

*A remonstrance of many thousand citizens and other freeborn people of England to their own House of Commons, occasioned through the illegal and barbarous imprisonment of that famous and worthy sufferer for his country's freedoms, Lieutenant-Colonel John Lilburne. Wherein their just demands in behalf of themselves and the whole kingdom concerning their public safety, peace and freedom, is expressed, calling these their commissioners in parliament to an account: how they (since the beginning of their session to this present) have discharged their duties to the universality of the people, their sovereign lord, from whom their power and strength is derived, and by whom (ad bene placitum)<sup>1</sup> it is continued*

*Printed in the year 1646*

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*A remonstrance of many thousand citizens and other freeborn people of England to their own House of Commons*

We are well assured ye cannot forget that the cause of our choosing you to be parliament-men was to deliver us from all kind of bondage and to preserve the commonwealth in peace and happiness. For effecting whereof we possessed you with the same power that was in ourselves to have done the same; for we might justly have done it ourselves without you if we had thought it convenient, choosing you (as persons whom we thought fitly qualified, and faithful) for avoiding some inconveniences.

But ye are to remember this was only of us but a power of trust – which is ever revocable, and cannot be otherwise – and to be employed to no other end than our own well-being. Nor did we choose you to continue our trusts longer than the known, established constitution of this commonwealth will justly permit. And that could be but for one year at the most: for by our law, a parliament is to be called once every

<sup>1</sup> *ad bene placitum* = by their good pleasure.

<sup>2</sup> End of title page.



year, and oftener if need be – as ye well know.<sup>3</sup> We are your principals, and you our agents; it is a truth which you cannot but acknowledge. For if you or any other shall assume or exercise any power that is not derived from our trust and choice thereunto, that power is no less than usurpation and an oppression from which we expect to be freed, in whomsoever we find it – it being altogether inconsistent with the nature of just freedom, which ye also very well understand.

The history of our forefathers since they were conquered by the Normans does manifest that this nation has been held in bondage all along ever since by the policies and force of the officers of trust in the commonwealth, amongst whom we always esteemed kings the chiefest. And what in much of the former time was done by war and by impoverishing of the people to make them slaves and to hold them in bondage, our latter princes have endeavoured to effect by giving ease and wealth unto the people; but withal corrupting their understanding by infusing false principles concerning kings and governments and parliaments and freedoms, and also using all means to corrupt and vitiate the manners of the youth, and the strongest prop and support of the people, the gentry.

It is wonderful<sup>4</sup> that the failings of former kings to bring our forefathers into bondage (together with the trouble and danger that some of them drew upon themselves and their posterity by those their unjust endeavours) had not wrought in our latter kings a resolution to rely on and trust only to justice and square dealing with the people, especially considering the unaptness of the nation to bear much, especially from those that pretend to love them and unto whom they expressed so much hearty affection (as any people in the world ever did) as in the quiet admission of King James from Scotland<sup>5</sup> – sufficient (if any obligation would work kings to reason) to have endeared both him and his

<sup>3</sup> The Triennial Act of February 1641 laid down procedures for calling a new parliament if there had been no session of parliament for three years. But it had a preamble which began: 'Whereas by the laws and statutes of this realm the parliament ought to be holden at least once every year for the redress of grievances', because it followed much debate in which two statutes to this effect (4 Ed III.cap.14; 36 Ed III.cap. 10) were quoted against the king's prerogative of calling and dissolving parliaments at will. Lilburne and other reformers had already begun to concentrate on the preamble and its suggestion of more frequent parliaments. Overton follows their lead.

<sup>4</sup> wonderful = a matter of puzzlement.

<sup>5</sup> James VI of Scotland became also James I of England on Queen Elizabeth's death in 1604, despite having a title that could have been seriously disputed. He moved to England unopposed.

son King Charles to an inviolable love and hearty affection to the English nation. But it would not do.

They chose rather to trust unto their policies and court arts – to king-waste and delusion – than to justice and plain dealing, and did effect many things tending to our enslaving (as in your first remonstrance you show skill enough to manifest the same to all the world).<sup>6</sup> And this nation, having been by their delusive arts and a long-continued peace much softened and debased in judgement and spirit, did bear far beyond its usual temper or any example of our forefathers, which (to our shame), we acknowledge.

But in conclusion: longer they would not bear; and then ye were chosen to work our deliverance and to estate<sup>7</sup> us in natural and just liberty agreeable to reason and common equity. For whatever our forefathers were, or whatever they did or suffered or were enforced to yield unto, we are the men of the present age and ought to be absolutely free from all kinds of exorbitances, molestations or arbitrary power; and you we chose to free us from all, without exception or limitation either in respect of persons, officers, degrees, or things; and we were full of confidence that ye also would have dealt impartially on our behalf and made us the most absolute free people in the world.

But how ye have dealt with us we shall now let you know; and let the righteous God judge between you and us. The continual oppressors of the nation have been kings, which is so evident that you cannot deny it. Yourselves have told the king (whom yet you own) that his whole sixteen years' reign was one continued act of the breach of the law. You showed him that you understood his under-working with Ireland, his endeavour to enforce the parliament by the army raised against Scotland.<sup>8</sup> Ye were eye-witnesses of his violent attempt about the five members;<sup>9</sup> ye saw evidently his purpose of raising war; ye have seen him engaged, and with obstinate violence persisting in the most bloody war that ever this nation knew – to the wasting and destruction of multitudes of honest and religious people. Ye have experience that none

<sup>6</sup> Parliament's *Grand Remonstrance* of 1 December 1641 had listed nearly 200 grievances in the narrative it gave of Charles's government.

