

**Sir William Blackstone,  
Commentaries on the Law of England  
in Four Books, Vol. 1[1753]**

Sir William Blackstone was born in England on 10th July 1723 and passed away on 14 February 1780 in his fifty seventh year.

William Searle Holdsworth, a successor of Sir William Blackstone and also Vinerian Professor is reputed to have said that "if the Commentaries had not been written when they were written, I think it very doubtful that [the United States], and other English speaking countries would have so universally adopted the [common] law".

The Commentaries are to this day cited in judicial decisions and were reprinted until after the Second World War.

**INTRODUCTION: OF THE STUDY OF NATURE AND EXTENT OF THE LAWS OF ENGLAND.**

**SECTION 1: ON THE STUDY OF THE LAW**

[Extract]

Yet farther; most gentlemen of considerable property, at some period or other in their lives, are ambitious of representing their country in parliament: and those, who are ambitious of receiving so high a trust, would also do well to remember its nature and importance. They are not thus honourably distinguished from the rest of their fellow-subjects, merely that they may privilege their persons, their estates, or their domestics; that they may list under party banners; may grant or withhold supplies; may vote with or vote against a popular or unpopular administration; but upon considerations far more interesting and important. They are the guardians of the English constitution; the makers, repealers, and interpreters of the English laws; delegated to watch, to check, and to avert every dangerous innovation, to propose, to adopt, and to cherish any solid and well-weighed improvement; bound by every tie of nature, of honour, and of religion, to transmit that constitution and those laws to posterity, amended if possible, at least without any derogation. And how unbecoming must it appear in a member of the legislature to vote for a new law, who is utterly ignorant of the old! what kind of interpretation can he be enabled to give, who is a stranger to the text upon which he comments!

Indeed it is perfectly amazing that there should be no other state of life, no other occupation, art, or science, in which some method of instruction is not looked upon as requisite, except only the science of legislation, the noblest and most difficult of any. Apprenticeships are held necessary to almost every art, commercial or mechanical: a long course of reading and study must form the divine, the physician, and the practical professor of the laws; but every man of superior fortune thinks himself *born* a legislator. Yet Tully was of a different opinion: "It is necessary," says he,(e) "for a senator to be

thoroughly acquainted with the constitution; and this,” he declares, “is a knowledge of the most extensive nature; a matter of science, of diligence, of reflection; without which no senator can possibly be fit for his office.”

The mischiefs that have arisen to the public from inconsiderate alterations in our laws, are too obvious to be called in question; and how far they have been owing to the defective education of our senators, is a point well worthy the public attention. The common law of England has fared like other venerable edifices of antiquity, which rash and unexperienced workmen have ventured to new-dress and refine, with all the rage of modern improvement. Hence frequently its symmetry has been destroyed, its proportions distorted, and its majestic simplicity exchanged for specious embellishments and fantastic novelties. For, to say the truth, almost all the perplexed questions, almost all the niceties, intricacies, and delays, (which have sometimes disgraced the English, as well as other courts of justice,) owe their original not to the common law itself, but to innovations that have been made in it by acts of parliament, “overladen (as Sir Edward Coke expresses it)(f) with provisoes and additions, and many times on a sudden penned or corrected by men of none or very little judgment in law.” This great and well-experienced judge declares, that in all his time he never knew two questions made upon rights merely depending upon the common law; and warmly laments the confusion introduced by ill-judging and unlearned legislators. “But if,” he subjoins, “acts of parliament were after the old fashion penned, by such only as perfectly knew what the common law was before the making of any act of parliament concerning that matter, as also how far forth former statutes had provided remedy for former mischiefs and defects discovered by experience; then should very few questions in law arise, and the learned should not so often and so much perplex their heads to make atonement and peace, by construction of law, between insensible and disagreeing words, sentences, and provisoes, as they now do.” And if this inconvenience was so heavily felt in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, you may judge how the evil is increased in later times, when the statute book is swelled to ten times a larger bulk, unless it should be found that the penners of our modern statutes have proportionably better informed themselves in the knowledge of the common law.

What is said of our gentlemen in general, and the propriety of their application to the study of the laws of their country, will hold equally strong or still stronger with regard to the nobility of this realm, except only in the article of serving upon juries. But, instead of this, they have several peculiar provinces of far greater consequence and concern; being not only by birth hereditary counsellors of the crown, and judges upon their honour of the lives of their brother-peers, but also arbiters of the property of all their fellow-subjects, and that in the last resort. In this their judicial capacity they are bound to decide the nicest and most critical points of the law: to examine and correct such errors as have escaped the most experienced sages of the profession, the lord keeper, and the judges of the courts at Westminster. Their sentence is final, decisive, irrevocable; no appeal, no correction, not even a review, can be had: and to their determination, whatever it be, the inferior courts of justice must conform; otherwise the rule of property would no longer be uniform and steady.

Should a judge in the most subordinate jurisdiction be deficient in the knowledge of the law, it would reflect infinite contempt upon himself, and disgrace upon those who employ him. And yet the consequence of his ignorance is comparatively very trifling and small: his judgment may be examined, and his errors rectified, by other courts. But how much more serious and affecting is the case of a superior judge, if without any skill in the laws he will boldly venture to decide a question upon which the welfare and subsistence of whole families may depend! where the chance of his judging right, or wrong, is barely equal; and where, if he chances to judge wrong, he does an injury of the most alarming nature, an injury without possibility of redress.

If man were to live in a state of nature, unconnected with other individuals, there would be no occasion for any other laws than the law of nature, and the law of God. Neither could any other law possibly exist: for a law always supposes some superior who is to make it; and, in a state of nature, we are all equal, without any other superior but Him who is the author of our being. But man was formed for society; and, as is demonstrated by the writers on this subject,(b) is neither capable of living alone, nor indeed has the courage to do it. However, as it is impossible for the whole race of mankind to be united in one great society, they must necessarily divide into many, and form separate states, commonwealths, and nations, entirely independent of each other, and yet liable to a mutual intercourse. Hence arises a third kind of law to regulate this mutual intercourse, called “the law of nations,” which, as none of these states will acknowledge a superiority in the other, cannot be dictated by any, but depends entirely upon the rules of natural law, or upon mutual compacts, treaties, leagues, and agreements between these several communities: in the construction also of which compacts we have no other rule to resort to, but the law of nature; being the only one to which all the communities are equally subject; and therefore the civil law(c) very justly observes, that *quod naturalis ratio inter omnes homines constituit, vocatur jus gentium.*7

Thus much I thought it necessary to premise concerning the law of nature, the revealed law, and the law of nations, before I proceeded to treat more fully of the principal subject of this section, municipal or civil law; that is, the rule by which particular districts; communities, or nations, are governed; being thus defined by Justinian,(d) “*jus civile est quod quisque sibi populus constituit.*” I call it *municipal* law, in compliance with common speech; for, though strictly that expression denotes the particular customs of one single *municipium* or free town, yet it may with sufficient propriety be applied to any one state or nation which is governed by the same laws and customs.

[Extract]

## **BOOK THE FIRST. Of the Rights of Persons.**

### **CHAPTER I.**

#### **OF THE ABSOLUTE RIGHTS OF INDIVIDUALS.**

Now, as municipal law is a rule of civil conduct, commanding what is right, and prohibiting what is wrong; or as Cicero,<sup>(a)</sup> and after him our Bracton,<sup>(b)</sup> have expressed it, *sanctio justa, jubens honesta et prohibens contraria*, it follows that the primary and principal object of the law are rights and wrongs. In the prosecution, therefore, of these commentaries, I shall follow this very simple and obvious division; and shall, in the first place, consider the *rights* that are commanded, and secondly the *wrongs* that are forbidden, by the laws of England.

