

Elizabethan Government and Power

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the English government was a monarchical, personal government managed under the explicit direction of the sitting queen or king (known, also, as the monarch). Queen Elizabeth was, without question, the supreme and absolute ruler of England, just as all monarchs of England had been for several centuries. Unlike monarchs in contemporary England, the monarch in the Elizabethan era was essentially responsible for all governmental actions and decisions. Due to the Divine Right of Kings, not obeying the queen's orders or rulings was considered treason and punishable by execution. While the queen was not allowed to pass laws herself; she was required to draft a Bill for consideration by Parliament in order for a law to be passed. She could, however, issue Royal Proclamations without the consent of any other governmental party that were as binding as law.

Queen Elizabeth was aided in her governmental decisions by a group of trusted counselors and officials. Queen Elizabeth's closest, most empowered advisers were known as the Privy Council and were tasked with providing the queen with different perspectives and opinions on the various political and social issues she faced. While the council was allowed to make governmental decisions on matters of religion, the citizenry, and even the military, the queen reserved the right to overrule any decision that the Privy Council made. The council consisted of a number of powerful English noblemen, though the actual number of council members shifted greatly throughout Queen Elizabeth's reign. The Parliament, upon which many members of her Privy Council often sat, was also responsible for assisting the queen in decision-making.

Parliament consisted of a group of representatives from various parts of England who were tasked with negotiating matters of finance, passing laws, and offering advice to the queen. Parliament was divided into two "houses": the Upper House (or House of Lords), which consisted of members of the nobility as well as bishops and archbishops, and the Lower House (or "House of Commons"), comprised of "common people" (usually prominent land owners) who were elected to their positions by the voting public. The monarch, Privy Council, and Parliament worked together to govern England, though the monarch was always the final authority on all political, martial, legal, and social matters throughout the nation.

People of noble birth were granted far more power in Elizabethan England than people of low birth. Members of the nobility and the gentry (people who were considered to be of a high social class) both had a great deal of financial and social power in Elizabethan England given that they tended to own large plots of land and that the queen depended on them to assist with governing within the lands over which they presided. Within the Elizabethan government, there were a number of other empowered officials who helped to maintain order on a local scale, including justices of the peace, sheriffs, and mayors.