Oliver Cromwell and Parliaments By David Smith | Published in History Review 2003

David L Smith explains why Cromwell so signally failed to establish harmony with his Parliaments.

Oliver Cromwell's inability to achieve an effective working relationship with successive Parliaments during the 1640s and 1650s remains one of the greatest ironies of the English Revolution. It was also a crucial reason why the English Republic failed to generate lasting political stability. This article will reconsider this problem and suggest that the principal difficulty lay in Cromwell's desire to use Parliament to reconcile the interests of the English nation as a whole with those of a godly minority (including himself) who embraced a radical religious agenda. He hoped that through Parliaments the nation and the godly people could become one. His refusal to acknowledge the essential incompatibility of these two interests lay at the heart of his failure to find any Parliament that fulfilled his high hopes. Always he searched for a Parliament that would promote his vision of a godly commonwealth, and always it eluded him.

Cromwell and the Long Parliament

Cromwell's aim helps to explain, first of all, why he ultimately fell out with the Long Parliament, in whose armies he had played such a critical role during the Civil Wars. He clearly believed in the justice of Parliament's cause against Charles I in that conflict. As he wrote to Colonel Valentine Walton on 5 September 1644:

*We study the glory of God, and the honour and liberty of the Parliament, for which we unanimously fight, without seeking our own interests ... I profess I could never satisfy myself of the justness of this war, but from the authority of the Parliament to maintain itself in its rights; and in this cause I hope to approve myself an honest man and single-hearted.*

However, it is important to notice that even here Cromwell's loyalty to Parliament was not unconditional. He believed that it had a trust imposed upon it and that it should be held accountable, above all to God's cause and to the godly people. This conviction became starkly apparent during 1647-8, as Parliament struggled to reach a settlement with the King. Cromwell believed that the worst outcome would be for Parliament to betray those who had fought for it by selling out to the King, and he argued that it would be better, if necessary, to break off negotiations with Charles by passing a Vote of No Addresses. On 3 January 1648 he made an impassioned speech in support of this Vote, urging members of the Commons to:

*Look on the people you represent, and break not your trust, and expose not the honest party of the kingdom, who have bled for you, and suffer not misery to fall upon them for want of courage and resolution in you, else the honest people may take such courses as nature dictates to them.*

*That strangely menacing final line raised the possibility of some very radical courses of action, although these were as yet left vague.*

To Cromwell, the Army's decisive victory in the second Civil War, culminating in its defeat of Scottish Royalists at the battle of Preston in August 1648, gave Parliament both a divine mandate and a responsibility to bring the King to justice. Writing to the Speaker of the Commons, William Lenthall, the day after Preston, Cromwell described this latest victory as 'nothing but the hand of God … for whom even Kings shall be reproved', and urged him to 'take courage to do the work of the Lord, in fulfilling the end of your magistracy, in seeking the peace and welfare of the people of this land'. Cromwell and other Army leaders were deeply disappointed when Parliament instead resumed talks with the King on terms that were essentially unaltered since 1642. This frustration eventually prompted Colonel Pride's decisive intervention on 6 December 1648 when he excluded the more conservative members of the Commons and thus opened the way for setting up a special High Court to try the King. Historians have found Cromwell's behaviour in the closing weeks of 1648 and the beginning of 1649 deeply enigmatic. He carefully distanced himself from Pride's Purge, not arriving in London until after it was over, probably because he did not wish to be personally associated with such a breach of constitutional propriety. It is likely, as John Morrill and Philip Baker have recently argued, that he wanted Charles to be tried and to cease to be King, either by deposition or abdication, but that he hoped that an alternative short of executing him could be found. Cromwell wanted the King brought to account, but he was a reluctant regicide and he had no wish to see monarchy abolished. Yet, once the King was dead, he did not resist the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords as 'useless and dangerous'. The ancient parliamentary trinity of Crown, Lords and Commons was thus reduced to the purged remnant of the Commons, the Rump Parliament. This was the body, comprising barely 70 active members, which he hoped would now embrace the cause of godly reform.