<sup>7</sup> estate = instate.

<sup>8</sup> The parliamentary claim was that the king had wished to use Irish and Scots armies to reduce his parliament to obedience in late 1641.

<sup>9</sup> In January 1642 the king had tried to arrest five MPs and one lord, against whom he had prepared charges of treason. Soon after, he left Westminster to find armed supporters.



but a king could do so great intolerable mischiefs – the very name of ‘king’ proving a sufficient charm to delude many of our brethren in Wales, Ireland, England, and Scotland too, so far as to fight against their own liberties, which you know no man under heaven could ever have done. And yet – as if you were of counsel with him and were resolved to hold up his reputation, thereby to enable him to go on in mischief – you maintained ‘the king can do no wrong’, and applied all his oppressions to ‘evil counsellors’, begging and entreating him in such submissive language to return to his kingly office and parliament as if you were resolved to make us believe he were a god without whose presence all must fall to ruin, or as if it were impossible for any nation to be happy without a king.

You cannot fight for our liberties, but it must be in the name of king and parliament; he that speaks of his cruelties must be thrust out of your House and society; your preachers must pray for him – as if he had not deserved to be excommunicated by all Christian society, or as if ye or they thought God were a respecter of the persons<sup>10</sup> of kings in judgement.

By this and other your like dealings – your frequent treating and tampering to maintain his honour – we that have trusted you to deliver us from his oppressions and to preserve us from his cruelties are wasted and consumed in multitudes to manifold miseries, whilst you lie ready with open arms to receive him and to make him a great and glorious king.

Have you shook this nation like an earthquake to produce no more than this for us? Is it for this that ye have made so free use and been so bold both with our persons and estates? And do you (because of our readiness to comply with your desires in all things) conceive us so sottish<sup>11</sup> as to be contented with such unworthy returns of our trust and love? No. It is high time we be plain with you. We are not, nor shall not be so contented. We do expect according to reason that ye should in the first place declare and set forth King Charles his wickedness openly before the world, and withal to show the intolerable inconveniences of having a kingly government from the constant evil practices of those of this nation – and so to declare King Charles an enemy, and to publish your resolution never to have any more to do with him,

<sup>10</sup> Acts 10: 34. ‘Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.’

<sup>11</sup> sottish = foolish.

but to acquit us of so great a charge and trouble forever and to convert the great revenue of the crown to the public treasure to make good the injuries and injustices done heretofore, and of late, by those that have possessed the same. And this we expected long since at your hand; and until this be done we shall not think ourselves well dealt withal in this original of all oppressions – to wit kings.

Ye must also deal better with us concerning the Lords than you have done. Ye only are chosen by us the people; and therefore in you only is the power of binding the whole nation by making, altering, or abolishing of laws. Ye have therefore prejudiced us in acting so as if ye could not make a law without both the royal assent of the king (so ye are pleased to express yourselves) and the assent of the Lords; yet when either king or Lords assent not to what you approve ye have so much sense of your own power as to assent what ye think good by an order of your own House.<sup>12</sup>

What is this but to blind our eyes, that we should not know where our power is lodged, nor to whom to apply ourselves for the use thereof? But if we want a law, we must await till the king and Lords assent; if an ordinance, then we must wait till the Lords assent. Yet ye, knowing their assent to be merely formal (as having no root in the choice of the people, from whom the power that is just must be derived),<sup>13</sup> do frequently importune their assent, which implies a most gross absurdity. For where their assent is necessary and essential, they must be as free as you to assent or dissent as their understandings and consciences should guide them and might as justly importune you as ye them.

Ye ought in conscience to reduce this case also to a certainty, and not to waste time, and open your counsels, and be liable to so many obstructions as ye have been. Ye ought to prevail with them – enjoying their honours and possessions – to be liable and stand to be chosen for knights and burgesses by the people as other the gentry and free men of this nation do, which will be an obligation upon them as having one and the same interest; then also they would be distinguished by their

<sup>12</sup> From 1642–9 there were no ordinances made without the Lords, but severe pressure was often put on them.

<sup>13</sup> Contemporary peers were created by a royal patent installing them in one of the various degrees of peerage or by a king’s writ calling them to parliament as peers of a certain degree. However created, the degrees, titles and the rights to sit in the House of Lords thenceforth descended by primogeniture to the eldest son, and so were the result of an act of royal prerogative uncontrolled by parliament.



virtues and love to the commonwealth, whereas now they act and vote in our affairs but as intruders or as thrust upon us by kings to make good their interests, which to this day have been to bring us into a slavish subjection to their wills.

Nor is there any reason that they should in any measure be less liable to any law than the gentry are. Why should any of them assault, strike, or beat any, and not be liable to the law as other men are? Why should not they be as liable to their debts as other men?<sup>14</sup> There is no reason. Yet have ye stood still and seen many of us – and some of yourselves – violently abused without reparation.

