Issue: 23 | December 1995 | Page 15-19 | Words: 3774 | Author: Cust, Richard

**Charles I**

**Using evidence from contemporary culture, Richard Cust reassesses the Stuart monarch's political style.**

Early one morning in 1623, soon after returning from Spain where he had been acting as prince Charles's chaplain during the farcical bid to marry the Infanta, Matthew Wren was summoned to Whitehall to attend on his patron, Lancelot Andrewes. With an air of conspiracy, he was ushered into the presence of Andrewes and his fellow Arminians, Richard Neile and William Laud, and charged to tell them 'how the Prince's heart stands to the Church of England that when God brings him to the crown we may know what to hope for.' Wren's reply is one of the most interesting early assessments that we have of Charles. He was careful to cover himself, emphasising that he attended on the Prince for only two months of the year, then only in his closet and at meal times, but delivered his opinion that, although 'my master's learning is not equal to his father's, yet I know his judgement to be very right; and as for his affections for upholding the doctrine and discipline of the church, I have more confidence of him than of his father, in whom they say is so much inconstancy in some particular cases'. Neile and Laud then proceeded to argue over this verdict until Wren was dismissed, still not quite sure whether he had told them what they wanted to hear.

Wren's assessment proved remarkably astute. He was certainly right about Charles's loyalty to the Church of England, or at least to his vision of the hierarchical, non-Calvinist church that the Arminians wanted. Right up to his death this was probably his most consistent priority. He was also right about Charles's lack of learning, at least in comparison to James. He probably had a more refined aesthetic taste than any other English monarch, but little of his father's native wit or grasp of ideas. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Wren's comments, however, is the uncertainty they reveal about Charles's political inclinations. He was twenty-three when Wren delivered his verdict and few heirs to the throne in this period could have remained quite so inscrutable to those whose futures depended on them. But Charles was very much a late developer, probably as a consequence of his dif6cult childhood.

Unfortunately we know all too little about this, and certainly not enough to subject Charles to the amateur psycho-analysis attempted by a recent biographer. However, it is at least clear that he grew up in the shadow of his elder brother and sister, and received little in the way of love and attention from his parents. It was not until he became heir to the throne, with Prince Henry's death in 1612, that people began to take notice of him. What they saw was a shy and extremely gauche adolescent, with a pronounced stammer which he never got rid of and a tendency to fits of rage and jealousy, particularly towards the glamorous young men who dominated his father's affections. An incident in 1616 when, in the presence of the court, he turned a water fountain full in the face of George Villiers and soaked him to the skin, was perhaps indicative of his early frustrations. Charles as a young man was certainly not the stuff of which seventeenth century rulers were supposed to be made. Yet by the early 1630s he had transformed himself into a dignified, kingly figure, every bit as impressive as his contemporaries Louis XIII and Philip IV.

This had come about through a considerable effort of will-power and self-discipline. He was acutely conscious of the responsibilities of his office and, although lacking confidence, he made himself play to the full what he regarded as the proper role of a king. Thus, in spite of his stammer, he regularly delivered public speeches on occasions such as the opening of parliament; and early in his reign evoked considerable admiration for this, not least because he was so much more direct and concise than his father.

**Control of policy**

More significantly he also exercised a close direction over the central aspects of royal government. The extent of this has often been underestimated because historians have been taken in by contemporary claims that he was dominated by a succession of royal favourites from Buckingham and Henrietta Maria to Laud and Wentworth. In assessing these it is important to make allowance for the common early modern practice of blaming counsellors rather than the king for unpopular policies. In fact, a close examination of the processes of government and decision-making suggests that in almost every area it was Charles who was in charge.

Kevin Sharpe, in his magnum opus on the personal rule, has clearly established that, contrary to some suggestions, Charles was a diligent administrator. He was not perhaps in the same league as Philip II of Spain, who spent upwards of eight hours a day processing mounds of paperwork; but Sharpe memorably describes him as 'a royal swot'. His marginal annotations on state papers show that he read them carefully and thoughtfully, and his secretaries testified to the speed at which he could make decisions and his diligence in dealing with petitions.

