King Charles was not heading inexorably towards Civil War. Recent historians have been right to expose this underlying teleological assumption and dispel the air of inevitability surrounding many earlier accounts of Charles’s reign. We know the ending of the story, so to speak, and we must be careful not to let that knowledge colour our view of earlier events. In 1629 it was still possible for the story to take many twists and turns and arrive at quite different endings. Indeed, in 1629 there was good reason to expect a happier ending. Charles had begun his reign with two huge liabilities: Buckingham and war. Now suddenly he was rid of the one and nearly rid of the other. Freed from the financial burden and political quagmire of war, freed from the influence and jealousies generated by Buckingham, Charles could now chart his own course under more normal circumstances. He had a fresh start, a second chance; how he chose to use this chance would determine the future course of events more than anything that had already happened.

Introduction to the Personal Rule

For 11 years, from the spring of 1629 to the spring of 1640, Charles ruled without Parliament. This was perfectly legal, but it was also rather unusual. Although it was normal for a few years to elapse between Parliaments, the longest previous gaps in the Tudor–Stuart period lasted only about seven years (under Henry VII, Henry VIII, and James I). Still, Parliament was not part of the routine machinery
of government, and ruling without one for 11 years did not by itself make Charles a tyrant. A few historians in the past referred to this stage in Charles’s reign as ‘The Eleven Years’ Tyranny’, but today such words sound like Whiggish hyperbole.¹ For anyone still interested in constitutional issues, John Morrill has identified several grounds on which Charles could technically be charged with legal tyranny, but most of those reasons stem from what the king did before and after the 1630s rather than what he did during the 1630s.² As a substitution for ‘Eleven Years’ Tyranny’, historians have sometimes called this the period of ‘autocratic rule’ or ‘prerogative rule’ or ‘unparliamentary government’, but these terms too carry negative connotations, so the preferred term today is the more neutral ‘personal rule’.

It is impossible to know how long Charles expected to rule without a Parliament. Certainly he had developed a strong antipathy to the institution and was in no hurry to deal with it again. His father had told him back in 1624 that ‘he would live to have his bellyful of Parliaments’, and indeed he had.³ In the proclamation he issued just after the dissolution of 1629, Charles made it clear that he would ‘account it presumption’ for anyone to recommend the meeting of another Parliament until the malefactors of the last Parliament had been punished and people in general had come to a better (that is, more favourable) understanding of his actions.⁴ Charles Carlton has collected the king’s pronouncements on Parliament early in the personal rule, as reported by the Venetian ambassador: ‘in May 1629 he told the ambassador that “whosoever speaks to him about parliament shall be his enemy”’; in 1631 that “on no account” would he ever again call parliament; in 1633 that he was “more opposed to it than ever”; and in 1635 that he would “do anything to avoid having another parliament”’.⁵ To this should be added the ambassador’s report at the beginning of 1637 stating that the king ‘cannot suffer the mention of parliament, much less its assembling’.⁶ Charles also expressed his views on Parliament in letters he wrote in the mid-1630s to Sir Thomas Wentworth, then Lord Deputy of Ireland. As Wentworth prepared to meet with an Irish Parliament, Charles warned him ‘that here I have found it as well cunning as malicious’. In another letter to Wentworth, Charles said that he had learned from experience that Parliaments should not be kept in session too long because they ‘are of the nature of cats, that ever grow cursed with age ... young ones are ever most tractable’. Furthermore, ‘you will find that nothing can more conduce to the beginning of a new