

WHAT IS A SOCIAL CONTRACT? WHERE DOES THE POWER TO GOVERN COME FROM?

I. Deserted Island Exercise (how governments arise) -15-20 minutes

STEP ONE: Break into 4 small groups (as usual)

Initial instruction to group: Imagine everyone at in this school is taken to a deserted island to live there for the rest of their lives. How will decisions be made and what type of government, if any, would you like to create?

Questions to guide discussion:

1. How should decisions be made on the island, about how to find or build shelter, about how to find food?
2. What if there are mean, weak, or particularly skilled/smart people in your group? What will happen to them? Should strong people be able to take what they want from weak people? Who will stop them?
3. What if someone takes something from someone else? How are people protected? I.e. is it every person for him or herself, or does someone watch out for others?
4. Do you think you need a government for your island? Why? What will happen if no one is in charge or responsible for decision making?
5. What traits or characteristics of basic human nature do you need to think about in organizing how your island will be run?
6. What form of government would you select for your island? *Facilitators describe democracy, monarchy, oligarchy, rule by consensus, anarchy.*

STEP TWO: Select a spokesperson for your group to briefly explain the type of government you selected and defend your reasons for why you made that choice. (5 minutes)

Congratulations! You just made a social contract.

II. Brief examination of Declaration of Independence and John Locke's Ideas (10 minutes)

STEP ONE: Explain that the Declaration of Independence was just like forming a government from scratch. Describe key concepts embodied in text.

1. Equality - "All men are created equal."
2. Natural rights - "They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."
3. Government by consent of the people - "To secure these rights, governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

These ideas came largely from the philosophy of John Locke.

STEP TWO: Look at how these ideas got into the document by reading 3 analogous sentences from Locke. Ask for volunteers to describe how the basic ideas from Locke became text in the Declaration proclaiming the new form of government.

Questions for discussion:

1. What did Locke and the framers of the new government mean by "all men are created equal?" What does that imply for a monarchy?
2. What is the source of government in their view? *Draw diagrams: Contrast monarchy, where Creator gives absolute authority directly to king who exercises it over the people, with Locke's and Framers' ideas, where Creator gives all people the same rights and authority over their own lives, and they consent to give the government power to protect those rights.*

III. Examination of Slave Petition to the Governor of Massachusetts (10 minutes)

Two years before the Declaration of Independence, a group of slaves wrote a petition to the government of Massachusetts. Let's take a look at it and see where they used the very same ideas of natural rights to ask for a new "social contract" with the leader of Massachusetts.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the slaves using to justify their request for freedom? *The fact that they never entered into any agreement; the idea that they have natural rights as humans.*
2. When the Declaration of Independence says "all men are created equal," did it mean women, too? How about black people?
3. How does this petition fit into the ideas of the basic rights of LIFE, LIBERTY and PROPERTY that Locke and the Declaration considered to be natural rights? *Are the slaves appealing to the government to show that they are more than property?*

THE FOUNDERS' CONSTITUTION



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Rights

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Slave Petition to the Governor, Council, and House of Representatives of the Province of Massachusetts

25 May 1774 *MHS Collections, 5th ser., 3:432--33*

The Petition of a Grate Number of Blackes of this Province who by divine permission are held in a state of Slavery within the bowels of a free and christian Country

Humbly Shewing

That your Petitioners apprehind we have in common with all other men a naturel right to our freedoms without Being depriv'd of them by our fellow men as we are a freeborn Pepel and have never forfeited this Blessing by aney compact or agreement whatever. But we were unjustly dragged by the cruel hand of power from our dearest frinds and sum of us stolen from the bosoms of our tender Parents and from a Populous Pleasant and plentiful country and Brought hither to be made slaves for Life in a Christian land. Thus are we deprived of every thing that hath a tendency to make life even tolerable, the endearing ties of husband and wife we are strangers to for we are no longer man and wife then our masters or mestreses thinkes proper marred or onmarred. Our children are also taken from us by force and sent maney miles from us wear we seldom or ever see them again there to be made slaves of for Life which sumtimes is vere short by Reson of Being dragged from their mothers Breest Thus our Lives are imbittered to us on these accounts By our deplorable situation we are rendered incapable of shewing our obedience to Almighty God how can a slave perform the duties of a husband to a wife or parent to his child How can a husband leave master and work and cleave to his wife How can the wife submit themselves to there husbands in all things. How can the child obey thear parents in all things. There is a grat number of us sencear . . . members of the Church of Christ how can the master and the slave be said to fulfil that command Live in love let Brotherly Love contuner and abound Beare yea onenothers Bordenes How can the master be said to Beare my Borden when he Beares me down whith the Have chanes of slavery and operson against my will and how can we fulfill our parte of duty to him whilst in this condition and as we

cannot searve our God as we ought whilst in this situation Nither can we reap an equal benefet from the laws of the Land which doth not justifi but condemns Slavery or if there had bin aney Law to hold us in Bondege we are Humbely of the Opinon ther never was aney to inslave our children for life when Born in a free Countrey. We therefor Bage your Excellency and Honours will give this its deu weight and consideration and that you will accordingly cause an act of the legislative to be pessed that we may obtain our Natural right our freedoms and our children be set at lebetly at the yeare of Twenty one for whoues sekese more petequeley your Petitioners is in Duty ever to Pray.

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