

Chapter XIV

FROM POLITICAL NATION TO GOVERNING CLASS

I

The political nation has seemingly to be thought of as distinct from 'the people'. But it is also much more than Walter Bagehot's 'ten thousand', that mythical body of 'informed public opinion' which used so often to be invoked by political journalists. It is especially and categorically distinct from any idea, or ideology, to do with democracy, the 'sovereignty of the people', 'natural rights', and so forth, however often such terms entered into the debates and conflicts about representation, policy issues, executive powers, and the 'national interest', which political parties have so often invoked.

For all its vagueness of definition and shifting significance, the concept of 'political nation' has its uses, and is certainly not easily argued away. Its usefulness lies in its encompassing the idea of a major section of the population which - at least occasionally, or potentially - participates, or at the very least, expresses some interest or concern in national politics. Of course, the kind of participation which may be open varies a good deal, as does the significance which may attach to it. At the very least, though, it manifests a widespread desire and, in however minimal a way, both the power and the means to influence changes in government or the choice of government policies either directly or through representatives.

I have taken it as common ground that the political nation was a potent political force in seventeenth century England: much more than it was for most of the eighteenth century, say, when its importance diminished, though not to the point of nonentity to which Sir Lewis Namier consigned it, perhaps. As Parliament during that century assumed more and more constitutional prominence and political power, the part the political nation had shown it could play - its voice - was smaller, heard only occasionally, and almost never listened to. The equation of property ownership not only with political interest, political voice and, broadly speaking, political power, but with the 'patriotism' to which all parties laid claim, was a way of asserting the prerogative right of Parliament and parliamentarians to identify the national interest and the public good with their own.¹

It could be said to have made itself apparent during the decades which preceded, and followed the passing of the 1832 Reform Bill,² but after that, the propensity of Parliament and its members to 'speak for' and even to 'speak as' the nation forced the

¹ See H.T.Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, Methuen, 1979, esp. pp.103-4.

² See, especially, E.P.Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Gollancz, 1963, and P. Hollis, *Pressures from Without*, Arnold, 1974.

political nation into a kind of twilight zone, from which it has emerged into full engagement in the political arena only for brief periods. Even then, so far as England is concerned, it makes its appearance only as one of an assortment of elements which enter into constitutional arrangements and political action: executive power, Parliament, the electoral system, organised political parties, law, and the like - although it is not, as they are, institutionalised. References to it tend to be confined largely to the expression, through elections, of approval or disapproval - retrospectively of policies and ministries, and prospectively in terms of 'mandates' for future policies and ministries. In other words, the 'political nation' became seen as identical with a parliamentary majority; most of the time, Parliament was able to act as what it claims to be: its surrogate. And it has been a far less integrated, and indeed significant, element during the twentieth century than it was even in the nineteenth. The present-day currency of the term 'populist' is almost of itself sufficient evidence for that.

There is therefore some disentangling and sorting to be done if one wants to exploit the idea of the political nation, as I do, as collective action in one of its more fundamental, or all-inclusive, guises. If the political nation is a non-institutional form of political engagement, it is a character it shares with 'public opinion,' which is obviously related to it but equally ill-defined. Public opinion is a much older term in so far as it is synonymous - as the Oxford dictionary renders it - with 'general', 'common', or 'vulgar' opinion, but its entry into specifically political discourse seems to date from the late eighteenth century. Late in the nineteenth century, however, the notion of public opinion became identified in practice with what was taken to be its expression in newspapers, which is how Bryce interpreted it.³ In more recent times, public opinion has come to be envisaged in even simpler terms as the distribution of responses to questions asked of a sample of pedestrians by interviewers employed by firms specialising in 'opinion polls'.

But public opinion is hardly the same, however much reliance is placed on its reflecting the mood of the political nation. Nor is either of them identifiable as Rousseau's 'popular will.' For what is revealed in public opinion or evinced by the political nation is not common purpose or desire but common preoccupation, a preoccupation with purposes essentially in conflict with each other.

To say so is perhaps reminiscent of the idea, which was made much of by sociologists during the 1950's, that conflict itself is an integrative force - in society as a whole, in urban communities, in industry.⁴ To a large extent, the idea was no more than an attempt to import what was seen as a formative principle of classical economics - competition - into sociology, with interest groups manoeuvring and struggling ceaselessly to shift the balance or imbalance of power among them, and in so doing to sustain, or constantly to reestablish, the equilibrium which we accept as social order. But there were other versions, notably one that James Coleman put forward after completing a study of

³ J. Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, (1893), Macmillan, 1918, Vol. II, pp. 251-55.

⁴ See, for example, L.A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, Free Press, 1956, R. Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in and Industrial Society*, Routledge, 1959. Most writers on the topic acknowledged a sizeable debt to the pioneering work of Georg Simmel, especially chapter 4 of his *Soziologie*, Duncker & Humblot, 1908 (trans. by Kurt Wolff as 'Conflict' in *Conflict and The Web of Group Affiliations*, Free Press, 1955).

community conflict in a number of different settings.⁵ And this brings us much closer to the notion I want to develop.

Coleman starts from the unexceptionable observation that although from reading the sociological literature, or the newspapers for that matter, one can tot up a sizeable number of local community conflicts which have been described and analysed, there are precious few in any one community. Moreover, he says, the lessons from experience in one community are not learned by other communities. And, lastly, the development and the outcome of one particular conflict tends to predispose what happens when the next one starts up.

Despite the diversity of issues and events which spark them off, "once the controversy has begun, they resemble each other remarkably." However it turns out, most significance attaches to whether the original event or issue that sparks the dispute off is internal or external to the locality. After that, however, the way in which conflict develops depends first of all on the 'area of life' which it hits: economic, the power structure or, thirdly, cultural values or beliefs. Later on, usually, there is a further basis of response, one which derives from attitudes to particular persons or groups, and best summed up in the phrase, 'if he's for it, then I'm against it.'

"The basis of response, primarily economic interests, power, and values, provide the initial dynamics for the controversy. They drive a nucleus of adherents to carry forward the dispute, to expand and intensify it until perhaps the whole community is involved." Not only do the people caught up in it increase in number, but the issues spread from specific to general, they give rise to new and quite different issues, buried differences come to the surface, and there is a shift from merely expressing disagreement to sheer antagonism and to the 'personalising' of issues.

As controversy grows, there are changes in the way in which social relationships within the community, however intimate, are organised. "Associations flourish within each group but wither away between persons on opposing sides" - there is "a stripping for action." Social relationships which hinder action necessary to win are shed, and in their place one finds new partisan organisations and the emergence of extremist leaders, so as to "wage war more efficiently."

"Over and over again," Coleman remarks, "as one case study after another was examined, the same pattern appeared; the same kinds of feeling were generated within the participants; the same kinds of partisan activity occurred." This, he thought, was because conflict - of this kind at least - has its own special epigenetic character. "Once set off, controversies develop quite independently of the incident. Early stages generate later ones; conflicts which began quite differently end up alike; the community divides up into opposing factions, angry and adamant, arguing about old quarrels which have nothing to do with the original issue."

