Britpolitics Fact Sheet – Causes of the English Civil War

The Civil War did not start as a revolution.

Those involved did not start out to get rid of the Monarchy and replace it with a Republic (no Kong or Queen). Conflicting feelings towards Royal power and religion brought about a number of events, which made things worse until there were battles fought and armed conflict.

King Charles I believed he ruled with what was called ‘The Divine Right of Kings’. This meant Charles thought he was King by a higher right than ordinary people and it was the wishes of God himself. That meant that his decisions could not be challenged or questioned.

This way of thinking was opposed by people who believed there should be a limit to the King’s money, powers and authority over them. They thought that the people and those elected to represent them in Parliament should have more say in how England was governed.

Tied up with this were arguments over the Church and religion. There were deep divisions over what religious practices, forms of worship and structure the Church should have.

# Cause A: Religion

Religion was a major cause of the English Civil War. It was part of a Europe wide conflict between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

At the start of his reign (1625) King Charles I married Henrietta Maria of France. Henrietta was a Roman Catholic. In her marriage treaty it said that she was allowed to practice her religion freely at Court. It also said that King Charles I should start lifting restrictions for ‘recusants’ (that is Catholics who refused to go to Anglican (Protestant) Church services). The marriage was not a popular one.

At this time Roman Catholics were feared. Why was this?

* The earlier reign of the Catholic Queen Mary I (Bloody Mary as she came to be known) had seen a lot of Protestants badly treated and killed.
* The attempted invasion of England by Roman Catholic Phillip II of Spain and his Spanish Armada in 1588 ended by Queen Elizabeth I’s;
* The Gunpowder Plot of 1605 (Guy Fawkes) which was a Catholic plot to blow up James I in the Houses of Parliament; and
* The on-going Thirty Years War, which was viewed as Roman Catholic countries trying to get rid of all Protestants in Europe.

King Charles I was deeply religious. He believed that he ruled with the Divine Right of Kings. He preferred a High Anglican form of worship, with ceremonies, rituals and glamour.

Charles thought the hierarchy of bishops and priests to be important. This caused alarm for some Protestants as it appeared that Charles was leaning towards Catholicism. The Puritans, who were extreme Protestants, considered all of this to be forms of what they called ‘Popery’. They wanted a simpler form of worship without rituals and without glamour. Puritans believed that they had a personal relationship with God and did not need bishops.

In 1633 King Charles I appointed William Laud as Archbishop of Canterbury. William Laud was a Protestant but thought the Puritans were too extreme for his taste.

Like King Charles I, William Laud also liked a High Anglican form of worship. Laud wanted to impose uniformity of worship based on The Book of Common Prayer and thought that Bishops were important to run the Church.

Laud also wanted to bring back some of the ceremonies and rituals and decoration like statues and stained-glass windows. Priests were to wear clothes known as vestments as a sign of their higher status.

William Laud saw this as the ‘beauty of holiness’. Puritans saw this as an attempt to make the Church more Roman Catholic.

There was much opposition to this religious change. William Laud saw Puritans as a threat to the Church and pursued his critics in the courts. In 1637 William Prynne, John Bastwick and Henry Burton were convicted in the Star Chamber of ‘seditious libel’ for criticising Laud’s policies in a written pamphlet. They had their cheeks branded and their ears cropped.

In 1637 King Charles I and Archbishop Laud imposed a new Prayer Book on the people of Scotland.

It was a revised edition of the English Prayer Book. When it was introduced riots broke out in Edinburgh. The Scottish Presbyterians thought that the new Prayer Book had too many similarities to Catholicism.

They saw it as an attack on the true Protestant religion and on their freedom to choose how they worshipped. Although Scotland had Charles I as its King, it was still a separate kingdom from England. Scotland had its own government, laws and established church – The Kirk. Charles’ response was to insist on the full implementation of the new Prayer Book and punishment for those who refused. He considered their refusal to be an attack on his Royal authority.

In 1638 the Scottish people signed a Covenant in which they promised before God to defend and preserve the true religion and pledged loyalty to the King.

In 1639 King Charles sent an army to try and enforce the use of the new Prayer Book in Scotland. King Charles already distrusted by some as liking Catholicism was now declaring war on his loyal, Protestant people.

The English army was easily defeated in what was later known as the First Bishops’ War. In 1640 King Charles was defeated in the Second Bishops’ War. He was forced to sign the Treaty of Ripon in October 1640, which said that the Covenanter (Scottish) troops were to be paid £850 a while they still occupied northern England.

# Cause B: Money

A key factor that led to the outbreak of the Civil War was King Charles and his lack of money.

Charles’ father King James I, had led a lavish, extravagant lifestyle, which had left the Royal treasury very low on money.

The cost of running Charles I’s Royal home was equally expensive. King Charles liked the arts and spent large amounts of money on musicians to entertain his Court and in buying works of art.