We desire you to free us from these abuses *and* their negative voices, or else tell us that it is reasonable we should be slaves – this being a perpetual prejudice in our government neither consulting with freedom nor safety. With freedom it cannot: for in this way of voting in all affairs of the commonwealth, being not chosen thereunto by the people they are therein masters and lords of the people – which necessarily implies the people to be their servants and vassals. And they have used many of us accordingly, by committing divers to prison upon their own authority – namely William Larnier, Lieutenant-Colonel John Lilburne, and other worthy sufferers – who upon appeal unto you have not been relieved.<sup>15</sup>

We must therefore pray you to make a law against all kinds of arbitrary government as the highest capital offence against the commonwealth, and to reduce all conditions of men to a certainty, that none hence forward may presume or plead anything in way of excuse, and that ye will have no favour or scruple of tyrannical power over us in any whatsoever.

Time has revealed hidden things unto us – things covered over thick and threefold with pretences of the true reformed religion – when as we see apparently that this nation and that of Scotland are joined together in a most bloody and consuming war by the waste and policy

<sup>14</sup> All members of parliament and their servants were immune from civil actions (for instance, actions for debt) during parliamentary sessions, but it was a common legal opinion that peers, their families, and those protected by them were *never* liable.

<sup>15</sup> On Larnier, see p. 206. He had been arrested in March 1646 for publishing an unlicensed book defending religious toleration and in April was brought before the Lords, where he had refused to answer them on grounds of their incompetence to try commoners, and was imprisoned. Lilburne had suffered the same fate in June. A Leveller campaign against the Lords ensued – Overton and Walwyn prominent in it – and Overton himself was to be imprisoned by the Lords in August.

of a sort of lords in each nation that were malcontents and vexed that the king had advanced others, and not themselves, to the managing of state affairs.<sup>16</sup> Which they suffered till the king, increasing his oppressions in both nations, gave them opportunity to reveal themselves; and then they resolve to bring the king to their bow and regulation, and to exclude all those from managing state-affairs that he had advanced thereunto, and who were grown so insolent and presumptuous as these discontented ones were liable to continual molestations from them, either by practices at Council Table, High Commission, or Star Chamber. So as their work was to subvert the monarchical lords and clergy, and therewithal to abate the power of the king, and to order him.

But this was a mighty work and they were nowise able to effect it of themselves. 'Therefore' (say they) 'the generality of the people must be engaged; and how must this be done?' 'Why' (say they) 'we must associate with that part of the clergy that are now made underlings and others of them that have been oppressed, and with the most zealous religious non-conformists; and by the help of these we will lay before the generality of the people all the popish innovations in religion, all the oppressions of the bishops and High Commission, all the exorbitances of the Council Board and Star Chamber, all the injustice of the Chancery and courts of justice, all the illegal taxations (as ship-money, patents and projects) whereby we shall be sure to get into our party the generality of the city of London and all the considerable substantial people of both nations – by whose cry and importunity we shall have a parliament, which we shall by our manifold ways, allies, dependants, and relations soon work to our purposes.'<sup>17</sup>

'But' (say some) 'this will never be affected without a war; for the king will have a strong party and he will never submit to us.'

'Tis not expected otherwise' (say they); 'and great and vast sums of money must be raised, and soldiers and ammunition must be had,

<sup>16</sup> In England such peers as Lord Saye and Seal, and Lord Brooke; in Scotland the 'covenanting Lords'. Overton is describing splits in the ruling classes of the two nations who shared the same king.

<sup>17</sup> A very reasonable catalogue of parliament's case against the king. In 1641 the Star Chamber, the Council Board (the Privy Council acting in a judicial capacity) and High Commission were abolished, and ship money (a tax without the consent of parliament) was declared illegal. In February 1642 clerics, including bishops, were forbidden to exercise secular powers, though episcopacy was not actually abolished (and provision made for selling church lands) until October 1646.



whereof we shall not need to fear any want. For what will not an oppressed, rich, and religious people do to be delivered from all kinds of oppression, both spiritual and temporal, and to be restored to purity and freedom in religion, and to the just liberty of their persons and estates? All our care must be to hold all at our command and disposing. For if this people thus stirred up by us should make an end too soon with the king and his party, it is not much to be doubted they would place the supreme power in the House of Commons, unto whom only of right it belongs – they only being chosen by the people, which is so presently discerned that as we have a care the king and his lords must not prevail, so more especially we must be careful the supreme power fall not into the people's hands, or House of Commons.'

'Therefore we must so act as not to make an end with the king and his party, till, by expense of time and treasure, a long, bloody and consuming war, decay of trade, and multitudes of the highest impositions, the people by degrees are tired and wearied, so as they shall not be able to contest or dispute with us either about supreme or inferior power. But we will be able, afore they are aware, to give them both law and religion.'<sup>18</sup>

'In Scotland it will be easy to establish the presbyterial government in the church. And that being once effected, it will not be very difficult in England – upon a pretence of uniformity in both nations and the like – unto which there will be found a clergy as willing as we, it giving them as absolute a ministry over the consciences of the people, over their persons and purses, as we ourselves aim at, or desire. And if any shall presume or oppose either us or them, we shall be easily able by the help of the clergy, by our party in the House of Commons, and by their and our influence in all parts of both nations, easily to crush and suppress them.'

'Well', (say some) 'all this may be done, but we, without abundance of travail'<sup>19</sup> to ourselves and wounding our own consciences – for we

<sup>18</sup> It was the tension between 'peace' 'middle' and the 'war' groups in parliament which underlay a famous quarrel between Cromwell and the earl of Manchester, in which Lilburne took Cromwell's side, for which Lilburne was imprisoned, and which brought Lilburne and Walwyn together. Cromwell, who was to be in the forefront of the attempt in 1644 to reorganise the parliamentary armies for a more vigorous prosecution of the war, was told by Manchester – the paradigmatic peace-group member – 'We may beat the king ninety and nine times, and yet he will be king still. But if the king beat us once, we shall be hanged.'

