

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2015  
THE MONARCHICAL REPUBLIC OF OLIVER CROMWELL

---

*By Dr David L Smith*

The last time I gave the address on Cromwell Day was twenty-one years ago, back in 1994. On that occasion, I explored Cromwell's relationship with Parliaments, and considered how far he might be called 'a great Parliamentarian'. Today I want to turn to examine Cromwell's relationship with that other great institution of English government, the monarchy. My aim is not to discuss Cromwell's relationship with Charles I – a subject on which much has already been written – but rather to explore his views on monarchy itself and to look at how far the Protectorate came, in its trappings and ceremonial, to resemble a monarchy.

My title is a conscious allusion to Patrick Collinson's famous description of Elizabethan England as a 'monarchical republic'.<sup>1</sup> This is a term that has stimulated much interest and debate among historians of early modern England over the past couple of decades.<sup>2</sup> When applied to the Cromwellian period it opens up an interesting contrast. Whereas Elizabeth I's regime was a monarchy with traces of a republic, Cromwell's regime was a republic with traces of a monarchy. Indeed, in some ways the term might be regarded as more truly applicable to the Interregnum because, unlike Elizabethan England, it actually was a republic.

It seems that in the 1640s Cromwell's hostility was directed against Charles I personally rather than against the monarchy as an institution. John Morrill and Philip Baker have described him as 'a reluctant Regicide, and a firm monarchist': they have stressed the importance of distinguishing between 'Cromwell's attitude to Charles himself and his attitude towards monarchy', and also between 'his view of the role of that king and of the monarchy itself in the settlement of the nation'.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that whereas Cromwell came to regard Charles I as a 'man against whom the Lord hath witnessed', and was the third signatory on Charles's death warrant, he was not appointed to the parliamentary committee that drew up the act for the abolition of the kingship.<sup>4</sup>

Cromwell's lack of hostility towards monarchy per se helps to explain why, during the Interregnum, he was so frequently willing to contemplate the possibility of a monarchical settlement. In the aftermath of the battle of Worcester, there was intense speculation that Cromwell might shortly

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2015  
THE MONARCHICAL REPUBLIC OF OLIVER CROMWELL

---

become king,<sup>5</sup> and in December 1651, if Bulstrode Whitelocke is to be believed, Cromwell argued that ‘if it may be done with safety and preservation of our rights, both as Englishmen and as Christians, that a settlement of somewhat with monarchical power in it would be very effectual’.<sup>6</sup> According to Whitelocke, nearly a year later, in November 1652, Cromwell asked him ‘What if a man should take upon him to be king?’; to which Whitelocke claimed he replied that ‘as to your own person the title of king would be of no advantage because you have the full kingly power in you already’.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary speculation about whether Cromwell might assume the kingship was especially intense during the later weeks of Barebone’s Parliament. In November 1653, Edward Hyde wrote that he believed Cromwell would ‘speedily possesse himselfe either under the title of Protectour of the 3 kingdome[s], or of King, of the sole power’.<sup>8</sup> Shortly afterwards, the Venetian Secretary in London, Lorenzo Paulucci, reported that ‘some private persons and even preachers have suggested the nomination of a king’,<sup>9</sup> while another newsletter writer ‘heartily wish[ed] the noble general would take the absolute power and disposing of the kingdoms into his own hands; for until he doth so, and that he manage the business by the sole rule of his own judgment, there is no hope, that affairs will be in a better condition.’<sup>10</sup> There is evidence that the early drafts of the Instrument of Government would have made Cromwell king rather than Lord Protector.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that Cromwell was amenable to the idea, but that many of the Army officers opposed it.<sup>12</sup> According to Allart Pieter van Jongestall, one of the Dutch diplomats in London, ‘Cromwell would fain have the title of a king, but the officers of the army were against it.’<sup>13</sup>

Speculation continued throughout the Protectorate that Cromwell might shortly become king. In February 1654, a London newsletter reported that ‘our judges and great lawyers many of them having declared this protectorship not to be consistent with the law doeth make our councill now think of the necessity of crowning him; which I beleeve will certainly be done next parliament, if not afore.’<sup>14</sup> Certainly the possibility appears to have preoccupied Cromwell. In May 1655, Colonel Herbert Price reported that he had it ‘from a hand that professeth to know’ that ‘Cromwells common discourse is that the three Kingdomes cannot be governed any other way but by a King, and that he professeth to be very sorry for it, and it

