Politics and War
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Politics in Henry VIII’s England was much like politics anywhere else. It was a sordid struggle for power, wealth and glory. It was a high-minded quest to serve the public good through constructive, even visionary, policies. And the skulduggery and the statesmanship were inextricably mixed.

By 1543 Henry had decided to rule without a chief minister. The first half of his reign had been dominated by Cardinal Wolsey. His partnership with Henry had freed the king from the nannying of his father’s surviving councillors. It had given him the place he craved among the great powers of Europe and a raft of initiatives to give his subjects better justice and soften the effects of social and economic change. But it had failed to deliver the divorce Henry needed so he could marry again and secure the succession with a son.

Thomas Cromwell followed in the 1530s. He gave Henry supremacy over the church, lavish wealth confiscated from the monasteries and, in a tightly-managed parliament, the instrument to achieve seemingly whatever policy the king could desire. Queens came and went and Henry got his heir, Prince Edward, born in 1537 to heartfelt national rejoicing. But the entwining politics of religious change, international tension and a failed marriage to Anne of Cleves broke Henry’s confidence in Cromwell and the minister ended on the block.

Now Henry governed through a privy council twenty or so strong. It featured great noblemen ripe in experience. The dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, for example, had led Henry’s armies since his first forays into France. At home they lorded it over local politics, one based at Kenninghall in Norfolk, the other at Grimsthorpe in Lincolnshire. Alongside them on the council sat heavyweight intellectual bishops. Thomas Cranmer would be the author of the Book of Common Prayer, prototype of all Church of England service books down to the present day. Cuthbert Tunstall penned a bestselling maths textbook and used his knowledge of the Greek Orthodox church in English religious debates. Stephen Gardiner wrote treatises
defending Henry’s break with Rome but arguing against German evangelical theology. Finally the council mixed ambitious young aristocratic generals, like the earl of Hertford, with lawyers and bureaucrats like Richard Rich, whose Court of Augmentations managed the ex-monastic lands, and William Paget, the king’s low-born but politically dexterous secretary of state. Personal, political and social tensions pulled these men apart, but the demands of the king’s service drove them and their complementary talents together.

Politics went on in the council, but it also went on at court. Anyone who could get to the king could ask him for a favour or put an idea into his head, if they dared. Those around the king night and day, the servants in his privy chamber, were naturally ahead of the game. They matched the king in his sporting and military interests, with hunters and jousters like Sir Anthony Browne. He was both the captain of the gentleman pensioners, the king’s aristocratic bodyguard, and the master of the horse, head of the royal stables. The gentlemen of the privy chamber kept up with Henry’s intellectual enthusiasms too. Anthony Denny, one of the king’s most intimate attendants and the keeper of Whitehall Palace, had been educated at St Paul’s School, London and St John’s College, Cambridge. He was close to the classical scholars who educated the royal children and he persuaded Henry to take an interest in Sir Thomas Elyot’s ground-breaking Latin-English dictionary.

Historians have disagreed about how far these courtiers could create a micro-climate of opinion around the king that could sway his mind and his actions. Clearly they were important in the constant search for favour and reward. Great men needed to ask the king not just for benefits for themselves – a grant of monastic land here, the stewardship of a royal estate or the wardship of a well-endowed heiress there – but also for favours for their clients. Councillors and courtiers had servants, relatives and friends to look after. Their respectful cooperation enabled the great to exercise influence in local society and get things done for the king; but they needed their patron’s influence with the king to get the offices, land leases and little exertions of royal favour that built their own careers. The greater the courtier, the bigger the network to keep supplied with crumbs from the royal table. This made the political system naturally competitive, but it was up to the king to make sure that it did not become unhealthily so. By
spreading his bounty around between patrons and political groupings, Henry could stimulate the hopeful service that kept his government running and avoid the dangerous polarisation into ins and outs that had bedevilled the reigns of some of his predecessors. By and large he managed to do so.

