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# The Political Consequences of King Charles II's Catholic Sympathies in Restoration England

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## THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF KING CHARLES II'S CATHOLIC SYMPATHIES IN RESTORATION ENGLAND

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By Nathan Harkey

Religion now will serve no more  
To cloak our false professors;  
There's none so blinde but plainly sees  
Who were the Lands Oppressors.  
– a pre-Restoration Royalist Propaganda  
rhyme<sup>1</sup>

In 1660, after spending over a decade in exile, Charles Stuart was invited back to the throne of England by a parliament that was filled with recently elected Royalists. He had spent his exile on mainland Europe, appealing to various other Royal powers to help him take back his kingdom. Fortunately for Charles, he was welcomed back by his people, who had for the most part suffered under a bland and morally strict regime following the execution of his father, Charles I. While Oliver Cromwell was alive, his power went virtually unquestioned, but his Puritan Commonwealth struggled to make an agreeable constitution that would replace the monarchy.

English men and women have long viewed the monarchy as a symbol of which they could be proud. When Cromwell died, his son Richard left much to be desired as an inspiring leader, as instability and confusion intensified during his short tenure.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the people of England must have felt some sort of optimism for a revival of the monarchy, hoping that the new king would be able to find a healthy balance between his father's financial woes and the oppressive nature of the Commonwealth. With the new monarchy would return the flamboyance of court life, as well as theaters and other forms of entertainment that had been banned during the interregnum. But the return of a Stuart to the throne naturally came with difficulties, and this new reign was plagued with similar issues as those that caused the death of Charles I. One would think that after the English Civil War, any subsequent ruler would avoid the financial and religious discord that made Charles I so unpopular. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Godfrey Davies, *The Restoration of Charles II: 1658-1660* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1955), 314.

<sup>2</sup> J.R. Jones, *The Restored Monarchy: 1660-1688* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), 8.

despite the disastrous outcome of his father's reign, Charles II wore on the patience of the English people through his disagreements with Parliament due to his religious sympathies and constant need for money. The assumption that the will of the king must be tolerated by the people was the undoing of his father, and ultimately led to the downfall of his brother, after which Parliament would become supreme over the monarch in the British governmental sphere.

When talking about Charles II's restoration, it is crucial to first examine why it was necessary. Charles I, being at odds with Parliament, dissolved it multiple times for not voting him money (among other reasons), leading to the passage of a list of grievances against the King and resulting in his defeat in the English Civil War. The government, controlled by Cromwell, then proceeded to execute the king as a traitor, although Charles denied to his end the legitimacy of the body that condemned him.

When asked if he would pardon the executioner, Charles replied that "the King cannot pardon a subject that willfully spills his blood," for the reason that he, the source of the law, could not consent to the ultimate lawlessness of high treason.<sup>3</sup> It was custom for the condemned person to pardon the headsman for executing him, signifying that they were only carrying out the sentence. Charles I's refusal to pardon his executioner was an abnormality, showing that Charles held anyone who did not prevent his death to be treasonous. On the other hand, an actor of the day named Quin justified Charles's execution "by all the laws he had left them,"<sup>4</sup> showing that at least some people viewed Charles as treasonous to himself by breaking his own laws. Therefore, executing Charles as a traitor and subjecting him to the same laws imposed on the general populace was an indication that the monarch was not above the law. Charles II was undoubtedly aware of this idea when he made his return, lest he lose his head as well.

While Charles II may have found it necessary to tread carefully, it would be wrong to say that the entire country was in favor of the death of Charles I. As a matter of fact, many people at the time were appalled that Parliament would presume to execute an anointed monarch, as evidenced by the reaction of the crowd to his beheading. A spectator later reported that when the axe descended and the blow was struck, "there was such a groan by the thousands then present as I never heard before and desire I may never hear

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<sup>3</sup> Hugh Ross Williamson, *The Day They Killed the King* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), 145-146.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

again,”<sup>5</sup> showing that while the people in power called for Charles's death, much of the general public disapproved. In fact, various groups would eventually venerate Charles as a martyr,<sup>6</sup> indicating how revolutionary and unheard of the idea of executing a king was at the time.