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2015  
THE MONARCHICAL REPUBLIC OF OLIVER CROMWELL

---

is from that meere necessity which he seeth unavoidable that he must assume the power and title'.<sup>15</sup> The following month, the Swedish envoy Peter Julius Coyet composed a judicious assessment of the arguments for and against Cromwell's becoming king, and concluded that on balance those in favour outweighed those against.<sup>16</sup> Christer Bonde, the Swedish ambassador, expressed a similar view when he wrote in July 1656 that 'it seems likely that in the course of this Parliament his highness will become king'.<sup>17</sup>

Because Cromwell's fight in the Civil Wars had been against Charles I personally rather than against monarchy institutionally, he had little difficulty in contemplating the possibility of reviving the monarchy during the Interregnum. This in turn helps to explain why the second Protectorate Parliament's formal offer of the kingship in February 1657 presented him with such a difficult dilemma, and why he hesitated for over two months before declining it. It is possible that, as Jonathan Fitzgibbons has argued, Cromwell's dilemma was made greater by the omission from the offer of the hereditary principle, to which Cromwell was known to be averse.<sup>18</sup> As he contemplated the offer, Cromwell's concerns came to focus on the issue of whether it was 'necessary' for him to accept the kingship. By 13 April, he was coming to the view that 'there is nothing of necessity in your argument' and that 'all those arguments from the law are...not necessary, but are to be understood upon the account of conveniency'. He was 'ready to serve not as a king, but a constable'. He argued that 'the providence of God hath laid aside this title of king providentially *de facto*' and, after stating memorably that 'I will not seek to set up that, that providence hath destroyed, and laid in the dust; and I would not build Jericho again', he concluded that 'I do not think the thing necessary'.<sup>19</sup> When he finally declined the offer on 8 May, it was because he was 'not to be convinced of the necessity of that thing...to wit, the title of King, as in itself so necessary as it seems to be apprehended by yourselves'.<sup>20</sup>

It is possible, however, that Cromwell had other motives as well. He may have sensed that he was more powerful as Lord Protector than he would become as king. According to the Venetian ambassador in Paris, Francesco Giustiniani, Cromwell's ambassador told him that 'they wanted his master to take the title of King, but he seemed reluctant to do this since he wields more authority in his present position than he would as King'.<sup>21</sup> It is also

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2015  
THE MONARCHICAL REPUBLIC OF OLIVER CROMWELL

---

probable that the strong opposition of a number of senior Army officers strengthened Cromwell's feeling that it was not necessary for him to become king.<sup>22</sup>

Cromwell's decision came as a shock to many of his contemporaries. As late as 27 April, Francis Russell informed Henry Cromwell that his 'father begins to come out of the cloudes, and it appears to us that he will take the kingly power about him'.<sup>23</sup> Four days after Cromwell's decision, William Jephson reported that 'really his Highnesse's refusal of the parliament's petition and advise hath soe amaz'd his most reall servants, as I know not what to write or say concerning it'.<sup>24</sup> Jephson's surprise was shared by the French ambassador, Bordeaux, who wrote that even on the day before the announcement the general expectation was that Cromwell was about to become king.<sup>25</sup>

It may be that Cromwell himself did not regard the matter as closed. One Royalist agent wrote that Cromwell 'privately assured his monarchical friends that as soon as he can weed out those that opposed him he will then revive the business'.<sup>26</sup> James Waynwright reported in March 1658 that 'our state here is for a King, and none fitter then his Highness', and that 'perhaps in a very short time we shall crown his Highness King of Great Britain'.<sup>27</sup> The following month, the Venetian Resident, Francesco Giavarina, believed that a Parliament would shortly be summoned 'expressly to raise the Protector to the throne'.<sup>28</sup> A newsletter of May 1658 recorded that 'the two capps of crimson and purple velvet, worne onely by princes, and now making up by order of the M[aste]r of the Wardrobe, make the people talke largely of Kingship'.<sup>29</sup>

