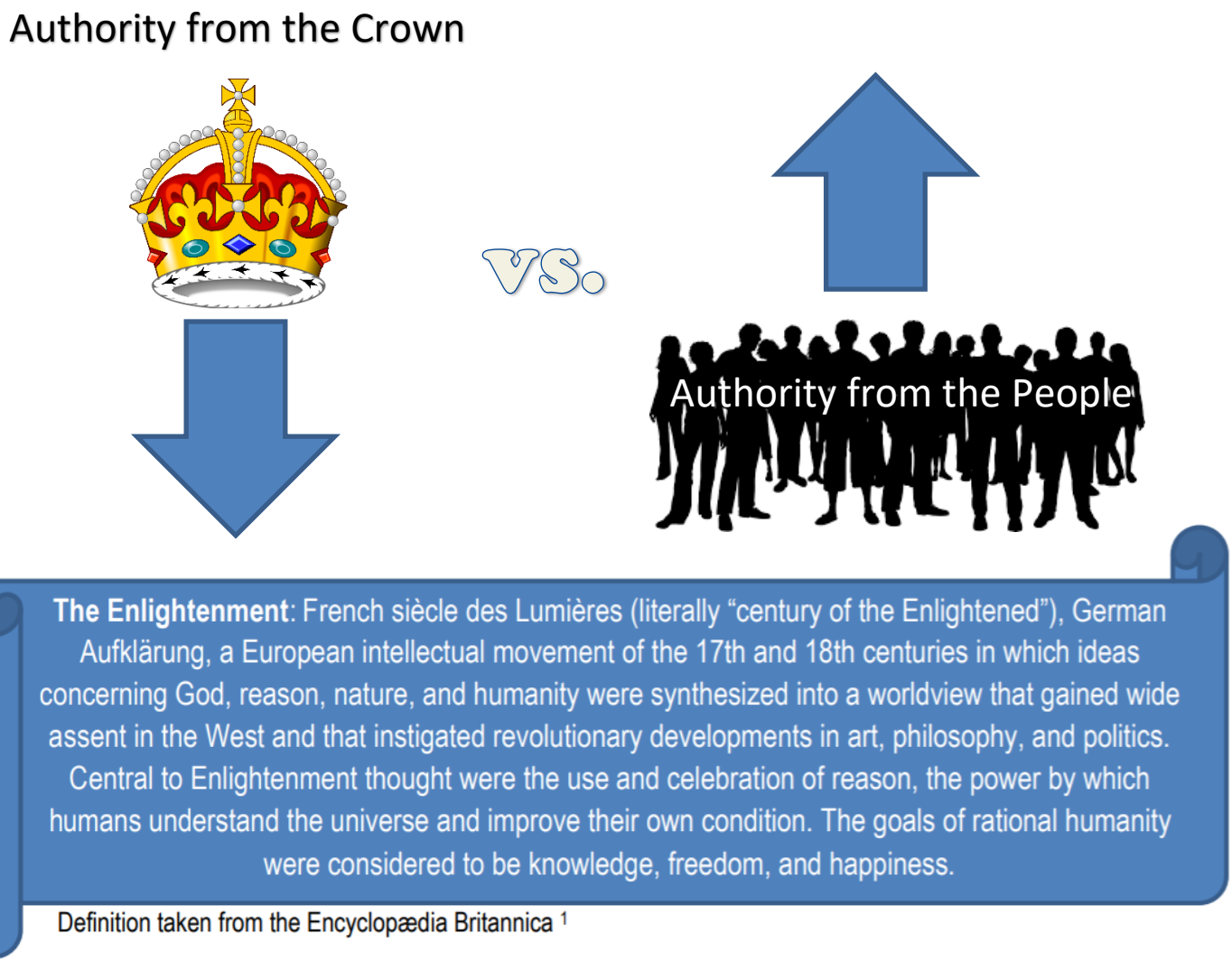
The American Revolution and its Consequences



Some Notes taken from Traditions & Encounters (Third Edition) by Jerry H. Bentley and Herb Ziegler (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006). Chapter 29: Revolutions and National States in the Atlantic World.

