**Does Oliver Cromwell merit a statue outside the Houses of Parliament?**

History is an exercise in constant revision. Statues - by contrast - are objects of permanence. Since 14th November 1899, when the statue was unveiled under a cloud of controversy illustrated by strident letters of complaint in *The Times*, the debate over Cromwell’s reputation rages on. Even before Hamo Thornycroft’s statue went up, memorials to the man courted controversy. Following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, a statue of sorts was displayed outside Parliament. The deceased Cromwell was dragged limp from his grave, and his head displayed outside Westminster from 1662 to 1685. In the eyes of Charles II, Cromwell was not worthy of history, and deserved to be erased.

Cromwell ruled England when there was no monarch, and leaders tend to - but not always - demand a statue in their own right. However, respective locations are a greater topic of debate. At a first assessment, Parliament seems home territory for Oliver Cromwell; because he fought for Parliament in the Civil War; because he started out as an MP, and because he believed that even a monarch should die for his sins against Parliament. While attitudes toward Parliament will continue to change, it is - for now - a steadfast symbol of democracy and British politics. But was Parliament Cromwell’s true cause, and does his colossal statue belong there?

Cromwell made his name defending the rights of Parliament. Explicitly, on the battlefields in the English Civil War; but in a more grand and controversial gesture, with the trial and execution of Charles I. The Battle of Marston Moor, on 2nd July 1644, proved a turning point in Cromwell’s career; and from the position of Lieutenant-General of the Eastern Association, Cromwell was able to steer Parliament into the realm of the victorious.

There was no doubt that, alongside his military prowess, Cromwell had the political grit to find a place in history. He gave proof of this when he turned against his commander, the Earl of Manchester, in November 1644 for ‘averseness to action’[[1]](#footnote-1), in light of his [Manchester’s] fears of a social revolution. In this episode, Cromwell demonstrates his conviction that he had become part of something greater than himself; Cromwell graduates to the level where he is no longer satisfied with exemplary effort on his own part, but feels it is his moral obligation towards Parliament to weed out those that leave obstacles in the path of a crushing victory. In addition, administrative disadvantages were removed. Cromwell reformed the armed forces into the New Model Army, which removed a class-based hierarchy and secured promotion based upon merit.

The army bred in Cromwell a thirst for social justice, which was evident throughout the Civil War; he harboured close relationships with his soldiers, and argued on their behalf for regular pay and disputed unjust punishments. When John Lilburne was owed arrears of pay for time served under Cromwell’s command, Cromwell wrote to Parliament on Lilburne’s behalf, arguing ‘It would be an honour to the Parliament and an encouragement to those who faithfully serve them, if provisions were made for the comfortable subsistence of those who have lost all for them’[[2]](#footnote-2). Cromwell zealously represented those who served beneath them in the Civil War. It is in this respect that Cromwell can be considered a true Parliamentarian, voicing the wishes of those beneath him, to serve them in return for their trust and loyalty.

In 1648, Cromwell left the company of his political allies to join forces with the small clique of individuals who pushed for the trial and execution of King Charles. Cromwell supported Pride’s Purge, a calculated attack on democracy that was engineered to secure a revolution of the minority. Submerged in controversy, the death of Charles provided a steadfast triumph in Parliament’s name, leaving Cromwell to take up the reigns of a new society. Cromwell sacrificed political, religious and social stability in order to remove Charles, and it would prove a battle to restore peace - in these respects - right up to his death in 1658. Despite this, Cromwell and Parliament did coexist in perfect harmony throughout the Interregnum.

There were moments in Cromwell’s career when his behaviour went beyond the constraints of constitutional respectability; threatening democracy and the security of Parliament in its rights as a governmental institution. Cromwell forcibly disbanded the Rump Parliament in 1653, and exhibited similar behaviour in the dissolution of the First Protectorate Parliament in January 1655. In 1653, Cromwell made attempts following the dissolution of the Rump to impress upon people that it was his intention to behave within boundaries dictated by the constitution, asking Oliver St John to ‘draw up some instrument of government that might put the power out of his hands’[[3]](#footnote-3). Two years later, Cromwell was less anxious to reconcile with Parliament. Cromwell faced forceful Republican opposition at his First Protectorate Parliament. Bitterness toward Cromwell stemmed from the impression shared that he had abandoned the Parliamentary cause to further his own agenda, and the opposition suggested radical changes to the political system, most notably that the nation should be governed by a single-chamber Parliament, shunning the need for an executive, a direct attack on the capabilities of Cromwell and his political worthiness. On 12th September 1654, Cromwell compelled MPs to sign a ‘Recognition’ of adherence to government by a single person and Parliament, or withdraw from Westminster. Approximately 100 MPs withdrew immediately; a demonstration of the distrust and disappointment in Cromwell as their leader.

Without Parliament, Cromwell tried - unsuccessfully - to maintain control himself. Cromwell took control of the press by Protectoral Order in mid-1655, ruling that there was to be no publication of ‘books of news … unless authorised by us or our council’[[4]](#footnote-4). The Major-General system experimented with between 1655-6 was wildly unpopular, and Cromwell was forced to abandon it after a year. Cromwell retreated from this spell of authoritarianism in January 1657, calling a Second Protectorate Parliament, and saving himself from an autocratic reputation.

