

To what extent did the political problems between 1547 and 1558 arise from the facts that Edward VI was a minor and Mary a woman?

In the years after Henry VIII's death, the profound changes that were taking place in the religious, economic and political life of the country all took place in the context of a relative lack of firm sovereign control as had been previously the case. Due to the fact that the monarch between 1547 and 1558 was not a king who had reached his majority automatically in some eyes made the government less able to exert its proper authority. Certainly this period saw a larger number of rebellions - whether localised or not - than either before or immediately after it. However at no point was it ever the case that there was a vacuum on executive control in the central government. The Protectorate under the Earl of Hertford (immediately created Duke of Somerset) was established only 3 days after Henry VIII's death, giving sovereign powers to the Somerset until Edward's 18th birthday. Indeed since the Protectorate was clearly legitimately established according to both the will of Henry VIII and the consent of the executors of that will, there was no role for faction to paralyse the workings of the Council. Indeed the prestige of the Council if anything increased after the fall of Somerset, since the Duke of Northumberland governed as Lord President of the Council. Its sphere of government remained unchallenged, even when rivalry between Gardiner and Paget in Mary's reign spilled over into Parliament itself as regarded the Queen's marriage. Yet despite this, the Council continued to manage Parliamentary business in general very effectively, despite apparent opposition especially over religious issues. An example could be the 1554 Parliament, in which only 80 out of 350 members opposed the bill whereby all of Edward VI's religious legislation was repealed - especially surprising considering that approximately a third of the Commons had been present in the session which originally passed them. Although Gardiner's Bill for reviving the heresy laws was rejected by the Lords after fears for the future of secularised Church land - yet an identical bill passed easily the following year, with proper management by the leading Councillors.

Yet the fact that a Protectorship was ever felt necessary in the first place highlights the continuing uncertainty that was inevitable for a period of time when the king was too young to exercise real sovereign judgement. Even then it was possible to criticise Protectors in a way which was unthinkable towards the anointed king. Southampton was removed from the Council according to Dale Hoak 'not because the earl had remained a Henrician Catholic, but because he had from the very beginning opposed Hertford's creation as Protector.'¹ Yet apart from this removal it was impossible to bring any further charges against him. Even where this were not the case members of the Council did not possess the prestige which was necessary for the true maintenance of royal authority. An example comes from Protector Somerset's own brother Thomas Seymour, who complained that in previous minorities where the king had two uncles it was unknown that 'one should have all the rule and the other none, but that if one were protector, the other should be governor.'² Somerset's activities in ruling without the Council's consent - examples being the construction of the garrison at Haddington, the cession of Boulogne to the French and the 1549 enclosure commissions - led to 29 articles of law against him. Even Edward VI in his *Chronicle* recorded the charges as including 'enriching himself of my treasure, following his own opinion, and doing all by his own authority.'³ - and the fact that charges were brought go to prove that authority still only lay with the king despite his extreme youth. Northumberland's position after the coup which brought down Somerset was so weak

¹ Loach *Edward VI* p.56

² Loach *Edward VI* p.55

³ Loach *Edward VI* p.91

initially that he was forced to not only allow the latter to live but even to welcome him back to the Council. In Mary's reign on the other hand, her sovereignty as Queen was never subject to discussion, and her marriage was concluded by herself with a free hand for the maintenance of the succession as much as a dynastic trick to shore up England's foreign policy. In this case the fact of a royal minority appeared much more serious than if the claimant were female.