When Charles I was executed, the House of Commons quickly met to prevent the proclamation of his son as king.<sup>7</sup> The rightful king found himself a fugitive in England, with a reward of £1,000 on his head.<sup>8</sup> This hefty price meant that Charles would have to be careful with whom he trusted in his flight to France and ensuing exile. While in France he bided his time, waiting for Cromwell to falter or show an opening. Then, on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1658, Cromwell died, and a stirring of Royalist sympathy began to threaten the authority of the Commonwealth. Richard Cromwell served for a short stint as Lord Protector, but the election of the Convention Parliament with a Royalist majority ensured Charles II's return.<sup>9</sup> On April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1660, less than two years after Oliver Cromwell's death, a letter by Charles was given to the House of Commons, stating his interest to return. Parliament's reaction was swift, as they voted £50,000 to the King and declared that he should be invited to return at once and rule them.<sup>10</sup> From a constitutional perspective, it was as if the last nineteen years had never happened<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most comforting aspect of the Restoration was that it was done peacefully,<sup>12</sup> unlike so many previous changes of power. In light of this, the English people saw smooth waters ahead. However, it was not to be, for Charles II had spent too much time in Catholic France.

The most significant issue throughout the reigns of the Stuart period was unquestionably religion. One can hardly blame the Stuarts, as they were foreigners (Scots) who received the crown from a Tudor dynasty that had rejected Roman Catholicism less than a century before, then switched back and forth several times at the expense of the people. Still, the sovereign of England at this time was expected to conform to the Anglican Church, a demand to

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Hibbert, *Charles I* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 280.

<sup>6</sup> Faber, *'The Blessed King Charles the Martyr' as he appeared to 18<sup>th</sup>-century Tories*, 1717, National Portrait Gallery, London.

<sup>7</sup> Williamson, 151.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Bryant, *King Charles II* (London; New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Davies, 338-340.

<sup>10</sup> Bryant, 71.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Harris, *Restoration: Charles II and his Kingdoms, 1660-1685* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 47.

<sup>12</sup> Bryant, 78.

which the later Stuarts never seemed to acquiesce. Charles I's grandmother, Mary Queen of Scots, was Catholic, his wife Henrietta Maria was Catholic, and all of his offspring were feared (for good reason) to be Catholic. However, Charles I himself seemed to pick and choose what he would believe.

Prior to his execution, Charles claimed that, "my conscience in religion is, I think, very well known to all the world, and therefore I declare before you all that I die a Christian according to the profession of the Church of England as I found it left me by my father."<sup>13</sup> Here, in the last minutes of his life, he was a professed Anglican. On the other hand, Hugh Ross Williamson, a noted historian, claims that Charles was put to death because during his reign, he undertook to establish Presbyterianism "at the point of Scottish Swords as the State religion of England," reasoning that Cromwell "disliked the presbyter only slightly less than the priest," and that "he could not forgive Charles's tenderness to Presbyterianism."<sup>14</sup> It is intriguing to think that while almost his entire family was sympathetic to Catholics, Charles I seems to have headed in a different direction, favoring the Scottish faith. Nevertheless, his faith still contributed to his death.

Charles II may have learned from his father's religious woes, but he seemed not to heed them entirely. Within two years of the Restoration, he married a Catholic, Catherine of Braganza. This all but ensured that if Charles produced an heir, he would become Catholic through the nature of being more closely associated with his mother than with his father. To cause further public discord, Charles' brother, the Duke of York also married a Catholic.<sup>15</sup> This was something that Charles could have prevented, and in hindsight probably should have. Parliament advised the King to keep the marriage from happening, but he was "not inclined to listen," showing a disregard to Parliament that echoed his father's arrogant behavior, which could by no means be beneficial to the Stuarts.<sup>16</sup> In spite of this, the English people "did not know that Charles was himself a Catholic" as evidenced by his deathbed conversion to Catholicism.<sup>17</sup> However, his associations and actions as monarch caused suspicion, and "in every place where he wrote 'dissent' the English mind read 'Pop of Rome.'"<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Williamson, 144.