This kind of implication is not far off V.W.Turner's reading of what he describes as the

⁵ J.S.Coleman, *Community Conflict*, Free Press, 1957.

sequential 'social drama' of disputes and quarrels that occurred in the tribal villages in Africa which he had studied as an anthropologist.⁶ What Turner, like Coleman, was interested in was the general pattern followed in conflicts. Of course, conflict must somehow be contained, if communities are to survive, let alone sustain their vitality. Turner's rendering of village conflict as 'social drama' portrays the recurrent family quarrels, the disputes between rival factions, even a local uprising, as a repeat performance, a new 'production,' of a traditional script. The surrender to common moods and common purposes he describes parallels the epigenetic character of Coleman's community conflicts. But later developments lead to crises and denouements which are seen to call for public performances in accordance with conventions of appropriate behaviour such as litigation or feud on the one hand, sacrifice and prayer on the other. For unless there is to be total breakdown, some resolution of conflict has to occur so that the order of things which prevailed previously, or something like it, is restored. And the restoration of public order must mean that the measures taken were the right ones.

By way of bonus, a later study of community conflict by William Gamson,⁷ points to a rationale for conflict as an integrative force which is rather more persuasive than the analogy drawn from the economists' postulate of competitive equilibrium. The initially slightly disconcerting conclusion to this study was that the more conflict-ridden a place is, the more deeply involved in the community were the people who lived there. While Gamson found the conventional New England community rather dull and stagnant, some of the those embroiled in quite rancorous conflict were among the most 'vital.'

A third perspective may help to connect this notion with the main theme. This comes from a much-cited essay by Norbert Long.⁸ The paper is really by way of critical comment on studies of the politics of local communities, especially of the notion which so many of them conveyed of a struggle for power going on in them in much the same way as, in the longer term, a struggle for supremacy goes on between social classes or organised parties in the nation at large. The trouble is that when one comes to look at local communities qua communities (i.e., aside from local government and law enforcement agencies), there is no overall organisation which governs, or is supposed to govern, or can be appealed to so as to exercise governmental control over everything that happens in a local community - no supreme position, in short, for which to contend. "Much of what occurs seems to just happen, with accidental trends becoming cumulative over time and producing results intended by nobody." And this, he claims, holds true whether the local community is seen as a political system, an economic system, or a social system.

The local community remains none the less a system of social order, one in which "expectations are met and functions performed."

In teasing out and trying to explain the way in which this apparently acephalous yet

⁶ V.W.Turner, *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*, Manchester Univ. Pr., 1957.

⁷ W.A.Gamson, *Power and Discontent*, Dorsey, 1968.

⁸N.E.Long, "The Local Community as an Ecology of Games," *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. LXIV (1958), pp. 251-261.

well-ordered system is organised, Long suggests that we ought to envisage the local community as the field in which a very large number of games are being played: the newspaper game, the banking game, the business game, the clerical and church congregation game, and so on. For each game there is an established set of rules, a number of manifest purposes and goals to be achieved, and criteria by which success is marked. There is also a set of roles, or positions for the different players, however large a number there are, to operate in, as well as strategies and tactics learned from predecessors, from one's own experience, and "occasionally subject to improvement and change."

All of which is familiar and acceptable enough. What Long goes on to suggest, however, is new, and that is that the players in each game, whether it be the game of commerce, local politics, journalism, or whatever, are indeed playing a special game of their own, in which they have a prescribed part, and for which they may have special training or special experience, but the game they are playing is observed, or observable, by everybody else. These others may be principally concerned with playing their own game but they can also take time out to watch what is happening in other games; indeed, they have to do so, for what is happening in other games can affect their own. So everybody in a local community has, to a greater or lesser extent, this double role of player and spectator. To be sure, local politicians, and players in some other games, may be expected to be involved in several games and have a general interest in many others, but they have a game of their own to play, and it is watched by a sizeable number of spectators.

Lastly, despite the absence of some overall institution or organisation, all games have to be played under the surveillance, so to speak, of the rules of a larger, vaguer, set of rules which apply to all games. Try as they may to make their own particular game private, the walls which players may erect may at any time prove to be embarrassingly transparent - and one of the overriding rules of the larger games is that while it may not be that everyone does join in, it should be possible, and is seen by most people as very desirable, for everybody to feel able to join in.

It is precisely this conception of Long's that highlights the essentials of the idea of the 'political nation' I want to develop. It conveys the sense of wholesale political participation which is nevertheless held in posse, or in abeyance. It emerges into active participation in community - or national - politics when one or more of the 'games', large or small, becomes serious, and provokes a conflict in which all feel concerned.

II

For a start, by disconnecting the idea of the political nation from its conventional usage in history (and, for that matter, from the treatment of community conflict in sociology), and connecting it up with smaller scale manifestations of collective action of the same kind, it becomes possible to discern some compatibility between it and the 'constitutive system' of Italian city-republics in the later Middle Ages. The constitutive system in

Florence and other cities during the frequent bouts of intense political tension stretched well outside the usual confines of the *signoria*, the great families and their adherents, and the political activists in the guilds and the city quarters; the *popolo* certainly came into it. If one stretched a little further back in time, one could find another resemblance in the communal movement in France, Picardy and Northern Italy during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Again, whether the leading figures were clergy or city merchants, the driving force was supplied by the mass of common people who supported them.

True, A.F. Pollard once remarked that "The 'people' is so indeterminate an expression, that its use, let alone its abuse, obscures almost all political discussion."⁹ But the tangle of ambiguities in which the idea of 'the people' and its role in politics has been caught up is wholly of modern origin. In classical Rome, the term '*populus*' stood for the whole body of citizens, divided as this was between two classes, patricians and plebs. Most places in medieval Europe had much the same group of terms, one comprehending the whole body of people, the others being used to distinguish specific classes: nobles, the higher clergy, gentry, commoners, freemen, and the like. Aliens, servants and 'the servile' did not belong to 'the people', any more than did non-citizens and slaves in the ancient world.

At times, the 'people' played a major part in the politics of the Italian city-republics especially, but also of the towns of Germany, the Netherlands and northern France. But the scene - the political arena - in which they played their part was the squares and streets of a city, an accessible, convenient and familiar field or meadow which could accommodate an assembly of people from the city, sometimes from the district around it, too. In other words, the 'collectivity' which could organise, or be organised for collective action of the more or less spontaneous kind was essentially small, and local. Collective action with the common people as principal participants involved, in medieval as in ancient times, modes of interaction and communication which were face-to-face - even if the meaning has to be stretched to allow for speakers addressing large assemblies.

In essence, the existence of the political nation or of its equivalent in a local community has to do with that perpetual concern of the individual for the right ordering of what is going on around him which is implicit in the ethos of any society - social order being, in fact, one of the features that define a society. But this concern is not evinced simply as obedience to 'the normative system,' and satisfied by following the code of impersonal rules imposed by 'society' on its members, as it is so very often made out to be. Individual members of society are constantly at work not merely conforming to prevailing norms of behaviour, or even in promoting, reinforcing, repairing or restoring social order but creating, recreating and rearranging it. Social order is not a finished system which individuals acknowledge by obeying its rules, but a *modus vivendi* which operates in so far as - and only in so far as - we, also individually, take the time and trouble to keep it going.

