JOHN LILBURNE
1615?–1657

The iron determination of the revolutionary often comes out most vividly in conflict with his fellow revolutionaries. John Lilburne was a natural-born agitator who had suffered for propagandizing against the bishops and had fought in the parliamentary army against the king, but who achieved perhaps his finest moment in a direct confrontation with Oliver Cromwell during the early months of 1649.

Charles I had just been executed (January 30, 1649), and Cromwell, with a picked council of army officers and trusted allies from the House of Commons, was trying to set up a new form of governmental authority. But his plan was simply to keep power in his own hands. Lilburne and the Levelers (a name given them originally in derision because of their democratic principles) wanted a radically new political deal. They wanted, for instance, free elections; by one device or another, they estimated, nineteen of every twenty potential voters were being disenfranchised. They wanted freedom of speech; they wanted the political, legal and social rights for which, as they thought, the whole war had been fought. When they saw Cromwell moving the other way, toward a tight personal dictatorship, they protested violently. A pamphlet titled *England's New Chains Discovered* denounced the betrayal of the revolution as unmeasured terms, and determined Cromwell to suppress a movement which seemed to be making dangerous headway against him. Toward the end of March he ordered troops to arrest the four leading Levelers (Lilburne, Prince, Overton, and Walwyn), and bring them before his Council of State for examination.

The whole proceeding stood on very dubious legal ground. Cromwell was general of the parliamentary armies, but that fact gave him no right to arrest ordinary citizens. The Council of State existed on Cromwell’s say-so; it had never been created legally by an official body. With the king dead, the House of Lords abolished, and the House of Commons reduced by purges to a fraction of its original size, the Levelers were quite justified in arguing that nothing could set up a stable legal authority in England except new elections.

Being arrested was therefore a great opportunity for Lilburne—a headstrong, fearless, melodramatic man with a strong sense of national pride. He saw at once that the tribunal before which he was forced to appear must itself be put on trial; and he lectured his judges unmercifully. He said he would not plead his great services to the parliamentary cause, and then referred to them constantly, for the rest of his speech. Thrown into jail by the Council, as he actually asked them to do, he and his fellow Levelers published a long and passionate pamphlet titled *The Picture of the Council of State*, in which they represented at length their own eloquence and logic, while contrasting it with the harsh and narrow behavior of their persecutors. Our excerpt begins at the moment when Lilburne has just been asked by Mr. John Bradshaw, President of the Council, what he has to say for himself.

*From The Picture of the Council of State*

“...Well, then, Mr. Bradshaw,” said I, “if it please you and these gentlemen to afford me the same liberty and privilege that the Cavaliers did at Oxford, when I was arraigned against them for my life, for levying war in the quarrel of the commonwealth against the late king and his party (which was liberty of speech,
to speak my mind freely without interruption), I shall speak and go on; but without the grant of liberty of speech, I shall not say a word more to you."

To which he replied, "That is already granted to you, and therefore you may go on to speak what you can or will say for yourself, if you please; or if you will not, you may hold your peace and withdraw."

"Well, then," said I, "Mr. Bradshaw, with your favor, thus. I am an Englishman born, bred, and brought up, and England is a nation governed, bounded, and limited by laws and liberties: and for the liberties of England I have both fought and suffered much. But truly, sir, I judge it now infinitely below me, and the glory and excellency of my late actions, now to plead merit or desert unto you, as though I were forced to fly to the merit of my former actions, to lay in a counter-scale, to weigh down your indignation against me, for my pretended late offences. No, sir, I scorn it, I abhor it. And therefore, sir, I now stand before you upon the bare, naked, and single account of an Englishman, as though I had never said, done, or acted anything that tended to the preservation of the liberties thereof; but yet, have never done any act that did put me out of a legal capacity to claim the utmost punctilio, benefit, and privilege that the laws and liberties of England will afford to any of you here present, or any other man in the whole nation. And the laws and liberties of England are my inheritance and birthright.

"And in your late declaration, published about four or five days ago, wherein you lay down the grounds and reasons (as I remember) of your doing justice upon the late king, and why you have abolished kingly government and the House of Lords, you declare in effect the same, and promise to maintain the laws of England in reference to the people's liberties and freedoms. And amongst other things therein contained, you highly commend and extol the Petition of Right,1 made in the third year of the late king, as one of the most excellent and glorious laws in reference to the people's liberties that ever was made in this nation; and you there very much blame and cry out upon the king for robbing and denying the people of England the benefit of that law. And sure I am (for I have read and studied it), there is one clause in it that saith expressly, That no freeman of England ought to be adjudged for life, limb, liberty, or estate but by the laws already in being established and declared. And truly, sir, if this be good and sound legal doctrine (as undoubtedly it is, or else your own declarations are false and lies), I wonder what you gentlemen are. For the declared and known laws of England know you not, neither by names nor qualifications, as persons endowed with any power either to imprison or try me, or the meanest freeman of England. And truly were it not that I know the faces of divers of you, and honor the persons of some of you, as members of the House of Commons that have stood pretty firm in shaking times to the interest of the nation. I should wonder what you are, or before whom I am, and should not in the least honor or reverence you so much as with civil respect, especially considering the manner of my being brought before you, with armed men, and the manner of your close sitting, contrary to all courts of justice. **

