

## Is there any evidence that the Civil Wars were a popular uprising?

The heated period leading up to the formation of combatant parties in England between the royal faction and their parliamentary antagonists had been formed - albeit from outside England itself - by a popular uprising against the Stuart monarch. The formation of the Solemn League and Covenant by outraged the Presbyterian population of Scotland in reaction to Laud's new Prayer Book marked clearly that popular demonstrations of dissent against government policies could find expression with or without the initiative of their elected representatives. That the government failed almost uniquely to suppress open rebellion provoked a crisis in both its reserves of credit and credibility. Yet one matter which must be borne in mind from the episode is that opposition to the Crown did not come about in this affair through criticism of the monarch's religious powers and prerogatives in England - but rather in Presbyterian Scotland. Although serious reservations to Laud's new liturgy had been expressed in England, no overt rebellion had broken out because of it until after the Scottish victory over royal troops. Certainly, anticlericalism remained a significant factor in English life, both on the political stage at Westminster and in the parishes. Bishop Cooper's *Admonition to the People of England* for example as far back as 1589 speaks of 'the loathsome contempt, hatred and disdain that *the most part of men* in these days bear... towards the ministers of the church of God.'<sup>1</sup> Certainly the ministers most hated of all were the higher ranks of the Church hierarchy, such that Joan Hoby of Colnbrook, Buckinghamshire, said in 1634 'that she did not care a pin or fart for my Lord's Grace of Canterbury... and she did hope that she should live to see him hanged.'<sup>2</sup> A more concrete example of this popular opposition to firstly the Arminian innovations into the Prayer Book and episcopal rule in general came from the fact that the 'Root and Branch' petition calling for an end to the Catholic church structure in the Church of England was signed by 15,000 citizens of London in early 1640.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is also clear that the monarch himself was not held responsible for the growth of ill-feeling, but merely the hostile reaction on the part of a more pious and godly section of the community to the perceived return of the Catholic doctrines of the past - as was the basis of the Covenant in Scotland. Edward Nicholas explained it by saying that 'The noise of an intention to introduce popery was that which first brought into dislike with the people the government both of the church and commonwealth.'<sup>4</sup> It was also clear that puritan members of the House of Commons were very willing to exaggerate the threat of this in order to force through their own radical reforms of the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559. John Selden admitted as much when he said in 1640 that 'We charge the prelatial clergy with popery to make them odious, though we know that they are guilty of no such thing.'<sup>5</sup>

The role of the people in this political conflict over the future course of religion lay chiefly in the proximity of the people of the City of London to the political centre of Westminster. London as with much of the rest its hinterland in the south-east of England had received the largest number of Protestant preachers in the century which had passed since the arrival of the Reformation. 17% of all the evangelicals in the country could be found there even before 1558, and while the large majority of the population acquiesced in the changes in religion, for the more Puritan segments of the community, separatism and confrontation with the established church became more and more common especially after the Arminian innovations under Laud. The Solemn League and Covenant found many supporters very close to Westminster, while 'in many church have some members of their private authority forbid the priests to read divine service, others in

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<sup>1</sup> Hill: *The world turned upside-down* p.23

<sup>2</sup> Hill: *The world turned upside-down* p.24

<sup>3</sup> Manning: *The English People and the English Revolution* p.4

<sup>4</sup> Manning: *The English People and the English Revolution* p.29

<sup>5</sup> Manning: *The English People and the English Revolution* p.28

contempt thereof put on their hats during the reading of prayers, which gave such encouragement to the rabble rout of that faction in the City, that in divers churches unheard of violences were offered to ministers officiating in full congregations by a few sectaries, yet scarce durst any man either rescue the minister, or defend their own religion.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, such reactions were not reserved only for the capital, since in Bristol a small group of separatists founded in 1640 quickly grew to 160 members, and by August 1641 there were several separatist congregations in the city. In Chelmsford it was said that ‘this town is so filled with sectaries, especially Brownists and Anabaptists’ that one-third of the congregation refused to communicate ‘in the Church-Liturgy’ and half refused communion kneeling.<sup>7</sup> This series of popular protests meant that the Elizabethan settlement was severely tested by a puritan movement whose aims were to change the liturgy and ecclesiastical structure of the Church, but which remained tied to the concept of a national Church under Government control. Yet the effect of these protests was to create a backlash among the gentry and especially by their representatives in Parliament against the extreme language used by some puritans, whom they denounced as demonstrating a wider political and social radicalism. Certainly Sir Thomas Aston saw in 1641 that ‘under pretext of reforming the church, the true aime of such spirits is to shake off the yoke of all obedience, either to ecclesiastical, civill, common, statute or customary lawes of the kingdome and to introduce a mere arbitrary government.’<sup>8</sup> Without doubt such aims did exist, best expressed by the Leveller Richard Overton’s boast after the successful conclusion of the war against the king in 1646 that ‘without a powerful and compulsive presbytery in the church, a compulsive mastership of aristocratic government over the people in the state could never long be maintained.’<sup>9</sup>

