

## Biographical Briefing on Thomas Hobbes

**Directions:** The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Thomas Hobbes and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Thomas Hobbes was born in London in 1588. He received his college education at Oxford University in England, where he studied classics. Hobbes traveled to other European countries several times to meet with scientists and to study different forms of government. During his time outside of England, Hobbes became interested in why people allowed themselves to be ruled and what would be the best form of government for England. In 1651, Hobbes wrote his most famous work, entitled *Leviathan*. In it, he argued that people were naturally wicked and could not be trusted to govern. Therefore, Hobbes believed that an absolute monarchy—a government that gave all power to a king or queen—was best.

Stop here  
and discuss

- **Where and when was Hobbes born?**
- **Where did Hobbes go to study government?**
- **Did Hobbes believe that people could be trusted to govern? Explain.**

Hobbes believed that humans were basically selfish creatures who would do anything to better their position. Left to themselves, he thought, people would act on their evil impulses. According to Hobbes, people therefore should not be trusted to make decisions on their own. In addition, Hobbes felt that nations, like people, were selfishly motivated. To Hobbes, each country was in a constant battle for power and wealth. To prove his point, Hobbes wrote, “If men are not naturally in a state of war, why do they always carry arms and why do they have have keys to lock their doors?”

Stop here  
and discuss

- **According to Hobbes, why should people not be trusted to make decisions?**
- **What did Hobbes believe motivated nations?**
- **What evidence did Hobbes use to prove his point that countries were in battle for wealth and power?**

Governments were created, according to Hobbes, to protect people from their own selfishness and evil. The best government was one that had the great power of a leviathan, or sea monster. Hobbes believed in the rule of a king because he felt a country needed an authority figure to provide direction and leadership. Because the people were only interested in promoting their own interests, Hobbes believed democracy—allowing citizens to vote for government leaders—would never work.

Hobbes wrote, “All mankind [is in] a perpetual and restless desire for power...that [stops] only in death.” Consequently, giving power to the individual would create a dangerous situation that would start a “war of every man against every man” and make life “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- **Why did Hobbes think governments were created?**
- **Why did Hobbes believe in the rule of a king?**
- **Why would democracy not work, according to Hobbes?**

Despite his distrust of democracy, Hobbes believed that a diverse group of representatives presenting the problems of the common person would, hopefully, prevent a king from being cruel and unfair. During Hobbes' lifetime, business began to have a big influence on government. Those who could contribute money to the government were given great status, and business interests were very powerful. In order to offset the growing power of business, Hobbes believed that an individual could be heard in government by authorizing a representative to speak on their behalf. In fact, Hobbes came up with the phrase "voice of the people," which meant that one person could be chosen to represent a group with similar views. However, this "voice" was merely heard and not necessarily listened to—final decisions lay with the king.

*Stop here  
and discuss*



- **For Hobbes, what was the proper role in government for the people?**
- **According to Hobbes, how did business influence the government?**
- **How did Hobbes propose giving a "voice" to the people?**