Rights are, however, liable to another subdivision; being either, first, those which concern and are annexed to the persons of men, and are then called *jura personarum*, or the *rights of persons*; or they are, secondly, such as a man may acquire over external objects, or things unconnected with his person, which are styled *jura rerum*, or the *rights of things*. Wrongs also are divisible into, first, *private wrongs*, which, being an infringement merely of particular rights, concern individuals only, and are called civil injuries; and, secondly, *public wrongs*, which, being a breach of general and public rights, affect the whole community, and are called crimes and misdemeanors.

The objects of the laws of England falling into this fourfold division, the present commentaries will therefore consist of the four following parts: 1. *The rights of persons*, with the means whereby such rights may be either acquired or lost. 2. *The rights of things*, with the means also of acquiring or losing them. 3. *Private wrongs*, or civil injuries, with the means of redressing them by law. 4. *Public wrongs*, or crimes and misdemeanors, with the means of prevention and punishment.<sup>1</sup>

We are now first to consider the *rights of persons*, with the means of acquiring and losing them.

Now the rights of persons that are commanded to be observed by the municipal law are of two sorts: first, such as are due *from* every citizen, which are usually called civil *duties*; and, secondly, such as belong *to* him, which is the more popular acceptance of *rights* or *jura*. Both may indeed be comprised in this latter division; for, as all social duties are of a relative nature, at the same time that they are due *from* one man, or set of men, they must also be due *to* another. But I apprehend it will be more clear and easy to consider many of them as duties required from, rather than as rights belonging to, particular persons. Thus, for instance, allegiance is usually, and therefore most easily, considered as the duty of the people, and protection as the duty of the magistrate; and yet they are reciprocally the rights as well as duties of each other. Allegiance is the right of the magistrate, and protection the right of the people.

Persons also are divided by the law into either natural persons, or artificial. Natural persons are such as the God of nature formed us; artificial are such as are created and devised by human laws for the purposes of society and government, which are called corporations or bodies politic.

The rights of persons considered in their natural capacities are also of two sorts, absolute and relative. Absolute, which are such as appertain and belong to particular men, merely

as individuals or single persons: relative, which are incident to them as members of society, and standing in various relations to each other. The first, that is, absolute rights, will be the subject of the present chapter.

By the absolute *rights* of individuals, we mean those which are so in their primary and strictest sense; such as would belong to their persons merely in a state of nature, and which every man is entitled to enjoy, whether out of society or in it. But with regard to the absolute *duties*, which man is bound to perform considered as a mere individual, it is not to be expected that any human municipal law should at all explain or enforce them. For the end and intent of such laws being only to regulate the behaviour of mankind, as they are members of society, and stand in various relations to each other, they have consequently no concern with any other but social or relative duties. Let a man therefore be ever so abandoned in his principles, or vicious in his practice, provided he keeps his wickedness to himself, and does not offend against the rules of public decency, he is out of the reach of human laws. But if he makes his vices public, though they be such as seem principally to affect himself, (as drunkenness, or the like,) then they become, by the bad example they set, of pernicious effects to society; and therefore it is then the business of human laws to correct them. Here the circumstance of publication is what alters the nature of the case. *Public* sobriety is a relative duty, and therefore enjoined by our laws; *private* sobriety is an absolute duty, which, whether it be performed or not, human tribunals can never know; and therefore they can never enforce it by any civil sanction.<sup>2</sup> But, with respect to *rights*, the case is different Human laws define and enforce as well those rights which belong to a man considered as an individual, as those which belong to him considered as related to others.

For the principal aim of society is to protect individuals in the enjoyment of those absolute rights, which were vested in them by the immutable laws of nature, but which could not be preserved in peace without that mutual assistance and intercourse which is gained by the institution of friendly and social communities. Hence it follows, that the first and primary end of human laws is to maintain and regulate these *absolute rights of individuals*. Such rights as are social and *relative* result from, and are posterior to, the formation of states and societies: so that to maintain and regulate these is clearly a subsequent consideration. And, therefore, the principal view of human laws is, or ought always to be, to explain, protect, and enforce such rights as are absolute, which in themselves are few and simple: and then such rights as are relative, which, arising from a variety of connections, will be far more numerous and more complicated. These will take up a greater space in any code of laws, and hence may appear to be more attended to—though in reality they are not—than the rights of the former kind. Let us therefore proceed to examine how far all laws ought, and how far the laws of England actually do, take notice of these absolute rights, and provide for their lasting security.<sup>3</sup>

The absolute rights of man, considered as a free agent, endowed with discernment to know good from evil, and with power of choosing those measures which appear to him to be most desirable, are usually summed up in one general appellation, and denominated the natural liberty of mankind. This natural liberty consists properly in a power of acting as one thinks fit, without any restraint or control, unless by the law of nature; being a

right inherent in us by birth, and one of the gifts of God to man at his creation, when he endued him with the faculty of free will. But every man, when he enters into society, gives up a part of his natural liberty, as the price of so valuable a purchase; and, in consideration of receiving the advantages of mutual commerce, obliges himself to conform to those laws, which the community has thought proper to establish. And this species of legal obedience and conformity is infinitely more desirable than that wild and savage liberty which is sacrificed to obtain it. For no man that considers a moment would wish to retain the absolute and uncontrolled power of doing whatever he pleases: the consequence of which is, that every other man would also have the same power, and then there would be no security to individuals in any of the enjoyments of life. Political, therefore, or civil liberty, which is that of a member of society, is no other than natural liberty so far restrained by human laws (and no farther) as is necessary and expedient for the general advantage of the public.(c) Hence we may collect that the law, which restrains a man from doing mischief to his fellow-citizens, though it diminishes the natural, increases the civil liberty of mankind; but that every wanton and causeless restraint of the will of the subject, whether practised by a monarch, a nobility, or a popular assembly, is a degree of tyranny: nay, that even laws themselves, whether made with or without our consent, if they regulate and constrain our conduct in matters of more indifference, without any good end in view, are regulations destructive of liberty: whereas, if any public advantage can arise from observing such precepts, the control of our private inclinations, in one or two particular points, will conduce to preserve our general freedom in others of more importance; by supporting that state of society, which alone can secure our independence. Thus the statute of king Edward IV.,(d) which forbade the fine gentlemen of those times (under the degree of a lord) to wear pikes upon their shoes or boots of more than two inches in length, was a law that savoured of oppression; because, however ridiculous the fashion then in use might appear, the restraining it by pecuniary penalties could serve no purpose of common utility. But the statute of king Charles II.,(e)4 which prescribes a thing seemingly as indifferent, (a dress for the dead, who are all ordered to be buried in woollen,) is a law consistent with public liberty; for it encourages the staple trade, on which in great measure depends the universal good of the nation. So that laws, when prudently framed, are by no means subversive, but rather introductive, of liberty; for, as Mr. Locke has well observed,(f) where there is no law there is no freedom. But then, on the other hand, that constitution or frame of government, that system of laws, is alone calculated to maintain civil liberty, which leaves the subject entire master of his own conduct, except in those points wherein the public good requires some direction or restraint.<sup>5</sup>

The idea and practice of this political or civil liberty flourish in their highest vigour in these kingdoms, where it falls little short of perfection, and can only be lost or destroyed by the folly or demerits of its owner: the legislature, and of course the laws of England, being peculiarly adapted to the preservation of this inestimable blessing even in the meanest subject. Very different from the modern constitutions of other states, on the continent of Europe, and from the genius of the imperial law; which in general are calculated to vest an arbitrary and despotic power, of controlling the actions of the subject, in the prince, or in a few grandees. And this spirit of liberty is so deeply implanted in our constitution, and rooted even in our very soil, that a slave or a negro, the

moment he lands in England, falls under the protection of the laws, and so far becomes a freeman;(g) though the master's right to his service may *possibly* still continue.6