How much those around him could influence Henry’s policies, as opposed to his distribution of reward, is harder to say. Religion was the greatest political issue of the day and it is possible to see Henry’s idiosyncratic religious settlement as entirely the product of his own convictions. God had given him the rule of his subjects’ spiritual lives, just like King David or King Solomon in the Old Testament. In shaping the church as its supreme head he did as God willed, whether cleaning out superstitious saint-worship from monastic pilgrimage shrines or stamping on the heretical disrespect for the miracle of the mass of the more forward English evangelicals. No doubt it did look that way to Henry. But around him were men and women desperate to steer his policies one way or another, who surely had some effect. Evangelicals wanted free access to the Bible in English, free preaching of the gospel message of justification by faith and further purification of the church’s worship and visual apparatus. Conservatives wanted restrictions on reading and preaching that would bolster the clergy’s ability to defend traditional doctrines on the mass, on prayer for the dead, on the wholesomeness of religious images and the importance of good works for salvation.

Religion split the court and council down the middle. Norfolk, Gardiner, Tunstall, Rich and Browne were conservative. Cranmer, Hertford, Paget and Denny were for change. Others, like Suffolk, just seemed bewildered, or maybe fashioning their own hybrid piety like the king’s, or maybe pulled this way and that by the insistence of their own friends, family and followers. In 1543 the current ran mostly the conservatives’ way. Bible-reading was limited by act of parliament to the upper classes. An official statement of belief, *A Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for any Christian Man*, was issued, stressing good works, the mass and the importance of church ceremonies. Heresy investigations in Kent troubled Archbishop Cranmer’s network of evangelical preachers. Yet Cranmer and his allies survived to plan further change.
Even religious tensions did not divide Henry's servants into neat political parties. Ties of kinship, friendship and common interest cut across those of religious sympathy. Norfolk and Gardiner sometimes disagreed over foreign policy and Norfolk's own son, the poet Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, mixed with religious reformers. Hertford got on well with Tunstall and Paget seems to have been in everyone's confidence. The same complications were seen even in the king's family life. His choice of Kateryn Parr as his sixth queen encouraged the evangelicals and she was soon at the centre of a network of reformist court ladies, including Ladies Hertford and Denny. Her promotion also benefited her family, as her brother became earl of Essex and her uncle Lord Parr of Horton. Yet she maintained excellent relations with the king's resolutely conservative daughter by Katherine of Aragon, Princess Mary, the future Queen Mary I.

As Henry aged, politics acquired an extra edge as everyone contemplated the reign of his son. Henry would have to survive till 1555 for Edward to be as old as he himself had been when he came to the throne. With the king's ever-inflating girth and suppurating leg infection, that looked unlikely. The prince would need protectors and by 1546 jostling for pole position for that role generated a crisis. The Howards, undone by the reckless ambition of the earl of Surrey, were destroyed on treason charges and Gardiner lost the confidence of the ailing king. The scene was set for Hertford, Cranmer and their friends to take the helm of Edward's England and implement wholesale the religious change Henry had resisted.

The religious struggle was, to those engaged in it, of apocalyptic significance. It was also deep in its social range. It drew in the town councillors, churchwardens and parish constables who had to decide how enthusiastically to implement royal policy. At times of revolt against religious change, such as the Pilgrimage of Grace in the North in 1536, it drew in tens of thousands of angry commoners. Yet politics was always about more than piety and power-bases. Henry had duties towards his subjects' bodies as well as their souls and his government tried to meet them. In 1543 parliament made a lot of small adjustments to the law, on wills, bankruptcy, weights and measures, wine prices and so on. Increasingly it also drew in and provided legislative solutions to the concerns of local communities. In 1543 acts provided for the erection of a municipal windmill at Poole and banned the dumping of ballast in Bristol...
Harbour. If that year did not produce much by way of social and economic legislation, it was probably because so many issues had been tackled in 1542, with legislation against witchcraft, gambling and deceptive cloth-packing and in favour of archery practice, horse-breeding and the rebuilding of derelict towns.

Meanwhile in the background the legal system created a constant hum of governance. The central courts at Westminster heard thousands of cases a year between them. At county level the assizes and quarter sessions met regularly. Local courts settled minor disputes and punished offences from petty assaults to misplaced dunghills in every borough and manor in England. Important legislation in 1543 helped standardise this system, completing a redesign of Welsh government begun in 1536. This gave Wales and Cheshire parliamentary representation and structured Welsh local government along English lines, replacing the often incompetent or exploitative rule of the Marcher lords and principality office-holders by justices of the peace chosen from the local gentry.

