

PLAIN TRUTH: A RESPONSE TO COMMON SENSE (1776)

Excerpts from Plain Truth, a pamphlet that appeared in the colonies in March 1776 as a response to Thomas Paine's Common Sense. It launched a spirited defence of the British political and legal system, as well as attacking the "barbarity" of Paine's arguments. There was much speculation about the identity of 'Candidus', the pamphlet's author. It is believed to be the work of James Chalmers, a wealthy Maryland Loyalist:

"I have now before me the pamphlet entitled Common Sense, on which I shall remark with freedom and candour...

Liberty, says the great Montesquieu, is a right of doing whatever the laws permit; and if a citizen could do what they forbid, he would no longer be possessed of liberty, because all his fellow citizens would have the same power. In the beginning of his pamphlet the author asserts, that society in every state is a blessing. This in the sincerity of my heart I deny; for it is supreme misery to be associated with those who, to promote their ambitious purposes, flagitiously pervert the ends of political society...

His first indecent attack is against the English constitution which, with all its imperfections, is, and ever will be, the pride and envy of mankind. To this panegyric involuntarily our author subscribes, by granting individuals to be safer in England, than in any other part of Europe. He indeed attributes this ... to the constitution: to such contemptible subterfuge is our author reduced.

I would ask him why did not the constitution of the people afford them superior safety in the reign of Richard III, Henry VIII and other tyrannic princes? Many pages might indeed be filled with encomiums [praises] bestowed on our excellent constitution by illustrious authors of different nations...

Until the present unhappy period, Great Britain has afforded to all mankind the most perfect proof of her wise, lenient and magnanimous government of the Colonies, the proofs to which we already have alluded, viz. our supreme felicity and amazing increase...

But, says the author, the most powerful argument is that nothing but independence (that is, a continental form of government) can keep the peace of the continent, and preserve it inviolate from civil wars. I dread the event of a reconciliation with Britain, as it is more than probable it will be foiled by revolt somewhere; the consequences of which may be far more fatal than all the malice of Britain...

This piece [Common Sense], though it has taken a popular name and implies that the contents are obvious and adapted to the understandings of the bulk of the people, is so far from meriting the title it has attained, that in my opinion it holds principles equally inconsistent with learned and common sense. I know not the author, nor am I anxious to learn his name or character...

It is the glory of a free country to enjoy a free press, and of this, that the sentiments and opinions of the meanest are brought to view equally with those of the greatest... the rich and high born are not the monopolisers of wisdom and virtue; on the contrary, these qualities are more often to be found among the middling class in every country, who... in reality become better acquainted with the true interests of the society in which they live."