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ABBREVIATIONS

Wolfe - Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution, ed.
Don M. Wolfe, 1944.

Woodhouse - Puritanism and Liberty, ed. A.S.P. Woodhouse, 1938.

Haller and Davies - The Leveller Tracts,, 1647-1653, ed. William
Haller and Godfrey Davies,, 1944.

LEVELLER DEMOCRACY - FACT OR MYTH?

by A.L. Morton

One of the important historical advances made in the last thirty or forty years has been a new understanding of the part played by the Levellers in the English Revolution. Earlier historians had relegated them to a very secondary position. Gardiner, in his History of the Great Civil War, while devoting considerable space to their activities, as was inevitable in a work planned on such a generous scale, treats them as rather a disturbing factor, cutting across the main stream of development. Trevelyan, in England Under the Stuarts, dismissed them in the most cursory manner.

Today, a number of detailed studies, and, more useful still, of volumes in which their most outstanding writings have been made easily accessible, so that for the first time they can speak for themselves, make it possible to come to a juster estimate. We now see them as important in two ways. First, as having played a central part in the political struggle at its most critical stage, and second, as having made an important contribution to English political thinking.

For some time the generally accepted view had been that the Levellers were the first English democrats, forerunners of the advanced radicalism of the age of the French Revolution and of the Chartists. It was thought, in particular, that in principle they stood for a policy of universal manhood suffrage. More recently this view has been challenged by Professor C.B. Macpherson in a remarkable book, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism (Oxford, 1962). His arguments have been accepted

by many seventeenth-century scholars, including Christopher Hill, who summarises them as follows:

"By reading the texts more carefully, Professor Macpherson is able to demonstrate that in all their programmatic statements the Levellers excluded paupers and servants from the franchise; and that even in their more rhetorical flourishes they would restrict the vote to 'freeborn Englishmen', those who had not lost their birthright. In a very interesting appendix Professor Macpherson argues that whilst the Leveller franchise proposals would have doubled the number of voters in 1648, the adoption of manhood suffrage would have multiplied it by 5.5 times. That is to say, the Levellers proposed to enfranchise rather more than 10% of the unenfranchised adult males. One could argue with the details of the calculations by which Professor Macpherson reaches this conclusion but the tendency is difficult to deny. Terrifying though they seemed to their opponents in the seventeenth century, the Levellers were not democrats in the modern sense. Their electorate would have been composed of heads of households, men economically independent."(1)

This view now seems well on the way to becoming a new orthodoxy.

Let us first be clear as to what is at issue. It is a fact that in all their later programmatic statements the Levellers did make substantial exceptions about those to whom the franchise could be granted. This, I think has never been seriously disputed and I am certainly not disputing it here. What has to be considered, then, is the extent of these exceptions, the reasons for which they were made and their bearing upon the underlying political philosophy of the Levellers. It is with the greatest diffidence that one ventures to dissent from the views of such authorities as Macpherson and Hill, to whom we all owe a debt which entitles their conclusions to the greatest respect. All the same, I do not think that the last word has been said on this question. I certainly make no claim, to have said it here, but hope that it may be possible to take the discussion a few small steps further.

II. THE DOCUMENTS IN THE CASE

Let us begin by considering the main programme statements in which the Leveller attitude to the franchise is set out. These are the four

(1) Past and Present, April 1963, pp., 87-8.

Three

versions of An Agreement of the People. The Case of the Army Truly Stated and the Petition of January 1648. All these are printed in full in Wolfe's Leveller Manifestoes.

The first of these statements, chronologically, is The Case of the Army, dated October 15th, 1647. Signed by the Agents of five regiments, it has all the marks of a policy statement drafted by the Leveller leadership collectively. A large part deals with special army problems, but it ends with a number of political points. Number 4 demands:

"that a law paramount be made, enacting it, to be unalterable by Parliaments that the people shall of course meet without any warrants or writs once in every two years upon an appointed day in their respective Countyes, for the election of their representors in Parliament, and that all the freeborn at the age of 21 years and upwards, be the electors, excepting those that have or shall deprive themselves of that their freedome, either for some years, or wholly by delinquency..." (2)

A few lines later it declares that 'all power is originally and essentially in the whole body of the people of this Nation.'

Clearly, there are phrases here whose meaning is debatable. Who are 'the people', or 'the whole body of the people of this nation'? What is meant by "freeborn", Who are those who 'have or shall deprive themselves' of their freedom? No doubt this excludes delinquents, i.e. Royalists, Professor Macpherson argues that it also excludes those who have deprived themselves of freedom by accepting wages or alms, but I can see little justification for this. It is on the face of it improbable that a document of this sort, having specified delinquency as a reason for disfranchisement, would have included these other grounds in so unspecific and ambiguous a way.

The first Agreement appeared on November 3rd, 1647. It is addressed to 'all the free Commons of England' and the relevant clause reads:

"That the People of England being at this day very unequally distributed by Counties, Cities and Burroughs for the election of their Deputies in Parliaments, ought to be more indifferently

- (2) Wolfe p. 212. Woodhouse p. 433, gives the concluding words as 'deprived themselves of that their freedom, either for some years or wholly, by delinquency.' If this reading is accepted it would clearly mean that delinquency, and not the other grounds, is meant.