He also kept control of the more political processes at the heart of' government. The all-important business of dispensing patronage, in the form of senior appointments at court or in the privy council, he kept largely to himself, at any rate after the death of Buckingham in 1628. The most revealing instance of this was the appointment of Bishop Juxon as Lord Treasurer in March 1636, after months of speculation and jockeying for position. It has been thought that this was Laud's doing, part of a scheme to advance the power of the upper clergy. But Brian Quintrell has recently demonstrated that it was the king's own work and Laud was probably as surprised as anyone by the decision. He also dominated decision-making by setting the agenda for the privy council, laying down parameters for discussion and making his views sufficiently clear to deter those who might be tempted to challenge the royal line. Foreign policy, the main business of any early modern monarch, was largely determined by select groups consisting of the king, his most trusted advisers at the time and the secretaries of state who dealt with the paperwork. Final decisions about war and peace were the king's own, right from the start of the reign when the disastrous decision to fight France was largely determined by his sense that he had committed his personal honour to defending the Huguenots.

The exception to this picture of kingly control is the government of the church, where it remains difficult to assess how far the final responsibility for policy lay with Charles or his enormously capable and astute adviser, William Laud. To avoid a backlash from his Calvinist enemies, Laud was always concerned that church policy should appear to be the king's, getting Charles's written command for the reissue of the Book of Sports in 1633 or the revisions he made to the prayer book for Scotland. There were occasions, like the St Gregory's case in 1633 which led to communion tables being moved to the east end of churches, when Laud had to prod Charles hard to get him to move in the right direction. But for the most part they were in close accord. Charles needed Laud to translate his vision of the church into reality, and Laud needed Charles's authority to enforce his orders. As Ken Fincham and Peter Lake have argued, their relationship in church policy-making 'is best understood as a partnership, held together by a common view of the world, of order and threats to order...'. Wherever final responsibility lay, the king got more or less the policy he wanted.

**Managerial skills**

Charles certainly acted the part of a king and, thanks to Anthony Van Dyck, the greatest of all English royal portrait painters, he came to look the part. Van Dyck made up for Charles's lack of stature and rather immature appearance by various artistic devices. He painted him on horseback, aged him by about ten years in comparison with earlier portraits by Daniel Mytens, and gave his face a distant, melancholy expression which was seen as a sign of wisdom. As a result Charles came to appear to contemporaries as the epitome of kingly dignity.

In spite of appearances, however, he still lacked many of the personal qualities needed in an age when so much depended on a monarch's personal relationships. Whatever their other failings, his predecessors Elizabeth and James had been extremely shrewd in the art of man-management. Charles was not. Perhaps because of his early upbringing, he was never a confident judge of human character and found it difficult to take a detached view of relationships with his counsellors. He tended either to go over-board in his affection for those he felt were serving him loyally, or form strong dislikes which were almost impossible to shake. Two of James's most capable ministers, Archbishop Abbott and Lord Keeper Williams, found it almost impossible to function in the new reign because of Charles's personal animosity. In consequence he was deprived of wordly-wise advice which amongst other things might have helped him avoid making a mess of his first parliament.

This trait of character, however, did have a positive side in that his strong sense of loyalty helped to limit the extent of faction fighting at court. The clearest example of this was in 1626 when he stood by the duke of Buckingham in spite of a concerted effort to topple him leading opponents like the earl of Pembroke were presented with a choice of either abandoning their campaign or forfeiting their court offices, whereupon most of them promptly caved in. Much the same thing happened in 1633, when Lord Treasurer Weston was threatened with being overwhelmed by allegations of sleaze but was again rescued by the king's support. The recognition Charles imposed on court politicians, that certain key figures were more or less immovable, made for a settled pattern of politics at the centre which matched the stability achieved under Elizabeth.

A more negative feature of Charles's character, which can again perhaps be traced back to his childhood, was lack of confidence in the loyalty of his people. This showed itself on royal progresses. It was not the case, as some have suggested, that Charles rarely went on progress. He did so regularly up to 1637. But these did not generally involve the public walkabouts and displays of bonhomie towards local gentry which had been typical of his father, or indeed Elizabeth. Charles mostly confined himself to royal residences and hunting lodges and rarely met the people. This in itself was not necessarily divisive, but it seems to have been symptomatic of an attitude which was to be profoundly damaging. Charles's anxiety about the loyalty of his people led him into continually devising ways of testing that loyalty. Thus, right from the start of the reign, he treated grants of supply as just such tests, telling parliament or his subjects that if they did not pay up this would show they did not trust him and could not be relied on to obey him. Of course, most of his people did not see things in these terms at all, However, Charles's insistence that the whole basis of trust was at stake, on occasions like the Forced Loan, could push those who might be reluctant to pay for a whole variety of reasons into direct confrontation with the crown.

