



THE LEVELLERS: LIBERTARIAN RADICALISM AND THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

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DAVID HOILE

As we move towards the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the English Civil War, it is perhaps more than apt to examine a particularly early but nonetheless strong and fascinating example of libertarian consciousness within the first English Revolution. The legacy of that political movement which came to be known, somewhat misleadingly, as the 'Levellers', which came to prominence during the momentous years of that conflict, can still be identified today. The Levellers have long been claimed by prominent socialists such as Tony Benn, Michael Foot and Fenner Brockway as intellectual ancestors. Tony Benn mentions the Leveller movement, for example, in both *Arguments For Socialism*¹ and *Arguments For Democracy*,² as well as including some of their writings in his anthology of radical and socialist pieces *Writings On The Wall*.³ Fenner Brockway goes even further, citing the Levellers, their military colleagues, the Agitators, as well as the Diggers in his *Britain's First Socialists*.⁴ There has also been the spectacle of annual pilgrimages to Burford by radical socialists to commemorate the Burford mutineers, martyrs to the Leveller cause.

A closer examination of the Levellers, however, reveals them as lineal ancestors of a distinctly libertarian school of political thought, having much more in common with certain free market and classical liberal intellectual trends within the British libertarian movement, and Conservative Party, than with contemporary socialism. The Levellers' principled call for the abolition of monarchy and a republican government also predates much of the continuing controversy over the monarchy today.

The intellectual and political movement called the Levellers emerged in 1645-46 towards the latter end of the first English Civil War. As the Civil War is pivotal to the rise of the Levellers some political and historical background is essential. The Civil War between the King and Parliament began, after an escalating level of political conflict between them both over the issue of sovereignty, with the raising of the King's standard at Nottingham in August 1642. The Earl of Essex was nominated to command the Parliamentary forces. Military deadlock, and Parliamentary political faintheartedness characterised most of the first two years of the conflict, despite the entry of a Scottish army on the Parliamentary side after Parliament had signed the Solemn League and Covenant. This lacklustre approach to the conflict lasted until the formation of the Parliamentary New Model Army under Sir Thomas Fairfax, with Lieutenant-General Oliver Cromwell as his cavalry commander, and the Self-Denying Ordinance of April 1645 which saw all peers and Members of Parliament relinquish their military commissions. Parliamentary forces were subsequently victorious at the battles of Naseby and Langport, and Charles Stuart surrendered to the Scots, and was placed in the custody of the English Parliament on January 30th 1647.

Divisions over the creation of the New Model Army and the Self-Denying Ordinance led to the development of two factions within the Parliamentarians, the conservative Presbyterians and the more radically-inclined Independents. The existence of a Presbyterian majority within the Long Parliament, anxious to reach some accommodation with the King, hostile to any significant change to the political, economic religious and social *status quo*, and particularly uneasy about the New Model Army, provided the backdrop to the emergence of several political and religious tendencies of a republican orientation, one of which being the Leveller movement.

A BACKGROUND TO RADICALISM

It is crucial to examine the nature of the society, or specifically sections of the society, from which the Leveller movement sprang. Several attempts have been made to explain a class background to the Leveller movement and the people whose support it attracted. While it is prudent to acknowledge David Underdown's warning that "Class is a concept that can be applied to seventeenth-century English society only with the greatest possible caution".⁵ Professor Brian Manning's recently revised study, *The English People and the English Revolution*, an excellent examination of the Levellers from a socialist perspective has reviewed many of the interpretations of the importance of class within the civil war. Manning's own thesis is, in his own words, "that some of the 'middling sort' played a crucial role in the revolution".⁶

Manning cites several historians of the English civil war who have acknowledged, with varying qualifications, the class aspects of the conflict. John Morill: "Interpretations of allegiance which rest content with analysis of gentry activity are ... inadequate". Derek Hirst stated that the civil war was "clearly not merely a division within the elite".⁷ Keith Wrightson:

[T]he English Revolution of the 1640s was not an affair confined to the aristocracy, the greater gentry and their retainers, but involved the aspirations and military participation of thousands of their immediate social inferiors among the minor 'parochial' gentry and the 'middling sort' of town and country.⁸

F.D. Dow's 1985 review of the debate on the English civil war touched on the Manning thesis, stating that Manning had

... forcefully argued that economic discontent and popular unrest were important elements in producing an atmosphere of crisis before and after 1640 ... that this eruption of the lower and middling orders into the political arena crucially affected the alignment of political groupings within the elite ... parliament's appeal to the 'middling sort of people' was ... to release one

of the most dynamic forces of the decade and substantially promote the cause of popular radicalism.⁹

There can be no doubt whatsoever that the political grouping which came to be known as the Levellers can be seen as the political vanguard of that "popular radicalism".

THE EMERGENCE OF THE LEVELLER PARTY

The Leveller movement can be identified from the start with several outstanding political leaders and free-thinkers, including John Lilburne. Born into a Durham landowning family in about 1615, Lilburne was a remarkable liberal, coming into conflict with authority at an early age. In 1637, implicated in the production and circulation of a pamphlet critical of the Bishops, he was arrested and brought before the Star Chamber and Lord Privy Seal. Lilburne questioned their jurisdiction and refused to take the oath or answer incriminating questions. He was pilloried, flogged and imprisoned, becoming a popular hero, and was freed by the Long Parliament. On the outbreak of the civil war, Lilburne enlisted with the Eastern Association forces and after several actions was taken prisoner. Freed through a prisoner exchange, Lilburne saw more action and was promoted to lieutenant-colonel. Lilburne then resigned his commission on an issue of conscience. To have continued service he would have had to have taken the Covenant Oath, the price for Scottish military support for Parliament, an oath which carried an implication of the suppression by force of religious minority sects.

Disenchantment with the Long Parliament and its entrenched Presbyterian majority grew in the months following the end of the first civil war. Several of the issues which had been at the centre of the conflict with the monarchy began to resurface, criticism this time being levelled at Parliament, free-thinkers soon clashing with it over political issues, religious toleration, press freedom and the issue of sovereignty.

The Levellers' origin as a mass activist-orientated political movement is inextricably linked to John Lilburne not only philosophically but practically. The movement can be seen as coming into being, at least in part, as a reaction to his conflict with the Long Parliament. On leaving the army John Lilburne had continued his involvement in politics, campaigning on the issue of religious toleration. Publishing and distributing several pamphlets critical of Parliament and Parliamentarians on this issue, he was arraigned before the House of Commons on July 19th 1645. Refusing to comply with Parliament's wishes he was jailed for three months. In July 1646, the House of Lords put him on trial for publishing literature critical of the Earl of Manchester. Refusing to recognise the Lords' right to try him, Lilburne defended himself candidly: he was sentenced to seven years imprisonment, barred from holding civil or military office and fined two thousand pounds. This harsh sentence inspired an unprecedented level of political action in defence of Lilburne, including mass marches, a petition signed by over two thousand citizens of London and a massive lobby of Parliament, putting into place a political organisation which would emerge as the Leveller party.

The whole basis of the nature of government, sovereignty and its derivation from, and relationship with, the people, had also come sharply into focus because of the civil war and its implications. This focus was in many ways a natural extension of the debate on the organisation and constitu-

tion of the Church and religious freedom which dominated the lead-up to the English civil war.

