James I's First Speech to Parliament

Professor Paulina Kewes in conversation with Professor Andrew McRae

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Paulina Kewes: I'm sitting here with Professor Andrew McRae, who's going to talk to us about King James I's first speech to Parliament. Normally Parliament would meet within a few months of the monarch's succession, but in the case of James that was quite a bit longer. Why, if you could tell us a bit about the context of that first speech?
Andrew McRae: James's first appearance in the House of Commons had been delayed for almost a year on account of the plague that hit London in 1603, so there was much anticipation when he finally entered the parliamentary chamber on 19 March 1604. This was his opportunity to introduce himself to the English people by speaking to their elected representatives. Just a year before, of course, there had been much uncertainty about who would succeed Elizabeth. And yet the succession of James was accomplished swiftly and the moment was greeted with great celebration and relief that power passed so easily. And he travelled from Edinburgh to London in celebratory fashion. His new subjects, of course, were hungry for information about him. They knew that he was male. That brought to an end decades of female rule in England. They knew that he had a family and that he had three children, and that ensured the future of the dynasty. It meant the nation could avoid the traumas that they'd just been through.
PK: How did they find out what kind of person he was and what his theory of kingship might have been?
AMcR: One of the interesting things about James: that he wrote a lot on monarchy; he wrote a lot about his ideas of monarchy. The 1590s in particular was a time when there was a lot of debate across Europe about what a king should be, when a king might be removed from power. And James was involved in these kinds of debates and very much engaged in these kinds of questions. He wrote one book for example, *Basilicon Doron*, which is a book advice to his son (his older son Prince Henry who died in 1612) about how to be a king, how to prepare to be King. But he also wrote other books such as *The True Law of Free Monarchies*. So he's very interested in defending monarchy. He's very interested in defending the concept of divine right. People would have been reading these texts. They were all published in London in 1603, often in quite slim volumes that many people could have read, and eventually published in a full volume in 1616. But at that point there was clearly an effort being made to circulate the words of James to his new English people.
PK: You mentioned that his writings on kingship (*The True Law of Free Monarchies*, *Basilicon Doron*) had been previously published in Scotland and then republished in 1603 and 1604 in England. Would you say that the original publication was designed solely for the domestic market? Or were those writings supposed to reach his future English subjects and that they constituted effectively a sort of pitch?

AMcR: Well anything published in one city could find its way into other countries across Europe, and I think James was always thinking about a European readership. But he inevitably also had one eye, he always had one eye on England. And he was very keen to cultivate his position as the most likely heir to Elizabeth's throne. But he couldn't push that too far, because if he pushed that too far he could antagonize Elizabeth because she never ever announced that he was the preferred heir and that he would succeed her. So he always had a delicate game of diplomacy to play, presenting himself as the obvious heir without getting on the wrong side of the people who could make a decision that would tend that crown to someone else. But Paulina, this is something that you know a lot about. Could you tell us a little bit about the other candidates who might have been in line to take the throne if James hadn't?
PK: Well around 1603 the principal candidates were the Spanish Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia, Arabella Stuart (who was James's cousin; she was another Stuart from a cadet branch of the family), and the sons of Kathryn Gray. But essentially by 1601, after the Essex Rebellion and after the principal adviser to Elizabeth, Robert Cecil, became James's ally, James could be fairly sure of his succession, but obviously the secret correspondence between James and Sir Robert Cecil was secret. It wasn't in the public domain, so the general public were still worried. He was the most obvious and the most powerful candidate. But there were considerable anxieties about what might happen. And I think we see that in the writings that are published immediately after his proclamation. Even the proclamation had been drafted by Sir Robert Cecil, and with James's approval. But tell me about James's approach to monarchy?
AMcR: James believed in the divine right of the monarch. James believed very much the he had the ultimate authority in the state. He believed that there were certain mysteries of state that the people shouldn't even meddle with, shouldn't even attempt to understand, that were beyond them. And so it was what we might call a very conservative approach to monarchy. Quite an authoritarian approach to monarchy, even by the standards of the time, because there were different kinds of monarchy across Europe and this is a time when the idea of divine right was solidifying in England, and James is very much involved in that.
PK: And presumably his assertion, his very vigorous assertion, of the divine right of kings had something to do with the fact that his own mother was forced to abdicate, so that in effect he had come to the Scottish throne not so much as a hereditary heir but as an heir established by Parliament.
AMcR: Well James is very aware of what could go wrong. I think if anyone is put on the throne in those circumstances and whose mother dies in such a way was very aware of the risks that any monarch faced. And I guess one reason to assert divine right is to keep other forces at bay.
PK: What was the nature of the English Parliament at that time?
AMcR: Well the English Parliament as today was divided into the House of Lords and House of Commons. The House of Commons was elected. It wasn't elected in the democratic way that it is today. But it was elected by members of the gentry, largely across the country. It could be an unpredictable chamber. There were people developing different kinds of views of politics, different kinds of views of the power of the people, different kinds of views of political speech, of the relationship between the Parliament and the King. People therefore who were prepared to challenge James in some of his ideas of divine right, some of his ideas about mysteries of state being beyond their comprehension, in particular. People who are prepared to test the limits of free speech in Parliament.

