

# History of Republicanism in the UK

## The Cromwellian republic

The countries which eventually comprised the United Kingdom were briefly ruled as a republic in the 17th century, first under a Council of State, (1649-53) then under Oliver Cromwell personally (1653-58). Some commentators doubt whether the Commonwealth can truly be described as a republic: Hale, for example, argued that England was a monarchy in which the powers of the monarch happened to be exercised by the Lord Protector. If so, the Commonwealth could be compared to a regency, such as that of Franco in Spain or Horthy in Hungary.

First, England (comprising both England and Wales) was declared to be the Commonwealth of England and then Scotland and Ireland were briefly forced in to union with England by the army. This decision was later reversed when the monarchy was restored in 1660. In 1707 the Act of Union between England and Scotland was signed; the two countries' parliaments became one, and in return Scotland was granted access to the English colonies.

Many of Cromwell's actions upon gaining power were decried by a number of commentators as "harsh, unwise, and tyrannical". He was often ruthless in putting down the mutinies which occurred within his own army towards the end of the civil wars (prompted by Parliament's failure to pay the troops). Cromwell showed little sympathy for the Levellers, an egalitarian movement which had contributed greatly to Parliament's cause but sought representation for ordinary citizens. The Leveller point of view had been strongly represented in the Putney Debates, held between the various factions of the Army in 1647, just prior to the King's temporary escape from army custody. Cromwell and the Grandees were not prepared to countenance such a radical democracy and used the debates to play for time while the future of the King was being determined.

Catholics were persecuted zealously under Cromwell, although he personally was in favour of religious toleration "liberty for tender consciences" not all his compatriots agreed. The war led to much death and chaos in Ireland where Irish Catholics and Protestants who fought for the King were persecuted. There was a ban on many forms of entertainment; as public meetings could be used as a cover for conspirators, horse racing was banned, the maypoles were famously cut down, the theatres were closed, and Christmas celebrations were outlawed for being too ceremonial, Catholic, and "popish". When Charles II eventually regained the throne, in 1660, he was widely celebrated for allowing his subjects to have "fun" again.

Much of Cromwell's power was due to the Rump Parliament, a Parliament purged of opposition to grandees in the New Model Army. Whereas Charles I had been in part restrained by a Parliament that would not always do as he wished, (the cause of the Civil War) Cromwell was able to wield much more power as only loyalists were allowed to become MPs, turning the chamber into a rubber-stamping organisation. This was ironic given his complaints about Charles I acting without heeding the "wishes" of the people. But even so he found it almost impossible to get his Parliaments to follow all his wishes. His executive decisions were often thwarted - most famously in the ending of the rule of the regional major generals appointed by himself.

In 1657 Cromwell was offered the crown by Parliament, presenting him with a dilemma since he had played a great role in abolishing the monarchy. After two months of deliberation, he rejected the offer. Instead, he was ceremonially re-installed as "Lord

Protector", with greater powers than he had previously held. It is often suggested that offering Cromwell the Crown was an effort to curb his power: as a King he would be obliged to honour agreements such as Magna Carta, but under the arrangement he had designed he had no such restraints. This allowed him to preserve and enhance his power and the army's while decreasing Parliament's control over him, probably to enable him to maintain a well-funded army which Parliament could not be depended upon to provide.

The office of Lord Protector was not formally hereditary, though Cromwell was able to nominate his own successor in his son, Richard.

### **Restoration of the monarchy**

Although England became a constitutional monarchy, after the reigns of Charles II his brother James II and after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had placed William and Mary on the throne, there have been movements throughout the last few centuries whose aims were to remove the monarchy and establish a republican system. A notable period was the time in the late 18th century and early 19th century when many Radicals were openly republican.

During the later years of Queen Victoria's reign, there was considerable criticism of her decision to withdraw from public life following the death of her husband, Prince Albert. However this did not translate into clear support for republicanism. Most of the criticism was dismissed when she came out of mourning and returned to public life.

### **Prohibition of republican advocacy**

Parliament in 1848 passed the Treason Felony Act. This act made violation of the law punishable by lifetime imprisonment, even if such advocacy were by peaceful means. The law remains on the books.

### **Republicanism today**

The monarchy remains popular in the United Kingdom and there has never been any serious public debate regarding its abolition, even when support was at lowest ebb following the death of Princess Diana. Although a vocal minority of the British public is opposed to the monarchy, opinion polls have rarely put support for an elected head of state above 20 percent, with the most recent MORI poll in 2006 showing support for a republic at 18 per cent.

The Guardian newspaper approached the Attorney General in 2001, inquiring as to whether it would be prosecuted if it ran articles on the topic of whether British voters would have the right to choose a republic. The Attorney General refused to comment, so The Guardian published the articles anyway, then sued him.

In 2003 the House of Lords found that the section of the 1848 Act prohibiting advocacy of republicanism is invalidated by the Human Rights Act 1998, furthermore, they found "that no Attorney-General or Director of Public Prosecutions would or could authorise a prosecution for such advocacy without becoming a laughing stock". However, they criticised The Guardian for bringing "unnecessary litigation ... in order to obtain obvious results".