The religious influences both in the lead-up to and within the English civil war, the struggle for a free and more accountable church, are well known and have been widely documented. Their importance in helping to frame several key concepts in the minds of many of those who would subsequently become radical political leaders, including prominent Levellers is also clear. There was a direct relationship between radical religious thought and radical political stances. Sir John Strangeways, a reactionary Member of Parliament speaking in a debate in parliament was one of many who saw the connection: "If we make a parity in the Church we must come to a parity in the Commonwealth".¹⁰ Whereas orthodox Calvinism touched on spiritual individualism, many of the other sects challenged concepts such as predestination and invoked free will, man having some degree of control over his destiny. Many of the sects were also democratic in nature, including, in some instances according women identical rights within their congregations. Manning touches on the importance of religious radicalism:

Puritanism taught the middle sort of people to think for themselves and to assert their independence against King, lords and bishops. Godliness gave them status and the ability to express their identity as a separate class; and it enabled them to formulate and dignify their hostility towards the ruling class.¹¹

The catalyst to this extraordinary manifestation was, of course, a distinct deterioration in the British body politic. In the words of one of the five Members of Parliament Charles Stuart had attempted to arrest (thus precipitating the conflict):

The meanest of men, the basest and vilest of the nation, the lowest of the people have got the power in their hands; trampled upon the crown; baffled and misused the parliament; violated the laws ... broke in sunder all bonds and ties of religion, conscience, duty, loyalty, faith, common honesty, and good manners.¹²

The Leveller movement perceived that the previous arrangement was at an end and that the issue of sovereignty had to be renegotiated. The issue of sovereignty had been raised during the war itself by another of the Leveller leaders, William Walwyn. The son of a vicar and grandson of a bishop, he had already committed himself to the issues of religious toleration and press freedom. In Walwyn's *Englands Lamentable Slaverie*, published in October 1645, the Levellers' stance on Parliamentary authority and its relationship with the people was defined for the first time:

... a Parliamentary authority is a power intrusted by the people (that chose them) for their good saftie and freedom; and therefore a Parliament cannot justlie do anything to make the people less safe or lesse free then they found them.¹³

In the week or so before Lilburne was tried by the House of Lords, Richard Overton and William Walwyn, and possibly the republican parliamentarian Henry Marten, had written and published in early July 1646 *A Remonstrance of many thousand citizens*, a tract which can be seen as the entry into British politics of the Leveller party. *A Remonstrance* restated the sovereignty of the people, called for the dissolution of the House of Commons, the abolition of the

upper house, equality before the law, called for religious freedom and the end of the Merchant Adventurers Company's foreign trade monopoly.

There came into being, therefore, in the mid-1640s, a political movement which eventually would become in effect the third party after the Presbyterian and Independents. Other leading figures, apart from John Lilburne and William Walwyn, were Richard Overton, John Wildman, Thomas Prince, Samuel Chidley and William Larnar. Both Overton and Larnar were veteran pamphleteers and printers, having already come into conflict with the authorities over religious toleration and censorship; Thomas Prince was a merchant who had served in the civil war and was co-treasurer, with Chidley, of the Leveller party; John Wildman, a university graduate and with a legal education, liaised closely with the military Levellers, writing or helping to write several of their key documents, including *The Case of the Armie Truly Stated*.

LEVELLER IDEAS WITHIN THE MILITARY

The spread of Leveller ideas into the Army was inevitable. The New Model Army, particularly the cavalry units, was composed in large part of spirited volunteers. These soldiers had taken up arms to secure freedom and liberty, many of them Congregationalists and Baptists drawn in on the issue of religious toleration, and were increasingly conscious of Parliament's political and religious shortcomings. There was also a clear institutional interest: the army was threatened by the Long Parliament. The Presbyterian majority sought to neuter the army, and the increasing republican threat it posed, by disbanding part of it, largely unpaid, and committing the rest to service in Ireland. By late April several cavalry regiments elected 'agitators' or 'agents' to represent and articulate their institutional and political views. By May a significant part of the army's junior officers and rank and file had identified with the agitators in opposition to Parliament. When the Commons attempted to implement the disbanding of army units, the agitators of sixteen regiments called for resistance and a general meeting of the army.

This historic meeting of military Levellers in early June 1647 adopted *A Solemne Engagement of the Army*, setting up a Council of the Army with four representatives of both junior officers and junior ranks drawn from each regiment, to augment the senior officers already serving on the Council of War. A day earlier, on June 4th, a military unit took Charles Stuart into custody to frustrate a Presbyterian attempt to reach an accommodation with him. The identification of a significant section of the military with the Leveller's political programme was to be seen in the *Representation of the Army* document adopted by the army at St Albans. This asserted the military's right to a political voice, and called for a new parliament elected with a wider franchise.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LEVELLERS' POLITICAL PLATFORM

By August 1647, the army leadership was identified with further Parliamentary attempts to reach an accommodation with the Crown, namely the 'Heads of Proposals', outlining the basis for a constitutional monarchy. In late September, for example, both Oliver Cromwell and Henry Ireton helped to vote down a Commons motion that no further

addresses be made to the King. The army reacted vigorously. In early October several cavalry regiments, including those of Cromwell and Ireton elected new agitators and met at Guildford with civilian Levellers. The result was *The Case of the Armie Truly Stated*, a political manifesto calling for what amounted to a constitution, and biennial elections with universal manhood suffrage. This document was presented to the Council of the Army to consider on October 18th.

By the time the Army Council began discussing *The Case*, a new programme had been drafted. *An Agreement of the People*, called for a new social contract, addressing the fact that the traditional authority in England has been discredited.¹⁴ *An Agreement* called for biennial elections, and limited governmental power to make war or peace, relations with foreign states, appointing and dismissing magistrates and government officers and making laws. Parliament was committed to freedom of conscience, equality before the law, and was forbidden to conscript or press men for war service.

An Agreement of the People, was debated at the Council of the Army meeting at Putney church on October 29th. The 'Putney Debates', chaired by Oliver Cromwell, were conducted from October 28th until November 11th 1647. The principal spokesman for the Military Levellers was Colonel Thomas Rainsborough. In addition to being a distinguished soldier, he was also a Member of Parliament and held the naval rank of Vice-Admiral. Other Levellers prominent at the Putney Debates were John Wildman and Maximilian Petty. Their main opponent was Major General Ireton.

Much of the debate centred around the franchise issue. Replying to Ireton's criticism of universal manhood suffrage, Rainsborough stated the Leveller position succinctly:

For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under.¹⁵

A compromise was eventually reached over the franchise envisaged. A vote would be given to all except alms-takers and servants: this decision, and the franchise formula, has been analysed by several historians. Professor C. B. Macpherson in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* is critical of the view that the Levellers were champions of universal manhood suffrage: his generous interpretation of what constituted 'servants', including wage labourers for example, would have left two thirds of the adult male population without a vote. Those inclined to give the Levellers the benefit of the doubt would define 'servants' as those strictly in employment within, and therefore beholden to, a household. In either instance it meant a substantially increased electorate.¹⁶

Events within England coloured further political developments and alignments. Charles Stuart escaped from confinement at Hampton Court and fled to the Isle of Wight. The prospect of an alliance between Royalists, Presbyterians and Scots posed a distinct threat to the army and the gains won by Parliamentary radicals. Despite a minor military mutiny at Ware in support of *An Agreement*, a recon-

ciliation between military Levellers and the army leadership was reached. Detained Leveller leaders were released and the Grandees agreed that no further attempts be made to reconcile with the King, Cromwell moving a successful motion to that effect in the Commons on January 3rd 1648. The army was united, and the influence of civilian Levellers within it was curtailed.

