Introduction

The seventeenth century was a tough time to be alive. Not only was the weather unusually cold, but governments had an unhappy habit of collapsing. In China, India, Russia, France and elsewhere, countries self-immolated into civil war. Germany was ripped apart by 30 years of brutal conflict. In the Americas, European colonialism continued its expansion while the indigenous populations suffered. On the coasts of Africa, slave traders tore people away from their homes and subjected them to one of the vilest enormities of human history.

If you were a European peasant in 1600, you tended to find you were poorer and closer to starvation than you would have been a hundred years before. If you also happened to be female, then your prospects, your power and your voice were subject to even greater control and censure. Bubonic plague was a regular visitor, disease still badly understood and medical care rudimentary at best. Life was capricious and uncertain.

In 1603, the thirty-six-year-old James VI, king of Scotland, took the throne of England, as James I, the first Stuart monarch of the southern kingdom. He was cultured if rather uncouth, thoughtful but fundamentally lazy; an enigma wrapped in a velvet cloak. And his new realm was as unfathomable he was. Despite the hardness of the times, it was wealthy, politically sophisticated and culturally rich. It was the land of Shakespeare, which had just defeated a mighty Spanish empire, and where sparkling new prodigy houses were announcing the power of the aristocracy and gentry. But it was also fragile and thoroughly traditional. A place still dominated by the land and the turn of the seasons.

Politics centred on the king, his Privy Council and the royal court. Government ministers were appointed and dismissed on a royal whim

that owed more to court favour and faction than it did to competence. Nine out of ten of James's subjects lived in the countryside, mostly engaged in farming. The vast majority were illiterate. Thanks to recent advances in cartography, it was possible to get a sense of what England looked like, but no one had much idea of the size of the population, the wealth or the income of the country. Famine was a regular scourge, as was bubonic plague, and wattle and daub towns frequently burned to the ground. Population was growing, but the economy wasn't developing in such a way as to cope, leading to a serious poverty problem with unemployment, plummeting wages and rocketing rents. Fear about witchcraft was at its height, and executions for all kinds of crime, including fairly minor property offences, were peaking. You even had a pretty good chance of being prosecuted if you had extramarital sex.

By the end of the century, a new world had arisen. The great population rise had ended, but the economy kept growing: even labourers were earning more, and famine was now a thing of the past. There was a successful, if embryonic, welfare state. Towns were reborn as social hubs, rebuilt in brick and boasting coffee houses, theatres and concert halls. Trade was now the mainstay of economic life in a thriving market economy. Consumption was conspicuous and rampant, while motive power was increasingly coming from coal. Plague was gone; executions were far less frequent; the witch trials were all but over; and you were much less likely to be prosecuted for illicit sex. English Protestantism had simultaneously become firmly established while also fragmenting into a world of Church and Chapel: not just the official Anglican establishment, but also the widespread – and accepted – existence of Dissent.

In politics, too, so much had changed. James's son Charles I had been put on trial and executed for crimes against his own people, and although his grandsons Charles II and James II had both ruled – the first despite a youth spent in exile, the second despite serious attempts in Parliament to debar him from the throne for his Catholicism – both were forced to deal with a new political landscape. There were confident Parliaments, a vibrant and turbulent press, a split between two identifiable political parties and remarkable religious diversity. Both brothers were able to draw strength from a growing empire, but at home they had to contend with a newly confident public sphere and

a politicised middle rank of people who enjoyed nothing more than discussing the latest news over a pipe of tobacco and a pot of coffee.

The elder of the royal brothers, Charles II, was able to navigate this world, although he ended up resting his rule on one of the two political parties, the Tories. James II, on the other hand, was not. In fact, in 1689 his Catholicism and his authoritarian streak would cost him his throne. The English monarchy – and its British successor – has never recovered the power it lost after this revolution, known to posterity as the 'Glorious'. Indeed, the new state that arose out of this was recognisably ancestral to our own: regular Parliaments, the National Debt and the Bank of England and – of course – in 1707 the Union between England and Scotland, all came soon afterwards.

Just as remarkable as all this, though, were the paths not taken. In the 1640s, England descended into civil war, part of a labyrinthine conflict that ripped apart the whole archipelago. The causes of this were complex. They included the failings of Charles I as a king, the long-term financial weakness of his monarchy and the challenges of ruling England, Scotland and Ireland simultaneously. Charles's personal authoritarianism clashed with a deep belief in an 'ancient constitution', and his monarchy – like that of his father, though in a more aggressive way – took a side in a simmering culture war between Puritans and their enemies. But the Civil Wars also arose out of social change: the rise of the literate 'middling sort' expanded the political nation at a time when a media revolution was producing a vast deluge of print, including newspapers. London was growing into a politically engaged and unruly metropolis, with whom the monarchy and Parliament would have to live cheek by jowl, especially as the built-up area spread west out of the City and into Westminster around the royal palace of Whitehall. As Charles and Parliament jockeyed for power in the crisis years of 1640 to 1642, it was the population of London which repeatedly made the decisive interventions that pushed England into Civil War.