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proportioned, according to the number of the Inhabitants: the circumstances whereof, for number, place, and manner, are to be set down before the end of this present Parliament." (3)

Here, again, different interpretations are possible, but it should be noted that there are no references to any exceptions and the phrase 'according to the number of the Inhabitants' certainly suggests manhood suffrage, since if any such wholesale exceptions as Professor Macpherson suggests are implicitly assumed, some such phrase as 'according to the number of the electors' would surely have been more appropriate. Passages later in the Agreement speak of 'an equall just Government' and 'equal Government for a free people', both of which may reasonably be taken to imply manhood suffrage.

The first document in which specific exceptions other than delinquency are made is the Petition of January 1648. This appeared, after the Putney Debates and other developments of which it will be necessary to say more presently. The passage dealing with the franchise runs:

"That therefore, that Birth-right of all Englishmen, be forthwith restored to all which are not, or shall not be legally disfranchised for some criminal cause, or are not under 21 years of age, or servants, or beggars," (4)

The exceptions here are more specific, and are further enlarged in the second and the third (or 'Officers') Agreement, appearing on December 15th 1648 and January 15th 1649. Both these documents represent a compromise, following discussions between the Levellers, the Army leaders and representatives of the Independents. They are in fact the Leveller and the Grandes versions of what was agreed at these meetings and differ in some important respects. The Levellers repudiated the 'Officers' version, but the clauses dealing with the franchise are identical except that the latter omits the phrase 'such as have subscribed this Agreement' and the lines from 'and such as shall not subscribe' to the end of the passage quoted. This omission has a certain importance in view of the Levellers' intention that the Agreement should be a national covenant tendered to the whole people for approval, but it is not really relevant to our particular argument. The clause reads:

"That the Electors in every Division, shall be Natives or Denizens of England, such as have subscribed to this Agreement: not persona

(3) Wolfe, p. 226

(4) Wolfe, p. 267

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receiving Alms, but such as are assessed ordinarily towards the relief of the poor; not servants to, or receiving wages from any particular person. And in all Elections (except for the Universities) they shall be men of one and twenty years old, or upwards, and Housekeepers, dwelling within the Division, for which the Election is: Provided, That until the end of seven years next ensuing the time herein limited; for the end of this present Parliament, no person shall be admitted to, or have any hand or voyce in such Elections, who have adhered to, or assisted the King against the Parliament in any of these Wars or Insurrections; or who shall make or joyn in, or abet any forcible opposition against this Agreement; and that such as shall not subscribe it before the time limited, for the end of this Parliament, shall not have Vote in the next Election; neither, if they subscribe afterwards, shall they have any voice in the Elections next succeeding their subscription unless their subscription were six moneths before the same." (5)

The fourth}, and final, version of the Agreement was issued by the Levellers on May 1st 1649, after the Grandees had gone back on the understanding reached at the discussions just mentioned, and while the Leveller leaders were imprisoned in the Tower. Here the exceptions to the franchise reappear in a somewhat modified form:

"That the Supreme Authority of England and the Territories therewith incorporate, shall be and reside henceforward in a Representative of the people consisting of four hundred persons, but no more; in the choice of whom (according to naturall right) all men of the age of one and twenty yeers having served the late King in Arms or voluntary Contributions shall have their voices; and be capable of being elected to that Supreme Trust, those who served the King being disabled for ten years onely." (6)

It will be noted that here the stipulation that electors should be ratepayers and householders has disappeared. This may be taken as the final form in which the Levellers embodied their demands upon this question. Indeed, from this point the whole movement declined so rapidly that no further programme documents were issued.

What is essential to remember is that all these documents were not merely abstract statements of political theory - they were party programmes, weapons in an active political campaign and modified from time to time in accordance

(5) Wolfe, p. 297. 'Officers' Agreement, Wolfe, p. 342.

(6) Wolfe, p. 402,

with the changing situation and the practical needs of the struggle. It is therefore necessary to look at them not only from the standpoint of political theory, as Professor Macpherson seems too inclined to do, but in relation to the actual events then taking place. This is what I shall try to do in the next three sections. In passing I may remark that Hill's distinction between programmatic statements and rhetorical flourishes does not seem to me entirely justified. No doubt the former have a greater authority, but it is also true that men are more likely to reveal their real beliefs in the heat and passion of debate than in more formal statements where they are being statesmanlike and diplomatic and where questions of tactics and expediency have to be carefully considered.

III. THE PUTNEY DEBATES

The first version of the Agreement was less a fully considered political programme than a draft drawn up as a basis for discussion. It was this draft which was under consideration at the debates of the Army Council which opened at Putney church on October 28th 1647* The Case of the Army was then also under consideration.

At this time the Army Council included delegates or Agents elected by the rank and file of the regiments and of representatives of the junior officers as well as the higher officers. This was the time when Leveller influence in the Army was at its height and when political demands for a more democratic England were occupying the minds of the soldiers almost as much as their own military grievances.

