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ENGLISH POLITICS CONTRA LANGUAGE: THE BABEL OF 1621

*History never looks like history
when you are living through it...*

John W. Gardner

*In Sung there was a keeper of monkeys.
Bad times came and he was obliged to tell them
that he must reduce their rations of nuts.*

*"It will be three in the morning and four in the evening," he said.
The monkeys were furious. "Very well then," he said,
"you shall have four in the morning and three in the evening."
The monkeys accepted with delight.*

Waley

1. English politics: behind the scenes...

A political situation in England during the first half of the seventeenth century was in sharp contrast to the political situations of other European countries of the same period. While continental European states were developing absolute and centralized monarchies, England, in a chaotic and violent way, aimed at a radical reduction of the monarchical power and the development of an alternative state in which the powers of the monarch were to become subsidiary to the power of governmental branches.¹ Although the seventeenth-century England managed to stay away from the European military problems from the thirties to the fifties of the discussed century, the situation of England was generally framed in what has come to be called "the crisis of the seventeenth century."² The dramatic experiments inside the English politics starting from absolutist tendencies at the beginning of

¹ T. Munck, *Seventeenth-Century Europe: State, Conflict, and the Social Order in Europe, 1598–1700*, The Macmillan Press Ltd, New York and London, 1990, pp. 80–84.

² *Ibid.*

the century to the overthrow of the monarch in the middle of the century and the development of the English Republic did not correspond directly to any other European cases. Rooted in the growing conflict between the crown and the House of Commons, they consequently led to significant limitations of monarchical powers in the second half of the seventeenth century.³

The death of Elizabeth I in 1603, after nearly forty-five years of reign, was seen as a national relief. After the era of “Elizabethan Eden” what was left to the new monarch was the country with huge debts and the atmosphere of common dissatisfaction.⁴ Excited, Sir Robert Cecil rode through London proclaiming the new ruler: “James the First, King of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith...”⁵ Hence, when James I (1603–1625) succeeded Elizabeth I in 1603, he was already, as he told the English Parliament, “an old and experienced king” with the clearly defined principles of royal government.⁶

James became king at a very difficult point in history: the government was deeply in debt, the English church was divided with a growing radical Protestant minority and Parliament was gradually getting out of control. Though an experienced ruler, initially James did not realize the size of the conflict he was to handle. The English, in turn, put all their zeal into the belief that James, a highly educated man, was the right person to lead the country out of the general crisis the country was sinking in. The very first days of James I’s reign were marked by religious disagreements in the country. On his arrival in England James was presented with the Millenary Petition – a formal plea for the immediate accommodation of Puritans within the established church in England.⁷ However, at the Hampton Court

³ Historians highlight the unprecedented character of the background of the English Revolution pointing out that no European revolution before had the same causes and effects. It was the English Revolution that would become the model to study during the revolutions in France and Russia. See P. Johnson, *A History of the English People*, Perennial Library, USA, 1985, pp. 198–202.

⁴ The term “Elizabethan paradise” was first employed by Catherine Drinker Bowen in the book “Francis Bacon The Temper of a Man”, An Atlantic Monthly Press Book Little, Brown & Company, Boston, Toronto, 1963, p. 21.

⁵ See C. D. Bowen, *Francis Bacon The Temper of a Man*, *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶ Having successfully ruled Scotland for years before he succeeded to the throne of the King of England, James had all rights to call himself as he did on his inauguration. See L. B. Smith, *Internal Discontent*, in “Elizabethan and Jacobean England”, <http://search.eb.com/shakespeare/macro/5009/49.htm>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

⁷ The petition received its name from the fact that it had been signed by 1000 signers, who stood for one tenth of the English clergy. The petition requested the removal of all remaining popish elements from the church and adoption of Calvinistic articles of faith. See <http://learnthebible.org/preservation-king-james.htm>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

Conference in 1604⁸ James expressed his hostility towards Catholics in order to please Puritans whose demands he nevertheless could not fully satisfy. Consequently, within days all priests and Jesuits were expelled and recusancy fines were reintroduced. James's ignorance towards the aim of the conference angered both English Roman Catholics and Protestants.⁹

James's succession to the English throne brought him another huge problem which marked all his reign. The problem concerned a constant lack of money, partly due to the debts left after Elizabeth's reign and partly caused by his extravagant lifestyle.¹⁰ By 1608 the royal debt was more than £600,000.¹¹ The situation was more than serious and James forced the crown's financial ministers to turn their attention to other possible sources of income such as wardships, purveyance and the discovery of crown lands on which rents and dues were not being paid. The revival of that practice resulted in a public outcry. Negotiations had begun for the Great Contract between the king and his taxpaying subjects that aimed to rise £200,000 a year.¹² However, both royal officials and the leaders of Commons backed away from the deal, the government believing that the sum was too low, the leaders of the Commons that a land tax was too unpopular.¹³ The events that followed marked the inevitability of the crisis concerning the relationships between the king and his Parliament. In despair after the failure of the Great Contract, James decided to squeeze even more revenue due to his feudal rights including the sale of titles.¹⁴ Being the last straw, the desperate policy of James violated what the Commons recognized as the spirit of their principles regarding property and personal liberty and in reply they decla-

⁸ The conference only commissioned the translation of the Bible which resulted in the Authorized, or King James, Version.

