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Elizabeth I, "Golden Speech" (1601)

The lack of serious conflict between Crown and Parliament in the late Tudor period was due in part to the consummate political skill of Elizabeth I. Peter Wentworth's outbursts revealed an isolated member's growing consciousness of Parliament's rights, but his fate showed even more vividly the determination of Parliament to avoid a clash with the queen. The danger of Rome and Spain was generally sufficient to bring these potential rivals together.

Toward the end of Elizabeth's reign, however, when the fear of invasion had subsided, an issue arose that revealed a potential chasm between the Crown and the House of Commons. The issue was royal monopolies. These monopolies, or patents, could be legitimate attempts to protect copyrights or inventions. However, in her dire need for revenue, Elizabeth granted to individuals and groups monopolies over the manufacture and distribution of all sorts of everyday commodities, such as tin, steel, salt, and playing cards. These monopolies removed competition and reduced supplies, thus raising prices and giving the House of Commons a broad popular complaint. Parliament's previous petition having been ignored, many members were ready in 1601 to draft legislation forbidding the queen to grant monopolies and thus raising the fundamental question of the limits of the royal prerogative.

Elizabeth, correctly sensing the gravity of the situation, promised to withdraw the hated monopolies and sent the Commons a gracious message, thanking it for its attention to her needs and to the welfare of the kingdom. A few days later, the queen received a large deputation from the Commons to hear its reply to her message and to deliver what she perhaps realized might be her valedictory to her last Parliament. This speech, as reconstructed below, illustrates clearly the love affair between Elizabeth and her people and the exquisite political grasp of England's greatest queen. From the seriousness of the issue raised and then avoided and from the grace and charm of Elizabeth's reply can be gauged something of the difficulties that would face her less skillful and less fortunate Stuart successors.

Source: J. E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments, 1584–1601*, London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1953, pp. 388–391. Reprinted by permission of Jonathan Cape Ltd. and Lady Neale.

The audience took place in the Council Chamber at Whitehall at about 3 p.m. on November 30th. Speaker Croke was but meanly endowed with eloquence, yet his heart spoke the abundant gratitude of the Commons: "They come not as one of ten to give thanks, and the rest to depart unthankful; but they come, all in all, and these for all, to be thankful . . . for gracious favours bestowed of your gracious mere motion and of late published by your Majesty's most royal proclamation." For this and for all else, "they give glory first unto God, that hath in mercy towards them placed so gracious and benign a prince over them, praying to the same God to grant them continuance of your so blessed and happy government over them, even to the end of the world."

"Mr. Speaker," began Elizabeth, in reply, "We have heard your declaration and perceive your care of our estate, by falling into a consideration of a grateful acknowledgement of such benefits as you have received; and that your coming is to present thanks to us, which I accept with no less joy than your loves can have desire to offer such a present.

"I do assure you there is no prince that loves his subjects better, or whose love can countervail our love. There is no jewel, be it of never so rich a price, which I set before this jewel: I mean your love. For I do esteem it more than any treasure or riches; for that we know how to prize, but love and thanks I count unvaluable. And, though God hath raised me high, yet this I count the glory of my crown, that I have reigned with your loves. This makes me that I do not so much rejoice that God hath made me to be a Queen, as to be a Queen over so thankful a people. Therefore, I have cause to wish nothing more than to content the subject; and that is a duty which I owe. Neither do I desire to live longer days than I may see your prosperity; and that is my only desire. And as I am that person that still yet under God hath delivered you, so I trust, by the almighty power of God, that I shall be His instrument to preserve you from every peril, dishonour, shame, tyranny and oppression; partly by means of your intended helps [the subsidies they were granting] which we take very acceptably, because it manifesteth the largeness of your good loves and loyalties unto your sovereign.

"Of myself I must say this: I never was any greedy, scraping grasper, nor a strait, fast-holding Prince, nor yet a waster. My heart was never set on any worldly goods, but only for my subjects' good. What you bestow on me, I will not hoard it up, but receive it to bestow on you again. Yea, mine own properties I account yours, to be expended for your good; and your eyes shall see the bestowing of all for your good. Therefore, render unto them, I beseech you, Mr. Speaker, such thanks as you imagine my heart yieldeth, but my tongue cannot express."