There is a second point which the diversion into the by-ways of community studies was intended to establish. This is that along with - indeed, part and parcel of - the work of

⁹ Quoted by C.S. Emden in *The People and the Constitution*, O.U.P., 1956, Appendix I. p.317.

keeping social order as a going concern, the individual keeps a close eye on what other people around him are doing in the way of maintaining and repairing, or altering and adapting, the order which sustains them all. This, at bottom, is what 'public opinion' is about. It is once again Bryce who is most perceptive about this, and, by implication, about its continuing presence throughout history:

"The simplest form in which public opinion presents itself is when a sentiment spontaneously arises in the mind and flows from the lips of the average man upon his seeing or hearing something said or done. Homer presents this with his usual vivid directness in the line which frequently recurs in the Iliad when the effect of a speech or event is to be conveyed: 'And thus any one was saying as he looked at his neighbour.' This phrase describes what may be called the rudimentary stage of opinion. It is the prevalent impression of the moment. It is what any man (not every man) says, i.e. it is the natural and the general thought or wish which an occurrence evokes."¹⁰

Bryce goes on to spell out the elaboration of this 'rudimentary' stage into the fully-fledged public opinion met with in politics and the press. But, as we well know, and as he in fact shows in his own account, it is the very same 'rudimentary' process that occurs at every stage. 'Public opinion' is formed, expressed, and taken note of in countless episodes in which what one individual says, or writes, is heard, or overheard, or read by other individuals. And whether the episode is one of conversation between just two people, or a social gathering, or public meeting; whether it amounts to reading (or, when broadcasting comes on the scene, listening to) what someone else asserts, or says has happened, or says about what has happened, and so on; or whether 'the neighbour' he looks at for verification is alone with him, or is one of a small gathering or a crowd; or whether it is merely the utterance of some anonymous passer-by who happens to fit the still unfilled box in the matrix of possible interviewees on the reverse of an interviewer's clipboard, the occasion is an immediate, intimate, and intensely localised occasion of social interaction.

Moving from the constitutive system of medieval Italian republics - or, for that matter, from the fluoridation or desegregation campaigns fought over in American towns - to the political nation is a shift which is more than a simple matter of the numbers involved. It is a matter of the selfsame events or utterances setting off so widespread an accumulation of social interactions as to generate an active, nationwide, concern in political issues. This is the reason why the political nation has been treated as being - and has in fact been - so evanescent an element in national politics. But it was non-existent - on a national scale - before the seventeenth century.

Of course, even in the darkest times before then, rumours of distant events spread around, along with gossip and scandal about the court, but they were confused, out-of-date, and almost always contradictory; certainly they were too remote and unreliable to warrant concerted action - except at times when great distress, or anger, or fear were there, ready to provoke protest or riot or rebellion. But even the 'Peasants' Revolt' in England, the '*Jacquerie*' in France, and other medieval uprisings were regional rather

¹⁰ J. Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, Vol. II, p. 251.

than national; and the '*Ciompi*' revolt and the civic disturbances in Germany towards the end of the fifteenth century were local affairs.

Potent as 'the people' were from time to time in the circumscribed political arenas of medieval Italy, or in the local affairs of eleventh-century France, and all-important as they may well have been in the Athens of the fourth century BC, intervention by the common people in governmental decision-making or political debate had faded into insignificance by the sixteenth century. This was in large part the consequence of the greater effectiveness of the administrative (sc. juridical) systems now at the command of rulers - itself the direct outcome of the spread of literacy well beyond the clergy. Administrative systems are among the very first beneficiaries of increased literacy, as Stinchcombe and Goody, among others, have emphasised.¹¹

It is this - to refer back to Trevor-Roper's essay once again - which lies behind the 'administrative revolution' of Henry VIII's time, and the generosity of the kings and chief ministers of France, England and Spain towards universities and colleges.

But the spread of literacy also meant that it became possible for information and, in particular, up-to-date, reasonably accurate, and authoritative news to be disseminated widely and quickly throughout the nation - and, indeed, between nations.

This was slow to take hold - much slower, in the nature of things, than the recruitment of increased numbers of the literate into administrative and jurisdictional offices. Figures from which to construct even an 'educated guess' are lacking before the seventeenth century, but there is a significant episode noted by Robert Cressy which can be taken as a pointer. There was in 1534 a formal oath-taking enjoined on every male person over the age of fourteen by which he bound himself to abide by the Establishment of the King's Succession - i.e. to accept the children of Anne as heirs to the throne in place of Katherine's. The only parish of which records survive is one in Suffolk, but on the evidence of those signing their attestation as against those who put their mark, slightly less than ten per cent were literate. Similar nationwide attestations, this time concerning the Protestant religion, made just over a hundred years later and a good deal more reliable, suggest a figure of about thirty per cent for rural parishes; London parishes, for which better evidence is available, range from sixty-six to over ninety per cent literacy.

The consequent development of informed public discussion, it is worth remarking, met with a good deal of resistance by the authorities. The decline of vocal political opposition (or its smothering by increased administrative activity) was true of England up to the end of Elizabeth's reign, no less than France or any other country, Elizabeth's cultivation of popularity and flair for publicity notwithstanding. While Henry VIII's Parliaments were hardly quite the 'servile tools' they have been called,¹² they were regarded, and treated, rather as the legislative instruments of monarchy rather than as

¹¹ A.L. Stinchcombe, "Social Structure and Organization," in J.G. March (ed.), *Handbook of Organization*, Rand McNally, 1965, pp. 150-1.

J. Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*, C.U.P., 1986, Ch. 3, "The State, the Bureau and the File."

¹² C.W. Firth, *Oliver Cromwell*, Putnam, 1924, p.9.

assemblies of representatives of a people with some prescriptive rights in law-making. Popular protests were frequent enough and made themselves heard, but were not taken into account politically - unless violence was threatened, and force needed to quell them. Towards the end of her reign, protests against taxes and the 'abuses of monopoly' may have become louder and more frequent but displays of interest in politics by the common people were regarded as unwarrantable.

Elizabeth's restoration of royal supremacy over the national church and the 'Elizabethan compromise' over doctrine did produce, for the very first time, parliamentary opposition in the form of a small but dedicated band of puritan MPs and a spirit of opposition which went so far as to challenge the right to dispose of monopolies. Even so, members of the House of Commons voiced their opinions as privileged members of an assembly summoned by the queen - and, as often as not, nominated by the nobles or courtiers to whom the electors assigned the choice in deference to a patron's wishes,¹³ rather than elected as 'representatives of the people'.

As late as the 1590's, Robert Cecil thought it intolerable that "parliament matters" were "ordinary talk in the streets", and complained about it in the House of Commons.¹⁴ Some twenty years later, James I issued a proclamation against the excessive discussion of questions of state; and less than thirty years after that, Charles I, while asserting his respect for the people's liberties and freedom, "in the same breath, denied to them "any share in government."¹⁵

But Charles' words were spoken on the scaffold.

The political nation was born, so far as England is concerned, in the first half of the seventeenth century. If one tries to identify its parentage, it seems to lie in religious dissent as much as anything. But it was certainly fostered by the spread of literacy.