⁹ See <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc05/htm/ii.iv.iii.htm>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

¹⁰ T. Munck in *Seventeenth-Century Europe: State, Conflict, and the Social Order in Europe, 1598–1700*, p. 83. describes James's habit of sponsoring his numerous male lovers and their families. P. Johnson, in turn, sees James's homosexual preferences as one of the main sources of the conflict with the English who could not tolerate such a disgusting quality in so high a persona of the Kingdom. See P. Johnson, *A History of the English People*, op. cit., pp. 187–192; See also J. P. Kenyon, *The Stuarts*, London, 1967.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, [html://search.eb.com/shakespeare/macro/5009/49.htm](http://search.eb.com/shakespeare/macro/5009/49.htm). Accessed February 21, 2005.

¹² The Great Contract envisaged a compromise between James and the Commons' reluctance as to the royal taxation. In exchange for an annual income of & 600,000 James was ready to give up impositions, purveyance and wardship as a source of revenue. See <http://history.wisc.edu/sommerville/361/361-21.htm>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

¹³ C. D. Bowen, *Francis Bacon The Temper of a Man*, op. cit., pp. 111–131.

¹⁴ Practically James did something which certainly would have shocked Elizabeth for the majority of the nobleman aristocratic titles were a matter of honour, not sale.

red that the Scottish king did not understand the procedures and privileges of the English Parliament.¹⁵

In 1610 James, once again appealing to the divine rights of kings, addressed a pompous speech to his Parliament:

The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called Gods... Kings are justly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemble the divine power on earth (...) And the like power have Kings: they make and unmake their subjects: they have power of raising and casting down: of life and of death: judges over all their subjects, and in all causes, and yet accountable to none but to God only...¹⁶

With apparent signs of an open war in the atmosphere, the first Parliament of James I was dismissed on 9 February, 1611. The second Parliament, commonly known as the Addled Parliament¹⁷, took place between 5 April – 7 June, 1614. During that Parliament the king sat with the Commons only once and due to the lack of mutual understanding they did not pass a single bill. Significant is the fact that this time James, on dissolving the Parliament, articulated his attitude towards the very institution of it. He was surprised that his “ancestors should have permitted such an institution to come into existence... It is sedition in subjects to dispute to what a king may do in the height of his power...”¹⁸

Apparently poor, the harvest of the Parliament of 1614 was nevertheless prophetic: the Commons made an undoubtedly considerable step towards the limitation of the power of the royal prerogative showing that the English Parliament had to be regarded as a national institution which had its own rights. Therefore, the Parliament of 1614 certainly provided the foundations for the anti-absolutist movement as exercised by the king in the next Parliament of 1621 for “there was thus an important shift in constitutional orthodoxy in the early 17th century as the natural site of electoral jurisdiction shifted from Chancery to Parliament.”¹⁹

¹⁵ By this time most Englishman regretted their faith put in the persona of James on the day of his election. The majority was recollecting the queen Elizabeth who had become to be seen almost as the English Saint who was given to the English by the grace of God. See P. Johnson, *A History of the English People*, op. cit, pp. 193–195.

¹⁶ James I's speech before Parliament March 21, 1610 in J. P. Kenyon, *The Stuart Constitution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1966, p. 13.

¹⁷ The name alludes to its utter ineffectiveness.

¹⁸ James I in *The Early Stuarts and the English Civil War*: http://www.britainexpress.com/History/Early_Stuarts_and_the_Civil_War.htm as Accessed February 21, 2005.

¹⁹ G. Orr & G. Williams, *Electoral Challenges: Judicial Review of Parliamentary Elections in Australia*, p. 58: <http://www.law.usyd.edu.au>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

By excluding the executive influence of the crown this resolution was “a significant step in democratic evolution.”²⁰ On the other hand, apart from a considerable step forward towards the freedom of rights and speech made by the Commons, they did not triumph long. The direct consequence of the Commons’ triumph was the fact that James, on the lack of good communication with the Commons, quickly dissolved Parliament. As a result, the English Parliament was not to be summoned again for seven long years. During the next seven years to come the conflict between James I and the Commons was getting ripe to finally explode in 1621, the year of the last but one Parliamentary session James was to take part in during his reign in England.

