

What are the limitations of faction as a key to understanding the politics of Henry VIII's reign?

Henry VIII lived at a time in which government had advanced sufficiently so as to reach directly into local affairs with recognised and accepted instruments - the civil courts and justices of the peace were capable of exercising royal decrees in a way which had been impossible beforehand. On the other hand, this system of government remained intensely dependent on the personal intervention of the king himself in initiating any action, whether on the grand scale of war and peace on the European stage or the more mundane actions of filling vacancies at a country parsonage. Royal writs and grants were well understood, yet procuring these remained a difficult proposition, seeing as the king had to give his assent twice over - the second time by his written signature - as well as the terms of these grants haggled over with his officials, before they could be effected. The personal nature of this monarchy threw into question the role of those immediately surrounding the king himself, for they clearly held positions of power entirely separate from their official functions. As explained by late medieval scholars, in the sacred body of the king, there lay two bodies - the body natural and the body politic. Yet the conjunction of the two meant that those who held posts serving the body natural - the servants of his private chambers, such as the Groom of the Stool - also held considerable influence over the body politic. Bearing in mind that for every position to be filled there were plenty of willing candidates, it can be easily seen how those surrounding the king became constantly preoccupied with who had the greatest influence over him - and that those with less influence would look to gain more at others' expense. Historians have generally lumped the unstable alliances of retainers thus constantly formed and broken as being examples of faction, especially where these had influence over government policy. However it leaves a great deal to be desired in terms of definition. What seems abundantly clear is that the factions of courtiers did not come together in order to promote definite aims and objectives. Indeed, as Ives points out, 'All policies had to be the king's policies and hence the political battle was to persuade the king to listen. It is not too much to suggest that faction was the natural form of loyal political activity and that the 'political programme' was the characteristic of rebels.'¹ In his definition, faction therefore was a description of a constant battle to persuade the king to listen to a particular group or set of people as opposed to others. This definition also does not enlighten us greatly, since this process is inevitable around centres of power. In this period, however, there was a definite aim in persuading the king to listen - the promotion of the suits, benefices, offices and other grants which the king alone could grant. The concept of faction therefore has a definite meaning when applied to the game of patronage, and how one group could promote their own clients over and above those of another while the loyalty of all parties remained completely with the king.

The condition of the country in the sixteenth century certainly supports this interpretation of the importance of factional conflict. With a population rise of two-thirds in the century from 1500, a far greater number of people were now seeking political advancement compared with that of beforehand. At the same time, the number of available posts was declining - due to the effects of the dissolution of monasteries removing many monastic livings, and the inflation of the 1540s eroding the value of existing benefices. 304 monastic houses were dissolved by the Act of 1536, with over 200 more in the four years following it. A register at Lambeth recorded 975 monks who voluntarily withdrew without waiting for pensions, while an enquiry of 1552 found 800 more still awaiting payment of pensions.² The same process of dissolution and sale of church lands also saw a great increase in the number of offices in royal hands - and increased the importance of the Court once more in providing the means to obtaining these livings.

¹ Ives: *Faction in Tudor England* p.3

² Dickens: *The English Reformation* p.202

Competition for offices meant that alliances needed to be made, a fact emphasised even further by the changing layout of royal palaces. The increased size of restricted areas and Tudor monarchs increased usage of them, meant that potential grants - which required the king's assent twice - would have to be signed in the privy chamber and thus brought in by an official of the chamber who thus had ample opportunity to promote or scupper the would-be beneficiary. An example comes from Cavendish's biography of Wolsey, which states that 'he daily attended upon the king in court, being in his especial grace and favour, who then had great suit made unto him as councillors most commonly do that be in favour.'³ Again, the importance of personal contacts in this process can be seen in a letter written by Walter Walsh to William Brereton in 1530 which reads: 'the parson of Hanworth is not likely to continue living long. I spake yesterday to Master Norris; he promised me to move the king to be good to a brother of mine therein, which is a priest and studieth at Cambridge. I pray you solicit it and to hearken lest any priest or any other should make suit therein.'⁴ It also made rich men out of those in positions with access to the royal person. William Brereton, for example, had amassed 30 royal grants and a lucrative marriage to one of 'the king's widows' by the time of his execution in 1536 - a total of over £1000 per year. Straightforward bribery also in one case gave three members of the Privy Chamber 200 marks each for their 'good offices with the king.'

Yet if for supplicants it was important to find a patron in the king's closest retainers, it was no less important for ministers and councillors to control the flow of patronage since they themselves would not last long if honours started to flow through others. An example of can be seen given above on the concern of Walter Walsh that Brereton 'hearken lest any priest or any other should make suit therein.' When George Cavendish mentioned regarding Anne Boleyn that 'it was judged by and through all the Court, that she being in such favour with the king might work masteries with the king and obtain any suit of him for her friend...'⁵ - this proved a major problem for Cardinal Wolsey to face. If nothing else, the danger of allowing others to become a source of patronage could lie in the fact that sources of influential opposition could multiply. The actions of Thomas Wolsey himself prove the need to closely monitor the influence of others - as business took him more frequently from the king's side, he paid more attention to his attendants, engineering for example the dismissal of Richard Pace the king's secretary and in 1519 the dismissal of the gentlemen of privy chamber. The Eltham Ordinances of 1526 also bolstered Wolsey's position at court by reducing the number of staff in the Privy Chamber who could supplant him. More dramatically the rise and fall of the Boleyn family was precipitated almost solely by the shifting factions of courtiers.