Hitherto, the Commons had been kneeling, but now her Majesty said: "Mr. Speaker, I would wish you and the rest to stand up, for I shall yet trouble you with longer speech." Thereupon they all stood up, and she continued:

"Mr. Speaker, you give me thanks, but I doubt me I have a greater cause to

give you thanks than you me, and I charge you to thank them of the Lower House from me. For, had I not received a knowledge from you, I might have fallen into the lapse of an error, only for lack of true information.

"Since I was Queen, yet did I never put my pen to any grant but that, upon pretext and semblance made unto me, it was both good and beneficial to the subject in general, though a private profit to some of my ancient servants who had deserved well at my hands. But the contrary being found by experience, I am exceedingly beholding to such subjects as would move the same at the first. . . .

"That my grants should be grievous to my people and oppressions privileged under colour of our patents, our kingly dignity shall not suffer it. Yea, when I heard it, I could give no rest unto my thoughts until I had reformed it. Shall they, think you, escape unpunished that have thus oppressed you, and have been respectless of their duty, and regardless of our honour? No, I assure you, Mr. Speaker, were it not more for conscience' sake than for any glory or increase of love that I desire, these errors, troubles, vexations and oppressions, done by these varlets and lewd persons, not worthy the name of subjects, should not escape without condign punishment. . . .

"I have ever used to set the Last-Judgment Day before mine eyes, and so to rule as I shall be judged to answer before a higher Judge, to whose judgment seat I do appeal, that never thought was cherished in my heart that tended not unto my people's good. And now, if my kingly bounties have been abused, and my grants turned to the hurt of my people, contrary to my will and meaning, and if any in authority under me have neglected or perverted what I have committed to them, I hope God will not lay their culps and offences to my charge; who, though there were danger in repealing our grants, yet what danger would I not rather incur for your good, than I would suffer them still to continue?

"I know the title of a King is a glorious title; but assure yourself that the shining glory of princely authority hath not so dazzled the eyes of our understanding, but that we well know and remember that we also are to yield an account of our actions before the great Judge. To be a King and wear a crown is a thing more glorious to them that see it, than it is pleasant to them that bear it. For myself, I was never so much enticed with the glorious name of a King or royal authority of a Queen, as delighted that God hath made me His instrument to maintain His truth and glory, and to defend this Kingdom (as I said) from peril, dishonour, tyranny and oppression.

"There will never Queen sit in my seat with more zeal to my country, care for my subjects, and that will sooner with willingness venture her life for your good and safety, than myself. For it is my desire to live nor reign no longer than my life and reign shall be for your good. And though you have had and may have many princes more mighty and wise sitting in this seat, yet you never had nor shall have any that will be more careful and loving.

"Shall I ascribe anything to myself and my sexly weakness? I were not worthy to live then; and, of all, most unworthy of the mercies I have had from God,

who hath given me a heart that yet never feared any foreign or home enemy. And I speak it to give God the praise, as a testimony before you, and not to attribute anything to myself. For I, oh Lord! what am I, whom practices and perils past should not fear? Or what can I do? ["These words," says our diarist, "she spake with a great emphasis"]. That I should speak for any glory, God forbid.

"This, Mr. Speaker, I pray you deliver unto the House, to whom heartily recommend me. And so I commit you all to your best fortunes and further counsels. And I pray you, Mr. Comptroller, Mr. Secretary, and you of my Council, that before these gentlemen go into their countries, you bring them all to kiss my hand."

Queen Elizabeth I: Against the Spanish Armada, 1588

In the sixteenth century, England experienced a cultural efflorescence and acquired a clear modern national identity. Part of that identity - insular and Protestant - was formed in conflict with Spain, the leading Catholic power of the day. A defining moment occurred with the attack of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Elizabeth I of England (1533-1603), was the daughter of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, and proved to be a canny ruler. These are her words when she visited her troops in the field.

My loving people, we have been persuaded by some, that are careful of our safety, to take heed how we commit ourselves to armed multitudes, for fear of treachery; but I assure you, I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear; I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good will of my subjects. And therefore I am come amongst you at this time, not as for my recreation or sport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live or die amongst you all; to lay down, for my God, and for my kingdom, and for my people, my honor and my blood, even the dust. I know I have but the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart of a king, and of a king of England, too; and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realms: to which, rather than any dishonor should grow by me, I myself will take up arms; I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field. I know already, by your forwardness, that you have deserved rewards and crowns; and we do assure you, on the word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you. In the mean my lieutenant general shall be in my stead, than whom never prince commanded a more noble and worthy subject; not doubting by your obedience to my general, by your concord in the camp, and by your valor in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory over the enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people.