

“To what extent did the ideas of the Enlightenment influence the Declaration of Independence?”

It is evident that theories developed by Enlightenment philosophes had a great impact on the discourse which led to the American Revolution, culminated in the Declaration of Independence, and would be realised via the United States Constitution. From John Locke’s understandings of government and the consent of the governed, to Voltaire’s arguments for religious freedom and secular governance, Enlightenment theories clearly influenced colonial thinking and action before, during, and after the American Revolution. Certainly, in some instances, historical context played a key factor, but it would undermine the principles which drove the Revolution if one ignores the Enlightenment’s influence.

It is vital to consider the role of Enlightenment thinkers on the wholesale rejection of Britain’s taxes and impositions on the American colonies. From the controversial Stamp Act 1765 to the Tea Act 1773, tax was an issue that permeated heavily into colonial discourse. Primarily, colonists took issue with British taxes and levies being placed on them without “their consent in person” (Otis, 1764). That is, colonists were displeased with the fact that taxes – which restricted their ability to freely conduct business and trade – were created without them being able to have a say on the matter in Parliament. Some historians argue, in fact, that the entire Revolution was a “tax revolt, first and foremost” (Rabushka, 2008), a movement solely against high taxes that stifled business. However, this is a reductive view on the matter. Rather, the public furore on the tax issue was representative of a wider disapproval of Britain’s method of governance over the colonies: colonists opposed Britain’s “arbitrary” taxes which were “adopted without the consent of the



Figure 1. Bostonians tar and feather a tax collector. Retrieved from <https://picryl.com/media/philip-dawe-attributed-the-bostonians-paying-the-excise-man-or-tarring-and-3e3411>

governed” (Walczak, 2018). The notion of the “consent of the governed” – fostered by the thinking of philosopher John Locke – would become an integral theme of the Revolution. In New Zealand, similar concerns are often raised by Māori, especially with regard to the issue of whether Māori ceded sovereignty to Britain in Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

These objections to British governance would result in widespread resistance within the American colonies; the most notable example of this are the Sons of Liberty. Made up of working-class colonists, these rebellious cells would go on to be instrumental in the Revolutionary movement. Samuel Adams, a. With regard to British rule, Adams argued that “[Britain] cannot justly take from any man any part of his property, without his consent,” and Parliament “[had] no right to absolute, arbitrary power over the lives and fortunes of the people” (Adams A., 1772). This suggests that colonists were indeed acting upon the notions set out by

Locke, rebelling against an empire which was ruling without popular sovereignty. Certainly, one can easily argue that these men acted solely in the interest of their own finances, as Rabushka does. However, it is more accurate to assert that they truly acted upon ideologies founded on Enlightenment ideals: “The ... British Empire in America depended on its promise of freedom and prosperity,” and thus the open rebellion by factions like the Sons of Liberty “was ultimately a response to an emerging political ... system that [was] exploitative and cruel” (Rivage, 2017). In Aotearoa, it is interesting to note that those who led rebellions against European settlers were typically Māori rangatira, who are comparatively higher in social strata than their counterparts in the American colonies; however, they were united by their common displeasure at Britain’s extraction of resources without consent.



*Figure 2. The Declaration of Independence is presented to the Second Continental Congress. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/peterjr1961/6951938796>*

Such concerns would come to a head at the Second Continental Congress, which adopted the Declaration of Independence in 1776. This was directly related to Enlightenment ideals. For instance, consider that Thomas Jefferson – one of its primary authors – is said to have been a “voracious reader”, whose ideas were greatly inspired by Enlightenment philosophes such as Locke (Reck, 1991). This influence can be seen in the structure and arguments of the Declaration. Namely, that the document is

