Part I

The Eighteenth Century
Britain became a great power with a large empire overseas in the eighteenth century. Episodes such as the Civil War (1642–49), the Cromwellian Commonwealth (1649–60), and the Glorious Revolution (1688–89) had focused attention and resources at home. As the eighteenth century progressed, Britons remained divided about constitutional matters yet the political system emerged as a strong and flexible instrument. It also provided a stable platform for commercial growth and overseas expansion. It helped Britain weather challenges from Louis XIV and Louis XV, Jacobites and Irish rebels, English radicals and American patriots, and the existential threat of invasion by French revolutionaries and Napoleon Bonaparte.

The secrets of British stability and growth in the eighteenth century lay partly in the nature of the intellectual environment and economic developments, which are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. What factors discussed in the documents of this chapter contributed to British prosperity and strength? Why were concerns about understanding the ground rules of the political system so salient?

As you read the documents in this chapter, consider the following questions:

- What were the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the British political system?
- How did the British constitution function and what did the authors of these documents perceive the role of the various elements in it to be?
- What was the relationship between Britain and its colonies in the eighteenth century?
The Constitution

1.1 Viscount Bolingbroke, The Idea of the Patriot King
(written 1738, pub. 1749)

Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678–1751), served in government under Queen Anne. His opposition to the Hanoverian succession led to a period of exile in France. He returned in 1723 and worked against Sir Robert Walpole and the Whigs. He had a strong influence on the royal tutor and later prime minister, the earl of Bute, and on the latter’s pupil and master, King George III, a monarch who came to believe he was pursuing the national interest above the bickering of self-interested political factions.

What was the British constitution like in 1738? What does Bolingbroke see as the foundations of government? Did he believe in “divine right” monarchy in the manner of Louis XIV of France? To what degree would Bolingbroke and Burke (see documents 1.5 and 1.10) agree or disagree about government?

Now we are subject, by the constitution of human nature, and therefore by the will of the Author of this and every other nature, to two laws. . . . By the first . . . I mean the universal law of reason; and by the second the particular law, or constitution of laws, by which every distinct community has chosen to be governed.

The obligation of submission to both, is discoverable by so clear and so simple a use of our intellectual faculties, that it may be said properly enough to be revealed to us by God; and though both these laws cannot be said properly to be given him, yet our obligation to submit to the civil law is a principal paragraph in the natural law, which he has most manifestly given us. In truth we can no more doubt of the obligations of both these laws, than of the existence of the lawgiver. As supreme Lord over all his works, his general providence regards immediately the great commonwealth of mankind; but then, as supreme Lord likewise, his authority gives a sanction to the particular bodies of law which are made under it. . . . It follows, therefore, that he who breaks the laws of his country resists the ordinance of God, that is, the law of his nature. . . .

. . . The just authority of kings, and the due obedience of subjects, may be deduced with the utmost certainty. And surely it is far better for kings themselves to have their authority thus founded on principles incontestable, and on fair deductions from them, than on the chimeras of madmen, or, what has been more common, the sophisms of knaves. A human right, that cannot be controverted, is preferable surely to a pretended divine right, which every man must believe implicitly, as few will do, or not believe at all.

But the principles we have laid down do not stop here. A divine right in kings is to be deduced evidently from them. A divine right to govern well, and conformably to the constitution at the head of which they are placed. A divine right to govern ill, is an absurdity: to assert it is blasphemy. A people may choose, or hereditary succession may raise, a bad prince to the throne; but a good king alone can derive his right to govern from God. The reason is plain: good government alone can be in the divine intention. [Nor can it] be said without absurd impiety, that he confers a right to oppose his intention.

The office of kings is then of right divine, and their persons are to be reputed sacred. As men, they have no such right, no such sacredness belonging to them: as kings they have both, unless they forfeit them. Reverence for government obliges to reverence governors, who, for the sake of it, are raised above the level of other men: by reverence for governors, independently of government, any further than reverence would be due to their virtues if they were private men, is preposterous, and repugnant to common sense. The spring from which this legal reverence, for so I may call it, arises, is national, not personal.

All this is as true of hereditary, as it is of elective monarchs; though the scribblers for tyranny, under the name of monarchy, would have us believe that there is something more august, and more scared in one than the other. They are sacred alike, and this attribute is to be ascribed, or not ascribed to them, as they answer, or do not answer, the ends of their institution.

To conclude . . . I think a limited monarchy the best of governments, so I think a hereditary monarchy the best of monarchies. I said a limited monarchy; for an unlimited monarchy, wherein arbitrary will, which is in truth no rule, is however the sole rule, or stands instead of all rule of government, must be allowed so great an absurdity, both in reason informed and uninformed by experience, that it seems a government fitter for savages than for civilized people. . . .

In fine, the constitution will be reverenced by him as the law of God and of man; the force of which binds the king as much as the meanest subject, and the reason of which binds him much more.

1.2 Third duke of Atholl to J. Mackenzie (Dec. 10, 1770)²

During the eighteenth century Britain exercised less restraint over the press than any other European country. Nonetheless the House of Commons repeatedly tried to block reports of debates made by journalists sitting in the gallery and imprisoned a number of printers. The struggle culminated in the 1771 “Printers’ Case” in which the courts ruled that the press had the right to print reports of the proceedings in the lower house. After a long struggle, the House of Lords similarly succumbed. Rockingham Whigs and the followers of

William Pitt the Elder tried to block motions to suppress journalists. In 1770 the Lords ordered “strangers” to leave the chamber during a debate on the Falkland Islands crisis with Spain. The duke of Atholl (1729–74) described the scene on December 10, 1770. The ban, however, lasted only until 1775, after which further attempts to suppress public reports on debates failed.

Why were published debates useful? Why was the government unable to keep the proceedings of Parliament secret? How serious were the political divisions among the landed elite? In what ways did the British constitution encourage the growth of the public sphere? Why might many aristocrats be reluctant to open debates to the press?