That newsletter account illustrates how far Cromwell had come to be surrounded by ceremonial, iconography, and other trappings that were quasi-monarchical. Roy Sherwood and Laura Knoppers, and more recently Paul Hunneyball, Andrew Barclay and Kevin Sharpe, have shown how the Protectoral Court resembled the court of a monarch.<sup>30</sup> As Barclay has written, 'Cromwell did not need to be king to have a court and, even without the formal title of king, he could still rule like one'.<sup>31</sup> This was apparent from the start of the Protectorate in the ceremonial that accompanied the reception of foreign diplomats. When the Venetian Secretary, Paulucci, had his first formal audience with the Lord Protector in

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2015  
THE MONARCHICAL REPUBLIC OF OLIVER CROMWELL

---

January 1654, he wrote that Cromwell ‘may be said to assume additional state and majesty daily, and lacks nothing of royalty but the name, which he is generally expected to assume when he wants to’.<sup>32</sup>

The ceremonial that attended the opening of Parliament likewise became steadily grander and more reminiscent of the monarchy. For example, in January 1658, when Cromwell opened the second session of the second Protectorate Parliament, he went to the newly created Other House where ‘he took his place under a superb canopy, all the lords and judges being arranged there according to the ancient custom of that house’. Cromwell ‘proceeded from Whitehall to Westminster by water and thence by coach to the palace in great pomp’.<sup>33</sup> By the later years of the Protectorate, the opening of Parliament had become almost indistinguishable from its traditional form.

A similar trend was evident in the two ceremonies that marked Cromwell’s inauguration as Lord Protector. Whereas in the first, in December 1653, he wore ‘a black suit and cloake’, and took an oath in the Court of Chancery, sitting on a ‘chair of state’,<sup>34</sup> Laura Knoppers has written that ‘the second Cromwellian inauguration appropriated and revised monarchical forms, transforming a sacred rite into a civil ceremony’.<sup>35</sup> For this ceremony, in June 1657, ‘a large place’ was ‘raised and prepared at the upper end of Westminster Hall’, ‘in the midst’ of which, ‘under the great window, a rich cloth of estate [was] set up, and under it a chair of state’ – Edward I’s coronation chair – ‘placed upon an ascent of two degrees’. Cromwell was invested with ‘a robe of purple velvet, lined with ermine, being the habit anciently used at the solemn investiture of princes’, together with a Bible, a sword and ‘a scepter, being of massie gold’.<sup>36</sup> Giavarina observed that in receiving these ‘royal ornaments’, Cromwell ‘lacked nothing but the crown to appear a veritable king’.<sup>37</sup>

That missing crown finally appeared posthumously in Cromwell’s state funeral, based on that of James VI and I in 1625.<sup>38</sup> His effigy was ‘vested with royal robes, a scepter in one hand, a globe in the other, and a crown on the head’.<sup>39</sup> Giavarina reported that ‘the effigy of the late Protector...was borne on a car, wearing a crown on its head and holding the sceptre and orb in its hands, with every other token of royalty’.<sup>40</sup> In Knoppers’ words, ‘the Cromwellian funeral procession’ drew ‘upon the full visual resources of

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2015  
THE MONARCHICAL REPUBLIC OF OLIVER CROMWELL

---

monarchical ceremony...Ceremony, effigy, and funeral hearse clearly imitated previous monarchical forms',<sup>41</sup>

How, in conclusion, should we interpret all of this evidence? Is it a case of Cromwell being willing to meet monarchy half-way? Can we discern symptoms of Cromwell's continuing lack of hostility towards monarchy per se? Or are we seeing a clever Cromwellian compromise that was intended to underline his acceptance of traditional forms and so broaden support for his regime? Or was he simply seeking to live up to contemporary expectations about the kind of trappings that should attend a head of state, whether republican or royal? As Jason Peacey has recently suggested, the Cromwellian regime's attempts to achieve 'grandeur' should not necessarily be equated with the monarchical.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps characteristically of Cromwell, it may well have been a complex blend of all of these things. As so often with Cromwell, a 'both...and' approach generally proves more fruitful than an 'either...or' one. In the evidence I have been considering this afternoon, we can see the multi-layered quality of Cromwell's thinking and his political behaviour: his capacity to kill several birds with one stone and to fulfill a number of objectives through the same action. To adapt his own words, no man rises so high as he who knows how to pursue several agendas simultaneously. Perhaps nowhere was this more evident than in Cromwell's willingness to embrace the apparent paradox of ruling over what can justly be called a monarchical republic.