<sup>14</sup> Williamson, 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> J. Fitzgerald Molloy, *Royalty Restored; or London under Charles II* (London: Downey and Co. Limited, 1897) 248.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 248.

<sup>17</sup> *The Last Days of Charles II*, 43-45.

<sup>18</sup> Osmund Airy, *The English Restoration and Louis XIV: from the Peace of Westphalia to the Peace of Nimwegen* (New York: Scribner, 1902), 128.

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As a result, “hatred of Catholicism, fear of the Duke of York, and distrust of the king disturbed the nation to its core.”<sup>19</sup> The English nation thought that it was at risk of sinking under the influence of Catholicism once again, after over a century of switching back and forth between Catholic and Protestant monarchs. For these reasons, Parliament began thinking of ways to combat the growing influence of Catholicism in court life as well as in the government.

When the Stuart Dynasty was first restored to the throne, Charles II's relationship with Parliament was cautious, as he hoped to divert suspicion in the early days of his reign by deferring to the government's authority until his rule was secure enough to dissolve Parliament, a power still granted to him by the constitution.<sup>20</sup> However, Parliament had learned from the extravagant personalities of Charles I and his father James I, and they significantly limited the amount of money that they voted their new monarch.<sup>21</sup>

The lack of money limited Charles in two crucial ways. Primarily, it ensured that Charles could not form an army, because he wouldn't be able to pay it. This was an important issue to the English people, who had witnessed the formation of two large armies by both Charles I and Parliament in the recent Civil War, and had afterwards endured a decade of military rule. If one thing was generally agreed on in the public mind, it was that they would not suffer another Cromwell-esque militaristic regime, whether it was imposed by a dictatorial lord protector or an anointed monarch.<sup>22</sup>

The second purpose for voting Charles less money was the simple fact that it would guarantee that Parliament met more often. If the king dissolved Parliament whenever he wished, then they would only stay dissolved for as long as he could fund his affairs, after which he would need them to approve giving him more money. Also, it is likely that abusing his dissolution powers caused actual resentment among the elected officials, which could influence them to vote even less money his way. Therefore, as a testament to Charles II's caution not to overstep his power, Parliament was called in every year but two between 1660 and 1681.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, his father had ruled alone for eleven years, dissolving Parliament in 1629 and not re-calling it until 1640. The dreadful outcome of Charles I's disputes with Parliament was surely enough in itself to discourage Charles II from defying them to too great of an extent.

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<sup>19</sup> Molloy, 255.

<sup>20</sup> Airy, 89.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, 30.

<sup>22</sup> Airy, 89.

<sup>23</sup> Jones, 30.

Despite Charles II's caution with Parliament, the Anglican government proved unable to tolerate a king who was a Catholic sympathizer. This religious tension culminated in a series of anti-Catholic legislation, all geared toward the king's brother. It had been noted that while the Duke of York still attended church services with the king, he no longer received the sacrament.<sup>24</sup> Parliament responded to this scandalous discovery by the passage of the Test Act in 1673, which stated that "all persons holding office, or place of trust, or profit, should take the oaths of supremacy and allegiance in a public court; receive the sacrament according to the Church of England in some parish church on the Lord's Day."<sup>25</sup> Charles II reluctantly allowed the passage of the bill, naturally in return for the money that he needed for the ongoing war against the Dutch.<sup>26</sup> The desired response was swift, as the Duke of York immediately resigned his post as Lord High Admiral of England,<sup>27</sup> confirming suspicions that he was a papist. While Charles was able to deny his Catholic tendencies until his death, his brother was clearly led by a conscience that rendered him unable to put any worldly institution over his faith. The feeling among Englishmen regarding "popery" at the time was that "it was the first duty of his King to hate and combat 'this last and insolentest attempt on the credulity of mankind,'"<sup>28</sup> and Charles was warned on a consistent basis that his brother's Catholicism was the main cause of his problems.<sup>29</sup> In that light, Charles' inability to effectively handle his brother and his blatantly Catholic friends, and in some cases his encouragement of their behavior was the basis of why the Stuarts eventually fell from power.

