Henry VIII and his Ministers

The choice of a ruler's ministers is a very important matter; whether they are good or not depends on the ruler's shrewdness'. So Machiavelli began chapter 22 of his manual of statecraft, The Prince. The relationship between Henry VIII and his ministers has sparked an enduring debate about policy-making under the Tudors. Was Crown policy formulated by the king or his advisers? Was Henry the architect of his own policy, or was he little more than an articulate puppet manipulated in turn by Thomas Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell?

Henry VIII was less attentive to mundane affairs of state than either Henry VII or Elizabeth I. He was relatively manipulable by women and intimates. In his youth he revelled in 'pastime with good company': this he boasted in a song he wrote himself. Yet always he was king. His voice was dominant in politics; his merest whisper could dictate the fundamental decisions of the reign.

By conventional standards Henry allowed his servants a remarkable degree of latitude. But he always retained the right to have the last word; therefore he was the ultimate arbiter of policy. For much of the twentieth century it has been claimed that Wolsey and Cromwell enjoyed 'prime-ministerial' ascendancy during Henry's reign, but this paradigm is borrowed from an understanding of Victorian politics. In Tudor terms it is anachronistic and misleading. Henry's ministers advised the king and controlled the implementation of Crown policy once a strategy had been conceived. But, since the king might intervene or change his mind at will, policy might waver, collapse or undergo revision at any moment in the interests of European diplomacy or domestic expediency. It is scarcely surprising that under so volatile a system Wolsey and Cromwell became the victims less of their own mistakes than of their master's egoism.

Wolsey enjoyed greater latitude than his successor, Cromwell, but this was because the young Henry intervened less in politics before 1527 (possibly 1525) than afterwards. The turning point was the king's first divorce campaign. This began in earnest in the summer of 1527 when Henry personally seized the initiative from an absent Wolsey in soliciting support and orchestrating the debate.

Thomas Wolsey

Wolsey's main appointments were those of lord chancellor, cardinal-archbishop of York, and papal legate a latere. Cromwell was successively master of the jewels, lord privy seal, vicegerent in spirituals (that is, Henry VIII's lay deputy as supreme head of the church) and finally lord great chamberlain.

If, however, Wolsey was Henry's chief minister for fifteen years and Cromwell for almost ten, it was not due to formal appointments. What mattered in Henrician politics was the king's unqualified trust. It is important to remember that in Tudor colloquial speech the term 'minister' did not mean what it means today. To be a 'minister' in the reign of Henry VIII was to be the personal servant of the king, not the public servant of the state. Insofar as Wolsey and Cromwell combined these functions, it was because they served the Crown at a time when no coherent theoretical distinction between the 'state' and royal government had been established. The doctrine of 'ministerial accountability' lay more than a century ahead, and Parliament was still an exclusively royal institution which the king summoned and dissolved at will.

Henry VIII was almost eighteen years old when he succeeded to the throne. He was therefore 'of full age' by the rules governing princely accession, but was manifestly inexperienced. Nothing was more natural than that an inner circle of his father's councillors should be nominated to govern on his behalf. But this interim Council proved to be unexpectedly tenacious. Five years later 'it was still there. And by then Henry VIII regarded it as superfluous, even as a threat. Increasingly he turned to his energetic and ebullient almoner, Thomas Wolsey, who 'liberated' him from the restrictions he found most irksome.

Wolsey's contemporary biographer, George Cavendish, tells us that Wolsey was always 'the most earnest and readiest among all the Council to advance the King's only will and pleasure without any respect to the case. The

King therefore perceived him to be a meet instrument for the accomplishment of his devised will and pleasure'. By the end of 1514 Henry VIII valued Wolsey's services so highly 'that his estimation and favour put all other ancient counsellors out of their accustomed favour'.