The Levellers carried on with their political work, drafting petitions to Parliament presented in November 1647 and January 1648. The January petition repeated the constitutional demands, called for "an equal rate" of tax, the ending of excise, called for elected magistrates and officials and for the first time since the Putney Debates articulated the call for a new franchise:

That therefore, that Birth-right of all English men, be forth with restored to all which are not, or shall not be legally disfranchised for some criminal cause, or are not under 21 years of age, or servants, or beggars; and we humbly offer, that every County may have its equal proportion of representers.¹⁷

The second civil war eventually broke out in April 1648, with heavy fighting in Essex, Kent and south Wales. A Royalist Scottish army invaded England in July 1648. The Parliamentary armies were ultimately victorious, Cromwell defeating the Scottish force at the battle of Preston and the King was taken back into custody. Leveller political activity had been suspended during the renewed civil war: its end saw the movement in action again. The collectively authored petition of September 11th 1648 attracted some forty thousand signatures and a mass lobby of Parliament. Its twenty-seven point agenda included a call for annual elections for parliaments of not more than fifty days duration, religious toleration, no pressing for military service, equality before the law, trial by jury, punishment proportionate to the crime, no arbitrary prosecutions, an end to imprisonment for debt, an end to tithing, safeguards for private property, an end to excise, and the freeing of trade from monopoly restrictions. The movement was soon drawn back into power politics. The Presbyterian dominated Parliament was still persisting in attempts to reconcile with the King despite all the evidence of his duplicity.

The politically-isolated military leadership actively courted the Leveller party. Negotiations between the Levellers and the military leadership in late 1648 resulted in the publishing of *Foundations of Freedom; or an Agreement of the People*, the Levellers' perception of what had been agreed during the negotiations. Essentially a compromise, this document was a detailed constitutional draft, prohibiting Parliament from altering fundamental rights: the franchise was widened to include only ratepayers and householders. The Levellers saw *An Agreement* as the political blueprint for a democratic parliament. The army presented a muted version of *An Agreement* to Parliament on January 20th 1649: it was never debated.

It is now clear that the military leadership's alignment with the Leveller party was essentially a tactical and temporary one, designed to placate the movement while they purged the Commons of over one hundred Presbyterian members and tried Charles Stuart before an appointed High Court of Justice. Charles Stuart was executed on January 30th 1649, the House of Lords dispensed with on February 6th and monarchy abolished the following day on the grounds that it was "unnecessary, burdensome, and dangerous to liberty,

safety and public interests of the people of this nation".¹⁸ Executive power was vested in a newly created Council of State, which met for the first time on February 17th. The military Levellers had, in the meantime, also suffered a severe blow. Colonel Rainsborough was assassinated on October 29th 1648 while commanding a mopping up operation against the Royalist-held stronghold of Pontefract. His death deprived the Levellers of their leading spokesman within the army. Rainsborough's funeral in London was turned into a huge political manifestation. His funeral procession from Tottenham High Cross to Wapping was accompanied by thousands of cavalry troopers, together with thousands of other mourners wearing sea-green ribbons, Rainsborough's colours. This would become the colour of the Leveller party.

From its inception, there was considerable dissatisfaction with both the basis and nature of the Council of State. The Levellers perceived the Council as taking power away from Parliament, a Parliament of which they were themselves highly critical. Lilburne refused an offer to sit on the court which tried Charles Stuart and, despite having been the first to call for his trial and execution in his January 1647 tract *Regal Tyranny Discovered*, was principled in his criticism of the King's execution. The trial, he argued, should have been postponed until after the adoption of *An Agreement of the People* and the democratic election of a new and free Parliament. As he later explained in *Legall Fundementall Liberties*:

I pressed again and again, seeing themselves confess'd all legal Authority in England was broke, that they would stay his tryall till a new and equal free Representative upon the agreement of the well-affected people, that had not fought against their Liberties, Rights and Freedoms, could be chosen and sit, and then try him thereby, or else by their Judges sitting in the Court called Kings Bench.¹⁹

The trial and subsequent execution of several royalist political prisoners by a new Parliament appointed High Court of Justice was a further area of tension between the regime and the Levellers.

The Leveller party launched their campaign against the Council of State with the publication on February 26th 1649 of *Englands New Chains Discovered*, and on March 21st of *The second Part of Englands Chains Discovered*. Both were critical of the new regime, which free thinkers had already come into conflict with, and the publication of the first tract had led to sympathetic, but ultimately futile, moves by sections of the army. In an account of an unsuccessful attempt by soldiers to place a petition sympathetic to the Levellers' political agenda before the Council of State entitled *The Hunting of the Foxes from Newmarket and Triploe Heaths to Whitehall by five small beagles late of the army*, criticism of the self-appointed nature of the Council's authority was voiced:

The old King's person and the old lords are but removed, and a new king and new lords with the Commons are in one House, and so (we are) under a more absolute arbitrary monarchy than before.²⁰

On the morning of March 28th, Lilburne, Overton, Prince and Walwyn were arrested by the Council of State. All four challenged the legality of their arrest, but were imprisoned within the Tower of London to await trial. The

Leveller party swung into frenzied action again. A petition calling for the release of Lilburne and his associates, and signed by some eighty thousand people was presented on April 2nd, followed by another on April 18th and by *A Petition of Well-affected Women* on April 23rd. The imprisoned Leveller leadership also kept up their political activity, producing *A Manifestation*, published on April 14th²¹ and then the third draft of *An Agreement of the Free People of England* on May 1st. The first addressed a number of the allegations concerning the Levellers, attacking claims that the movement was advocating no government and intent on taking away property: on the contrary, the party sought to secure property and was hostile to a state of “popular confusion” or anarchy. *An Agreement of the People* was “tendered as a peace-offering to this distressed nation”, and again outlined a constitutional blueprint for a limited government consisting of four hundred representatives, none of whom could be a government paid officer and official, elected for one year on the basis of an increased franchise. Parliament would have the right to deal with foreign states and to appoint general officers and allocate the raising of military forces under locally elected officers from localities. The manifesto also advocated religious toleration and freedom of conscience, an end to conscription, equality before the law, free trade, the end of customs and excise duty, a flat rate level of tax, an ending of tithes, capital punishment for murder, treason and other “heinous” crimes, a review of the scale of punishment, trial by jury, all legal proceedings to be conducted in English and completed within six months, and the election of all other public officers for one year terms.²²

The Levellers saw a direct relationship between the political and legal process, magistrates in the seventeenth century, fulfilling as they did many political as well as legal roles; the legal process was perceived as almost totally corrupt. Sample tracts declare, for example, that lawyers are the

manifest perverters of justice and corrupters of all places ... lawyers who are the vilest of men, and the greatest abusers of mankind.²³

And decry that

Men must travel term after term, from all quarters of the land to London, hiring their persons and spirits, wasting their estates, and beggaring their families; tending to nothing but the vexation of the people, and enriching of lawyers.²⁴

The Levellers clearly sought to make law and the legal process accessible to the common man, a very difficult objective: aspects of the archaic British legal system, including its closed shop nature, flourish to this day. Leveller thought envisaged the abolition of the London courts, and the transfer of legal powers from London to monthly courts within every Hundred, courts made up of a twelve-man jury chosen within the locality - a return to pre-Norman procedures. The Leveller party rejected much of what they saw as a Norman legacy, particularly in law. Sir Edward Coke's *Institutes*, a then contemporary text on English common law, was held in high regard by the revolutionaries. The Levellers' identification with common law predated the case for evolutionary common law as opposed to statutory law, later expounded by Friedrich Hayek.