If King Charles needed to money he asked Parliament. In June 1625 Parliament had only granted the King tonnage and poundage (income from customs duties (selling things)) for a single year, rather than for life as was usual. This meant that Charles would be forced to call Parliament again to grant further taxes and get more money.

Parliament refused to give King Charles enough money to pay for military campaigns against Spain and France.

Charles dismissed Parliament and began to raise money through a Forced Loan. That is money from taxes asked for without the agreement of Parliament. If people refused to pay they were often put in prison without trial. This caused much upset.

In 1628 a House of Commons’ Petition of Right was drawn up which said that the king could not levy taxes on his people without the assent of Parliament, nor just put them in prison if they didn’t pay. Although King Charles initially agreed to the Petition it was never properly enacted as law.

In March 1629 Charles dismissed Parliament and began what he called his ‘Personal Rule’ and what his opponents called the ‘Eleven Years’ Tyranny’.

As only Parliament could legally grant taxes King Charles had to find other ways going around them to get money.

Charles exploited his powers as King, known as the Royal prerogative, to impose knighthood fees on landowners worth £40 or more a year.

Monopolies were sold to rich merchants, even though Parliament and law forbade this. Forest boundaries were put back to their ancient lines, so that forest fines could be levied on those who now found themselves within the new boundaries.

In 1635 the King demanded ship money from all the counties of England and not just those by the sea. Wealthy landowner, John Hampden MP, ended up in court. He wouldn’t pay his ship money as he said the King had no legal right to collect it. King Charles made himself very unpopular amongst those people who had liked him and were traditionally royal supporters.

After his defeat in the First Bishops’ War, King Charles called Parliament in April 1640 to raise money for another campaign against Scotland. Not having been called for eleven years Parliament had a long list of things they wished to present to the King. Parliament refused to grant the money and Charles sent Parliament away again (called ‘dissolving of Parliament) after less than a month.

After defeat in the Second Bishops’ War, the terms of the Treaty of Ripon stated that King Charles had to pay the Scottish Covenanters £850 a day while they occupied northern England.

With huge debts the only option King Charles had was to call Parliament and ask for money. When Parliament met again, this became known as the Long Parliament.

King Charles’ financial problems meant that only Parliament had the means to raise enough money to pay the Covenanters and cover the costs of the unsuccessful Bishops’ Wars. Parliament finally had the chance to present their grievances and push through changes they wanted to see.

# Cause C: Parliament

Under the reign of James I there had been a breakdown in relations between Parliament and the Monarchy. Charles I had a similar negative view of any interference by Parliament in his rule. It was within the King’s royal powers not to call Parliament but they did have their purpose. As well as being necessary for raising taxes and passing legislation they could also be used as a source of advice and as a means of getting grievances heard.

## Parliament starts to play hardball with the King

King Charles called Parliament in April 1640 to raise money for the Second Bishops’ War. He needed Parliament to grant taxes to finance an army. Parliament expressed concern over King Charles and his administration and wanted their grievances heard. The Puritan MP, John Pym was particularly outspoken in the call for reform. As we have heard, King Charles dissolved Parliament after only three weeks when his request for money was refused. [S. R .Gardiner, 1884]

## The Long Parliament gets even tougher

After the defeat in the Bishops’ Wars, King Charles was forced to call Parliament in November 1640. The Members of Parliament now took their chance to have their complaints about Charles’ way of ruling heard. Their list of grievances was long:

* Concern about Archbishop Laud and his religious reforms, which were considered to be too Catholic;
* Concern about the use of the Royal prerogative to raise money, such as ship money
* Unhappy that the King dissolves Parliament rather than allow grievances to be heard and the arresting of Members of Parliament.
* Belief that King Charles was influenced far too much by some of his closest advisors. Parliament blamed bad advice rather than the King himself for most of the problems.

## Getting rid of the King’s Advisers

In December 1640 Archbishop Laud was arrested for High Treason. One of the charges brought against him was that he gave wicked and traitorous advice to the King. He was imprisoned in the Tower of London in March 1641. His trial finally began in March 1644. Unable to find any evidence that would prove him guilty of treason Parliament found another way because they wanted him gone. William Laud was executed in January 1645.

In 1641, John Pym MP accused Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford of treason and had him arrested. The Earl had been recalled as Lord Deputy of Ireland to become one of Charles’ chief ministers during the Bishops’ Wars.

Charles I tried to rescue Strafford by sending troops to the Tower of London. The attempt failed and resulted in demonstrations in London, with the protestors demanding justice. The House of Lords passed a Bill of Attainder and King Charles signed it. Strafford was executed in May 1641.

## Forcing a stubborn King to make changes

Parliament wanted to see its place in the running of the country made more secure. It also tried to remedy the religious and political problems that had arisen during the king’s Personal Rule. Some of these thingd would also reduce the Kings’ ability to rule without Parliament. King Charles agreed to some of these reforms.

