

CROMWELL DAY 2010: OLIVER CROMWELL AND THE GOOD
OLD CAUSE

By Dr Patrick Little

Friends,
Tis you who did defend the Good Old Cause,
And guarded England's fundamental laws,
That for a time under a cloud do lie
To make you know the price of Liberty;
Oh droop not then! There is no reason why
You should not suffer bonds as well as I,
Who have engaged for a parliament
And many drop of precious blood have spent?
Yet doubt I not (though now in bonds I be)
But I a day of Liberty shall see.
And though our sunshine's darkened by a cloud,
Yet time will move away that veil or shroud
That doth eclipse our light: then shall appear
The Morning Star, our daylight shall be clear

Thus runs the opening of *The Wheel of Time turning round to the good old way; or The Good Old Cause Vindicated*, a broadside published in March 1661.¹ By this time, the Good Old Cause had become the great revolutionary slogan, the rallying cry of those opposed to the Stuart monarchy. It remained a powerful concept later in the century. When the republican, Algernon Sidney, went to the scaffold in 1683, he proclaimed his devotion to the 'Old Cause', in a deliberate attempt to connect him with the regicides martyred twenty years before. Writing in the later 1680s and early 1690s Edmund Ludlow, a regicide who had escaped to Switzerland, also asserted that the 'Good Old Cause' was alive and well. Sidney and Ludlow were joined by John Milton as the heroes of the Whig party in the next century, and the 'Good Old Cause' was also of great importance for the radicals of the mid-nineteenth century, especially Thomas Babington Macaulay.²

After the Restoration the 'Good Old Cause' became a call for unity among the opponents of monarchy; but it had become popular as a slogan a few years earlier, during the last years of the protectorate. Traditionally, its origins are traced to the Petition of the Three Colonels of October 1654. Colonels Thomas Sanders, John Okey and Matthew Alured, three old soldiers, now serving in Scotland, were increasingly concerned about the direction the newly-fledged protectorate was taking. In their petition they

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addressed Cromwell personally, 'finding you to have been of late upon transactions of highest moment, whereupon the life or death of a good cause, and the public interest of the commonwealth doth depend; and that the price of our blood is brought to the utmost crisis of danger'. Cromwell's rule, they complained, was little more than a resurgence of 'that tyranny against which we engaged' during the 1640s. All men should be loyal not to the protectorate but to 'that old cause'.³ The reaction of Cromwell and his friends was swift. The colonels were arrested and cashiered or imprisoned, and efforts were made to ensure that the petition itself was not spread through the army. The Good Old Cause could not be suppressed that easily, however. From the winter of 1654-5 it slowly became the rallying cry of the disgruntled. In October 1655 there appeared a pamphlet *The Protector (so called) in Part Unveiled*, which attacked Cromwell's 'usurped power over the nation, [who] hath most woefully betrayed, forsaken and cast out the good old cause of God, and the interest of Christ, and hath cheated and robbed his people of their rights and privileges'.⁴ The most forceful, and most influential, defence of the Good Old Cause was that of a former friend of Cromwell, Sir Henry Vane the younger, whose pamphlet *A Healing Question* of May 1656, had as its stated aim 'the moving of the honest party, that still agree in the reason and justice of the good old cause'.⁵ Vane's closely argued attack was political dynamite, and he was also cast into prison by the protectoral regime.

With the fracturing of the Cromwellian alliance during the 1656-7 session of parliament, and in particular the divisive kingship debates, more and more of Cromwell's enemies saw themselves as upholding the Good Old Cause against protectoral corruption and tyranny. A good example of this can be found in John Thurloe's account of a personal protest to Cromwell in February 1658, by the protector's old associate, and major of his regiment, William Packer. Packer and his friends protested to Cromwell that 'they were ready to follow his highness upon the grounds of the Good Old Cause. His highness asked them what they meant by the Good Old Cause, and bid them instance but one particular wherein he had departed from it, stating to them what he understood by the Good Old Cause in particular. But they kept themselves in general terms (which I did perceive none of the company did like in them)'.⁶ These officers were immediately cashiered. Oliver's strength of personality kept such mutinous movements under control; and his intimacy with his officers encouraged them to approach him privately rather than denounce him publicly. His successor, Richard

