

English Politics After Bosworth

The Battle of Bosworth presents in retrospect a random, almost casual, appearance. Henry Tudor commanded a tiny army of 5,000 men; Richard led one that was only slightly larger – 8-10,000. Eight peers fought for the reigning monarch and three for his rival. Few men were prepared to commit themselves on either side. The outcome was largely decided by chance, when Richard's bold charge against Henry led to his own death after he had refused the offer of a horse on which to flee, preferring to fight on in the midst of Tudor's troops.

The consequences of the engagement were out of all proportion to its size. One might have expected that, if one dynasty was to be so easily overturned, its successor would be equally insecure, that chance events would continue to raise up and cast down English Kings. Yet this was not to be: the twenty-five years of Yorkist rule, marked by violent dynastic feuds and rapid changes of political fortune, were followed by more than a century of relative security for the ruling house.

After his victory Henry Tudor was in a far stronger position than his Yorkist predecessors. Many, though not all, of the great magnate houses which dominated England and Wales in 1461 had been eliminated by the political feuds, conspiracies and battles of the following twenty-four years. Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, the greatest of the nobles, had been killed at Barnet in 1471. Of the large Neville clan only two branches survived into the sixteenth century: the Earls of Westmorland and the Lords Abergavenny. Henry Holland, Duke of Exeter, died with Warwick at Barnet. Of those families built up by Edward IV, the Woodvilles and the Hastings were destroyed by Richard III. With Richard's own death the effective power of the House of York came to an end: his niece Elizabeth was married to Henry; his nephew Warwick was imprisoned in the Tower. Although the nobility as a whole survived the Wars of the Roses with some success – in many cases by avoiding commitment to either side – its highest ranks were drastically thinned.

The transformation can be seen in a brief survey of the political map of Wales and its Marches. In 1461, outside the Principality proper – the counties of Anglesey, Caernarvon, Merioneth, Flint, Cardigan and Carmarthen – few lordships were held directly by the Crown. In his capacity as Duke of Lancaster, the King held some small areas in South Wales, but the bulk of the Marcher territory was ruled by independent lords. Warwick held the vast Lordship of Glamorgan and the smaller one of Elfael in mid-Wales. The House of York held the Lordship of Denbigh and the Earldom of March, critically situated on the border and incorporating much of present-day Shropshire, including Ludlow. After Bosworth all these had reverted to the Crown, which became by far the greatest power in the Marches: the geography of politics in that turbulent region had been wholly changed. The situation in the North had altered less. There the Percies, Earls of Northumberland, remained the dominant power. But the fourth Earl was killed in a riot in 1489, leaving his son a minor; although the Neville Earls of Westmorland kept their lands, other Neville lordships had fallen to the Crown.

The idea that Henry VII ruled without the nobility has long been discredited: he could never have done so. But he was able to avoid unhealthy dependence upon them and to keep them more effectively under his control than had Edward IV. In the north and in Wales he established or strengthened the powers of lesser magnates who relied upon the Crown for their advancement; and he thus set a pattern for the early Tudor monarchy of ruling, where possible, through nobles who were strong enough to control their regions but not so powerful that they could threaten royal interests.

Henry VII was also fortunate in being much less encumbered by close relatives than his predecessors. The reigns of Henry VI and Edward IV had been disturbed by the ambitions of great princes of the blood. Edward's death had been followed immediately by the struggle between his brother Richard and the family of his wife for control of the young princes. Henry Tudor had no first cousins and no brothers; his only uncle, Jasper, Duke of Bedford, supported him firmly during the first few years of the reign and then had the loyalty to die childless in 1495. It is significant that Henry's enemies had to turn to imposters, Lambert Simnel and Perkin Warbeck, when they put forward rival claimants for the crown. The death of Henry's eldest son, Arthur, removed the danger of rivalry between brothers in the next reign; and Henry VII lived long enough for his younger, and surviving, son to have

reached his majority by 1509.

Henry VIII too had virtually nothing to fear from princes of the blood, and noblemen with even a remote claim to the throne were ruthlessly despatched. He stood alone above the ranks of the English nobility, the only man with any genuine semblance of royalty. The leaders of the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536 could have put forward no alternative candidate for the monarchy even if they had wished to do so. Henry's own infertility was to cause problems in the long run; but it freed each of his three children from the threat of a male rival. Elizabeth's situation was strengthened by the fact that the only serious contender, until 1587, was another woman, Mary Stuart. In the late fifteenth century one central problem of English politics had been the size of the royal family and the number of potential claimants to the throne. By the second half of the sixteenth century scarcity prevailed: Elizabeth was succeeded by her first cousin twice removed, and a Scotsman at that.

Once the Tudor dynasty had been established, there began a gradual centralisation of both government and politics. Under the houses of Lancaster and York the royal court was still undeveloped and much of the competition for power, wealth and influence was played out in the provinces. During the years leading up to Edward IV's seizure of the throne, the royalist faction led by Queen Margaret and the Yorkists led by Duke Richard both exploited local feuds to draw to their sides prominent regional magnates. Under Henry VIII the balance between centre and periphery shifted towards the former. Henry became King, rather than Lord, of Ireland; and attempts were begun to bring Ireland under English control. The Marcher lordships of Wales were brought within the English shire system in the so-called 'Acts of Union'. The arrival of a Welsh dynasty on the English throne had the effect of absorbing Welsh politics into English. Provincial magnates still remained powerful in their own 'countries', to use the contemporary term, and no understanding of Tudor politics is possible unless we take account of that fact. But increasingly they needed influence at Court if they were to make any impression on affairs.

The Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536 brings home the point. It was not the last provincial rising in England, but it was the most threatening of the sixteenth century; and it drew sympathisers from some of the most prominent northern families: Percy, Neville, Lumley, Dacre, Darcy. But the Pilgrims failed to secure the support of such great court magnates as the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, without whose backing their cause was hopeless; and the loyalty to Henry VII of the Earls of Derby and Shrewsbury, who between them controlled southern Lancashire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, ensured that the movement did not spread to midland or southern England. Noble power still influenced national events, but the nobles themselves were looking to the King. It is significant that the heads of the two northern houses most heavily involved in the rising, the Earls of Northumberland and Westmorland, held themselves neutral and withdrawn during the Pilgrimage: their brothers or sons rose in defence of the family interest.

The crucial importance of the royal court is revealed most vividly in the reign of Edward VI. One might expect that a royal minority would release the centrifugal forces of provincial power and permit a resurgence of noble feuds. But the political fighting occurred at court, not in the provinces. Lord Protector Somerset owed his position partly to being maternal uncle to the King, partly to his renown as a soldier and partly to the skill with which his political manager, William Paget, manipulated first the dying King Henry, whose will put Somerset and his friends firmly in control of the Council, and then Somerset's fellow councillors, who agreed to make him Protector. Somerset's landed possessions, although considerable, played little part in the matter. Two years later, after governing with a striking mixture of arrogance, insensitivity and incompetence, he was brought down. But he fell, not beneath the provincial risings of 1549, in which the nobility and gentry played little part, but as the victim of a masterly conspiracy among the leading courtiers and councillors, led by the Earls of Arundel, Southampton and Warwick – the latter soon to become Duke of Northumberland.

Although the conspirators drew upon the military power of their retainers, their principal strength lay in the Council, sitting in London. Somerset, who had control of Edward's person, might have raised popular support in his own defence; but he did not risk the civil turmoil that would have been provoked had he done so. The courtiers who were with him as he retreated from Hampton Court to Windsor soon saw the way events were moving and successfully urged surrender on Somerset. The first stage of the coup was swiftly accomplished without violence. But the successor to Somerset had still to be decided between the leading conspirators. Warwick succeeded, because he secured the favour of the young King, packed the royal household with his own friends and from that

power-base secured control of the Council itself. This was not the end of faction-fighting in Edward's reign. But the political struggles were conducted almost entirely at court – there was virtually no contention between nobles in the provinces – and they involved very little bloodshed. Until Edward's premature death, Northumberland and the Council maintained governmental control with a fair degree of success.

The outcome of the succession crisis of 1553, when Northumberland tried to prolong his own regime by placing his daughter-in-law, Lady Jane Grey, upon the throne in place of Mary Tudor, runs against the usual form of Tudor politics. For once the provinces triumphed against the centre. Yet the circumstances were, to say the least, unusual. Edward's 'Devise', handing on the crown to Lady Jane, was almost certainly illegal. Many councillors had agreed to it only under strong pressure from the King and Northumberland. Mary herself was allowed to escape, and, instead of fleeing abroad, rallied forces to herself in East Anglia. With strong backing from provincial nobles and gentry, many of them Catholics, and a fair measure of popular support, she made it clear that she would fight for her title. Northumberland, the only man willing or able to command the army sent against her, surrendered when he learned that his fellow-councillors in London were deserting him. The Council's transfer of allegiance to Mary was crucial to her success. But that transfer was itself prompted by the support she obtained in the regions.

