

Activity 6. Putney Debates Define the Rights of Englishmen

Source: Adapted from <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/STUPutneydebates.htm>, accessed May 30, 2010

Background: The Putney Debates in England took place in 1647. They involved leaders of the New Model Army and Parliament that were challenging King Charles I for power. The question debated was whether ordinary men without property were entitled to the right to vote. Participants in the debate included Thomas Rainsborough, a military officer and Member of Parliament, who was considered a radical and supporter of the Leveller movement, Edward Sexby and John Wildman, military officers who were leaders of the Levellers, and Henry Ireton, who represented the senior officers in the New Model Army and argued that the vote should be based on the ownership of property. Ireton and his supporters believed that while men might have the same “natural rights” before God, they had different civil rights awarded by government. The political program of the Levellers included voting rights for all adult males, annual elections, complete religious freedom, an end to the censorship of books and newspapers, trial by jury, and the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords. A year after the Putney Debates, Thomas Rainsborough was murdered by his opponents.

Instructions: After you read and reenact the debate, imagine you are assigned to be the final speaker and write a presentation expressing your views. As a follow-up, write a 250-word editorial for an American colonial newspaper explaining how the Putney Debates and the positions taken by the Levellers will affect colonial rights.

The Putney Debates

Thomas Rainsborough: I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he. I think it is clear that every man that is to live under a Government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that Government. The poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that Government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under.

Henry Ireton: If you make this rule I think you must fly for refuge to an absolute natural Right, and you must deny all Civil Right. I am sure it will come to that in the consequence. Where will you end? Will you not take away all property?

John Wildman: We have been under slavery, that is acknowledged by all. Our very laws were made by our Conquerors. I conceive there is no credit to be given to any of them. We are now engaged for our freedom. That is the end [goal] of Parliament, to legislate according to the just ends of government, not simply to maintain what is already established. Every person in England has as clear a right to elect his Representative as the greatest person in England. I conceive that's the undeniable maxim of government: that all government is in the free consent of the people. I move that the Question be this: Whether any person can justly be bound by law, who doth not give his consent that such persons shall make laws for him?

Edward Sexby: We have engaged in this kingdom and ventured our lives, and it was all for this: to recover our birthrights and privileges as Englishmen. There are many thousands of us soldiers that have ventured our lives; we have had little property in this kingdom as to our estates, yet we had a birthright. But it seems now except a man hath a fixed estate in this kingdom, he hath no right in this kingdom. I wonder we were so much deceived. If we had not a right to the kingdom, we were mere mercenary soldiers.

Thomas Rainsborough: I want to know what the soldier has fought for all this while? He has fought to enslave himself, to give power to men of riches, men of estates, to make him a perpetual slave. When these Gentlemen fall out among themselves they shall press the poor scrubs to come and kill each other for them.

Henry Ireton: Universal suffrage is dangerous if it destroys property rights. Altering the Constitution according to a law of nature will grant people the liberty to use of other men's goods.