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## THE BOLINGBROKEAN CONSTITUTIONAL ARGUMENT IN JOHN ADAMS'S 1766 CLARENDON LETTER

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**A**s part of the debate over the constitutionality of the Stamp Act(<https://allthingsliberty.com/2014/07/the-stamp-act-a-brief-history/>), John Adams wrote a series of letter to the *Boston Gazette* discussing the nature and duties of the British government. He signed these letters "Clarendon" rather than using his own name.<sup>[1]</sup> In his January 27, 1766 "Clarendon" letter Adams penned this line:

Were I to define the British constitution, therefore, I should say, it is a limited monarchy, or a mixture of the three forms of government commonly known in the schools, reserving as much of the *monarchial splendor, the aristocratical independency, and the democratical freedom* , as are necessary, that each of these powers may have a controul both in legislation and execution, over the other two, for the preservation of the subjects liberty.<sup>[2]</sup>

This definition is basically a Bolingbrokean one. We can see this in Henry St John, 1st Viscount Bolingbroke's *A Sketch of the History and State of Europe*, which is a part of Bolingbroke's *Letters on the Study of History* (printed privately before Bolingbroke's death and formally published in 1752):

Few know, and scarce any respect, the British constitution: that of the Church has been long since derided; that of the State as long neglected; and both have been left at the mercy of the men in power, whoever those men were.

Thus the Church, at least the hierarchy, however sacred in its origin or wise in its institution, is become an useless burden on the State; and the State is become, under ancient and known forms, a new and undefinable

monster; composed of a king without monarchical splendor, a senate of nobles without aristocratical independency,<sup>[3]</sup> and a senate of commons without democratical freedom .<sup>[4]</sup>



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It is evident that John Adams directly borrowed from Bolingbroke in his January 1766 letter. The logic of referring to, or alluding to, Bolingbroke in this "Clarendon" letter is also quite clear: they were linked. As pointed out by Zoltan Haraszti, "The *Study and Use of History*, Bolingbroke's first work after he settled at Chanteloup, consists of eight letters addressed to Lord Cornbury, the later Baron Hyde, great-grandson of Clarendon . The young lord . . . remained all his life a great admirer of Bolingbroke."<sup>[5]</sup>

Not only the striking textual similarity is there, we also have other evidence to prove that Adams was extremely familiar with this Bolingbroke work. In Adams's April 29, 1780 letter to Edme Jacques Genet, he specifically cited another paragraph from Bolingbroke's *A Sketch of the History and State of Europe*,<sup>[6]</sup> and in the same day, he also paraphrased this exact same paragraph and sent it to Edmund Jenings.<sup>[7]</sup> Also, the timing is right: as early as March 1756 (approximately a decade earlier than his 1766 Clarendon letter), John Adams had already started to read Bolingbroke's writings.<sup>[8]</sup>

It is well-known that Adams once wrote of Bolingbroke's *Dissertation upon Parties* as "this is a jewel, there is nothing so profound, correct, and perfect on the subject of government, in the English or any other language."<sup>[9]</sup> Long ago Zoltan Haraszti showed us that "Bolingbroke was no passing interest with John Adams."<sup>[10]</sup> Recently, R. B. Bernstein once again correctly pointed out: "Adams had studied Bolingbroke's writings with care and sympathy."<sup>[11]</sup> According to Richard Alan Ryerson, "Adams read Bolingbroke over a longer period, some fifty-five years, than any other author, and he read him closely . . . Yet Bolingbroke's impact upon Adams is somewhat ambiguous . . . looking back over nearly fifty years, he doubted that Bolingbroke had much influence on his political thought."<sup>[12]</sup> Ryerson then cited a paragraph from Adams's 1804 Autobiography:

I read him through, before the Year 1758 and . . . I have read him through at least twice since that time: But I confess without much good or harm. His Ideas of the English Constitution are correct and his Political Writings are worth something: but in a great part of them there is more of Faction than of Truth: His Religion is a pompous Folly: and his Abuse of the Christian Religion is as superficial as it is impious. His Style is original and inimitable: it resembles more the oratory of the Ancients, than any Writings or Speeches I ever read in English.