The minority have all this session of Parliament endeavored to represent the Weakness of Britain in every Part of the globe. By sea and land, and in her forts and garrisons. This the duke of Manchester was doing today in a very strong manner so as might invite an Enemy to attack us, he was stopped by Lord Gower who said the House was so full of Strangers that if such discourse went on the House must be cleared, as everything that was said would be taken down in shorthand and published to the world. Whereupon it was moved to clear the House, which by a standing order takes place of Every other motion, and none can speak till it be done; However, Lord Chatham [Pitt the Elder] stood up and attempted to speak but the House would not hear him, and drowned his voice with the Cry clear the House, clear the House. Which he took so much amiss that he immediately walked out and 16 other Peers who have voted in the minority this session followed him. This affair I doubt not will be a fine topic for newspapers and opposition writers. There are faults on all sides and every days experience convinces me that planting trees is more agreeable and more honest business than either supporting or opposing ministers.

1.3 Horace Walpole, Memoirs of the Reign of King George the Third (written between 1766 and 1784)

Horace Walpole (1717–97), the son of the first prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole, was an attentive observer of the political system in the mid-eighteenth century. Here he summarizes the Whig interpretation of the British constitution. Because it was not set down in a single document and many elements were based on tradition and custom, disagreements often cropped up when one party competed with another for advantage within the political system. Many of these disputes had to do with procedure, but broad
philosophical differences also existed. One should be careful, however, about attributing conflict to the “unwritten” nature of the constitution. In fact much of it was written down in statutes. One can identify serious disagreements about the American constitution in the opinions of the Supreme Court and in contests between the executive and legislative branches, even though it is a single document.

How does Walpole’s version of the constitution differ from Bolingbroke’s (document 1.1)? How did the British constitution, as described by Walpole, differ from the American one? Why is personal liberty dependent on freedom of speech and the press?

The legislature consists of the three branches of King, Lords, and Commons. Together they form our invaluable Constitution, and each is a check on the other two. But it must be remembered at the same time, that while any two are checking, the third is naturally aiming at extending and aggrandizing its power. The House of Commons has not seldom made this attempt like the rest. The Lords, as a permanent and as a proud body, more constantly aim at it: the Crown always. Of liberty, a chief and material engine is the liberty of the Press; a privilege for ever sought to be stifled and annihilated by the Crown. . . . Liberty of speech and liberty of writing are the two instruments by which Englishmen call on one another to defend their countrymen.

1.4 George Grenville, Diary (Mar. 23, 1764)4

George Grenville (1712–70) recorded a discussion with King George III (1738–1820) about the still evolving office of prime minister. Sir Robert Walpole had emerged in the 1720s as the key intermediary between the Cabinet Council and King George II, but the minister denied that he was any more than first among equals. Gradually, the term “first minister” (later variants included “premier”) entered common usage, and the life of a government came to stand or fall on his decisions. At this time the Secretaries of the Northern and Southern Departments (of which Lord Egremont, referred to below, was one) divided responsibilities for both domestic and foreign affairs between them, and some exercised power nearly comparable to the prime minister’s. George III’s decision, which he repeated frequently throughout his reign, though not always, allowed premiers increasingly to consolidate ministerial control in their own hands.

What were the advantages to the king of making one man solely responsible for the conduct of an administration? What were the disadvantages?

[His Majesty said] ... now, all the world confessed it as well as himself, that it was necessary to lodge the power of the government in one man alone, and that Mr. Grenville was the person in whom he wished to see it; that when Lord Egremont [died 1763] was alive, it was necessary from particular circumstances to make that power more equal in the three Ministers; that he meant it should be in him; that to him he gave, and would give his confidence; that it would be necessary for Mr. Grenville to keep certain managements with the two Secretaries of State and the Duke of Bedford, but that must be at his own discretion, for that it was his desire and purpose that all recommendations and appointments come through Mr. Grenville.

1.5  Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)⁵

Edmund Burke (1729–97) was appalled by the French Revolution (1789–99) even though he had made a spirited defense of the American colonists in the 1770s and supported Whiggish opposition to English oppression in Ireland. Even before the Revolution moved into its more radical phase, Burke denounced it in a clarion call for upholding tradition and gradual reform of existing institutions in the face of the predations of abstract theory. His polemic against revolution has become a cardinal document in the discussion of modern democracy.

On what did Burke base the legitimacy of the British political system? Why did he think the constitution must be anchored in the past? Could such a system adjust easily to change? What would Burke be likely to say about the recently ratified constitution of the United States? Is it surprising that Burke should defend the right of large landowners to a predominant role in government when he had risen as an aide to Whig aristocrats and had himself established a landed estate which he intended to pass on to his heir, and hoped to gain membership in the House of Lords?

You will observe, that from Magna Charta [1215] to the Declaration of Right [1689], it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties, and an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity; as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom without any reference whatever to any more general or prior right. By this means our constitution preserves a unity in so great a diversity of its parts. We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and a house of commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors.

This policy appears to me to be the result of profound reflection; or rather the happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it. A spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors. Besides, the people of England well know, that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission; without at all excluding a principle of improvement. . . . Whatever advantages are obtained by a state proceeding on these maxims, are locked fast as in a sort of family settlement. . . .

Nothing is a due and adequate representation of a state that does not represent its ability, as well as its property. But as ability is a vigorous and active principle, and as property is sluggish, inert and timid, it never can be safe from the invasions of ability, unless it be, out of all proportion, predominant in the representation. It must be represented to in great masses of accumulation, or it is not rightly protected. The characteristic essence of property, formed out of the combined principles of its acquisition and conservation, is to be unequal. The great masses therefore which excite envy, and tempt rapacity, must be put out of the possibility of danger. Then they form a natural rampart about the lesser properties in all their gradations. . . .