It was at Putney that the question of the franchise first came into prominence. Up to this time it was only among many Leveller concerns - Annual Parliaments, the subordination of the representatives to the electors, religious toleration, civil liberties and a variety of social and political issues had hitherto been equally or perhaps even more prominent in their propaganda. Now the question of exactly who was entitled to elect the sovereign parliament was seen to be of special importance.

In the debate that took place Ireton was the main speaker for the Grandees, supported by Colonel Rich and others. Cromwell in the chair tried to preserve some appearance of impartiality but was always ready to come to Ireton's help at difficult moments. On the other side were two civilian Levellers, John Wildman and Maximilian Petty. Among the soldiers the outstanding spokesman was Colonel Thomas Rainborough, with Edward Sexby and other rank-and-file Agents.

After the clause quoted above had been read, Ireton opened the attack:

Seven

"It is said, they are to be distributed according to the number of the inhabitants: 'The people of England? &c. And this doth make me to think that the meaning is, that every man that is an inhabitant is to be equally considered, and to have an equal voice in the election of those representers, the persons that are for the general Representative; and if that be the meaning, then I have something to say against it:" (7)

To this Petty replied:

"We judge that all inhabitants that have not lost their birthright should have an equal vote in elections."

Clearly here is a note of ambiguity, almost of weakness. Perhaps sensing this, Rainborough springs in immediately:

"I desired that those that had engaged in it might be included. For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that 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; and I am confident that, when I have heard the reasons against it; something will be said to answer those reasons, insomuch that I should doubt whether he was an Englishman or no, that should doubt of these things*" (8)

A little later he says, 'I do hear nothing at all that can convince me, why any man that is bom in England ought not to have his voice in election of burgesses. (9) And Clarke puts the claim firmly on the basis of natural rights:

"The grand question of all is, whether or no it be the property of every individual person in the kingdom to have a voice in elections; and the ground on which it is claimed is the Law of Nature, which, for my part, I think to be the law which is the ground of all constitutions?" (10)

(7) Woodhouse, p. 52.

(8) Woodhouse, p. 53.

(9) Woodhouse, p. 55.

(10) Woodhouse, p. 75.

Eight

In view of all this it seems to me that Professor Macpherson goes somewhat beyond the evidence when he writes:

"But the only consistent construction of the debate as a whole suggests that the Levellers (and their opponents) assumed that servants and alms-takers, as well as criminals and delinquents, had lost their birthright." (11)

On the contrary, it seems to suggest that on both sides the debate at least opens on the understanding that what they were talking about was manhood suffrage. If not, it is difficult to see what all the heat and passion was about, especially in view of statements by Ireton and Rich. Ireton is prepared to allow some extension of the suffrage!

"The objection does not lie in that, the making of the representation more equal, but in the introducing of men into an equality of interest in this government, who have no property in this kingdom, or who have no local permanent interest in it. For if I had said that I would not wish at all that we should any enlargement of the bounds of those that are to be electors, then you might have excepted against it. But what I said was that I would not go to enlarge it beyond all bounds, so that upon the same ground you may admit of so many men from foreign states as would outvote you." (12)

If all that the Levellers were proposing was a franchise that would add another 10% to the 10% who were already electors, it seems strange both that Ireton should have objected so strongly to their proposals, and that, when he had declared himself in favour of some extension, no one took him at his word and said, in effect, 'Very well, we are agreed on some extension - now let us sit down to discuss just what extension we can all accept.' Instead, the debate went on as if nothing important had been said, and almost at once Rich remarked:

"If the master and servant shall be equal electors, then clearly those that have no interest in the kingdom will make it their interest to chose those that have no interest." (13)

A strange remark if everyone on both sides was tacitly agreed that servants were excluded anyhow!

Nevertheless I think we can discern a certain difference between soldier and civilian Levellers, and it is striking how constantly, when

(11) Possessive Individualism, p. 122. (12) Woodhouse, p. 62.

(13) Woodhouse, p. 63.

Nine

Petty or Wildman intervene, the discussion loses its force and is diverted into technicalities and side issues. It was perhaps unfortunate that at these crucial debates the Leveller leadership was represented only by Petty, a quite minor figure, and the politically dubious Wildman. If Lilbume, then in prison, had been able to be present, it is tempting to wonder if the debates might not have taken a different course.

At any rate it was Petty who, in response to a question from Cromwell, first formulated the definite exclusion of servants and takers of alms. For this he gave a quite definite reason which needs to be noted:

"I conceive why we should exclude apprentices, or servants, or those that take alms, is because they depend upon the will of other men and should be afraid to displease them. For servants and apprentices, they are included in their masters, and so for those that receive alms from door to door." (14)

What he seems to be saying is not that the franchise is not a right to which all are entitled by Natural Law, but rather that in existing circumstances there are some for whom the exercise of this right is not possible, a point to which we shall return. This was no doubt true. At a time when voting was open and public it would be virtually impossible for servants to vote in a way displeasing to their masters, and to give them the vote, however formally democratic, would have meant in practice to place large blocks of votes in the hands of the very rich, blocks by which elections might well be turned. In the particular circumstances of the time, when Royalist nobles and gentry were disfranchised for delinquency, it would have meant restoring a large measure of political power to the most hostile elements. Yet Petty's statement seems to have come remarkably pat for a spontaneous reply to a question, and it may be permissible to wonder if there may not have been a measure of collusion here.