- ★ In the mid-eighteenth century there was no sign that North America might become a centre of revolution.

- ★ Slavery was a key institution in colonial America. Watch: Teaching Hard History: American Slavery, Key Concept 1

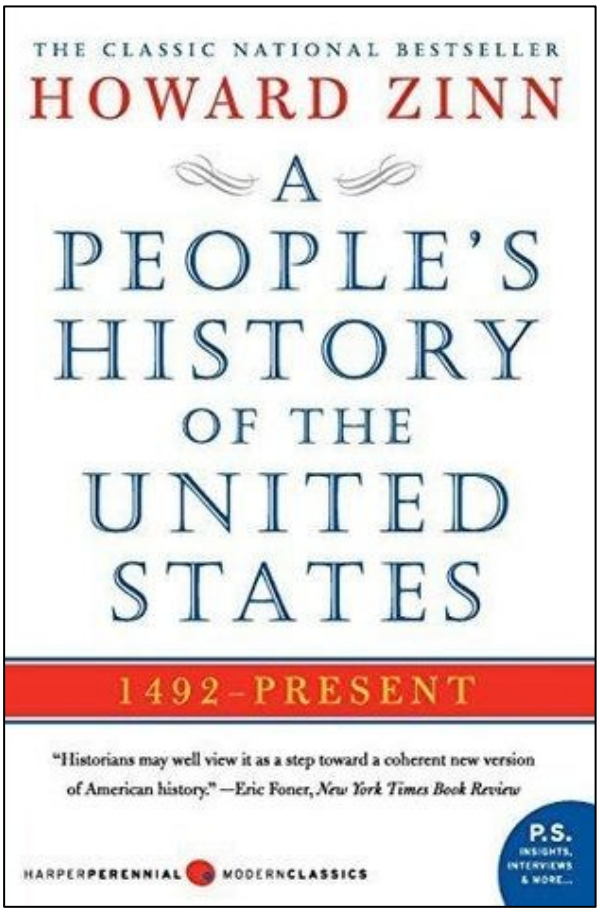
- ★ Faced with staggering financial difficulties incurred during the *Seven Years War* (*French and Indian Wars*, 1754-1763), the British Parliament passed legislation to levy new taxes and bring order to the far-flung trading empire.

[1] Duignan, Brian. "Enlightenment." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., December 31, 2019. https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history.

- These laws, coupled with other developments such as the Royal Proclamation of 1763 (and the 1764 Treaty of Niagara that saw Indigenous Nations ratify it) triggered what would become the American War for Independence.

  Interesting fact: George Washington claimed 32,000 acres of farmland west of the Royal Proclamation line – as long as the Royal Proclamation was honoured he could not access it.[2]

★ The Declaration of Independence drew deep inspiration from Humanist and Enlightenment political thought in justifying the colonies' quest for independence.