2. Storming the Jacobean fortress of divine prerogative

In 1621, after eighteen years of James I’s reign, England was in its most severe political and economic crisis.²¹ The incompetence of James’s policy had reached its climax. The country was in a deep economic depression: due to the error in setting the ratio of gold to silver, which led to silver leaving the country, the English were forced to resort to barter.²² The Thirty Years War additionally reinforced the drain of silver and increased the price of English goods on the Continent which resulted in the English trade quickly getting into the state of serious economic stagnation. Never before had the streets of London been filled with so numerous wage-labourers, mostly cloth-workers, almost dying from starvation.²³

The reason for the English crisis was, above all, James’s private failure as an English monarch and his disability to rule the country in cooperation with Parliament. Norman Jones suggests that the primary causes of the 1621 crisis in England were numerous religious and ideological disagreements between the king and the Commons resulting from James I’s belief in his royal authority over Parliament, his disability to manage the royal treasure, and finally, James’s idea-fix of integrating Scotland and England

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ R. E. Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-Century England Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, London: Associated University Press, London, 1995, p. 55.

²² See *James & Buckingham*, <http://history.wisc.edu/sommerville/361/361-23.htm>, Accessed February 21, 2005,

²³ See *Economic Crisis*, <http://history.wisc.edu/sommerville/361/361-23.htm>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

into one state.²⁴ It was clear both for James and the English Parliament that something was to be done to stop the country from sinking in a further economic and political stagnation.

The success of the Catholic League in the Thirty Years War brought an additional impulse for the king and Parliament to gather together in order to take a clearly defined political stand of England: the Spanish troops had invaded the Palatinate and after the decisive battle at the White Mountain, Frederick Elector Palatine, James's son-in-law, and his English wife Elizabeth²⁵, James's daughter, were put under imperial ban and totally deprived of all remaining territories. It is no wonder that the English, with their Protestant preferences, showed much sympathy for James's son-in-law. As James I sadly put it, his children "had lost their ancient and lawful patrimony."²⁶ Comenius, a figure much beloved by the English, went into exile, too.²⁷

Therefore, James, on summoning Parliament after a seven-year break in January, 1621, had a clearly defined plan. On the one hand, he sympathized with his son-in-law; on the other, he intended to finalize his plans regarding the marriage of his son Charles to a Spanish princess. So far Philip IV of Spain had been reluctant to take any steps into the possible project of that marriage. James deeply hoped that his intention to raise money to support the Protestant in the Palatinate would bully Philip into concluding the marriage plans and into using his influence to put an end to the German war.²⁸ During parliamentary sessions James in the first place meant to discuss financial matters of the crown with a view to getting a subsidy to support the Protestants in their fight against the Catholics. That view was certainly in accordance with the Commons' intentions for they also expected a dialogue as to the prevention of the potential threats brought by the Catholic League. What is more, they also wished to discuss the possible

²⁴ N. Jones, *The Politics of Renaissance England*, p. 19, http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/BPL/Images/Content_store/Stample_chapter/0631219501/001.pdf. Accessed February 21, 2005.

²⁵ In 1613 James had married Elizabeth to the Elector Palatine of the Rhine, the leader of the Calvinist Protestants in Germany. This match was as popular among the English as unpopular was the possible match of Charles and the Spanish Infanta.

²⁶ J. R. Tanner, *Constitutional Documents of the Reign of James I, 1603–1625*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1952, p. 290.

²⁷ R. E. Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-Century England Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, op. cit., p. 55. See also J. Velinger, *Jan Amos Comenius – the teacher of nations*, a lecture presented 06–07–2004 <http://radio.cz/en/article/55618>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

²⁸ See *James IV/I and the Union of Crowns 1603–1625*, in "Tremors 1517–1625", <http://www.open2.net/civilwar/1.4.tremors.html>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

Spanish marriage project of which the majority in the Commons did not think highly. The new Parliament included John Pym and John Hampden who joined Sir Thomas Wentworth and Sir Edward Coke. It is necessary to add here that the newcomers were a matter of considerable nervousness for the King for their presence meant, above all, a critique of the Howard fiscal policy beyond which lay James's passive acceptance of their ruining fiscal system of the crown.²⁹

Although impositions, the main cause of the previous conflict between the crown and the former Parliament, were still being collected, the Commons wanted to present a united front in the face of an international crisis. Therefore, they did not at once turn to their financial grievances. To encourage King's sense of cooperation, the Commons, although not eagerly, at once granted the King two nominal subsidies totally of £160,000.³⁰ That generous sum was meant to give financial support to the Protestants in the war against the Catholic League, something widely expected from the king. James, pleased with that Parliament's unexpected will to cooperate, on 2 March addressed to the Commons his grateful speech:

In former Parliament there was not true understanding betwix my subjects and me. Wee were like the builders of Babel, where one called for Morter, another for Stones, whereby we could not receive contentment and satisfaccion from eache other. But hereafter I hope all things wilbe soe cleare betwixt us That without any Orations our hearts shall speake for us.³¹