His statement seems to have brought this part of the debate to an end (which in itself is surely an indication that the point had not previously been understood) and the Council passed on to discuss other matters. Some days later a resolution on this basis was agreed. The minutes of this part of the debate have not survived, but the text of the resolution is given in A Letter from Several Agitators to their Regiments:

"We sent some of them to debate in love the matters and manner of the Agreement. And the first article thereof, being long debated, it was concluded by vote in the affirmative: vi.,

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That all soldiers and others if they be not servants or beggars, ought to have voices in electing those which shall represent them in Parliament- although they have not forty shillings per annum in freehold land. And there were but three voices against this your native freedom." (15)

The text; once more, is slightly ambiguous, but in the context of what was said during the debates it must mean that all soldiers, regardless of social status, and all others except servants and beggars, should be electors. The disfranchisement of delinquents was not specifically mentioned because it was never an issue at Putney.

IV. CORKBUSH FIELD AND AFTER

This victory was followed up with a resolution, proposed by Rainborough, for a general Rendezvous of the Army. At this it was intended that the Agreement should be put before the Army for endorsement as a first step towards its nation-wide implementation. Cromwell and Ireton, who, no doubt, were among the 'voices against', had other ideas and were soon able to launch an effective counter-stroke. There followed a period in which the situation was changing almost from day to day, and a short time-table of events may therefore be helpful.

<u>1647.</u>	November 4th	The Army Council passed the franchise resolution.
	5th	Resolution for a general Rendezvous of the Army.
	9th	The Agents ordered to return to their regiments. It is revealed that three Rendezvous are to be held. Lilbume released from prison by order of Parliament.
	11th	The King escaped from Hampton Court.
	15th	First Rendezvous held at Corkbush Field. Ware. Abortive mutiny crushed.
	December 15th	Army Council meets at Windsor. Reconciliation between Grandees and Army Levellers.
	30th	<u>Putney Projects</u> published.

Eleven

1648. January 3rd Cromwell moves vote of No Addresses to King
in House of Commons.

May Second Civil War.

This was, perhaps, the decisive period of the Leveller challenge. Instead of a single Rendezvous, at which their programme should be adopted by a united Army, the Grandees now arranged to hold three sectional meetings at which authority and discipline would be asserted. To the first of these, at Corkbusr Field, two regiments, Harrison's horse and Robert Lilburn's foot, (16) appeared, contrary to orders, without most of their officers and wearing copies of the Agreement in their hats. Even more significant, perhaps, Rainborough came, without his regiment, together with Colonel Eyres, Major Scott and other officers. In his report to the House of Lords Fairfax wrote that,

"Colonel Rainborough with some others, tendered this enclosed Petition, together with the People's Agreement annexed thereunto. And (by what hands I yet know not fully) very many copies of the same Agreement were dispersed among the soldiers, thereby to engage them." (17)

Lilburne, just out of prison, had come down to Ware and was waiting upon events, and it seems clear that the Levellers were expecting a decision and were hoping to carry the Army against Fairfax and Cromwell. If any officer could have done this, that officer was Rainborough. But the circumstances could hardly have been more unfavourable. The King's escape from Hampton Court only four days earlier raised the threat of renewed war, in which he might find new allies even inside Parliament itself. At such a moment the prestige of Fairfax and Cromwell; generals with an unbroken succession of victories behind them, was immensely strengthened. Whatever the political differences, Cromwell had earned genuine respect for his conduct in the field, while Fairfax, though in truth just as hostile to Leveller aspirations, had always managed to avoid political commitment and so represented a fund of unused goodwill on which the Grandees could draw.

(16) Robert Lilburne John's brother, had previously been a Leveller supporter, but by now had moved over towards the Grandees.

(17) Maseres, Select Tracts, I. p. xlii. The Petition declared that the Army had fought for its native rights and had waited long to secure them. Therefore they must remain in arms to secure their freedom. It asked Fairfax to continue to lead them to these ends.

in any case, the soldiers were pulled in two ways. As citizens their political sympathies were with the Levellers. But as members of a victorious and well disciplined army their sense of military obligation was always powerful. In certain circumstances, off duty or in discussion, their political convictions might prevail: on the parade ground, under command, they were likely to act rather as soldiers. So it turned out at Ware, and the stirrings of mutiny were soon crushed.

Rainborough was also a soldier with a magnificent military record and no more immune than the rest to such influences. As a high-ranking officer he could hardly initiate a mutiny, though he might have taken command if one had developed. At Ware he certainly came to the very verge of mutiny, but was unable to take the final step. As things turned out he must have seen that any hope of carrying the Army for the Agreement against its leaders had now vanished - the most that could now be hoped for was to divide it. And as a soldier he would have seen that to divide the Army in the existing circumstances would have been fatal. It would have led with certainty to a Royalist victory and the end of all he had been fighting for. Therefore new tactics were unavoidable.