<sup>19</sup> travail = painful labour.

must grossly dissemble before God, and all the world will see it in time – we can never do all this that ye aim at but by the very same oppressions as were practised by the king, the bishops, and all those his tyrannical instruments both in religion and civil government. And it will never last or continue long. The people will see it and hate you for it – more than ever they hated the former tyrants and oppressors. Were it not better and safer for us to be just, and *really* to do that for the people which we pretend and for which we shall so freely spend their lives and estates: and so have their love, and enjoy the peace of quiet consciences?'

'No' (say others). 'Are not we a lord, a peer of the kingdom? Have you your lordship or peerage, or those honours and privileges that belong thereunto from the love and election of the people? Your interest is as different from theirs and as inconsistent with their freedoms as those lords' and clergy's are whom we strive to supplant. And therefore rather than satisfy the people's expectations in what concerns their freedoms, it were much better to continue as we are and never disturb the king in his prerogatives nor his lords and prelates in their privileges. And therefore let us be as one; and when we talk of conscience, let us make conscience to make good unto *ourselves* and our *posterities* those dignities, honours and pre-eminencies conveyed unto us by our noble progenitors by all the means we can, not making questions for conscience' sake, or any other things. And if we be united in our endeavours, and work wisely, observing when to advance and when to give ground, we cannot fail of success, which will be an honour to our names for ever.'

These are the strong delusions that have been amongst us; and the mystery of iniquity<sup>20</sup> has wrought most vehemently in all our affairs. Hence it was that Strafford was so long in trial and that he had no greater heads to bear his company.<sup>21</sup> Hence it was that the king was

<sup>20</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2: 7–8: 'For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming.' The 'mystery of iniquity' was widely held to be the (variously identified) conjunction of the forces of evil (popish or English episcopal mostly) which would be overthrown in the Last Days preceding Christ's return to earth and the Last Judgement.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Wentworth, first earl of Strafford, was the first of the two of Charles's 'evil councillors' to be executed by parliament for his service to the king before the war. He was condemned to death by Act of Attainder in May 1641. The other 'evil counsellor' to be executed was William Laud, archbishop of Canterbury, in January 1645.



not called to an account for his oppressive government and that the treachery of those that would have enforced you was not severely punished. Hence it was that the king gained time to raise an army, and the queen to furnish ammunition, and that our first and second armies were so ill-formed, and as ill-managed. Sherborne, Brentford, Exeter, the slender use of the Associate Counties, the slight guarding of the sea, Oxford, Dennington, the west defeat, did all proceed from (and upon) the mystery of iniquity.<sup>22</sup>

The king and his party had been nothing in your hands had not some of you been engaged, and some of you ensnared, and the rest of you overborne with this mystery, which you may now easily perceive if you have a mind thereunto. That ye were put upon the continuation of this parliament during the pleasure of both houses<sup>23</sup> was from this mystery, because in time these politicians had hopes to work and pervert you to forsake the common interest of those that chose and trusted you, to promote their unjust design to enslave us – wherein they have prevailed too, too, much.

For we must deal plainly with you. Ye have long time acted more like the house of peers<sup>24</sup> than the House of Commons. We can scarcely approach your door with a request or motion, though by way of petition, but ye hold long debates whether we break not your privileges. The king's or the Lords' pretended prerogatives never made a greater noise nor was made more dreadful than the name of privilege of the House of Commons.

Your members, in all impositions, must not be taxed in the places where they live, like other men. Your servants have their privileges too. To accuse or prosecute any of you is become dangerous to the prosecutors. Ye have imprisonments as frequent for either witnesses or prosecutors as ever the Star Chamber had: and ye are furnished with new-devised arguments to prove that ye only may justly do these gross injustices which the Star Chamber, High Commission, and Council Board might not do – and for doing whereof (whilst ye were untainted) ye abolished them. But ye now frequently commit men's persons to

<sup>22</sup> These sieges and battles were lost at the low point in parliament's fortunes in 1643 and 1644. Associations of separate county armies were thought to be a solution by the 'war' party.

<sup>23</sup> By *An Act to prevent inconveniences which may happen by the untimely adjourning, proroguing, or dissolving this present parliament* (10 May 1641), the Long Parliament (as it was now set to become) could not be dissolved except by statute.

<sup>24</sup> peers = lords.

prison without showing cause; ye examine men upon interrogatories and questions against themselves and imprison them for refusing to answer; and ye have officious servile men that write and publish sophistical arguments to justify your so doing – for which they are rewarded and countenanced, as the Star Chamber and High Commission beagles lately were – whilst those that ventured their lives for your establishment are many of them vexed and molested and impoverished by them. Ye have entertained to be your committees' servants those very prowling varlets that were employed by those unjust courts who took pleasure to torment honest conscionable people; ye vex and molest honest men for matters of religion and difference with you and your Synod in judgement, and take upon you to determine of doctrine and discipline – approving this, and reproaching that, just like unto former ignorant politic and superstitious parliaments and convocations<sup>25</sup> – and thereby have divided honest people amongst themselves by countenancing only those of the presbytery and discountenancing all the Separation, Anabaptists and Independents.