Another destabilising factor in the political life of the country during the reigns of Edward and Mary was the desperate state of the royal finances, despite the best efforts of Cromwell and Henry VIII's ministers to leave them on a solid footing. According to the Privy Council, the dissolutions of 1548 were carried out to relieve the king's 'charges and expences, which do dayly growe and encrease.'⁴, although their religious message cannot be denied. From this statute, the bishopric of Lincoln lost 30 manors to the Crown, Bath & Wells 20, Norwich 12 and Exeter 9 manors. Yet this money, as with so much else of the proceeds of dissolution, was itself dissolved in wars with England's neighbours, specifically in this case the wars with Scotland and later France. Royal finances were often so dire that the young Edward VI noted that 'My Unkell off Sumerset deylth very hardly with me, and keypth me so strayt that I cane not have mony at my wylle, but my Lord Admiral both sendes me mony and gyves me mony.'⁵ In these circumstances, it is easy to see how many of the political problems facing the Crown could come from the fact that revenues were insufficient to carry out the Crown's policies. Parliamentary taxation - in theory only requested in exceptional circumstances, became more common - Parliaments were required to grant subsidies to the government in 1545, 1548, 1553, 1555 & 1558. The scale of the shortfall can be seen from Paget reminding Somerset in 1548 that taxation was 'the only cause why Parliament was called before Christmas' while the Commons expected that the subsidy bill was 'the first thing that shall have come in Parliament.'⁶ The obvious cause of this apparent shortfall was clearly from the cost of making war against the Scots and Welsh. In total, the Scottish wars bridging the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI came to £580,000 - in other words half the total wealth accumulated from the dissolution, while the garrisoning method employed by the Protectorate came to approximately double that of Henry. When there subsequently arose rebellions in England itself, the costs only rose further. The Western Rebellion of 1549 was to a great extent precipitated by the Edwardian Reformation in any case, yet the impoverished government required even further dissolutions in order to pay for the troops suppressing the rebellion and thus exacerbating the already difficult situation. Unfortunately the method used by the government to remain solvent - debasement of the coinage - proved to be yet more damaging to an already fragile economy since the consequent inflation meant that rises in army wages could quickly become prohibitively expensive.

The connection between the state of royal finances and those of the country as a whole should not be overstated, but nevertheless it must be said that much of the poverty of the Crown matched the difficulties being faced more generally. Firstly, the population of the country rose dramatically in the middle of the sixteenth century, causing more stress on the agricultural stability of the country. The population rise as a whole - 2.774m in 1541, but 3.01m in 1551 - also masks several even more dramatic rises in certain regions. Predominant among these was the population of London which over tripled from 60,000 in 1520 to 200,000 in 1603.⁷ Despite this dramatic rise - which the monarch could do little about - the actual supplies of food did not increase alongside it, leading to inflated prices for food reinforcing the inflation caused by the debasement of coinage. When in 1555 and 1556 two successive harvests failed, epidemics of typhus and influenza combined with it to create a demographic disaster wholly beyond the

⁴ Loach *Edward VI* p.48

⁵ Loach *Edward VI* p.55

⁶ Loach *The Mid-Tudor Polity* p.10

⁷ Loach *Edward VI* p.37

control of the government.⁸ What made the population pressure worse came from the fact that beforehand, the increase in England's cloth trade had come at a time of a fairly steady population level - thus making sheep-farming a more profitable occupation than arable crops. The Townsend family in East Anglia as an example owned 3,000 sheep in 1544 and just four years later this had increased to 4,200 - and to achieve this they infringed on common land. Sheep-farming therefore clearly bore the brunt of subsequent protests in the 1550s and the government used it as an excuse for their own actions in depreciating the currency. As Edward's proclamation read 'christian people by the greedy covetousness of some men are eaten up and devoured of brute beasts, and driven from their houses by sheep and bullocks.' Commissioners were sent out 'since of late by the enclosing of lands and arable grounds in divers and sundry places of this realm many have been driven to extreme poverty and compelled to leave the places where they were born.'⁹ Enclosure may have seemed an easy target, yet only 2% of the country was enclosed between 1455 and 1603, and of that the greatest amount was enclosed almost a century before Edward's reign. However the commissioners had to give out warnings not 'to take upon you to be executors of the statutes; to cut up men's hedges and to put down their enclosures.' Even more strikingly, a gathering at Salisbury in 1549 said: 'they wylle obaye the kynges maieste and my lord protector with alle the counselle, but...thaye wyll not have ther commonse and ther growndes to be inclosyd and soo taken from them.'¹⁰