The power of perpetuating our property in our families is one of the most valuable and interesting circumstances belonging to it, and that which tends the most to the perpetuation of society itself. It makes our weakness subservient to our virtue; it grafts benevolence even upon avarice. The possession of family wealth, and of the distinction which attends hereditary possession . . . are the natural securities for this transmission. [The House of Lords and the House of Commons are filled with landowners.] Let those large proprietors be what they will, and they have their chance of being among the best, they are, at the very worst, the ballast in the vessel of the commonwealth. . . .

[Admirers of the French Revolution in England] despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men; and as for the rest, they have wrought under-ground a mine that will blow up at one grand explosion all examples of antiquity, all precedents, charters, and acts of parliament. They have “the rights of men.” Against these there can be no prescription; against these no agreement is binding. . . . Against these their rights of men let no government look for security in the length of its continuance, or in the justice and lenity of its administration.

. . . Government is not made in virtue of natural rights, which may and do exist in total independence of it; and exist in much greater clearness, and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection: but their abstract perfection is their practical defect. Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom. Among these wants is . . . the want, out of civil society, of a sufficient restraint upon their passions. Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that . . . the inclinations of men should be frequently thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection . . . Liberties and
restraints vary with times and circumstances, . . . they cannot be settled upon any abstract rule; and nothing is so foolish as to discuss them upon that principle.

. . . The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught à priori. Nor is it a short experience that can instruct us in that practical science; because the real effects of moral causes are not always immediate; but that with which in the first instance is prejudicial may be excellent in its remoter operation; and its excellence may arise even from the ill effects it produces in the beginning. The reverse also happens; and very plausible schemes, with very pleasing commencements, have often shameful and lamentable conclusions. . . . It is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or of building it up again, without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.

1.6 Charles James Fox, speech in the House of Commons (May 11, 1791)\(^6\)

One of the ironies of British politics in the years immediately before and after the French Revolution is that the principal party leaders – William Pitt the Younger, Charles James Fox, Henry Addington, and the earl of Liverpool – came from recently risen families, often of quite humble origins only a generation or two previously. Yet no men could be found who more vigorously defended the aristocratic order. It is also ironic that the more progressive party, the Whigs, who were initially in sympathy with the early achievements of the French Revolution, was led, aside from Fox (1749–1806), by magnate families often of old lineage and massive estates, while the Tory leaders included many more “new” men. Fox’s grandfather had been a servant, but his father earned a fortune and a peerage in politics. He stood on the left of the parliamentary political spectrum but, as the following passage suggests, was sympathetic to aristocratic rule.

Why might Fox sing the praises of the aristocracy? When he spoke of democracy, what did he mean by the term? The House of Commons was filled with members of the landowning gentry and the sons of peers, so how could it be seen as democratic? Does the fact that this speech was delivered two years after the French Revolution commenced have any significance? What might Fox think of the monarchy? Was Fox correct in thinking that hereditary dynasties of politicians emerge in democracies?

. . . He laid it down as a principle never to be departed from, that every part of the British dominions ought to possess a government, in the constitution of which

monarchy, aristocracy and democracy were mutually blended and united; nor could any government be a fit one for British subjects to live under, which did not contain its due weight of aristocracy, because that, he considered to be the proper poise of the constitution, the balance that equalized and meliorated the powers of the two other extreme branches, and gave stability and firmness to the whole. It became necessary to look what were the principles on which aristocracy was founded, and he believed it would be admitted to him, that they were two-fold, namely, rank and property, or both united. In this country the House of Lords formed the aristocracy, and that consisted of hereditary titles, in noble families of ancient origin, or possessed by peers newly created on account of their extended landed property. He said that prejudice for ancient families, and that sort of pride which belonged to nobility, was right to be encouraged in a country like this; otherwise one great incentive to virtue would be abolished and the national dignity as well as its domestic interest would be diminished and weakened. There was also such a thing to be remembered, which gave additional honor to our House of Lords, as long established respect for the persons and families of those who, in consequence either of their own superior talents and eminent services, or of one or both in their ancestors, constituted the peerage. This he observed, was by no means peculiar to pure aristocracies such as Venice and Genoa, nor even to despotic or to mixed governments. It was to be found in democracies, and was there considered as an essential part of the Constitution; affection to those whose families had best served the public being always entertained with the warmest sincerity and gratitude. Thus in the ancient republics of Athens and Rome, they all knew the respect paid to those who had distinguished themselves by their services for the commonwealth.

**Threats to the Political and Social Order**

**1.7 John Wilkes, speech in the House of Commons (Mar. 21, 1776)**

The radical businessman John Wilkes (1727–97) attacked the ministry of the earl of Bute, which earned him the enmity of King George III. Later he opposed government policy regarding the Thirteen Colonies during the War of Independence. At one point he fled into exile for fear of prosecution for printing obscene material in his journal, *The North Briton*. He was repeatedly elected to Parliament and then denied his seat. He became widely popular across the country. Eventually he established a conservative, respectable career that culminated in being elected Lord Mayor of London. Figure 1.1 shows John Wilkes as drawn by William Hogarth.

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7 *The Parliamentary Register*, III, Mar. 21, 1776, 440.
What is Wilkes’s case for enacting parliamentary reform? Does he advocate universal suffrage? Did his social class have anything to do with his opinions? To what degree may this be a personal crusade to rectify what he felt was ill treatment by the king and Parliament and to what degree were his views ideologically driven?

Figure 1.1 “John Wilkes” by William Hogarth (1769).

