Does Cromwell’s legacy have any relevance in the 21st century?

Cromwell’s legacy may be considered as the achievements for which he is credited and the results of his direct and indirect actions. In particular, while Cromwell did not necessarily intend for a more democratic society as we see it today, his role in the undoing of absolute monarchy is seen as an important step on the path to democratic government. The aspects of his legacy that I intend to focus on are: Cromwell’s role in the evolution of modern democracy, meritocracy and the rise of the gentry, the dangers of politicization of the army, religion and his Irish Campaign.

Due to Cromwell’s part in the later stages of the Civil War and his later rise to power in the Commonwealth, Cromwell has been credited by many as a symbol of modern democracy and constitutional monarchy. This is clearly relevant today as for some Cromwell is credited with creating the foundations of our current system of government. It has been argued that due to Cromwell’s critical actions during the Civil War, he helped win the war for Parliament and by doing so removed the potential for absolute monarchy in Britain ever again. His legacy, or at least what has been credited to him, is such that he has been given a statue opposite the House of Commons, showing that for most people his legacy is relevant today. However, it could be argued that the real limitations to the power of the monarch came during the Glorious Revolution or the Act of Settlement in 1701.This was because Parliament chose the monarchs, William of Orange and George Elector of Hanover respectively. The limitations that Parliament imposed on the new monarchs can be seen as the real birth of constitutional monarchy. This idea is demonstrated by the way that Charles II, with financial help from Louis XIV of France, was able to avoid summoning Parliament from 1683 to 1685.

Without the meritocratic policy of Pym and the Self Denying Ordinance of 1645, Cromwell would not have risen to command the Ironsides, and therefore gone on to form his legacy. Before rising to prominence he was from a poor gentry family in East Anglia. His legacy is a result of the opportunities arising from the new meritocracy. His legacy highlights the great power of meritocracy, but also poses a key problem. It was the skilled command of Cromwell and Fairfax that helped Parliament win the Civil War, showing an obvious advantage of meritocracy. However, while meritocracy can help raise brilliant people to positions of importance, paradoxically it creates problems resulting from their ambitions and other negative character traits. Cromwell’s religious fanaticism and his ambition, though the extent of this is often debated, is an example of this paradox.

Marxist historians claim that Cromwell’s rise to power is part of the “bourgeois revolution” during this period and claim that the rise of the gentry is evident throughout this period. Some would argue that this is relevant today as politics is becoming more of a career path and is mainly filled with middle-class, educated people. It could, therefore, be argued that class divides have existed for centuries and Cromwell was a key part of the bourgeois revolution. On the other hand, it has been argued that while the gentry did see a rise in importance during this period, it was not a “revolution” as during this period the nobility still held significant power. During the reign of William III, many still saw the royal court as a better way to gain advancement than the mostly gentrified Parliament, showing the continued significance of the nobility.

Cromwell was able to seize and maintain power by using the New Model Army as a political force; this therefore shows the dangers of a politicized army. The spread of radical religious and political ideologies in the army heavily influenced their actions. Prides Purge in 1648 is a prime example of this, as well as Cromwell’s dissolution of the Rump Parliament in 1653. This demonstrates how dangerous the military can be when used as a political weapon, as well as how unstable politics is when it is involved. The 1655 rule of the Major-Generals was not successful, which was a factor in Cromwell accepting the title of Lord Protector. Another aspect of Cromwell’s legacy is the Restoration due to the failure of his son Richard resulting from his inability to gain the support of the army. This shows how significant the army was in politics during this period and it is true of almost all dictatorial governments today; they are almost totally reliant on the army. It highlights a key weakness of dictatorships founded by a great man.