The Rump and Barebone's

Once again, Cromwell was profoundly disappointed. He saw his conquests of Ireland and Scotland during 1649-51 as further mandates from God. Yet, in his eyes, the Rump wholly failed to live up to its trust and to fulfil God's purpose. Cromwell's disillusionment deepened until in April 1653, convinced that the Rump was no longer 'a Parliament for God's people', and fearing that it intended to hold fresh elections without adequate safeguards to exclude the ungodly, he stormed down to Westminster and expelled it, protesting to members that 'you have sat here too long for the good you do'. Two days later he issued a declaration justifying his action and complaining that the Rump 'would never answer those ends which God, His people, and the whole nation expected from them'. Those words reveal much about his vision of Parliament and its role: in Cromwell's view, a Parliament that had broken its trust to God and godly people could not be permitted to survive.

At that moment, Cromwell probably wielded greater power than at any other stage of his career. Interestingly, he did not try to assume dictatorial powers but instead looked to establish another Parliament. Believing that the Rump Parliament had betrayed the godly, he now adopted Major-General Thomas Harrison's scheme of a Parliament consisting exclusively of the godly. Modelled on the ancient Jewish Sanhedrin of saints, this body comprised 140 carefully selected godly souls, nominated by the radical religious congregations of London, and added to by the Army Council. This was a very different kind of Parliament, unique in English constitutional history. Its members were nominated rather than elected (hence one name given to it, the Nominated Assembly); it consisted of a single chamber of 140 members, rather than the customary seventeenth-century Commons of over 400 (hence another name, the Little Parliament); and it contained staunch Puritans, of whom one typical and prominent example was Praise-God Barebone (hence a third name, Barebone's Parliament). The members were to be 'persons fearing God, and of approved fidelity and honesty'; people, as Cromwell put it, 'with the root of the matter in them'.

Once again, his underlying hope was that through Parliament the interests of the godly and of the whole nation could be reconciled. In his summons to members of Barebone's, Cromwell spoke in the same breath of their 'love to, and courage for, God and the interest of His cause, and of the good people of this Commonwealth'. His opening speech to members on 4 July 1653 contained the following visionary call to them to embrace the trust that God had placed in them:

*Truly God hath called you to this work by, I think, as wonderful providences as ever passed upon the sons of men in so short a time. It's come, therefore, to you by the way of necessity; by the wise Providence of God ... God hath owned you in the eyes of the world; and thus, by coming hither, you own Him. Consider the circumstances by which you are called hither; through what strivings, through what blood you are come hither, where neither you, nor I, nor any man living, three months ago, had a thought to have seen such a company taking upon them, or rather being called to take, the supreme authority of this nation! Therefore, own your call!*

But once again, Cromwell's hopes were soon dashed. Less than six months later, beset by internal divisions, Barebone's Parliament dissolved itself and surrendered power back to Cromwell, who later referred to the Parliament as 'a tale of my own weakness and folly'.

The First Protectorate Parliament

It was indicative of the constitutional ferment of these years that one of Cromwell's Army colleagues, John Lambert, had already drafted an alternative constitution, the Instrument of Government, which was adopted on 15 December 1653. Under its terms, Cromwell was appointed Lord Protector, an office he held until his death in September 1658. The central principle of this paper constitution was government by 'a single person and a Parliament', an arrangement that was ironically reminiscent of that which had existed under the monarchy. The vital importance of the relationship between the Lord Protector and Parliaments was thus enshrined in the constitution, and Cromwell's inability to make that relationship work lay at the heart of the Republic's lack of political stability. As before, the principal reason for that failure ultimately lay in the incompatibility between the sort of reforms that Cromwell wanted Parliament to pursue - the vision of a godly commonwealth that he wished it to promote - and the attitudes and priorities of the majority of members of Parliament. Cromwell certainly wanted to rule with a Parliament. Throughout the Protectorate, he greeted each new Parliament with an optimistic welcome, such as this to the first Protectorate Parliament on 4 September 1654:

*You are met here on the greatest occasion that, I believe, England ever saw; having upon your shoulders the interests of three great nations with the territories belonging to them; and truly, I believe I may say it without any hyperbole, you have upon your shoulders the interest of all the Christian people in the world.*