How has Hogarth portrayed Wilkes? How might people of different social classes have reacted to this engraving?
The disfranchising of the mean, venal, and dependent boroughs would be laying the axe to the root of corruption and [executive] influence, as well as aristocratical tyranny. . . . Burgage tenures [votes tied to the control of property that could be easily manipulated by a landowner], and private property in a share of the legislature [property owners being able to select MPs], are monstrous absurdities in a free state, as well as an insult to common sense. I wish, Sir, an English parliament to speak the free, unbiased sense of the body of the English people, and of every man among us, of each individual, who may justly be supposed to be comprehended in a fair majority. The meanest mechanic, the poorest peasant and day-laborer, has important rights respecting his personal liberty, that of his wife and children, his property, however inconsiderable, his wages, his earnings, the very price and value of each day’s hard labor, which are in many trades and manufactures regulated by the power of Parliament. Every law relative to marriage, to the protection of a wife, sister, or daughter, against violence and brutal lust, to every contract or agreement with a rapacious or unjust master, interest the manufacturer, the cottager, the servant, as well the rich subjects of the state. Some share therefore in the power of making those laws, which deeply interest them, and to which they are expected to pay obedience, should be reserved even to this inferior, but most useful, set of men in the community. We ought always to remember this important truth, acknowledged by every free state, that all government is instituted for the good of the mass of the people to be governed.

1.8 Thomas Paine, Common Sense (1776)\(^8\)

The radical Thomas Paine (1737–1809) was the son of a rural stay- (corset) maker and was himself a failed businessman, later an excise officer, and then a school teacher. In the pamphlet Common Sense, he analyzed what in his eyes were the defects of the British constitution. Initially, his work had a greater impact in North America, where he had fled his troubles at home, than it did in Britain.

Was Paine’s assessment of the power of the monarchy and the aristocracy accurate? In speaking to an audience remote from London, why might he focus on the role of George III? What aspects of the British legal system and constitution does he neglect to mention because they might undermine his argument? Was patriotism the only reason George III became more popular as he grew older?

\(^8\) Thomas Paine, The Political Works of Thomas Paine (Springfield, 1826), 143, 145.
I know it is difficult to get over local or long-standing prejudices, yet if we will suffer ourselves to examine the component parts of the English constitution, we shall find them to be base remains of two ancient tyrannies. . . .

First – The remains of monarchical tyranny in the person of the king.
Secondly – The remains of aristocratical tyranny in the persons of the peers. . . .

By being hereditary, [they] are independent of the people; wherefore in a constitutional sense they contribute nothing towards the freedom of the state.

To say that the constitution of England is a union of [the king, Lords, and Commons] reciprocally checking each other, is farcical; either the words have no meaning, or they are flat contradictions.

To say that the Commons is a check on the king, presupposes two things:
First – That the king is not to be trusted without being looked after, or in other words, that a thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy.
Secondly – That the Commons, by being appointed for that purpose, are either wiser or more worthy of confidence than the crown.

But as the same constitution which gives the Commons a power to check the king by withholding [financial allocations], gives afterwards the king a power to check the Commons, by empowering him to reject their other bills; it again supposes that the king is wiser than those whom it has already supposed to be wiser than him. A mere absurdity!

There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of monarchy; it first excludes a man from the means of information, yet empowers him to act in cases where the highest judgment is required. The state of a king shuts him from the world, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly; wherefore the different parts, by unnaturally opposing and destroying each other, prove the whole character to be absurd and useless. . . .

That this crown is the overbearing part in the English constitution, needs not to be mentioned, and that it derives its whole consequence merely from being the giver of places and pensions, is self-evident, wherefore, though we have been wise enough to shut and lock a door against absolute monarchy, we at the same time have been foolish enough to put the crown in possession of the key.

The prejudice of Englishmen in favor of their own government by king, Lords and Commons, arises as much or more from national pride than reason.

1.9 Thomas Paine, The Rights of Man (1791)9

Tom Paine (see document 1.8) attacked Burke’s (document 1.5) assertion of the legitimacy of the constitutional settlement made after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Paine had traveled to the Thirteen Colonies in the 1770s and helped arouse the populace against monarchical rule. He went

to Paris after the outbreak of revolution in France, and was a strong supporter of radicalism there.

Why and on what grounds did Paine criticize the existing system in general and Burke in particular? How effective is his criticism? Was it true that Parliament could pass unchangeable enactments binding on all future Parliaments?

The English parliament of 1688 did a certain thing, which for themselves and their constituents, they had a right to do, and which it appeared right should be done: but, in addition to this right, which they professed by delegation, they set up another right by assumption, that of binding and controlling posterity to the end of time. The case, therefore, divides itself into two parts; the right which they possessed by delegation, and the right which they set up by assumption. The first is admitted; but with respect to the second, I reply:

There never did, there never will, and there never can exist a parliament of any description of men, or any generation of men, in any country, possessed of the right or the power of binding and controlling posterity to the “end of time,” or of commanding forever how the world shall be governed, or who shall govern it: And therefore all such clauses, acts or declarations, by which the makers of them attempt to do what they have neither the right nor the power to do, nor the power to execute, are in themselves null and void. Every age and generation must be free to act for itself, in all cases, as the ages and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave, is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies. Man has no property in man: neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow. . . . It is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated.

1.10 Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)10

Burke’s attack on the French Revolution has been discussed above (document 1.5). What disturbed Burke so much about the French Revolution? Was his willingness to ignore the defective characters of the French royal family mere sentiment or did it have importance in his argument? Could xenophobia have led him to exaggerate the depravity of the French? Would you say his argument that the tyranny overthrown in France was considerably more benign than the one by which it was replaced valid? What might lead revolutions to produce tyrannies worse than those they overthrew?

Your constitution [in France], it is true, whilst you were out of possession [Burke is referring here to failure of the Estates General to meet between 1614 and 1789], suffered waste and dilapidation; but you possessed in some parts the walls, and in all the foundations of a noble and venerable castle. You might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those foundations. ... You had the elements of a constitution very nearly as good as could be wished.

