

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT 6

John Locke: Two Treatises on Government, 1690



PHILOSOPHER John Locke (1632–1704) published *Two Treatises on Government*, which contends that all people possess natural rights. Locke's ideas, including the notion that the foundation of government is the consent of the people, influenced the Framers of the United States Constitution.

THE great and chief end . . . of men's uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property, to which in the state of Nature there are many things wanting [lacking].

Firstly, there wants an established, settled, known law, received and allowed by common consent to be the standard of right and wrong, and the common measure to decide all controversies between them. . . .

Secondly, in the state of Nature there wants a known and indifferent [unbiased] judge, with authority to determine all differences according to the established law. . . .

Thirdly, in the state of Nature there often wants power to back and support the sentence when right, and to give it due execution. . . .

But though men, when they enter into society give up the equality, liberty, and executive power they had in the state of Nature into the hands of society . . . the power of the society or legislative constituted by them can never be supposed to extend farther than the common good. . . . [W]hoever has the legislative or supreme power of any commonwealth, is bound to govern by established standing laws, promulgated and known to the people, and not by extemporary decrees, by indifferent and upright judges, who are to decide controversies by those laws; and to employ the force of the community at home only in the execution of such laws, or abroad to prevent or redress foreign injuries and se-

cure the community from inroads and invasion. And all this to be directed to no other end but the peace, safety, and public good of the people. . . .

The reason why men enter into society is the preservation of their property; and the end while they choose and authorise a legislative is that there may be laws made, and rules set, as guards and fences to the properties of all the society, . . . Whensoever, therefore, the legislative shall transgress this fundamental rule of society, and either by ambition, fear, folly, or corruption, endeavour to grasp themselves, or put into the hands of any other, an absolute power over the lives, liberties, and estates of the people, by this breach of trust they forfeit the power the people had put into their hands for quite contrary ends, and it devolves [passes] to the people; who have a right to resume their original liberty, and by the establishment of a new legislative (such as they shall think fit), provide for their own safety and security, which is the end which they are in society. . . .

Who shall be judge whether the prince or legislative act contrary to their trust? . . . The people shall be judge. . . .

. . . The power that every individual gave the society when he entered into it can never revert to the individuals again, as long as the society lasts, but will always remain in the community; because without this there can be no community—no commonwealth, which is contrary to the original agreement. . . .

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In Locke's "state of Nature," what are people lacking?
2. What do people stand to lose in favor of government?
3. Who is the final authority of government in Locke's opinion?