The Levellers identified a common thread in the monopolies in commerce, law and religion. They also criticised the cost of government, particularly the salaries paid to government officials:

The highest oppression, theft and murder in the world, thus to rob poor people ... to maintain their pomp, superfluities, and debauchery.²⁵

The Council of State's first few months of existence were marked with political disquiet from military as well as civilian quarters. In addition to events surrounding the publication of *The Hunting of the Foxes*, there were several major disturbances within military units. Unrest centred around impending service in Ireland. Three hundred infantrymen in Hewson's regiment, having resolved not to serve in Ireland until the Levellers programme had been realised, were cashiered without pay arrears. Elements of another unit, Whalley's regiment, quartered in Bishopsgate, refused orders to leave the City of London. Fifteen soldiers were courtmartialled, of which six were sentenced to death. All were pardoned except for Robert Lockyer, a former agitator and political leader within his regiment. He was executed by firing squad in front of St Paul's Cathedral on April 27th 1649. Lockyer's funeral was the occasion for another massive Leveller-led demonstration, with thousands of mourners wearing sea-green ribbons. A major disturbance initially involving the mutiny of Scroop's cavalry regiment at Salisbury gathered momentum: some twelve hundred mutineers began to march westwards to join up with other regiments pledged to their cause. They were surprised at Burford on the evening of May 14th by Parliamentary forces under the command of Cromwell and Fairfax. Resistance was brief, and the mutineers either surrendered or fled without much bloodshed. The mutiny ended with the execution of one junior officer, Cornet Thompson, and two corporals near Burford church the following day. Parliamentary forces also crushed a similar Leveller-inspired uprising in Oxfordshire. Led by William Thompson, a former soldier, friend and protege of Lilburne, and brother of Cornet Thompson, a grouping of soldiers and militiamen united under a Leveller-orientated political statement, *England's Standard Advanced*. The rebels were militarily routed with Thompson dying on May 17th in a desperate action near Wellingborough. With the ending of these military attempts to focus a political settlement based on *An Agreement of the People*, so ended the possibility of a Leveller-led political solution within the English Revolution.

John Lilburne was eventually brought to trial for his life in the Guildhall on October 25th 1649. Lilburne used the occasion to level extensive political criticism at the Council of State, and was declared to be not guilty by the jury. Both he, and his companions, were freed from custody on November 8th. Their release was the occasion of considerable celebration throughout London. The Levellers, as an organised political force, had, however, passed their zenith. Leading Levellers continued to write and publish political tracts. Lilburne was to be exiled by the Rump Parliament within the year. On his return in early 1653, following the dissolution of the Rump Parliament, he was tried again: despite not being found guilty he was detained by the state. Lilburne was held in the Tower of London, in the Channel Islands and then at Dover Castle. He died, having been freed by Cromwell, at Eltham on August 29th 1657.

The Levellers can be seen to have failed for several reasons. The Leveller movement was at its strongest during the political and economic instability which characterised much of the 1640s, particularly towards the end of the decade. From 1649/50 onwards, however, economic conditions improved steadily, draining away much of the hitherto popular support for items within the Leveller platform. There had always been a gulf between the somewhat intellectual nature of several Leveller ideas and visions and the people: abstract political theory was easily lost on the ordinary people, a socially conservative and politically apathetic population. It can be seen that there was often support for grievances articulated by the Levellers but not always for the political solutions offered by the movement.

The Leveller movement had alienated several powerful groupings within the English body politic, groupings such as the army Grandees and various of the groups which constituted the new "ruling class" within the new commonwealth, people and interests who were deeply suspicious of Leveller motives and politics. Another key factor in the political demise of the Leveller movement was their loss of a support base within the military. Many of the grievances against the government which had resulted in common cause being made between significant elements within the military and the Leveller movement were addressed by commonwealth governments: the death of Rainsborough also drastically weakened the Leveller hand within the army.

THE LEGACY OF THE LEVELLERS

The Levellers can be seen as probably the first modern broad-based activist political party in Britain and possibly Western Europe. As a party, by 1648 the movement was organised down to ward and parish level within the City of London: each ward within the City had Leveller organisers or supporters, usually meeting within a local tavern. A directly-elected executive committee of twelve members directed Leveller activities and policies from its London headquarters, the Whalebone Tavern, at which the committee would meet three times a week. Party finances were accrued through subscriptions from members, and regulated by two treasurers. The party also had its own weekly newspaper, *The Moderate* - a previously declining and uninspiring Puritan publication before coming under Leveller control in June 1648. Edited by Gilbert Mabbott, *The Moderate* became a crucial means of national communication, with correspondents across England, until it was silenced by government censorship in late 1649. In addition to its London stronghold, Leveller activities were also closely organised in Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Kent, with further supporters in Somerset, Yorkshire, Oxfordshire, Leicestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire.

In addition to the quite unique party structures mentioned above, the Levellers can also be seen as having developed the first mass propaganda techniques deployed in Britain. In the words of A. L. Morton:

They wrote effectively not merely because they were exceptionally gifted or technically well equipped ... but because they wrote with a purpose clearly understood and deeply felt, and for an audience which they knew to be close and immediately responsive ... they can fairly claim to be the fathers of the tradition of

plain English writing dedicated to the service of the plain man.²⁶

Many of the Leveller activists were printers, and the movement rapidly and expertly mastered the origination, deployment and distribution of printed political propaganda, with political petitions such as *A Manifestation* being presented to parliament with often thousands and tens of thousands of signatures attached: Leveller ward committees and activists would provide the groundwork for amassing the signatures on these mass petitions. The Levellers, in conjunction with several of the other groupings and sects which emerged during the 1640s it must be pointed out, also broke new ground in their acceptance of women as political and social equals, with many women playing prominent roles both within the party and its activities.

The Levellers helped to put the issue of sovereignty on the political map - the principle of the consent of the people to be governed. They were indirectly responsible for the origination of Britain's first and only written constitution, the *Instrument of Government*. Probably authored by Ireton, it was a far from satisfactory document, a mixture of ideas from the Heads of Proposals, *An Agreement of the People* and several ideas floated by the Rump Parliament. Its mere existence, however, owed everything to the debate fostered by the Leveller movement.

A clear legacy in terms of Leveller thought can be seen in much of the intellectual motivation both behind and throughout the American Revolution, well over one hundred years later. J. G. A. Pocock's *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688 and 1776* draws much of the common ground together.²⁷ Many of the ideas outlined in the various drafts of *An Agreement of the People* can be identified in several of the constitutions and key political documents within the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary American States, including both the United States Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. Thomas Jefferson's famous statement that

[T]he mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favoured few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately.

directly echoed the words of prominent Leveller activist, Richard Rumbold.²⁸

If the Levellers helped in any way to guide or direct the political birth of the United States of America, still and certainly then the freest society on earth, insisting as they did on the separation of powers and that government is the servant and not the master of the people, then their legacy and importance is inestimable.

