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Common Sense

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By Thomas Paine

16 Of the Origin and Design of Government in General, with Concise

21 Remarks on the English Constitution

30 SOME writers have so confounded society with government, as

42 to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not

53 only different, but have different origins. Society is produced by our

63 wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our

71 happiness POSITIVELY by uniting our affections, the latter

79 NEGATIVELY by restraining our vices. The one encourages

91 intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last

93 a punisher.

105 Society in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its

119 best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one:

132 for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries BY A

141 GOVERNMENT, which we might expect in a country WITHOUT

150 GOVERNMENT, our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we

162 furnish the means by which we suffer. Government, like dress, is the
175 badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins
187 of the bowers of paradise. For were the impulses of conscience clear,
197 uniform and irresistibly obeyed, man would need no other lawgiver;
212 but that not being the case, he finds it necessary to surrender up a part
226 of his property to furnish means for the protection of the rest; and this
140 he is induced to do by the same prudence which in every other case
152 advises him, out of two evils to choose the least. Wherefore, security
163 being the true design and end of government, it unanswerably follows
176 that whatever form thereof appears most likely to ensure it to us, with
187 the least expense and greatest benefit, is preferable to all others.
201 In order to gain a clear and just idea of the design and end of
213 government, let us suppose a small number of persons settled in some
225 sequestered part of the earth, unconnected with the rest; they will then
238 represent the first peopling of any country, or of the world. In this
250 state of natural liberty, society will be their first thought. A thousand
262 motives will excite them thereto; the strength of one man is so
274 unequal to his wants, and his mind so unfitted for perpetual solitude,

288 that he is soon obliged to seek assistance and relief of another, who in
303 his turn requires the same. Four or five united would be able to raise a
315 tolerable dwelling in the midst of a wilderness, but one man might
325 labour out the common period of life without accomplishing any
339 thing; when he had felled his timber he could not remove it, nor erect
353 it after it was removed; hunger in the mean time would urge him to
365 quit his work, and every different want would call him a different
375 way. Disease, nay even misfortune, would be death; for, though
387 neither might be mortal, yet either would disable him from living, and
402 reduce him to a state in which he might rather be said to perish than
404 to die.

414 Thus necessity, like a gravitating power, would soon form our
423 newly arrived emigrants into society, the reciprocal blessings of
433 which would supersede, and render the obligations of law and
442 government unnecessary while they remained perfectly just to each
454 other; but as nothing but Heaven is impregnable to vice, it will
464 unavoidably happen that in proportion as they surmount the first
474 difficulties of emigration, which bound them together in a common

487 cause, they will begin to relax in their duty and attachment to each
498 other: and this remissness will point out the necessity of establishing
509 some form of government to supply the defect of moral virtue.
520 Some convenient tree will afford them a State House, under the
531 branches of which the whole Colony may assemble to deliberate on
544 public matters. It is more than probable that their first laws will have
556 the title only of Regulations and be enforced by no other penalty than
567 public disesteem. In this first parliament every man by natural right
571 will have a seat.

581 But as the Colony increases, the public concerns will increase
592 likewise, and the distance at which the members may be separated,
605 will render it too inconvenient for all of them to meet on every
616 occasion as at first, when their number was small, their habitations
629 near, and the public concerns few and trifling. This will point out the
640 convenience of their consenting to leave the legislative part to be
652 managed by a select number chosen from the whole body, who are
664 supposed to have the same concerns at stake which those have who
677 appointed them, and who will act in the same manner as the whole

688 body would act were they present. If the colony continue increasing,
698 it will become necessary to augment the number of representatives,
713 and that the interest of every part of the colony may be attended to, it
726 will be found best to divide the whole into convenient parts, each part
737 sending its proper number: and that the ELECTED might never form
746 to themselves an interest separate from the ELECTORS, prudence
758 will point out the propriety of having elections often: because as the
770 ELECTED might by that means return and mix again with the general
783 body of the ELECTORS in a few months, their fidelity to the public
796 will be secured by the prudent reflection of not making a rod for
806 themselves. And as this frequent interchange will establish a common
817 interest with every part of the community, they will mutually and
829 naturally support each other, and on this, (not on the unmeaning name
838 of king,) depends the STRENGTH OF GOVERNMENT, AND THE
842 HAPPINESS OF THE GOVERNED.

854 Here then is the origin and rise of government; namely, a mode
865 rendered necessary by the inability of moral virtue to govern the
887 world; here too is the design and end of government, viz. Freedom

899 and security. And however our eyes may be dazzled with show, or
910 our ears deceived by sound; however prejudice may warp our wills,
921 or interest darken our understanding, the simple voice of nature and
926 reason will say, 'tis right.

939 I draw my idea of the form of government from a principle in
952 nature which no art can overturn, viz. that the more simple any thing
966 is, the less liable it is to be disordered, and the easier repaired when
980 disordered; and with this maxim in view I offer a few remarks on the
992 so much boasted constitution of England. That it was noble for the
1005 dark and slavish times in which it was erected, is granted. When the
1016 world was overrun with tyranny the least remove therefrom was a
1027 glorious rescue. But that it is imperfect, subject to convulsions, and
1037 incapable of producing what it seems to promise is easily
1038 demonstrated.