The Civil Wars were conflicts about ideology: partly religious but also partly about the constitution. In the beginning, an absolutist monarchy faced off against an opposition that vested power in property rights, the traditional constitution and Parliament. By the time war broke out, it was the Parliamentarians who were starting to argue for radical change while the Royalists could claim that they, now, were

the defenders of the traditional constitution. The shift had happened in the astonishingly fast-moving months between November 1640 and the summer of 1642. Gradually, the Parliamentarians went down a more radical path, the ultimate consequences of which were the abolition of the monarchy, the House of Lords and the bishops, followed by Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate based on a balanced, written constitution. Eventually all this would fail, but it remains the most radical political experiment in English history.

Meanwhile, the mid-century crisis also brought what is still one of the greatest explosions in political and social creativity the country has ever seen. New social and religious movements terrified the political classes, while more respectable voices suggested everything from legal aid to welfare reform to freedom of speech, divorce and a national health service. Even before the execution of the king, the political awakening of the Parliamentary army, a force of peasants and traders led by minor gentlemen, had generated astonishingly sophisticated debates over the country's future, including suggestions of giving the vote to all adult men. The Protectorate would turn its back on political radicalism, and after the Republic failed in 1660 the backlash against this, and the religious sects, would be forceful. This particular revolutionary moment passed, but it left a lasting legacy, and even today the story of people who transcended the confines of a reactionary culture to argue for genuinely transformative change remains an important one.

The echoes of seventeenth-century England are still with us, in our society, in the built environment and in the very landscape. We, too, are living through our own historical moment in which a media revolution, social fracturing and culture wars are redefining society and politics, creating issues that, dare we say it, not every leader has proved entirely adept at navigating. Comparisons between our own society and those that came before are often rather excitable and overblown, but it does seem worth thinking about what can happen when social change, cultural conflict and political mistakes combine. The answers are not always comforting, but neither are they uniformly negative. Crises can be creative as well as injurious.

More to the point, the seventeenth century also saw one fundamental change on the English political scene, which has consequences we're still working through now. When he sat down to write his own thoughts on why the Stuart monarchy had collapsed, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes observed that 'the power of the mighty hath no foundation but in the opinion and belief of the people'.[1] It was an idea that would have horrified the absolutist King James I. Through much of the century, ordinary people were derided by their betters as rascals, 'vulgar', a 'rabble'; they were 'giddy-headed' and 'fickle'. As one tutor to the future King Charles I put it in 1613 – translating an Italian historian – the people were a 'many-headed monster, which hath neither head for brains, nor brains for government'.[2] Such attitudes survive to this day, of course, in some quarters at least, but in the seventeenth century the people, including those outside the traditional elite, and ***public opinion***, became decisive factors in politics.

The idea that power should, ultimately, reside in the people remains one of the cardinal slogans of the modern era. It is foundational to the United States constitution, beginning as it does with its stirring – if somewhat inaccurate – assertion to speak for the whole population: '*We the people* ...' Famously, also, it's there in the Gettysburg Address, with the call for 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. And it's there in more recent times, too. In the 1960s, activists called and chanted for 'power to the people', while the belief that 'All Power Belongs to the People' was expressed at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Such is the power of the idea that even authoritarians have to appeal to the 'will of the people', and suchlike.

All of this had been anticipated in seventeenth-century England. In fact, a debate over sovereignty ran through the century. Even before the Civil War, the Parliamentarian propagandist Henry Parker had argued that 'Power is originally inherent in the people', while in 1650 one republican theorist – John Parker (no relation to Henry) – came remarkably close to anticipating President Lincoln's words during another great civil war, by arguing that government 'is in the people, from the people, and for the people'. As the century progressed, the theoretical notion that power ultimately resided in the people clashed with the absolutist argument that it lay with the monarchy.

Our story, though, is not really one of theories; it is one of grubby politics. Indeed, thanks to a major growth in the political literacy of those just outside the traditional political elite – namely the gentry and the newly confident 'middling sort' – English politics was, over the century, radically changed. It became essential for governments

to present an ideological vision, and to try to sell this to the people. Central to this was Parliament, which was the institutional voice of the new political classes, and which by the end of the century had won control over taxation, the government and even the royal succession. The political world we live in today, with regular Parliaments and elections, ideologically defined parties, a vibrant press and mass campaigns centred on large protests and petitions, was born in the seventeenth century. For this, as well as so much else, the story told here remains fascinating and vital to this day.

It is also a story of detail and social depth, for in the seventeenth century, thanks to the astonishing variety of source materials available, from letters and diaries, to autobiographies, government and legal documentation, petitions and print, the lives of ordinary people can be accessed in vivid technicolour. The society they lived in and shaped can be seen in remarkable detail. So this book is about raw politics, but it is also about the social change that conditioned those politics. It is narrative history, and for this it makes no apologies, but it's also about how the forces that combined to create nearly a hundred years of turbulence, out of which arose a remarkable new world, one which – for better or worse – was blazing a path towards our own.

PART ONE

1603–29
The Hearts of Thy Subjects