

Why was Edward II deposed?

By the time that Edward II ascended the throne, the office of kingship had gone through a sea-change. No longer was it the powerful personal bond which was enjoyed by Henry II, and instead kings were increasingly subject to the will of magnates whose loyalty lay to his office not his person. As Edward's own coronation oath puts it, '*Do you agree to maintain the laws and rightful customs which the community of the realm shall have chosen...*?' In this atmosphere the king's relations with the political class were paramount, and as he was later to find out to his cost, the latter did indeed possess the ultimate weapon of deposition. What was threatened in 1214 and 1237 and was a serious danger in 1258 was actually effected in 1327. Yet although this clearly shows the growth in the power of the magnates, deposition was in fact in nobody's interests. In deposing a king, one merely replaced one man with another, and did not alter the fundamentals of the problems at hand. Generally, co-operation between king, magnates and commonalty was by far the easiest, quietest and most profitable policy. Edward II was not deposed because certain nobles felt the need to flex their muscles: it indicates a much deeper set of problems with Edward II both in person and in his government of the country.

The single most obvious feature of Edward's rule was the predominance of royal favourites in the court extending their influence over government and policy. Edward's favourites were able to entirely dominate him in such a way that excluded almost everybody else from the king's counsel. A shining example of this is the fact that even after the death of Gaveston, Edward refused to listen to the advice of any of the barons who had played a part in the former's downfall. It also provoked strong personal hatreds among the nobles themselves. Gaveston had already been exiled in the last years of Edward I and returned to the fury of the same nobles who had requested that. It is unsurprising that when the latter exacted the Ordinances in 1311 by tightening their purse-strings, they could demand that '*because the king has been badly guided and counselled by evil counsellors, we ordain that all the evil counsellors be dismissed and that other people should be put in their place.*' Though it is true that this idea had been used in both Magna Carta and the Provisions of Oxford, Edward's continued use of royal favourites as opposed to formulating his own policies - in the manner of his kingly father for example - continued to infuriate the rest of the political community of the realm. However the fact that the Ordinances had been exacted led to other hatreds and jealousies among the triumphant barons, such as that which divided Warenne from Thomas of Lancaster. There was a definite split among nobles as to how to proceed towards the king, now he had been partially subjected to the rule of parliament - he was no longer entitled to leave the realm without permission, for example. The execution of Gaveston proved to be a decisive moment in precipitating a major crisis inside the political class. Was the subjection of the king to the law right or treacherous? One the one hand was the major medieval preoccupation with the rule of Law versus the tyranny of Will. This issue had been at the heart of so many previous crises between the monarch and his principal subjects, and certainly the Ordainers saw themselves as guaranteeing the freedom of the nation from royal tyranny. Indeed, they felt themselves to be carrying out their oath of 'Homage et serment' which said that '*Wherefore if the king by chance is not guided by reason...his liege subjects are bound by oath...to guide the king back again to reason and amend the estate of the crown...(and to do so, if need be) by violence.*' On the other hand, no ready alternative to the king was available: the source of law and justice resided in his own person, as did the entire social fabric of the country.

That the king overcame these difficulties can be ascribed to many causes, but they did not however end the rule by favourites. The Despensers became quite so prominent after 1322 because they had control of the king's ear. The deaths or executions of the main leaders of the baronial party merely formed a vacuum into which it was even easier to step.

The king was not only discredited by his reliance on unpopular favourites, but he also suffered greatly from his continued failure in the Scottish war. His attitude towards it was the first point of grievance that many nobles had: from the death of his father until 1311, he lacked the decisiveness to attempt a final solution to the war. In fact, throughout his rule, his war-leadership was a constant source of disgust in noble eyes. In an age when chivalry and knighthood were becoming much more a spiritual and moral ideal, Edward II preferred rustic crafts to war. Where his father had led a Crusade to Jerusalem, Edward II spent his time boating or swimming. The results of his ventures were similarly ignominious, with his personal presence at the humiliation of Bannockburn an especially low-point. In this campaign, he not only discredited himself but also the royalists who were with him - a serious blow considering that his opponents led by Thomas of Lancaster did not feel obliged to be present at the battle at all. Edward also never fully dealt with the Scottish threat throughout the whole of his reign, despite pouring ever greater numbers of troops north of the border every summer. Although it was not personally his fault that the cavalry-based nature of English armies was comprehensively out-thought by the guerrilla tactics of his opponent, Edward as king was responsible for the conduct of war. The most creditable performances of English armies actually came when Edward had nothing at all to do with their stewardship: the Scots were often successfully held by the militias of northern marcher lords, and it was to one of their number that Edward was indebted for the defeat of Lancaster. However, Scottish raiders plagued the northern half of England such that many landowners there were encouraged to pay protection-money to King Robert of Scotland and some indeed pledged homage. If Edward could not even offer protection to his own subjects, his failings as a king were very grave indeed.

If one of the duties of a king was to be successful in war, the other was to maintain justice at home. In the former role, Edward failed to protect the property and interest of his subjects, and in the latter role he actively connived at the subversion of justice in property matters. Throughout his reign, Edward did not merely listen to his favourites and accept what others called evil counsel. He also in return granted them such great preferment that it seriously unbalanced the system of royal patronage. Where all monarchs previously had 'raised men from the dust', Edward raised a select few to enormous power, with massive amounts of land. Thus the Ordinances say that '*All grants made to the king's damage and the diminution of the Crown are to be annulled...and not to be reinstated without the common assent of parliament.*' or in other words the king is not to alienate royal demesne to his favourites without consulting parliament. In doing this he trod viciously on the major baronial preoccupation with personal security. It was for this purpose that the Ordinances were exacted in 1311, and it continued to be a very great issue. When the troubles surrounding Edward's position came to an end in 1322 there was an opportunity for the king to form a reconciliation with his subjects and to create a further peace. On the advice of the Despensers, he declined to do this, and instead ordered a massive number of disinheritances and indeed executions. Personal security of tenure was further threatened when much of the forfeited land was given to the Despensers themselves. For those who retained their lands by means of paying a fine, a harsh financial policy was put into place and the hard-earned principle of parliamentary consent to taxation was put under severe strain: Edward was so rich that he did not need to rely on his subjects to carry out his policies. It is noticeable that when Isabella invaded the country, Edward was also deserted by his own barons of the exchequer who were also feeling the sharp end of the rule of royal Will over the heads of the community.

However the one fact that made Edward's rule more insupportable than any other was the fact that after 1322, those who were in royal favour felt that they could illegally seize other people's land with impunity. It was in this way that many landowners on the Welsh March woke up to find Despenser troops on their property. As the news spread it became increasingly clear that the king was reluctant to act against this, or indeed supported the Despensers' action as a

punishment against those who had not sufficiently supported Edward against his baronial enemies. The king's duty to protect his subjects was demonstrably incompatible with his present style of government, and so when Bishop Statford said in 1327 '*The king is incompetent to govern*' he need hardly have added in explanation '*Throughout his reign he has been controlled and governed by others who have given him evil counsel, to his dishonour and the destruction of the Holy Church and all his people.*'

When Isabella invaded the country, then, and provided an alternative to Edward's rule, she found a country deeply dissatisfied with its king. That the City of London opened its gates to her again shows how universal was the wish for change. Though not everyone agreed with all the new government's policies, notably on peace with Scotland, scarcely a tear was shed for the passing of Edward II