As mentioned above, the left have long attempted to claim the Leveller movement as political antecedents. To say this is intellectually dishonest would be an understatement. Fenner Brockway's attempt to claim them as the first British socialists is a particularly arbitrary one. He argues that both the Levellers and the Agitators "contributed" towards the concept of "democratic socialism" because the Levellers

were pioneers of political democracy and the sovereignty of the people; the Agitators were the pioneers of participatory control by the ranks at their workplace.²⁹

Brockway then equates unashamedly the Levellers with the Diggers, or “True Levellers”, a movement with a clear and undoubted communistic programme. His methodology leaves a great deal to be desired.

The libertarian clarity, and anti-collectivist nature, of Leveller thought is apparent and particularly impressive for the seventeenth century, a century still stamped with much of the theory and mystique of absolutism. Even a fleeting selection of Leveller thought on individual rights provides fascinating confirmation of a clearly-rationalised libertarian mindset. *Vox Plebis*, one of the earlier Leveller tracts, declares:

For as God created every man free in Adam: so by nature are all alike freemen born.³⁰

John Lilburne, invoked pure natural rights when he stated that men were

by nature all equal and alike in power, dignity, authority, and majesty.³¹

This natural law dictated that no man had

any authority, dominion or magisterial power, one over or above another, neither have they, or can they exercise any, but merely by institution, or donation, that is to say, by mutual agreement or consent, given, derived, or assumed, by mutual consent and agreement.³²

Richard Overton:

By natural birth, all men are equal and alike born to the like propriety and freedom.³³

and:

To every individual in nature, is given an individual propriety by nature, not to be invaded or usurped by any ... for every one as he is himself hath a self-propiety, else could not be himself, and on this no second may presume without consent.³⁴

It was also in their defence against the smear of seeking to ‘level’ men’s estates, that the Levellers made a clear and unambiguous defence of private property. John Lilburne declared that the Levellers were

the truest and constantest assertors of liberty and propriety (which are quite opposite to community and levelling)

and that there was nothing in Leveller literature or statements

that doth in the least tend to the destruction of liberty and propriety or to the setting up of levelling by universal community or anything really and truly like it.³⁵

In a separate text, Lilburne also states, for example:

In my opinion and judgement, this conceit of levelling of property and magistracy is so ridiculous and foolish an opinion, as no man of brains, reason or ingenuity, can be imagined such a sot as to maintain such a principle, because it would, if practised, destroy not only any industry in the world, but raze the very foundation of generation, and of subsistence or being of one man by another. For as for industry and valour by which the societies of mankind are maintained and preserved,

who will take pains for that which when he hath gotten is not his own, but must equally be shared in, by every lazy, simple, dronish sot? Or who will fight for that, wherein he hath no interest, but such as must be subject to the will and pleasure of another, yea of every coward and base low-spirited fellow, that in his sitting still must share in common with a valiant man in all his brave noble achievements? The ancient encouragement to men that were to defence their country was this: that they were to hazard their persons for that which was their own, to wit, their own wives, their own children, their own estates.³⁶

Manning himself also points out that the Levellers never even condemned unlimited acquisition of property.³⁷

What is also probably the case is that many of the Leveller views may have been more radical than those which appeared in print. Several Leveller publications, particularly the second *Agreement of the People*, for example, were deliberately compromised in content in order to form political alliances. Gregg states that:

The spirit of Leveller teaching was more revolutionary than its content, and there was a spirit of equalitarianism in their doctrines which existed not merely in the apprehensive imagination of the army grandees.³⁸

Eminent historians of the English Revolution have also touched on the issue of the Levellers’ political stance. F. D. Dow states for example:

Their creed was that of liberalism and individualism, not socialism or equality.³⁹

Even the Marxist social historian A. L. Morton acknowledged that the Levellers were not a movement which the Marxist or socialist left could claim as their own:

It was a radical but not a working class party: indeed, how could it be at a time when the working class as we know it was only beginning to exist? Still less was it a ‘socialist’ party in the sense of advocating the type of egalitarian and agrarian communism which was widespread at this time and was not articulately expressed by Winstanley and his Diggers or ‘true Levellers’.⁴⁰

Dr Christopher Hill, writing in his *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714*, is also critical of claims that the Levellers were in some way communist:

On the contrary, they expressed the outlook of men of small property, the artisan, yeoman, and husbandman majority of the population. They sharply differentiated themselves from the Diggers who advocated a communist programme ...⁴¹

With their commitment to political, social and economic freedom the Levellers were clearly not socialist in orientation. Far from being the lineal ancestors of British socialism, within the family tree of British political thought they were, at the very least, if not grandparents then ideological first cousins to that body of political and economic thought identified as Thatcherism. Advancing a platform of individual rights, they were particularly hostile to the state and the state’s encroachment on natural rights and violation of civil liberties. The Levellers’ social composition was quite similar to the Thatcherites who came to power first within the Conservative party and then electorally in Britain.

There also exists within the Conservative party a school of thought which is anti-aristocratic, suspicious of Tory grandees, and fundamentally politically, economically and socially egalitarian - within the strict definition of that word - seeking the establishment of a classless society within Britain. Sections of the New Right are clearly ill at ease with the concept of monarchy. Peregrine Worsthorne, for example, editorialising in the *Sunday Telegraph*, identified elements of

a deliberate campaign to disparage all the institutions of Britain that pre-date the ascendancy of the new entrepreneurs, most of whom hate tradition and continuity quite as much as they hate socialism.

Worsthorne went on to examine the substance of what he sees as right-wing republicanism:

There is a new phenomenon here - Republicanism of the Right. The monarchy - so the argument goes - is the linchpin of an archaic feudal structure that stands in the way of economic progress. Weaken the linchpin, and the whole archaic structure will crumble into dust and ashes, from which will arise a new, wholly bourgeois society fit for entrepreneurial heroes to live in.

He also states that:

Right wing Republicanism sees it (monarchy) as a structure of privilege preventing a capitalist utopia.⁴²

In so doing he echoes a plank of the Leveller argument.

The political programme which the Levellers outlined in their various publications and manifestos, particularly in their drafts of the constitutional blueprint *An Agreement of the People*, is one which would not be alien, and would be positively attractive, to most libertarian conservatives: the abolition of the monarchy and House of Lords, a unicameral legislature elected for one or two year terms and meeting only for a few months per year, the introduction of universal suffrage, the election for one-year terms of local government officials such as magistrates; a free market abolishing the monopolies enjoyed by the chartered companies, flat-rate taxation, an end to customs and excise duties; equality before the law, trial by jury, no one to be tried "where no law before provided", defendants able to defend themselves or appoint a counsel, no one to have to incriminate themselves, an end to imprisonment for debt, capital punishment only for murder, other "heinous" offences and attempts to overthrow *An Agreement*, a review of the scale of punishments, all legal proceedings to be in English and completed within six months; Parliament to appoint general officers for the army, and to assign quotas to local authorities, whose officers would be elected or dismissed by local electors, an end to impressment for service; freedom of conscience and religion, and the denationalisation of religion, each parish to elect its own minister.