However, the apparent harmony was not meant to stay long in the Houses of Parliament and it soon turned out that James's desire that their "hearts shall speake for {them}"³² was not meant to fulfill when in November 1621 James called Parliament again. Again, the crown needed money but this time the Commons played their cards openly. Offended by the lack of a definite stand of the King as to giving decent support to the Protestants

²⁹ The presence of the new members, devoted anti-royalists, meant their open attack against the Howard family whom James had promoted in his government: Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk, and Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel. In a short time they managed to corrupt the financial system of the crown and enrich themselves at the cost of James whose debts reached £900,000 by 1618. See M. A. Kishlansky, *Factions and Favourites*, in "Elizabethan and Jacobean England", <http://search.eb.com/shakespeare/macro/5009/49.htm>. Accessed February 21, 2005

³⁰ See S. Reed Brett, *The Stuart Century, 1603–1714*, George G. Harp, London, 1961, p. 51.

³¹ *Common Debates, 1621*, (ed.) W. Notestein, F. Relf, and H. Simpson, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1935, 4: 207–9.

³² *Ibid.*

in the Palatinate and the real possibility of the Spanish marriage project for James's son, Charles, the Commons took a united front against the king. During their first meeting they at once turned to the country's economic problems which many members of the Lower House blamed on the monopolies – as it was mentioned in the previous section, James had long been using monopoly rights as a cheap way of rewarding his servants.³³ The Lower House was highly dissatisfied with Buckingham, who had not only clashed with the Commons over political matters many times but was also hated because of James's open declaration of sexual allure towards him.³⁴ Above all, the Commons were dissatisfied with James's lack of definite stand in the case of the Palatine Protestants' support but before they could openly object to it, they aimed at examining the monopolies for which Buckingham was responsible.

The atmosphere in the Parliament of 1621 was tense and this time the king could do nothing to stop the procedure: the Lower House had already started the committee for inquiring into abuses in the courts of justice and that was the beginning of Bacon's fiasco – since he was a servant of justice, the investigation was conducted to examine his role in the abuses. The Commons turned to attacking James's favourites: Buckingham and his relatives were commanded to be examined by the Parliamentary commission. One of the monopolists impeached by Parliament was Sir Giles Mompesson.³⁵ Sir Edward Coke went further and persuaded Parliament to investigate royal advisors. Next it made an attack upon the corruption of the courts of law, and as its victim they chose Lord Chancellor Francis Bacon. He was found guilty of receiving bribes from suitors and was dismissed from his office and heavily fined.

Therefore, the seeds of the comparative peace of the first half of the 1621 Parliament had gone for good when the House of Commons began attacks against the possibility of the Spanish marriage project for Charles. Indeed,

³³ Due to the monopolies Buckingham and his family benefitted heavily.

³⁴ The story of Buckingham throws an additional light on the background of the conflict of 1621. The majority of the members of the Commons belonged to the anti-Spanish group. Aware of the power of the Howards' influence over James (they were pro-Spanish in their views hoping for better treatment of English Catholics), they searched for the way to influence James. Playing on James's homosexual likes, they introduced the king with George Villiers, apparently one of the handsomest men in Europe. Villiers was nobody's fool and after he gained the aristocratic title of duke of Buckingham, he joined the royalist fraction. See P. Johnson, *A History of the English People*, op. cit., pp. 190–193.

³⁵ Parliament began to attack the monopolists to impeach and punish in their opinion, the worst offender, Sir Giles Mompesson (a close relative of Buckingham) See *James I*, <http://www.angelfire.com/ok3/chester/maindir/onejames.htm>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

James did want Parliament to bring pressure to bear on Spain, but he was outraged by the open critique of his plans regarding the Spanish marriage for his son. Shocked, James addressed an angry letter to the Commons:

Some fiery and popular spirits of some of the House of Commons {...} argue and debate publicly of {...} matters far above their reach and capacity, tending to our high dishonour and breach of prerogative royal {...} These are therefore to command you to make known in our name unto the House, that none therein shall presume henceforth to meddle with anything concerning our government or deep matters of State, and namely not to deal with our dearest son's match with the daughter of Spain, nor to touch the honour of that King or any other our friends and confederates...³⁶

James's letter provoked a major row with the House of Commons, which regarded it as an infringement of the right of free speech. James was forced to fire angrier letters back and the Commons finally passed the Protestation of the House of Commons:

The Commons now assembled in Parliament, being justly accessioned thereunto concerning sundry liberties, franchises, and privileges of Parliament, amongst other here mentioned, do make this Protestation following, that the liberties, franchises, privileges and jurisdictions of Parliament are the ancient and undoubted birthright and inheritance of the subjects of England; and at the arduous and urgent affairs concerning the King, State, and defense of the realm and of the Church of England, and the maintance and making of laws, and redress of mischiefs and grievances, which daily happen in this realm, and proper subjects and matters of counsel and debate in Parliament; and that in the handling and proceeding of those businesses every member of the House of Parliament hath, and of right ought to have, freedom of speech to propound, treat, reason, and bring to conclusion the same; and the Commons in Parliament have like liberty and freedom to treat of these matters in such order as in their judgments shall seem fittest; and that every member of the said House hath like freedom from all impeachment, imprisonment, and molestation (other than by the House itself) for or concerning any speaking, reasoning, or declaring of any matter or matters touching Parliament or Parliament-business; and that if any of the said members be complained of and questioned for anything done or said in Parliament, the same is to be showed to the King by the advice and assent of all the Commons assembled in Parliament, before the King give credence to any private information.³⁷