And though it rests in you to acquiet<sup>26</sup> all differences in affection (though not in judgement) by permitting everyone to be fully persuaded in their own minds, commanding all reproach to cease, yet as ye also had admitted Machiavel's<sup>27</sup> maxim '*Divide et impera*, divide and prevail', ye countenance only one, open the printing press only unto one, and that to the presbytery, and suffer them to rail and abuse and domineer over all the rest – as if also ye had discovered and digested that without a powerful, compulsive, presbytery in the church, a compulsive mastership or aristocratical government over the people in the state could never long be maintained.

Whereas truly we are well assured, neither you nor none else can have any power at all to conclude the people in matters that concern the worship of God. For therein every one of us ought to be fully assured in our own minds and to be sure to worship Him according to our consciences. Ye may *propose* what form ye conceive best and most available for information and well-being of the nation, and may per-

<sup>25</sup> National convocations, made up of two houses of clergy (an upper house of bishops), were called at the king's command – most recently in 1604, 1606 and 1640. They claimed, with the king's consent (perhaps parliament's too), to make canon law to govern the church. The convocation of 1640 had been extremely subservient to the king.

<sup>26</sup> acquiet = make quiet.

<sup>27</sup> Machiavelli's.



suade and invite thereunto; but *compel*, ye cannot justly. For ye have no power from us so to do, nor could you have. For we could not confer a power that was not in ourselves, there being none of us that can without wilful sin bind ourselves to worship God after any other way than what (to a tittle) in our own particular understandings we approve to be just. And therefore we could not refer ourselves to you in things of this nature. And surely if we could not confer this power upon you ye cannot have it, and so not exercise it justly. Nay, as we ought not to revile or reproach any man for his differing with us in judgement more than we would be reviled or reproached for ours, even so ye ought not to countenance any reproachers or revilers or molesters for matters of conscience but to protect and defend all that live peaceably in the commonwealth, of what judgement or way of worship whatsoever.

And if ye would bend your minds thereunto and leave yourselves open to give ear and to consider such things as would be presented unto you, a just way would be discovered for the peace and quiet of the land in general and of every well-minded person in particular. But if you lock up yourselves from hearing all voices, how is it possible you should 'try all things'?<sup>28</sup> It is not for you to assume a power to control and force religion or a way of church government upon the people because former parliaments have so done. Ye are first to prove that ye *could have* such a power justly entrusted unto you by the people that trusted you – which you see you have not.

We may haply be answered that the king's writ that summons a parliament and directs the people to choose knights and burgesses implies the establishment of religion.<sup>29</sup> To which we answer that if kings would prove themselves lawful magistrates they must prove themselves to be so by a lawful derivation of their authority, which

<sup>28</sup> 1 John 4: 1. 'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out in the world.'

<sup>29</sup> In the writ sheriffs were told that the king proposed to hold a parliament 'for certain difficult and urgent businesses concerning us [the king], the state and defence of England and the English church', and that knights from the shires and burgesses from the boroughs should be caused by the sheriff in question to be elected so as 'to have conference and to treat with the prelates, great men and peers' and be delegated sufficient power to 'perform and consent to those things' which would happen in parliament. The king – and then the parliament without him, obviously with more difficulty – argued against the *jure divino* claims of their established churches (anglican and Presbyterian respectively) that they (king or parliament, without the church) had the power to settle religion.

must be from the voluntary trust of the people; and then the case is the same with them as between the people and you – they (as you) being possessed of no more power than what is *in* the people justly to entrust. And then all implications in the writs of the establishment of religion show that in that particular, as many other, we remain under the Norman yoke of an unlawful power, from which we ought to free ourselves, and which ye ought not to maintain upon us, but to abrogate.

But ye have listened to any counsels rather than to the voice of us that trusted you. Why is it that you have stopped the press but that you would have nothing but pleasing, flattering, discourses and go on to make yourselves partakers of the lordship over us, without hearing anything to the contrary?

Yea, your lords and clergy long to have us in the same condition with our deluded brethren, the commons of Scotland, where their understandings are so captivated with a reverend opinion of their presbytery that they really believe them to be by divine authority, and are as zealous therein as ever the poor deceived papists were. As much they live in fear of their thunder-bolts of excommunication – and good cause they have, poor souls, for those excommunications are so followed with the civil sanctions, or secular power – that they are able to crush any opposer or dissenter to dust, to undo or ruin any man. So absolute a power has their new clergy already gained over the poor people there, and earnestly labour to bring us into the same condition, because if we should live in greater freedom in this nation it would (they know) in time be observed by *their* people, whose understandings would be thereby informed, and then they would grow impatient of their thraldom and shake off their yoke.

They are also in no less bondage in things civil. The lords and great men over-rule all as they please; the people are scarce free in anything.

Friends, these are known truths.

And hence it is that in their counsels here they adhere to those that maintain their own greatness and usurped rule over us, lest if we should dare possess greater liberty than their vassals, the people in Scotland, they might in short time observe the same and discharge themselves of their oppressions.

It is from the mystery of iniquity that ye have never made that use of the people of this nation in your war as you might have done, but have chosen rather to hazard *their* coming in than to arm your own native undoubted friends: by which means they are possessed of too



many considerable strengths of this nation, and speak such language in their late published papers as if they were not paid for their – slow – assistance. Whereas ye might have ended the war long ere this, if by sea or land you had showed yourselves resolved to make us a free people. But it is evident a change of our bondage is the uttermost is intended us, and that, too, for a worse, and longer – if we shall be so contented.