The absolute rights of every Englishman, (which, taken in a political and extensive sense, are usually called their liberties,) as they are founded on nature and reason, so they are coeval with our form of government; though subject at times to fluctuate and change: their establishment (excellent as it is) being still human. At some times we have seen them depressed by overbearing and tyrannical princes; at others so luxuriant as even to tend to anarchy, a worse state than tyranny itself, as any government is better than none at all.7 But the vigour of our free constitution has always delivered the nation from these embarrassments: and, as soon as the convulsions consequent on the struggle have been over, the balance of our rights and liberties has settled to its proper level; and their fundamental articles have been from time to time asserted in parliament, as often as they were thought to be in danger.8

First, by the great charter of liberties, which was obtained, sword in hand, from king John, and afterwards, with some alterations, confirmed in parliament by king Henry the Third, his son. Which charter contained very few new grants; but, as Sir Edward Coke(h) observes, was for the most part declaratory of the principal grounds of the fundamental laws of England. Afterwards by the statute called *confirmatio cartarum*,(i) whereby the great charter is directed to be allowed as the common law; all judgments contrary to it are declared void; copies of it are ordered to be sent to all cathedral churches, and read twice a year to the people; and sentence of excommunication is directed to be as constantly denounced against all those that, by word, deed, or counsel, act contrary thereto, or in any degree infringe it. Next, by a multitude of subsequent corroborating statutes, (Sir Edward Coke, I think, reckons thirty-two,)(k) from the first Edward to Henry the Fourth. Then, after a long interval, by *the petition of right*; which was a parliamentary declaration of the liberties of the people, assented to by king Charles the First in the beginning of his reign: which was closely followed by the still more ample concessions made by that unhappy prince to his parliament before the fatal rupture between them; and by the many salutary laws, particularly the *habeas corpus* act, passed under Charles the Second. To these succeeded *the bill of rights*, or declaration delivered by the lords and commons to the Prince and Princess of Orange, 13th of February, 1688; and afterwards enacted in parliament, when they became king and queen; which declaration concludes in these remarkable words:—"and they do claim, demand, and insist upon, all and singular the premises, as their undoubted rights and liberties." And the act of parliament itself(l) recognises "all and singular the rights and liberties asserted and claimed in the said declaration to be the true, ancient, and indubitable rights of the people of this kingdom." Lastly, these liberties were again asserted at the commencement of the present century, in *the act of settlement*,(m) whereby the crown was limited to his present majesty's illustrious house: and some new provisions were added, at the same fortunate era, for better securing our religion, laws, and liberties; which the statute declares to be "the birthright of the people of England," according to the ancient doctrine of the common law.(n)

Thus much for the *declaration* of our rights and liberties. The rights themselves, thus defined by these several statutes, consist in a number of private immunities; which will appear, from what has been premised, to be indeed no other, than either that *residuum* of natural liberty, which is not required by the laws of society to be sacrificed to public convenience; or else those civil privileges, which society hath engaged to provide, in lieu of the natural liberties so given up by individuals. These, therefore, were formerly, either by inheritance or purchase, the rights of all mankind; but, in most other countries of the world being now more or less debased and destroyed, they at present may be said to remain, in a peculiar and emphatical manner, the rights of the people of England. And these may be reduced to three principal or primary articles; the right of personal security, the right of personal liberty, and the right of private property: because, as there is no other known method of compulsion, or abridging man's natural free will, but by an infringement or diminution of one or other of these important rights, the preservation of these, inviolate, may justly be said to include the preservation of our civil immunities in their largest and most extensive sense.

I. The right of personal security consists in a person's legal and uninterrupted enjoyment of his life, his limbs, his body, his health, and his reputation.

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5. The security of his reputation or good name from the arts of detraction and slander, are rights to which every man is entitled by reason and natural justice; since, without these, it is impossible to have the perfect enjoyment of any other advantage or right. But these three last articles (being of much less importance than those which have gone before, and those which are yet to come,) it will suffice to have barely mentioned among the rights of persons: referring the more minute discussion of their several branches to those parts of our commentaries which treat of the infringement of these rights, under the head of personal wrongs.

II. Next to personal security, the law of England regards, asserts, and preserves the personal liberty of individuals. This personal liberty consists in the power of locomotion, of changing situation, or moving one's person to whatsoever place one's own inclination may direct, without imprisonment or restraint, unless by due course of law. Concerning which we may make the same observations as upon the preceding article, that it is a right strictly natural; that the laws of England have never abridged it without sufficient cause; and that, in this kingdom, it cannot ever be abridged at the mere discretion of the magistrate, without the explicit permission of the laws. Here again the language of the great charter(*i*) is, that no freeman shall be taken or imprisoned but by the lawful judgment of his equals, or by the law of the land.<sup>15</sup> And many subsequent old statutes(*j*) expressly direct, that no man shall be taken or imprisoned by suggestion or petition to the king or his council, unless it be by legal indictment, or the process of the common law. By the petition of right, 3 Car. I., it is enacted, that no freeman shall be imprisoned or detained without cause shown, to which he may make answer according to law. By 16 Car. 1. c. 10, if any person be restrained of his liberty by order or decree of any illegal court, or by command of the king's majesty in person, or by warrant of the council board,



or of any of the privy council, he shall, upon demand of his counsel, have a writ of *habeas corpus*, to bring his body before the court of king's bench or common pleas, who shall determine whether the cause of his commitment be just, and thereupon do as to justice shall appertain. And by 31 Car. II. c. 2, commonly called the *habeas corpus* act, the methods of obtaining this writ are so plainly pointed out and enforced, that, so long as this statute remains unimpeached, no subject of England can be long detained in prison, except in those cases in which the law requires and justifies such detainer.<sup>16</sup> And, lest this act should be evaded by demanding unreasonable bail or sureties for the prisoner's appearance, it is declared by 1 W. and M. st. 2, c. 2, that excessive bail ought not to be required.

Of great importance to the public is the preservation of this personal liberty; for if once it were left in the power of any the highest magistrate to imprison arbitrarily whomever he or his officers thought proper, (as in France it is daily practised by the crown,)(k) there would soon be an end of all other rights and immunities. Some have thought that unjust attacks, even upon life or property, at the arbitrary will of the magistrate, are less dangerous to the commonwealth than such as are made upon the personal liberty of the subject. To bereave a man of life, or by violence to confiscate his estate, without accusation or trial, would be so gross and notorious an act of despotism, as must at once convey the alarm of tyranny throughout the whole kingdom; but confinement of the person, by secretly hurrying him to jail, where his sufferings are unknown or forgotten, is a less public, a less striking, and therefore a more dangerous engine of arbitrary government. And yet sometimes, when the state is in real danger, even this may be a necessary measure. But the happiness of our constitution is, that it is not left to the executive power to determine when the danger of the state is so great as to render this measure expedient; for it is the parliament only, or legislative power, that, whenever it sees proper, can authorize the crown, by suspending the *habeas corpus* act for a short and limited time, to imprison suspected persons without giving any reason for so doing; as the senate of Rome was wont to have recourse to a dictator, a magistrate of absolute authority, when they judged the republic in any imminent danger. The decree of the senate, which usually preceded the nomination of this magistrate, "*dent operam consulēs ne quid respublica detrimenti capiat*," was called the *senatus consultum ultimae necessitatis*. In like manner this experiment ought only to be tried in cases of extreme emergency; and in these the nation parts with its liberty for a while, in order to preserve it forever.

