

Extract from John Locke's "Two Treatises on Government", London 1690

To correctly understand political power we must first consider in what condition men are naturally in: that is, a state of perfect freedom to do and say as they wish, limited only by the law of nature, without having to ask permission of anyone.

It is also a state of perfect equality in which no one has more power or authority than anyone else. Nothing is more obvious than that creatures of the same species, endowed with the same gifts of nature and the same abilities, should be completely one to another.

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it : this is reason. This teaches anyone who enquires of it that, being equal and independent, no one ought to harm anyone else in his life, health, liberty or possessions All men are naturally in this state, and remain so, till, by their own consent, they make themselves members of some political society.

If man in this state of nature is as free as has been said, if he is absolute lord of himself and his possessions, equal to the greatest and subject to nobody, why would he part with his freedom and place himself under the control of any other power? The answer is that, although in the state of nature he has a right to perfect freedom, the enjoyment of it is very uncertain and is constantly being threatened by others. For every man being equally free and not many being concerned with justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in the state of nature is not at all secure. It is quite reasonable, then, that man looks for, and is willing to join in society with others for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberty and property.

The main reason, then, for man uniting into political society is the preservation of their property.....

When people submit themselves to a legislature of their own making, it is obvious that they cannot let that legislature destroy that which they had hoped to secure in entering into society. Whenever the legislature tries to take away or destroy the property of the people, or reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, it puts itself into a state of war against the people, who are then immediately justified in rejecting it. Whenever, therefore, the legislature, by ambition, fear, folly or corruption tries to grasp for itself, or put into the hands of any other, an absolute power over the lives, liberties and property of the people, by breaking the trust placed in it by the people, it forfeits the power the people had put into its hands. The people then have the right to resume their original liberty and establish a new legislature to provide for their safety and security.

What I have said here concerning the legislature in general is also true of the executive which has a double trust placed in it, both to take part in the legislature and to carry out the law, and which acts against both when it uses its arbitrary will as the law of the society.

Some, however, may say that the people, being ignorant and always discontent, to lay the foundations of government in its uncertain opinion and changing moods, is to expose it to certain ruin; and that no government would be able to survive very long if the people can set up a new legislature whenever they take offense at the old one. To this, however, I answer the contrary.

People are not so changeable as some suggest The slowness of the people to give up their traditional form of government has, in the many revolutions which have been seen in the Kingdom, in this and former ages, still kept us to, or after some interval of fruitless attempts at other forms of government, still brought us back to, our legislature of King, Lords and Commons.

But, it will be said, this right to replace governments may lead to frequent rebellions. To which I answer that such revolutions do not happen on every little mismanagement in public affairs... But if a long series of abuses, provocations and deceits, all in the same sense, make a conspiracy visible to the people, they cannot help sensing what is happening. It is quite natural then that the people should arise and attempt to put power into such hands as may secure for them the end for which the government was first established.