³⁶ *James I's letter to the Speaker of the Commons, 3 December 1621*, <http://history.wisc.edu/sommerville/361/361-23.htm>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

³⁷ *The Commons Protestation, 18 December, 1621*, http://history.wisc.edu/sommerville/363/commons-protestation_1621.htm. Accessed February 21, 2005.

With nothing left to be said and done, James, in a reply, dissolved Parliament in February 8, 1622 desperately tearing the Protestation letter out of the Commons journal.³⁸ Sir Edward Coke who, in James's opinion, was the main provocateur of the affair, was sacked from the Privy Council. Mark A. Kishlansky summarizes the poor harvest of the Parliament of 1621 in the following way: "The Parliament of 1621 was a failure at all levels. No legislation other than the subsidy was passed; a simple misunderstanding among the members had led to a dramatic confrontation with the king; and judicial impeachments were revived, costing the king the services of Lord Chancellor Bacon. James, moreover, was unable to make any progress with the Spaniards, and supporting the European Protestants drained his revenue".³⁹ Therefore, the agreement the king and the Commons had hoped for was out of reach giving way to the dramatic events to follow. The period covered by the reign of James I and especially the first three Parliaments he summoned have been widely discussed by parliamentary and political historians for they brought the first seeds for the Civil War marking the conflict between the Commons and the Crown and tackling such issues as liberties of speech, personal freedom and reformation of the legal system.

3. Towards freedom of speech: divine rhetoric contra legalistic discourse

A closer look at the parliamentary sessions of 1621 reveals much more than a mere disagreement between the king and the House of Commons as to the foreign policy of England regarding the Catholic threat and the liberties of the Commons as seen by both sides. Undoubtedly, the disagreement between the king and the Commons was provoked in the first place by the lack of James's clear stand regarding the situation in the Palatinate and his apparent ignorance of the Commons's views as to their role in the English Parliament. However, what had started as a political debate over current affairs of the state unexpectedly turned into a political debate which was "centered wholly on the issue of free speech."⁴⁰

³⁸ See *James & Buckingham*, <http://history.wisc.edu/sommerville/361/361-23.htm>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

³⁹ M. A. Kishlansky, *Factions and favourites*, in "Elizabethan and Jacobean England", [html://search.eb.com/shakespeare/macro/5009/49.htm](http://search.eb.com/shakespeare/macro/5009/49.htm). Accessed February 21, 2005.

⁴⁰ R. E. Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-Century England Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, op. cit., p. 58.

Indeed, a thorough study of the journal documents illustrating the run of the Parliament of 1621 shows the source of that conflict which, according to R. E. Stillman, was an extreme polarization of languages employed by James and the Commons.⁴¹ According to J. G. A. Pocock, “the language of politics is obviously not the language of a single disciplined mode of intellectual inquiry; it is rhetoric, the language in which men speak for all the purposes and in all the ways in which men be found articulating and communicating as part of the activity and the culture of politics.”⁴² The above definition about the nature of political language throws some light on the nature of the conflict taking place during the Parliament of 1621. The different political languages and vocabularies used by both sides represented by James and the Commons to articulate their mutual dissatisfaction seem to have derived from what Derek Hirst has called the Jacobean England’s “double majesty.”⁴³ Being rooted in history, they were a natural outcome of the political circumstances in the country:

On the one hand stood a fairly coherent theory of kingship and authority, guaranteed in the last resort by the king’s “absolute prerogative”; and on the other an equally powerful theory of law, rights and custom, articulated and defined not just in the law courts but also in parliament. Both demanded respect and allegiance, yet political circumstances – especially the crown’s repeated requests for money – seemed to be drawing them apart.⁴⁴

Moreover, the mutually exclusive vocabularies of both sides “had at their origin equally exclusive assumptions about language.”⁴⁵ The both sides represented a different political group and spoke its specific language: “the political member is assumed to be thinking as a member, and in the context, of the political community itself, and therefore to be speaking a specialized variation of its public language.”⁴⁶ The case of the Parliament of 1621 represent a perfect example of such variations of the political language. R. E. Stillman describes James’s divine rhetoric as “a motivated theory of

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴² J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time Essays on Political thought and History*, op. cit., p. 17.

⁴³ D. Hirst, *Authority and Conflict: England, 1603–58*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p. 42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ R. E. Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-Century England Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, op. cit., p. 60.