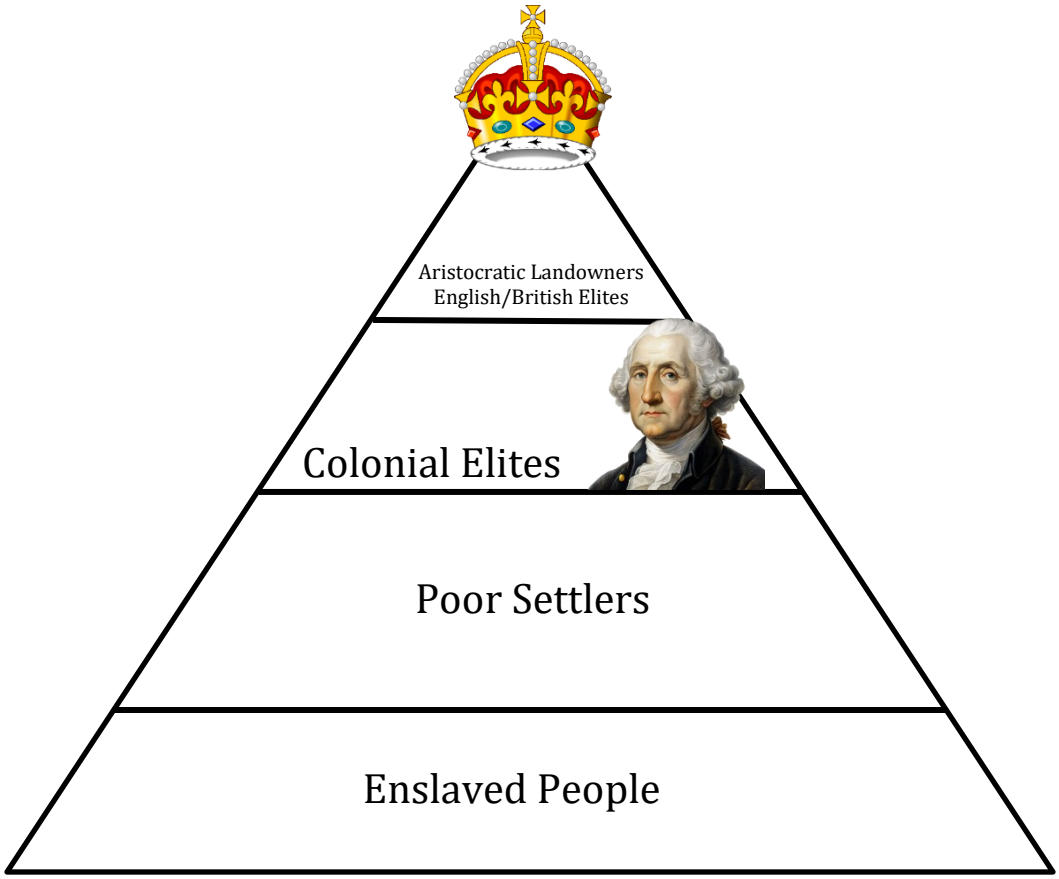


★ However, American historian Howard Zinn writes: "Around 1776, certain important people in the English colonies made a discovery that would prove enormously useful for the next two hundred years. **They found that by creating a nation, a symbol, a legal unity called the United States, they could take over land, profits, and political power from favorites of the British Empire.** In the process, they could hold back a number of potential rebellions and create a consensus of popular support for the rule of a new, privileged leadership.

When we look at the American Revolution this way, it was a work of genius, and the Founding Fathers deserve the awed tribute they have received over the centuries. They created the most effective system of national control devised in modern times, and showed future generations of leaders the advantages of combining paternalism with command."[3]

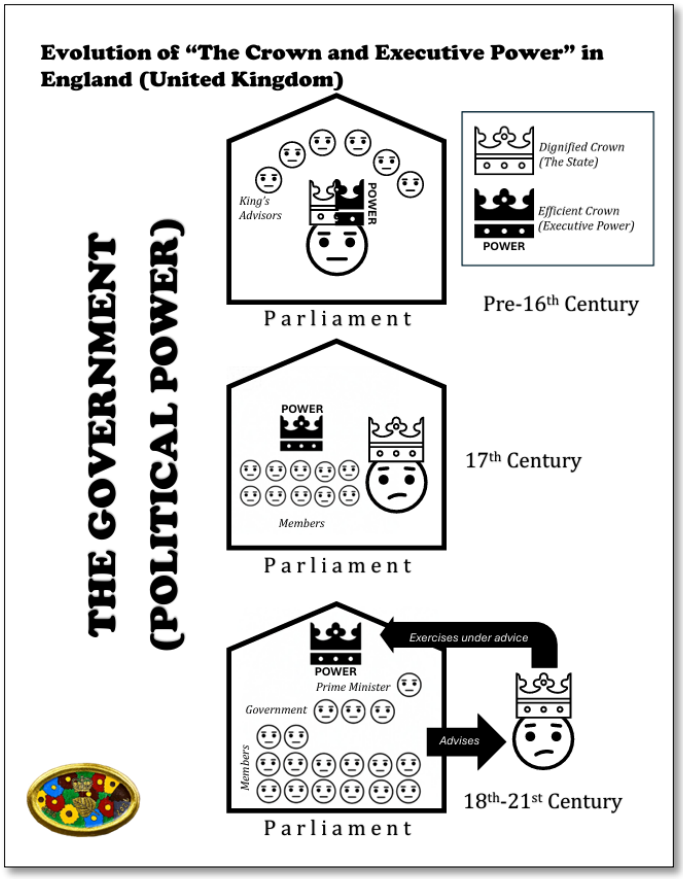
★ The US Declaration of Independence was drafted by the 33-year old Thomas Jefferson who wrote the immortal lines "all Men are created equal."

