

On Rule by the People

During the 1770s, debates raged in the British Parliament and in the American colonies over the degree of independence that should be granted to the colonial assemblies. While some colonists welcomed the prospect of democratic rule, others feared what might follow under a system that did not include a monarch.

As you read the passages below, try to identify the arguments for and against democratic government.

British Statesman Edmund Burke in a speech to the House of Commons in March, 1775, tried to persuade the British government to relax its demands on the colonies. If this were done, Burke argued, the colonists would be content to remain a part of the British Empire.

In this character of the Americans a love of freedom is the predominating feature which marks and distinguishes the whole; . . . your colonies become suspicious, restive, and untractable whenever they see the least attempt to wrest from them by force, or shuffle from them by chicane [trickery], what they think the only advantage worth living for. This fierce spirit of liberty is stronger in the English colonies probably than in any other people of the earth, and this from a great variety of powerful causes. . . .

First, the people of the colonies are descendants of Englishmen. England, Sir, is a nation, which still I hope respects, and formerly adored, her freedom. The colonists emigrated from you when this part of your character was most predominant, and they took this bias and direction the moment they parted from your hands. They are therefore not only devoted to liberty, but to liberty according to English ideas and on English principles. . . . It happened, you know, Sir, that the great contests for freedom in this country were from the earliest times chiefly upon the question of taxing. . . . On this point of taxes the ablest pens and most eloquent tongues have been exercised. . . . They took infinite pains to inculcate, as a fundamental principle, that in all monarchies the people must in effect themselves mediately or immediately, possess the power of granting their own money, or no shadow of liberty could

subsist. The colonies draw from you, as with their life-blood, these ideas and principles. . . .

Their governments are popular in a high degree; . . . in all, the popular representative is the most weighty; and this share of the people in their ordinary government never fails to inspire them with lofty sentiments, and with a strong aversion from whatever tends to deprive them of their chief importance.

An anonymous newspaper editorial, published November 14, 1774, denounced the rule of kings.

All power of government is derived from God through the instrumentality of kings or the people. Has the impartial Governor of the universe communicated His attributes of power, wisdom, justice, and mercy to kings only, and denied the least portion of them to every other class of mankind? Let history decide this question. The history of kings is nothing but the history of the folly and depravity of human nature. . . .

We read now and then, it is true, of a good king; so we read likewise of a prophet escaping unhurt from a lion's den, and of three men walking in a fiery furnace without having even their garments singed. The order of nature is as much inverted in the first as it was in the last two cases. A good king is a miracle.

The American Congress derives all its power, wisdom, and justice, not from scrolls of parchment signed by kings but from the people. A more august and a more equitable legislative body never existed in any quarter of the globe. It is founded upon the principles of the most perfect liberty. A freeman, in honoring and obeying the Congress, honors and obeys himself.