Henry had sworn at his coronation to do good justice to his subjects and also to keep the realm in peace. The defence of the realm often loomed larger for Henry than any other political issue. For war was the business of great kings and if it was the king's duty to defend the nation, it was also the nation's duty to maintain the king's honour and his just claims. Henry was not only king of England, but also lord of Ireland, indeed since 1541 king of a separate kingdom of Ireland proclaimed in that year. He claimed the lost French territories of his Norman and Angevin ancestors, among which only the Channel Islands remained. He inherited Edward III's claim to the French throne, of which English Calais was the only surviving token. He aspired to the overlordship of Scotland asserted by Edward I. In 1543 he was busy in pursuit of all these claims.

In Ireland Henry's effective rule covered only parts of the island, but his officials had plans to extend his grip over the Gaelic lords who governed the rest. Intermittent military campaigns earlier in the reign had done little to expand his control, especially once the leading Anglo-Irish family, the Fitzgerald earls of Kildare, had rebelled in 1534. In 1543 Sir Anthony St Leger's alternative policy was in full flow. This offered the Gaelic chiefs titles in the Irish peerage and royal confirmation of their lands in return for
their recognition of Henry’s sovereignty and cooperation with his policies. Thus in June 1543 Ulick MacWilliam Burke and Murrough O’Brien came to court to be created earls of Clanrickard and Thomond. St Leger’s policy was never thoroughly carried through – it has been argued that it might have made ensuing Anglo-Irish relations a lot easier had it been – but its aspiration, to pacify Ireland by negotiation rather than conquest, recurred throughout the Tudor period.

In 1543 remarkable circumstances also offered Henry the chance to dominate Scotland by treaty rather than war. The Scots, traditionally allied with France and resistant to English bullying, had fought three border wars against Henry since 1513. They were a few months into another when they suffered a double blow in late 1542. On 24 November their army was routed at Solway Moss, near Gretna, and many leading noblemen captured. On 14 December their king, James V, died, leaving his throne to a six-day old daughter, Mary, queen of Scots. Henry had his captives brought south and talked them into a treaty, settled at Greenwich in July 1543, by which Mary would marry Edward and unite the British kingdoms. Most Scots soon thought better of this, and Henry tried to compel the union by war, sending Hertford to burn Edinburgh in 1544 and leaving his son’s councillors to fight on futilely to 1550.

France loomed larger in Henry’s imagination than Ireland or Scotland. Victories against France would make his mark in Europe and emulate his heroic role models, Edward III and Henry V. Alliance with the Habsburg rulers of the Netherlands, Germany and Spain, natural rivals of the French, would secure England’s trade routes and ease the international isolation Henry risked by his schism from the Roman church. In February 1543 he concluded just such an alliance. He would renew the wars with France which had won him some glory, but no lasting territorial gains, in 1512-14 and 1522-5. By June he was at war, sending his navy to sea and bolstering the Netherlands against the French. The following year he captured Boulogne and thereafter he clung to it. His allies abandoned him. The French fleet sailed into the Solent and threatened to invade England. But in 1546 the French agreed to peace.

If Henry’s gains were small – Boulogne was returned to the French in 1550 and eight years later Calais too was lost – the scale of his enterprises and
their effects on his subjects were not. He raised armies at least twice the size of his predecessors’ and vastly expanded the navy. He organised regular musters for all his adult male subjects and commanded them to practise archery. Coroners’ reports on accidental deaths at archery practice show that many obeyed. He ordered coastal towns to fortify themselves and send out privateering ships. He built artillery forts to defend the coasts from Cornwall to Northumberland. To pay for it all he pushed up taxes to a level that would not be seen again till the English Civil War. Worse, he debased the coinage, sharply reducing its silver content in a way that broke foreign confidence in sterling and drove up prices at home.

Many of Henry’s subjects may have worried that the religious politics of his court would put their souls in danger. In the 1540s his conduct in international politics threatened their bodily welfare too. Yet they celebrated the capture of Boulogne almost as enthusiastically as the birth of Prince Edward. The king’s terrible but charismatic personality inspired a mixture of fear, admiration and loyalty that has clung about his person ever since. The mainsprings of politics and war lay in the enigmas of that personality, but they were made more complex and more fascinating by their interplay with the councillors and courtiers who surrounded the king and with the several million subjects beyond.