But you chose to act as if you had never been molded into civil society, and had everything to begin anew. You began ill, because you began by despising every thing that belonged to you.

Burke denounced the attacks on the royal family and their forced removal from Versailles to Paris. How do you account for the survival of the British monarchy in this period?

Little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon [the queen] in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever. Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defense of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honor, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness. ...

All pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

... When the old feudal and chivalrous spirit of Fealty, which, by freeing kings from fear, freed both kings and subjects from the precautions of tyranny, shall be extinct in the minds of men, plots and assassinations will be anticipated by preventive murder and preventive confiscation, and that long roll of grim and bloody maxims, which form the political code of all power, not standing on its honor, and the honor of those who are to obey it. Kings will be tyrants from policy when subjects are rebels from principle.
When ancient opinions and rules of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment we have no compass to govern us; nor can we know distinctly to what port we steer. . . .

Nothing more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners and with civilization, have, in this European world of ours depended for ages upon two principles: and were indeed the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion. The nobility and clergy, the one by profession, the other by patronage, kept learning in existence, even in the midst of arms and confusions, and whilst governments were rather in their causes, than formed. Learning paid back what it received to nobility and to priesthood: and paid it with usury by enlarging their ideas, and by furnishing their minds. Happy if they had all continued to know their insoluble union, and their proper place! Happy if learning, not debauched by ambition, had been satisfied to continue, the instructor, and not aspired to be master! Along with its natural protectors and guardians, learning will be cast into the mire, and trodden down under the hoofs of a swinish multitude. . . .

Your literary men [the French *philosophes*], and your politicians . . . essentially differ in these points. They have no respect for the wisdom of others; but they pay it off by very full measure of confidence in their own. With them it is sufficient motive to destroy an old scheme of things, because it is an old one. As to the new, they are in no sort of fear with regard to the duration of the building run up in haste; because duration is no object to those who think little or nothing has been done before their time, and who place all their hopes in discovery . . .

1.11  *Thomas Paine*, The Rights of Man (1791)\(^{11}\)

Tom Paine challenged Burke’s attack on the French “Declaration of the Rights of Man.” He was serving as a deputy in the French legislature when he was caught up in the Terror. He escaped execution only by chance. This experience somewhat tempered his enthusiasm for revolution. On what grounds did Paine challenge Burke’s arguments? How persuasive is his reasoning? What was Paine likely to put on his list of Rights of Man?

Mr. Burke with his usual outrage, abused the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, published by the National Assembly of France [1789], as the basis on which the constitution of France is built. This he calls “paltry and blurred sheets of paper about the rights of man.” Does Mr. Burke mean to deny that man has any rights? If he does, then he must mean that there are no such things as rights anywhere, and that he has none himself; for who is there in the world but man? But if Mr. Burke

\(^{11}\) Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (Putnam’s, New York, 1894), 303, 309 and (Ecker, New York, 1894), 190.
means to admit that man has rights, the question then will be: What are those rights,
and how man came by them originally? . . .

It has been thought a considerable advance towards establishing the principles
of Freedom to say that Government is a compact between those who govern and
those who are governed; but this cannot be true, because it is putting the effect
before the cause; for as man must have existed before governments existed, there
necessarily was a time when governments did not exist, and consequently there
could originally exist no governors to form such a compact with.

The fact therefore must be that the *individuals themselves*, each in his own personal
and sovereign right, *entered into a compact with each other* to produce government:
and this is the only mode in which governments have a right to arise, and the
only principle on which they have a right to exist. . . . Governments must have arisen
either *out of* the people or *over* the people. Mr. Burke has made no distinction.
He investigates nothing to its source, and therefore he confounds everything. . . .

[Challenging Burke’s emphasis on following tradition, Paine wrote] Government
by precedent, without any regard to the principle of the precedent, is one of the
vilest systems that can be set up. In numerous instances the precedent ought
to operate as a warning, and not as an example, and requires to be shunned instead
of imitated; but instead of this, precedents are taken in the lump, and put at once for
Constitution and law.

Either the doctrine of precedents is policy to keep man in a state of ignorance,
or it is a practical confession that wisdom degenerates in governments as
governments increase in age, and can only hobble along by the stilts and crutches of
precedents. How is it that the same persons who would proudly be thought wiser
than their predecessors appear at the same time only as the ghosts of departed
wisdom? How strangely is antiquity treated! . . .

If the doctrine of precedents is to be followed, the expenses of government need
not continue the same. Why pay men extravagantly who have but little to do? If
everything that can happen is already in precedent, legislation is at an end, and
precedent, like a dictionary, determines every case. Either, therefore, government
has arrived at its dotage, and requires to be renovated, or all the occasions for
exercising its wisdom have already occurred.

**The Sinews of Empire**

1.12 *Daniel Defoe, A Tour through the Whole Island
of Great Britain (1724–26)*¹²

Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), the author of the first great English novel, *Robinson
Crusoe* (1719), described the dockyards of the Royal Navy near Rochester on

the River Medway east of London, close to the mouth of the Thames. The Royal Navy ensured the security of the island nation and protected its commerce and overseas empire. It was also the largest manufacturing organization in Britain, and its great battleships were the most complex machines as yet devised by man.

Why was it important for Britain to invest heavily in naval power? What did a very large and highly skilled ocean-going force allow Britain to do? What sort of economy would allow a country to assemble and maintain such a force? Was naval success an indicator that the British system of government was more efficient than its competitors in raising tax revenue and encouraging industrial development? Perhaps the success of the navy was more due to the skills of its officers and the organization established by officials?

This being the chief arsenal of the Royal Navy of Great Britain. The buildings here are indeed like the ships themselves, surprisingly large, and in their several kinds beautiful. The warehouses, or rather streets of ware-houses, and storehouses for laying up the naval treasure are the largest in dimension, and the most in number, that are any where to be seen in the world. The ropewalks for making cables, and the forges for anchors and other ironwork, bear a proportion to the rest as also the wetdock for keeping masts, and yards of the greatest size, where they lie sunk in water to preserve them, the boatyard, the anchor yard; all like the whole, monstrously great and extensive, and are not easily described.