⁴⁶ J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time Essays on Political thought and History*, op. cit., p. 16.

languages” whereas the Commons possesses “a legalistic discourse, issuing from conventional assumptions about language.”⁴⁷

As it was already mentioned, from the very beginning of his reign James was appealing to the old doctrine of the divine rights of kings according to which kings were equipped with the divine and absolute power of Word. Undoubtedly, such a theory was comfortable to James for it aimed at an unrestricted prerogative enabling him to hold unlimited power over the Commons. It goes without saying that James’s vision of the divine doctrine of the kings with its absolute power of Word did not coincide with that of the Commons’ who had always cherished the very institution of the English Parliament where they had always had a say.

As early as 1604 the two variations of the political language clashed when the Commons expressed their right to free speech in Parliament stating that “the prerogatives of princes may easily and do daily grow” but “the privileges of the subject are for the most part at an everlasting stand.”⁴⁸ Indeed, freedom of speech was what had marked the institution of the English Parliament. It is no wonder, then, that the very event of gathering together with the Commons in 1621 was a matter of considerable nervousness to James. The scale of James’s nervousness is well illustrated by Bacon’s letter regarding the opening session of the Parliament of 1621. Bacon, James’s faithful supporter and adviser, was fully aware of the growing power of the Commons and their determination to fight for their rights. Therefore, before the opening session of Parliament he warned James against possible disputes summarizing his anxieties in the following words: “The prognostics are not so good as I expected, occasioned by late occurrences abroad, and the general licentious speaking of state matters.”⁴⁹ At the end of the letter Bacon promised to represent James’s interests “with the secrecy appertaineth.”⁵⁰ Significant in the letter is the use of what Bacon named “licentious speaking of state matters.”⁵¹ The note implies that possible and, what is more, highly probable Commons’ critique of the state matters is not welcome. According to Stillman, “free speech” becomes for Bacon “licentious” speech, whereas “unlawful Babel” of the forthcoming Parliament

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 60–61.

⁴⁸ *The Letter of the Commons’ Apology of 1604*, in M. Fulbrook, *Piety and Politics: Religion and the Rise of Absolutism in England, Wurttemberg, and Prussia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 45.

⁴⁹ F. Bacon in J. Marwil, *The trials of Counsel: Francis Bacon in 1621*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1976, p. 23.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

becomes a threatening event which may even cause “the fall of Jacobean order.”⁵²

Indeed, even without Bacon’s warning James was well aware of the tense situation he was to handle. To play on time, in his speech on opening the Parliamentary sessions delivered on 27 March, 1621, James turned to his favourite trick – he employed what Stillman calls the “Biblical mythology”.⁵³ Equipped with his right to “divine” art of oration, James played on words trying to explain a state of misunderstanding during the previous parliamentary meetings by calling the gathering “the Builders of Babel,” who could not arrive at any agreement for “one called for Morter” and “another for Stones.”⁵⁴

Surely, it was a deliberate enterprise for it suggested that the tense situation was the result of mere linguistic misunderstanding between the sides rather than an extreme polarization of interests: “In former Parliaments there was *not true understanding* betwixt my subjects and me”.⁵⁵ Now, after he had been given two subsidies, James was quick to express his hope that Babel had left the English Parliament forever and from that moment on a *true understanding* would enter the meetings so that “without any Orations {their} hearts shall speake for {them}.”⁵⁶

In other words, James wished for the parliamentary language to become transparent so that its members could understand each other without words. The model of political success is, therefore, seen as an “Adamic language, clear and unencumbered by the ambiguities of words.”⁵⁷ Thus, James becomes a new “Adam” who sees the success of language as the principle condition for good communication between the two sides.⁵⁸ In accordance with that perception of language remains the faithful royalist Bacon who, as we have seen from his letter to James, also sees Adamic language as transparent and deprived of any “licentious speech” which could be a real danger to the Jacobean reign.⁵⁹

⁵² R. E. Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-Century England Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, op. cit., p. 56.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ *Common Debates, 1621*, (ed.) W. Notestein, F. Relf, and H. Simpson, op. cit., 4: 207–9.

⁵⁵ *Italics – mine*, Ibid., 4: 207.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ R. E. Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-Century England Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, op. cit., p. 57.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 56.

⁵⁹ See J. Marwil, *The trials of Counsel: Francis Bacon in 1621*, op. cit., p. 23.