Wolsey's rise to power owed much to hard work. But it was equally the product of supreme political skill, because he alone saw that the way to royal favour was to perform the Council's administrative functions strictly in accordance with Henry's wishes. The breakthrough came in 1513, when Wolsey successfully procured all the equipment and supplies needed for Henry's invasion of France. Between 1514 and 1518 he engineered a dazzling series of coups which won Henry glory abroad and multiplied his receipts from taxation at home. And as lord chancellor Wolsey launched a law-enforcement campaign which rendered corrupt landowners and Crown officials accountable for their misdeeds, and which offered 'impartial' justice equally to rich and poor.

Faced with such indomitable achievements, the surviving councillors of Henry VII could only retire from the scene or be eclipsed by Wolsey, who wrote his own job description as chief minister.

Contemporary resentment of Wolsey

Wolsey was – and still is – controversial figure, but the real issue at stake was his 'ministerial' status. He was attacked by his enemies far a host of alleged abuses of power; taking the great seal abroad; taking the king's name in vain; misleading the king by falsely reporting the views of others; banging his fist on the Council table in fits of impatience; depriving the king of attendant councillors at Court; and failing to consult the nobility. But these charges were largely manufactured or exaggerated. They were symptoms of the cause, not the cause itself.

The evidence shows that Wolsey did normally consult other leading nobles and councillors about significant policy shifts; he did not act improperly by the standards of the day; and he did attempt to govern consensually. The crucial distinction is that he monopolized power and dominated the Council no less as a result, because he consulted his fellow-councillors only after he had already settled personally with the king the direction that Crown policy should take. It was not Wolsey's decisions which were the cause of his unpopularity, but the fact that Henry VIII treated him as his partner. His political rivals envied the privileged access he obtained to the king, and were jealous that he and Henry walked arm-in-arm together and were intimate confidants to the exclusion of others.

Cavendish illustrated these dynamics to perfection when describing how Henry VIII allied with Charles, duke of Bourbon, in the summer of 1523. He wrote that Wolsey first 'moved the King in this matter', whereupon Henry 'dreamed' of it more and more, 'until at the last it came in question among the council in consultation'. And Wolsey himself clari6ed that this was how things worked, when overruling some suggestions submitted a year later by Richard Pace, Henry' s ambassador to Bourbon. He explained: 'All which matters by the King's Highness and me first apart, and after with the most sad and discreet Lords of his most honourable Council, substantially digested, and profoundly debated, it hath been finally by good deliberation determined [etc]...'

Wolsey's 'ministerial' tactics were at odds with the preference of the Yorkists and Henry VII for conciliar government. Moreover, he broke the mould of conciliar government unilaterally: this was his offence. It was why he rarely got credit later for genuine attempts to consult the Council: he was seen to be 'ministerial', even when his efforts to involve the Council were sincere. It was why he was said to have arrogated power to himself, depriving the king of attendant councillors at Court. It was why he was charged with saying and writing, 'The King and I would ye should do thus: the King and I do give unto you our hearty thanks'.

For fifteen years Henry and Wolsey governed as a partnership. The king required a minister to accomplish his 'will and pleasure', and Wolsey triumphantly succeeded. Not everything was plain sailing. Tensions occasionally arose in the fields of military strategy and church patronage. But only rarely did Henry and Wolsey overtly disagree – as in the summer of 1521, when Wolsey was visiting Calais and was therefore unable to ride to Court, or in the spring of 1522, when he urged a surprise attack on the French navy, but Henry thought the plan too dangerous.

It follows from this interpretation that Wolsey, whom foreign ambassadors depicted as alter rex or 'second king', was more the loyal servant of the Crown than conventional historiography has suggested. That does not imply that Henry VIII knew or approved of everything Wolsey did, nor did it oblige Henry to stand by his minister when

things went wrong. When Wolsey tamed factionalism in Star Chamber, when he punished enclosing landlords or when he seemingly achieved 'universal peace' in Europe by a miracle of diplomacy, Henry was the first to claim the credit. But by 1525 Wolsey had overreached himself in foreign policy, finance, and relations with the localities.