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Collinson, *Elizabethan Essays* (London, 1994), chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> See especially John F. McDiarmid (ed.), *The Monarchical Republic of Early Modern England: Essays in Response to Patrick Collinson* (Aldershot, 2007); and Peter Lake, 'The "Political Thought" of the "Monarchical Republic of Elizabeth I," Discovered and Anatomized', *Journal of British Studies*, 54 (2015), 257-87.

<sup>3</sup> John Morrill and Philip Baker, 'Oliver Cromwell and the Sons of Zeruah', reprinted in David L. Smith (ed.), *Cromwell and the Interregnum* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 17-36, at pp. 17, 19.

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2015  
THE MONARCHICAL REPUBLIC OF OLIVER CROMWELL

---

- <sup>4</sup> S.C. Lomas (ed.), *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell, with Elucidations by Thomas Carlyle* (3 vols., London, 1904) (hereafter cited as Lomas-Carlyle), 1:399; *Commons Journal*, 6:132-3.
- <sup>5</sup> C.H. Firth (ed.), *The Memoirs of Edmund Ludlow* (2 vols., Oxford, 1894), 2:9; Leo Miller (ed.), *John Milton and the Oldenburg Safeguard* (New York, 1985), p. 49.
- <sup>6</sup> Bulstrode Whitelocke, *Memorials of the English Affairs* (4 vols., Oxford, 1853), 3:374 (10 December 1651).
- <sup>7</sup> Whitelocke, *Memorials*, 3:471 (November 1652); Ruth Spalding (ed.), *The Diary of Bulstrode Whitelocke, 1605-1675* (British Academy, Records of Social and Economic History, new series, 13, Oxford, 1990), p. 281.
- <sup>8</sup> Bodleian, MS Clarendon 47, fo. 115r (Edward Hyde to Henry Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, 25 November 1653).
- <sup>9</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Venetian* (1653-4), p. 155 (Lorenzo Paulucci to Giovanni Sagredo, 2/12 December 1653).
- <sup>10</sup> Thomas Birch (ed.), *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe, Esq.* (7 vols., London, 1742) (hereafter cited as *TSP*), 1:628 (newsletter, 9/19 December 1653).
- <sup>11</sup> Lomas-Carlyle, 3:487-8 (Cromwell to the Army officers, 27 February 1657).
- <sup>12</sup> The National Archives, PRO 31/3/92, fo. 104r (Bordeaux to Brienne, 19/29 December 1653).
- <sup>13</sup> *TSP*, 1:644 (Jongestall's despatch, 23 December 1653/2 January 1654).
- <sup>14</sup> *TSP*, 2:64 (newsletter, 2 February 1654).
- <sup>15</sup> G.F. Warner (ed.), *The Nicholas Papers*, 2 (Camden 2nd series, 50, 1893), 295 (Herbert Price to Edward Nicholas, 10/20 May 1654).
- <sup>16</sup> Michael Roberts (ed.), *Swedish Diplomats at Cromwell's Court, 1655-1656* (Camden 4th series, 36, 1988), pp. 75-7.
- <sup>17</sup> Roberts (ed.), *Swedish Diplomats at Cromwell's Court*, pp. 317-18.
- <sup>18</sup> Jonathan Fitzgibbons, 'Hereditary Succession and the Cromwellian Protectorate: the Offer of the Crown Reconsidered', *English Historical Review*, 128 (2013), 1095-1128; Lomas-Carlyle, 2:422-3 (Cromwell to the first Protectorate Parliament, 22 January 1655).
- <sup>19</sup> Lomas-Carlyle, 3:57-8, 63, 70-1 (Cromwell to representatives of the second Protectorate Parliament, 13 April 1657).