[2] Simon Winchester, *Land*, (New York: Harper, 2021), 136.
[3] Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States*, (New York: Harper, 2005).



Society in the Thirteen Colonies (Pre-revolutionary War)

Remember . . .



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- However, as Ibram Kendi points out "It is impossible to know for sure whether Jefferson meant to include his [1200] enslaved laborers (or women) . . . Even if Jefferson believed all groups to be 'created equal,' he never believed the antiracist creed that all human groups *are* equal."[4]

- Kendi goes on to say: "Thomas Jefferson only really handed revolutionary license to his band of wealthy, White, male revolutionaries. He criminalized runaways in the Declaration of Independence, and he silenced women."[5]

★ The American War for Independence was a long colonial war that raged from 1776 until British forces finally surrendered in October 1781. The British Crown formally recognized the United States as an independent state with the Treaty of Paris (1783). **Important note: This severing of the American settlers from the British Crown threw Treaty relationships established with Indigenous People into disarray. Example: The Royal Proclamation of 1763 (and Treaty of Niagara, 1764) were no longer honoured.**

- Howard Zinn points out: "The American victory over the British army was made possible by the existence of an already- armed people. Just about every white male had a gun, and could shoot. The Revolutionary leadership distrusted the mobs of poor. But they knew the Revolution had no appeal to slaves and [Indigenous Peoples]. They would have to woo the armed white population.

  This was not easy. Yes, mechanics and sailors, some others, were incensed against the British. But general enthusiasm for the war was not strong. While much of the white male population went into military service at one time or another during the war, only a small fraction stayed. John Shy, in his study of the Revolutionary army (A People Numerous and Armed), says they "grew weary of being bullied by local committees of safety, by corrupt deputy assistant commissaries of supply, and by bands of ragged strangers with guns in their hands calling themselves soldiers of the Revolution." Shy estimates that perhaps a fifth of the population was actively treasonous. John Adams had estimated a third opposed, a third in support, a third neutral."[6]

★ Ultimately victorious, the leaders of the fledgling republic organized a state that reflected enlightened principals. This was negotiated out during a series of constitutional conventions.

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[4] Ibram K. Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning*, (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016), 104.
[5] Ibid, 106.
[6] Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States*.

★ In 1787 a constitutional convention drafted the blueprint for a new system of government which emphasized the rights of certain individuals. After some debate, a republican form of government was pursued.

American leaders based the federal government on popular sovereignty, and they agreed to follow a **written constitution** (England had, and continues to have, an **unwritten constitution** – Canada has both a written and unwritten constitution). The US written constitution guaranteed individual liberties including (for some) freedom of speech, of the press and of religion.

★ Political and legal equality WAS NOT granted to all inhabitants – Landless Men, Black People, All Women, and Indigenous Peoples were excluded.

- Protections for slavery were embedded in the founding documents: enslavers dominated the federal government, Supreme Court, and Senate from 1781 through 1860. Watch Annette Gordon-Reed's Teaching Hard History: American Slavery, Key Concept 3.