The confinement of the person, in any wise, is an imprisonment; so that the keeping a man against his will in a private house, putting him in the stocks, arresting or forcibly detaining him in the street, is an imprisonment.(l) And the law so much discourages unlawful confinement, that if a man is under *duress of imprisonment*, which we before explained to mean a compulsion by an illegal restraint of liberty, until he seals a bond or the like, he may allege this duress, and avoid the extorted bond. But if a man be lawfully imprisoned, and, either to procure his discharge, or on any other fair account, seals a bond or a deed, this is not by duress of imprisonment, and he is not at liberty to avoid it.(m) To make imprisonment lawful, it must either be by process from the courts of judicature, or by warrant from some legal officer having authority to commit to prison;

which warrant must be in writing, under the hand and seal of the magistrate, and express the causes of the commitment, in order to be examined into, if necessary, upon a habeas corpus.17 If there be no cause expressed, the jailer is not bound to detain the prisoner;(n) for the law judges, in this respect, saith Sir Edward Coke, like Festus the Roman governor, that it is unreasonable to send a prisoner, and not to signify withal the crimes alleged.

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III. The third absolute right, inherent in every Englishman, is that of property: which consists in the free use, enjoyment, and disposal of all his acquisitions, without any control or diminution, save only by the laws of the land. The original of private property is probably founded in nature, as will be more fully explained in the second book of the ensuing commentaries: but certainly the modifications under which we at present find it, the method of conserving it in the present owner, and of translating it from man to man, are entirely derived from society; and are some of those civil advantages, in exchange for which every individual has resigned a part of his natural liberty. The laws of England are therefore, in point of honour and justice, extremely watchful in ascertaining and protecting this right. Upon this principle the great charter(*r*) has declared that no freeman shall be disseised, or divested, of his freehold, or of his liberties, or free customs, but by the judgment of his peers, or by the law of the land. And by a variety of ancient statutes(*s*) it is enacted, that no man's lands or goods shall be seized into the king's hands, against the great charter, and the law of the land; and that no man shall be disinherited, nor put out of his franchises or freehold, unless he be duly brought to answer, and be forejudged by course of law; and if any thing be done to the contrary, it shall be redressed, and holden for none.

So great moreover is the regard of the law for private property, that it will not authorize the least violation of it; no, not even for the general good of the whole community. If a new road, for instance, were to be made through the grounds of a private person, it might perhaps be extensively beneficial to the public; but the law permits no man, or set of men, to do this without consent of the owner of the land. In vain may it be urged, that the good of the individual ought to yield to that of the community; for it would be dangerous to allow any private man, or even any public tribunal, to be the judge of this common good, and to decide whether it be expedient or no. Besides, the public good is in nothing more essentially interested, than in the protection of every individual's private rights, as modelled by the municipal law. In this and similar cases the legislature alone can, and indeed frequently does, interpose, and compel the individual to acquiesce. But how does it interpose and compel? Not by absolutely stripping the subject of his property in an arbitrary manner; but by giving him a full indemnification and equivalent for the injury thereby sustained. The public is now considered as an individual, treating with an individual for an exchange. All that the legislature does is to oblige the owner to alienate his possessions for a reasonable price; and even this is an exertion of power, which the legislature indulges with caution, and which nothing but the legislature can perform.19

Nor is this the only instance in which the law of the land has postponed even public necessity to the sacred and inviolable rights of private property. For no subject of England can be constrained to pay any aids or taxes, even for the defence of the realm or the support of government, but such as are imposed by his own consent, or that of his representatives in parliament. By the statute 25 Edw. I. c. 5 and 6, it is provided, that the king shall not take any aids or tasks, but by the common assent of the realm. And what that common assent is, is more fully explained by 34 Edw. I. st. 4, c. 1, which(*t*) enacts that no talliage or aid shall be taken without the assent of the archbishops, bishops, earls, barons, knights, burgesses, and other freemen of the land: and again by 14 Edw. III. st. 2, c. 1, the prelates, earls, barons, and commons, citizens, burgesses, and merchants, shall not be charged to make any aid, if it be not by the common assent of the great men and commons in parliament. And as this fundamental law had been shamefully evaded under many succeeding princes, by compulsive loans, and benevolences extorted without a real and voluntary consent, it was made an article in the petition of right 3 Car. I., that no man shall be compelled to yield any gift, loan, or benevolence, tax, or such like charge without common consent by act of parliament. And, lastly, by the statute 1 W. and M. st. 2, c. 2, it is declared, that levying money for or to the use of the crown, by pretence of prerogative, without grant of parliament, or for longer time, or in other manner, than the same is or shall be granted, is illegal.

In the three preceding articles we have taken a short view of the principal absolute rights which appertain to every Englishman.<sup>20</sup> But in vain would these rights be declared, ascertained, and protected by the dead letter of the laws, if the constitution had provided no other method to secure their actual enjoyment. It has therefore established certain other auxiliary subordinate rights of the subject, which serve principally as outworks or barriers to protect and maintain inviolate the three great and primary rights, of personal security, personal liberty, and private property. These are,

1. The constitution, powers, and privileges of parliament; of which I shall treat at large in the ensuing chapter.

2. The limitation of the king's prerogative, by bounds so certain and notorious, that it is impossible he should either mistake or legally exceed them without the consent of the people. Of this, also, I shall treat in its proper place. The former of these keeps the legislative power in due health and vigour, so as to make it improbable that laws should be enacted destructive of general liberty: the latter is a guard upon the executive power by restraining it from acting either beyond or in contradiction to the laws, that are framed and established by the other.

3. A third subordinate right of every Englishman is that of applying to the courts of justice for redress of injuries. Since the law is in England the supreme arbiter of every man's life, liberty, and property, courts of justice must at all times be open to the subject, and the law be duly administered therein. The emphatical words of *magna carta*,(*u*) spoken in the person of the king, who in judgment of law (says Sir Edward Coke)(*w*) is ever present and repeating them in all his courts, are these; *nulli vendemus, nulli negabimus, aut differemus rectum vel justitiam*: "and therefore every subject," continues

the same learned author, “for injury done to him *in bonis, in terris, vel persona*, by any other subject, be he ecclesiastical or temporal, without any exception, may take his remedy by the course of the law, and have justice and right for the injury done to him, freely without sale, fully without any denial, and speedily without delay.” It were endless to enumerate all the *affirmative* acts of parliament, wherein justice is directed to be done according to the law of the land; and what that law is every subject knows, or may know, if he pleases; for it depends not upon the arbitrary will of any judge, but is permanent, fixed, and unchangeable, unless by authority of parliament. I shall, however, just mention a few *negative* statutes, whereby abuses, perversions, or delays of justice, especially by the prerogative, are restrained. It is ordained by *magna carta*,<sup>(x)</sup> that no freeman shall be outlawed, that is, put out of the protection and benefit of the laws, but according to the law of the land. By 2 Edw. III. c. 8, and 11 Ric. II. c. 10, it is enacted, that no commands or letters shall be sent under the great seal, or the little seal, the signet, or privy seal, in disturbance of the law; or to disturb or delay common right: and, though such commandments should come, the judges shall not cease to do right; which is also made a part of their oath by statute 18 Edw. III. st. 4. And by 1 W. and M. st. 2, c. 2, it is declared that the pretended power of suspending, or dispensing with laws, or the execution of laws, by regal authority, without consent of parliament, is illegal.