PK: What were the possible areas of tension that James knew he had to navigate when he faced his first parliament?
AMcR: Well religion was a key one at the time that James took over. There was great uncertainty about the nature of the Church of England and the direction of the Church of England. The vision was actually not so much between Catholics and Protestants, but between different forces of Protestantism, different kinds of Protestantism, between people who became known as Puritans and people who might in future become known as Anglicans. But at the time there almost wasn't the language to distinguish these people. Foreign policy was another. Foreign policy was an area that James believed was his own, and yet the members of Parliament (for all sorts of good reasons) wanted to be involved in those kinds of discussions. And obviously money was another. Finance. To what extent would the Parliament agree to fund some of the policies that James wanted to bring in?
PK: What was at stake in James's first speech to Parliament?
AMcR: Well here he's establishing himself as an English king. He's committing himself to peace with Spain.
PK: Yes, because of course England was at war with Spain on James's succession.
AMcR: England had been a war throughout a lot the final years of Elizabeth's reign. And he was committed to bringing an end to this, and saw that this could transform the nation in terms of its fortunes as a peaceful trading nation. He wanted to position himself as a Protestant king. Obviously he's very well aware of the tensions that are opening up and that he's going to have to face over the months to come. But he's very much concerned to position himself as a Protestant King. And then there's the union question. He entered England with the assumption that, as the King of England and of Scotland, he would be the king of a new country. He started using the term Great Britain very very early in his reign. And yet he's also aware that there are all sorts of challenges to that idea: that England and Scotland have different legal systems, that England and Scotland have centuries behind them of tension and warfare. So he starts raising various arguments about why the two nations should be joined. He relies a lot on geography: the fact that this is the island of England and Scotland must be designed by God to be one country. He says: 'what God hath conjoined, then let no man separate'. And this a line from the marriage service of the time. So he's lifting that and using it in this new context. And then he says: 'I am the husband, and all the whole isle is my lawful wife. I am the head and it is my body. I am the Shepherd and it is my flock.'
PK: What do these metaphors say about his conception of kingship?
AMcR: I think if you look at that metaphor of him as a husband and the whole island as 'my lawful wife', there's a clear hierarchy there. This is a time, of course, when the man is the head and the woman is controlled by the by the man in marriage. And I think clearly he has this sense: that he is the head of this nation. And I think that's one reason why he saw that the two nations should be combined. If he is the king of both of them, they should easily form into one nation underneath him.
PK: And what about the notion of the King as shepherd?
AMcR: That's a biblical metaphor and again it's presenting him in a position of authority over the people.
PK: You mentioned that James was especially keen on uniting England and Scotland, going beyond a mere union of crowns that his accession effectively put in place. What were perhaps

the fears and anxieties that his English subjects harboured about the project of union?
AMcR: I think that the subjects were worried about legal issues. They were worried about cultural issues. I think James made some mistakes by bringing so many Scots town and surrounding himself with Scots at court. So that whipped up a degree of antagonism. Purely on a sort of personal, cultural level, people felt put out, important people felt put out, by the way that James set up the court in those early months and so some people started to worry about the kind of technical legal questions about what rights, say, Scottish citizens would have in England. And eventually it was these kinds of more technical questions that help to unravel the whole project over the subsequent years.
PK: What about the economy? Would the union have been to the advantage of the Scots or the English? Might it have brought economic prosperity to both countries?
AMcR: I think there was a fear among the English that the Scots would be a drain on their economy. It's hard to necessarily know what the reality would have been. But certainly that was the fear at the time: that Scotland was a poorer nation than England and stood to benefit from them.
PK: Were any advocates in England of union? Did James have allies among his new English subjects?
AMcR: Well there's certainly many people who were prepared to stand up and support the word of the king and support the policy of the king. People who thought that they might benefit from doing so. There was no shortage certainly in those early months of people who were prepared to argue the case of the king and present (again in celebratory ways) that model of Great Britain. The idea of Great Britain was quite powerful among poets and so among cartographers, right through actually. It survived longer than the actual policy survived.
PK: Does he allude to his own popularity? Does he say anything in the speech about his reception by his new subjects and also about the nature of his right to the throne?
AMcR: Yes he does. Now obviously he's not the best source of evidence for these things, but all the evidence that we do have is that he was very well received. A text describes his journey from Edinburgh down to London, and he was clearly welcomed wherever he went by his new subjects. That's not to say that there weren't plots against him in those early years, including of course the gunpowder plot of 1605. He wasn't universally welcomed, but I think he was very very widely welcomed, and he felt that, and he wanted to make that clear in that speech in 1604.

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