It is, I think, important to bear in mind that the political nation is not a constant in national politics. Nor is it - and this is perhaps most important of all - an element in 'modernisation' or 'social evolution.' I want in particular to distinguish the idea of the political nation from *Offentlichkeit*, the conception developed at some length by Jurgen Habermas¹⁶ of a largely bourgeois 'public sphere' which emerges in the discussion by people at large of public affairs, especially politics, in a variety of private or semi-private *milieux* of the kind made available by the increasing domestication and privatisation of upper and middle class styles of life and by the fairly rapid spread of literacy. In the eighteenth century, it is argued, the wealthy and educated led less of their lives in public and more in their own comfortable homes, where they could devote themselves to books, and meeting their like-minded fellows in salons, clubs, inns, cafes, where they could read newspapers and broadsheets and discuss their contents.

¹³ See J.E.Neale, *The Elizabethan House of Commons*, Cape, 1949, p.16.

¹⁴ C.S.Emden, *The People and the Constitution*, O.U.P., 1956, p. 31.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.32.

¹⁶ J.Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Offentlichkeit*, Luchterhand, 1962.

Habermas presents *Offentlichkeit* as yet another child of the Enlightenment and the 'consumer revolution'. The spread of literacy to a good third of the population and the greater amplitude of domestic and private life for the well-to-do may have made a useful nursery for the development of political dissidence in France - as indeed they have been made out to be - but it is equally obvious that they hardly amount to sufficient cause.¹⁷

The Enlightenment and consumerism, after all, both made their mark on eighteenth century England and Germany, as well as France, but neither country caught fire politically - although after 1760, England did grow rather warm.

III

One country in Western Europe which, midway through the seventeenth century (and so midway through the monarchist period, too), could have been well on the road to the centralised autocracy which monarchy saw as its manifest destiny was England. In 1650, the country's ruler had at his disposal both the prerequisites which the Great Elector's grandson specified for glory and safety: money and a good army. But the monarchy had been abolished the year before, and the king executed.

Taxation was no more popular under the Protectorate than at any other time, and money for government and, especially, for the army, continued to be a problem, but it was not the supremely unsettling factor it was elsewhere, or at other times. (Some of the pressure was removed simply by confiscating the estates of royalists and imposing penal taxes on royalist sympathisers). As for the 'good army', the forces at the government's disposal included what was probably the best army of its time as well as a navy which, after 1652, proved superior to the Dutch, and commanded the respect of western Europe.

But the process at work was wholly different from centralisation and absolutism. Starting off after 1600 with attempts to build military strength and get money similar in nature and method to those in other European countries, the monarchy had found itself countered by an opposition engineered and powered by social and political forces quite different from any which appeared in mainland Europe. As those forces worked themselves out during the century, what one can best call 'a political nation' was created.

During the first half of the seventeenth century, opposition between King and Parliament had grown into outright hostility and, eventually, war. Just how far the conflict could be said to be between 'court' and 'country' - between the king's entourage and various dependents and clienteles, with their principled, sectarian, loyal, or traditionalist supporters, and members of the House of Commons and their principled, sectarian, loyal, and equally tradition-bound¹⁸ sympathisers - is of no direct concern here. But it is very clear that, however the lines were drawn, the limits previously set to interest and involvement in politics had been stretched enormously. After two lengthy periods, lasting several years, when the king dispensed with Parliament altogether, the new

¹⁷ See R. Darnton, "An Enlightened Revolution", *New York Review*, 24 Oct. 1991, pp. 33-6.

¹⁸ For justification by appeal to tradition, see esp. J.G.A.Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*, C.U.P., 1957.

parliaments, when they met, were even more recalcitrant, more antagonistic, more insistent on their privileges and on the grievances of 'the people', than their predecessors.

Increasingly, parliamentary claims rested on the fact that it represented 'the people'. But, significantly, it did so not because of any direct expression of popular demand but as a result of the obstinate efforts of the House of Commons throughout James I's reign to exercise jurisdiction over elections, in place of Star Chamber and the Privy Council. Part of the campaign, led by Hampden, Pym and Eliot, was directed towards extending the franchise in boroughs: a deliberate attempt to enlarge the 'political nation' at the time of its greatest potency.

Greater public interest in Parliament and elections was a natural by-product. In the intervals between parliaments, principles were clarified and attitudes hardened by a continuous flow of argument, discussion, propaganda and exhortation. Material enough was supplied by newsletters, 'separates' (transcripts of state trials and 'advices' to the crown, or reports of proceedings, diplomatic negotiations, foreign news, and so forth), pamphlets and the voluminous correspondence of parsons, merchants and landowners with colleagues, agents and kinsfolk.¹⁹ Much of this material was read aloud or recounted in country houses, inns, and taverns, and fed national (and some foreign) news into the perpetual round of 'common talk' and 'country intelligence' which purveyed local news and opinion.

The existence of a political nation is discernible only fleetingly before 1620, or thereabouts. Dietz had this same period in mind when he wrote of the unconcern of the upper classes in national government and national politics. "It simply wasn't their business... They didn't get enough out of it to make it worth their while."²⁰ But it was certainly something to be reckoned with by the 1630's. No parliament was summoned during the whole decade, and the 'political nation' came into existence, for the first time, entirely in its own right.

Decades of conflict between the two sides, royalist and parliamentary, compelled sizeable numbers of landowners, merchants and artisans, and even magistrates and office-holders, to reinterpret their individual beliefs and attachments, their interests in property, trade, and employment in terms of political alignment. As the difference between the apparatus of central government and the miscellany of interests in town and country hardened into adversarial debate, so interests, personal or common, vested or principled, incorporated or unincorporated, coalesced - much in the manner described by James Coleman in *Community Conflict*. From being either indifferent to government or merely avoiding or resisting, in ad hoc, piecemeal, fashion, attempts to impose or extend its control, more and more people were forced to see the need for somehow getting some control over it by themselves or claiming a share in governmental decision-making, or at least making it responsive to 'pressures from without'.

¹⁹ See R.Cust, "News and Politics in Early Seventeenth Century England", *Past & Present*, No. 112, Aug., 1986.

²⁰ F.C.Dietz, *English Public Finance, 1558-1641*, The Century Co., 1932, p. 202.

The political nation emerged out of the coalescence of a multiplicity of networks of common interest and communication with the network of parliamentary representation, centuries old, hitherto only of occasional interest to a few people apart from the court, nearby Londoners and some local worthies in boroughs and counties, but now the dominant organising principle for the whole country.

Naturally, the factors which went to the making of the political nation were many and varied. We can count among them, first, the spread of literacy. To feed the appetite it created, there were not only books but pamphlets and periodicals and, eventually, newspapers. The dissemination of news and opinions about the affairs of a larger world created, while it fed, an enlarged appetite for discussion and speculation, for social criticism and political debate. Again, the elaboration of religious differences and dissent, the growth and increasing complexity of trade and industry and of the processes of law and financial business all made for denser and busier communication networks.

Little of this was peculiar to England. The same drive for raising money by taxation, in the guise it wore for most people, rich and poor alike - for making war, extravagant expenditure by royal courts, the unscrupulous greed of ministers and officials - was going on in the other kingdoms of Europe. The demands and the deprivations, the disasters and the vicissitudes, of war, the autocratic pretensions and the wayward ineptitudes of the nobility, of ministers and of government servants, and the arrogance, extravagance, venality and corruption of the court and its clienteles were the object of resentment by everyone who did not profit by them.

