William Penn, from "Model of Government" (1681)

William Penn was born to the English gentry and became a Quaker convert at a young age. In 1681, King Charles II granted Penn an enormous tract of land north of Maryland and west of the Delaware River. This land, which became Pennsylvania, was one of the most fertile regions along the Atlantic coast. Under Penn’s leadership, Pennsylvania was marked by diversity, prosperity, and fair dealings with the Indians. In addition, its citizens enjoyed many basic rights, including freedom of religion, a legislative assembly, and trial by jury. This essay, composed prior to Penn’s settlement in Pennsylvania, reveals some of his revolutionary democratic ideas concerning government.

For particular frames and models [of government] it will become me to say little. . . . My reasons are: First, that the age is too nice and difficult for it, there being nothing the wits of men are more busy and divided upon. . . . Secondly, I do not find a model in the world that time, place, and some singular emergencies have not necessarily altered; nor is it easy to frame a civil government that shall serve all places alike.

Thirdly, I know what is said by the several admirers of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, which are the rule of one, a few, and many, and are the three common ideas of government when men discourse on that subject. But I choose to solve the controversy with this small distinction, and it belongs to all three: any government is free to the people under it (whatever to be the frame) where the laws rule, and the people are a party to those laws; and more than this is tyranny, oligarchy, and confusion.

Document Analysis

What does this document tell us about William Penn’s ideal form of government? Why did many people of the time consider Penn’s ideas to be “revolutionary”?