One of the problems facing the government from popular actions such as this is that government policy was often difficult to discern, due to the lack of a central royal policy. During Kett's rebellion it was said that a rebel could be found 'in every towne and typplyng house, my lordes graces name in hys mouthe sayng that hys grace hath allowed alle hys doyngs for goode.'¹¹ The serious opposition to Mary's marriage to Philip of Spain also allowed Sir Thomas Wyatt for instance to think that he was acting on behalf of the country. Certainly the defection of Norfolk's captains encouraged him in this thought, and Mary's final conciliatory effort was to offer to hear any petition which stated that the marriage 'implied a divorce between her and her first spouse' the Crown of England.¹²

However in the differing religious policies of the Crown, there is very little doubt that the agenda during Edward's reign was set by others, while Mary herself had a great role in reasserting Catholic doctrines. The imposition of the English Prayer Book in 1548 for instance had nothing to do with the ten-year old Edward, yet was an instantly recognisable change, not least because of the fact that the Cornishmen who rebelled against it could not understand the English version any more than the Latin it replaced. The wide ranging demands of the rebels even in 1549 - the restoration of holy images, holy bread 'and all other auncient olde ceremonyes' as well as 'that the General Councils and holy decrees of our forefathers be observed, kept and performed'¹³ shows how far and how effective the commissioners sent out by Edward VI's government had been. Visitations by radical bishops such as Latimer, Ridley and Hooper set out to go well beyond the commissions they were entrusted with, and yet these same bishops also did not hesitate to criticise directly the government's religious policies. In his 1548 visitation of Oxford & Cambridge, merger plans for a separate college for civil law condemned by Ridley, who said: 'it is a very sore thing, a great scandal...to take a college founded for the study of God's word, and to apply it to the use of students in men's law.'¹⁴ Hooper refused the bishopric of Gloucester

⁸ Tittler *The Reign of Mary I* p.6

⁹ Loach *Edward VI* p.60

¹⁰ Loach *Edward VI* p.60

¹¹ Loach *Edward VI* p.86

¹² Loach *The Mid-Tudor Polity* p.62

¹³ Loach *Edward VI* p.76

¹⁴ Loach *Edward VI* p.42

since 'are these offices ordained in the name of the saints or of God?' and said of the first Prayer Book that 'I am much offended with that book, and that not without abundant reason, that if it be not corrected, I neither can nor will communicate with the church in the administration of the Lord's Supper.' It was noticeable that even this Prayer Book which Hooper thought so little of, was sanctioned only by Parliament and not by the clerical convocation, which would most likely have rejected it. On the other hand, Mary's restoration of Catholic practice to England was carried out to a great extent by her personally. It was Mary for instance, who re-awarded the First Fruits and Tithes to the Church, thus shoring up its crippling financial situation in the aftermath of the Dissolution; she too was instrumental in bringing Spanish clerics to England - one of whom, Juan de Villagarcia, succeeded in obtaining a recantation from Cranmer; finally it was by her influence that Pole was prevented from pursuing his uncompromising yet impossible demands towards the need to return church lands.

In conclusion, both Mary and Edward faced by their sex and age respectively several difficulties in imposing their personal impact upon the political life of the nation. More especially, the political men of England also had to change their positions and roles to compensate for the weaknesses of their sovereign. However in many ways Edward as a young boy was not in a position to utilise his own person to best advantage. He had been betrothed in his infancy to the young queen of Scots, but had not had a direct impact on this or the conduct of the war fought on his behalf. Mary however was able to make use of her peculiar strengths as queen regnant especially in persuading Londoners to support her claim in 1553, and again in gaining a Spanish alliance by her marriage. Whether this latter decision was a wise one is debatable, but what is not is that it was Mary's own decision by reason of state to enter into it. Both monarchs, however, attempted to rule over a kingdom whose serious economic disruption and religious divisions meant that whoever was on the throne would have had to grapple with the same problems - and with advisors common to their predecessors. Government in Tudor England was based on maintaining stability and security, and therefore the solutions in all but religious policy were cautious, conventional and above all common.