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Cromwell, had no such advantages, and it is from September 1658 that the Good Old Cause becomes not just a cry of protest but a hunting call. It was for the Good Old Cause that Richard was deposed by the army in May 1659; and it was for the same cause that the army took power from the restored Rump in the following October. And when a year later the regicides were hauled through the streets of London by the henchmen of the triumphant Stuarts - to face a grotesque, vengeful, death - it was the Good Old Cause they still upheld. Another of Cromwell's old friends turned vehement opponents, Thomas Harrison, was taunted as he approached the scaffold, 'Where is your Good Old Cause now?' The Major-general 'with a cheerful smile clapped his hands on his breast and said "here it is, and I go to seal it with my blood"'.⁷ Sir Henry Vane, executed in June 1662, proclaimed that 'this cause which was owned by the parliament, was the cause of God', and that he hoped for the coming of Christ 'in order to a speedy and sudden revival of his Cause'.⁸

This brief discussion of the history and development of the Good Old Cause leaves us with a problem of definition. What exactly did contemporaries mean by the Good Old Cause? It has been argued, with some justification, that the phrase did not have a fixed meaning at all. Austin Woolrych's cautionary note in his discussion of the term is worth remembering: 'the responses it evoked, always more emotional than rational, were a passionate nostalgia for the earlier years of the revolution and an acute sense of present betrayal - understandable when the conservative, secular, anti-militarist tendencies of the later Protectorate are contrasted with the extravagant expectations of the New Jerusalem to which many in the army still clung... But why did the army's mounting revulsion against Richard's rule produce a corresponding enthusiasm for the very government which it had turned out of doors six years earlier, in much the same mood of moral and prophetic fervour?'⁹ One might add that the Good Old Cause was not just an emotional appeal; it was also a call to resist, to overthrow the oppressive regime, and to uphold the twin concepts of religious and civil liberty. These had been the essential ingredients of the 'cause' since 1642. But this in turn raises the question of how these terms might themselves be defined.

Henry Stubbe, in his attempt to defend the Good Old Cause in 1659, provided a brief definition of the concept: 'Truth to say that Liberty, civil and spiritual, were the Good Old Cause'.¹⁰ His words are almost the same

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as those of another speaker who addressed Parliament in January 1658, little more than a year before: 'The state of this cause... was the maintaining of the liberty of these nations; our civil liberties, as men; our spiritual liberties, as Christians'.¹¹ The speaker on this occasion was none other than Oliver Cromwell, whose supposed betrayal of the Cause as lord protector had provoked the rush to defend it. In fact, Cromwell seems to have had no problem with the Good Old Cause as a concept, provided it wasn't being used as a stick with which to belabour himself or his regime. His writings and speeches are full of references to 'the cause'. As early as June 1643 Cromwell professed to be one who would not hesitate 'to lay down his life, and bleed the last drop to serve the cause'; and in a bitter irony, in the next year he defended William Packer as 'one so faithful to the cause'.¹² In 1647 Cromwell assured Michael Jones in Dublin that they were engaged in 'the same cause', and in 1651 he told Thomas Harrison that he was engaged in 'the cause of God and of His people'.¹³ As yet, Cromwell did not talk in terms of the Good Old Cause (it was undeniably good, but was it yet old?), but in November 1652 he came close, telling Bulstrode Whitelocke that he knew of his commitment to 'the same good cause with myself and the rest of our friends'.¹⁴ This was evidently the common language of the commonwealth politicians and their army allies in the early 1650s. There was no need to explain or define. In his speech to the Nominated Assembly in July 1653 Cromwell used the term 'this cause' or 'the cause' no fewer than eight times, and it reappears in later speeches as well, notably on 12 September 1654, when he upheld 'the cause and interest so long contended for', and in 22 January 1655 when he attacked the men 'who knew not where the cause was begun nor where it is'.¹⁵ At the opening of the second protectorate parliament on 17 September 1656, Cromwell's friend Dr John Owen exhorted MPs 'that you may be the preservers of the good old cause of England'; while later the same day Cromwell praised the rule of the Major-Generals, calling them 'men that have freely adventured their blood and lives for that good cause'.¹⁶ In the early weeks of 1658 Cromwell challenged his opponents' claim to represent 'the cause' on several occasions: demanding that Packer define it precisely; telling Parliament that it was a matter of civil and religious liberties; and elsewhere referring to 'the Protestant cause and interest abroad'.¹⁷