Before the outbreak of hostilities, however, the constant simmering of civic tensions so close to the seat of power allowed merely for a greater sense of paranoia among Parliamentarians of all views and greater credence to be granted to rumours of popular uprisings. Sir John Coke heard rumours in 1641 of a Scottish mobilisation and proposals ‘to transport their forces to London, where they have a very strong party among the discontented citizens; so that unless this earl be sacrificed to the public discontentment I see not what hopes we have of peace.’<sup>10</sup> Later he said that ‘In the House of Commons he hath not any party considerable, some think about a hundred. To balance the Lords there is a petition preparing in the City with 20,000 or 30,000 hands subscribed... to demand justice against the earl of Strafford.’<sup>11</sup> If the Parliament felt that it needed to keep constant vigilance against an attack by radical Londoners - Essex as commissioner was charged to provide a guard of 200 during the king’s absence in Scotland in 1641 - paranoia also extended to the latter possibly ordering anti-parliamentary and anti-Protestant action from covert Catholic forces based with recusant nobles. John Pym himself worried that ‘Secret forces were ready in some places and secret meetings had been in Hampshire, and by sundry great recusants, which might give us occasion to conceive that some wicked design were still in hatching.’<sup>12</sup>

There were some attempts by peers to reconcile the fevered situation, attitudes remained coloured by the feverish political temperature both inside and outside parliament. As an example, Lord Savile said in early 1642 ‘I would not have the king trample on the parliament, or the parliament lessen him so much as to make a way for the people to rule us all.’<sup>13</sup> Yet even here,

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<sup>6</sup> Manning: *The English People and the English Revolution* p.32

<sup>7</sup> Manning: *The English People and the English Revolution* p.38

<sup>8</sup> Morill: *The Revolt of the Provinces* p.49

<sup>9</sup> Hill: *The world turned upside-down* p.30

<sup>10</sup> Manning: *The English People and the English Revolution* p.9

<sup>11</sup> Manning: *The English People and the English Revolution* p.8

<sup>12</sup> Manning: *The English People and the English Revolution* p.23

<sup>13</sup> Morill: *The Revolt of the Provinces* p.36

his attitude was greatly coloured by class-based antagonism to the London poor. As far back as 1594, propaganda for colonisation in Ireland noted that ‘the people poor and seditious, which were a burden to the commonweal, are drawn forth, whereby the matter of sedition is removed out of the City.’ It is unsurprising to find unflattering portraits of the petitioners to Parliament in 1640 being ‘most of them, men of mean or a middle quality themselves, having no aldermen, merchants or Common Councilmen among them... They were modest in their apparel but not in their language.’ In the other expanding towns of the period, gentry and notables retained the same low opinion of the ‘people of mean condition’ as in 1633 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne who ‘...are apt to turn every pretence and colour of grievance into uproar and seditious mutiny.’<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hobbes after the Civil Wars in 1651 reminded that ‘it was under pretence of religion that the lower sort of citizens...do challenge liberty to themselves.’<sup>15</sup>