But it was only when they forced themselves, by way of the tax-gatherer, the customs official, the exciseman, into becoming the everyday concern of propertied men of all denominations that they became the object of active, public, protest. What was special in the case of England was that taxation, from the land-tax to 'ship money', fell largely on the propertied classes. Taxation was one of the main hinges on which the movement in England towards political awareness, resentment, and organised opposition turned.

There were two other features of the social and political structure of England at the time which made it a special case. There was, first, the existence of Parliament and, above all, of the election of representatives by the same propertied classes. So long as Parliament remained very largely the instrument by which the monarch was able to promulgate legislation, with parliamentary acts, and most parliamentary action, instigated by him or his ministers, elections were of no great political consequence. It was the long-drawn-out altercation between the first two Stuart kings and their parliaments which first turned the electorate into a factor in national politics.

The connection between members of parliament and their electors, renewed (or reconstructed) from time to time by elections, made for a comprehensive network of communication and intercourse covering the whole country which provided a kind of foundation matrix of news and opinion. Other information networks could be - and from time to time were - connected with it, and in sheer volume it soon surpassed by far the official network by which the Privy Council instructed, and drew information from, the

lords lieutenant and sheriffs of counties and justices of the peace who constituted what there was in the way of local government. Furthermore, the interconnections between the 'informal communication networks' were themselves fostered - broadened, 'nationalised' - by a development which was, among all the representative assemblies which had emerged in Europe during the later Middle Ages, peculiar to the English. This was "the divorce of the idea of representation from any local ties with the constituency."²¹ 'Carpet-bagging', as Neale says, had a long history, but it was in the latter part of the sixteenth century, when patronage seized on parliamentary membership as a useful perquisite, providing as it did residence in London and access to the court, that it became common practice for parliamentary elections to be contested by 'anyone from anywhere'. In this way, the House of Commons tended to become 'nationally rather than locally minded'. The new communication networks of news and of diverse interests became not merely connected with this matrix of MPs and expanded electorate but interfused with, and, eventually, superimposed on it.

Secondly, there was the decline - so precipitate as to constitute a social revolution - in the prestige, and in the political power and influence of the aristocracy.²² The demotion of the aristocracy was in large part the direct consequence of royal action. The Tudors, from first to last, pursued an unrelenting campaign of attrition against the power and influence of the nobility. Elizabeth's refusal to ennoble even the most deserving of her subjects owed at least as much, and perhaps more, to a politic desire to restrict the number of aristocratic, and therefore potentially trouble-making, families as to her notorious parsimony; even Burleigh stayed a baron, and Walsingham was denied even that degree of distinction.

Shortages in the supply of titles were more than remedied by Elizabeth's successor, who took over from the French the idea of the direct cash sales of titles, and supplemented it by granting courtiers - especially Buckingham - the right to nominate men to the peerage. If the existence of titles of honour is the most immediately obtrusive aspect of a monarchy, as Lawrence Stone suggests,²³ then the profligate distribution of those titles lowered the prestige of the monarchy as much as that of the aristocracy. The suddenness of the change made things worse.

Since Henry VIII's time, too, the higher clergy had lost wealth, power and influence - again as the direct consequence of royal action - and the Puritan challenge to the episcopacy found an easy parallel in derogation of the peerage.

These seemingly independent changes in the higher reaches of the social structure reinforced Parliament's reassertion of electoral rights against patronage and raised the relative prestige of MP's. It gave members of the House of Commons greater social prominence than their place in the social order had previously warranted, and parliamentary affairs, elections and the sheer fact of parliaments being summoned, prorogued, dissolved, or completely dispensed with, a political significance they had

²¹ J.E.Neale, *The Elizabethan House of Commons*, Cape, 1949, p.16.

²² L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641*, O.U.P., 1965, pp.748-9.

²³ L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641*, p.749.

never possessed previously. By 1640, "M.P.s had convinced themselves that the House of Commons was by its very nature an infinitely more important body than the House of Lords. John Pym described the latter as merely 'a Third Estate, by inheritance and birth-right', compared with 'the whole body of the Commons of the Kingdom.'"²⁴

'Seventeenth century crisis', 'the Great Rebellion', 'Civil War', 'the English Revolution' - the variety of labels reflects the oddly open, or confused, verdict pronounced by historians on the conflict between royalists and parliamentarians fought out during the whole decade of the 1640's. By the end, it surely seemed that the political nation had asserted itself, that its instrument and creature, Parliament, was sovereign, and that a form of republican constitution on some Dutch, Venetian, Roman, or more liberal, even democratic, model would be established.

But nothing happened. Sovereignty - supreme legislative and executive authority - was indeed lodged with Parliament, but only about a tenth remained out of all those elected in 1640, at the beginning of its life. And they stayed, until eventually they were forced out of the building by Cromwell and a few musketeers from his own regiment.

The trouble was that with the victory for which those on the parliamentary side had made common cause, political and religious alignments began to break apart. After the first civil war, when victory over the royalists had been to all appearances secured, the army became a political assembly rivalling Parliament, and challenging its supremacy. In face of Parliament's announcement (in 1647) of a scheme to reduce the army's strength fairly drastically, all regiments made for Newmarket, where they resolved not to disband until they received satisfactory treatment. For, they declared, they were not "a meer mercenary army, hired to serve any arbitrary power of a state, but called forth and conjured by the several declarations of Parliament, to the defense of our own and the peoples just rights and liberties."²⁵ After that, the *pas de quatre* of negotiations between king, Parliament, army and Scots which ended in the second civil war, an opposition between what was left of Parliament and a victorious army put paid to any real attempt at constitutional or administrative reform, and Cromwell took over as virtually absolute ruler.

IV

Cromwell's absolute rule was assumed, it seems, reluctantly, or at least with little of the dedicated self-interest or opportunism which marked the progress of other European rulers towards autocracy. Even the 'Rump', the remnant of the Parliament which had been elected in 1640, was permitted to stay in place, if not in power, until 1653. By then it had become unpopular, had proved negative and contumacious, and showed itself, by the end, incompetent and useless: the reform of legal procedure which all sides were agreed on foundered in unending debates; "We know," said Cromwell, "that many months together were not enough to pass one word, called 'incumbrances'".

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 749.

²⁵ Quoted G.Davies, *The Early Stuarts*, O.U.P., 1937, p. 144.

The extraordinary thing is that, throughout the Interregnum, the idea that government should be representative remained the moving principle of rulers and ruled - despite disillusionment, the forcible dissolution of the Long Parliament by Cromwell's own troops, and the failed experiment of the 'Nominated Parliament' of 1653; despite, too, the fact that a hundred of those elected in 1656 were excluded and fifty or more absented themselves by way of protest. The remainder went on to oppose a bill to continue taxing ex-royalists to support the militia, and, in doing so, attacked the division of the country into regions ruled by authorities (the major-generals) too powerful to admit of legal restraint.

It was as though the only posture that Parliament knew how to assume was one of defiance of authority. That Parliament had been convened, and was meeting, on sufferance meant nothing. For true parliament men, while the war had admittedly been fought and won by the army, the army existed as the instrument of Parliament; it had been created by Parliament, had fought in its cause, and it was (apparently) unthinkable that Parliament should now submit to the dictates of army officers.