In this way, the game of patronage was played out along factional lines, with the winners seeing their own influence grow along with the numbers of their clients. Yet one must not go from there as far as suggesting that government policy and actions were necessarily decided solely by those with immediate access to the king to the detriment of their personal enemies. On the contrary, Privy Chamber officials were often employed for precisely the fact that they did not represent individual factions, but because of their complete loyalty to the king's cause above all other motives. Almost all of those sent on more than 7 diplomatic missions abroad were gentlemen of the Privy Chamber, for example. Their status as the king's body-servants also gave greater prestige to their commissions than those of other officials. An example being that upon his arrest, Wolsey questioned the authority of the commission until the appearance of Walter Walsh: as Wolsey said: 'you are a sufficient commission in yourself inasmuch as ye be one of the king's privy chamber.' In missions abroad, they were also heavily used - William Brereton was sent for instance to the Pope in 1530 to request the annulment of Henry's marriage to Catherine

³ Ives: *Faction in Tudor England* p.9

⁴ Ives: *Faction in Tudor England* p.6

⁵ Ives: *Faction in Tudor England* p.6

of Aragon. Bishop Bonner upon his appointment as ambassador to France specifically requested that he be presented to Francis I along with the gentleman of the privy chamber Anthony Browne.⁶ Factional politics in the Court generally had very little impact on Henry VIII's erratic foreign policy, except in the case of his approaches to the German Lutheran princes in the 1530s, which was associated strongly with the evangelical grouping around Cromwell & Cranmer. Indeed the bodies which did have more influence were not at Court at all. An example comes from the reversal of policy in 1525 which allied England with France and not against her, humiliating as this was to both Henry and his chief minister Wolsey. The refusal of the Amicable Grant by parliament - leaving Henry with an empty war-chest despite the profitable situation created by Charles V's victory at Pavia - had nothing to do with Court. In fact, the king's itinerant court worked against the factions influencing many policies especially foreign policy and religious policy - simply because of the fact that royal itineraries took privy gentlemen away from the administrative capital that was Westminster.

The idea that faction was central to the government of the country also ignores the very real effect of Henry VIII in personally conducting his own government. In policies, especially those touching religion, Henry's firm lead can clearly be seen - with the courtly factions trailing behind. Although it is not known how far Henry VII believed it, it is certainly true that Henry VIII considered himself personally chosen by God to rule England, as could be seen by his father's victory in battle at Bosworth. Attempts by the church to claim that access to the divine was only via themselves met with regular rebukes, such as that following the Hunne affair - in which Henry declared that he 'had no earthly superior but God alone.' Similarly, in the dispute surrounding the bishopric of Tournai he declared that he 'had no superior in the kingdom and the bishopric of Tournai, and the Pope has no right to interfere.'⁷ Henry's attitude at the annulment trial held at Blackfriars in 1529 remained obstinately different to the advice given to him by Wolsey, while the *Collectanea satis copiosa* of 1530/1 outlined a plan for imperial status over the English church before either Anne Boleyn arrived at court or Cromwell became a minister. Henry's influence on his own policy was such that John Skip felt able to say in his Lenten sermon of 1536 that: 'a king's council nowadays will move him no otherwise unto any things but as they see him disposed and inclined to do the same'.⁸

There is also no evidence either to suggest that Henry was ever entirely governed by his councillors as far as patronage was concerned. Admittedly it is true that he created more new peerages than either his father Henry VII or his daughter Elizabeth, but it was only those created after the Reformation who proved to be politically important, such as William Parr, whom he created Marquis of Northampton, Edward Seymour - created Earl of Hertford in 1537 and John Dudley, created Viscount Lisle. Instead, Henry pursued a successful policy of reducing the powers of the nobility in order to make them dependent on the king. Firstly he managed to successfully attain the principal landholding nobles in the shape of Buckingham in 1521, the Percys in 1536 and the Howards in 1547. By this method as well he resisted - in sharp contrast to Francis I of France - the concept of hereditary offices for noble families, e.g. Buckingham's position as high constable. On the contrary, the introduction of lieutenancies in the latter part of his reign subjected nobles to further royal supervision - a supervision many accepted willingly by themselves becoming lieutenants. Attainders, such as that of Buckingham also brought private castles into royal hands - 11 in 1521 - which then were allowed to quietly decay in favour of coastal forts and a strengthened navy - activities which the nobles were unable to dominate since privateering was a risky business best handled by accomplished sailors.⁹ Most importantly of all

⁶ Potter: *Foreign Policy* (in ed MacCulloch *The reign of Henry VIII*) p. 106

⁷ from lecture by Diarmid MacCulloch 20 Jan 2000

⁸ Ives: *Henry VIII: a political perspective* (in ed MacCulloch *The reign of Henry VIII*) p. 31

⁹ Williams: *The Tudor Regime*

in the relationship between Crown and nobility, it was clearly shown that no subject could ever get so mighty as to be unable to fall - the numbers of important men and women whom Henry had once loved yet were still executed bear witness to this: Fisher, More, Anne Boleyn and Cromwell to name but a few.

In this atmosphere it is undoubtedly the case that the king's closest retainers did have some sort of influence over personalities. There is no doubt that had it not been for the machinations of Anne Boleyn's enemies, she for example would not have gone to the block. However, it seems very unlikely that such an occurrence could have occurred had it not been for Henry's own fickleness in choosing his favourites and his lead having been detected by the courtiers who surrounded him. There was considerable room for factions of courtiers to form and break up over opposition to certain other courtiers and dignitaries - yet never did a faction develop which could genuinely press policies onto the king. Even religion could not create a stable factional objective: the opponents to Cromwell did indeed tend to be conservative, but also destroyed in the turmoil of 1536 were the evangelical supporters of Anne Boleyn. Likewise after the more conservative courtiers succeeded in toppling Cromwell, opposition tended to be more radical, yet was by no means universally so. The limits of faction lay in the fact that it dealt only with personalities rather than policies - for the latter, all subjects followed the king.