But it is strange you should imagine that. For the truth is we find none are so much hated by you as those you think do discern those your purposes, or that apply themselves unto you with motions tending to divert you from proceeding therein. For some years now, no condition of men can prevail with you to amend anything that is amiss in the commonwealth.

The exorbitances in the city's government and the strivings about prerogatives in the mayor and aldermen against the freedoms of the commons (and to their extreme prejudice) are returned to the same point they were at in Garway's time<sup>30</sup> – which you observe, and move not, nor assist the commons. Nay, worse than in his time, they are justified by the mayor in a book published and sent by him to every Common Councilman.<sup>31</sup>

The oppression of the Turkey Company and the Adventurers' Company, and all other infringements of our native liberties of the same nature and which in the beginnings of the parliament ye seemed to abominate, are now by you complied withal and licensed to go on in their oppressions.<sup>32</sup>

Ye know the laws of this nation are unworthy a free people and deserve from first to last to be considered and seriously debated, and reduced to an agreement with common equity and right reason, which ought to be the form and life of every government – Magna Carta itself being but a beggarly thing containing many marks of intolerable

bondage; and the laws that have been made since by parliaments have in very many particulars made our government much more oppressive and intolerable.

The Norman way for ending of controversies was much more abusive than the English way; yet the Conqueror, contrary to his oath, introduced the Norman laws and his litigious and vexatious way amongst us. The like he did also for punishment of malefactors – controversies of all natures having *before* a quick and final dispatch<sup>33</sup> in every hundred. He erected a trade of judges and lawyers to sell justice and injustice at his own unconscionable rate and in what time he pleased, the corruption whereof is yet remaining upon us to our continual impoverishing and molestation from which we thought you should have delivered us.

Ye know also imprisonment for debt is not from the beginning. Yet ye think not of these many thousand persons and families that are destroyed thereby. Ye are rich and abound in goods and have need of nothing; but the afflictions of the poor – your hunger-starved brethren – ye have no compassion of.<sup>34</sup> Your zeal makes a noise as far as Argiere to deliver those captived Christians at the charge of others,<sup>35</sup> but those whom your own unjust laws hold captive in your own prisons – these are too near you to think of. Nay, ye suffer poor Christians, for whom Christ died, to kneel before you in the streets – aged, sick, and crippled – begging your half-penny charities, and ye rustle by them in your coaches and silks daily, without regard or taking any course for their constant relief. Their sight would melt the heart of any Christian and yet it moves not you nor your clergy.

We entreat you to consider what difference there is between binding a man to an oar as a galley-slave in Turkey or Argiere, and pressing of men to serve in your war. To surprise a man on the sudden, force him from his calling where he lived comfortably from a good trade, from his dear parents, wife or children, against inclination and disposition to

<sup>30</sup> Sir Henry Garway was Lord Mayor in 1639–40. Active in collecting ship money and severe on anti-episcopal demonstrators, he attempted to stop the Common Council petitioning the king about city grievances. He became a royalist.

<sup>31</sup> The Mayor was Thomas Adams (1586–1688), a political Presbyterian and neo-royalist.

<sup>32</sup> Overton refers mainly to the Merchant Adventurers' Company and the Levant Company, who had monopolies on overseas trade, notably in the Low Countries and Germany, and in the Mediterranean. Industrial monopolies, granted by crown patent to individuals and companies, had long been unpopular. Many were abolished in 1624, and the Long Parliament undertook a revision of the system. But the trading monopolies had been less of a kingly than a traders' convenience, and they survived.

<sup>33</sup> dispatch = speedy settlement.

<sup>34</sup> Small producers and merchants might have been expected to react very favourably to this proposal. As extenders of credit, they needed machinery for recovery of debts – and a man in prison could not be forced to pay, indeed might even go there (where the living was comfortable enough if they had money to buy provisions and to bribe the jailers) to avoid it. And when they were debtors themselves, they needed to stay out of prison to trade their way into a position to pay.

<sup>35</sup> Argiere = Algiers. A continuing problem was that Moorish and Turkish pirates captured and imprisoned English merchants there for ransom.



fight for a cause he understands not and in company of such as he has no comfort to be withal, for pay that will scarce give him sustenance – and if he live, to return to a lost trade, or beggary, or not much better: if any tyranny or cruelty exceed this, it must be worse than that of a Turkish galley-slave.<sup>36</sup>

But ye are apt to say, 'what remedy? Men we must have.' To which we answer in behalf of ourselves and our too-much-injured brethren that are pressed: that the Hollanders, our provident neighbours, have no such cruelties, esteeming nothing more unjust or unreasonable; yet they want no men. And if ye would take care that all sorts of men might find comfort and contentment in your government ye would not need to enforce men to serve your wars. And if ye would in many things follow their good example and make this nation a state free from the oppression of kings and the corruptions of the court and show love to the people in the constitutions of your government, the affection of the people would satisfy all common and public occasions. And in many particulars we can show you a remedy for this and all other inconveniences – if we could find you inclinable to hear us.