1047 Absolute governments, (tho' the disgrace of human nature) have
1059 this advantage with them, they are simple; if the people suffer, they
1070 know the head from which their suffering springs; know likewise the
1083 remedy; and are not bewildered by a variety of causes and cures. But

1094 the constitution of England is so exceedingly complex, that the nation
1106 may suffer for years together without being able to discover in which
1120 part the fault lies; some will say in one and some in another, and
1128 every political physician will advise a different medicine.

1140 I know it is difficult to get over local or long standing
1151 prejudices, yet if we will suffer ourselves to examine the component
1164 parts of the English Constitution, we shall find them to be the base
1173 remains of two ancient tyrannies, compounded with some new
1175 Republican materials.

1186 First. — The remains of Monarchical tyranny in the person of the
1187 King.

1197 Secondly. — The remains of Aristocratical tyranny in the persons of
1199 the Peers.

1209 Thirdly. — The new Republican materials, in the persons of the
1218 Commons, on whose virtue depends the freedom of England.

1229 The two first, by being hereditary, are independent of the People;
1237 wherefore in a CONSTITUTIONAL SENSE they contribute nothing
1243 towards the freedom of the State.

1255 To say that the constitution of England is an UNION of three
1264 powers, reciprocally CHECKING each other, is farcical; either the
1273 words have no meaning, or they are flat contradictions.
1286 First. — That the King it not to be trusted without being looked after;
1299 or in other words, that a thirst for absolute power is the natural
1302 disease of monarchy.
1311 Secondly. — That the Commons, by being appointed for that
1322 purpose, are either wiser or more worthy of confidence than the
1323 Crown.
1334 But as the same constitution which gives the Commons a power
1345 to check the King by withholding the supplies, gives afterwards the
1357 King a power to check the Commons, by empowering him to reject
1370 their other bills; it again supposes that the King is wiser than those
1382 whom it has already supposed to be wiser than him. A mere
1383 absurdity!
1392 There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of
1404 Monarchy; it first excludes a man from the means of information, yet
1416 empowers him to act in cases where the highest judgment is required.

1431 The state of a king shuts him from the World, yet the business of a
1441 king requires him to know it thoroughly; wherefore the different
1451 parts, by unnaturally opposing and destroying each other, prove the
1458 whole character to be absurd and useless.

1467 Some writers have explained the English constitution thus: the
1481 King, say they, is one, the people another; the Peers are a house in
1495 behalf of the King, the commons in behalf of the people; but this hath
1507 all the distinctions of a house divided against itself; and though the
1516 expressions be pleasantly arranged, yet when examined they appear
1527 idle and ambiguous; and it will always happen, that the nicest
1537 construction that words are capable of, when applied to the
1547 description of something which either cannot exist, or is too
1557 incomprehensible to be within the compass of description, will be
1570 words of sound only, and though they may amuse the ear, they cannot
1580 inform the mind: for this explanation includes a previous question,
1590 viz. HOW CAME THE KING BY A POWER WHICH THE
1598 PEOPLE ARE AFRAID TO TRUST, AND ALWAYS OBLIGED
1612 TO CHECK? Such a power could not be the gift of a wise people,

1622 neither can any power, WHICH NEEDS CHECKING, be from God;
1633 yet the provision which the constitution makes supposes such a power
1635 to exist.

1647 But the provision is unequal to the task; the means either cannot
1662 or will not accomplish the end, and the whole affair is a Felo de se:
1677 for as the greater weight will always carry up the less, and as all the
1691 wheels of a machine are put in motion by one, it only remains to
1703 know which power in the constitution has the most weight, for that
1719 will govern: and tho' the others, or a part of them, may clog, or, as the
1733 phrase is, check the rapidity of its motion, yet so long as they cannot
1744 stop it, their endeavours will be ineffectual: The first moving power
1759 will at last have its way, and what it wants in speed is supplied by
1760 time.

1769 That the crown is this overbearing part in the English
1780 constitution needs not be mentioned, and that it derives its whole
1791 consequence merely from being the giver of places and pensions is
1802 self-evident; wherefore, though we have been wise enough to shut

1815 and lock a door against absolute Monarchy, we at the same time have
1827 been foolish enough to put the Crown in possession of the key.

1836 The prejudice of Englishmen, in favour of their own
1847 government, by King, Lords and Commons, arises as much or more
1857 from national pride than reason. Individuals are undoubtedly safer in
1871 England than in some other countries: but the will of the king is as
1885 much the law of the land in Britain as in France, with this difference,
1898 that instead of proceeding directly from his mouth, it is handed to the
1910 people under the formidable shape of an act of parliament. For the
1922 fate of Charles the First hath only made kings more subtle — not
1924 more just.

1933 Wherefore, laying aside all national pride and prejudice in
1946 favour of modes and forms, the plain truth is that IT IS WHOLLY
1955 OWING TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PEOPLE, AND NOT
1964 TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE GOVERNMENT that the crown
1973 is not as oppressive in England as in Turkey.

1981 An inquiry into the CONSTITUTIONAL ERRORS in the
1993 English form of government, is at this time highly necessary; for as

2007 we are never in a proper condition of doing justice to others, while we
2018 continue under the influence of some leading partiality, so neither are
2031 we capable of doing it to ourselves while we remain fettered by any
2044 obstinate prejudice. And as a man who is attached to a prostitute is
2057 unfitted to choose or judge of a wife, so any prepossession in favour
2068 of a rotten constitution of government will disable us from discerning
2071 a good one.