Parliament's displeasure with the Duke of York was actualized in the Exclusion Bill of 1680, an aptly named piece of legislation that was meant to "exclude" the Duke from the royal line of succession. It was felt that James had gained complete ascendancy over the will of Charles,<sup>30</sup> making the prospect of a Catholic king seem far more immediate in the public eye.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the ministers of the opposition began to seek a deal with Charles regarding his brother's exclusion. The king's agreement rested on the only thing that he

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<sup>24</sup> Molloy, 241.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 241.

<sup>26</sup> John Miller, *James II* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 69.

<sup>27</sup> Molloy, 245.

<sup>28</sup> Airy, 126.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, 69.

<sup>30</sup> Edward Hale, *The Fall of the Stuarts and Western Europe: from 1678 to 1697* (New York: Scribner, 1901), 43.

<sup>31</sup> Miller, 92.

wanted out of Parliament: the voting of more money and supplies. He requested that the money be voted to him first, before any decision was made on the exclusion, a ploy that ended in stalemate, for the Whigs knew that he would dissolve Parliament the moment that he had what he wanted.<sup>32</sup> Due to this impasse, nothing was left but the dissolution of Parliament, with neither side getting what they wished. From here, Parliament would take the fate of the country into its own hands, and the power of the nation shifted from King to Parliament.

Although it didn't happen in his lifetime, the reign of Charles II was disastrous for the Stuart family and monarchical power. Each time the king called Parliament, it was to ask for money, and only in the possibility of fulfilling his monetary needs would he humor their demands about religion. Although he converted to Catholicism on his deathbed, his life was a virtual tug-of-war between Anglicanism and Catholicism, and he tried his best to toe a razor-thin line, giving neither side the clear advantage. This behavior proved to wear on the patience of Parliament, who must have grown tired of Charles II's indecisiveness while the future promised a Catholic king. Parliament's fears were realized when Charles died in 1685, and his brother ascended the throne as James II. A couple of years into James' Catholic rule, Parliament invited William of Orange and his wife Mary (Daughter of James II) to take the throne as a Protestant alternative. In December 1689, less than a year into their reign, William III and Mary II allowed the passage of the English Bill of Rights, which declared that "James, with the help of evil counselors, had attempted to destroy the Protestant religion and the laws and liberties of the kingdom,"<sup>33</sup> echoing the rhyme that said as much about the oppressive efforts of the Commonwealth.

The bill significantly limited the power of the sovereign, ending the king's ability to dissolve Parliament, and claimed that William and Mary's reign was legitimized by Parliament's affirmation.<sup>34</sup> From then on, the King or Queen of England ruled by right of Parliament, and all of their powers rested in the fact that Parliament sanctioned them. The inability of Charles II to quell his brother's religious tendencies, and his ensuring that he became king were direct causes of the dissatisfaction of Parliament. Because of Charles' Catholic sympathies, the rule of James II quickly resulted in the Glorious Revolution, and the subsequent dominance of Parliament over the sovereign. Therefore, the question of religion

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<sup>32</sup> Hale, 44-45.

<sup>33</sup> David Ogg, *England in the Reigns of James II and William III* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 241.

<sup>34</sup> Ogg, 242.



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was present at the restoration of Charles II, and because of the way he managed it, became the instrument for his brother's downfall.