Charles's lack of confidence in the people's loyalty was also an element in his characteristic unwillingness to bargain and negotiate. He tended to try to bludgeon his way through by directly invoking his personal authority. This could be disastrous. As monarchs like Henry VIII and Elizabeth appreciated, it was much better to act through the agency of others and allow them to shoulder the blame if things went wrong. Charles never seems to have understood this and an incident late in 1627 showed just how damaging it could be. At the time the main topic of political discussion was whether or not the king would summon a parliament. It was widely assumed that the obstacle to this was the opposition of Buckingham. However, in a carefully staged audience at court Charles let it be known that it was he rather than the duke who opposed the summons. He seems to have believed that once his views were known, and his royal authority thrown against a parliament, his people would accept this and shut up. But, in fact, it had the opposite effect. Speculation redoubled as the political nation was faced with the appalling prospect that their own king was against something which everyone was supposed to believe was a good thing. Charles was refusing to play the traditional game of allowing counsellors to bear the blame for unpopular policies; and hardly anything could be calculated to do more to upset the delicate balance of faith and trust on which political stability depended.

**Political ideology**

Charles's character as a politician, then, did a good deal to undermine trust and made it much more difficult for his critics to negotiate a settlement when crises arose. But of course, these crises might have been avoided in the first place had it not been for conflicts over policy and ideology which divided Charles from many of his subjects. Just how profound these divisions were has been a subject of considerable debate amongst early Stuart historians. Those historians who have been labelled 'revisionist', such as Conrad Russell and Kevin Sharpe, have tended to argue that the gap was not great. King and people shared beliefs in such things as the rule of law and the benefits of regular meetings of parliament. What tended to cause conflict was that Charles, as Sharpe puts it, 'suffered from energy'. Whereas his father had been content to leave most things well alone, he was determined to implement reform and go to war, which exposed a. series of structural problems such as the chronic state of the royal finances, and led to political clashes inside and outside parliament. Against this, so-called 'post-revisionist' historians, like Johann Sommerville and myself, have placed rather more stress on ideological divisions over matters such as the scope of the royal prerogative and the role of parliaments. The debate has arisen, in part at least, because Charles's political ideology is often quite difficult to fathom. Unlike his father, he did not write long treatises or expound his political philosophy in public. We have to turn instead to more oblique indicators, such as the reports of what he said in private, or the texts of declarations and proclamations written by others but issued in his name, or else the court masques and entertainments of the 1630s.

**The evidence of court masques**

Masques offer some valuable insights into Charles's approach to kingship. In the first place they give clues to the king's thinking in matters of high politics. It is significant that in none of the masques performed at court is there any suggestion that those outside it have any positive contribution to make in establishing order and harmony. Parliament never appears in the masque, and when the people are on stage they are cast either as the disobedient and rebellious characters of the anti-masque, or loving but essentially passive subjects who look on whilst the king performs heroic and creative acts. This fits with the hints we get elsewhere about Charles's attitude to parliaments. It was not that he disliked them in principle but rather that he expected them to be docile and submissive when it came to making grants of supply. If they were not he tended to suspect disloyal and subversive intentions. It is clear from the Declarations he issued to explain his reasons for dissolving parliaments in the late 1620s that he believed the house of commons to be dominated by a group of' 'ill-affected', 'malevolent' MPs, inspired by the evils of 'popularity' and puritanism and bent on stirring the people up to oppose monarchy. This was bow he accounted for the attacks on Buckingham in 1626, the pressure for the Petition of Right in 1628 and the holding down of the speaker in 1629. Given this view, a meeting of parliament was hardly some- thing Charles was likely to welcome, and this more than anything explains why he chose to rule without it for eleven years.

However, this did not mean he felt he should rule alone. Even in the masques, where he was invariably presented as the primary virtue, he was accompanied by subordinate virtues, striving to imitate his perfection; and it is significant that these roles were performed by members of the nobility present at court. The masque suggests that for Charles those who really mattered in the distribution of political power were himself and his peers, and this is supported by other evidence, such as his summons of a great noble council before fighting the Scots in 1639 or the attention he paid to re-establishing the Order of the Garter. It is tempting to suggest that he had a vision of the political order which matched the seating plan of one of Jones's theatres: himself at the centre, his peers and councillors arranged in hierarchical order around him and the rest of the political nation shut outside.

