

Charles had a plan that he believed would help control Parliament. The Scots had written a letter – with Montrose among its signatories – sometime in February 1640 which was addressed to Louis XIII, King of France. It denounced Charles's oppressive rule as the result of Spanish influence and Hapsburg power, and urged France to ally with the Scots against England. Charles was certain that Parliament would be so horrified by the letter that it would at once vote him the monies he needed to bring the renegade Scots to heel. But Parliament was not especially horrified, perhaps because better-informed members of the Commons knew that Louis's adviser Cardinal Richelieu was unlikely to want to support the Covenanters. Stolidly, the Commons insisted on bringing a long list of English grievances to Charles before it would agree to vote him the money for the Scottish wars.

To grasp the transient drama of the Short Parliament it is necessary to understand what Parliament was in the seventeenth century. Although called by the same name and occupying the same site, it was very different from the body we know today. In the first place, a seventeenth-century House of Commons was not democratically elected. MPs were almost always from a particular stratum of society, the gentry or merchant class – the number of the latter among MPs was growing, but not at any breakneck speed – and most elections were not contested; rather, the MP stood before the assembled franchise-holders and was acclaimed. Even this very feeble democratic gesture was confined to men with property, characteristically landed property. Very occasionally a woman property-holder did try to exercise the franchise, but she was usually turned away by outraged males, and generally suffrage and being an MP were entirely landed male affairs. Women, servants and labourers were no more part of it than they were part of the monarchy – less, if anything, for a female ruler was more conceivable than a female MP. Like everything else in the seventeenth-century state, the vote was unevenly distributed, so that in some urban areas maybe as many as one-third of adult men could vote, but this was an atypical peak; in rural areas suffrage could fall below 5%. Then there was the problem of the Celtic kingdoms. Although the Welsh sent representatives, the Scots and Irish did not. Finally, the Commons' powers were always bracketed by the power of the House of Lords, which represented the aristocracy and also the government of the Church of England.

Together with the monarch, the two houses were supposed to form a kind of snapshot of the nation's various social classes, but in fact the result was a portrait-bust, showing the nation only from the chest up.

Secondly, Parliament could only be summoned by the monarch, and each time this happened a different body resulted, which then sat until the monarch chose to dismiss it. Finally, monarchs tended to see Parliaments solely as a way of raising money, while legal experts such as Edward Coke saw Parliaments as much more – vehicles of complaint, guarantees of justice if the courts failed, and – most controversially – sites of ultimate sovereignty, on behalf of the whole people. In fact most Parliamentary time was spent on local issues, often of soporific triviality to everyone outside the locale in question – deepening the River Ouse, for example. Men might become MPs because of an interest in some such local issue, or more simply and far more commonly to prove their status. Because becoming an MP was such a popular way to show yourself a proper gentleman, the number of seats kept increasing. Once elected, MPs tended to race up to London for as short a time as possible, since life in the capital was expensive and they had things to do at home. Divisions (actual votes) were fairly uncommon; mostly the goal was unity, 'the sense of the house', rather as in the elections themselves, where the goal was unanimity, participation, and not choice. Nor was there a great deal of talk or debate. Most country gentlemen were unused to speechmaking; only those who had been at university or the Inns of Court had the right rhetorical training. These were the same men who were charged with maintaining law and order when they got home to their counties – JPs, deputy lieutenants, tax commissioners, commissioners of array. So there were always plenty of other things to occupy time.

Parliament was supposed to act in an ad hoc manner, to fix things that had gone wrong, like a physician. So permanent alliances were rare and parties nonexistent. Parliament was also seen as ancient, part of an older way where the Commons spoke to the king: 'We are the last monarchy in Christendom that yet retains our original rights and constitutions', thought Sir Robert Phelps proudly in 1625. The antiquity of Parliament was reflected in the site where the House of Commons met. The Royal Chapel of St Stephen was secularized at the

Reformation; before that, it had been part of Westminster Abbey, and by 1550 it had become the meeting-place of the Commons, which had previously been forced to cram itself into any old vacant committee room. The symbolism was obvious. The Commons was a true, redeemed fount of the virtue which the Catholic Church and its denizens had failed to acquire, and hence failed to infuse into the national fabric. Secular authority elbowed out spiritual authority while borrowing its prestige. The overlap between religion and politics was clear.

The chapel was tall, two-storeyed, and had long, stained-glass windows. The members sat in the choir stalls, on the north and south walls. As the number of MPs increased inexorably, these expanded to a horseshoe shape, four rows deep, and then an additional gallery was built in 1621 to house still more seats. It was like a theatre, thought John Hooker. The Speaker's Chair replaced the altar, and his mace rested on a table which replaced the lectern. The antechapel acted as a lobby for the rare divisions; members who wished to vote aye could move out into it, while noes stayed inside. St Stephen's Chapel was the seat of the House of Commons from 1550 until it was destroyed by fire in 1834. Parliament's authority was enhanced by this spectacular setting, and from it the English developed the habit of housing important secular institutions in buildings of medieval Gothic design.