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2015  
THE MONARCHICAL REPUBLIC OF OLIVER CROMWELL

---

- <sup>20</sup> Lomas-Carlyle, 3:127 (Cromwell to representatives of the second Protectorate Parliament, 8 May 1657).
- <sup>21</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Venetian* (1657-9), p. 32 (Francesco Giustiniani to the Doge and Senate, 17/27 March 1657).
- <sup>22</sup> *TSP*, 6:281 (John Thurloe to Henry Cromwell, 12 May 1657).
- <sup>23</sup> Peter Gaunt (ed.), *The Correspondence of Henry Cromwell, 1655-1659* (Camden 5th series, 31, 2007), p. 264 (Francis Russell to Henry Cromwell, 27 April 1657).
- <sup>24</sup> Gaunt (ed.), *Correspondence of Henry Cromwell*, p. 269 (William Jephson to Henry Cromwell, 12 May 1657).
- <sup>25</sup> The National Archives, PRO 31/3/101, fos. 207-13 (Bordeaux to Brienne, 10/20 May 1657).
- <sup>26</sup> Bodleian, MS Clarendon 55, fo. 6r (William Rumbold to George Langley, 25 May 1657).
- <sup>27</sup> Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Sixth Report* (London, 1877), p. 443 (James Waynwright to Richard Bradshaw, 12, 19 March 1658).
- <sup>28</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Venetian* (1657-9), p. 189 (Giavarina to the Doge and Senate, 16/26 April 1658).
- <sup>29</sup> C.H. Firth (ed.), *The Clarke Papers*, 3 (Camden 2nd series, 61 [recte 60], 1899), 150 (newsletter, 15 May 1658).
- <sup>30</sup> Roy Sherwood, *The Court of Oliver Cromwell* (Willingham, 1977); Roy Sherwood, *Oliver Cromwell: King in all but name, 1653-1658* (Stroud, 1997); Laura Lunger Knoppers, *Constructing Cromwell: Ceremony, Portrait, and Print, 1645-1661* (Cambridge, 2000); Paul Hunneyball, 'Cromwellian Style: The Architectural Trappings of the Protectorate Regime', in Patrick Little (ed.), *The Cromwellian Protectorate* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 53-81; Andrew Barclay, 'The Lord Protector and his Court', in Patrick Little (ed.), *Oliver Cromwell: New Perspectives* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 195-215; Kevin Sharpe, *Image Wars: Promoting Kings and Commonwealths in England, 1603-1660* (New Haven and London, 2010), chapters 16-19.
- <sup>31</sup> Barclay, 'The Lord Protector and his Court', p. 210.
- <sup>32</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Venetian* (1653-4), p. 177 (Paulucci to Sagredo, 21/31 January 1654).
- <sup>33</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Venetian* (1657-9), pp. 157-8 (Giavarina to the Doge and Senate, 22 January/1 February 1658).



CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2015  
THE MONARCHICAL REPUBLIC OF OLIVER CROMWELL

---

- <sup>34</sup> *Severall proceedings of state affaires*, 221 (15-22 December 1653), pp. 3498-500; *Mercurius Politicus*, 184 (6-22 December 1653), p. 3053.
- <sup>35</sup> Knoppers, *Constructing Cromwell*, p. 123. Cf. Sharpe, *Image Wars*, pp. 518-19.
- <sup>36</sup> *Mercurius Publicus*, 369 (25 June – 2 July 1657), pp. 7881-2.
- <sup>37</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Venetian* (1657-9), p. 82 (Giavarina to the Doge and Senate, 3/13 July 1657).
- <sup>38</sup> Knoppers, *Constructing Cromwell*, pp. 133-6; Sharpe, *Image Wars*, pp. 520-1.
- <sup>39</sup> *Mercurius Politicus*, 443 (18-25 November 1658), p. 30.
- <sup>40</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Venetian* (1657-9), p. 269 (Giavarina to the Doge and Senate, 26 November/6 December 1658).
- <sup>41</sup> Knoppers, *Constructing Cromwell*, pp. 143, 145.
- <sup>42</sup> Jason Peacey, 'The Street Theatre of State: The Ceremonial Opening of Parliament, 1603-60', in Chris R. Kyle (ed.), *Managing Tudor and Stuart Parliaments: Essays in Memory of Michael Graves* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 155-72, at pp. 165-72.

Dr David L Smith is a Fellow and Director of Studies in History at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He was a Trustee of the Cromwell Association from 2012 to 2015.