As the course of events showed, James's dream of purification of the Parliament of 1621 from the earlier "Babel" was not fulfilled. As it was mentioned before, the two quick subsidies given by the Commons and interpreted by James as "true understanding" were in the first place to encourage James to discuss his plans to support the Protestants in the Palatinate and negotiate Charles's Spanish marriage. The polarization of interests broke up with an unexpected power after James's talk of a limited campaign against the Catholic League which seemed to the Commons inept. Consequently, it finished as a constitutional conflict about freedom of speech.⁶⁰ R. E. Stillman summarizes the Parliament of 1621 as "a conflict over particulars of policy" which "turned for good into a debate about words."⁶¹

Shortly, the Commons articulated their stand in the Petition of Rights which, in Stillman's opinion, "reads like a medical diagnosis".⁶² Indeed, the illness is recognized (the cancer of the English Parliament), the reason mentioned (failure of king's understanding of the institution of the English Parliament) and the treatment is prescribed (a list of commands to be exercised by the King). This time it was clear that James would do with no more oration games – an undoubted domain of James's rhetoric. What the Commons did was draw up a petition demanding immediate war with Spain ("take your sword into your hand"), fighting the Catholic threat in England ("act against Popish recusants") and suggested a Protestant marriage for Charles ("marry one of our own religion").⁶³

Outraged, James's addressed an angry letter provoked by a great measure by Charles's dissatisfaction on his learning that the issue of his marriage had become a point of the Parliamentary discourse.⁶⁴ In the letter James warned the Commons "not to meddle henceforth with any thing concerning our government or deep matters of state" and when the Commons claimed a right to do so, James replied: "we cannot allow of the style, calling in your *ancient and undoubted right and inheritance*; but could rather have wished that ye had said, That your privileges were derived from the grace and permissions of our ancestors and us, for most

⁶⁰ See R. Zaller, *The Parliament of 1621: A Study in Constitutional Conflict*, University California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971, p. 149.

⁶¹ R. E. Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-Century England Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, op. cit., p. 57.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ See Tanner, *Constitutional Documents*, op. cit., p. 277–78.

⁶⁴ See C. Russel, *Parliament and English Politics, 1621–1629*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 137.

of them grow from precedents, which show rather a toleration than inheritance.”⁶⁵

This time the tone of the letter differed much from the previous “oration” in praise for the transparent, “Adamic” model of communication in Parliament. Here James clearly articulates his supreme position over anybody daring to interfere with his matters and envisages no chance of getting into the “matters far above {the Commons’} reach and capacity tending to our high dishonour and breach of prerogative royal...”⁶⁶ Thus, Charles’s possible marriage became a private matter so that the Commons were “not to deal with {his} dearest son’s match with the daughter of Spain” nor “to touch the honour of that King or any other our friends and by confederates.”⁶⁷ The use of the phrase “friends and confederates” in that context implies the apparent and real inequality in the circles loyal to James. The logic of the divine rhetoric was evidently what mostly shocked the Commons and consequently led to the processes of impeachments of James’s supporters.⁶⁸

The petition of 3 December, 1621 was soon followed by the second petition issued on 9 December, 1621. The second petition shows a considerable shift of the Commons’ tone. Regarding James’s angry letter, they expressed their “grief and unspeakable sorrow,” blaming a failure in understanding on “partial and uncertain reports.”⁶⁹ Such a quick enterprise was, according to Stillman, “borrowing a trick from the king”⁷⁰ and aimed at urging the king to reconsider the petition of 3 December in the name of “the ancient liberty of Parliament for freedom of speech..., the same being our ancient and undoubted right, and an inheritance received from our ancestors.”⁷¹ In

⁶⁵ James I, dated 10 December 1621 in answer to the Petition of the House of Commons of 9 December 1621, in John Rushworth, *Historical Collections of Private Passages of State, Weighty Matters of Law, Remarkable Proceedings in Five parliaments: 1618–29*, London, 1659–1701, 1: 46.

⁶⁶ *James I’s letter to the Speaker of the Commons, 3 December 1621* <http://history.wisc.edu/sommerville/361/361–23.htm>. Accessed February 21, 2005.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ According to James’s vision of the state, on the one hand, there stood the king who was above all citizens; on the other hand, he highlighted the superior position of some individuals who benefited from his absolute and unlimited power. The phrase outraged the Commons who hardly tolerated the supreme position of Buckingham and eventually led to numerous impeachments. The background of Bacon’s impeachment was analyzed in the previous chapter.

⁶⁹ Tanner, *Constitutional Documents*, op. cit., p. 280.

⁷⁰ R. E. Stilman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-Century England Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, op. cit., p. 58.