Wolsey on the skids

The touchstone was the so-called 'Amicable Grant', the nonparliamentary tax which Wolsey devised to finance an invasion of France to profit from Charles V's victory at Pavia. His fiscal demands led to a tax revolt, whereupon Henry denied all knowledge of' the plan. Wolsey was obliged to perform a humiliating volte-face, switching from an alliance with Charles V against France to an alliance with France against the emperor. Moreover, the French entente was risky. It was criticized by leading nobles, it jeopardized England's trade with the Low Countries and it put Henry VIII on the wrong side of Italian politics when his suit for annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon opened at Rome two years later.

Wolsey's career foundered on the rock of the divorce. The reason was simple: his loyalties were divided. As a cardinal and legate *a latere*, he was the pope's plenipotentiary as well as Henry's minister. Hitherto his dual status had been a winning card. In fact, it bad been Henry as much as Wolsey who had lobbied Rome to secure amplifications and extensions to Wolsey's legatine commissions and who advocated his candidacy for the papacy. Wolsey's authority over the English church was invaluable to Henry, who strove to rival the iron grip which Francis I secured over the lands and patronage of the French church by the Concordat of Bologna (1516). By advancing Wolsey's ecclesiastical career, Henry VIII could dictate the affairs of' church and state at once. Professor Wilkie grasped this important point when he wrote: 'Wolsey was under no illusion about the exercise of [his] authority being dependent on his serving the king's pleasure, and the king's pleasure was that Wolsey control the English church in the king's interest'.

The crunch came when Henry VIII insisted that the Biblical texts on marriage he had trawled out of the Book of Leviticus were God's law binding on Christians. These texts forbade sexual relations between a man and his deceased brother's wife; if they were God's law, then Henry's marriage was sinful. Everyone knew that there were contradictory texts in the Book of Deuteronomy, but Henry dismissed those as Jewish customs irrelevant to Christians.

Wolsey immediately saw his dilemma. If the king's divorce were delayed, then Henry would attack the pope and papal institutions for usurping God's law. He therefore urged the king to rest his case upon a technical defect which Wolsey had discovered in the original dispensation authorizing Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. It was to no avail. Henry was determined not only to have his divorce, but to have it his own way as a matter of principle. When Wolsey could not achieve this, he was disgraced. The partnership between king and minister was dissolved, and Henry sought new counsels.

Thomas Cromwell

Thomas Cromwell was Henry VIII's second minister: within two years he had made himself indispensable to the king. His rise to power can easily be explained. When Wolsey pleaded guilty to the charge of praemunire in October 1529, confessing that he had maintained papal authority in England in derogation of royal prerogative and the laws and customs of the realm, his property was forfeit to the Crown. Only Cromwell, as his former solicitor, knew where his assets had been conveyed. Cromwell resolved to 'make or mar' his career, and used his interviews with Henry about Wolsey's property as opportunities to play the courtier. He entered royal service in the spring of 1530, and was sworn of the Council at the end of that year. His enemies claimed that he had offered to make Henry 'the richest prince in Christendom', a rumour relished by opponents of the Reformation. It was most likely a smear; but firm proof is lacking either way.

Within another year Cromwell was Henry VIII' s chief executive. But he never became the king's partner, nor did he enjoy exclusive access to Henry. He contributed vigorously to Crown policy-making, but never wholly succeeded in dominating the king's counsels. He was more subtle, more emollient, less secure politically than Wolsey. Of course, the political context had changed: Cromwell served the mature Henry VIII – a ruler who (in Thomas More's graphic phrase) 'knew his own strength'.