Politics was becoming more centralised under the Tudors, but provincial reactions could not be discounted. The majority of the political nation was determined to avoid civil war. Memories of the peasant risings of 1549 were still alive; and most people in 1553 were probably bewildered and uncommitted, as they had been in 1485. But Mary had enough support to frighten the Council into immediate surrender at the prospect of serious fighting. This reluctance to risk internal dissension was apparent again within a year. Although Mary's proposal to marry Philip of Spain was generally unpopular, only one of the risings planned against it took off, and that, led by Sir Thomas Wyatt, collapsed when the hopes of support from London were disappointed.

Elizabeth's reign saw the final triumph of court politics. All the principal politicians owed their power and influence to the favour of the Queen rather than their landed estates. This was obviously true of administrator-statesmen like William Cecil, Lord Burghley, his son Robert, and Mr Secretary Walsingham. It was true also of favourites like Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Christopher Hatton, who were bred from unremarkable gentry families. It was even true of such great aristocrat-courtiers as Leicester and Essex. Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, younger son of the Duke of Northumberland, came from a titled family; but the title was recent and tarnished, for his father had died on the scaffold. Like many men who had begun their careers under Edward VI, Dudley came back into favour with the accession of Elizabeth; but he had little beyond his personal attractions to advance him. They were, however, enough; and within a few years his infatuated Queen had granted him extensive estates in England and Wales. Yet for all his local followers Leicester's power base was always at court. Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, came from a more ancient aristocratic lineage than his stepfather, Leicester. But the Devereux, with lands in South Wales and Staffordshire, were never far from debt and often sunk deeply into it.

Until the last decade of the century Elizabethan politics were largely free from the faction-fights which marked the reigns of her father and her brother. Burghley and Leicester competed for royal favours for themselves and their clients; and they sometimes disagreed over policy. But fundamentally they were at one in their determination to protect the Protestant settlement in England and ensure the security of the Queen and the realm. In 1569 there seems to have been a plot, obscure even in its outlines, to overthrow Cecil. But Elizabeth made it clear that, unlike her father, who had cut down both Wolsey and Cromwell, she would stand by her chief minister. From then on, until the rise of Essex, court politics were relatively peaceful; and allegiances were too flexible and shifting for the term 'faction' to be appropriate, however much it may have been employed by foreign ambassadors at the time and English historians since.

The political crisis of 1569, prompted by the proposed marriage of Mary Stuart to the Duke of Norfolk, diminished almost to impotence the independent power of provincial magnates. When the marriage plans were revealed to Elizabeth, Norfolk was sent to the Tower. His allies in the north, the Earls of Northumberland and Westmorland, frightened that they would suffer a similar fate, rose in an ill-planned and futile revolt. Its defeat led to the destruction of the Neville house of Westmorland and the political 'exile' of the Percies to southern England. Within two years Norfolk, drawn into the Ridolfi plot, was executed and his great palatinate in East Anglia abolished. There were still great nobles in Elizabethan England; but a rising by provincial magnates against the centre was no longer conceivable.

The political calm of the 1570s and 1580s was however broken after the death of Leicester in 1588. Burghley, grown old, melancholy and suspicious, was determined to monopolise power and transmit it intact to his son Robert. The rising favourite of the Queen, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, was equally ambitious. Lacking the political finesse of Leicester he insisted on having his way and regarded those not totally committed to him as enemies. The court divided sharply and fiercely into competing factions, which struggled for the political succession after Burghley's death in 1598. Essex, fatally, was enticed into taking command of the army fighting the Irish rebels. He realised the risk of leaving Elizabeth's presence, but was tempted by military glory. 'The court', he wrote, 'is the centre; but methinks it is the fairer choice to command armies than honours'. Probably he hoped to command both.

After his Irish campaign had collapsed in failure, he returned home, against royal orders, to meet Elizabeth's anger and endure political disgrace. Finally, in February 1601, he and his few remaining followers attempted a palace revolution. The plan was to rally support in London, eject Robert Cecil from court and restore Essex to the position of principal courtier. But the City refused to follow him and within twenty-four hours Essex had surrendered. Although Essex had tenants and retainers on his Welsh estates who might, given time, have rallied to him, his was no provincial rising. It was the armed protest of frustrated courtiers; and its failure demonstrates the effective strength of the Elizabethan court.