But the temple of democracy was surrounded by a den of thieves. Ben Jonson commented on how disreputable the little city of Westminster was. The Palace was surrounded by shops and taverns; it did not help the area's reputation that the three best-known taverns were called Hell, Heaven and Purgatory. Hell had several exits, to allow MPs to make a quick getaway. The area around the Palace was crowded and crammed with hawkers' stalls. Hoping to catch the eye of MPs and peers, were lobbyists; barristers, clerks, servants, messengers and other employees scurried down the many shortcuts that led from the street to the Thames, from the Commons chambers to the Lords. Printers congregated around the Palace, many specializing in printing petitions to the Commons, others documenting its activities, publicizing the Commons' just discovery of the wickedness of this man, its fairness in helping that struggling local industry. When Parliament was sitting, its 450-odd Commons members, 50-70 peers and handful of bishops created an economic powerhouse for the entire area.

Parliament also had practical functions. It was supposed to make taxes honest. Chronically short of money, the monarchy got its income from rents, court fines, and a mass of funny, quaint revenue-raisers, including customs and excise (tonnage and poundage). What made for shortage was the Europe-wide economic crisis generated by inflation; taxes didn't keep pace with the dropping value of money, and any attempt to make good the deficit by levying more of them led to political trouble. In theory, this grim scenario gave Parliament more power; any group of MPs could withhold money in exchange for concessions on whatever grievances they wanted to air. There were some Jacobean attempts at a settlement involving a fixed royal income, swapping taxes for redressed grievances, but they had always collapsed in the face of James's apparently genetic difficulty in sticking to a budget for his own spending. Charles, sensibly enough, was trying to find a way around the entire creaky machine, a way that would allow him to make the English state modern, like France and Spain, its rivals. But some of the men who felt their local authority depended on Parliament knew they could use the House of Commons to stop him, and they did so without further ado.

They were helped by the fact that the House of Commons was not static. It was changing, evolving. Increasingly, local electors had begun to expect that MPs would deliver local projects; in exchange, they would agree to taxes without too much fuss. Conversely, if pet projects evaporated, they might grow restive. And it is easy to overstate the consensuality of Jacobean Parliaments. There was the particular case of the Petition of Right, produced by the 1628 Parliament, which announced roundly that there should be no taxation without representation, no taxes without the consent of the Commons. It also decried arbitrary imprisonment. As often, these were presented as traditional rights; actually, from the king's point of view they extended Parliament's powers, clarifying what had been gratifyingly murky, and he agreed to the petition only in order to ensure supply (a term which means the provision of money). The same 1628 Parliament, gratified, grew more and more determined to ensure the safety of Protestantism; indeed, its MPs felt they had been chosen for this very purpose. Amidst scenes of unprecedented passion, in which the Speaker was physically prevented from rising by Denzil Holles, who pinned him in his chair, the House

condemned Arminians and the collectors and payers of tonnage and poundage as enemies of England, and deserving of death. What followed was dissolution, but the tantrum had its effect. Charles felt sure Parliament was a kind of rabble. It was its behaviour that made him grimly determined never to call one again. And when he did, having avoided doing so for twelve years, it turned out that its ideas had not changed.

Parliament met on 13 April 1640. At once it became apparent that little had changed since 1629; if anything the members were more anxious, more discontented, and more determined to be heard by the king. The personnel were different – one of the reasons for John Pym's prominence was that virtually all his seniors had died in the long interval of personal rule – but their concerns remained the same. The stories of two MPs illustrate how Parliament came to be so intransigent. A member of the old guard from 1628, William Strode was well-known already for his radical activities in that year. Strode had played a major part in resisting the Speaker's efforts to adjourn the House. He explained that 'I desire the same, that we may not be turned off like scattered sheep, as we were at the end of the last session, and have a scorn put on us in print; but that we may leave something behind us'.

Summoned next day to be examined by the Privy Council, Strode refused to appear, and was arrested in the country, spending some time in the Tower after he had doggedly refused bail linked to a good-behaviour bond. He was still in gaol in January 1640, when he was finally released. This was supposed to be a reconciling, peacemaking move. In fact, he was a kind of living martyr for the Good Old Cause before it was properly formed. He was not a maker of policy, but he was exceedingly bitter against Charles. Clarendon calls him 'one of the fiercest men of the party', and MP Simonds D'Ewes describes him as a 'firebrand', a 'notable profaner of the scriptures', and one with 'too hot a tongue'. Strode was also animated by the same sense of godly mission that was motivating the Covenanters themselves. Like their wilder spirits, he was fervently anti-episcopal. It was these godly views that led him to assert Parliamentary authority over prerogatives, the guarantee of religious rectitude and a bulwark against the crafts of popery.