"Sir, by the law of England, let me tell you, what the House [of Commons] votes, orders, and enacts within their walls is nothing to me, I am not at all bound by them, nor in law can take any cognizance of them as laws, although

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1. In the so-called Petition of Right (1628), Parliament drew up and presented to Charles I a formal statement of the rights and privileges to which they laid claim in the name of the people of England.
twenty members come out of the House and tell me such things are done, till they be published and declared by sound of trumpet, proclamation, or the like, by a public officer or magistrate, in the public and open places of the nation. But truly sir, I never saw any print or writing that declares your power so proclaimed or published. And therefore, sir, I know not what more to make of you than a company of private men, being neither able to own you as a court of justice, because the law speaks nothing of you; nor as a council of state, till I see and read or hear your commission, which I desire (if you please) to be acquainted with."

[After a great deal of haggling over whether the Council really exists in a legal sense, Mr. Bradshaw finally gets down to asking the question which is at the root of the whole affair.]

"Whether you made not this book, or were privy to the making of it, or no?"

And after some pause, and wondering at the strangeness of the question, I answered, and said: "Mr. Bradshaw, I cannot but stand amazed that you should ask me such a question as this, at this time of the day, considering what you first said unto me at my first being before you; and considering it is now about eight years ago since this very Parliament annihilated the court of Star Chamber, Council Board, and High Commission, and that for such proceedings as these. And truly, sir, I have been a contestor and sufferer for the liberties of England these twelve years together, and I should now look upon myself as the basest fellow in the world if now in one moment I should undo all that I have been doing all this while, which I must of necessity do if I should answer to you questions against myself. For in the first place, by answering this question against myself, I should betray the liberties of England in acknowledging you to have a legal jurisdiction over me to try and audge me; which I have already proved to your faces you have not in the least. And if you have forgot what you said to me thereupon, yet I have not forgot what I said to you. And secondly, sir, if I should answer to questions against myself and to betray myself, I should do that which not only law but nature abhors. And therefore I cannot but wonder that you yourselves are not ashamed to demand so illegal and unworthy a thing of me as this is. And therefore in short were it that I owned your power (which I do not in the least) I would be hanged before I would do so base and un-Englishman-like an action, to betray my liberty, which. I have already proved to your faces you have not in the least. And if you have forgot what you said to me thereupon, yet I have not forgot what I said to you. And secondly, sir, if I should answer to questions against myself and to betray myself, I should do that which not only law but nature abhors. And therefore I cannot but wonder that you yourselves are not ashamed to demand so illegal and unworthy a thing of me as this is. And therefore in short were it that I owned your power (which I do not in the least) I would be hanged before I would do so base and un-Englishman-like an action, to betray my liberty, which. I must of necessity do in answering questions to accuse myself. But, sir, this I will say to you, my late actions have not been done in a hole or a corner, but on the housetop in the face of the sun, before hundreds and some thousands of people. And therefore why ask you me any questions? Go to those that have heard me and seen me, and it is possible you may find some hundreds of witnesses to tell you what I have said and done. For I hate holes and corners. My late actions need no covers nor hidings, they have been more honest than so, and I am not sorry for what I have done, for I did look well about me before I did what I did, and I am ready to lay down my life to justify what I have done. And so much in answer to your question.