Not only the substantial part, or judicial decisions, of the law, but also the formal part, or method of proceeding, cannot be altered but by parliament; for, if once those outworks were demolished, there would be an inlet to all manner of innovation in the body of the law itself. The king, it is true, may erect new courts of justice; but then they must proceed according to the old-established forms of the common law. For which reason it is declared, in the statute 16 Car. I. c. 10, upon the dissolution of the court of starchamber, that neither his majesty, nor his privy council, have any jurisdiction, power, or authority, by English bill, petition, articles, libel, (which were the course of proceeding in the starchamber, borrowed from the civil law,) or by any other arbitrary way whatsoever, to examine, or draw into question, determine, or dispose of the lands or goods of any subjects of this kingdom; but that the same ought to be tried and determined in the ordinary courts of justice, and by *course of law*.

4. If there should happen any uncommon injury, or infringement of the rights before mentioned, which the ordinary course of law is too defective to reach, there still remains a fourth subordinate right, appertaining to every individual, namely, the right of petitioning the king, or either house of parliament, for the redress of grievances.<sup>21</sup> In Russia we are told<sup>(y)</sup> that the czar Peter established a law, that no subject might petition the throne till he had first petitioned two different ministers of state. In case he obtained justice from neither, he might then present a third petition to the prince; but upon pain of death, if found to be in the wrong: the consequence of which was, that no one dared to offer such third petition; and grievances seldom falling under the notice of the sovereign, he had little opportunity to redress them. The restrictions, for some there are, which are laid upon petitioning in England, are of a nature extremely different; and, while they promote the spirit of peace, they are no check upon that of liberty. Care only must be taken, lest, under the pretence of petitioning, the subject be guilty of any riot or tumult, as happened in the opening of the memorable parliament in 1640: and, to prevent this, it is

provided by the statute 13 Car. II. st. 1, c. 5, that no petition to the king, or either house of parliament, for any alteration in church or state, shall be signed by above twenty persons, unless the matter thereof be approved by three justices of the peace, or the major part of the grand jury<sup>22</sup> in the country; and in London by the lord mayor, aldermen, and common council: nor shall any petition be presented by more than ten persons at a time. But, under these regulations, it is declared by the statute 1 W. and M. st. 2, c. 2, that the subject hath a right to petition; and that all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal.

[Extract]

## CHAPTER II. OF THE PARLIAMENT.

It is highly necessary for preserving the balance of the constitution, that the executive power should be a branch, though not the whole, of the legislative. The total union of them, we have seen, would be productive of tyranny; the total disjunction of them, for the present, would in the end produce the same effects, by causing that union against which it seems to provide. The legislative would soon become tyrannical, by making continual encroachments, and gradually assuming to itself the rights of the executive power. Thus the long parliament of Charles the First, while it acted in a constitutional manner, with the royal concurrence, redressed many heavy grievances, and established many salutary laws. But when the two houses assumed the power of legislation, in exclusion of the royal authority, they soon after assumed likewise the reins of administration; and, in consequence of these united powers, overturned both church and state, and established a worse oppression than any they pretended to remedy. To hinder therefore any such encroachments, the king is himself a part of the parliament: and as this is the reason of his being so, very properly therefore the share of legislation, which the constitution has placed in the crown, consists in the power of *rejecting* rather than *resolving*; this being sufficient to answer the end proposed. For we may apply to the royal negative, in this instance, what Cicero observes of the negative of the Roman tribunes, that the crown has not any power of *doing* wrong, but merely of *preventing* wrong from being done.<sup>(q)</sup> The crown cannot begin of itself any alterations in the present established law; but it may approve or disapprove of the alterations suggested and consented to by the two houses.

The legislative therefore cannot abridge the executive power of any rights which it now has by law, without its own consent; since the law must perpetually stand as it now does, unless all the powers will agree to alter it. And herein indeed consists the true excellence of the English government, that all the parts of it form a mutual check upon each other. In the legislature, the people are a check upon the nobility, and the nobility a check upon the people, by the mutual privilege of rejecting what the other has resolved: while the king is a check upon both, which preserves the executive power from encroachments. And this very executive power is again checked and kept within due bounds by the two houses, through the privilege they have of inquiring into, impeaching, and punishing the conduct

(not indeed of the king,<sup>(r)</sup> which would destroy his constitutional independence; but, which is more beneficial to the public) of his evil and pernicious counsellors. Thus every branch of our civil polity supports and is supported, regulates and is regulated, by the rest: for the two houses naturally drawing in two directions of opposite interest, and the prerogative in another still different from them both, they mutually keep each other from exceeding their proper limits; while the whole is prevented from separation and artificially connected together by the mixed nature of the crown, which is a part of the legislative, and the sole executive magistrate. Like three distinct powers in mechanics, they jointly impel the machine of government in a direction different from what either, acting by itself, would have done; but at the same time in a direction partaking of each, and formed out of all; a direction which constitutes the true line of the liberty and happiness of the community.<sup>7</sup>

An act of parliament, thus made, is the exercise of the highest authority that this kingdom acknowledges upon earth. It hath power to bind every subject in the land, and the dominions thereunto belonging; nay, even the king himself, if particularly named therein. And it cannot be altered, amended, dispensed with, suspended, or repealed, but in the same forms, and by the same authority of parliament: for it is a maxim in law, that it requires the same strength to dissolve, as to create, an obligation. It is true it was formerly held, that the king might, in many cases, dispense with penal statutes:<sup>(n)</sup> but now, by statute 1 W. and M. st. 2, c. 2, it is declared that the suspending or dispensing with laws by regal authority, without consent of parliament, is illegal.

[Extract]

## **CHAPTER VII. OF THE KING'S PREROGATIVE.**

It was observed in a former chapter<sup>(a)</sup> that one of the principal bulwarks of civil liberty, or (in other words) of the British constitution, was the limitation of the king's prerogative by bounds so certain and notorious that it is impossible he should ever exceed them, without the consent of the people on the one hand; or without, on the other, a violation of that original contract which, in all states impliedly, and in ours most expressly, subsists between the prince and the subject. It will now be our business to consider this prerogative minutely; to demonstrate its necessity in general; and to mark out in the most important instances its particular extent and restrictions: from which considerations this conclusion will evidently follow, that the powers which are vested in the crown by the laws of England, are necessary for the support of society; and do not intrench any further on our *natural* liberties, than is expedient for the maintenance of our *civil*.<sup>1</sup>

There cannot be a stronger proof of that genuine freedom, which is the boast of this age and country, than the power of discussing and examining, with decency and respect, the limits of the king's prerogative; a topic, that in some former ages was thought too delicate and sacred to be profaned by the pen of a subject. It was ranked among the *arcana imperii*: and, like the mysteries of the *bona dea*, was not suffered to be pried into by any

but such as were initiated in its service: because perhaps the exertion of the one, like the solemnities of the other, would not bear the inspection of a rational and sober inquiry.

.....