⁷¹ Tanner, *Constitutional Documents*, op. cit., p. 283.

his response James named the freedom of speech as seen by the Commons “anti-monarchical wishes” and mentioned that the Commons’ “privileges were derived from the grace and permission of our ancestors and *us*”.⁷² Firing back, the Commons formulated the Protestation of Rights issued on 18 December where they expressed the essence of what they regarded as the institution of the English Parliament:

~ the liberties, franchises, privileges and jurisdictions of Parliament are the ancient and undoubted birthright and inheritance of the subjects of England

~ urgent affairs concerning the King, State, and defense of the realm and of the Church of England

~ every member of the House of Parliament hath, and of right ought to have, freedom of speech to propound, treat, reason, and bring to conclusion the same;

~ the Commons in Parliament have like liberty and freedom (...) in such order as in their judgments shall seem fittest;

~ every member of the said House hath like freedom from all impeachment, imprisonment, and molestation (other than by the House itself) for or concerning any speaking, reasoning, or declaring of any matter or matters touching Parliament or Parliament-business;

~ and that if any of the said members be complained of and questioned for anything done or said in Parliament, the same is to be showed to the King by the advice and assent of all the Commons assembled in Parliament, before the King give credence to any private information.⁷³

The Commons’ Protestation centred around the issue of freedom of speech was evidently what awoke the lion: theatrically tearing the Protestation letter away from the journal, once again James showed what he was thinking about the Commons’ vision of understanding based on clear principles of “legalistic discourse” exercised by both sides. James’s gesture reveals the unexpected depth and the character of the conflict. The divine rhetoric was indeed the only thing James was to stick to bearing in mind the circumstances: being in a weak financial position, with no army to rely on and with a strong tradition of common law in the country he ruled, James was unlikely to reintroduce a strong reign of absolutism.⁷⁴ Interesting is the fact that the issue of speech occurred spontaneously: the Commons had not

⁷² Ibid., p 287.

⁷³ See *The Commons Protestation, 18 December, 1621*, op. cit; http://history.wisc.edu/sommerville/363/commons_protestation_1621.htm. Accessed February 21, 2005.

⁷⁴ See J. P. Sommerville’s “Introduction” in *Politics and Ideology in England, 1603–1640*, Longman, New York and London, 1986, pp. 176–183.

intended to discuss it before the gathering and it seems to have occurred as their immediate reaction to James's letter. R. Zaller claims that if the Commons had had a decent shadow of certainty that James would have followed their advice as to the foreign policy, they would have never offered their petition.⁷⁵ In other words, the whole muddle about the freedom of speech appeared somehow on the margins of the political affairs discussed at the meetings of the Parliament of 1621. Undoubtedly, the members of the House of Commons hardly saw themselves as "marching firmly to the historic goal of revolution" acting rather as "last-ditch conservatives, desperately defending embattled freedoms".⁷⁶

The harvest of the Parliament of 1621 was therefore revealing. Starting as a dispute over the outer and inner English policies, it soon got out of control for both sides and turned into a debate about freedom of speech. The debate was soon to result in dramatic consequences which would also prove to be unique. To echo R. E. Stillman's words, "the effort to master language is, once again, an effort to master history."⁷⁷ If it is "in the nature of rhetoric and above all political rhetoric {...} to reconcile and coordinate different groups pursuing different values,"⁷⁸ it may be equally so that the political rhetoric may act as a catharsis showing the inadequacy of the royal language in the given circumstances and aiming at purifying the mutual understanding of the sides. The Parliament of 1621 was obviously the case illustrating and exploiting the political language's "inherent ambiguity and its cryptic content."⁷⁹

Indeed, for the first time in their history Englishmen had the opportunity to employ the political rhetoric to conduct a political argument on a grand scale, and for the first time they were in the position to choose between political visions for their country. For the success of governing lies in that golden piece of advice that "governors must learn and speak the language of the governed."⁸⁰ In 1625 Sir Robert Phelips – a worried member of Parliament – challenged the other members to exploit the unlimited possibilities of the new reality: "We are the last monarchy in Christen-

⁷⁵ See R. Zaller, *The Parliament of 1621: A Study in Constitutional Conflict*, University California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971, p. 153.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁷⁷ R. E. Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-Century England Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, op. cit., p. 56.

⁷⁸ J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time Essays on Political thought and History*, op. cit., p. 17.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

dom that retain our original rights and constitutions. Therefore, let us not perish now!"⁸¹

S U M M A R Y

This paper aims at a thorough analysis of the English Parliamentary session of 1621 which turned out to be one of the most dramatic moments in the history of the European parliamentarism. England, in a chaotic and violent way, aimed at a radical reduction of the monarchical power and the development of an alternative state in which the powers of the monarch were subsidiary to the power of governmental branches. Discussing the underlying causes of the conflict between the king and the Commons and emphasizing its unprecedented character, the author approaches the problem from the political, historical and linguistic perspectives for the parliamentary session of 1621 reveals much more than a mere disagreement between the king and the House of Commons as to the foreign policy of England regarding the Catholic threat and the liberties of the Commons. What had started as a political debate over current affairs of the state unexpectedly turned into a grand political debate centered on the issue of free speech. For the first time in the British history of parliamentarism divine rhetoric, which had always been the domain of kings, failed to confront the legalistic discourse of the members of the Commons confidently marching towards the establishment of the Parliamentary institution of free speech which was to become their trademark.

⁸¹ Sir Robert Phelps, cited in C. Drinker Bowen, *The Lion and the Throne: The life and Time of Sir Edward Coke*, Boston, 1956, p. 470.