We come next to the stores themselves, for which all this provision is made; and first, to begin with the ships that are laid up there. The sails, the rigging, the ammunition, guns, great and small shot, small arms, swords, cutlasses, half pikes, with all the other furniture belonging to the ships that ride at their moorings in the river Medway. These take up one part of the place, where the furniture of every ship lies in particular warehouses by themselves, and may be take out on the most hasty occasion without confusion, fire excepted. . . .

The particular government of these yards, as they are called is very remarkable, the commissioners, clerks, accountants, etc. within doors, the store-keepers, yard-keepers, dock-keepers, watchmen, and all other officers without doors, with the subordination of all officers one to another respectively, as their degree and offices require, is admirable. . . .

The expedition that has been sometimes used here in fitting out men of war, is very great, and as the workmen relate it, ’tis indeed incredible . . . The Royal Sovereign, a first rate of 106 guns, was riding at her moorings, entirely unrigged, and nothing but her three masts standing, as is usual when a ship is laid up, and that she was completely rigged, all her masts up, her yards put to, her sails bent, anchors and cables on board, and the ship sailed . . . in three days. . . . a thousand or fifteen hundred men to be employed in it and more if they were wanted . . . The dexterity of the English sailors in those things is not to be matched by the world.
Sir William Keith (1669–1749) was governor of Pennsylvania from 1712 to 1726. He advocated a mercantilist policy which viewed colonies as existing solely for the benefit of the mother country. The latter extracted as much as it could of the natural resources and sent back manufactured goods in a closed system that excluded the colonies from trading with other markets.

How would Adam Smith (see document 2.10) have viewed Keith’s arguments? How did Sir William’s political arguments accord with British traditions of liberty and parliamentary representation? What might be the reaction of the residents of the Thirteen Colonies to this discourse? What did they gain by remaining British colonists?

Every act of a dependent provincial government therefore ought to terminate in the advantage of the mother state unto whom it owes it’s being, and by whom it is protected in all its valuable privileges . . .

It has ever been the maxim of all polite nations, to regulate their Government to the best advantage of their trading interest: wherefore it may be helpful to take a short view of the principle benefits arising to Great Britain from the trade of the colonies.

1. The colonies take off and consume above one sixth Part of the woollen manufactures exported from Britain, which is the chief staple of England, and main support of the landed interest.

2. They take off and consume more than double that Value in Linen and callicoes, which is either the product of Britain and Ireland, or partly the profitable returns made for that product carried to foreign countries.

3. The luxury of the colonies, which increases daily, consumes great quantities of English manufactured silk, haberdashery, household furniture, and trinkets of all sorts; also a very considerable value of East India goods.

4. A great revenue is raised to the crown of Britain by Returns made in the Produce of the plantations, especially in tobacco, which at the same time helps England to bring nearer to a Balance their unprofitable trade with France.

5. Those colonies promote the interest and trade of Britain, by a vast increase of shipping and seamen, which enables them to carry great quantities of fish to Spain, Portugal, Leghorn, etc., furs, logwood, and rice to Holland, whereby they help Great Britain considerably in the Balance of trade with those countries.

6. If reasonably encouraged, the colonies are now in a Condition to furnish Britain with as much of the following commodities as it can demand, viz. masts for

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the Navy, and all sorts of timber, hemp, flax, pitch, tar, oil, rosin, copper ore, with pig and bar iron, by means whereof the balance of trade to Russia and the Baltic may be very much reduced in favor of Great Britain.

7. The profits arising to all those colonies by trade is returned in bullion or other useful effects to Great Britain, where the superfluous cash, and other riches acquired in America must center, which is not one of the least securities that Britain has to keep the colonies always in due subjection.

8. The colonies upon the main are the granary of America, and a necessary support to the sugar plantations of the West Indies, which could not subsist without them.

By this short view of trade in general we may plainly understand, that those colonies can be very beneficially employed both for Great Britain and themselves, without interfering with any of the staple manufactures in England. . . .

From what has been said of the nature of colonies, and the restriction that ought to be laid on their trade, it is plain that none of the English plantations in America can with any reason or good sense pretend to claim an absolute legislative Power within themselves . . . They cannot be possessed of any rightful capacity to contradict, or evade the true intent and force of any act of Parliament, wherewith the wisdom of Great Britain may think fit to affect them from time to time . . .

North America

1.14 William Pitt [the Elder], speech in the House of Commons (Jan. 14, 1766)¹⁴

William Pitt the Elder, first earl of Chatham (1708–78), was credited with greatly expanding the empire by war in the 1750s and early 1760s. Here he seems to strike a somewhat different note in the aftermath of the hugely unpopular Stamp Act of 1765 imposed on the Thirteen Colonies. A number of leading British politicians, including Burke and Fox, also urged conciliation and respect toward the colonies.

What might account for Pitt’s position? Did Pitt’s view reflect the majority of opinion in the British political class? Why might Parliament and the king think they could impose their will on the American colonies? Had Pitt been prime minister in 1776, would the American Revolution have happened?

The gentleman tells us America is obstinate; America is almost in open rebellion. I rejoice that America has resisted. Three millions of people so dead to all the feelings of liberty as voluntarily to submit to be slaves, would have been fit instruments to make slaves of the rest. . . . Even under former arbitrary reigns,

parliaments were ashamed of taxing a people without their consent, and allowed them representatives. . . .