But, whatever might be the sentiments of some of our princes, this was never the language of our ancient constitution and laws. The limitation of the regal authority was a first and essential principle in all the Gothic systems of government established in Europe; though gradually driven out and overborne, by violence and chicane, in most of the kingdoms on the continent. We have seen, in the preceding chapter, the sentiments of Bracton and Fortescue, at the distance of two centuries from each other. And Sir Henry Finch, under Charles the First, after the lapse of two centuries more, though he lays down the law of prerogative in very strong and emphatical terms, yet qualifies it with a general restriction, in regard to the liberties of the people. "The king hath a prerogative in all things, that are not injurious to the subject; for in them all it must be remembered, that the king's prerogative stretcheth not to the doing of any wrong."<sup>(e)</sup> *Nihil enim aliud potest rex, nisi id solum quod de jure potest.*<sup>(f)</sup> And here it may be some satisfaction to remark, how widely the civil law differs from our own, with regard to the authority of the laws over the prince, or (as a civilian would rather have expressed it) the authority of the prince over the laws. It is a maxim of the English law, as we have seen from Bracton, that "*rex debet esse sub lege, quia lex facit regem.*" the imperial law will tell us, that, "*in omnibus, imperatoris excipitur fortuna; cui ipsas leges Deus subjecit.*"<sup>(g)</sup> We shall not long hesitate to which of them to give the preference, as most conducive to those ends for which societies were framed, and are kept together; especially as the Roman lawyers themselves seem to be sensible of the unreasonableness of their own constitution. "*Decet tamen principem,*" says Paulus, "*servare leges, quibus ipse solutus est.*"<sup>(h)</sup> This is at once laying down the principle of despotic power, and at the same time acknowledging its absurdity.

By the word prerogative we usually understand that special pre-eminence, which the king hath over and above all other persons, and out of the ordinary course of the common law, in right of his regal dignity. It signifies, in its etymology, (from *præ* and *rogo*,) something that is required or demanded before, or in preference to, all others. And hence it follows, that it must be in its nature singular and eccentric; that it can only be applied to those rights and capacities which the king enjoys alone, in contradistinction to others, and not to those which he enjoys in common with any of his subjects: for if once any one prerogative of the crown could be held in common with the subject, it would cease to be prerogative any longer. And therefore Finch<sup>(i)</sup> lays it down as a maxim, that the prerogative is that law in case of the king, which is law in no case of the subject.

Prerogatives are either *direct* or *incidental*. The *direct* are such positive substantial parts of the royal character and authority, as are rooted in and spring from the king's political person, considered merely by itself, without reference to any other extrinsic circumstance; as, the right of sending ambassadors, of creating peers, and of making war or peace. But such prerogatives as are *incidental* bear always a relation to something else, distinct from the king's person; and are indeed only exceptions, in favour of the crown, to

those general rules that are established for the rest of the community; such as, that no costs shall be recovered against the king; that the king can never be a joint-tenant; and that his debt shall be preferred before a debt to any of his subjects. These, and an infinite number of other instances, will better be understood, when we come regularly to consider the rules themselves, to which these incidental prerogatives are exceptions. And therefore we will at present only dwell upon the king's substantive or direct prerogatives.

These substantive or direct prerogatives may again be divided into three kinds: being such as regard, first, the king's royal *character*; secondly, his royal *authority*; and, lastly, his royal *income*. These are necessary, to secure reverence to his person, obedience to his commands, and an affluent supply for the ordinary expenses of government; without all of which it is impossible to maintain the executive power in due independence and vigour. Yet, in every branch of this large and extensive dominion, our free constitution has interposed such seasonable checks and restrictions, as may curb it from trampling on those liberties which it was meant to secure and establish. The enormous weight of prerogative, if left to itself, (as in arbitrary governments it is,) spreads havoc and destruction among all the inferior movements: but, when balanced and regulated (as with us) by its proper counterpoise, timely and judiciously applied, its operations are then equable and certain, it invigorates the whole machine, and enables every part to answer the end of its construction.

Are then, it may be asked, the subjects of England totally destitute of remedy, in case the crown should invade their rights, either by private injuries, or public oppressions? To this we may answer, that the law has provided a remedy in both cases.

And, first, as to private injuries: if any person has, in point of property, a just demand upon the king, he must petition him in his court of chancery, where his chancellor will administer right as a matter of grace, though not upon compulsion.<sup>(q)</sup>4 And this is entirely consonant to what is laid down by the writers on natural law. "A subject," says Puffendorf,<sup>(r)</sup> "so long as he continues a subject, hath no way to *oblige* his prince to give him his due, when he refuses it; though no wise prince will ever refuse to stand to a lawful contract. And if the prince gives the subject leave to enter an action against him, upon such contract, in his own courts, the action itself proceeds rather upon natural equity than upon the municipal laws." For the end of such action is not to *compel* the prince to observe the contract, but to *persuade* him. And, as to personal wrongs, it is well observed by Mr. Locke,<sup>(s)</sup> "the harm which the sovereign can do in his own person not being likely to happen often, nor to extend itself far; nor being able by his single strength to subvert the laws, nor oppress the body of the people, (should any prince have so much weakness and ill nature as to endeavour to do it,) the inconveniency therefore of some particular mischiefs that may happen sometimes, when a heady prince comes to the throne, are well recompensed by the peace of the public and security of the government, in the person of the chief magistrate being thus set out of the reach of danger."

Next, as to cases of ordinary public oppression, where the vitals of the constitution are not attacked, the law hath also assigned a remedy. For, as the king cannot misuse his power, without the advice of evil counsellors, and the assistance of wicked ministers,



these men may be examined and punished. The constitution has therefore provided, by means of indictments and parliamentary impeachments, that no man shall dare to assist the crown in contradiction to the laws of the land. But it is at the same time a maxim in those laws, that the king himself can do no wrong: since it would be a great weakness and absurdity in any system of positive law to define any possible wrong, without any possible redress.

For, as to such public oppressions as tend to dissolve the constitution and subvert the fundamentals of government, they are cases which the law will not, out of decency, suppose; being incapable of distrusting those whom it has invested with any part of the supreme power; since such distrust would render the exercise of that power precarious and impracticable.<sup>(t)</sup> For, wherever the law expresses its distrust of abuse of power, it always vests a superior coercive authority in some other hand to correct it; the very notion of which destroys the idea of sovereignty. If therefore, for example, the two houses of parliament, or either of them, had avowedly a right to animadvert on the king, or each other, or if the king had a right to animadvert on either of the houses, that branch of the legislature, so subject to animadversion, would cease to be part of the supreme power; the balance of the constitution would be overturned, and that branch or branches, in which this jurisdiction resided, would be completely sovereign. The supposition of *law* therefore is, that neither the king nor either house of parliament, collectively taken, is capable of doing any wrong: since in such cases the law feels itself incapable of furnishing any adequate remedy. For which reason all oppression which may happen to spring from any branch of the sovereign power, must necessarily be out of the reach of any stated rule, or express legal provision; but if ever they unfortunately happen, the prudence of the times must provide new remedies upon new emergencies.

Indeed, it is found by experience, that whenever the unconstitutional oppressions, even of the sovereign power, advance with gigantic strides, and threaten desolation to a state, mankind will not be reasoned out of the feelings of humanity; nor will sacrifice their liberty by a scrupulous adherence to those political maxims which were originally established to preserve it. And therefore, though the positive laws are silent, experience will furnish us with a very remarkable case wherein nature and reason prevailed. When king James the Second invaded the fundamental constitution of the realm, the convention declared an abdication, whereby the throne was rendered vacant, which induced a new settlement of the crown. And so far as the precedent leads, and no further, we may now be allowed to lay down the *law* of redress against public oppression. If, therefore, any future prince should endeavour to subvert the constitution by breaking the original contract between king and people, should violate the fundamental laws, and should withdraw himself out of the kingdom; we are now authorized to declare that this conjunction of circumstances would amount to an abdication, and the throne would be thereby vacant. But it is not for us to say that any one, or two, of these ingredients would amount to such a situation; for there our precedent would fail us. In these, therefore, or other circumstances, which a fertile imagination may furnish, since both law and history are silent, it becomes us to be silent too; leaving to future generations, whenever necessity and the safety of the whole shall require it, the exertion of those inherent,

though latent, powers of society, which no climate, no time, no constitution, no contract, can ever destroy or diminish.