- The US Constitution originally included the "Three-Fifths Compromise" which Kendi explains in *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You*:

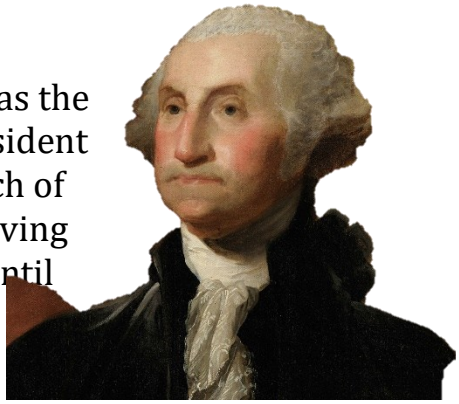
"The South wanted to play both sides of the fence. On one hand, they didn't want to count slaves as people, but instead wanted to count them as property, because the greater the population, the more taxes you have to pay. *But*, on the other hand, they needed more population, because the greater the population, the more representation they got, and with more representation came more power. And the North was like, "NOOOOOPE! Slaves can't be human," because the North didn't have (as many) slaves and therefore couldn't risk letting the South have more power. So, the compromise was to create a fraction. Every five slaves equaled three humans. So, just to do the math, that's like saying if there were fifteen slaves in the room, on paper, they counted as only nine people."[7]

The US State of Mississippi did not ratify the Thirteenth Amendment (the abolition of Slavery) until March 16th, 1995.

- In 1791, inspired by the French Revolution (which was inspired by the American Revolution – Article 1 of the *Declaration of the Rights of* Man stated "Men are born free and equal in rights") enslaved Africans revolted in the French colony of Haiti.

[7] Ibram K. Kendi, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, (New York: Little and Brown, 2020), 60-61.

- Kendi writes: "[Haiti's] was a [revolution] that no slaveholder, including Thomas Jefferson, wanted enslaved Africans to win. If these Black freedom fighters could declare their independence and win it on the richest soil of the Americas, then their nation would become the hemispheric symbol of freedom, not Jefferson's United States. Enslaved people's everywhere would be inspired by that symbol and fight for their freedom, and there was nothing that racist ideas could do anymore to stop them.[8]



★ George Washington was chosen, and ultimately sworn in as the first President of the United States on April 30, 1789. President Washington's first act was to establish the judiciary branch of the American government. Washington resigned after serving two terms – setting this precedent for future presidents until it was formalized in the 20th century.

- **Interesting Fact**: Although Washington advocated for a small army to protect the new republic's borders in the 18th century, he wrote in 1783: "Altho' a large standing Army in time of Peace hath ever been considered dangerous to the liberties of a Country, yet a few Troops, under certain circumstances, are not only safe, but indispensably necessary. Fortunately for us our relative situation requires but few."

- Howard Zinn also points out " . . . Edmund Morgan sums up the class nature of the Revolution this way: 'The fact that the lower ranks were involved in the contest should not obscure the fact that the contest itself was generally a struggle for office and power between members of an upper class: the new against the established." Looking at the situation after the Revolution, Richard Morris comments: "Everywhere one finds inequality." He finds *the people* of *We the people of the United States* (a phrase coined by the very rich Gouverneur Morris) did not mean Indigenous Peoples or Black People or women or white servants. In fact, there were more indentured servants than ever, and the Revolution "did nothing to end and little to ameliorate white bondage."

[8] Ibram K. Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning*, 119.

Carl Degler says (Out of Our Past): "No new social class came to power through the door of the American revolution. The men who engineered the revolt were largely members of the colonial ruling class." **George Washington was the richest man in America. John Hancock was a prosperous Boston merchant. Benjamin Franklin was a wealthy printer**. And so on."

Wealth of the Founding Fathers (adjusted for inflation to 2016 US dollars):

George Washington ($587 million – 2nd wealthiest president in US history)
Thomas Jefferson ($236 million – 3rd wealthiest president in US history)
James Madison ($113 million – 5th wealthiest president in US history)

Ben Franklin ($43.5 million)
John Hancock ($9 million)

All of the above enslaved African People – Ben Franklin and James Madison did, eventually, begin to argue against the institution.