Ye are extremely altered in demeanour towards us. In the beginning ye seemed to know what freedom was, made a distinction of honest men, whether rich or poor. All were welcome to you and ye would mix yourselves with us in a loving familiar way, void of courtly observance or behaviour. Ye kept your committee doors open. All might hear and judge of your dealings. Hardly ye would permit men to stand bare-headed before you, some of you telling them ye more regarded their health, and that they should not deem<sup>37</sup> of you as of other domineering courts. Ye and they were one, all commons of England. And the like ingenious carriage by which ye won our affections to that height that ye no sooner demanded anything but it was effected. Ye did well then. Who did hinder you? The mystery of iniquity: that was it that perverted your course.

<sup>36</sup> The New Model had great difficulty in pressing infantry ('scum', said an officer) and dragoons ('middling sorts'). The horse, volunteering themselves and equipment, remained fairly stable from the spring of 1645 to the summer of 1646 (5,000 to 6,500) but the foot and dragoons varied from 6,500 to 18,000. Only one of every two pressed men arrived at the front. Perhaps 40,000 men were recruited during the period to keep the army's strength at the low 20,000 mark. Desertion was endemic, especially after victory and the chance to escape with loot. The core of the faithful was maybe 11,000.

<sup>37</sup> deem = judge.

What a multitude of precious lives has been lost? What a mass of monies has been raised? What one way was proposed to advance monies that was refused by you, though never so prejudicial to the people? (Allowing your committees to force men to pay or lend or else to swear that they were not worth so or so – the most destructive course to tradesmen that could be devised: fifty entire subsidies to be lent throughout London, if not procured, yet authorised by you?)<sup>38</sup> Never the like heard of.

And the excise, that being once settled, all other assessments should cease. Notwithstanding, in few months comes forth ordinance upon ordinance for more monies.<sup>39</sup> And for the customs. They were thought an oppression in the beginning, and being so high, an hindrance to trade and extremely prejudicial to the nation; nevertheless they are now confirmed with many augmentations, insomuch as men of inferior trading find great trouble to provide monies for customs and have so many officers to please that it is a very slavery to have anything to do with them; and no remedy – the first commissioners being more harsh and ingenious than the late farmers, and the last worse than the former. Truly it is a sad thing but too true: a plain quiet-minded man in any place in England is just like a harmless sheep in a thicket – can hardly move or stir but he shall be stretched and lose his wool – such committees have ye made in all cities and counties, and none are so ill-used as honest godly men.

Ye have now sat full five years, which is four years longer than we intended; for we could choose you but for (at most) one year. And now

<sup>38</sup> War finance was always a problem for the parliament, and the measures taken were in fact objected to by the municipality of London and its Presbyterian supporters as much as by the now emerging Leveller movement. Enforcement was difficult. Loans were required, and those who had property and moveables worth more than £100 p.a. were required to pay weekly (later monthly) assessments. Tax avoiders were assessed at one-twentieth of their real estate and one-fifth of their personal possessions. A parliamentary committee was set up at Haberdashers' Hall to administer these and other extraordinary taxes throughout the nation; a sub-committee at Weavers' Hall spawned at least 110 collectors and overseers throughout London, its outparishes and surrounding villages. Outside London, county committees were responsible for the assessment and collection of taxes.

<sup>39</sup> Excise, a tax on manufactured goods before they went to sale, had first been imposed in 1643. It covered an expanding range of essential goods, like beer and meat (though not bread). It spawned a horde of excise officers, the hope being it would finance the war. But by 1645 assessments, fines on delinquents' estates and sale of crown-fee farm rents overtook it.



we wish ye would publish to all the world the good that you have done for us, the liberty ye have brought us unto. If ye could excuse yourselves as ye used to do by saying it has been a time of war, that will not do. For when the war might in the beginning have been prevented if ye had drawn a little more blood from the right vein, and might often (ere this) have been ended, occasion has been given away and treated away. And now, when through the faithfulness of the New Model<sup>40</sup> ye have almost forced an end and have no great part to effect, now again at the instigation of those that love their kings more than all this nation and their own, his 'sacred' or 'holy' majesty must again be treated with – their national and Solemn League and Covenant with their God binding them to be respecters of persons in judgement and to preserve his person in the defence of the true, Protestant religion and liberty of the people<sup>41</sup> – that has constantly against all persuasion and obligation done whatever he could to subvert both. If this be not the height of the mystery of iniquity, what is higher?

But let not these be deceived, nor thus under zealous expressions deceive you. We wish your souls may no further enter into their secret; for God will not be mocked nor suffer such gross hypocrisy to pass without exemplary punishment.<sup>42</sup> And if ye believe there is a God, ye *must* believe it; and if ye *do* believe it, and consider the ways ye have trod and truly repent, *show* it by walking contrary to what ye have done or purposed to do and let us quickly and speedily partake thereof. For God is a God that takes vengeance<sup>43</sup> and will not suffer you to go on to our ruin.

We have some hopes ye will; for amongst you there have been always faithful and worthy men whose abundant grief it has been to observe

<sup>40</sup> The formation of the New Model Army in the first three months of 1645 was part of a process in which three southern armies under aristocratic and incompetent army commanders (the earls of Essex and Manchester among them) were replaced by a single army under Sir Thomas Fairfax. It was this army that took parliament to victory.

<sup>41</sup> Article III of the *Solemn League and Covenant*: 'We shall with the same sincerity, reality and constancy, in our several vocations endeavour with our estates and lives mutually to preserve the rights and privileges of the parliaments, and the liberties of the kingdoms, and to preserve and defend the king's majesty's person and authority in the preservation of the true religion and liberties of the kingdoms, that the world may bear witness with our consciences of our loyalty, and that we have no thoughts or intentions to diminish his majesty's just power and greatness.'