The fear of the people which scandalised the political classes did however have a definite political consequence, which was to aid the formation of a group of former reformers who now saw the only chance of security being with the king whom they had previously criticised for the tyrannies of Thorough. Digby for instance complained that ‘I am confident there is no man of judgement, that will think it fit for a parliament, under a monarchy, to give countenance to irregular, and tumultuous assemblies of people, be it for never so good an end... what can be of greater presumption, than for petitioners not only to prescribe to a parliament what, and how it shall do; but for a multitude to teach to a parliament what and what is not the government according to God’s Word.’<sup>16</sup> This return of sympathies towards the king was only enhanced when leaders of the Commons first attempted to associate with the crowds by publishing amongst other things the Grand Remonstrance. As Sir Edward Dering put it ‘When I first heard of a Remonstrance, I did not dream that we should remonstrate downward, tell stories to the people, and talk of the king as a third person.’<sup>17</sup> When added to the previous actions forced on them in parliament, such as the demand that ‘unless this earl be sacrificed to the public discontentment I see not what hopes we have of peace’, the radicalism of the mob seemed a growing danger. In this attitude, the proto-royalist camp, somewhat surprisingly shared the views of the Leveller Richard Overton, who although saying ‘The generality of the people must be engaged’, made it clear that ‘but we must be careful the supreme power fall not into the people’s hands.’<sup>18</sup> Certainly the radicalism of many of the people - and especially the religiously-motivated ones - did increase as the years went on, as can be seen from the reaction of a Northamptonshire sectary in 1643 who said ‘What do you tell me of birth and descent? I hope within this year to see never a gentleman in England.’<sup>19</sup>

In the counties, as opposed to in the main towns, the main pressures of the national political life tended to confuse and the ruling classes, while their importance came less clear in a situation requiring rather a defence of their own property in the face of disturbances coming from outside and in the collapse of recognised systems of order such as the assizes and prerogative courts. Disorders were perceived as being more frequent, again often class-based, such as the fact that enclosure-riots affected 26 counties. However it was again religious matters which attracted the greatest level of lawlessness. Tithes were attacked in isolated incidents of *jacquerie*, while even the King’s army, while marching to Scotland in 1640-1 sacked churches or attacked their conductors in 20 counties. On the other hand radical Protestant preachers instigated attacks on Laudian innovations such as altar rails and stained-glass windows, this bout of iconoclasm even

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<sup>14</sup> Hill: *The world turned upside-down* p.17

<sup>15</sup> Hill: *The world turned upside-down* p.26

<sup>16</sup> Manning: *The English People and the English Revolution* p.6

<sup>17</sup> Manning: *The English People and the English Revolution* p.50

<sup>18</sup> Hill: *The world turned upside-down* p.26

<sup>19</sup> Hill: *The world turned upside-down* p.19

having some official blessing. As the *Souldier's Catechisme* put it in 1644 'I confess that nothing ought to be done in a tumultuous manner. But seeing that God hath put the sword of Reformation into the soldiers' hands, I think it not amiss that they should cancel and demolish those monuments of superstition and idolatry, especially seeing the magistrate and the minister that should have done it formerly neglected it.'<sup>20</sup> However as war spread on a more formal basis, it also took on a more bureaucratic and expensive nature, which had nothing to do with a spontaneous provincial uprising. For a start, both the Royal and Parliamentary armies remained tactically under firm government control, either via the Council of War for Charles's army, or Essex and Lords Lieutenant being responsible to Parliament. The means of equipping these armies and feeding them also took on bureaucratic appearances, with tax-collectors sent out for this purpose. Secondly, no particular region gave any special appearance of enthusiasm for war or the London politics which had brought it about. As an example, in August 1642, Cheshire drew up a declaration which stated that both King and Parliament had pledged themselves to the same aims and objectives, and that Cheshire men would not subject themselves to either the commission or array or Militia Ordinance, but would call for the cessation of arms and for 'some moderate persons' to act as mediators. They also attempted to suspend parliamentary and royal commissions 'without disputing the legality or illegality of either, but as finding neither of them soe necessary at this tyme as for setting them on foot to involve this county in blood.'<sup>21</sup> Similarly Lincolnshire declared support for neither the parliament nor king, raising a troop of horse 'only for the preservation of peace within themselves, in that they resolve... not to embark further by sending forces out of the county, to aid either side, but as much as in them lies, to endeavour accommodation.'<sup>22</sup> The efficiency of administering a war-budget proved to be one of the key factors in Parliamentary success, since the costs incurred by the fighting, even only in monetary terms, were ruinously expensive. The Treasurer of the Eastern Association of counties handled in 1644-5 a sum of money equivalent to the Crown's entire income before the war. Kent was paying more in assessments in a month in 1645-6 than it had for a whole year's worth of the loathed ship-money. In Essex in the summer of 1645, the inhabitants were paying £6,750 per month for the New Model Army, £300 per month for 'local defence', £720 per month for the combined garrisons of the local Association, £750 per month of the relief of Ireland and a further sum for the Scots. In addition to this, free quartering and billeting cost Buckinghamshire £17,000 up to the middle of 1646.

