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Of 'rage of party' and the coming of civility

Gregory C. Melleuish

University of Wollongong, gmelleui@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

The article discusses the emergence of political parties in Great Britain during the English Civil War. According to the author the conflict brought an end to political division which was replaced by etiquettes as a standard of political behavior. Topics include the political transformation of England in the year 1690, the conflict between the Royalists and Parliamentarians, and propagating ideals of politeness, moderation, and enlightenment.

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Of 'Rage of Party' and the Coming of Civility

Greg Melleuish

Abstract

There is a disparity between expectations that the members of a community will work together for the common good — and the stark reality that human beings form into groups, or parties, to engage in conflict with each other. This is particularly the case in so-called popular governments that include some wider political involvement by the people. In ancient Greece *stasis*, or endemic conflict between the democratic and oligarchic elements of a city was very common. Likewise, the late Roman Republic maintained a division between the *populares* and the *optimates*. In both cases there was violence as both sides battled for dominance. For example, in late republican Rome street gangs formed that employed intimidation and violence for political ends.

In seventeenth century England there was conflict between those who favoured royal authority and those who wished to see more power devolved to parliament, which led to Civil War in the 1640s. Yet the English ideal, as expressed by *The Book of Common Prayer* (1549; and other editions) was that the country be quietly governed. It seemed perverse that the members of the body politic should be in conflict with each other.

By the late seventeenth century England was still riven by conflict between two groups which became designated as the Whigs and the Tories. The divisions were both political and religious. Most importantly, these divisions were expressed at the local level, in such things as the struggle for the control of local corporations. They were not just political but could also be personal and often turned nasty as families contended for local control.

The mid seventeenth century had been a time of considerable violence and warfare, not only in Europe and England but across Eurasia, including the fall of the Ming dynasty in China (Parker). This violence occurred in the wake of a cooler climate change, bringing in its wake crop failure followed by scarcity, hunger, disease and vicious warfare. Millions of people died.

Conditions improved in the second half of the seventeenth century and countries slowly found their way to a new relative stability. The Qing created a new imperial order in China. In France, Louis XIV survived the Fronde and his answer to the rage and divisions of that time was the imposition of an autocratic and despotic state that simply prohibited the existence of divisions. Censorship and the inquisition flourished in Catholic Europe ensuring that dissidence would not evolve into violence fuelled by rage. In 1685, Louis expelled large numbers of Protestants from France.

Divisions did not disappear in England at the end of the Civil War and the Restoration of Charles II. Initially, it appears that Charles sought to go down the French route. There was a regulation of ideas as new laws meant that the state licensed all printed works. There was an attempt to impose a bureaucratic authoritarian state, culminating in the short reign of James II (Pincus, Ertman). But its major effect, since the heightened fear of James' Catholicism in Protestant England, was to stoke the 'rage of party' between those who supported this hierarchical model of social order and those who wanted political power less concentrated (Knights *Representation*, Plumb).

The issue was presumed to be settled in 1688 when James was chased from the throne, and replaced by the Dutchman William and his wife Mary. In the official language of the day, liberty had triumphed over despotism and the 'ancient constitution' of the English had been restored to guarantee that liberty.

However, three major developments were going on in England by the late seventeenth century:

The first is the creation of a more bureaucratic centralised state along the lines of the France of Louis XIV. This state apparatus was needed to collect the taxes required to finance and administer the English war machine (Pincus).

The second is the creation of a genuinely popular form of government in the wake of the expulsion of James and his replacement by William of Orange (Ertman). This means regular parliaments that are elected every three years, and also a free press to scrutinise political activities.

The third is the development of financial institutions to enable the war to be conducted against France, which only comes to an end in 1713 (Pincus). Here, England followed the example of the Netherlands. There is the establishment of the bank of England in 1694 and the creation of a national debt. This meant that those involved in finance could make big profits out of financing a war, so a new moneyed class developed.

England's Transformation

In the 1690s as England is transformed politically, religiously and economically, this develops a new type of society that unifies strong government with new financial institutions and arrangements. In this new political configuration, the big winners are the new financial elites and the large (usually Whig) aristocratic landlords, who had the financial resources to benefit from it. The losers were the smaller landed gentry who were taxed to pay for the war. They increasingly support the Tories (Plumb) who opposed both the war and the new financial elites it helped to create; leading to the 1710 election that overwhelmingly elected a Tory government led by Harley and Bolingbroke. This government then negotiated the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, with the Whigs retaining a small minority.

History indicates that the post-1688 developments do not so much quell the 'rage of party' as encourage it and fan the fires of conflict and discontent. Parliamentary elections were held every three years and could involve costly, and potentially financially ruinous, contests between families competing for parliamentary representation. As these elections involved open voting and attempts to buy votes through such means as wine and dining, they could be occasions for riotous behaviour. Regular electoral contests, held in an electorate that was much larger than it would be one hundred years later, greatly heightened the conflicts and kept the political temperature at a high.



Fig. 1: "To Him Pudel, Bite Him Peper"

Moreover, there was much to fuel this conflict and to 'maintain the rage': First, the remodelling of the English financial system combined with the high level of taxation imposed largely on the gentry fuelled a rage amongst this group. This new world of financial investments was not part of their world. They were extremely

suspicious of wealth not derived from landed property and sought to limit the power of those who held such wealth. Secondly, the events of 1688 split the Anglican Church in two (Pincus). The opponents of the new finance regimes tended also to be traditional High Church Anglicans who feared the newer, more tolerant government policy towards religion. Finally, the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695 meant that the English state was no longer willing to control the flow of information to the public (Kemp).

The end result was that England in the 1690s became something akin to a modern public culture in which there was a relatively free flow of political information, constant elections held with a limited, but often substantial franchise, that was operating out of a very new commercial and financial environment. These political divisions were now deeply entrenched and very real passion animated each side of the political divide (Knights *Devil*).

Under these circumstances, it was not possible simply to stamp out 'the rage' by the government repressing the voices of dissent. The authoritarian model for creating public conformity was not an option. A mechanism for lowering the political and religious temperature needed to arise in this new society where power and knowledge were diffused rather than centrally concentrated. Also, the English were aided by the return to a more benign physical environment. In economic terms it led to what Fischer terms the equilibrium of the Enlightenment. The wars of Louis XIV were a hangover from the earlier more desperate age; they prolonged the crisis of that age. Nevertheless, the misery of the earlier seventeenth century had passed. The grim visions of Calvinism (and Jansenism) had lost their plausibility. So the excessive violence of the 1640s was replaced by a more tepid form of political resistance, developing into the first modern expression of populism. So, the English achieved what Plumb calls 'political stability' were complex (1976), but relied on two things. The first was limiting the opportunity for political activity and the second was labelling political passion as a form of irrational behaviour – as an unsatisfactory or improper way of conducting oneself in the world. Emotions became an indulgence of the ignorant, the superstitious and the fanatical. This new species of humanity was the gentleman, who behaved in a reasonable and measured way, would express a person commensurate with the Enlightenment.

This view would find its classic expression over a century later in Macaulay's *History of England*, where the pre-1688 English squires are now portrayed in all their semi-civilised glory, "his ignorance and uncouthness, his low tastes and gross phrases, would, in our time, be considered as indicating a nature and a breeding thoroughly plebeian" (Macaulay 244).

While the Revolution of 1688 is usually portrayed as a triumph of liberty, as stated, recent scholarship (Pincus, Ertman) emphasises how the attempts by both Charles and James to build a more bureaucratic state were crucial to the development of eighteenth century England. England was not really a land of liberty that kept state growth in check, but the English state development took a different path to statehood from countries such as France, because it involved popular institutions and managed to eliminate many of the corrupt practices endemic to a patrimonial regime.

The English were as interested in 'good police', meaning the regulation of moral behaviour, as any state on the European continent, but their method of achievement was different. In the place of bureaucratic regulation, the English followed another route, later be termed in the 1760s as 'civilisation' (Melleuish). So, the Whigs became the party of rationality and reasonableness, and the Whig regime was Low Church, which was latitudinarian and amenable to rationalist Christianity. Also, the addition of the virtue and value of politeness and gentlemanly behaviour became the antidote to the "rage of party" (Knights *Devil* 163–4). The Whigs were also the party of science and therefore, followed Lockean philosophy. They viewed themselves as 'reasonable men' in opposition to their more fanatically inclined opponents. It is noted that any oligarchy, can attempt to justify itself as an 'aristocracy', in the sense of representing the 'morally' best people. The Whig aristocracy was more cosmopolitan, because its aristocrats had often served the rulers of countries other than England. In fact, the values of the Whig elite were the first expression of the liberal cosmopolitan values which are now central to the ideology of contemporary elites. One dimension of the Whig/Tory split is that while the Whig aristocracy had a cosmopolitan outlook as more proto-globalist, the Tories remained proto-nationalists.

The Whigs became simultaneously the party of liberty, Enlightenment, cosmopolitanism, commerce and civilised behaviour. This is why liberty, the desire for peace and 'sweet commerce' came to be identified together. The Tories, on the other hand, were the party of real property (that is to say land) so their national interest could easily be construed by their opponents as the party of obscurantism and rage. One major incident illustrates how this evolved.

The Trial of the High Church Divine Henry Sacheverell

In 1709, the High Church Divine Henry Sacheverell preached a fiery sermon attacking the Whig revolutionary principles of resistance, and advocated obedience and unlimited submission to authority. Afterwards, for his trouble he was impeached before the House of Lords by the Whigs for high crimes and misdemeanours (*Tryal* 1710). As Mark Knights (6) has put it, one of his major failings was his breaching of the "Whig culture of politeness and moderation". The Whigs also disliked Sacheverell for his charismatic appeal to women (Nicholson). He was found guilty and his sermons ordered to be burned by the hangman. But Sacheverell became simultaneously a martyr and a political celebrity leading to a mass outpouring of printed material (Knights *Devil* 166–186). Riots broke out in London in the wake of the trial's verdict. For the Whigs, this stood as proof of the 'rage' that lurked in the irrational world of Toryism. However, as Geoffrey Holmes has demonstrated, these riots were not aimless acts of mob violence but were directed towards specific targets, in particular the meeting houses of Dissenters.

History reveals that the Sacheverell riots were the last major riots in England for almost seventy years until the Lord Gordon anti-Catholic riots of 1780. In the short term they led to an overwhelming Tory victory at the 1710 elections, but that victory was pyrrhic. With the death of Queen Anne, followed by the accession of the Hanoverians to the throne, the Whigs became the party of government. Some Tories, such as Bolingbroke, panicked, and fled to France and the Court of the Pretender. The other key factor was the Treaty of Utrecht, brokered on England's behalf by the Tory government of Harley and Bolingbroke that brought the Civil war to an end in 1713. England now entered an era of peace; there remained no longer the need to raise funds to conduct a war. The war had forced the English state to both to consolidate and to innovate.

This can be viewed as the victory of the party of 'politeness and moderation' and the Enlightenment and hence the effective end of the 'rage of party'. Threats did remain by the Pretender's (James III) attempt to retake the English throne, as happened in 1715 and 1745, when was backed by the barbaric Scots.

The Whig ascendancy, the ascendancy of a minority, was to last for decades but remnants of the Tory Party remained, and England became a "one-and one-half" party regime (Ertman 222). Once in power, however, the Whigs utilised a number of mechanisms to ensure that the age of the 'rage of party' had come to an end and would be replaced by one of politeness and moderation. As Plumb states, they gained control of the "means of patronage" (Plumb 161–88), while maintaining the ongoing trend, from the 1680s of restricting those eligible to vote in local corporations, and the Whigs supported the "narrowing of the franchise" (Plumb 102–3). Finally, the Septennial Act of 1717 changed the time between elections from three years to seven years.

This lowered the political temperature but it did not eliminate the Tories or complaints about the political, social and economic path that England had taken. Rage may have declined but there was still a lot of dissent in the newspapers, in particular in the late 1720s in the *Craftsman* paper controlled by Viscount Bolingbroke. The *Craftsman* denounced the corrupt practices of the government of Sir Robert Walpole, the 'robocracy', and played to the prejudices of the landed gentry. Further, the Bolingbroke circle contained some major literary figures of the age; but not a group of violent revolutionaries (Kramnick). It was true populism, from ideals of the Enlightenment and a more benign environment.

The new ideal of 'politeness and moderation' had conquered English political culture in an era of Whig dominance. This is exemplified in the philosophy of David Hume and his disparagement of enthusiasm and superstition, and the English elite were also not fond of emotional Methodists, and Charles Wesley's father had been a Sacheverell supporter (Cowan 43). A moderate man is rational and measured; the *hoi polloi* is emotional, faintly disgusting, and prone to rage.

In the End: A Reduction of Rage

Nevertheless, one of the great achievements of this new ideal of civility was to tame the conflict between political parties by recognising political division as a natural part of the political process, one that did not involve 'rage'. This was the great achievement of Edmund Burke who, arguing against Bolingbroke's position that 1688 had restored a unified political order, and hence abolished political divisions, legitimated such party divisions as an element of a civilised political process involving gentlemen (Mansfield 3). The lower orders, lacking the capacity to live up to this ideal, were prone to accede to forces other than reason, and needed to be kept in their place. This was achieved through a draconian legal code that punished crimes against property very severely (Hopppit). If 'progress' as later described by Macaulay leads to a polite and cultivated elite who are capable of conquering their rage – so the lower orders need to be repressed because they are still essentially barbarians. This was echoed in Macaulay's contemporary, John Stuart Mill (192) who promulgated Orientals similarly "lacked the virtues" of an educated Briton.

In contrast, the French attempt to impose order and stability through an authoritarian state fared no better in the long run. After 1789 it was the 'rage' of the 'mob' that helped to bring down the French Monarchy. At least, that is how the new cadre of the 'polite and moderate' came to view things.

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