The same differences between the army and Parliament made their appearance in the new Parliament elected after Cromwell's death. Parliamentary resolutions designed to suppress interference in political matters by the army were met by counterthreats by the army leaders, who persuaded Richard Cromwell, the new Protector, to dissolve Parliament. Yet the next move was - of all things - the recall of the remnant of the Long Parliament.

Uncompromising as ever, the Rump lasted six months before being evicted once more by the army. This time, though, it was the army which debated its own power away, with Fleetwood, the army's leader in London, saying at the end of it, "God hath spit in our faces." The Rump was recalled yet again, to be defied this time by the City of London, which refused to pay taxes unless the members of the Long Parliament who had been excluded were recalled, and Parliament restored to some semblance of representativeness. The army's leader in the north, Monck, pronounced in favour of the move. This signified that the Protectorate was finished, with the most likely consequence of negotiations with Charles II to follow.

But the significance of this last rapid sequence of coups and counter-coups went beyond its outcome. The principal actors in the political moves were outside Parliament. They included not only leading figures from the army and Parliament like Monck, Lambert and Hesilrige but different groups of army officers and men, the Common Council of London, and large numbers of ordinary people. But they had all participated in the events of the past twenty years as electors, soldiers, militia men, and as individually assessed taxpayers, not merely as spectators. So, while it was hardly the case that the outcome would be determined by popular demand, it certainly had to conform with it; at least the consent, at best the approval, of people at large was now an established political factor, and was already known as such. On the evening of the day that the restored Parliament met, Pepys wrote, "Out of the window it was a most pleasant sight to see the

City from [one] end to the other with a glory about it, so high was the light of the Bonfires and so thick round the City, and the bells rang everywhere."

The seventeenth century was not a time of dramatic or radical innovation in government administration. Even Cromwell had seen no need for radical change; indeed, what changes he did instigate were in the direction of restoring some older Exchequer practices which had been discarded. This is not to say, though, that there were no significant changes. Where the structure of government, the holders of power, and the political process were all fundamentally different by the end of the century, the system of administration itself could hardly have remained unaltered. Yet most of the innovative changes which did occur are best thought of as changes in style and in the kind of person recruited into government service rather than in organisational structure.

One momentous structural change had occurred, of course, when, on the outbreak of the Civil War, the king and many of the king's servants had to leave the centre of government. Control of the central government establishment passed in 1641 to Parliament, and Parliament "had to improvise for itself an administration without the King and his supporters."²⁶

Vacant offices were filled simply enough by appointing people loyal to Parliament - many of them members of the House of Commons - to the vacancies. Given the nature of administrative office and of the part played in administration by law, the takeover presented no real problem. But this still left empty the role, the responsibilities, and the authority of the central executive, which had been occupied by the king, the privy council, and their staff. This role was taken by Parliament, either in full session, as in the case of dealings with foreign states, or through committees of members.

Working through committees was no novelty for members of parliament, but hitherto their functions had - naturally - been confined to preparing legislation and enquiring into matters and actions thought worthy of investigation. Executive decision-making and supervising administrative action were things entirely new to Parliament. Even so, committee procedure was something its members really knew about. Moreover, there was precedent in government administration itself for handling business in committee rather than leaving everything to single ministers. Responsibility for some defined sector of government had been handed over to a committee or board, sometimes permanent, as with the Admiralty, Ordnance or Trade, sometimes temporary, as with the Treasury in James I's time. Resort to councils, boards and committees during the Stuart period was certainly prompted by the desire for some insurance against fraud and speculation (the departments concerned were those which handled the largest sums of money) or to compensate for lack of competence and experience. But while the practice of handing over a department or a general governmental function not to one man but to several, who bore collective responsibility for decisions, may have its roots in the distrust felt by kings towards politicians and their servants, or have been fostered by it, Parliament's recourse to committees for the conduct of government undoubtedly grew out of trust; it was bred out of consciousness of the weight of responsibility and the commitment they

²⁶ G.E.Aylmer, *The State's Servants*, Routledge & K.Paul, 1973, p. 9

all shared.

The Committee of Safety, which later became the Committee of Both Kingdoms and finally the Derby House Committee, bore the closest resemblance to a supreme central executive, being responsible for the army and the conduct of the war, but almost every distinguishable branch of governmental activity had its commission or committee, and many of them had several committees. These were made up either of members of parliament (as all committees were in the first years) or of outsiders appointed by Parliament and reporting to it. As the war continued, and as the need grew for the better management of its financing, army recruitment, and supplies, so more executive authority was devolved on to regions and counties. Again, the instrument for regional and local government of this kind was the committee; for regions, there were parliamentary committees, but tax assessment was considered a matter best handled locally - following a tradition which went back to Tudor times - by committees which included MPs and local supporters.

A good deal of this elaborate structure of committees was removed when Cromwell became Protector. After 1653, the central government consisted of Cromwell as Protector and a nominated Council of State, with eleven regional governors - the 'major-generals' - appointed to organise and command a new militia and also to collect taxes and enforce the law, taking over the work of regional and local committees. Gardiner's suggestion that the Commonwealth tried to create a state within the nation catches most of the truth, although it was rather that the parliamentary side tried to create an administrative system out of that part of the political nation to which it looked for support.

Nevertheless, those remarks to the effect that the Civil War had been won by committees, and that the most marked feature of government under the Long Parliament was its lack of centralisation, have wider implications. A far greater proportion of people during the Interregnum were involved in government and politics than ever before, or were thereafter for over a hundred years.

Parliament failed to create an effective administrative system for a number of reasons: the limitations imposed by the presence of the Army as the repository of real power; the political divisions within the Army; and the increasingly crass arrogance and recalcitrance of Parliament itself, especially after the greater number of its members had been excluded. Most of all, the revolutionary role of the army, like that of the sects, was inspired much more by religious than by political feelings and beliefs; and these became more and more pronounced - or, at least, came increasingly to determine the currency of useable argument - as time passed.

The English Revolution, it is usually said, failed to revolutionise anything: the one attempt at radical reform, aimed at the law, came to nothing; administration was a totally ad hoc affair, with no eye to constructing a durable system of administration or fiscal management; and while corruption and venality were almost certainly much reduced,

there were plenty of instances of both.²⁷

All the same, when it came to the Restoration, while the constitution and the machinery of government were, on the face of it, put back to what they had been in 1641, there was no going back to the pre-war situation of either. The diffusion of power and authority and the involvement of so many people, not only in London but throughout the country, in the business of government - and thus in politics - had spread knowledge of the ways of politics and politicians, ability to read the intentions of government, and experience of administering affairs in support of government, among a very large constituency of lawyers, merchants, farmers and tradesmen.

It was this new constituency which, according to Sir George Clark²⁸, along with the landowning gentry who survived the Restoration, provided the nucleus of what he called 'a governing class' - a social category which became the recognised source from which the semi-professional staff of government administrators were drawn over the next three centuries.