I am no courtier of America. I stand up for this kingdom. I maintain that the parliament has the right to bind, to restrain America. Our legislative power over the colonies is sovereign and supreme. When it ceases to be sovereign and supreme, I would advise every gentleman to sell his lands, if he can, and embark for that country. When two countries are connected together, like England and her colonies, without being incorporated, the one must necessarily govern; the greater must rule the less; but so rule it as not to contradict the fundamental principles that are common to both. . . .

The Americans have not acted in all things with prudence and temper. They have been wronged. They have been driven to madness by injustice. Will you punish them for the madness you have occasioned? Rather let prudence and temper come first from this side. I will undertake for America that she will follow the example. . . .

Upon the whole, I will beg leave to tell the House what is really my opinion. It is, that the Stamp Act be repealed absolutely, totally, and immediately. That the reason for the repeal be assigned, because it was founded on an erroneous principle. At the same time let the sovereign authority of this country over the colonies be asserted in as strong terms as can be devised, and be made to extend to every point of legislation whatsoever; that we may bind their trade, confine their manufactures, and exercise every power whatsoever except that of taking their money out of their pockets without consent.

1.15 Horace Walpole to the countess of Upper Ossory (Oct. 15, 1776)15

Opinions among the political elite about the rebellion of the Thirteen Colonies were sharply divided. In the following passage Horace Walpole (see document 1.3) expressed grave concern about the impact of the war on Britain. To many Britons the loss of the colonies was seen as the beginning of the end of British greatness. How could that be? Did he think Britain would succeed in holding onto the colonies? How did he see the colonies in relation to Britain’s other foreign interests?

About the American news, I say what I always have thought and said, that whatever way this war ends, it will be fatal to this country. The liberty of America made it flourish to the prodigious height it did. If governed by an army, instead of inviting settlers and trade, it will be deserted and be a burthen to us, as Peru and Mexico, with all their mines, have been to Spain. The war has already drained us of men; if the army could be brought back, how many, between climate, and others chances, will return? Our ships are entering their third winter in those seas,

and we have flung away in those three years what should have lessened our debt, and prepared against a war with France. The plea for the last peace was our inability of proceeding with the war. Are we in the condition we were in 1763? How soon we shall have a French war, I know not; it is much talked of already at Paris; but come when it will, then will be the moment of judging of this war with the Colonies. I believe France will then recover Canada, with interest; and for the East Indies, which our fleets, supported by our trade, obtained, I have always looked on them as a vision, which made us drunk with riches, which will be a burthen to maintain, and which will vanish like a scene in the Arabian tales. I have not less gloomy ideas of your Ireland, where I conclude the first storm will burst.

1.16 John Adams, letter to John Jay (June 2, 1785)\(^{16}\)

John Adams (1735–1826), a founding father and second President of the United States, was appointed the first minister (ambassador) to Great Britain and presented his credentials to King George III on June 2, 1785 at St James’s Palace. How did Adams, who a few years earlier could have been hanged for treason had the revolutionaries lost, respond to the meeting with his former sovereign? Were his declarations sincere? What were the king’s emotions likely to have been?

The Marquis of Carmarthen returned, and desired me to go with him to his majesty! I went with his lordship through the levee room into the king’s [office]; the door was shut, and I was left with his majesty and the secretary of state alone. I made the three reverences; one at the door, another about half way, and a third before his presence, according to the usage established at this and all the northern courts of Europe, and then addressed myself to his majesty in the following words:

“Sir – The United States of America have appointed me their minister plenipotentiary to your majesty, and have directed me to deliver to your majesty this letter which contains the evidence of it. It is in obedience to their express commands, that I have the honor to assure your Majesty of the unanimous disposition and desire to cultivate the most friendly and liberal intercourse between your Majesty’s subjects and their citizens, and of their best wishes for your majesty’s health and happiness, and for that of your royal family.

The appointment of a minister from the United States to your majesty’s court will form an epoch in the history of England and of America. I think myself more fortunate than all my fellow-citizens, in having the distinguished honor to be the first to stand in your Majesty’s royal presence in a diplomatic character; and I shall esteem myself the happiest of men, if I can be instrumental in recommending my country more and more to your Majesty’s royal benevolence, and of restoring

\(^{16}\) Public and Private Life of George the Third (London, 1821), 429.
an entire esteem, confidence, and affection, or, in better words, the old good nature
and the old good humor between people, who, though separated by an ocean,
and under different governments, have the same language, a similar religion, and
kindred blood. I beg your majesty’s permission to add, that, although I have
some time before been intrusted by my country, it was never in my whole life in a
manner so agreeable to myself.”

The king listened to every word I said, with dignity, but with an apparent
emotion.

India

1.17 “Narrative of J.Z. Holwell,” The Annual Register (1758)

The British headquarters in India at Calcutta fell to the Newab (ruler) of
Bengal in 1756. This is an eyewitness account written by one of the prisoners of
the horrific first night the British spent in captivity in what came to be known as “the Black Hole of Calcutta.”

What does the treatment of the prisoners tell us about Indian attitudes
toward the British? What does the incident suggest about the ability of
Europeans to sustain imperial control in distant places? Did the conduct
of the prisoners accord with the image of European superiority asserted by
Edward Gibbon in document 3.4? Is an eyewitness account likely to be
completely or even marginally reliable? What circumstances might make this
account more or less accurate?

Figure to yourself, my friend, if possible, the situation of a hundred and forty-six
wretches, exhausted by continual fatigue and action, crammed together in a cube of
eighteen feet, in a close sultry night, in Bengal, shut up to the eastward and
southward (the only quarters from whence air could reach us) by dead walls, and by
a wall and a door to the north, open only to the westward by two windows, the
strongly barred with iron, from which we could receive scarce any the least
circulation of fresh air. . . .

We had been but a few minutes confined before every one fell into a perspiration
so profuse, you can form no idea of it. This brought on a ragging [sic] thirst, which
increased in proportion as the body was drained of its moisture. . . .