Far more than Wolsey, Cromwell had to work obliquely. Publicly he cast himself as the administrative genius whose flair was his ability to transform abstract ideas into practical measures. Like Wolsey, he presented an affable disposition to the world. But the inner man was more ruthless and single-minded. Whereas Wolsey had been envied rather than feared, Cromwell was feared rather than envied. Moreover, he was feared increasingly on account of his partisan politics arid covert support for Protestantism. Cromwell rose to power in incremental stages. He reached the summit of his career only after Anne Boleyn's fall (May 1536). Until then he acted mainly as a parliamentary draftsman and police chief, for it was the circle of advisers led by Edward Fore and Thomas Cranmer which developed the theory for Henry VIII's ecclesiastical supremacy. Cromwell's role at that stage was to implement their ideas by drafting the necessary legislation, steering it through Parliament and stifling opposition in the country. His influence should not be underestimated. He played the leading part in subordinating the clergy to the Crown; he orchestrated the press campaign in defence of the break with Rome. Above all, he enforced the royal supremacy by means of oaths of allegiance and extensions to the treason law. When Henry repudiated Anne Boleyn in the spring of 1536, Cromwell was deft enough to obtain the evidence needed to destroy both Anne and her Court allies in order that Henry might marry Jane Seymour. But he also took his opportunity to drive his own political opponents from Court on the grounds that they had plotted to restore Princess Mary to the succession.

The *putsch* of 1536 gave Cromwell the ascendancy he had hitherto lacked at Court. His power was real, but it was less secure than Wolsey's, precisely' because it was sustained by factional politics rather than the king's unqualified trust. The mature Henry VIII did not need a partner; Cromwell remained 'the king's servant'. Hence attempts to topple him began immediately. As early as October 1536 the leaders of the revolt known as the Pilgrimage of Grace demanded that Cromwell and his clients be expelled from Court as ministerial 'upstarts' and 'heretics'. The rebels invoked the 'feudal-baronial' paradigm of counsel which stressed the king's duty to consult the leading nobility and other 'representatives' of the community at times of national crisis. Cromwell survived this challenge, but not before Henry had issued a printed Answer to the rebels which conceded that Cromwell was not a member of his Privy Council by right, but was merely 'elected and chosen' upon the advice of the Council to serve the whole body by virtue of his administrative skills.

Cromwell’s religious mission

When order was restored in April 1537, Cromwell reasserted his 'ministerial' status over the Privy Council. If, however, he could achieve that, why was he overthrown? The answer lies in his commitment to the Reformation, for Cromwell was an 'evangelical': a proto-Protestant, as Thomas More had always recognized. Labels must be applied with caution. Before the Council of Trent (1545-63) rigid definitions of 'Catholicism' and 'Protestantism' did not exist. Cromwell did not deny Christ's real presence in the Eucharist nor did he teach Luther's doc- trine of 'justification by faith alone' – the most compelling tests of 'heresy' while he was alive. It goes too far to describe Cromwell as an outright Protestant. But his emphasis on faith, the primacy of the Bible and the value of preaching put him 6rmly in the 'reformed' camp. His Protestant contemporaries clearly identified him as the 'hammer of the monks' and a 'valiant soldier and captain of Christ'.

In January 1535 Cromwell was appointed Henry VIII's vicegerent in spirituals. His task was to conduct a visitation of' the English church. He duly compiled Valor ecclesiasticus, a census of the church's wealth and condition which paved the way for the dissolution of all religious houses valued under £200 per annum. Initially there was no plan to dissolve the greater houses too, but by the summer of 1538 Cromwell's agents were at work upon a systematic programme of confiscation.

Henry VIII extended Cromwell's vicegerential commission after Anne Boleyn's fall. The new powers were modelled virtually word for word on those previously enjoyed by Wolsey as papal legate *a latere*. Without delay Cromwell ordered the clergy to defend the royal supremacy in sermons; to teach children the Lord's Prayer, Ten Commandments and articles of faith out of Scripture; and to abandon pilgrimages. Two years later he even authorized iconoclasm for images which were the objects of pilgrimage or veneration, and named his own agents as commissioners to determine which images were idolatrous. He forbade the burning of candles for saints and the dead, and (no less controversially) ordered an English translation of the Bible to be placed in every parish church.

