

Why did Britain become a republic?

Case study 2: New government - Source 1

A report on the arrest of some Levellers, 29 March 1649

(Catalogue ref: SP 25/62, pp.134-5)

What is this source?

This is a report from a committee of MPs to Parliament. It explains their actions against the leaders of the Levellers.

One of the men they arrested was John Lilburne, a key figure in the Leveller movement.

What's the background to this source?

Before the war of the 1640s it was difficult and dangerous to come up with new ideas and try to publish them. However, during the Civil War censorship was not strongly enforced. Many political groups emerged with new ideas at this time. One of the most radical (extreme) groups was the Levellers.

From 1645 onwards Lilburne and other writers published pamphlets that set out a range of ideas. They organised petitions that gained thousands of signatures. The Levellers wanted the vote to be given to all men, not just rich gentlemen. As well as big political ideas, the Levellers also highlighted important everyday issues. They complained about high food prices that the poor could not afford. They complained about poor pay and late pay for the soldiers in the army. They gained a lot of support from the poor in the towns and among the ordinary soldiers of the New Model Army. Not surprisingly, their ideas were alarming to the nobles and gentry. Their support in the army also worried the army commanders. In May 1649 Levellers in the army led a mutiny, a rebellion against the army leaders at Burford in Oxfordshire.

It's worth knowing that ...

This document was published soon after the king was executed in 1649, so England was a republic. Many radical thinkers like the Levellers hoped that the



new England would be a better place. As this source shows, their hopes were not really fulfilled.

A republic is a nation whose head of state is not a monarch. For example a country that is headed by a President might be called a republic.

Your turn: What can we learn from this source?

1. Who are arrested?
2. Why were they arrested?
3. What does this tell you about society at the time?
4. What was the title of the book Lilburne was reading from?
5. Try and guess what kind of things the book was saying. Use the notes and the key people & events section to help you. (See key people & events)



Source 1

That it be reported to the House, That in pursuance
of their Order of the 27th of March instant —
this Council hath caused four persons to be
apprehended, viz: Lieut^{nt} Colonel John Lilburne,
M^r. William Walwyn, M^r. Richard Overton & —
M^r. Thomas Priner. That the Council hath
beene informed by some witnesses, who were
before the Council. That the said Lt^{nt} Colonel
Lilburne did read the Booke called Englands —
now Charms discovered, on Sunday last at —
Winthropes house, before a great multitude of people
and perswaded Subscriptions to it, and endeavoured
to answer objections made against it, And did
there affirme that himselfe, and three others —
viz: M^r. Walwyn, M^r. Priner and M^r. Cobby
would make good the matter of that Booke, with
their lives