He was not alone in this realisation. In spite of their victory Cromwell and Ireton must also have seen the danger of their position. Discipline had been restored, but the Army had not changed its political convictions overnight. Its loyalty had still to be kept, especially as the developing alliance between Royalists and many Presbyterians, backed by the Scots, made a renewal of war almost certain. They, too, could see that they needed the support of the Levellers, inside and outside the Army, even if this involved distasteful political concessions.

The result was another meeting of the Army Council at Windsor from December 15th, the last which the Agents of the regiments attended, at which a reconciliation was reached. Rainborough and others apologised for acts of indiscipline and promised that they would not be repeated. There is nothing to suggest that they repudiated any of their political aims. On the other side, officers and others under arrest were set free and restored to their commands and a general amnesty given for all past acts. On the political side the Grandees undertook that there should be no more attempts at agreement with the King - a Leveller demand which Ireton had strongly resisted at Putney. This was shown to be a genuine change of policy when Cromwell on January 3rd moved and carried a motion in the House of Commons that no further Addresses should be made to Charles. The unity of the Army was restored, but on the basis of an important shift to the 'left' by the Grandees.

THE FATE OF THE AGREEMENT

The publication of Wildman's Putney Projects on December 30th, with

Thirteen

its all-out attack on the Grandees, suggests that the civilian leaders were slower to accept the new tactics than their colleagues in the Army. After the defeat at Ware they concentrated their attention increasingly on winning mass support in and around London. Strong party organisation, with branches and a dues-paying membership was built up. A weekly paper, The Moderate, was published and a stream of petitions with thousands of signatures were drawn up and presented. In this position of strength, as spring came on, with the likelihood of war increasing, they seem to have gradually accepted the new situation. By May, when the second Civil War broke out, they were ranged alongside the Army leaders, whatever political differences still existed. On August 3rd Lilburne wrote to Cromwell, setting out to give battle to the Scottish Army:

"... to demonstrate unto you that I am no staggerer from my first principles that I engaged my life upon, nor from you, if you are what you ought to be, and what you are strongly reported to be; although, if I prosecuted or desired revenge for an hard and almost sterving imprisonment, I could have had of late the choice of twenty opportunities to have payd you to the purpose; but I scorn it, especially when you are low; and this assure your self, that if ever my hand be upon you, it shall be when you are in your full glory, if then you shall decline from the righteous wayes of Truth and Justice: Which, if you will fixedly and impartially prosecute I am

Yours, to the last drop of my heart blood
(for all your late severe hand towards me)

JOHN LILBURNE" (13)

"Which letter &c." he adds, "as I have been told by the Bearer (19) was not a little welcome "

When the war was over, Cromwell's need of Leveller support was if anything greater, committed as he was to the trial and execution of the King and the abolition of the monarchy in the face of a hostile majority in the House of Commons. Here a difference appears between the Army Levellers, who supported the prosecution, and the civilians, Lilburne, while not opposed in principle to trying Charles, objected to the form taken by the specially appointed Court (on which he refused an invitation to serve) and wished in any case for the trial to be postponed till after a new constitution had been established on the basis

(18) Haller and Davies, p. 414

(19) Edward Sexby, a leading Agent at Putney who was later to write Killing No Murder.

Fourteen

of the Agreement. Otherwise, he argued, monarchy would only be replaced by a military dictatorship still more odious. It was necessary for the Grandees to secure at least the tacit and temporary support of the Levellers.

In November; after some acrimonious bargaining, a committee was set up representing the Army leadership; the Parliamentary Independents, the Independent churches and the Levellers, The result was the second and third versions of the Agreement, which, as has been said, represent rival views of what was agreed. They were thus compromise documents, not arrived at without considerable difficulty. Lilburne wrote afterwards:

"... all parties chosen of all sides constantly meet at White-hall after the Army came to town, saving the Parliament men failed, only Master Martin was most commonly there, and a long and tedious tug we had with Commissary Generall Ireton only, yea sometimes whole nights together, Principally about Liberty of Conscience and the Parliaments punishing where no law provides, and very angry and Lordly in his debates many times he was; but to some kind of an expedient in the firsts for peace sake we condescended in to please him, and so came amongst the major part of the 16 Commissioners? according to our originall Agreement, to an absolute and finall conclusion; and thinking it had all been done as to any more debate upon it, and that it should without any more adoe be promoted for subscriptions, first at the Council of Warre, and so in the Regiments, and so all over the Nation; but alas poor fools we were meerly cheated and cozened ... and that which we Commissioners feared at the first, viz that no tye, promises nor ingagements were strong enough for the grand Juglers and Leaders of the Army, was now made clearly manifest." (20)

When the discussions were ended, Lilburne writes:

"having an exact copy of what the greatest part of the foresaid sixteen had agreed upon, I onely mended a clause in the first Reserve about Religion, to the sense of us all but Ireton. and put an Epistle to it, of the 15 of December 1648, and printed it of my own accord, and the next day it came abroad," (21)

This was the second Agreement, and the clause on the franchise embodies the greatest concessions which both the Levellers and their opponents were

(20) Haller and DavieB, pp. 422-3,

(21) Haller and Davies, p. 423.

ever prepared to make. The latter abandoned their insistence that it be confined to freeholders in the counties and freemen of corporations in the boroughs, The Levellers, in addition to the earlier exception of servants and takers of alms, 'were now prepared to restrict it also to those who were ratepayers and householdera. This is in line with what I have been arguing, that, while in favour in principle of manhood suffrage, they were ready to recognise the practical problems involved and were willing to make tactical compromises if these would lead to the acceptance of their programme as a whole. It must be remembered that while the suffrage question had been central in the Putney debates, it was, in relation to the whole long-term Leveller campaign, only one of a number of issues and perhaps not the most important. If they could secure agreement for a broadly elected Parliament, regularly meetings subordinated to the electors, with firmly limited power to infringe civil and religious grievances, the precise extent of the franchise was of lesser immediate importance.

