

Biographical Briefing on John Locke

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play John Locke 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.

John Locke was born in Bristol, England, on August 29, 1632. Locke's father was an attorney who collected taxes from seaport towns. He wanted his son to become a minister, but Locke rejected this and studied medicine. Locke entered Oxford University in England and was influenced by John Owen, Dean of Christ Church College. It was Owen who first introduced Locke to the idea of religious freedom and the idea that people should not be punished for having different views of religion. Locke believed that all sides had the right to be heard. Moreover, he felt that conflicts could be solved if the two groups could settle their differences by seeking a middle ground and compromise.

Stop here
and discuss



- **Where was Locke born?**
- **How did Locke feel about religious freedom?**
- **According to Locke, how should conflicts be resolved?**

After college, Locke continued to study and read with passion. He expressed his views about freedom of religion and the rights of citizens. In 1682 his ideas were seen by the English government as a challenge to the King's authority. He fled to Holland, and then returned to England in 1689 after the Civil War in England. Shortly thereafter, Locke began publishing his writings, many of which focused on government. Throughout his writings, Locke argued that people had the gift of reason, or the ability to think. Locke thought they had the natural ability to govern themselves and to look after the well-being of society. He wrote, "The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which [treats] everyone [equally]. Reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind...that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health or possessions."

Stop here
and discuss



- **Why did Locke go to Holland?**
- **What ability did Locke believe people had?**
- **Did Locke believe people were capable of governing themselves? Why or why not?**

Locke did not believe that God had chosen a group or family of people to rule countries. He rejected this idea of "Divine Right," which many kings and queens used to justify their right to rule. Instead, he argued that governments should only operate with the consent, or approval, of the people they are governing. In this way, Locke supported democracy as a form of government. Locke wrote, "[We have learned from] history we have reason to conclude that all peaceful beginnings of government have been laid in the consent of the

people.” Governments were formed, according to Locke, to protect the right to life, the right to freedom, and the right to property. These rights were absolute, belonging to all people. Locke also believed that government power should be divided equally into three branches of government so that politicians will not face the “temptation...to grasp at [absolute] power.” If any government abused these rights instead of protecting them, then the people had the right to rebel and form a new government.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- **What did Locke think about “Divine Right”?**
- **According to Locke, what is the purpose of government?**
- **What did Locke think people should do if governments abused people’s rights?**

John Locke spoke out against the control of any man against his will. This control was acceptable neither in the form of a unfair government, nor in slavery. Locke wrote, “The natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth, and not to be under the will or legislative authority of man, but only have the law of nature for his rule.” In addition, Locke felt that women had the ability to reason, which entitled them to an equal voice—an unpopular idea during this time in history. Despite fearing that he might be censored, he wrote, “It may not be [wrong] to offer new...[ideas] when the old [traditions] are apt to lead men into mistakes, as this [idea] of [fatherly] power’ probably has done, which seems so [eager] to place the power of parents over their children wholly in the father, as if the mother had no share in it; whereas if we consult reason or [the Bible], we shall find she has an *equal* title.”

*Stop here
and discuss*



- **What did Locke think of men being controlled against their will?**
- **What did Locke write about the abilities of women?**
- **How do you think Locke’s views were received?**