comprised of charges against the British King. As such, the colonists argue that the Crown in America was acting against the will of the people – the consent of the governed – and thus colonists were obligated to rebel. It is evident that such concerns are central to the colonists, writing that “governments are instituted among men” to uphold one’s rights: “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Thus, as the colonists argued, revolution was necessary to defend their rights; this is directly reflective of Locke’s understanding of “life, liberty, and property” as the fundamental rights of man. Indeed, as historian Kenneth D. Stern writes, “Locke’s justification of revolt, as based on his theory of natural rights, was the background from which the Declaration sprang” (Stern, 1955). Similarly, Aotearoa’s own Declaration of Independence – He Whakaputanga – asserted that mana over the land and the right laid solely with tangata whenua; of course, Te Tiriti o Waitangi’s signing in 1840 would supersede this document, but such principles and rights remain central to Te Ao Māori.

After the conclusion of the Revolutionary War with the signing of the Treaty of Paris 1783, the challenge of nation building would befall the newly formed United States of America. One notable consequence of Enlightenment influence on the new country can be seen in the place of religion in the Constitution. Famously, the First Amendment of the Constitution decrees that the American Congress “shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” (U.S. Const. Amend. I). This creates a separation between religion and the Federal Government, “church and state”. It can be evident, then, that the influence of Enlightenment thinkers is

pervasive in the foundational principles of American democracy. Voltaire, an important Enlightenment philosopher, argued that "the church should be subject to civil authority," that clergy should not have greater power and influence than lawmakers (Neserius, 1926). In this sense, it is clear that the secularist arguments made by Voltaire had a direct influence on the separation of church and state established by the Constitution. This is further affirmed by the prohibition of religious discrimination in entering public office: that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States" (U.S. Const. art. VI, cl. 3). Expanding upon the ideas brought about by Voltaire, this Article commits the United States to the principles of "religious liberty and equality" (Brownstein, n.d.). Likewise, in Aotearoa, the oral "fourth article" of Te Tiriti o Waitangi – brought about by the Bishop Jean Baptiste Pompallier – enshrines protections for all religious proclivities, including Māori faiths.

This protection for religious freedom was one of the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution, referred to as the Bill of Rights. This enshrined protections of natural rights into the foundations of the country. Understandings of such rights were developed in this period by Enlightenment philosophes such as Locke and Montesquieu, among others. Primarily, the Bill of Rights sought to create and enshrine into law protected rights for Americans: these rights related to both social protections for persons, and to legal matters. For instance, Article I protects the freedoms of speech, religion, assembly, and press which are "rights which Enlightenment philosophers discovered in their reflections of man as a rational being and as living in society" (Reck, 1991). Meanwhile, Articles V to VIII relate to judicial processes – such as ensuring that one has the right to trial by an impartial jury in criminal proceedings – which originated in English common law. Thus, as Reck argues, the principles of the Bill of Rights emerge from "the natural rights theories of the Enlightenment, on the traditions of English common law ... and on the theory of the federal system ..." In this way, it follows that the Bill of Rights did not solely emerge as a product of Enlightenment thinking. Instead, it is the product of both the legal developments of the English legal system, in addition to centuries of Enlightenment philosophy. One should consider that in New Zealand, while our legal system does recognise rights discussed by Enlightenment thinkers, it would perhaps be more accurate to assert that it is a union of English common law and tīkanga Māori.

In a correspondence between himself and fellow Founding Father Thomas Jefferson, John Adams asserted that "The Revolution was in the minds of the people" (Adams J., 1815), and he does so with a strong basis. It is clear that the thoughts of Enlightenment philosophes – Locke, Voltaire, Montisquieu, and others – shaped the intellectual foundation that drove the heretical thinking of the Revolutionaries. From the Sons of Liberty to the Declaration of Independence, Enlightenment philosophy was the basis upon which the Revolution was justified. Arguably, it served that purpose well, given that colonists in America would be galvanised enough to revolt against the world's largest empire. The legacy of the Enlightenment can still be readily observed too, with fierce debates about the rights of freedom of speech and religion dominating the cultural discourse in the modern United States.