Until the water came, I had myself not suffered much from thirst, which instantly
grew excessive. We had no means of conveying it into the prison, but by hats
forced through the bars; and thus myself and Messieurs Coles and Scott
(notwithstanding the pains they suffered from their wounds) supplied them as fast
as possible. . . . Though we brought full hats within the bars, there ensued such

violent struggles, and frequent contests to get at it, that before it reached the lips of any one, there would be scarcely a small tea cup full left in them.

By half an hour past eleven, the much greater number of those living were in an outrageous delirium, and the others quite un gover nable; few retaining any calmness, but the ranks next the windows. They all now found, that water, instead of relieving, rather heightened their uneasiness; and, Air, air, was the general cry. Every insult that could be devised against the guard, all the opprobrious names and abuse . . . were repeated to provoke the guard to fire upon us, every man that could, rushing tumultuously towards the windows, with eager hopes of meeting the first shot. . . . They whose strength and spirits were quite exhausted, laid themselves down and expired quietly upon their fel lows: others who had yet some strength and vigour left, made a last effort for the windows, and several succeeded by leaping and scrambling over the backs and heads of those in the first ranks; and got hold of the bars, from which there was no removing them. Many to the right and left sunk with the violent pressure, and were soon suffocated; and the stench arising from the dead bodies [grew] intolerable . . .

[After release was ordered:] As the door opened inwards, and as the dead were piled up against it, and covered all the rest of the floor, it was impossible to open it by any efforts from without; it was therefore necessary that the dead should be removed by the few that were within, who were become so feeble, that the task, though it was the condition of life, was not performed without the utmost difficulty, and it was 20 minutes after the order came, before the door could be opened.

About a quarter after six in the morning, the poor remains of 146 souls, being no more than three and twenty, came out of the Blackhole alive, but in a condition which made it very doubtful whether they would see the morning of the next day . . . . The bodies were dragged out of the hole by the soldiers, and thrown promiscuously into the ditch of an unfinished ravelin, which was afterwards filled with earth.

1.18 Edmund Burke, speech in the House of Commons (Dec. 1, 1783) 18

Edmund Burke (see documents 1.5 and 1.10), as a senior advisor to the Whig elite, placed great emphasis on individual liberty and supported the calls for granting representation to the Thirteen Colonies in North America. He devoted enormous time and energy to rooting out corruption in the British administration in India. He refers here in particular to the “nabobs,” self-made men who returned to England often with vast fortunes after a career with the East India Company. He believed that colonies were held by the mother country as a trustee, which was a philosophy ultimately dangerous to the continuance of empire.

Why might Burke’s Irish nationality have made him alert to colonial misrule? Did he object to the idea of empire in the first place? How do you square his conservatism in the face of the French Revolution with his sympathy for those who suffered from tyrannical rule in India and America?

Our conquest [of India], after twenty years, is as crude as it was the first day. The natives scarcely know what it is to see the grey head of an Englishman. Young men (boys almost) govern there, without society, and without sympathy with the natives. They have no more social habits with the people, than if they still resided in England; nor, indeed, any species of intercourse but that which is necessary to making a sudden fortune, with a view to a remote settlement. Animated with all the avarice of age, and all the impetuosity of youth, they roll in one after another; wave after wave; and there is nothing before the eyes of the natives but an endless, hopeless prospect of new flights of birds of prey and passage, with appetites continually renewing for a food that is continually wasting. Every rupee of profit made by an Englishman is lost for ever to India. With us are no retributory superstitions, by which a foundation of charity compensates, through ages, to the poor, for the rapine and injustice of the day. With us no pride erects stately monuments which repair the mischiefs which pride had produced, and which adorn a country out of its own spoils. . . .

. . . English youth in India drink the intoxicating draught of authority and dominion before their heads are able to bear it, and as they are full grown in fortunes long before they are ripe in principle, neither nature nor reason have any opportunity to exert themselves for remedy of the excesses of their premature power. The consequences of their conduct, which in good mind, (and many of there are probably such) might produce penitence or amendment, are unable to pursue the rapidity of their flight. Their prey is lodged in England; and the cries of India are given to seas and winds, to be blown about, in every breaking up of the monsoon, over a remote and unhearing ocean. In India all the vices operate by which sudden fortune is acquired; in England are often displayed by the same persons, the virtues which dispense hereditary wealth. Arrived in England, the destroyers of the nobility and gentry of a whole kingdom will find the best company in this nation, at a board of elegance and hospitality. Here the manufacturers and husbandman will bless the just and punctual hand that in India has torn the cloth from the loom, or wrested the scanty portion of rice and salt from the peasant of Bengal, or wrung from him the very opium in which he forgot his oppressions and his oppressor. They marry into your families; they enter into your senate; they ease your estates with loans. . . . Our Indian government is in its best state of grievance. It is necessary that the corrective should be uncommonly vigorous; and the work of men, sanguine, warm, and even impassioned in the cause. But it is an arduous thing to plead against abuses of a power which originates from your own country, and affects those whom we are used to consider as strangers.
HISTORIANS’ DEBATES

What forces shaped the development of the law and punishment system and its reform during the eighteenth century?


How serious a threat were the Jacobites? What motivated support for the Rising of 1745?


Sir Lewis Namier famously argued that politics during much of the eighteenth century was about squabbles over patronage and jockeying among various aristocratic factions, not motivated by political principle or ideology. Subsequent historians have questioned his interpretation. How much of a role did principle and ideology play in party politics?


Particular focus has been aimed at the question of to what degree the eighteenth-century Whigs formed a coherent and principled party.

What sort of king was George III? A tyrant, an incompetent, a noble man?


COUNTERFACTUALS TO CONSIDER

What if the Jacobite risings in 1715 or 1745 had succeeded? What if Britain had won the American War of Independence? What if Napoleon had successfully invaded Britain? What if there had been a revolution in Britain in 1790?