That several of these themes have transcended three hundred years of political thought, and are as relevant today as in the 1640s bears testimony both to their clarity and genius. The libertarian school of thought present and active within the Conservative party in the 1980s and 1990s would strongly identify with many of the Leveller ideas. The role of the monarchy within a libertarian state has already excited a level of debate, some of it humorously examining the option of privatisation. Others, hostile to

hereditary claims to political office, perceive the constitutional position, dependent to an extent on a hereditary sovereign and peers, as an unwelcome and unjust arrangement - preferring a republican government free of the shackles of an accident of birth.

Committed minimal statist would also view Leveller calls for parliaments to be of one or two years duration with favour. The community charge controversy, for example, had resulted in central government toying with the idea that local government should be elected yearly in order to make local councils more accountable to the people: these calls directly echo Leveller ideas and caution concerning the nature of government. Advocates of a free economy would welcome both a flat rate level of taxation, the abolition of customs and excise duty, and the freeing of the market. Small businessmen and merchants at the time of the Levellers would have been very resentful of Crown chartered companies and the monopolies they enjoyed at the expense of the market.

The Leveller movement failed because of the several factors mentioned above. They had tried to work through a parliament which was ultimately unsympathetic and suspicious of the movement, its leaders and its political aspirations. It was a parliament deeply uneasy with any break with the Crown, nurturing as it did for much of the 1640s a hope for a rapprochement with the king. And when the break did come, with the execution of Charles Stuart, Leveller views were still seen as too radical for the English body politic under Cromwell, a man more concerned, at that stage at least, with the nature of political power than with political philosophy. It was this growing gulf between the Levellers and the government of the Commonwealth which saw a stepping-up in the extra-parliamentary activity such as the political propaganda petition which was the hallmark of the movement. It would lead ultimately to the advocacy of armed struggle against what was perceived as an illegitimate authority.

It is perhaps fitting to end with the thoughts of two eminent socialist social historians on the enduring validity of the libertarian movement known as the Levellers, a fundamentally anti-collectivist party which would have been intensely hostile to socialism in any of its forms, which burnt itself into British political history over three hundred years ago.

Christopher Hill:

It was so great an intellectual revolution that it is difficult for us to conceive how men thought before it was made. So although the Puritan revolution was defeated, the revolution in thought could not be unmade ... Even the ideas of men who would not compromise in 1660, of Milton and the Levellers, these ideas were driven underground but could not be killed.⁴³

A. L. Morton:

A Party that held the centre of the stage for three of the most crucial years in our nation's history, voiced the aspirations of the unprivileged masses, and was able to express with such force ideas that have been behind every great social advance since their time, cannot be regarded as wholly a failure or deserve to be wholly forgotten.⁴⁴

THE LEVELLERS: A SELECTION OF POLITICAL THOUGHT⁴⁵

The Petition of March 1647

This piece of work, the first political agenda of the Leveller movement, was printed in early March, and circulated for signatures. The House of Commons received it on March 15th and despite its temperate wording it was immediately declared seditious.

The Petition touches on several themes which recur throughout Leveller or Leveller-inspired literature, calling on Parliament to lift all sentences and fines imposed arbitrarily, and pay reparations to those affected; no compulsion on citizens to answer incriminating questions against themselves; no legislation or covenants adversely affecting citizens for nonconformity or "different opinion or practice in Religion"; religious toleration; the dissolution of monopolistic merchant companies; a simplification of the legal processes, the use of English within them and a written and published definition of the duty and fees of all legal officers within the Commonwealth; no capital punishment without the testimony of at least two witnesses, and punishment proportionate to the crime with pre-trial imprisonment used only as safe custody and not as punishment; the end of tithes and enforced maintenance, ministers being maintained by voluntary contributions; the relief of debt prisoners; that the prison keepers be honest and civil in their duties. An economic angle is also examined in the introduction:

And although all new illegall Patents are by you abolished, yet the oppressive Monopoly of Merchant-adventurers, and others, do still remain to the great abridgement of the liberties of the people, and to the extreme prejudice of all such industrious people as depend on cloathing, or other wollen manufacture, (it being the Staple commodity of this Nation,) and to the great discouragement and disadvantage of all sorts of Tradesmen, Seafaring-men, and hindrance of Shipping and Navigation.

June 5th 1647 ***A Solemne Engagement of the Army***

This Leveller-inspired programme was read to the regiments at Newmarket Heath meeting on June 5th, accepted and published in London later that month. The army resolved not to divide or disband until its demands had been met and it set up the Council of the Army, in which each regiment elected two junior officers and two rank and file representatives to sit with the senior officers on the Council of War.

June 14th 1647 ***Representation of the Army***

Drafted by military leaders at St Albans, this essentially political document complemented *A Solemne Engagement*, which had addressed mainly military concerns, and underlined the Army's claim to an independent political voice. It called for an end to the Long Parliament and for a new parliament elected with a wider franchise. It very clearly

stated the army's right to be interested in political affairs, having been:

called forth and conjured, by the severall Declarations of Parliament, to the defence of our owne and the peoples just rights, and liberties; so we took up Armes, in judgement and conscience to those ends, and have so continued them, and are resolved according to your first just desires in your Declarations, and such principles as we have received from your frequent informations, and our own common sence concerning those our fundamentall Rights and Liberties, to assert and vindicate, the just power, and Ritghts of this Kingdome in Parliament for those common ends premised, against all arbitrary power, violence and oppression and against all particular parties, or interests whatsoever.

October 15th 1647 ***The Case of the Armie Truly Stated***

Meeting in Guildford, newly-elected representatives of five cavalry regiments including those of Cromwell and Ireton, together with civilian Levellers drafted this document, and presented it to the Army Council on or about October 18th.

It called for biennial elections

and that all the freeborn at the age of 21 yeares and upwards, be the electors, excepting those that have or shall deprive themselves of that their freedome, either for some yeares or wholly by delinquency.

It demanded "a law paramount to be made ... unalterable by Parliaments". In other words, a constitution. The document also called for the restoration of common land "ancient rights and donations" belonging to the poor.

November 3rd 1647 ***An Agreement of the People***

Drafted shortly before it was debated by the Council of the Army at Putney on October 29th, it was published in London several days later. Probably written by the military representatives whose names were affixed, in conjunction with Leveller political leaders.

Article 1:

That the People of England being at this day very unequally distributed by Counties, Cities and Burroughs, for the election of their deputies in Parliament, ought to be more indifferently proportioned, according to the number of the Inhabitants: the circumstances whereof, for number, place, and manner, are to be set down before the end of this present Parliament.

Article 3:

That the People do of course chuse themselves a Parliament once in two yeares.

Which would sit from early April until the end of September.

Article 4:

That the power of this, and all future Representatives of this Nation ... doth extend ... to the enacting, altering, and repealing of Lawes; to the erecting and abolishing of Offices and Courts; to the appointing, removing, and calling to account Magistrates, and Officers of all degrees; to the making War and peace, to the treating with forraign States: And generally, to whatsoever is not expresly, or impliedly reserved by the represented to themselves.

