

English Bill of Rights (1689)

It was 1688, James II of England, a Roman Catholic, ruled a predominantly Protestant in England. Many Protestants were hopeful that after his death, his protestant daughter Mary would succeed after him. When the Queen and King had a son in 1688, however, it appeared that a reign of Catholics would continue. Therefore, Parliament seized the initiative and invited Mary and her husband, William of Orange, to come over from the Netherlands and rule England. After William and Mary accepted Parliament's offer, James II fled to France. This changing of the crowns marked what the English refers to as the "Glorious Revolution".

Parliament, however, wished to ensure that it, and not a monarch, would have a supreme authority over English government. As a result, Parliament in 1689 passed what has become known as the English Bill of Rights, the capstone of the long evolution of the rights of Parliament and of ordinary English citizens.

An Act of Parliament Declaring the Rights and the Liberties of the Subject and Settling the succession of the Crown

- That the pretended power of suspending laws or the execution of laws by regal (royal) authority without consent of the Parliament is illegal;...
- The levying money for or to the use of the Crown (monarchs) by pretence of prerogative (rights) without grant of Parliament...is illegal;
- That is the right of the subjects to petition the king, and all commitments (arrests) and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal;
- That the raising and keeping a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace, unless it be with consent of Parliament, is against (the) law;...
- The election of members of Parliament ought to be free;
- That the freedom of speech and debates or proceedings in parliament ought not to be impeached (challenged) or questioned in any court or place out of parliament;
- The excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishment inflicted;...
- That all grants and promises of fines and forfeitures of particular persons before conviction are illegal and void;
- And that for redress (setting right) of all grievances, and for the amending, strengthening and preserving of the laws, Parliament (session)s ought to be held frequently...

Review Questions

1. Why did Parliament pass the English Bill of Rights?
2. Describe ways in which the English Bill of Rights made Parliament the supreme authority of government while limiting the powers of the monarchs.
3. Why do you think Parliament included a provision about money used by the monarchs?
4. Why was a provision made for free elections?
5. Why do you think Parliament declared that its sessions should be held frequently?
6. How did the English Bill of Rights help set the stage for the American Revolution?
7. Which principles in the English Bill of Rights are part of our democratic government today?