V

Although the whole Commonwealth apparatus was removed with the Restoration, the Interregnum left its mark on government and politics. There were three sorts of legacy: first, a number of administrators who had served the Commonwealth survived as King's servants. Secondly, it left behind a fair number of men with intimate knowledge of government affairs and the conduct of administrative systems. London was full of them, and they retained an interest in Parliament and the administration, especially when it came to financial affairs. Thirdly, Parliament was there to stay, and while Charles II was welcomed back, there was no question of giving him an entirely free hand in ruling the country, any more than there was of handing him blank cheques to cover his expenditure.

Wholly new kinds of people other than the select band of noble and upper-class ministers and king's servants who had served the first two Stuart kings had been involved in government and administration under the Commonwealth. Quite apart from those who survived in office after the Restoration, recruitment into the administration was as wide-ranging after 1660 as before. Aylmer calls the change 'massive',²⁹ and, circumspect as his judgments are in his second book, there is little doubt that, in his view, the change was for the better. Roseveare, writing of the men of the Treasury, is more fulsome: "The Puritan Revolution had unquestionably fostered a useful spirit of public service to the state....An anxiety to see the economic destinies of the country backed by a thrifty, conscientious government and an equitable, comprehensive fiscal policy was one of the most powerful forces to come out of mid-seventeenth century England."³⁰

²⁷ G.E.Aylmer, *The State's Servants*, pp. 139-167.

²⁸ G.N.Clark, *The Later Stuarts*, O.U.P., 1964, p. 16.

²⁹ G.E.Aylmer, *The State's Servants*, p.328.

³⁰ H. Roseveare, *The Treasury*, Allen Lane, 1969, p. 56.

The new men were, generally speaking, better qualified, more competent, of more assiduous habit (partly because of their origin, partly because of the greater commitment expected of the Commonwealth's men), and less corrupt (partly because they had been given something like adequate salaries, partly because, however fashionable it may be nowadays to play it down, there was an ethical aspect to puritanism and the parliamentary cause). The change shows up in some individuals who had served their apprenticeship - and something more - under the Commonwealth and stayed in office under Charles II. Notable among them were William Jessop, William Clarke, George Downing and Samuel Pepys. Pepys' main contribution to the increased efficiency and effectiveness of the Navy Board came later, but Downing made his presence felt in the Treasury during the 1660's. It was he who broke the system - similar to that obtaining in France - whereby the government used the selfsame syndicates of business men both for raising loans and farming out customs and excise. Tied to an Act of 1665 which made the king an additional grant-in-aid were provisions for borrowing against the expected revenue. Ordinary citizens prepared to lend to the government would be issued Treasury Orders authorising repayment in chronological sequence and half-yearly payments of interest at 6 per cent.. This innovation paved the way for breaking off the practice of farming the customs (in 1671) and, after an interval, excise duties.

Downing did not accomplish everything alone, of course. With the departure of Shaftesbury, almost the last Lord Treasurer of England, the Treasury was 'put into commission'. This was nothing new: Treasury Commissioners had been appointed to replace the Lord Treasurer early in the seventeenth century, although it had proved a temporary expedient. However, the Treasury was now a department of government distinct from the Exchequer, which remained responsible for the practical tasks of collection, custody and disbursement of the national revenue. The 'rougher hands' (Charles' phrase) who were appointed Commissioners of the Treasury in 1667, urged on by their secretary, Downing, began to assert their right to control not only the management of government borrowing and revenue but the expenditure authorised by the two Secretaries of State and expenditure by the king himself.

Although much of this work seemed to have been destroyed in 1673, when the Treasury went virtually bankrupt, the beginnings of orderliness had been introduced into the fiscal system.³¹

Finally, to come to the third aspect of the legacy of the recent past, Parliament claimed a much larger say in the conduct of government, especially in the way financial affairs were managed, than had ever been the case before - even though medieval precedents were put forward as the basis of the claim. This was evident from the very first, for it was Parliament which had taken the initiative in recalling the king. It was Parliament which decided to retain the excise introduced under the Commonwealth and to 'allocate' half to 'the Crown' (i.e., government expenditure) and half to Charles in person, thus establishing in a quite practical way its stake in government and its degree of financial control. This was followed up by a series of challenges over minor taxes which

³¹ H. Roseveare, *The Treasury*, pp. 58-64.

strengthened the Commons' hold over finance.

Equally important for the future was the system of committees, which was carried over from the revolutionary and Commonwealth period. The king's chief ministers were the two secretaries of state; their specifically ministerial responsibilities lay in foreign affairs (uneasily divided between the 'north' and the 'south' of Europe), but they were also kept busy putting work into other departments of state and coordinating their efforts. It was these departments of state which were given over to committees: the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury, the Navy Board, the Board of Ordnance, various committees and boards of trade and plantations, the Commissioners of Customs, and the a sizeable number of other boards, some of them concerned with other branches of taxation, some with minor governmental business. All were in some way answerable to, or worked together with, the secretaries of state. Within a few years of the Restoration, these ceased to be regarded as committees of the privy council. They were still, of course, officially appointed by and responsible to the king; for the king remained not merely chief executive but also, so far as outward constitutional forms went, the sole possessor of public power. But since the great majority of commissioners and members of boards and committees were also members of parliament, and since Parliament took it upon itself to raise questions about all government business and to debate it in some detail, the committees heading departments of state came to treat themselves (as parliamentary control over finance became more explicit) as accountable to the House of Commons as much as to the Secretaries of State or the king himself. Matters were resolved eventually by the cabinet system, but this was slow to develop, and, until then, all branches of government were operated by officials who, though formally appointed (and dismissible) by the king, either directly or indirectly through his ministers, worked under the direction of committees, subject to the requirements of secretaries of state or other senior ministers, and accountable to Parliament.

All in all, this meant that the arena of political conflict had shifted. In Tudor times it had been the court. For the first forty years of the seventeenth century it had lain in the middle ground between King and Court on the one side and Parliament on the other. From now on, it was lodged firmly in Parliament. Charles II was the first to acknowledge this in setting influence and the inducements of office to work to build something like an organised 'court party'. "By 19 February, 1670, when eighty ordinary MP's rose from their seats and walked out in disgust at the slavish way the courtiers were voting, that process had gone far, and by 1674, when the control of this party had passed from the Secretaries of State to the Treasurer, the pattern of future parliamentary politics had begun to take shape. Danby, as head of the Treasury and organiser of the court party, had more in common with the age of Walpole than the age of the Cecils."³²

The very attempt to organise a court party has the obvious implication that there was an opposition, and that it, too, might be organised. Even in 1660. Plumb observes, "Lord Wharton had a well-drilled regiment of Presbyterians in opposition; they were organised by counties, each company headed by an experienced Parliamentarian."³³ County groups

³² H. Roseveare, *The Treasury*, p.66.

³³ J.H.Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675 -1725*, Macmillan, 1967, p.31.

such as these may have held together for some years, although 'organised' is perhaps an overstatement. Opposition stemmed from a mixture of interests, of sympathies and sentiments, and of sheer distaste for the men whose support of court policies had, for the most part, been bought by places, titles, and outright bribes.

There were rivalries and defections on both sides; among the court 'party', ambition, envy, and mistrust "in a period of uncertainty and constant change produced a political world of cut-throat competition, (in) which the private virtues of constancy and openness could lead to ruin."³⁴ Charles seems to have encouraged disunity as a means of keeping himself in control and his options open. Also, he made it easier for himself to watch what was happening and to manipulate individuals and groups by avoiding elections as long as possible: the 'Cavalier Parliament' lasted from 1661 to 1679.

