

Voltaire, “The English Constitution”

From Voltaire’s *Letters on England* (1734)

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CONTEXT: *In 1726, Voltaire challenged a nobleman to a duel and was exiled to England after a brief imprisonment in the Bastille. While in England, Voltaire wrote several letters comparing its government, society, and culture with that of his native country.*

Active
Reading

This mixture of different departments in the government of England; this harmony between the king, lords, and commons has not always subsisted. England was for a long time in a state of slavery, having, at different periods, worn the yoke of the Romans, Saxons, Danes, and, last of all, the Normans. William the Conqueror, in particular, governed them with a rod of iron. He disposed of the goods and lives of his new subjects like an eastern tyrant: he forbade, under pain of death, any Englishman to have either fire or light in his house after eight o’clock at night, whether it was that he intended by this edict to prevent their holding any assemblies in the night, or, by so whimsical a prohibition, had a mind to try to what a degree of abjectness men might be subjected by their fellow-creatures. It is, however, certain that the English had parliaments both before and since the time of William the Conqueror; they still boast of them, as if the assemblies which then bore the title of parliaments, and which were composed of the ecclesiastical tyrants and the barons, had been actually the guardians of their liberties, and the preservers of the public felicity....

While the barons, with the bishops and popes, were tearing all England to pieces... the people, I say, were considered by them as animals of a nature inferior to the rest of the human species. The commons were then far from enjoying the least share in the government; they were then [serfs] or slaves, whose labor, and even whose blood, was the property of their masters, who called themselves the nobility. Far the greatest part of the human species were in Europe—as they still are in several parts of the world—the slaves of some lord, and at best but a kind of cattle, which they bought and sold with their lands. It was the work of ages to render justice to humanity, and to find out what a horrible thing it was, that the many should sow while a few did reap: and is it not the greatest happiness for the French, that the authority of those petty tyrants has been extinguished by the lawful authority of our sovereign, and in England by that of the king and nation conjointly?

Happily, in those shocks which the quarrels of kings and great men gave to empires, the chains of nations have been relaxed more or less. Liberty in England has arisen from the quarrels of tyrants. The barons forced John Sans Terre and Henry III to grant that famous charter, the principal scope of which was in fact to make kings dependent on the lords; but, at the same time, the rest of the nation were favored, that they might side with their pretended protectors. This great charter, which is looked upon as the palladium and the consecrated fountain of the public liberty, is itself a proof how little that liberty was understood: the very title shows beyond all doubt that the king thought himself absolute, *de jure*; and that the barons, and even the clergy, forced him to relinquish this pretended right, only because they were stronger than he. It begins in this manner: “We¹, of our free will, grant the following privileges to the archbishops, bishops, abbots, priors, and barons of our kingdom,” etc. In the articles of this charter there is not one word said of the house of commons; a proof that no such house then existed; or, if it did, that its power was next to nothing. In this the free men of England are specified—a melancholy proof that there were then some who were not so. We see, by the thirty-second article, that those pretended free men owed their lords certain servitude. Such a liberty as this smelled very rank of slavery. By the twenty-first article, the king ordains, that from henceforth officers shall be restrained from forcibly seizing the horses and carriages of free men, except on paying for the same. This regulation was considered by the people

¹ The “Royal We,” used by monarchs and others in high office

as real liberty, because it destroyed a most intolerable kind of tyranny. Henry VII, that fortunate conqueror and politician, who pretended to cherish the barons, whom he both feared and hated, bethought himself of the project of alienating their lands. By this means the [peasants], who afterward acquired property by their industry, bought the castles of the great lords, who had ruined themselves by their extravagance; and by degrees nearly all the estates in the kingdom changed masters.

The House of Commons daily became more powerful; the families of the ancient peerage became extinct in time; and as, in the rigor of the law, there is no other nobility in England besides the peers, the whole order would have been annihilated had not the kings created new barons from time to time; and this expedient preserved the body of the peers they had formerly so much dreaded, in order to oppose the House of Commons, now grown too powerful. All the new peers, who form the upper house, receive nothing besides their titles from the crown; scarcely any of them possessing the lands from which those titles are derived. The duke of Dorset, for example, is one of them, though he possesses not a foot of land in Dorsetshire; another may be earl of a village, who hardly knows in what quarter of the island such a village lies. They have only a certain power in parliament, and nowhere out of it, which, with some few privileges, is all they enjoy.

Here is no such thing as the distinction of high, middle, and low justice in France; nor of the right of hunting on the lands of a citizen, who has not the liberty of firing a single shot of a musket on his own estate.

A peer or nobleman in this country pays his share of the taxes as others do, all of which are regulated by the House of Commons; which house, if it is second only in rank, is first in point of credit. The lords and bishops, it is true, may reject any bill of the commons, when it regards the raising of money; but are not entitled to make the smallest amendment in it: they must either pass it or throw it out, without any restriction whatever. When the bill is confirmed by the lords, and approved by the king, then every person is to pay his quota without distinction; and that not according to his rank or quality, which would be absurd, but in proportion to his revenue. Here is no *taille*,² or arbitrary poll-tax, but a real tax on lands; all of which underwent an actual valuation under the famous William III. The taxes remain always the same, notwithstanding the fact that the value of lands has risen; so that no one is stripped to the bone, nor can there be any ground of complaint; the feet of the peasant are not tortured with wooden shoes; he eats the best wheaten bread, is well and warmly clothed, and is in no apprehension on account of the increase of his herds and flocks, or terrified into a thatched house, instead of a convenient slated roof, for fear of an augmentation of the *taille* the year following. There are even a number of peasants, or, if you will, farmers, who have from five to six hundred pounds sterling yearly income, and who are not above cultivating those fields which have enriched them, and where they enjoy the greatest of all human blessings, liberty.

What comparisons does Voltaire make between England and his native country?

ENGLAND

FRANCE

² A tax in France from which nobles were exempt