<sup>42</sup> Galatians 6: 7. 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'

<sup>43</sup> E.g. Psalms 94: 1; Nahum 1: 2; 2 Thessalonians 1: 8.

the strange progress of the chosen men of the commonwealth, and have strove exceedingly on all occasions to produce better effects, and some Christians of late produced to their praise.

Others there are that have been only misled by the policies and stratagems of politic men; and these, after this our serious advice, will make you more seriously study the common interest of this nation. Others there are – and those a great number – that are newly chosen into your House,<sup>44</sup> and we trust are such as will exceedingly strengthen the good part that hitherto has been too weak to steer an even course amidst so many oppositions and cross waves, but henceforth joined all in one will be able to do and carry on whatsoever is just and good for the commonwealth: the more just and good, the more easily effected; for such things are easily to be made evident to all men and can never fail of the uttermost assistance of all well-minded people. And therefore we would not have you to be discouraged in attempting whatsoever is evidently just. For we will therein assist you to the last drop of our blood. Fear neither the Anakims nor the sons of the giants: for the Lord our God He will stand by you in all things that are just and will bless and prosper you therein.<sup>45</sup>

Forsake and utterly renounce all crafty and subtle intentions; hide not your thoughts from us and give us encouragement to be open-breasted unto you. Proclaim aforehand what ye determine to do in establishing anything for continuance; and hear all things that can be spoken with or against the same; and to that intent, let the imprisoned presses at liberty that all men's understandings may be more conveniently informed and convinced as fair as is possible by the equity of your proceedings.

<sup>44</sup> 'Recruiters', new men, were elected to the House of Commons, mainly in 1645 and 1646, to replace royalist defectors. Before the parliamentary victory in the first civil war they tended to be what historians call 'Political Independents' (i.e. eager to win the war and force the king to a settlement; more likely to be somewhat tolerant in religion, even if some were 'Religious Presbyterians'); after the victory they tended to be 'Political Presbyterians' (i.e. willing to settle for minimum constitutional change, but insisting on a Presbyterian church settlement, often not so much because they believed that that was the form of church ordained in scripture, but for the sake of social order and control. Not all of them were against toleration, but their city and clerical allies were.)

<sup>45</sup> The Anakims were the gigantic descendants of Arba, founder of Hebron and the despair of Israel. Though they were to be conquered and contained by Moab and Joshua, the Israelites regarded themselves as 'grasshoppers' compared with this gigantic race (Numbers 13: 28, 33). A common saying was 'Who shall stand before the sons of Anakim?' (Deuteronomy 9: 2).



We cannot but expect to be delivered from the Norman bondage whereof we now as well as our predecessors have felt the smart by these bloody wars, and from all unreasonable laws made ever since that unhappy conquest. As we have encouragement, we shall inform you further, and guide you as we observe your doings.

The work, ye must note, is ours and not your own, though ye are to be partakers with us in the well or ill-doing thereof. And therefore ye must expect to hear more frequently from us than ye have done; nor will it be your wisdom to take these admonitions and cautions in evil part. If ye consider well ye may wonder we are no tarter. Ye may perceive we have not yet left our true English confidence, but are willing that both you and all our neighbour nations should know that we both see and know all stratagems and policies that are laid in wait to entrap – and so to enslave – us, and that we bid defiance to their worst our enemies can do. We know we have store of friends in our neighbour countries.

Our head is not yet so intoxicated with this new mystery of iniquity but that a reasonable cordial administered by your hand will set us fast in our seat.

Ye are not to reckon that ye have any longer time to effect the great work we have entrusted unto you; for we must not lose our free choice of a parliament once every year, fresh and fresh for a continual parliament. For so, if a present parliament be mistaken in their understandings and do things prejudicial, we may so long remain under these prejudices that the commonwealth may be endangered thereby. Nor do we value a triennial parliament. Before three years come to an end grievances and mischiefs may be past remedy. And therefore our advice is that ye order a meeting of the chosen of parliament-men to be expressly upon one certain day in November yearly throughout the land in the places accustomed and to be by you expressed, there to make choice of whom they think good, according to law – and all men that have a right to be there, not to fail upon a great penalty, but no summons to be expected. And if any person without exception shall write letters or use any endeavours to incline the choosers to choose any man, or use any means to disturb or pervert them from a free choice, then that all such sinister dealing be made punishable or a most heinous crime. And that a parliament so chosen in November, succeeding year by year, may come in stead of the preceding parliament, and proceed with the affairs of the commonwealth. Nor would

we have it in the power of our parliament to receive any member from his place or service of the House without the consent had of those counties, cities and boroughs respectively that choose him – great inconveniences depending thereon, whereof we have seen and felt too much.

Now, if ye shall conscionably<sup>46</sup> perform your trust the year ensuing and order the parliaments to succeed as aforesaid, then we shall not doubt to be made absolute freemen in time, and become a just, plentiful and powerful nation. All that is past will be forgotten and we shall yet have cause to rejoice in your wisdom and fidelity.

#### Postscript

Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way: Only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth and with all your heart: for consider how great things he has done for you. But if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king. 1 Samuel 12: 23–25.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> conscionably = in good conscience.

<sup>47</sup> The original says verse 22.