Secondly masques offer some insights into how Charles thought political power operated. Steeped as he was in the ideology and images of divine right: kingship, he often seems to have believed that order in the world of politics was imposed rather in the way it was in a masque, by the king acting out his role and laying down patterns for his people to follow. This points to one of the most intriguing contrasts between Charles and his father. Whereas James, influenced by an upbringing in the small, intimate court of Scotland, treated politics as a matter of face-to-face debate, leading to compromises from which everyone might gain something, Charles regarded it more in terms of clear-cut ideals or images. It was a matter of getting people to conform to a series of patterns. Thus, his reforms at court, where he introduced a level of ritual not far short of Louis XIV's Versailles, were in part an attempt to produce a model of an ideal society which his people could emulate in their daily lives; whilst Arminian reforms in the church used visual imagery to encourage acts of reverence to divinely-ordained authority. Again and again we are reminded of the idea inherent in the masque, that stylised and symbolic actions were a pattern, an example, which could shape events in the 'real' world.

Of course, all this was far from being as effective as Charles perhaps envisaged and this brings us to a third aspect of the masques: the suggestion they offer of a king out of touch with political reality. This should not be pushed too far. Charles was no fool and often showed himself a cunning, hard-headed political operator; but there is no doubt that he had only a limited understanding of the hopes and fears of most of his people, and perhaps even less in the way of sympathy for them. This was revealed very clearly in the mid-1630s when he became involved in discussions with the papal envoys about reuniting the English church with Rome. How seriously Charles pursued these negotiations is unclear, and in the event nothing came of them. But the fact that he could even contemplate an action which, given the depth of antipapal feeling in England, would have horrified his people ore than almost anything else he could have done, suggests a king who was profoundly out of touch.

This emerged most disastrously in his policy towards Scotland in the late 1630s. It was very much Charles's own policy. He did not take advice from the privy council because they had no authority in Scotland, and those whom he consulted, like Laud and Hamilton, found themselves largely having to obey orders. Each stage in the escalation of the conflict with the Scots was a consequence of decisions which revealed the flaws in the king's political make-up. His initial insistence in 1636 that the presbyterian Scots be made to use an English prayer book seems to have been based on his near-paranoia about the link between presbyterianism and subversion. He was convinced, as he put it, that 'those who are against episcopacy are in their hearts against monarchy'. The proclamation of February 1638, in which he declared that he alone, and not his bishops or counsellors, was responsible for enforcing the prayer book, seems to have been based on his view that once his personal views were clear he would be obeyed. But as usual the approach backfired, and the proclamation led directly to the signing of the National Covenant because it raised the stakes and forced opponents of the prayer book to face the fact that they were opposing the monarch directly. Finally Charles's characteristic refusal to negotiate whilst he still had the opportunity in the summer of 1638 allowed the Covenanters to seize the initiative and attract much more widespread support than they might otherwise have done. It was the failure of the Scottish policy which necessitated the summoning of the Short Parliament and brought the personal rule to an end. This was perhaps appropriate because more than any other policy it exposed the king's lack of political skill and judgement. Unlike James, who rarely made the mistake of confusing divine right ideals with political reality, Charles seems to have felt it was almost his duty to impose his vision of politics on his people. In the last analysis, it was this as much as anything which made a civil war in England possible.

**Further Reading**

* The best account of Charles’s personality as a politician is chapter 8, ‘The Man Charles Stuart’, in C.S.R. Russell, The Causes of the English Civil War (1990).
* For detailed coverage of Charles’s involvement in politics up to 1640 see:
	+ R.P. Cust, The Forced Loan and English Politics 1626-1628 (1987)
	+ L.J. Reeve, Charles I and the Road to Personal Rule (1989)
	+ K. Sharpe, the Personal Rule of Charles I (1992)
	+ C.S.R. Russell, The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637-1642 (1991)
* Two important articles about Charles are:
	+ ‘The ecclesiastical policies of James I and Charles I’ in K. Fincham and P. Lake eds, The Early Stuart Church, 1603-1642 (1993)
	+ B. Quintrell, ‘The emergence of a spiritual Lord Treasurer 1635-6’, in J. Merritt ed., The Political World of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford (1996)
* For paintings and masques, see R. Strong, Van Dyke: Charles I on Horseback (1972)

**About the Author**

Richard Cust is a lecturer in History at the University of Birmingham.