The doctrinal formularies issued under Cromwell's vicegerency were also 'reformed' in slant. (Strictly the

formularies were Convocation's work, but Cromwell as vicegerent stood behind them.) For example, the Ten Articles (1536) – like the Lutheran Confession of Augsburg – omitted any mention of four of the seven Catholic sacraments. It is true that these Articles were not as 'reformed' as is sometimes claimed. Apart from their reservations over the four sacraments, and over the doctrine of purgatory and the cult of the saints, they were mainstream and uncontroversial. What was not uncontroversial was the way in which they were published, since Cromwell ordered his client, the Lutheran, Richard Taverner, to translate the Confession of Augsburg into English for simultaneous publication with the Articles. The two works appeared in print on the streets of London at almost the same time, which set the Articles into a Lutheran context.

Again, *The Institution of a Christian Man* (1537), which is otherwise known as the Bishops' Book, conceded that the four disputed sacraments were valid, but immediately deemed them to be inferior to the others, since only baptism, penance and the Eucharist had been instituted by Christ as 'necessary for our salvation'. The Bishops' Book claimed to be the first comprehensive account of the faith of the new Henrician church of' England. Contemporary opinion rightly saw in it a threat to traditional orthodoxy. The conservative Bishop Gardiner reckoned it to be systematically ambiguous, and wrote to Henry VIII to dissociate himself from it. Nor was it long before the king came to share Gardiner's distaste.

Cromwell's controversial formularies were the climax of a heated theological debate. In June 1537 he had used his vicegerential powers to convene a synod at the House of Lords to debate whether sacraments could exist in the absence of Scriptural authority and whether 'un-written verities' (i.e. traditional Catholic doctrines not founded on the Bible) were valid. He had opened the proceedings with a warning that Henry VIII would not 'suffer the Scripture to be wrested and defaced by any glosses, any papistical laws, or by any authority of doctors or councils'. He would not admit 'any articles or doctrine not contained in the Scripture, but approved only by continuance of time and old custom'. Whether Cromwell spoke for Henry VIII or for himself on this occasion is highly questionable. Either way, the heterodoxy of Cromwell's position was the idea that Scripture stood in opposition to traditional Catholic teaching. The crux of the Reformation, in England as much as on the Continent, was the division between the church and the Bible which the reformers regarded as the basis for their attack on Catholicism.

Cromwell used his position as vicegerent to ensure that evangelical reformers were promoted to bishoprics. He encouraged Protestant preachers wherever they could be found and made London the target of a major pulpit campaign. He even intervened in London's mayoral elections in order to support candidates with Protestant leanings. Above all, he masterminded the mass circulation of the English Bible, a step which in principle Henry VIII approved but Catholic bishops opposed on the grounds that it would foment heresy. Cromwell gave £400 of his own money to print a Bible that was essentially a revision by Coverdale of Tyndale's translations. Begun at Paris, but finished in England owing to the intervention of the French Inquisitor General, some 3,000 copies were printed by November 1539. Although few rural parishes had purchased the English Bible by the time of Cromwell's fall, almost all had acquired it within five years. Cromwell therefore did more than any other Englishman to put the Bible into the hands of ordinary people.

Cromwell's decline and fall

But the dangers of rapid Reformation were obvious. Pressure built up at Court as Cromwell's enemies claimed he would provoke further revolts. European politics also swerved against him when a rapprochement between France and Spain led to the peace of Nice. In London the Protestants went too far, and the turning point for Henry VIII was the case of John Lambert, who publicly denied Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. A show trial was held at Whitehall at which Henry VIII personally condemned Lambert to the stake for heresy (November 1538).

Cromwell was pushed further on to the defensive when the pope pronounced sentence of excommunication against Henry, and Charles V and Francis I agreed not to ally with England save by mutual consent. Papal schemes for a crusade against England came to nothing, but the scare was real. When France and Spain recalled their London ambassadors at the beginning of 1539, a concerted Catholic invasion was expected.