Which are as followeth,

1. That matters of Religion, and the wayes of Gods Worship, are not at all intrusted by us to any humane power, because therein wee cannot remit or exceed a tittle of what our Consciences dictate to be the mind of God, without wilfull sinne: nevertheless the publike way of instructing the Nation (so it be not compulsive) is referred to their discretion.

2. That the matter of impresting and constraining any of us to serve in the warres is against our freedome; and therefore we do not allow it in our Representatives ...

4. That in all Laws made, or to be made, every person may be bound alike, and that no Tenure, Estate, Charter, Degree, Birth, or place, do confer any exemption from the ordinary Course of Legall proceedings, whereunto others are subjected.

The above are declared to be “native Rights”, and an attached declaration to the free-born people of England explains the need for an *Agreement of the People* rather than another petition of Parliament as being self evident. Without a general Agreement, one Parliament can overturn what another has decreed: the limits of what Parliament can be empowered to do must be defined.

In a statement to their fellow soldiers, it is explained that several principles of freedom were extracted from the *Case Truly Stated* and it was “chiefly because for these things wee first ingaged against the King”.

The Petition of September 11th 1648

This collectively-authored piece of work, presented to the House of Commons on September 11th 1648 with some forty thousand signatures, was the Levellers’ first following the end of the second civil war, the movement’s political work having been suspended for the duration. The military government under Cromwell was more favourably disposed towards Leveller policies than previously, both groupings being aligned against the Presbyterian faction within the House of Commons.

The petition included a twenty-seven point agenda amongst which the following featured: annual elections for parliaments of not more than fifty days duration:

4. That you would have exempted matters of Religion and God, from the compulsive or restrictive power of any Authoritie upon earth, and reserved to the supreme authoritie an uncompulsive power only of appointing presecution, and hart-burning would for ever be avoyded;

There would be no power to conscript or press men for military service “there being nothing more opposite to freedom”, a just cause being able to attract men; equality before the law of the land; trial by a jury of twelve men, and “no conviction but upon two or more sufficient known witnesses”;

8. That you would have freed all men from being examined against themselves, and from being questioned or punished for doing of that against which no Law hath bin provided;

that legal proceedings were abbreviated;

10. That you would have freed all Trade and Merchandising from all Monopolizing and Engrossing, by Companies and otherwise;

11. That you would have abolished Excise, and all kind of taxes, except subsidies, the old and onely just way of England;

The opening up of fens and common land, except where it benefits the poor; a resolution of the problem of imprisonment for debt;

15. That you would have proportioned Punishments more equal to offences; so mens Lives and Estates might not be forfeited upon trivial and slight occasions;

16. That you have removed the tedious burthen of Tythes, satisfying all Impropiators, and providing a more equal way of maintenance for the publike Ministers; ...

18. That you would have bound your selves and all future Parliaments from abolishing propriety, levelling mens Estats, or making all things common; ...

20. That you would have rectified the election of publike Officers for the Citie of London, of every particular Company therin, restoring the Comunalty thereof to their just Rights, most unjustly withheld from them, to the producing and maintainance of corrupt interests, opposite to common Freedom, and exceedingly prejudecal to the trade and manufactures of this Nation;

That freedom of conscience without Parliamentary interference would have been secured, “divine truths need no human helps to support them”, also allowing “that liberty of discourse by which Corruption and tyranny would be soon discovered”.

April 5th 1649 **The English Souldiers Standard**

Attributed to William Walwyn, assisted by the other Leveller leaders, this piece of work emphasises the relationship between the military and civilians, urging “by all means every man of you to preserve the love of the people”. It also touches on several recurrent themes, including the issue of service in Ireland.

You have been many of you Country-men and know well what a miserable burthen Tythes and Free-quarter are: many of you have been Trades-men and laborious people, and can be sensible how intolerable the burthen of Excise, and Customs, and Monopolies in Trade are, Officers and Usurers running away with that

which should pay you, and the poor labour for; to the ruine of trade.

The legal issue is also raised:

You, we live under unknown Laws, written in canting French, vexed and molested with a whole drove of corrupt Judges, Lawyers, Jaylors, and the like Caterpillers of the Common-wealth.

There is also criticism of the present regime's conservatism in addressing matters of the law, religious toleration, censorship. Service in Ireland is mentioned, and the document calls on soldiers to ensure that those liberties and rights which the army had been striving for were actually established in England before the soldiers left for Ireland:

Certainly, before you go, it will be good for you to see those Rights and Liberties of the people, for which you took up Arms in judgement and conscience, cleared and secured, by a full and clear Agreement of the people; and not to leave them at the meer arbitrary mercy of the Council of State, or a pack'd Parliament: for since they have dared to gull and cheat you to your faces, and whilst you are hereabouts, and together; what inhumane cruelties may they not do in your absence? ... before you resolve upon a new Engagement, first see a new Representative of the Army established, by the free Election of every Regiment; and refer your selves to their Counsel and advice in all things ... For consider, as things now stand, to what end you should hazard your lives against the Irish: have you not been fighting these seven years in England for Rights and Liberties, that you are yet deluded of? and that too, when as none can hinder you of them but your own Officers, under whom you have fought? and will you go on stil to kil, slay and murther men, to make them as absolute Lords and Masters over Ireland as you have made them over England? or is it your ambition to reduce the Irish to the happinesse of Tythes upon trebble damages, to Excise, Customs and Monopolies in Trades? ... it certainly concerns you in the first place, and before you go, to see those evils reformed here; that when occasion shall justly invite you thither, you may carry a good platform in your hands, such a one as possibly they will never fight against.

April 14th 1649 *A Manifestation and Full Vindication*

Published upon the name of all four Leveller leaders while imprisoned in the Tower of London, this tract seeks to address some of the anti-Leveller allegation of the time, namely:

... that we would Levell all mens estates, that we would have no distinction of Orders and Dignities amongst men, that we are indeed for no government, but a Popular confusion; and then againe that we have bin Agents for the King, and now for the Queen; That we are Atheists, Antiscrupturalists, Jesuites and indeed any thing, that is hatefull and of evill repute amongst men.

The allegation of seeking to level all men's estates is tackled:

First, Then it will be requisite that we express our selves concerning Levelling, for which we suppose is

commonly meant an equalling of mens estates, and taking away the proper right and Title that every man has to what is his own. This as we have formerly declared against, particularly in our petition of the 11 of Sept. so do we againe professe that to attempt an inducing the same is most injurious, unlesse there did precede an universall assent thereunto from all and every one of the People. Nor doe we, under favour, judge it within the Power of a Representative it self, because because although their power is supream, yet it is but deputative and of trust, and consequently must be restrained expresly or tacitely, to some particular essential as well to the Peoples safety and freedom as to the present Government ... We profess therefore that we never had it in our thoughts to Level mens estates, itbeing the utmost of our aime that the Commonwealth be reduced to such a passe that every man may with as much security as may be enjoy his propriety.

On the allegation of professing anarchy, it is clear that the Levellers saw a distinct role for authority:

That we are for Government and against Popular Confusion, we conceive all our actions declare ... though Tyranny is so excessively bad, yet of the two extremes, Confusion is the worst: Tis somewhat a strange consequence to infer that because we have laboured so earnestly for a good Government, therefore we would have none at all, Because we would have been dead and exorbitant Branches pruned, and have better sciens grafted, therefore we would pluck the Tree up by the roots.