Despite this, the image of the Protectorate was tainted as a whole, labelled by W. C. Abbott as ‘a new and powerful dictatorship’[[5]](#footnote-5), a direct suggestion that Cromwell lost his concern for Parliament. At a press conference in December 2013, Vladimir Putin asked his audience: ‘what is the essential between Cromwell and Stalin?’. The death toll under Cromwell is of no comparison to the atrocities that occurred under Stalin, but his reputation for ruthlessness has endured. Legislation by the Rump in 1652 decreed the death penalty for any Irishman who advocated ‘the rebellion’ against England; the act implicated an estimated 100 000 out of a population of 180 000[[6]](#footnote-6), and was by no means diplomatic.

Cromwell was able to act so because his leadership could not be contested; to the extent that in years of the Protectorate, his rule has been described as suspiciously monarchical. In 1654, the Council of State ordered the following to be vested in Oliver Cromwell and his successors: St James Palace, Westminster Palace, Somerset House, Greenwich House, Windsor Castle and Hampton Court, and in was in April 1654 that Cromwell, with his family, took up residence at Whitehall. In 1658, Cromwell created two life peers, with Charles Howard made Baron Gilsand in July, and Edward Dunock named Baron Burnell in August. Such responsibilities usually fell to the prerogative of a monarch, and these behaviours contributed to the fierce Republican opposition that waited for Cromwell in his First Protectorate Parliament. There was an underlying feeling of betrayal toward Cromwell, a perception that Cromwell had laid down the fight for Parliamentary and social liberty aside in order to pursue self-promotion.

Cromwell was brutal in dealing with threats to the infant Republic, evidence of his wider political considerations. In Ireland, Cromwell adopted a Machiavellian approach, claiming that brutality in Ireland ‘will tend to prevent the effusion of blood in the future’[[7]](#footnote-7). Following the Irish conflicts of 1649-50 - in which he devastated the opposition - Cromwell travelled to Scotland to neutralise the royalist threat, and dealt with his opposition with less barbarity. It was through this that Cromwell made his priorities clear, and it was not Parliament, but rather his idealistic pursuit of a godly reformation. Throughout the Civil War, the realisation dawned on Cromwell that securing Parliament’s position would not automatically prompt a godly reformation, and when the interests of Parliament and the godly cause began to diverge, Cromwell was forced to promote one over the other. Cromwell’s declaration on the 3rd April 1657: that ‘Civil liberty … ought to be subordinate to a more peculiar interest in God’[[8]](#footnote-8) is reflected in his repeated in his eagerness for religious reform, and frustration when Parliament failed to do so. Such frustrations drove Cromwell to disband the Rump Parliament in 1653 by force and dissolve the First Protectorate Parliament in 1655. Cromwell made attempts to reconcile the godly cause and parliamentary cause, hence the experimental Nominated Assembly in 1653. The inclusion of a group of Fifth Monarchists in the assembly fuelled the fear of social subversion; some favoured the abolition of the Court of Chancery and tithes, which were perceived as an attack on property rights. Cromwell’s political judgement was clouded by his overwhelming desire for religious toleration, and fears of radicalisation from the public were foreseeable. When Cromwell was offered the crown in 1657, he rejected it. While Cromwell may have done so to protect the godly cause and to keep the allegiance of the army, he lost the chance to create a true constitutional monarchy.

In hindsight, Cromwell was not unsuccessful in pushing for religious reform. Barry Coward cites his ‘major legacy’ as ‘an indelible religious imprint on the development of his country’. However, stability and democracy came under threat - on occasion - in Cromwell’s bid to achieve his idealistic aims. Cromwell was progressive in other respects which substantiate a statue outside of the Houses of Parliament. Today, our Parliament in Westminster rules across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, a reality on which Cromwell was influential. The appointment of men who shared the Cromwellian philosophy to positions of influence north of the border - General Monk as commander-in-chief of the army and Lord Broghill to president of the Council of Scotland in 1656 - allowed Cromwell to rehabilitate English-Scottish relations and pre-empt the Act of Union in 1707 to the extent that ‘a united British Republic had become a temporary reality’[[9]](#footnote-9). Furthermore, it is conceivable that the Republic gave Parliament the confidence to assure themselves thirty years after the restoration - in the Glorious Revolution - when Parliament truly became an institution of permanence.

The Republic collapsed a matter of months after Cromwell’s death. The execution of the King was not achieved without problematic tactics, and the morality of this will never fail to be controversial. While Cromwell’s methods in Ireland 1649-50 were uncivilized, he secured the safety of the English Republic at its most vulnerable. Cromwell was, at times, consumed by his religious ideals, but these ideals did not exclude the rights of Parliament, although they were overruled in 1653 and 1655. Cromwell’s leadership is a historical anomaly - a monarch has stood as head of state since the restoration of Charles II in 1660 - and it is a measure of Cromwell’s character and influence on society that he has received recognition from an establishment that he shunned so publicly. Controversy will always invite historical debate, which can only serve to keep alive Cromwell’s vital place in history. Throughout his career, Cromwell did what he thought was right, not just for himself, but for the nation as a whole. It was his unrelenting commitment to act for the good of the people that merits him a statue outside Parliament.

1. Barry Coward, *Cromwell*, (Routledge, 2013) p36 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (4 vols, Cambridge. Mass.,1937-47) vol. I, p.363 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ludlow, *Memoirs*, vol I, pp. 357-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted by P.W. Thomas in his introduction to *The English Revolution: III. Newsbooks 5, vol. I, Mercurius Politicus* (Cornmarket Press, 1971), p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (4 vols, Cambridge. Mass., 1937-47) vol. III, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. S. R. Gardiner, *Commonwealth,* vol. IV, p.83, note. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (4 vols, Cambridge. Mass., 1937-47) vol. II, p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (4 vols, Cambridge. Mass., 1937-47) vol. IV, p.445 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Barry Coward, *Cromwell*, p175 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)