"But now, sir, with your favor one word more, to mind you again of what I said before, in reference to my martial imprisonment. And truly, sir, I must tell you, circumstantials of my liberty at this time I shall not much dispute, but for their victims of the Inquisition. Lilburne himself had suffered imprisonment and whipping at their hands.
the essentials of them I shall die. I am now in the soldiers’ custody, where to continue in silence and patience is absolutely to betray my liberty. For they have nothing to do with me, nor the meanest freeman in England in this case. And besides, sir, they have no rules to walk by but their wills and their swords, which are two dangerous things. It may be I may be of an hasty, choleric temper, and not able or willing to bear their affronts; and peradventure, 3 they may be as willing to put them upon me as I am unwilling to bear them. And for you in this case to put fire and tinder together, to burn up one another, will not be much commendable, nor tend much to the accomplishment of your ends. But if for all this you shall send me back to the military sword again, either to Whitehall or any other such like garrisoned place in England, I do solemnly protest before the Eternal God of Heaven and Earth, I will fire it and burn it down to the ground, if possibly I can, although I be burnt to ashes with the flames thereof. For, sir, I say again, the soldiers have nothing to do to be my jailers; and besides, it is a maxim among the soldiers, that they must obey without dispute all the commands of their officers, be they right or wrong; and it is also the maxim amongst the officers, that if they do not do it, they must hang for it. Therefore if the officers command them to cut my throat, they must either do it or hang for it. And truly, sir (looking wishfully 4 upon Cromwell, that sat just against me), I must be plain with you, I have not found so much honor, honesty, justice or conscience in any of the principal officers of the army as to trust my life under their protection or to think it can be safe under their immediate fingers. And therefore, not knowing nor very much caring what you will do with me, I earnestly entreat you, if you will again imprison me, send me to a civil jail that the law knows, as Newgate, the Fleet, or Gatehouse.”

[After being questioned by the Council, and uniformly refusing to answer, Lilburne and his three associates are shut in a room along side the Council-room.]

So after we were all come out, and all four in a room close by them, all alone, I laid my ear to their door and heard Lieutenant General Cromwell (I am sure of it) very loud, thumping his fist upon the Council table till it rang again, and heard him speak in these very words or to this effect: “I tell you, sir, you have no other way to deal with these men but to break them in pieces.” And thumping on the Council table again, he said: “Sir, let me tell you that which is true, if you do not break them, they will break you; yea, and bring all the guilt of the blood and treasure shed and spent in this kingdom upon your head and shoulders; and frustrate and make void all that work that with so many years’ industry, toil, and pains you have done, and so render you to all rational men in the world as the most contemptiblest generation of silly, low-spirited men in the earth, to be broken and routed by such a despicable contemptible generation of men as they are; and therefore, sir, I tell you again, you are necessitated to break them.”. . . Upon which discourse of Cromwell’s, the blood run up and down my veins, and I heartily wished myself in again amongst them (being scarce able to contain myself), that so I might have gone five or six stories higher than I did before. . . .

[Lilburne concludes his narration with a direct personal appeal to his reader and to his own religious conscience.]

I know they have an army at command, but if every hair on the head of that officer or soldier they have at command were a legion of men, I would fear

3. Perhaps. 4. Intently.
them no more than so many straws, for the Lord Jehovah is my rock and
defense, under the assured shelter of whose wings I am safe and secure, and
therefore will sing and be merry; and do hereby sound an eternal trumpet of
defiance to all the men and evils in earth and hell, but only those men that
have the image of God in them, and demonstrate it among men by their just,
honest, merciful, and righteous actions. And as for all those vile actions their
saint-like agents have fixed upon me of late, I know before God that none is
righteous, no, not one, but only he that is clothed with the glorious righte-
ousness of Jesus Christ, which I assuredly know my soul hath been, and now
is clothed with, in the strength of which I have walked for above twelve years
together, and through the strength of which I have been able at any time in all
that time to lay down my life on a quarter of an hour’s warning. But as to man,
I bid defiance to all my adversaries upon earth, to search my ways and goings
with a candle and to lay any one base action to my charge in any kind whatso-
ever, since the first day that I visibly made profession of the fear of God, which
is now above twelve years. Yes, I bid defiance to him or them to proclaim it upon
the housetops, provided he will set his hand to it, and proclaim a public place
where before indifferent men in the face of the sun his accusation may be
scanned. Yea, I here declare that if any man or woman in England, either in ref-
erence to my public dealings, to the state’s money, or in reference to my pri-
vate dealings in the world, shall come in and prove against me that ever I
defrauded him or her of twelvepence, and for every twelvepence that I have so
done, I will make him or her twenty shillings worth of amends, so far as all the
estate I have in the world will extend.

Courteous reader and dear countryman, excuse I beseech thee my boasting
and glorying, for I am necessitated to it, my adversaries base and lying calum-
niations putting me upon it, and Paul and Samuel did it before me: and so I am
thine, if thou art for the just freedoms and liberties of the land of thy nativity.

JOHN LILBURNE, that never yet changed his principles from
better to worse, nor could never be threatened out of them, nor
courted from them, that never feared the rich nor mighty, nor
never despised the poor nor needy, but always hath, and hopes
by God’s goodness to contine, semper idem.7

From the Tower of London, April 3, 1649

5. Except.
6. Attributed to me.
7. Ever the same.