Besides the attribute of sovereignty, the law also ascribes to the king, in his political capacity, absolute *perfection*. The king can do no wrong: which ancient and fundamental maxim is not to be understood, as if every thing transacted by the government was of course just and lawful, but means only two things. First, that whatever is exceptionable in the conduct of public affairs, is not to be imputed to the king, nor is he answerable for it personally to his people; for this doctrine would totally destroy that constitutional independence of the crown, which is necessary for the balance of power in our free and active, and therefore compounded, constitution. And, secondly, it means that the prerogative of the crown extends not to any injury: it is created for the benefit of the people, and therefore cannot be exerted to their prejudice.(u)5

The king, moreover, is not only incapable of *doing* wrong, but even of *thinking* wrong: he can never mean to do an improper thing: in him is no folly or weakness. And, therefore, if the crown should be induced to grant any franchise or privilege to a subject contrary to reason, or in any wise prejudicial to the commonwealth, or a private person, the law will not suppose the king to have meant either an unwise or an injurious action, but declares that the king was deceived in his grant; and thereupon such grant is rendered void, merely upon the foundation of fraud and deception, either by or upon those agents whom the crown has thought proper to employ. For the law will not cast an imputation on that magistrate whom it intrusts with the executive power, as if he was capable of intentionally disregarding his trust; but attributes to mere imposition (to which the most perfect of sublunary beings must still continue liable) those little inadvertencies, which, if charged on the will of the prince, might lessen him in the eyes of his subjects.

Yet still, notwithstanding this personal perfection, which the law attributes to the sovereign, the sovereign, the constitution has allowed a latitude of supposing the contrary, in respect to both houses of parliament, each of which, in its turn, hath exerted the right of remonstrating and complaining to the king even of those acts of royalty, which are most properly and personally his own; such as messages signed by himself, and speeches delivered from the throne. And yet, such is the reverence which is paid to the royal person, that though the two houses have an undoubted right to consider these acts of state in any light whatever, and accordingly treat them in their addresses as personally proceeding from the prince, yet among themselves, (to preserve the more perfect decency, and for the greater freedom of debate,) they usually suppose them to flow from the advice of the administration. But the privilege of canvassing thus freely the personal acts of the sovereign (either directly or even through the medium of his reputed advisers) belongs to no individual, but is consigned to those august assemblies; and there too the objections must be proposed with the utmost respect and deference. One member was sent to the tower(v) for suggesting that his majesty's answer to the address of the commons contained "high words to fright the members out of their duty;" and another,(w) for saying that a part of the king's speech "seemed rather to be calculated for the meridian of Germany than Great Britain, and that the king was a stranger to our language and constitution."

## CHAPTER XVIII. OF CORPORATIONS.

[Extract]

We have hitherto considered persons in their natural capacities, and have treated of their rights and duties. But, as all personal rights die with the person; and, as the necessary forms of investing a series of individuals, one after another, with the same identical rights, would be very inconvenient, if not impracticable; it has been found necessary, when it is for the advantage of the public to have any particular rights kept on foot and continued, to constitute artificial persons, who may maintain a perpetual succession, and enjoy a kind of legal immortality.

These artificial persons are called bodies politic, bodies corporate, (*corpora corporata*.) or corporations: of which there is a great variety subsisting, for the advancement of religion, of learning, and of commerce; in order to preserve entire and forever those rights and immunities, which, if they were granted only to those individuals of which the body corporate is composed, would upon their death be utterly lost and extinct. To show the advantages of these incorporations, let us consider the case of a college in either of our universities, founded *ad studendum et orandum*, for the encouragement and support of religion and learning. If this were a mere voluntary assembly, the individuals which compose it might indeed read, pray, study, and perform scholastic exercises together, so long as they could agree to do so: but they could neither frame, nor receive, any laws or rules of their conduct; none, at least, which would have any binding force, for want of a coercive power to create a sufficient obligation. Neither could they be capable of retaining any privileges or immunities: for, if such privileges be attacked, which of all this unconnected assembly has the right, or ability, to defend them? And, when they are dispersed by death or otherwise, how shall they transfer these advantages to another set of students, equally unconnected as themselves? So also, with regard to holding estates or other property, if land be granted for the purposes of religion or learning to twenty individuals not incorporated, there is no legal way of continuing the property to any other persons for the same purposes, but by endless conveyances from one to the other, as often as the hands are changed. But when they are consolidated and united into a corporation, they and their successors are then considered as one person in law: as one person, they have one will, which is collected from the sense of the majority of the individuals: this one will may establish rules and orders for the regulation of the whole, which are a sort of municipal laws of this little republic; or rules and statutes may be prescribed to it at its creation, which are then in the place of natural laws: the privileges and immunities, the estates and possessions, of the corporation, when once vested in them, will be forever vested, without any new conveyance to new successions; for all the individual members that have existed from the foundation to the present time, or that shall ever hereafter exist, are but one person in law, a person that never dies: in like manner as the river Thames is still the same river, though the parts which compose it are changing every instant.

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Before we proceed to treat of the several incidents of corporations, as regarded by the laws of England, let us first take a view of the several sorts of them; and then we shall be better enabled to apprehend their respective qualities.<sup>1</sup>

The first division of corporations is into *aggregate* and *sole*. Corporations aggregate consist of many persons united together into one society, and are kept up by a perpetual succession of members, so as to continue forever; of which kind are the mayor and commonalty of a city, the head and fellows of a college, the dean and chapter of a cathedral church. Corporations sole consist of one person only and his successors, in some particular station, who are incorporated by law, in order to give them some legal capacities and advantages, particularly that of perpetuity, which in their natural persons they could not have had. In this sense, the king is a sole corporation;

When a corporation is erected, a name must be given to it; and by that name alone it must sue, and be sued, and do all legal acts; though a very minute variation therein is not material.<sup>(v)</sup> Such name is the very being of its constitution; and, though it is the will of the king that erects the corporation, yet the name is the knot of its combination, without which it could not perform its corporate functions.<sup>(w)</sup> The name of incorporation, says Sir Edward Coke, is as a proper name, or name of baptism; and therefore when a private founder gives his college or hospital a name, he does it only as a godfather, and by that same name the king baptizes the incorporation.<sup>(x)</sup><sup>4</sup>

II. After a corporation is so formed and named, it acquires many powers, rights, capacities, and incapacities, which we are next to consider. Some of these are necessarily and inseparably incident to every corporation; which incidents, as soon as a corporation is duly erected, are tacitly annexed, of course.<sup>(y)</sup><sup>5</sup> As, 1. To have perpetual succession. This is the very end of its incorporation: for there cannot be a succession forever without an incorporation;<sup>(z)</sup> and therefore all aggregate corporations have a power necessarily implied of electing members in the room of such as go off.<sup>(a)</sup> 2. To sue or be sued, implead or be impleaded, grant or receive, by its corporate name, and do all other acts as natural persons may. 3. To purchase lands, and hold them, for the benefit of themselves and their successors; which two are consequential to the former.<sup>6</sup> 4. To have a common seal. For a corporation, being an invisible body, cannot manifest its intentions by any personal act or oral discourse: it therefore acts and speaks only by its common seal. For, though the particular members may express their private consent to any acts, by words, or signing their names, yet this does not bind the corporation: it is the fixing of the seal, and that only, which unites the several assents of the individuals who compose the community, and makes one joint assent of the whole.<sup>(b)</sup><sup>7</sup> 5. To make by-laws or private statutes for the better government of the corporation; which are binding upon themselves, unless contrary to the laws of the land, and then they are void.<sup>8</sup> This is also included by law in the very act of incorporation:<sup>(c)</sup> for, as natural reason is given to the natural body for the governing it, so by-laws or statutes are a sort of political reason to govern the body politic. And this right of making by-laws for their own government, not contrary to the law of the land, was allowed by the law of the twelve tables at Rome.<sup>(d)</sup> But no trading company is with us allowed to make by-laws which may affect the king's prerogative, or the common profit of the people, under penalty of 40*l.*, unless they be

approved by the chancellor, treasurer, and chief justices, or the judges of assize in their circuits; and, even though they be so approved, still, if contrary to law, they are void.(e)

These five powers are inseparably incident to every corporation, at least to every corporation *aggregate*; for two of them, though they may be practised, yet are very unnecessary to a corporation *sole*, viz. to have a corporate seal to testify his sole assent, and to make statutes for the regulation of his own conduct.