Cromwell therefore turned to diplomacy. He persuaded a reluctant Henry to seek marriage with a German Lutheran noblewoman in order to negotiate an alliance with the Protestant League of Schmalkalden. The result was a treaty, signed at Hampton Court in October 1539, between Henry VIII and Duke William of Cleves, But

Henry married Anne of Cleves under protest: Cromwell's career lay in the balance.

Meanwhile, the king had resumed command of his religious policy. The outcome was the Act of Six Articles (1539) which flatly reversed the thrust of Cromwell's vicegerential policy. Cromwell fought back at Court, but by the spring of 1540 was stymied. For Henry VIII insisted that the Act of Six Articles be enforced. A widening diplomatic gulf between France and Spain persuaded him that the Lutheran alliance was unnecessary. He loathed Anne of Cleves and wished to marry Catherine Howard. And the last straw was that Cromwell was denounced for shielding radical Protestants at Calais, and Henry's committee of investigation largely upheld the charges against him.

On 10 June 1540 Henry VIII threw Cromwell to the wolves. His goods and papers were seized, and he was executed on 28 July after providing from the Tower the evidence needed to obtain a divorce from Anne of Cleves.

Both Wolsey and Cromwell had made mistakes. Both possessed avowed political enemies. Yet neither fell purely as the result of these. On the contrary, despite the intense pressure of Court factionalism both clung to the greasy pole for several months until finally abandoned by Henry VIII. Wolsey's offence was his inability as papal legate to obtain the king's divorce from Rome. Cromwell was cast aside when Henry perceived him to be a crypto-Lutheran who had married him to the wrong wife, and whose pro-Lutheran diplomacy had become a liability.

Henry VIII's egoism was corrosive. When he chose to exert his will, the results could be fatal. He was consistent even in his seeming inconsistency, because throughout his reign he asserted himself consistently on issues that touched his regality. These were war and peace, diplomacy and foreign policy, the settlement of the Church of England and his wives. For Henry, as much as for Elizabeth I, these were the arcana imperii or 'mysteries of state'. The difference was that Elizabeth never allowed them to be wrested from her control, whereas Henry allowed others to handle them upon conditions. But it was the king who ruled and not his ministers. Furthermore, where the values of 'honesty' and 'expediency' conflicted, Henry VIII invariably chose 'expediency'. In this sense, it was the king, and not his ministers, who was truly Machiavellian.

Further Reading:

- G. Bernard, War, *Taxation and Rebellion in Early Tudor England: Wolsey and the Amicable Grant of 1525* , Brighton 1985
- S. Brigden,*London and the Reformation*, Oxford 1989
- S. Brigden, ‘Thomas Cromwell and the “Brethen”’ in C. Cross, D. Loades and J. Scarisbrick (eds.), *Law and Government under the Tudors*, Cambridge 1988 pp31-49
- G. Dickens, *Thomas Cromwell and the English Reformation*, London 1959
- G. Elton, *Reform and Reformation: England 1509-1558*, London 1977
- G. Elton,*Policy and Police: the Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell*, Cambridge 1972
- A. Fox and J. Guy, *Reassessing the Henrician Age: Humanism, Politics and Reform*, Oxford 1986
- P. Gwyn, *The King’s Cardinal: the Rise and Fall of Thomas Wolsey*, London 1990
- J. Guy, *Tudor England*, Oxford 1988
- J. Guy, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More*, Brighton 1980
- E. Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, Oxford 1986
- G. Redworth, *In Defence of the Catholic Church: the Life of Stephen Gardiner*, Oxford 1990
- R. Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation*, London 1993

- J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, London 1968
- D. Starkey,*The English Court: From the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War*, London 198
- D. Starkey, 'Court, Council and Nobility in Tudor England', in R. Asch and A. Birke (eds.), *Princes, Patronage and the Nobility*, Oxford 1991, pp 175-20
- R. Sylvester and D. Harding (eds.), *Two Early Tudor Lives: The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* by George Cavendish; *The Life of Sir Thomas More* by William Roper, New Haven Conn. 1962

John Guy is Professor of Modern History and Head of the School of History and International Relations at the University of St Andrews.