It is quite possible that it was this last circumstance - the absence of elections - as much as any other, which led to the surge of opposition to the crown in the 1680's. For, as J.H.Plumb has been at some pains to demonstrate,³⁵ the electorate grew very substantially during the seventeenth century, mostly through the success of parliamentarians such as Hampden, Eliot and Pym during the first quarter of the century in extending borough franchises. While the representation of towns was reduced drastically during the Commonwealth, "elections to these Parliaments involved more of the nation than ever before, and it should be remembered that a taste of political power, no matter how brief, was given to yeomen, craftsmen, and men of the middling sort."³⁶ Any appetite this extended electorate had for its recently acquired political power would have been whetted by the elections of 1660 and 1661 - and thereafter denied for nearly twenty years. The dam burst in 1679.

"Crises come when nations are ready for them." Sir George Clark's remark (a half-truth of that special kind which is sometimes wholly true, sometimes absurdly wrong) was written with the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis in mind. In the lengthy, confused aftermath of the Popish Plot, Charles at long last dissolved the Cavalier Parliament. The immediate occasion was to save his minister Danby from impeachment, but the Commons had voted for the disbandment of the troops raised for a foreign campaign; what is more, the money to be paid out on disbandment was to go through the City of London's treasury, not 'The Treasury'. All this was on top of the bill to exclude Catholics from Parliament which had already been passed, although the clause in the same bill aimed at excluding the king's brother James, now a professed Roman Catholic, from succession to the throne was defeated in the House of Lords.

It seemed - and almost was - as if 1640 was to be played all over again with a new cast. Instead, there were elections, and more elections. Charles tried to bypass opposition in Parliament by combining the leaders of both court party and opposition in a reconstructed council which would handle all business. It did not work. As one Parliament followed another, the Commons "became the focus of all politics as Whig

³⁴ J.R.Jones, *Country and Court*, Arnold, 1978, p.16.

³⁵ J.H.Plumb, *op. cit.*, pp.33-64.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.39.

energies were concentrated on attempts to enact the bill excluding James from the succession."³⁷

The political nation, excluded from direct participation in politics for thirty years, apart from the all-too-brief interlude of the Restoration, was brought to full life again for the last years of Charles' life. It is perhaps worth emphasising that this was not simply a matter of taking sides in a contest in which the issues were articulated and the prizes awarded by the members of the House of Commons, or the Lords - not an expression and a consequence of partisan struggles between whig and tory, or country and court. It had to do directly with the emotional ties, with the hopes and fears, and with the assumptions and perceptions of individual people. Events, rumours, legal proceedings, speeches and publications might provoke rational argument - or unreasoning passion, might feed attachments or animosities, might reinforce assumptions and intentions - or subvert them. They worked especially on the fears and hopes of people about religion and religious intolerance, about the power of the monarchy and the liberties and privileges of individuals and corporations, about dealings with Holland or with France or with other foreign countries, about armed forces, and about taxation and the spending of money raised by taxation.

There was nothing new in all this. What was new was that all such matters were political issues, and so, it was now commonly thought, could best be - could only be - resolved by Parliament. All the connections between the events and actions, the emotional ties, and the fears and hopes began with, ran through, or ended in Parliament and what happened in Parliament. A sizeable proportion of political matters coming up for actual decision - far more than had ever been the case before - were thought to be for Parliament to resolve. Since, in the last resort, such issues had to be resolved one way or the other by a vote for or against, this did tend to bring together members who voted the same way on a major issue - like the exclusion crisis. There was a solid core of members always prepared, for good reasons and bad, to take the king's side, and another of members who would oppose them, but any members might, and many of them did, cast their next votes differently from their erstwhile fellows. Decision often lay with these so-called 'independent members'.

It was clear that if he were to move things his way, the king would have to add many more MP's to the number he could rely on. Which brings us to what is the episode which is crucially significant in the history of the political nation in seventeenth-century England: the attempt by Charles II to control Parliament (or at least acquire a parliamentary majority) by controlling the electorate. Nothing could be done about the counties, but the four-fifths of the members represented boroughs. Boroughs owed the rights and privileges they possessed - their 'liberties' - to royal charters; it was all too easy to find grounds on which charters could be revoked, and then renewed, suitably amended. Soon after the Restoration, the government set to work to reduce the probability of unfriendly candidates being returned by remodelling corporation charters; they were to some degree restrained by the House of Commons, but there was strong pressure to restrict the membership of borough councils - and voting rights in

³⁷ J.R.Jones, *Country and Court.*, p.197.

parliamentary elections - to loyal Churchmen. Charles resurrected the procedure in the last years of his reign, and saw to it that it was more rigorously pursued. The Crown lawyers "made short work of the charters. There were some preliminary victims like Evesham and Norwich, then in 1683 down went London. After that it was useless for the smaller towns to do anything but surrender, and they handed in their charters to the judges by the dozen."³⁸

Charles' second attempt to nobble Parliament, this time by ensuring the election of a complaisant House of Commons, was entirely successful. He did not live to enjoy the fruits for long, but the first Parliament of his brother's reign was more agreeable to the Crown than any since 1661. The swift suppression of Monmouth's rebellion served to increase the subservience of a Parliament which had already demonstrated its loyalty to the king.

This of course does not mean that all opposition to Roman Catholicism, militarism, and the free exercise of the royal prerogative was at an end. But unfocused public discontent was a phenomenon of the seventeenth century, as of earlier periods, familiar enough to be regarded as manageable, where it was not ignored, especially with 16,000 of the troops of the new army Parliament had agreed to pay for stationed every summer at Hounslow.

The 'political nation' was conspicuous by its silence. In truth, with Parliament now more subject to royal influence than it had been for nearly a hundred years, there was no one to speak for it, and no audience: "The revolutionary elements of the opposition," as Clark called them, begging two questions in a single phrase, "had no longer the power to influence elections or to raise disturbances in London. They had no case to put before the governing class and no leaders in England. Those who had been their leaders, and those whose acts had already made them irreconcilable enemies of the new king, were in exile."³⁹

In the end, it was only James' uncompromising obstinacy in pursuing the cause of his religion at all costs - or his total misreading of the situation - that produced organised opposition. And this came not from Parliament or from the 'political nation' or from 'the people'. The 'Glorious Revolution' was the work of a handful of aristocrats - a *coup d'etat* in the most classic style, prefaced by conspiracy, negotiation, and an invitation to the usurper signed (in cypher) by four peers and three bishops.

But they acted in the interests of what they saw as the political nation (although numerically a tiny fraction of what had obtained fifty year earlier) and of Parliament. So Parliament won in the end. It had proved itself a generation earlier as an alternative repository of sovereign power. The trouble had been that no way had been found of controlling it in the interests of those who, having an army behind them, had the power to rule. After 1689, the problem of controlling Parliament was settled by those whose power to rule came from their wealth, which proved to be so much more versatile in use,

³⁸ G.N.Clark, *The Later Stuarts*, p.108.

³⁹ *ibid*, p. 118.

and dependable, than soldiers.