There are also certain privileges and disabilities that attend an aggregate corporation, and are not applicable to such as are sole; the reason of them ceasing, and of course the law. It must always appear by attorney,<sup>9</sup> for it cannot appear in person, being, as Sir Edward Coke says,(f) invisible, and existing only in intendment and consideration of law.<sup>10</sup> It can neither maintain, nor be made defendant to, an action of battery or such like personal injuries; for a corporation can neither beat, nor be beaten, in its body politic.(g) A corporation cannot commit treason, or felony, or other crime, in its corporate capacity:(h) though its members may, in their distinct individual capacities.(i)<sup>11</sup> Neither is it capable of suffering a traitor's or felon's punishment, for it is not liable to corporal penalties, nor to attainder, forfeiture, or corruption of blood. It cannot be executor or administrator, or perform any personal duties; for it cannot take an oath for the due execution of the office.

It cannot be seized of lands to the use of another;(j) for such kind of confidence is foreign to the end of its institution.<sup>12</sup> Neither can it be committed to prison;(k) for, its existence being ideal, no man can apprehend or arrest it. And therefore, also, it cannot be outlawed; for outlawry always supposes a precedent right of arresting, which has been defeated by the parties absconding, and that also a corporation cannot do: for which reasons the proceedings to compel a corporation to appear to any suit by attorney are always by distress on their lands and goods.(l) Neither can a corporation be excommunicated: for it has no soul, as is gravely observed by Sir Edward Coke;(m) and therefore also it is not liable to be summoned into the ecclesiastical courts upon any account; for those courts act only *pro salute animæ*, and their sentences can only be enforced by spiritual censures: a consideration which, carried to its full extent, would alone demonstrate the impropriety of these courts interfering in any temporal rights whatsoever.

There are also other incidents and powers which belong to some sort of corporations, and not to others. An aggregate corporation may take goods and chattels for the benefit of themselves and their successors, but a sole corporation cannot:(n) for such movable property is liable to be lost or embezzled, and would raise a multitude of disputes between the successor and executor, which the law is careful to avoid.....

We before observed, that it was incident to every corporation to have a capacity to purchase lands for themselves and successors: and this is regularly true at the common law.(t) But they are excepted out of the statute of wills:(u) so that no devise of lands to a corporation by will is good, except for charitable uses, by statute 43 Eliz. c. 4;(w) which exception is again greatly narrowed by the statute 9 Geo. II. c. 36. And also, by a great variety of statutes,(x) their privilege even of purchasing from any living grantor is much abridged: so that now a corporation, either ecclesiastical or lay, must have a license from

the king to purchase,(y) before they can exert that capacity which is vested in them by the common law: nor is even this in all cases sufficient. These statutes are generally called the statutes of *mortmain*; all purchases made by corporate bodies being said to be purchases in *mortmain*, *in mortua manu*: for the reason of which appellation Sir Edward Coke(z) offers many conjectures; but there is one which seems more probable than any that he has given us; viz. that these purchases being usually made by ecclesiastical bodies, the members of which (being professed) were reckoned dead persons in law, land therefore holden by them might with great propriety be said to be held *in mortua manu*.

.....

The general *duties* of all bodies politic, considered in their corporate capacity, may, like those of natural persons, be reduced to this single one, that of acting up to the end or design, whatever it be, for which they were created by their founder.

I know it is generally said, that civil corporations are subject to no visitation, but merely to the common law of the land; and this shall be presently explained. But first, as I have laid it down as a rule that the founder, his heirs or assigns, are the visitors of all lay corporations, let us inquire what is meant by the *founder*. The founder of all corporations, in the strictest and original sense, is the king alone, for he only can incorporate a society; and in civil incorporations, such as a mayor and commonalty, &c., where there are no possessions or endowments given to the body, there is no other founder but the king;

.....

The king being thus constituted by law visitor of all civil corporations, the law has also appointed the place wherein he shall exercise this jurisdiction: which is the court of King's Bench; where, and where only, all misbehaviours of this kind of corporations are inquired into and redressed, and all their controversies decided. And this is what I understand to be the meaning of our lawyers when they say that these civil corporations are liable to no visitation; that is, that the law having by immemorial usage appointed them to be visited and inspected by the king their founder, in his majesty's court of King's Bench, according to the rules of the common law, they ought not to be visited elsewhere, or by any other authority

.....

IV. We come now, in the last place, to consider how corporations may be dissolved. Any particular member may be disfranchised, or lose his place in the corporation, by acting contrary to the laws of the society, or the laws of the land; or he may resign it by his own voluntary act.(k)20 But the body politic may also itself be dissolved in several ways, which dissolution is the civil death of the corporation; and in this case their lands and tenements shall revert to the person, or his heirs, who granted them to the corporation: for the law doth annex a condition to every such grant, that, if the corporation be dissolved, the grantor shall have the lands again, because the cause of the grant faileth.(l)21 The grant is, indeed, only during the life of the corporation; which *may* endure forever: but,

when that life is determined by the dissolution of the body politic, the grantor takes it back by reversion, as in the case of every other grant for life.<sup>22</sup> The debts of a corporation, either to or from it, are totally extinguished by its dissolution; so that the members thereof cannot recover, or be charged with them, in their natural capacities:<sup>(m)</sup><sup>23</sup> agreeable to that maxim of the civil law, “*si quid universitati debetur, singulis non debetur; nec, quod debet universitas, singuli debent.*”<sup>(n)</sup>

A corporation may be dissolved, 1. By act of parliament, which is boundless in its operations.<sup>24</sup> 2. By the natural death of all its members, in case of an aggregate corporation.<sup>25</sup> 3. By surrender of its franchises into the hands of the king, which is a kind of suicide. 4. By forfeiture of its charter, through negligence or abuse of its franchises; in which case the law judges that the body politic has broken the condition upon which it was incorporated, and thereupon the incorporation is void.<sup>26</sup> And the regular course is to bring an information in nature of a writ of *quo warranto*, to inquire by what warrant the members now exercise their corporate power, having forfeited it by such and such proceedings. The exertion of this act of law, for the purposes of the state, in the reigns of king Charles and king James the Second, particularly by seizing the charter of the city of London, gave great and just offence; though perhaps, in strictness of law, the proceedings in most of them were sufficiently regular: but the judgment against that of London was reversed by act of parliament<sup>(o)</sup> after the revolution; and by the same statute it is enacted, that the franchises of the city of London shall never more be forfeited for any cause whatsoever. And because, by the common law, corporations were dissolved, in case the mayor or head officer was not duly elected on the day appointed in the charter, or established by prescription, it is now provided,<sup>(p)</sup> that for the future no corporation shall be dissolved upon that account; and ample directions are given for appointing a new officer in case there be no election, or a void one, made upon the prescriptive or charter day.<sup>27</sup>