By the end of 1601 Elizabeth's government had overcome – at least for the time being – the 'British problem': the threats presented to England's security from Scotland and Ireland. At the beginning of her reign the Scottish danger was far the most urgent, with French troops in Edinburgh and a Catholic Queen on the throne. English intervention at sea and on land helped the Protestant lords of Scotland to establish the Reformed Church, which Mary Stuart accepted. Although Scottish affairs fell again into confusion after the murder of Darnley, Mary's flight into England in 1568 restored a somewhat precarious stability. Successive Regents looked to England rather than France; and although James, when he came of age, flirted with the French connection, his anxiety to secure the succession to the English throne tied him to Elizabeth. Even the execution of his mother in 1587 produced not more than token indignation. As Elizabeth's death approached, his relations with her became ever more friendly: he was even willing to endure her condescending advice on the arts of government.

With Scotland firmly Protestant and its King poised to unite the two crowns, the northern doorway for England's enemies was more firmly controlled than it had been for centuries: only the maladroit interference of Charles I and Laud roused Scottish armies to cross the border again.

The Irish problem was solved with much greater pain and difficulty. An imaginative policy had been devised by Lord-Deputy St Leger in the latter years of Henry VIII to bring the Irish and Anglo-Norman lords under the control of the Dublin government. But the aggressive and blustering conduct of St Leger's successor had ensured its defeat. In 1558 the Irish lordships beyond the Pale were almost as far from being obedient to English rule as they had been in 1540. Throughout Elizabeth's reign successive viceroys laboured and fought to crush Irish revolt and establish effective government. By the 1590s the Irish question seemed as far from solution as ever when the Ulster lords, Tyrone and Tyrconnell, rose in revolt. In 1601 a Spanish army landed at Kinsale, near Cork, bringing to reality the long nightmare of English statesmen: that Ireland would become the base for a foreign invasion of England. But on Christmas Eve of that year the new Lord Deputy, Mountjoy, defeated the Spanish, whose commander remarked of Ireland: 'this land seems destined specially for the princes of Hell'. By the month of Elizabeth's death, March 1603, Tyrone surrendered and Ireland was at peace. The victory had been bought at appalling cost in devastation and suffering, since Mountjoy had executed a cruel scorched-earth strategy by which the Irish were starved into defeat. Militarily at least the Irish problem was ended for a time; but the establishment of effective political and religious control was always to elude the English government, and forty years later it was confronted with another Irish rebellion.

The final triumph of Tudor and Elizabethan rule lay in the end of the dynasty and the death of the Queen. Elizabeth's councillors and others had long urged her to name a successor, and she had consistently refused to comply. The legal and genealogical position was complex and obscure: but after the death of Mary Stuart there was only one politically realistic claimant – James VI of Scotland. However, he suffered the impediments of being both a foreigner and the son of a convicted traitor, and the answer to the succession problem remained uncertain. After the execution of Essex in 1601, the political field was clear enough for Robert Cecil to work towards its

solution. Cecil's aims were to reassure James of his own loyalty, ensure a smooth transfer of the crown and secure his own political survival. This had to be done without Elizabeth discovering that Cecil was in touch with the Scottish King. For two years secret letters passed between Cecil and his political henchman, Lord Henry Howard, in London and James in Scotland. Cecil assured James that he would secure the English throne provided that he did nothing rash and warned him against building up a popular party: he should entrust his cause to a few 'extraordinary persons' rather than the 'acclamation of many'. James, recognising that Cecil was 'in effect King in England', took the advice and waited on events.

As Elizabeth lay dying in March 1603 the councillors took over. According to their published account the Queen named James as her heir shortly before her death. But this story is hardly credible. In effect James succeeded to the throne, smoothly and peacefully, by courtesy of the court elite and the acquiescence in that choice of the political nation. Nothing could testify more effectively to the tight political control of the centre than the contrast between the accession of James and the seizure of the crown by Henry VII. Yet however firmly the inner ring of courtiers might direct affairs of high politics, they could not govern the country without the co-operation and support of the ruling classes in the shires. The diminution of magnate power had produced a wider diffusion of authority among provincial landowners. The strains of war and faction-fighting had already provoked resistance and dissension in the regions. Skilled handling of men and of issues would be required if the dominance of the court over national politics was to be maintained; and the necessary skill was not to be forthcoming.