Adams was clearly influenced by Bolingbroke, but the part he was influenced by basically surrounded the interpretation of "the

English Constitution,” and Bolingbroke indeed displayed a nice, original style in constructing his interpretation. By the same token, in a February 1767 writing, Adams explicitly talked about “my Ld. Bolingbroke” as “whose knowledge of the constitution will not be disputed, whatever may be justly said of his religion, and his morals.”<sup>[13]</sup> From here, we can also say that although Adams was famous for worrying about oligarchy and their harmful political dominance,<sup>[14]</sup> he nevertheless still recognized, at least to a certain extent, the possible theoretical advantages provided by the so-called “aristocratical independency.”

In terms of their diagnosis of the aristocracy, John Adams largely followed Bolingbroke. Adams once explicitly quoted Bolingbroke, announcing that aristocratic men could be “the guardian angels of the country . . . studious to avert the most distant evil, and to procure peace, plenty, and the greatest of human blessings, Liberty.” But the very same group of men could also appear in public life as “the instruments of Divine vengeance,” creating “desolation and oppression, poverty and servitude.”<sup>[15]</sup>

This suggests what exactly Adams meant when he talked about a plan to “ostracize” aristocrats into a different chamber (namely, the Senate). Usually, scholars consider this as a perfect representation of Adams’s deep “fear of aristocratic tyranny,” but perhaps we can also look at this from a more Bolingbrokean angle: to ostracize “aristocrats” into a different chamber might be simultaneously conducive not only to maintaining, but also further fostering, their “independency.”<sup>[16]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup>For basic information on this Adams writing, see [www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-06-01-02-0063-0001](http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-06-01-02-0063-0001) (<http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-06-01-02-0063-0001>); see also Anne Burleigh, *John Adams* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2017), 75–76; Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 50–51.



(<https://allthingsliberty.com/2017/03/100-best-american-revolution-books-time/>)

<sup>[2]</sup>*The Adams Papers, Papers of John Adams*, vol. 1, September 1755 – October 1773, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 164–170. See also [press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch17s12.html](https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch17s12.html) (<https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch17s12.html>).

<sup>[3]</sup>As pointed out by Isaac Kramnick, “for both Aristotle and Bolingbroke independence was equated with the possession of real property and dependence with its absence. For this reason money men were the natural servants of the landed political masters.” Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 79–80.

<sup>[4]</sup>Henry St. John Bolingbroke (Viscount), *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (London: A. Millar, in the Strand, 1752), 174–175.

<sup>[5]</sup>Zoltan Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 58–59; see also *Bolingbroke: Political Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xix; Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle*, 32.

<sup>[6]</sup>*The Adams Papers, Papers of John Adams*, vol. 9, March 1780 – July 1780, ed. Gregg L. Lint and Richard Alan Ryerson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 249–250.

<sup>[7]</sup>*Ibid.*, 250–252.

<sup>[8]</sup>*The Adams Papers, Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, vol. 1, 1755–1770, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 11.

<sup>[9]</sup>See David Nicholls, *God and Government in an ‘Age of Reason’* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2003). As pointed out by Bradley

Chapin, "Bolingbroke argued for limited monarchy and mixed government. Adams' marginal notes in *A Dissertation Upon Parties* indicate how positively he responded to Bolingbroke's ideas." Bradley Chapin, *Early America* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 228.

<sup>[10]</sup>Haraszti, *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*, 49-50; see also John R. Howe, *Changing Political Thought of John Adams* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 33; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 67-68; *The Political Writings of John Adams: Representative Selections* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing, 2003), xxiii; Patrick J. Charles, *Historicism, Originalism and the Constitution* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 41.

<sup>[11]</sup>R. B. Bernstein, *The Education of John Adams* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 76-77. See also C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 117-119.

<sup>[12]</sup>Richard Alan Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic: The One, the Few, and the Many* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 32. See also Joseph J. Ellis: *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

<sup>[13]</sup>*The Adams Papers, Papers of John Adams*, vol. 1, September 1755 – October 1773, 203–211. See also Clinton Rossiter, *The Political Thought of the American Revolution* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 67-68.

<sup>[14]</sup>See, for example, Luke Mayville, *John Adams and the Fear of American Oligarchy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>[15]</sup>Mayville, *John Adams and the Fear of American Oligarchy*, 179.

<sup>[16]</sup>Luke Mayville, "Fear of the Few: John Adams and the Power Elite," *Polity* 47, no. 1 (2015): 5-32.