One of the new MPs was Henry Marten, who was joining his father as an MP for a Berkshire seat dominated by the county town of

Abingdon, later to become a godly stronghold during the war. He had already refused to contribute to a new Forced Loan to fund the Scottish wars. Marten was not, however, an obvious or orthodox member of the godly faction led by John Pym and his allies. Indeed, Marten was widely known as a rake and a rascal. Seventeenth-century biographer John Aubrey called him 'a great lover of pretty girls', and he had been rebuked for it by the king himself, who called him 'ugly rascal' and 'whore-master'. Aubrey claims Marten never forgot the insult, and it may have been this which made him different from his much more moderate father and brother-in-law. Marten emerged quickly as a radical voice and was to develop a career as a key man on committees later, but during the Short Parliament he was not an obvious leader. He was, however, one of many MPs who were determined to assert the Commons' 'ancient rights' and restrain the king's attempts to diminish them. He played no role; he made no speeches. But he was there, and his later career shows that he was convinced. The calling of the Short Parliament created an opportunity for men like Strode to win those like Marten to their view of events, and to make them allies. Led by Pym, those concerned about religion were able to do so very effectively.

Hence when the Commons met, and Secretary Windebank read the Scottish Covenanters' letter to Louis XIII, he was met by an MP called Harbottle Grimston, who explained courteously that there were dangers at home that were even greater than those to which the letter referred. The liberty of the subject had been infringed, contrary to the Petition of Right. The king's bad ministers were not giving him the right advice. All this was reinforced when John Pym rose for a two-hour speech in which he explained that 'religion was the greatest grievance to be looked into', and here he focused on what he described as a campaign to return England to popery. 'The parliament is the soul of the commonwealth', the intellectual part which governs all the rest. As well, he said, the right to property had been infringed. It was embarrassingly clear that he meant Ship Money, and when the Commons sent for the records of the Ship Money trials, it became even clearer. Finally, the Commons said firmly that it could give the king nothing until he clarified his own position.

After only a few days, it was evident to most that there was little hope of compromise. Charles offered a last-ditch deal; he agreed to

abandon Ship Money in exchange for twelve subsidies for the war. This was less than he needed, but to Parliament it seemed like an enormous amount. MPs wondered about their constituents' reactions. Charles could see there was no prospect that MPs would agree. Pym had been in touch with the Scots, and some whispered that he might bring *their* grievances before the House. Thus it was that by 5 May 1640 Charles had – equally hastily – decided to dissolve Parliament again. The Short Parliament was a sign of Charles's short fuse, and a tactical disaster. The whole grisly mess to come might have been averted if Charles had only managed to endure people shouting critically at him for more than a month. But the insecure boy still alive and well in Charles Stuart simply couldn't do it. He wanted to believe that Parliament would go away if he told it to, as it had in 1629. He wanted to believe that the problem was the rebellious Scots and their co-conspirators in London, and that defeating the former would put an end to the latter. He didn't want to believe that John Pym, MP, had managed to talk others into sharing his own world-view. And so he couldn't get together the money he needed to prosecute the Scottish war again.

But he was determined to try. On 20 August 1640 Charles left London to join his northern army, while the Scots crossed the Tweed and advanced towards Newcastle. The king had managed to scrape up around 25,000 men, but they were untrained, raw. And they were hungry; the army brought no bakeries, no brewhouses. And they were cold; no one except the senior officers had tents. Their pistols were often broken across the butt, making them more likely to explode.

They were explosive in other ways, too. They fired guns through tents, including the king's tent. They were mutinous. They were beggarly. They were more fit for Bedlam (London's asylum) or Bridewell Prison than the king's service. They murdered a pregnant woman in Essex and beat up Oxford undergraduates. And some were vehement iconoclasts, which illustrated the incongruity of the war itself. In Rickmansworth, a quiet Sunday morning service was disrupted when Captain Edmund Ayle and his troop smashed the altar and rails. It was a taste of things to come; so too were the complaints from families whose larders were eaten bare by the hordes of soldiers, families who found themselves playing host to drunken soldiers.

When the hungry, ill-disciplined English clashed with the Scots at Newburn, on 28 August 1640, the Scots easily drove them back, securing their first victory over the English since Bannockburn. To the Scots, it was proof of their divine election. Bishops, thought one Covenanter, were 'the panders of the Whore of Babylon, and the instruments of the devil'.

So when Charles had to call Parliament again, on 3 November 1640, John Pym had his chance, and he also had experience, allies, and knowledge of the system.