

Jeffrey Scott Pearson

Mr. Palmer - ab actu ad posse valet illatio

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A.M.D.G.

DBQ #2 The Ideal Government as Envisioned in the Seventeenth Century

By the seventeenth century, Europe had witnessed kings rise and fall, nation-states form and others crumble, mighty populations capitulate to the hells of the Black Death, and the foundation of Christ divided. Between Charlemagne being crowned *Imperator Romanorum* on Christmas Day in the year 800 and Charles I being beheaded in 1649 Europe was the most tumultuous and volatile continent, in terms of government and nation building, ever in history. Using their diverse and rich culture of government styles as well as the immediately pertinent issues of the day, the brightest and most influential minds of the seventeenth century experimented with different ways to run the newly coherent nations of Europe. Although change was demanded and many nations were abused by absolute monarchs, the archetype of sovereign rulers envisaged by intellectual leaders was not significantly affected. The ideal government as envisioned during the seventeenth century was a benevolent, versatile and agile, skillful, intelligently advised absolute monarch who was religiously zealous and held the benefit of common interests between himself and the people.

From the Carolingian dynasty up to the Bourbons and the Habsburgs absolute monarchies have failed, lost the support of the people, and abused power. However, this does not affect the ideal government envisioned during the seventeenth century. Frederick William of Prussia provides insight into why the failures of previous absolute monarchs are

inconsequential when it comes to altering the seventeenth century model of good government. A letter to Frederick's son, never meant to be publicly read, elucidates that a sovereign should start by capitalizing on the wisdom of the clergy and established aristocrats. Continuing, the absolute leader of Prussia described the model of government as a king who was benevolent and keen to the needs of his subjects. Furthermore, he recognized the importance of promoting religious conviction at the same time as ensuring justice equally throughout the land. Even though these goals would require an extremely adept leader and were never totally expected to come to fruition, it was still this idea that resonated as the best form of government (10). Collaborating with the need for common interests between the people and sovereign, Jean de la Bruyère defines the duties between the ruler and his people as obligatory and equal. However, he maintains that the people were still subservient to the king's administration of the law and justice. Finally though, just like Frederick's cautions to his son, Bruyère warns against the king's ego and a lack of moderation in attitudes or royal policies (8). This proves to be especially essential if one was envisioning an ideal government in the case of Louis XIV. The Duke de Saint-Simon states vanity and fathomless love of admiration as the downfall of the Sun King (9). Therefore, as Frederick and Bruyère recognized, arrogance and egotism are virtues that must be non-existent when visualizing the ideal absolute government.

The general census of the great seventeenth century thinkers was that to achieve the best form of government, the absolute ruler needed a means by which he could be legitimized; given authority. The Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Excellency, Jacques Bossuet, a Bishop in France upheld the popular notion that the king's authority was from God. He asserted that the royal throne, to which all peoples were given as obedient, was not the throne of man, but

the throne of God. In fact, not only is the authority derived from divine providence, but the skills and ability to make decisions as well. Even the pro-constitution English Parliament described the only justified power as being from God (3). Ergo, not only is the sanction to rule provided by God but also any needed defenses of what may be controversial decisions made in the best interests of the future. So, this ideal ruler would have the authority, the ability, the cause, and the motivation to provide for the needs of the people all from the invulnerable source of God (7). Even the failed absolute monarch, Charles I of England, even if swayed by his imminent death, agreed that the sovereign must desire the liberty and good fortune of his people. In essence, the ideal form of government includes an absolute monarch who is willing to sacrifice himself for the people; albeit, not quite as literally as did Charles I (4).

England, although it does champion the parliamentary constitutionalism approach to government, is still an example providing evidence to the fact that the seventeenth century ideal absolute monarch must be skillful, versatile and agile in political maneuvers, and sufficiently surrounded by brilliant advisors. King James I of England, from his True Law of Free Monarchies, illustrates that absolute monarchy is still the desired government for Scotland and all of Great Britain. He says that the king must be adroit in his efforts to pass laws, statutes, and ordinances. This is so because the king should not have the crutch or the encumbrance of a legislative body which only slows an absolute monarch's endeavors towards greater benefit of his people (1). The 1621 English House of Commons protest to King James the First, is yet another piece of support for the seventeenth century ideal image of an absolute monarch. It defends the fact that a sovereign with absolute power must not give way to important matters, like Frederick said, and must be skillful like many others have proclaimed. This is so, because if

that envisioned absolute monarch boasts skill, diligence, and fortitude he will not face the protests of parliament with which Charles I and James I, who didn't have those attributes, had to struggle (2).

Though the face of Europe was radically different from the glory days of Charlemagne and a unified continent, the great thinkers of the seventeenth century still held on to a vision of that kind of power. They knew that the ideal government must emulate the successes of some leaders like Louis XIV, but must also heed the advice of a more moderately absolute ruler like Frederick. An absolute monarch blessed with benevolence for his people and common interests, aptitude for politics, yet still strong enough to inspire is the ideal form of leadership in government that was envisioned during the seventeenth century.