If the counties as a whole expressed a marked lack of involvement in the politics of Westminster, it reflected not a lack of interest, but rather an interest in maintaining neutrality and individual property rights regardless of the current occupier - Portland for instance changed hands 5 times in the space of two years between 1642-4. Many individuals were prepared to make payments both to royalist and parliamentarian taxation collectors, an example being the unfortunate William Davenport whose £500 payment to local parliamentarian collectors was declared *ultra vires* and not deducted from his fine. In non-financial spheres, people also remained tightly neutral on the question of allegiance. Ministers often refused to preach sermons supporting either side, until the withdrawal of the Book of Common Prayer pressurised the situation. Local rebellions also arose with manifestos not even mentioning the combatant-parties, and example being the Kentish rebellion of 1645 which cited 'illegal taxes', the abolition of the Prayer Book, the imposition of the Covenant and the impressment of men forced 'from the plough's handle.?' Likewise the rebellion in Lynn in 1643 was met with the demand that 'if they will deliver the town by Saturday nine in the morning, they shall have privilege and freedom; as for freedom from Ordinances of Parliament, they must expect no such thing.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hill: *The world turned upside-down* p.24

<sup>21</sup> Morill: *The Revolt of the Provinces* p.37

<sup>22</sup> Morill: *The Revolt of the Provinces* p.37

<sup>23</sup> Morill: *The Revolt of the Provinces* p.95

However, there were distinct local uprisings in the course of the Civil Wars, for the purpose not of a cause, but merely self-preservation. These were by no means small, since the Clubmen movements of Wiltshire and Dorset claimed to be able to raise 20,000 men at 48 hours notice - a fact which neither Royalists nor Parliamentarians disputed. As associations formed with the intention of defeating all invaders, they were however in some circumstances prepared to ally with one faction against another for the specific purpose of avoiding bloodshed in their county. Permanent alliances were not to be had, as can be seen from the response given by the Somerset Clubmen to overtures from Blake and Pyne saying 'it is quite contrary to the principles of our Association, for instead of Mediators, we shall become Parties, instead of making peace, we shall in all possibility lengthen the war.' - yet neither combatant party could accept that they were politically neutral as can be seen from Edward Massey's comment that 'I have used all the best arguments I can to moove them to declare themselves for the Parliament then they may have proteccion and authority for what they doe. Now their act is a perfect act of Rebellion to be justified by now Law or Statute and their confusion will bee certaine.'<sup>24</sup> Clubmen movements were often a symptom of widespread break-downs in public order, especially considering the looting and other foraging carried out by other armies - notably Goring's in the West Country. It is noticeable that Clubman contact with the New Model Army was far more cordial, due to the Army's immeasurably higher standard of discipline.

The New Model Army itself was to some extent a reflection of a popular involvement in government - its composition was far more representative of the nation than its nominal Parliamentary masters. The introduction of the Agitators and the Army Council into the command structure of a military force allowed for a much greater influence by the 'mean sort' of people. Joyce reported the capture of the king in 1647 by saying 'let the Agitators know once more that we have done nothing in our own name, but what we have done hath been in the name of the whole Army.' At the Army Council on 5 June 1647 the troops 'hooted divers officers out of the field, unhorsed some and rent their clothes and beat them... Officers at that time being admitted only by mutual consent, they could have no power but what was betrusted to them by the soldiers.'<sup>25</sup> Levellers such as Overton saw the opportunity for the military democracy he espoused, saying 'the Army is the only formal and visible head that is left unto the people for protection and deliverance,' while White said of the king 'I believe the sword may justly remove the power from him and settle it in its original fountain next under God - the people.' However, the control of the ordinary soldiers over that of the generals as regarded the conduct of the army lasted only so long as the king remained in custody, while subsequent battles to maintain the unity of command allowed the execution of the prominent Leveller leaders. In other respects it can be seen that there was only ever a very small minority of the population who were involved in the fighting, and only a small number more than that had any great interest in anything other than the defence of their own property. As a popular uprising, it cannot be denied that there was without doubt a popular element in the politics surrounding the outbreak of warfare, and later in the New Model Army. However this was tempered by the vigorous attempts by leaders of all sides to ensure that all participants were firmly under their own - mostly gentry-based - control.

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<sup>24</sup> Morill: *The Revolt of the Provinces* p.100

<sup>25</sup> Hill: *The world turned upside-down* p.50