*If what Donald Trump claims is accurate, he was the wealthiest president ever elected ($4.5 billion)

★ Howard Zinn writes: " . . . The American Revolution is sometimes said to have brought about the separation of church and state. The northern states made such declarations, but after 1776 they adopted taxes that forced everyone to support Christian teachings. William G. McLoughlin, quoting Supreme Court Justice David Brewer in 1892 that "this is a Christian nation," says of the separation of church and state in the Revolution that it "was neither conceived of nor carried out . . . Far from being left to itself, religion was imbedded into every aspect and institution of American life."

Land

One would look, in examining the Revolution's effect on class relations, at what happened to land confiscated from fleeing Loyalists. It was distributed **and privatized** in such a way as to give a double opportunity to the Revolutionary leaders: to enrich themselves and their friends, and to parcel out some land to small farmers to create a broad base of support for the new government. Indeed, this became characteristic of the new nation: **finding itself possessed of enormous wealth, it could create the richest ruling class in history, and still have enough for the middle classes to act as a buffer between the rich and the dispossessed.**

Remember that some Loyalists fled north, founding what would become "English" Canada

The huge landholdings of the Loyalists had been one of the great incentives to Revolution. Lord Fairfax in Virginia had more than 5 million acres encompassing twenty-one counties. Lord Baltimore's income from his Maryland holdings exceeded 30,000 pounds a year. After the Revolution, Lord Fairfax was protected; he was a friend of George Washington. But other Loyalist holders of great estates, especially those who were absentees, had their land confiscated."[9]

★ Zinn goes on to write about the American Revolution in Chapter 5:

[10]It was Thomas Jefferson, in France as ambassador at the time of Shays' Rebellion, who spoke of such uprisings as healthy for society**. In a letter to a friend he wrote: "I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing.... It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government . . . God forbid that we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion.**

Shays's Rebellion: (August 1786–February 1787), uprising in western Massachusetts in opposition to high taxes and stringent economic conditions. Armed bands forced the closing of several courts to prevent execution of foreclosures and debt processes. In September 1786 Daniel Shays and other local leaders led several hundred men in forcing the Supreme Court in Springfield to adjourn. Shays led a force of about 1,200 men in an attack (January 1787) on the federal arsenal at Springfield, which was repulsed. Pursued by the militia, on February 4 he was decisively defeated at Petersham and fled to Vermont.

Definition taken from the Encyclopædia Britannica[5]

[9] Howard Zinn. A People's History of the United States, (New York: Harper, 2005).
[10] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Shays's Rebellion." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., February 14, 2020. https://www.britannica.com/event/Shayss-Rebellion.

. . The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure."

★ Alexander Hamilton, aide to Washington during the war, was one of the most forceful and astute leaders of the new aristocracy. He voiced his political philosophy:

> All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first arc the rich and well-horn, the other the mass of the people. The voice of the people has been said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. **The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct permanent share in the government. . .** Can a democratic assembly who annually revolve in the mass of the people be supposed steadily to pursue the public good? **Nothing but a permanent body can check the imprudence of democracy**. . .

★ At the Constitutional Convention, Hamilton suggested a President and Senate chosen for life. The Convention did not take his suggestion.

- However it also did not allow popular elections, except in the case of the House of Representatives, where the qualifications were set by the state legislatures (which required property-holding for voting in almost all the states), and excluded women, Indigenous People, and enslaved folks. The Constitution provided for Senators to be elected by the state legislators, for the President to be elected by electors chosen by the state legislators, and for the Supreme Court to be appointed by the President.

★ Howard Zinn writes: "The problem of democracy in the post-Revolutionary society was not, however, the Constitutional limitations on voting. It lay deeper, beyond the Constitution, in the division of society into rich and poor. **For if some people had great wealth and great influence; if they had the land, the money, the newspapers, the church, the educational system- how could voting, however broad, cut into such power? There was still another problem: wasn't it the nature of representative government, even when most broadly based, to be conservative, to prevent tumultuous change?**"