Here again we have the familiar Cromwellian emphasis on the solemn trust that God had placed in Parliament, and the awesome responsibility to God's cause and the godly people that this imposed on members. Yet again Cromwell was bitterly disappointed: his optimism turned to frustration when the Parliament, instead of embarking on the moral reforms for which he yearned, instead started tinkering with the Instrument of Government. The crux of the problem was that he wanted a Parliament but it had to be a Parliament on his terms. This in turn helps to explain why, although he was committed to Parliaments in principle, he did not feel committed to any individual Parliament.

More specifically, Cromwell wanted a Parliament that would encourage godliness to a point where the godly people became coterminous with the nation as a whole. That required Parliament to set a lead not only by promoting godly behaviour but also by extending 'liberty of conscience' broadly among Protestant groups. Yet only a minority of members of successive Parliaments shared this radical agenda of Cromwell and his army colleagues. Again and again this caused his hopes to be dashed. He and Parliaments needed each other, yet found it impossible to work together, and this produced mutual frustration and bafflement. Cromwell's reactions and dilemmas were similar to those of someone in a relationship that they can neither break off nor make to work. Periodically, Cromwell's frustration would erupt in a decision to dissolve the current Parliament, for example the first Protectorate Parliament, which he dissolved at the earliest possible constitutional opportunity (after five lunar months rather than five calendar months) on 22 January 1655. After denouncing the Parliament for allowing 'weeds and nettles, briers and thorns' to thrive under its shadow, and lamenting that 'the Lord hath done such things amongst us as have not been known in the world these thousand years, and yet notwithstanding is not owned by us', Cromwell concluded, devastatingly:

*I think it my duty to tell you that it is not for the profit of these nations, nor fit for the common and public good, for you to continue here any longer. And therefore I do declare unto you, that I do dissolve this Parliament.*

Such rhetoric makes it easy to imagine why so many members of Parliament, and of the wider political elite, questioned Cromwell's motives and perceived him as a self-seeking hypocrite who invoked God's will as a cloak for his own ambitions. Those accusations are difficult either to prove or to disprove. What we can be sure of is that Cromwell's personality was full of paradoxes. One of the most striking was that a man so committed to government by 'a single person and a Parliament' also had a deeply authoritarian streak. Cromwell was willing to rule, as he put it in 1647, 'for the people's good not what pleases them'. His readiness to impose godly rule and a 'reformation of manners' regardless of public opinion came through most strongly during the period of the Major-Generals, which lasted from the late summer of 1655 until the beginning of 1657. Many members of Parliament came to feel that the Instrument of Government left the Lord Protector's powers dangerously vague. In early 1657 they therefore developed a plan to limit Cromwell's freedom of action by making him King, an ancient office whose powers had been defined in relation to centuries of English laws far more explicitly than those of the new office of Lord Protector. It was the supreme irony of Cromwell's career that this man, who had led the Long Parliament's struggle against Charles I, was himself later offered the Crown by the second Protectorate Parliament.

The Second Protectorate Parliament

This offer presented Cromwell with the most agonising dilemma of his career. It took him three months (from February to May 1657) to make up his mind. When he eventually decided to decline the Crown, his rhetoric characteristically stressed the importance of providence:

God hath seemed providentially, seemed to appear as a Providence, not only to strike at the family but at the name ... God hath seemed so to deal with the family that He blasted the very title ... I will not seek to set up that, that Providence hath destroyed, and laid in the dust; and I would not build Jericho again. Equally, Cromwell probably realised that he was more powerful as Lord Protector than he would be as King. Arguably the most crucial considerations in his own mind were a desire not to antagonise the Army (whose opposition he interpreted as a sign of God's disapproval), and a fear that to accept the Crown might indicate sinful ambition and greed. As a result, when a new constitution, the Humble Petition and Advice, was adopted in June 1657, Cromwell remained as Lord Protector. That constitution also reflected Cromwell's fears about the extent of Parliament's powers. He particularly regretted its harsh punishment of the Quaker James Nayler for blasphemy, which to him seemed indicative of members' religious intolerance and their opposition to extending liberty of conscience as widely as he desired. Increasingly, Cromwell felt the need for a second chamber to act as 'a check or balancing power' on the Commons. The Humble Petition and Advice therefore provided for an 'Other House' comprising at least 40 and not more than 70 members. These were to be nominated by the Lord Protector and approved by the Commons, and they were subject to stringent religious and moral checks. But the 'Other House' turned out to be another big disappointment, for only 42 of the 63 people whom Cromwell nominated actually accepted. Those nominees included seven English peers, but only two relatively obscure ones (Lord Fauconberg and Lord Eure) agreed to serve; one of the five who declined was Lord Saye and Sele, a former patron of Cromwell's, who now bitterly resented his willingness to countenance the abolition of the Lords. To Saye, the 'Other House' was merely a surrogate to appease peers and make the abolition of the Lords seem slightly more palatable. Saye wrote to another nominated peer, Lord Wharton, on 29 December 1657 urging him not to attend, arguing that the 'Other House' was evidence that there was *'a design of overthrowing the House of Peers, and in place thereof to bring in and set up a house chosen at the pleasure of him [i.e. Cromwell] that hath taken power into his hands to do what he will'.*

Yet there were others, especially the more committed republicans such as Sir Arthur Hesilrige, for whom the 'Other House' was far too reminiscent of the Lords. They also lamented the fact that even though Cromwell had declined the title of king, he was by this stage king in all but name. These republicans disrupted Parliament when it met in January 1658, and Cromwell stormily dissolved it after only three weeks. His bitterness came through in his final speech (the last speech he made to any Parliament) on 4 February 1658, when he declared: *'I think it high time that an end be put to your sitting. And I do dissolve this Parliament! And let God be judge between you and me!*' On that bitter note, Cromwell's troubled relationship with Parliaments came to a close, and he died seven months later, weary and disillusioned, on 3 September 1658.

Conclusion

The problems in the relationship ultimately owed less to a failure of management (as Hugh Trevor-Roper suggested) than to the nature of Cromwell's vision of Parliament. The underlying problem was that Cromwell wanted Parliament to pursue a cause that most members did not accept. He hoped that Parliament would encourage godliness and extend liberty of conscience until the godly ultimately become synonymous with the nation as a whole. This proved incompatible with his other goal of reuniting the nation after the Civil Wars through 'healing and settling'. Yet always he hoped that these goals might be reconciled, as for example in his speech on 21 April 1657:

I think you have provided for the liberty of the people of God, and for the liberty of the nation. And I say he sings sweetly that sings a song of reconciliation betwixt these two interests! And it is a pitiful fancy, and wild and ignorant to think they are inconsistent. Certainly they may consist!

Just how central this was to Cromwell's vision of a godly nation, and to what he believed he had been fighting for all along, was clear from a speech a few weeks earlier, on 3 April 1657:

If anyone whatsoever think the interest of Christians and the interest of the nation inconsistent, or two different things, I wish my soul may never enter into their secrets ... And upon these two interests, if God shall account me worthy, I shall live and die. And ... if I were to give an account before a greater tribunal than any earthly one; and if I were asked why I have engaged all along in the late war, I could give no answer but it would be a wicked one if it did not comprehend these two ends. However, in a nation where in 1658 perhaps half the parishes were still using all or part of the old Prayer Book, those two interests surely were inconsistent. This problem lay at the heart of why Cromwell could not work effectively with Parliaments. Even during the later 1640s and 1650s, Parliament was still sufficiently the 'representative of the realm' to provide an authentic reflection of the wider lack of enthusiasm for the godly reforms that Cromwell sought. Here, perhaps, there was an ironic echo of the problems that the early Stuarts had faced with their Parliaments. For just as Conrad Russell has written that these were 'not problems with their Parliaments; they were problems that were reflected in their Parliaments', so much the same was true of Cromwell and his Parliaments. The final irony was that Cromwell's inability to work effectively with Parliaments so eroded the English Republic's political stability that it ultimately paved the way for the restoration of the monarchy.