Cromwell's use of such language, before and after the Petition of the Three Colonels, is interesting. Until he became protector, Cromwell seems to have talked of 'the cause' in a general way, and no doubt his broad definition

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agreed with that of his friends and colleagues, such as Vane, Harrison, Packer and Okey; but once he had become 'his highness' the term became contested, and more narrowly defined. In fact, its earlier ubiquity may have given it an even greater weight when used as a weapon against the protector - his ambition was seen as having personally betrayed everyone who had subscribed to 'the cause' over the previous decade. But, as we have seen, the Good Old Cause was not the sole preserve of the anti-Cromwellians during the protectorate. Cromwell could not help but react to the negative connotations that the term acquired after the winter of 1654-5, yet instead of avoiding the word, he continued to use 'the cause' (if not the Good Old Cause) to support the policies of the protectorate, especially the key aims of liberty of conscience in religion and the creation of a pan-Protestant alliance across Europe. The divergence between Cromwell's 'cause' and that of his former friends thus matches the personal, political and religious divides between them, and serves to underline the essential tragedy of the interregnum. For while the old parliamentarians turned against each other, the common enemy – Charles Stuart – was waiting for his chance. This disunity, rather than any perfidy on the part of Oliver Cromwell, was the ultimate reason for the failure of the Good Old Cause. But, despite the trials, the executions, the desecrations, did it really fail? As Harrison, Vane and Sidney realised, the Good Old Cause for religious and civil liberty could not easily be extinguished. And it is not Charles II we are commemorating today, but Oliver Cromwell.

- ¹ *The Wheel of Time turning Round to the Good Old Way; or The Good Old Cause Vindicated* (24 Mar. 1661).
- ² Blair Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: the English Civil Wars and the Passions of Posterity* (2001), 36-7, 146, 212.
- ³ *To His Highness the Lord Protector. The Humble Petition of Several Colonels of the Army* (18 Oct. 1654).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, (title page)
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, Sig. D.
- ⁶ Thomas Birch (ed.), *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe Esq* (7 vols., 1742), vi. 806.
- ⁷ Edmund Ludlow, *A Voyage from the Watchtower, 1660-2*, ed. Blair Worden (1978), 215.
- ⁸ *The Tryal of Sir Henry Vane, Kt* (1662), 90, 92.

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- ⁹ Austin Woolrych, 'The Good Old Cause and the fall of the Protectorate', *Cambridge Historical Journal* (1957), 134.
- ¹⁰ Stubbe, *An Essay in defence of The Good Old Cause*, quoted in J. Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the English Republic, 1623-1677* (Cambridge, 1988), 35.
- ¹¹ Ivan Roots (ed.), *Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (1989), 169.
- ¹² Thomas Carlyle, *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ed. S.C. Lomas (3 vols., 1904), i. 138, 170.
- ¹³ Lomas-Carlyle, i. 277; W.C. Abbott, *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (4 vols., Harvard, 1937-47), ii. 411.
- ¹⁴ Abbott, ii. 587; also 588, 591-2.
- ¹⁵ Roots, *Speeches*, 12, 14, 17-19, 56, 62. See also *ibid*, 63, 68, 72.
- ¹⁶ Roots, *Speeches*, 92.
- ¹⁷ John Owen, *God's Work in founding Zion* (preached 17 Sept. 1656), 47; Roots, *Speeches*, 175.

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