They quickly found, however, that the Grandees had no intention of honouring their undertaking to implement the Agreement. Instead, the rather weakened "Officers' Agreement was merely laid formally before the House of Commons, which did not even trouble to debate it. On the same day that the third Agreement was published, January 20th 1649, the trial of the King opened. By the time it was clear that no steps would be taken to make it effective he had been executed. With a purged House of Commons the Council of State was firmly in control and the Grandees felt strong enough to do without Leveller support. On March 28th, Lilburne, Walwyn, Overton and Prince were arrested and taken to the Tower. It was from the Tower, and over their joint signatures, that the fourth and last version of the Agreement was issued,

This is in many respects the clearest and most radical formulation of the Leveller programme, and, so far as the franchise is concerned, may fairly be taken as the final expression of what they considered practicable under existing circumstances. The stipulation that electors shall be ratepayers and householders has now disappeared, Servants, takers of alms and Royalists are excluded. The latter are barred from being elected to Parliament for ten years only, and it seems a reasonable deduction that the same time limit applied to the electors also, though this is not specifically stated. The Agreement is declared as being "Tendered as a Peace Offering to this distressed Nation", and one may infer that the Levellers, who were always optimistic about human nature, expected that the reason and justice of their proposals would, in a comparatively short time, win the assent of the great majority of the people.

Their hopes were never put to the test. The publication of the Agreement was followed quickly by the Army mutiny that ended at Burford on May 14th. The movement steadily declined from this point and soon ceased to be a serious factor in English political life,

VI. FIGURES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Professor Macpherson includes in his book an elaborate statistical appendix. Briefly, it may be summarised as estimating that of an adult male population of 1,170,400, some 212,100 already enjoyed the franchise at this time. Under the wider franchise specifically demanded by the Levellers, excluding servants and alms-takers, but including soldiers who would otherwise have been disfranchised, 204,600 new voters would have been added. Of these, he estimates, 22,100 would have been soldiers. This seems an extremely low figure in view of the large numbers who served in the many Parliamentary armies and garrisons at various times and in various theatres of the war. He appears to arrive at it by assuming that only those serving at the time of the debates were to be reckoned - an assumption for which I can see no evidence at all.

This, however, is a minor matter, since even if the figure were doubled or trebled it would not really change the general pattern. It is this whole quantitative approach which is open to considerable criticism.

In dealing with seventeenth century England we are not using statistics in any modern sense, we are talking about estimates - it would not be unfair to say about guesses. Professor Macpherson bases his figures on the analysis of English population and class distribution made by Gregory King in 1688, assuming, reasonably enough, a rise in population of 10% over the intervening forty years. King's figures have been widely accepted by historians as intelligent guesses. They may possibly be quite accurate, but they are based on nothing more than suppositions. Even granting, however, that they were accurate for 1688, it does not follow, as Professor Macpherson assumes, that they were accurate for 1648, On the contrary, this was a time of very rapid economic change, when individual petty-production was declining and wage-labour increasing. On King's figures as interpreted by Professor Macpherson two thirds of the population are to be classified as servants or paupers against only one third independent producers - including not only farmers and artizans but all other classes - professional people gentry, traders and others: It may be questioned if such a picture is really true of England in 1688, let alone 1648. My guess, which may no worse if no better than anyone else's, is that it greatly over-estimates the number of wage-earners at both dates.

Further, Professor Macpherson interprets King's already rather schematic figures in an extremely schematic way, more appropriate to England of the nineteenth century than of the seventeenth. At this time, when the class of wage-earners is only evolving, it is surely nonsense to draw a hard and fast line between wage-earners and individual producers. All sorts of intermediate categories existed, into which a very large proportion of the population undoubtedly fell. Under the putting-

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out system many shades and graduations existed between the servant proper and the fully independent artizan. In the extractive and other industries it was common, and remained so well into the nineteenth century, for groups of workers to enter into collective contracts. Perhaps more important still numerically were the hosts of cottagers, with common rights, patches of land or part-time crafts, who eked out a living with sporadic wage earnings. In bad times such people might also come to the parish for poor relief. Are all these to be regarded as 'servants' or 'paupers' and, more to our purpose, would the Levellers have so regarded them? I think not.

Professor Macpherson himself argues that the Levellers regarded servants and paupers as self-excluded from citizen rights because they had lost their property in their own persons, because they 'depend upon the will of other men' as Petty put it. These large intermediate groups cannot properly be looked upon in this way. No doubt many of them were poor, but the Levellers consistently argued that poverty could not be a reason for disfranchisement, and historically these groups have generally been noted for an independence of outlook and a readiness to defend their rights- They could be far less dependent than many farmers and small tradesmen under the thumb of landlords or customers,

This leads us to a consideration of some of the terms used in the argument. Professor Macpherson treats the word 'servant' in the widest possible way as synonymous with 'wage-earner':

"The term servant in seventeenth-century England meant anyone who worked for an employer for wages, whether the wages were by piece-rates or time-rates, and whether hired by the day or week or by the year," (22)

No doubt it could be and often was used in this sense, but it could have a less extended meaning, as is indeed suggested by the phrase used in the second and third Agreements, 'servants to a particular person'. This suggests that what may have been intended was the personal servant, the apprentice, or the man living in his master's house, as many aid at this date, and need not be taken as excluding all wage-earners. It can hardly, on any interpretation, have included all the intermediate groups already referred to,

There is evidence, too, to suggest that servants were not a permanently separate section of the community, but that this was a condition through which a large part of the population passed at a certain stage of their lives;

(22) op. cit., p. 282.

The typical servant was a young unmarried person living in the household of his master. On marriage he set up a household of his own and would then be classed as a labourer, craftsman, cottager or husbandman. At Ealing in 1599 60% of those between 15 and 19 years were servants. At Clayworth, out of 67 persons who were servants in 1676, only one was still in service there in 1688: at Cogenhoe, of 31 persons listed as servants in 1618, only one was still in service in 1628. While the evidence is insufficient to be conclusive, it certainly suggests that most servants could expect to become householders and would then, on the basis of the Leveller proposals, qualify for the franchise unless barred on other grounds. Evidence about the total number of servants is also scanty, but Mr. Laslett estimates it as between 10 and 15% of the population and gives figures ranging between 25% in Ealing and 5.7% in Stoke-on-Trent. Even if this should prove an underestimate it certainly presents a very different picture, from Professor Macpherson's blanket disfranchisement of the majority of the population. And it must be remembered that a very large proportion of servants were minors who would not be voting in any case. (23)

'Takers of alms' is hardly less ambiguous, and this is underlined by the use at times of the word 'beggars' for example in The Case of the Army, the Putney resolution and in John Harris's pamphlet The Grand Design of December 1647. A beggar is quite different from the artizan or cottager who is forced in emergency to seek parish relief, and they again from those who are habitually dependent on such relief or on the charity of the rich. It could fairly be argued, I suggest, that 'takers of alms' might refer to the first and third of these categories but not to the second.

Once more, we find an ambiguity of language which may even have been intentional. The words used may have had different implications for the Levellers and for their opponents, and, if the time had ever come for the matter to be put to the tests, could have become a battleground. In such a case their meaning would have been determined by the actual relations of political forces, local and national, under which the electoral rolls were drawn up. It is by no means impossible that the Levellers, who were very shrewd tacticians, were aware of these ambiguities and hoped to be able to profit from them.

There is a further sense in which all these quantitative estimates are somewhat irrelevant. What we are concerned with, after all, is not what the actual results of the Levellers' proposals might have been.) but with their

(23) The details of this paragraph are taken from Peter Laslett, The World we have Lost (1965) and Peter Laslett and John Harrison, Clayworth and Cogenhoe, in Historical Essays Presented to David Ogg (1963) While many of Laslett's conclusions seem questionable, what he has to say about the position of servants in seventeenth century society may be provisionally accepted.

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policy and intentions. Ever granting, as I see no reason to do, that the effect of their proposals would have been to leave two thirds of the male population still disfranchised, it does not follow that this is what they intended. They seem to have thought of England as still a country of small-scale, independent producers in which wage-labour was exceptional apart from personal service. As Allan Merson writes:

"The Levellers had no figures like King's. They are more likely to have been thinking in terms of a social order that was passing away than of one still incompletely developed; in terms of 1608 rather than of 1688. They are likely, too, to have been thinking in terms of town communities, in which the struggle for democracy had a long history and in which the proportion of proletarians may have been smaller than in the countryside at this time, except perhaps in London -a big exception in this context. Their programme, finally, contained demands which would have maintained and perhaps increased the preponderance of petty production and the opportunities for apprentices and servants to become masters.

"It still seems easier to make sense of the Levellers' ideas on the traditional assumption that they were thinking in terms of a largely pre-capitalist society of small producers." (24)

If this is so, they could have regarded the exclusion of servants and alms-takers as a minor as well as a tactical exception. And here, too, the general perspective becomes relevant. They stated repeatedly and with obvious sincerity that they were defenders of the rights of property. But it is clear that primarily they were thinking of the small property of the common man, which they saw, and rightly, as threatened by the rich, the nobility, the monopolists and corporations, rather than by the unpropertied masses. The small producer was for them the norm, and a society in which rich men could have scores of servants while thousands depended upon alms was abnormal and even monstrous

Their franchise proposals were not meant to be taken in isolation but as part of a programme of democratic reform which would transform England. In the society they envisaged the ordinary man would be secure in his small property, pauperism would disappear or at least be greatly diminished and the old process by which the apprentice, after a short period as a journeyman might expect to become a master, would be strengthened. In such a society exceptions to the general principle that every man who lived under a government ought to have a voice in choosing that government would largely, though not, of course, entirely, take on a temporary and exceptional character, The

(24) Marxism Today October 1963, p. 315.

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people of England would, by degrees, recover their lost birthright. This may have been a Utopian dream, but that is something they could not have known.

VII. THE BIRTHRIGHT

"I am resolved to give my birthright to none", (25) declared Sexby at Putney, echoing, perhaps, words Overton had written a year earlier:

"I'll not sell my birthright for a messe of pottage, for Justice is my naturall right, my heirdome, my inheritance by lineall descent from the loins of Adam, and so to all the sons of men as their proper right without respect of person not by favour of Lords &c.

"What is this but an utter disfranchisement of the people, and a meer vasselage of this Nation, as if the Nation could have nothing by right, but all by favour, this cannot hold with the rule of Mine and Thine, one to have all, and another nothing: one's a gentleman, th' other a beggar; so that the birthrights, freedoms and properties of this Nation are thereby made these great Mens Alms ... as if we ought them by Villein Service, and held all the rights and properties we have, but by Tenure in Villeinage, and so were their slaves for ever." (26)

In this passage we touch the heart of Leveller political thinking, particularly in relation to the franchise. In the passages which we have been considering, from the various versions of the Agreement, and other programme documents, it is possible to find one or other of two sharply opposed political ideas. One is that the right to a voice in government is a privilege, attached to certain forms of property ownership, which it may be proper to extend to some who do not yet enjoy it. The other is that it is a natural right, and so proper to all, even though it may not be possible for all to enjoy it under existing conditions.

In their immediate results these two views may be similar. In their underlying philosophy they are totally opposed. The first represents the Whig political outlook, the second that of radical democracy. All the evidence seems to me to show that it was the second and not the first view that was held by the Levellers. This interpretation is in keeping with the wording of the franchise clause in the final version of the Agreement. The two preceding versions had been the outcome of discussion and compromise, and here the clause is purely descriptive. The electors shall be 'natives',

(25) Woodhouse, p. 69.

(26) A Defiance against All Arbitrary Usurpation (September 1646) pp. 6-7.

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qualified in a certain way. In this version the Levellers were able to speak in their own language, and so it is declared that 'according to natural right' the choice of a Representative should be in all men of the age of one and twenty years and upwards. Only after this statement of general principle are the exceptions listed.

Overton stated the principle in its most general terms in An Arrow against All Tyrants (October 1646):

"For by naturall birth, all men are equally and alike borne to like propriety, liberty and freedome, and as we are delivered of God by the hand of nature into this world, every one with a naturall, innate freedome and propriety (as it were writ in the table of every mans heart, never to be obliterated) even so are we to live, every one equally and alike to enjoy his Birth-right and privilege; even all whereof God by nature hath made him free." (27)

Lilbume applies this general principle to the franchise in several of his early pamphlets. In The Charters of London (December 1646) he writes:

"The only and sole legislative law-making power is originally inherent in the people and derivatively in their commissions chosen by themselves by common consent and no other. In which the poorest that lives hath as true a right to give a vote, as well as the richest and greatest." (28)

And five months later he expands this, in Rash Oaths Unwarrantable, and gives it a theoretical justification. Parliaments should be elected regularly,

"so that all the people (without confusion and tumult) may meet together in their severall divisions and every free man of England. as well poore as rich, whose life estate &c. is to be taken away by law, may have a Vote in chusing those that are to make the law, it being a maxim in nature, that no man can justly be bound without his own consent*" (29)

(27) Cited from Frank, The Levellers, p. 96 and Haller, Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution, p. 281.

(28) Cited from H.N. Brailsford, The Levellers in the English Revolution. P. 117.

(29) Cited from Frank, op. cit., p. 123 and Haller, op.cit., p. 303.

Twenty Two

All these passages, admittedly, come from early Leveller writings, when the principles and programme of the party were still developing. They are none the less relevant for that, since they show the roots from which their later practice sprung. Later, as the struggle developed and they made a serious bid for political power, the tactics of the Levellers underwent frequent changes in accordance with the circumstances. Yet through all these changes a constant thread can be traced, and I can see nothing to indicate that the basic principles which lay behind their political activities were ever abandoned or seriously modified.

All the Leveller programme documents in which the right to the franchise is restricted have been quoted above. It may be worth noting that the only such recorded statement by any individual is that of Maximilian Petty, also quoted. Petty may or may not be representative of Leveller thought; we do not know enough about him to venture any guess about what might be in his mind. But about Rainborough and Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn, we do know a good deal more. I find it impossible to believe, with the whole evidence of their lives and writings before me, that when they spoke of the rights of 'the people', or 'the free-bom commons of England' or 'the poorest that lives', "these men intended in principle the tacit exclusion of any part of the English nation, whatever exceptions might in practice be demanded by existing circumstances."

After this Essay was written a criticism of
Macpherson's views by J.C. Davis appeared in
Past and Present. July 1968, pp. 174-180.

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