* Non-Parliamentary forms of taxation, such as ship money, were declared illegal.
* The court of Star Chamber, which sat without a jury, was abolished.
* The English Parliament could not be dissolved without the consent of Parliament itself.
* The Triennial Act of 1641 required Parliament would be called at least once every three years.

The Puritan members of Parliament were still calling for further reforms, particularly of the Church and religious practices in England. Divisions began to appear within Parliament and within the wider population. The more moderate Protestants believed that religious reforms had gone far enough and did not agree with the more radical changes the Puritans were demanding. It was these who would emerge as supporters of the King.

# The eventual road to war

The Irish rebellion broke out in October 1641. Irish Catholics had risen up and massacred Protestant settlers in Ulster. King Charles needed to raise an army to put down the rebellion. This led to heated debates as to whether the King or Parliament should control the army. John Pym MP argued vociferously that “…mischievous counsels…” would influence the king. Pym and his Puritan supporters were worried that the army might be turned against Parliament after the Irish rebellion had been supressed. The Irish rebellion had also re-ignited fears of a Roman Catholic plot against Protestantism in the three kingdoms (England, Scotland and Ireland).

In November 1641 John Pym presented the Grand Remonstrance to the House of Commons.

This document suggested that King Charles had been ill-advised by “…malignant parties…” which included Bishops, “Jesuited Papists” and counsellors who were serving the interests of foreign powers. These persons “…for the advantage and increase of Popery…” had been attempting to undermine the political and religious reforms approved by Parliament and create conflict between the King and Parliament. The Remonstrance listed 204 instances from the beginning of Charles’ reign onwards. It demanded that the King remove these advisors and replace them with ones approved of by Parliament.

It was passed by the House of Commons, but with only a very small majority of eleven. The House of Lords and the King rejected it. [www.parliament.uk] In December the House of Commons voted to have the Grand Remonstrance printed and made available to ordinary members of the public.

King Charles in his response to the Remonstrance declared that there was no Church which practiced “…the true religion with more purity of doctrine than the Church of England…” Not everyone in Parliament or in England was a Puritan. His stance on religion gained King Charles much support, especially in the House of Lords.

On the 4th January 1642 King Charles entered the House of Commons with an armed escort of soldiers to arrest five Members of Parliament on charges of High Treason. These MPs were John Pym, John Hampden, Denzil Holles, Sir Arthur Haselrig and William Strode. Having been forewarned, the MPs were not there. The Speaker of the House of Commons, William Lenthall, defended Parliamentary privileges and refused to assist the King as to their whereabouts.

“May it please your majesty, I have neither eyes to see nor tongue to speak in this place but as this house is pleased to direct me whose servant I am here…”

This abuse of Parliamentary privileges by King Charles lost him political support. Some of the MPs already believed that the King could not be trusted and were worried that he might try and re-instate his ‘Personal Rule’. Bringing armed soldiers into Parliament only made these fears worse. When riots broke out in London King Charles fled to Hampton Court. The rift between Parliament and the King had become more obvious and people were being forced to take sides.

The London Trained Bands were brought out to guard Parliament with the consent of both Houses. Crowds gathered in London to have their opinions heard and voice their concerns. In February King Charles sent Queen Henrietta Maria to the Netherlands for her own safety and to raise foreign support for the war.

In March 1642 Parliament passed the Militia Ordinance which put the local militias under the control of Parliament. As it was passed as an Ordinance and not as an Act, Parliament decided that it did not need Royal Assent. They claimed they were acting for the safety and defence of the nation.

King Charles headed for York. His supporters among the Lords and the gentry began to rally to him. Some supported the Royalist cause as they disagreed with the Puritans demands for radical reforms and did not like the influence they had in Parliament. Others came out of loyalty to the Crown even if they did not necessarily agree with the King’s actions.

In June 1642 Parliament presented the Nineteen Propositions to King Charles at York in an attempt to prevent the “…imminent dangers and calamities…”. It proposed that Parliament would control all military resources. Parliament would approve all ministers and officials chosen by the King. Parliament would decide how the Church was to be reformed. Laws against Catholics were to be strictly enforced. Parliament would have a say in the education and marriage arrangements of the King’s children.

King Charles rejected the propositions.

Parliament was mustering troops under the authority of the Ordinance. King Charles reinstated the outdated Commissions of Array to raise men. Individuals now had to choose whether to mobilise under the Commissions of Array or the Militia Ordinance. Royalist and Parliamentarian forces seized military strongholds and raided stores for arms and munitions.

The nation was becoming increasingly polarised. It was more difficult to remain neutral.

On 12 July Parliament voted to raise an army under the command of the Earl of Essex, for the “… preserving of the true religion, the laws, liberty and peace of the kingdom.”

On 22 August 1642 King Charles I raised his Royal standard at Nottingham. Civil War had been openly declared.