finance the Crown so long as a number of grievances were addressed, but Charles accepted only grudgingly, doing his best to undermine it. Once again this aligns with Russell's description of 'a political style which tended to advertise the fact that concessions were made unwillingly',¹³ and did nothing to improve Parliament's trust in him; they carried on and passed three resolutions against his continued flouting of the Petition of Right, whereupon he cited 'seditious carriage' sparked by 'some few vipers'¹⁴ and dissolved Parliament.

This was the beginning of Charles' personal rule. While opinion is divided as to whether it was a tyranny (see, for example, Kevin Sharpe¹⁵ for an argument that it was not), it was certainly marked by continuing financial problems, among other things. Fundamentally the problem was that, since Charles could not impose taxation without Parliament, he needed to find ever more novel ways of generating revenue without new taxes. He had a particular talent for obeying the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit; for example, Ship Money was generally accepted to be within his power to raise, but his imposition of it on inland counties was an unwelcome innovation,¹⁶ as was his designation of a significant part of Essex as royal forest, upon which landowners were then fined for encroaching.¹⁷

However, these only increased the grievances against him; when Charles finally called a new Parliament in 1640, it was because of a lack of money to fund the war effort against Scotland. For its part, Parliament, once called, was more concerned with discussing the King's attempts at taxation, among other things, than in giving him more money.

The second recurring conflict throughout the early Stuart period was religion; again, this was an issue which did not begin with the Stuarts, but rather dated back to Henry VIII. A settlement had been reached under Elizabeth, but the issue was raised again by the Millenary Petition early in James'

¹³Russell.

¹⁴Smith.

¹⁵*The Personal Rule of Charles I* (Yale University Press, 1992).

¹⁶Smith.

¹⁷R.H Fritze and W. B. Robison, *Historical Dictionary of Stuart England: 1603-1689* (Greenwood, 1996), p. 201.

reign, from Puritans who saw the opportunity, under a new monarch, to push for further reform. However, the religious situation remained relatively stable, with James opposing major changes in either direction. His adherence to a middle way is evidenced by the opposition from both sides — although there was ongoing suspicion about his Catholic sympathies, particularly around the time of the Spanish Match, he was also (famously) the target of a Catholic assassination plot and firmly Protestant in his own convictions.¹⁸

Charles again differed from his father, both in his religious convictions and his policies. His inclination towards the ceremony of Arminianism, seen as dangerously close to Catholicism by suspicious Protestants, along with his marriage to a French Catholic princess, increased tensions with Puritans. However, it is easy to judge him harshly on his inflexibility in this regard: Charles' religious convictions were sincere, and not easily abandoned; while his pursuit of them may be seen as tactless, and he may have benefited from his father's ability to know when to back down, it should be remembered that he was not setting out to be unreasonable.

His appointment of the Arminian Laud as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, against the advice of his father, further incited discontent. As well as the "popish" tendencies he displayed, he was a strong proponent of uniformity in the Anglican church, which inevitably brought him (and by extension Charles) into conflict with the various Dissenting movements of the period. In particular, his plans to introduce the Anglican prayerbook in Scotland can be argued to be one of the more direct causes of the conflict.

The prayerbook had been introduced with little consultation, and along with Scotland's pride in its independence from England and its discontent as the junior partner of the personal union, it was said that the Reformation in England was "verrie far inferior" to that of Scotland;¹⁹ the strength of this opinion can be demonstrated by the rioting it provoked at St Giles', and the later, more organised resistance in the form of the National Covenant. Charles' attempts to bring this resistance under control were hampered by his usual inflexibility. His tendency was to refuse absolutely to negotiate, only to be left with no choice but to back down, a tendency remarked upon even by his supporters: "those particulars which I have so often sworn and said your Matie would never condescend to, will now be granted, therefore they will give no credit to what I shall say ther after, but will still hope and believe, that all their desires will be given way to".

¹⁸Woolrych.

¹⁹Russell.

The failure to negotiate escalated to the point where the Covenanters raised an army against Charles; the need to raise money to defend against this forced Charles to summon a Parliament at last. However, as noted above, this Parliament had other priorities; and beyond the financial disputes, the Short Parliament itself had a strong Puritan element and opposed Charles' religious innovations. Charles, given the choice of negotiating with the Scots or with Parliament, chose to do neither, dissolving Parliament within three weeks and continuing to raise an army against Scotland. This spectacularly poor decision led to the occupation of Newcastle by a Scottish army and the summoning of another Parliament within six months.

The Long Parliament was even less inclined to negotiate than the Short Parliament had been, immediately setting about a series of reforms, such as the Triennial act, and proceeding to impeach Laud and Strafford, Charles' most unpopular advisors. After disagreement over the handling of the Irish Uprising, Parliament (led by Pym) issued the Grand Remonstrance, detailing the many grievances since the start of the reign and positioning itself as the true defender of English liberty; Charles once more perceived dissent as a conspiracy against him and eventually retaliated by attempting to round up the ringleaders, marching to Parliament with armed soldiers. The resulting outcry led to his flight from London to Oxford and can be seen as the start of the civil war in England. Parliament declared itself to have no need of royal assent and the King eventually summoned an alternative Parliament at Oxford.

Conclusion

Across a range of themes it can be seen that Charles was rarely, if ever, the fundamental cause of the conflict. The social, political, and economic problems of his reign were structural, dating back a century or more, with religious differences developing from the reigns of Henry VIII and especially Mary, and economic problems starting possibly even earlier than that.²⁰ The transition to James' reign and personal union with Scotland marked a watershed and James became a convenient scapegoat, but more recently attention has been paid to 1625, or even later, as the point of no return. It is hard to lay all the blame on Charles, given the presence of these century-old structural issues, but also difficult to ignore his personal weaknesses that led him to fail so drastically (and terminally) at addressing them. Perhaps

²⁰Woolrych; Morton.

if Henry, Prince of Wales, had not died in 1612 and had succeeded his father in place of his younger brother, the middle part of the century would have looked drastically different. There are, however, no simple solutions to the question of blame in the English Revolution.

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