The *Manifestation* does deal with what must have been a distinct concern of the times, the ability that power has to corrupt:

And whereas 'tis urged, That if we were in power, we would bear our selves as Tyrannically as others have done: We confess indeed, that the experimentall defections of so many men as have succeeded in Authority, and the exceeding difference we have hitherto found in the same men in a low, and in an exalted condition, makes us even mistrust our own hearts, and hardly believe our own Resolutions of the contrary.

The other charges, clearly unfounded, that the Levellers were rolyalist agents, Jesuits or atheists are also dealt with in the tract.

May 1st 1649

An Agreement of the Free People of England

The third and final draft of the *Agreement*, "tendered as a Peace-Offering to this distressed Nation" by Lieutenant-Colonel Lilburne, William Walwyn, Thomas Prince and Richard Overton while still imprisoned.

The "Supreme Authority of England and the Territories therewith incorporate" would be a four hundred strong "Representative of the People" elected by all men aged twenty-one years and above, "not being servants, or receiving alms, or having served the late King in Arms or voluntary Contributions", with a quorum of two hundred Members; all government paid officers, treasurers and receivers were barred from election and lawyers were not to practice while elected; Members could only be elected for one term of office, but could be re-elected after one inter-

vening parliamentary session; the parliament would be elected annually, sitting for at least four months and then being at liberty to adjourn from two months to two months during which time a Committee of Members would manage affairs; the parliament's authority would be limited to dealing with peace and commerce with foreign states,

the preservation of those safe guards, and securities of our lives, limbs, liberties, properties, and estates, contained in the Petition of Right, made and enacted in the third years of the late King, ...

the raising of moneys, and generally to all things as shall be evidently conducting to those ends, or to the enlargement of our freedom, redress of grievances, and prosperity of the Common-wealth;

Clause 10 called for full religious toleration; no powers to conscript or press for war service,

everymans Conscience being to be satisfied in the justness of that cause wherein he hazards his own life, or may destroy an others;

Full equality before the law; "where there is no Law, there is no transgression" and separation of powers - no parliamentary interference with the law; no-one to be forced to incriminate himself; all legal proceedings to be completed within six months, to be in English and freedom to plead ones own case or to use others of ones choice to do so;

XVIII. That it shall not be in their power to continue or make any Laws to abridge or hinder any person or persons, from trading or merchandizing into any place beyond the Seas, where any of this Nation are free to trade;

XIX. That it shall not be in their power to continue Excise or Customes upon any sort of Food, or any other Goods, Wares, or Commodities, longer than four months after the beginning of the next Representative, being both of them extreme burthensome and oppressive to Trade ... nor shall they raise Moneys by any other ways ... but only by an equal rate in the pound upon every reall and personall estate in the Nation;

An end to imprisonment for debt; capital punishment only for an end to imprisonment for debt; capital punishment against severe punishment for minor offences; the ending of tithes; no imposition of ministers upon parishes, parishioners being able to choose their own ministers and make their own financial arrangements for his payment; trial by a jury of twelve men chosen "in some free way by the people" from the neighbourhood; religious views not to disbar anyone from holding government office, papists and foreign allegiance aside; that the electorate would be able to elect public officers, for one-year terms, in Counties, Hundreds, Cities, Towns and boroughs; the right to raise military forces was reserved to the parliament, with parliament allotting the raising and equipping of forces to "County, City, Town and Borrough" with local electors nominating and appointing all officers, parliament reserving for itself the right to appoint general officers;

XXX. We therefore agree and declare, That it shall not be in the power of any Representative, in any wise, to render up, or give, or take away any part of this Agreement, nor level mens Estates, destroy Propriety, or make all things Common.

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17. Woodhouse, *op cit*.
18. Cited in S. R. Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate*, Volume One 1649-50, The Windrush Press, Adlestrop, 1988, page 3.
19. John Lilburne, *Legall Fundamentall Liberties of the People of England*, London, 1649, in William Haller and Godfrey Davies (editors), *The Leveller Tracts 1647-1653*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1944, cited in Morton *op cit*, page 433.
20. Gardiner, *op cit*, page 33.
21. Morton, *op cit*, page 245.
22. Morton, *op cit*, page 261.
23. *England's Troublers Troubled: Or the just Resolutions of the plaine-men of England, Against the Rich and Mightie*, London, 1648, page 2, page 6.
24. William Walwyn, *A Helpe to the right understanding*, London 1645 in William Haller (editor), *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution*, Volume 3, Columbia University Press, New York, 1934, page 195.
25. John Lilburne, *Legall Fundementall Liberties*, in Haller and Davies, *op cit*, page 435.
26. A. L. Morton quoted by Christopher Hill in A. L. Morton (editor), *Freedom in Arms*, *op cit*, page 11.
27. J. G. A. Pocock, *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688 and 1776*, Princeton University Press, 1980.
28. Richard Rumbold was one of the eight soldiers who presented *England's New Chains*, a critical military Leveller petition to the Council of State: these men were subsequently court-martialled. A dedicated revolutionary, Rumbold was later involved in the Rye House plot and subsequently executed in Edinburgh for subversion, declaring that "he did not believe that God had made the greater part of mankind with saddles on their backs and bridles in their mouths, and some few booted and spurred to ride the rest", cited in Gardiner, *op cit*, page 32.
29. Brockway, *op cit*.
30. *Vox Plebis*, London, 1646, page 4.
31. John Lilburne, *The Free-mans Freedome Vindicated*, London, 1646, page 11.
32. *Ibid*.
33. Richard Overton, *An Appeale*, London, 1647, in Don Wolfe (editor), *Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution*, Nelson, London, 1944, page 162.
34. *Ibid*.
35. John Lilburne, cited in David Petegorsky, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War: A Study in the Social Philosophy of Gerrard Winstanley*, Gollancz, London, 1940, page 110.
36. Lilburne, quoted in D. B. Robertson, *The Religious Foundations of Leveller Democracy*, Kings Crown Press, Columbia University, New York, 1951, page 87.
37. Manning, *op cit*, page 400.
38. Pauline Gregg, *Freeborn John: a biography of John Lilburne*, Harrap, London, 1961, page 353.
39. Dow, *op cit*.
40. Morton, *op cit*, page 27
41. Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714*, Van Nostrand Reinhold (International), London, 1980, page 111.
42. *Sunday Telegraph*, 30 April 1989.
43. Hill, *op cit*, page 163
44. Morton, *op cit*, page 73.
45. All these selections appear in Manning, *op cit*.

A Manifestation

F R O M

Lieutenant Col. *John Lilburn*, Mr. *William
Walwyn*, Mr. *Thomas Prince*, and
Mr. *Richard Overton*,

(Now Prisoners in the TOWER of *London*)
And others, commonly (though unjustly)

S T Y L E D

LEVELLERS.

Intended for their

FULL VINDICATION

F R O M

The many aspersions cast upon them, to
render them odious to the World, and un-
serviceable to the *Common-wealth*.

And to satisfie and ascertain all MEN
whereunto all their Motions and Endeavours
tend, and what is the ultimate Scope of
their Engagement in the

PUBLICK AFFAIRES.

They also that render evill for good, are our adversaries: because we
follow the thing that good is.

Printed in the year of our LORD, 1649.