

# WHO WERE THE ENGLISH RADICALS?

23 MARCH 2002

ANABAPTIST NETWORK

## WORKSHOP ON THE THE LEVELLERS

(John Coffey)

'The Levellers are the first modern political movement organized around the idea of popular sovereignty. They are the first democrats who think in terms, not of participatory self-government within a city-state, but of representative government within a nation-state. They are the first who want a written constitution in order to protect the rights of citizens against the state. The first with a modern conception of which rights should be inalienable: the right to silence (torture to extract a confession was a normal judicial procedure over most of Europe) and to legal representation; the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of debate; the right to equality before the law and freedom of trade; the right to vote and, when faced with tyranny, to revolution. The Levellers are thus not merely the first modern democrats, but the first to seek to construct a liberal state. Not only do their objectives have a contemporary ring, but the very language they use is often indistinguishable from our own'.

David d Wootton 'The Levellers', in J. Dunn, ed., *Democracy's Unfinished Journey, 508BC to 1993AD* (OUP 1992), p. 71.

### The Political Background

1642: War breaks out between King and Parliament  
1646: First Civil War ends with Parliamentary victory  
Parliamentarians divided into different factions:

- Presbyterians - control Parliament, Westminster Assembly, London
- Independents - power base in New Model Army

1647: Army revolt against Parliament

1648: Second Civil War orchestrated by the King but won by Parliament

Dec: Army purge of Presbyterian MPs from Parliament

Jan 1649: Trial and execution of King

### 1. The Pre-History of the Levellers

- John Lilburne
- Richard Overton
- William Walwyn
  - committed Parliamentarians
  - associated with London's Independent/sectarian congregations
  - involved in-the great Toleration Debate of 1643 onwards

### 2. Birth (1645-1646)

Lilburne, Walwyn and Overton working together by mid-1645

- Campaign for religious toleration
- Develop broader critique of arbitrary power

### 3. High Point (1647)

- mass petitioning
- developed reform programme

### CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

- Written Constitution (Agreement of the People)
- More Equal Distribution of Constituencies
- Fixed-term Parliaments
- Regular Elections

- Extension of Franchise

#### RELIGIOUS REFORMS

- Freedom of Religion
- Abolition of Tithes

#### MILITARY REFORMS

- Abolition of Conscription
- Indemnity for Soldiers
- Arrears of Pay

#### LEGAL REFORMS

- No Imprisonment without Trial
- No Self-Incrimination
- Trial by Jury
- Simplified Law Code
- Improvement of Prison Conditions
- Punishments proportionate to Offences

#### ECONOMIC REFORMS

- End to Monopolies (Merchant Adventurers Co.)
- Free Trade
- Abolition of Excise and other war taxes
- Relief of Poverty

- *Agreement of the People*
- Putney Debates
- Leveller mutiny suppressed at Ware

#### 4. Demise (1648-49)

- Second Civil War
- Military Coup and Regicide (Dec 1648-Jan 1649)
- Lilburne, *England's New Chains Discovered*
- Walwyn, *The Vanitie of the Present Churches*
- Lilburne, Overton, Walwyn imprisoned in the Tower of London

#### Sources of Leveller ideas

- Norman Yoke theory (Anglo-Saxon liberties)
- Common Law (Rights of the Freeborn Englishman)
- Natural Law theory (Natural Rights)
- Civic Humanism (Popular Republicanism)
- Scripture
  - Human Equality in Creation, Fall and Redemption
  - OT prophets
  - 'Practical Christianity'

#### Relevance

- Government Accountable to the People
- Human Rights
- Practical Christianity