The Commonwealth government under Oliver Cromwell was held together by his political ability as well as his popularity with the army. It is also important to point out that some of the principal reasons for the army’s involvement in politics were due to their radicalisation. During and after the Civil Wars, radical ideas had begun entering the army. The ideas of the Levellers were especially attractive to the poorer rank and file of the army. This was because while promotions and positions were given based on merit, commissioned officers were still from the nobility and gentry. The Levellers called for universal suffrage, which would have been in the interests of the soldiers. Voting rights were limited during this period and only propertied males could vote. This is a key reason why the army became involved in politics; they aimed to instigate the reforms of the Levellers. So the true legacy of the army and Cromwell’s role is open to debate.

Cromwell’s religious policies helped erode another aspect of absolute monarchy, the confessional state. The Church of England had often been used by monarchs in order to maintain religious order throughout the country as the monarch was the head of the church. During Cromwell’s reign as Lord Protector, the Church of England was not quite dissolved but its power was greatly diminished. Puritan reforms were put into place; the removal of bishops is a key example of this as one of the main aims of the Puritan gentry was the removal of the Episcopalian church. Furthermore, the establishment of the Commissions of Triers and Ejectors in 1654 had the aim of monitoring members of the clergy and ensuring that they were competent and capable of preaching. Other radical groups that had been persecuted under Charles were generally left alone, as Cromwell wanted to promote religious tolerance. A key example of this was his objection to the punishment of James Nayler, a Quaker who had mimicked Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. This was against the will of Parliament. This minor toleration could be seen as the ground works for the gradual reforms in favour of toleration in the reigns of Charles II and William III. While Cromwell did try and promote religious toleration it was still only with modest results. So it would be an exaggeration to say that religious toleration was part of Cromwell’s legacy. Charles II, and even James II, made more effort in their attempts to instigate the Declarations of Indulgence to give universal religious toleration. In the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, William and Mary signed the Act of Toleration, allowing religious freedom to all Protestant dissenting groups. This provided much more toleration than Cromwell tried to achieve, showing that religious toleration is not a relevant part of his legacy.

Another religious aspect of Cromwell’s legacy is the problems of combining religion and politics. Cromwell repeatedly tried to improve Britain in accordance with his religious views. The Nominative Assembly was meant to be an Assembly of Saints and enact Godly reform; however radical members forced it to be dissolved by the moderates. The rule of the Major Generals was also meant to instigate more Godly reforms and attempted to improve the manners of their subjects. This too failed. Both of these attempts demonstrate the practical problems of combining religion and politics. This can be seen today in Iran and with other radical religious led regimes in the Middle East. For example, Iran is experiencing internal strife as the conservative religious authority supresses more liberal ideas. This shows that Cromwell’s legacy is still relevant in many different areas.

Cromwell’s Irish Campaign has made him a symbol of Irish oppression by the English and has caused divisions in opinions over Cromwell to this day. The massacres he committed in Drogheda and Wexford and others, have been the main reason. This is especially key as the relations between the United Kingdom and Ireland have been shaped by these events. Now that the UK is leaving the EU, the UK government will have to potentially face the results of these attitudes and the continued perception of the UK as an antagonist of the Irish. It could be argued that Cromwell, to the Irish, has become the embodiment of English oppression towards them, which was compounded by the inhumane response of the British to the Irish Famine as well as restrictive colonial practices impeding Irish development. Although, the Irish may take a rational approach with the current British government for atrocities committed nearly four centuries ago, the legacy is still very sensitive.

To conclude, Cromwell’s legacy is vitally important to the 21st Century, as part of his legacy is the constitutional monarchy and the democratic system of government that we have today. While it is debatable how much of this is truly his legacy, he is still credited for it and it is still highly relevant today, especially with important constitutional debates such as Brexit. Furthermore, Cromwell’s legacy is a result of meritocracy and shows both the positive and negatives of this system. Cromwell’s legacy involves the rise of the gentry and Parliament, which could be seen as the origins of the class divides that impact our society today. Cromwell’s legacy is further relevant today as it shows the dangers of politicization of the army as well as problems with the unification of religion and government. Finally Cromwell’s legacy in Ireland is vital to understanding the relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom.