

A Cloak for Knavery: Kingship, the Army and the First Protectorate Parliament 1654–55

Current interest in the role of kingship during the 1650s is confined largely to concerns about the origins and consequences of the *Humble Petition and Advice* presented to Oliver Cromwell on 31 March 1657 by the Second Protectorate Parliament.¹ That episode highlighted an unresolved tension at the heart of Protectoral authority: though Cromwell regularly utilised the trappings of kingship and already, in effect, exercised a *de facto* prerogative, he rejected the actual kingly title itself. This is undoubtedly a crucial issue but focusing narrowly on that one event has tended to obscure rather than clarify these issues under the Protectorate, reducing episodes where these matters were raised earlier in the Interregnum simply to staging posts on the road to the *Petition and Advice*.²

C. H. Firth's main conclusions on that event made at the beginning of the twentieth century remain essentially unchallenged, although evidence for a revision of some sort has slowly accumulated over the years.³ The *Petition and Advice*, of course, deserves close attention but we need also to recognise that the issue of kingship did not just 'happen' in 1657 or even 1656: it was a serious concern among the elite, both military and civilian, throughout the Interregnum. As J. M. Wallace noted in 1968, 'A good deal of evidence concerning the vitality of the kingship issue as early as 1654 can be found in the histories of the period, though never widely aired by historians, and more is available in the pamphlet literature'.⁴

My aim is to examine one episode in the mid-1650s – the first Protectorate Parliament, 3 September 1654 to 22 January 1655 – where concerns about monarchy and the succession did play a prominent role. Most familiar with the period will recall Augustine Garland's attempt to have the Parliament petition Cromwell to take the crown.⁵ This is generally regarded as an isolated incident with little support among the members. While it certainly lacked support in the House, this should not be taken as evidence it lacked support more generally. At that very moment, a lively debate on monarchy was in fact in progress in the pamphlet literature and, to a lesser extent, the news-books.

Moreover, the apparent lack of support in the House itself requires closer examination. Historians have taken the absence of kingship from the Parliamentary records to mean it lacked importance during 1654. The contrast between the lively debate in the pamphlet literatures and the silence of Parliamentary sources is too systematic simply to be dismissed as a difference between reliable and unreliable sources. It is as if kingship had been cut deliberately from the picture leaving only a suspicious silhouette.

Such silences are notoriously difficult to deal with. An argument from silence seems to break the golden rule of evidence: silence, at best, supports scepticism. If there was only silence then nothing more could be said but there is also the contrasting debate in the pamphlet literature, indications of censorship or at least ‘interference’ in the press, and considerable evidence – albeit circumstantial – that powerful interests in the Army, the Government and the Parliament, were desperate to keep a lid on any such debate with the House itself. From this perspective, the critical silence of the ‘eyewitnesses’ did not simply mark an absence; it also marked the invisible hub of Parliament’s anxiety: kingship and the succession. The aim of this article is to situate that silence and the anxiety it concealed within the debate on legitimate authority which dominated early Protectoral politics.

The Silence of Parliament

On 22 January 1655, at the dissolution of Parliament, Cromwell praised the *Instrument of Government* because it ‘put us off the hereditary way’ and achieved a balanced, equitable form of government by avoiding ‘the extremes of monarchy on the one hand, and democracy on the other’.⁶ He told Parliament that,

if you had upon the old government offered me this one . . . thing . . . if this one thing had been inserted . . . that this government should have been and placed in my family hereditary, I would have rejected it.⁷

Cromwell’s rough-hewn style is often treated as the watermark of sincerity.⁸ Seen in context, however, another dimension springs into view. Both he and the Council, who repeated this protest,⁹ were alluding to actual episodes when inheritance and monarchy were raised during session. At the time neither Cromwell nor the Council had spoken publicly on these issues. The Parliamentary record similarly remained silent. Yet one, Garland’s proposal in December 1654 that the House offer Cromwell the crown, was supported by Henry Cromwell, Oliver’s son and heir, and Sir Anthony Ashley-Cooper, an eminent Council member.¹⁰ The other, a long debate in mid-October over an hereditary succession, saw John Lambert, another leading Council member and the reputed author of the *Instrument* itself, argue for inheritance.¹¹

Cromwell's protest thus testifies chiefly to his 'cooperation' with Parliament in keeping the problems of inheritance and monarchy from the public. His 22 January speech broke that silence. Both he and the Parliament had avoided public comment on sensitive issues, particularly the morale and the funding of the Army, prior to the dissolution. Now, in the aftermath of the dissolution, both accused each other of feeding illicit information on these matters to the press in an effort to discredit the other. Both were outraged as if some general agreement on maintaining a public silence – whether tacitly agreed or otherwise – had been violated.¹² This mutual release of hostility threw into relief a contrasting *modus operandi* to which both Parliament and Protector had implicitly subscribed during the session. It is that *modus operandi* – in which points of controversy and conflict were screened-out with a public show of cooperation and mutual respect – which holds the key to understanding the role of kingship during the first Parliament.

Parliament symbolised a great heritage of ancient authority. Cromwell had convoked Parliament largely to have that authority endorse his own. The members were not so compliant. Rather than rubber-stamp the *Instrument of Government* as Cromwell hoped, they took the opportunity to debate what they saw as the 'fundamentals' of his authority. The first week of the session thus witnessed an open attack upon the him and his 'usurped' authority. The attack came largely from republicans who, allied with Cromwell in the late 1640s, were now disenchanted by what they saw as his betrayal of the 'good old cause'. Moreover, his dissolution of both the Rump Parliament and the Barebones Assembly in 1653 – the latter a stepping stone to the Protectorate – had given him a reputation for hostility to the Parliamentary tradition itself.¹³ These groups saw the 1654 session as their first opportunity for serious protest since he took the title Lord Protector.

Of major concern were the parallels between Cromwell's new office and kingship. Though his supporters strenuously denied any such similarities,¹⁴ his own use of symbols, ceremonies and language reminiscent of kingship kept alive rumours that hereditary monarchy might be revived at any time.¹⁵ His reputation for hostility to Parliamentary authority only added force to these anxieties. By mid-1654, many had become convinced that Cromwell was intent on securing for himself a servile House prepared, dutifully, to 'offer' him the crown.¹⁶

These concerns originated in the controversy surrounding the execution of the king in 1649, when legislation was passed outlawing all species of 'single person' government.¹⁷ This legislation itself grew from ideas discussed during the late 1640s in pamphlet literature and at the Putney Debates.¹⁸ In this respect, many considered Cromwell's use of rites and trappings typical of royalty as a secondary issue. Arguments over the benefits of elected as opposed to hereditary succession were also irrelevant. Merely taking the office of Protector was sufficient to earn him condemnation as a 'usurper' of elected Parliamentary authority and, hence, of the people's sovereignty and the 'good old cause'.

Cromwell's response to this initial attack was to close the House on 12 September and demand that all members subscribe to recognise his government before resuming their seats. Yet his intervention failed. While few members actually refused the Recognition, the debate of 'fundamental things' from the first week, that Cromwell had so strenuously opposed, proceeded as before.¹⁹ All that changed was the outward appearance. Where conflict in that first week had become 'so hot' that resolution seemed impossible,²⁰ after 12 September, all reference to conflict disappeared from the assembly's own records. Yet Goddard, our main witness to proceedings, now claimed that the bill of government,

was disputed as if they [the members] had been in the schools, where each man had liberty to propose his own *Utopia*, and to frame commonwealths according to his own fancy, as if we had been *in republica constituenda* and not *in republica constituta*.²¹

All Cromwell won by intervening was an outward display of courtesy. The House persisted with its examination of the *Instrument*, but now concealed its activities from public scrutiny with outward courtesy and deference. Keen observers still noted the discrepancy between the outward display of civility and the conflict which persisted behind the scenes. Antoine de Bordeaux, the French ambassador, reported that,

although there are a great many members, that have signed the engagement and sit in the Parliament, with contrary affection to his [Cromwell's] interests, yet it is not seen that they have acted anything against him. . . .²²

The members themselves went to great lengths to maintain this public fiction. Thus the *Commons Journal* avoided protest at the Protector's flagrant breach of privilege on 12 September. The members now dropped the direct attack on Cromwell himself and concentrated on the legal and administrative technicalities of the new government. Neither his name or his title were openly targeted. Instead, only the powers of abstract 'single person' required attention and then only as a future contingency – the present 'single person' could, evidently, be trusted.²³

It is this deference that holds the key to understanding the Parliament's silence on inheritance and monarchy. In all records of the Parliament, both Garland's offer of the crown and the debates in October are either ignored entirely or merely summarised in the most cryptic and inconclusive manner.²⁴ While controversial issues originally debated in committee were generally reviewed once the House resumed its regular sitting, this was not the case with the sensitive issue of hereditary succession.²⁵ Our only access to this episode is via the reports of external observers, chiefly 'unreliable' foreign correspondents.

Parliament did not just erase these episodes from its own records. It also reached out in an attempt to stifle debate among the public. While officially illegal, members regularly passed reports on Parliamentary proceedings to

the press.²⁶ But, because such access was so restricted and because the news-books (many of which were not licensed) were keen to avoid censorship, their articles tended to reproduce the language and, hence, the concerns of the House itself. A large proportion of news-book reports thus read like extracts from the *Commons Journal*. This was literally the case with *Several Proceedings in Parliament* which was originally edited by Henry Scobell the clerk both of the House of Commons and later also of the Council. By 1654 the editor was Henry Walker, another government official and associate of Scobell.²⁷ Through these and other less direct avenues, news-book reports served as conduits for broadcasting that image of courtesy and cooperation between Parliament and Protector.

Evidence supplied by the news-books also helps in delineating the margins of the Parliament's 'silence' on hereditary monarchy. For instance, though the *Faithful Scout* reported the debate on the succession in October it followed the practice of virtually all other news-books in refusing to print the conclusion which the House had reached. The wording of its report was identical to *Mercurius Politicus*, the mouth-piece for official views and news. The *Faithful Scout*, however, added another line in italics: '*Tis good sleeping in a whole skin; Experience is the onely Schoolmaster*'.²⁸ The aphorism allowed the editor a shrewd protest at restrictions on the press without giving the censors anything to bite on.

Garland's call to offer Cromwell the crown in December raised another example of censorship. Henry Walker, whom we encountered above, was in contact with Colonel William Clarke in Scotland and on occasion supplied him with copies of the news-book. He also wrote Clarke letters in which additional information apparently deemed unsuitable for the news-books could be passed on. One such letter reported Garland's call to crown the Protector. Walker admitted to Clarke that the enclosed news-books omitted the incident entirely – 'onely this shall I adde' – before describing the controversy.²⁹ The private letters of the editor could thus comment on episodes that could not be publicised in the press.

As shown, this censorship originated in the intervention in the affairs of the House by the Protector on 12 September. In this respect, the public image projected by the House was not composed in isolation. This image of Parliament emerged originally from Cromwell's intervention on 12 September but served equally to conceal divisions and instability within Army, Cromwell's power-base.

Problems with the Army

In dealings with the Parliament, Cromwell faced two major and ultimately conflicting concerns. When he intervened in the House, he was condemned as an enemy of the Parliamentary tradition. Yet, when he then allowed the

House to continue its revision of the *Instrument* he looked weak and ineffectual. One major factor complicated this situation still further: his continuing dependence on the Army. While he denied any monarchical ambitions, his lack of response to the debate on the *Instrument* in the House stirred disquiet in the Army. In this respect, his main concern was the detrimental effects inflicted by Parliamentary conflict and hostility on the morale of the Army. These two institutions overlapped, with many members of the House also holding active military commissions. A number led the attack during that first week of the session against the Protector. A major problem for Cromwell was thus the cross-pollination of rumours and ideas between the House and the Army. What created most anxiety was the rather eager and, hence, embarrassing reception which some sections of the Army accorded such information.

Evidence suggests that Cromwell, with the Protectorate, was seeking to extend his power base beyond the Army. Common lawyers had viewed the Barebones Parliament as a threat to the ancient law and were attracted by the prospect of stable centralised government.³⁰ Likewise, the merchants and money lenders of the city also found the promise of stability appealing.³¹ Bridging these groups were the aldermen of the City Council who were closely involved in Cromwell's original inauguration ceremony, and who celebrated the Protector's authority in February 1654 with a magnificent parade to the Lord Mayor's banquet.³² Endorsement of his authority by Parliament would have augmented this process much further.

Such moves drew fire from radicals in the Army – principally Levellers but also Fifth-Monarchy men – devoted to maintaining the rage against arbitrary 'single person' government.³³ For them, the Protector might masquerade as Godly authority but really he represented the perpetuation of kingly 'tyranny' by other means.³⁴ The manner in which Cromwell had acquired office also hit a raw nerve. The *Instrument* was presented to leading officers as a virtual *fait accompli*, the Barebones Parliament – an icon for the Fifth-Monarchy – was brusquely cleared aside and its leading advocates were cashiered.³⁵

As this opposition grew, divisions appeared among Cromwell's supporters. Monarchy was attractive for some but not all, and few agreed on how it might be attained. Cromwell simply could not wean himself from the Army when so little had been settled and the Parliament remained hostile. He was thus caught midway between frying pan and fire, accused on the one hand of betraying the Army and the ideals of the 'good old cause', but denied adequate support for a properly civilian government. He was forced into a paradoxical posture in which he depended for support on the Army for a style of 'single person' authority it had repeatedly condemned in the past. While divisions helped Cromwell to marginalise the opposition, such divisions also threatened his own authority. The convening of Parliament in September 1654 brought this dilemma to the fore. Two factors were instrumental in this process: one was Cromwell's failure to clarify an effective working arrangement with the House

after the 12 September crackdown; the other was his determination to pursue what has since become known as the ‘western design’.

His ambiguous relationship with Parliament created most problems. Though 12 September forced public deference from the House, those members who withdrew quickly combined with disgruntled sections of the Army and those Fifth-Monarchist officers cashiered in January. The immediate result was the Wildman plot, a protest which again accused Cromwell of violating the celebrated Army declarations of the late 1640s and reintroducing ‘tyranny’ under a different name.³⁶ In October, in response to the debate on hereditary succession in Parliament, these conspirators smuggled a broadsheet and a pamphlet past the surveillance of Secretary John Thurloe’s intelligence agents and into the popular press.³⁷ Though *The Humble Petition of Several Colonels of the Army* and *Some Mementos for the Officers and Souldiers of the Army* were quickly suppressed, vast quantities of each were circulated throughout the Army.³⁸ The Overton plot in Scotland later in the year involved some of the same conspirators and again saw distribution of these publications amongst military personnel. At the same time, at least five other ‘leveller’ petitions – some hand-written – which voiced similar concerns about the revival of single person ‘tyranny’ were also making the rounds.³⁹

These attempts to inspire radical opposition to Cromwell’s ‘single person’, ‘anti-Parliamentary’ regime were countered by junior officers who objected that the Protector was too indulgent when the House tampered with the *Instrument*.⁴⁰ They underlined concerns about attempts by the House to prune Army revenues. In this respect, though the petition they finally presented to Cromwell added little to existing concerns, it did increase the impression of disaffection and division within the Army. Senior officers also exhibited signs of dissent. Some reportedly met at Somerset House to discuss restoring the monarchy but were betrayed by Colonel Pride of Pride’s Purge fame.⁴¹ Others were said to be engaged in ‘days of humiliation’ where they fasted and prayed for spiritual guidance.⁴² Again, though their specific concerns were not detailed and the evidence was rather shadowy, observers had little difficulty in joining the dots to create a rather grim picture of division, disloyalty and dissent in the Army.⁴³

In these circumstances, the western design – Cromwell’s dream for a Protestant empire in the new world – proved a mixed blessing. Why he chose this moment to gather ships and troops to launch the first step in these planned conquests – the invasion of the island of Hispaniola in the West Indies – is not clear.⁴⁴ But certainly, while it provided an inspiring extension of Godly ideals around which the Protector’s supporters might have gathered, the western design also accentuated divisions within the military. The seamen’s petition, a document that recited the same protests against ‘tyranny’ found in the leveller petitions, dates from this period.⁴⁵ The Army command protested for different reasons. Lambert stressed that the Army was already over-extended in Ireland and Scotland, that the cost in men and materials had been grossly

underestimated, and that attempts to gain financial support from Parliament would only entrench the opposition.⁴⁶ The western design thus captured in miniature the broader clash between ideals and practicalities of republican government that continued to plague the Army.

With the possibility of empire came suggestions that Cromwell would take an imperial rather than just a royal title. Such talk would be revived later in 1656 during the lead up to the *Humble Petition and Advice*. But it was in 1654, during the debate over the succession, that the possibility was first suggested openly.⁴⁷ Some viewed this as a clear signal that he was serious about acquiring absolute power; others saw the title as a fitting consummation of authority attained through military victory.⁴⁸ Though there is no direct evidence that Cromwell took an interest in either possibility, it is notable that the departure of the fleet for the West Indies was yet another event that coincided with the October debate in the House on the succession. Moreover, because rumours and anxieties about his possible monarchical ambitions gained impetus from the western design and because he over-ruled Army objections to the venture, he only succeeded, once again, in alienating important sectors of the military and, hence, in accentuating the instability and division.

Some historians may hesitate to place such emphasis on these problems with the Army. Secretary Thurloe, one man with his finger firmly on the pulse, certainly claimed that divisions within the military had been highly exaggerated.⁴⁹ But the actual level of discord is not the issue. Though Thurloe dismissed the reports as mere rumour, he was still concerned about the attention these rumours were attracting. The Protector and Council had, after all, developed a habit of citing the threat of royalist insurrection to justify extreme measures. The dissolution of the Parliament would be defended on these terms as would the rule of the major-generals in October 1655.⁵⁰ During the 1654 Parliament itself, Cromwell was still dealing with the after-shocks from a royalist attempt on his life in May.⁵¹ In late 1654, the publicity and propaganda associated with these episodes produced an untimely spin-off. The scare-mongering in the press by Cromwell's supporters and the exaggerated reports of the assassination attempt now served to amplify anxieties about the state of the Army. For all practical purposes, therefore, its true condition was largely irrelevant. Though the number of officers involved might have been small, every sign of instability added considerably to the climate of uncertainty.

Just as Cromwell and the Council's ambiguous treatment of Parliament contributed to problems in the Army, so mounting concern about instability in the Army conditioned their response to continuing opposition in the House. The original objective, to isolate the Army from the influence of prominent dissidents inside the House, failed. The 12 September crackdown proved counter-productive, giving Cromwell's moderate opponents a more consistent majority in the House while the radicals who left joined with disgruntled Army personnel. Official policy now concentrated upon confining this conflict behind an appearance of partnership with the assembly in an

effort to defuse concerns about the Protector's seeming hostility to the Parliament's authority.

A major component of this strategy involved augmenting the self-censorship, examined above, which Parliament exercised through the media. Some observers reported that *A Perfect Diurnall* was closed down because it broached issues Cromwell wanted kept from the public.⁵² This was immediately after it alone amongst the news-books had published resolutions from the October debate in the House on hereditary succession.⁵³ Whoever was actually responsible, the sudden demise of *A Perfect Diurnall* suggests some intervention. When, at the dissolution and after, Cromwell and the ex-members censured each other for violating the alleged ban on reporting the session, both hinted that events like the fall of *A Perfect Diurnall* were collateral damage inflicted by the struggle over the ancient authority of the House. Cromwell himself linked such illicit reporting by rogue members of the House with attempts to 'put the Army into a distemper'.⁵⁴

At the same time, the Council sponsored its own news-book, the *Observer, with Summary Intelligence*. The editor, Marchmont Needham, was also responsible for the major government paper, *Mercurius Politicus*.⁵⁵ His assignment with the *Observer* was two-fold: firstly, to refute the charges of 'tyranny' which emanated from sections of the Army, their republican allies and the Fifth-Monarchy men; and secondly, to bolster that image of partnership between Cromwell and the Parliament. As we have seen, these aims combined the two sides of Council policy.

Needham ridiculed suggestions of dissent in the Army by casting doubt upon the authorship of opposition pamphlets. When *The Humble Petition of Severall Colonels of the Army* and *Some Mementos* cited the names of eminent officers it was, he claimed, 'a mere Plot, a mere Trick to Scandalise them and infect the Soldiery, and bring the little *Agitators* to Town again, and make the wheels of Time and the World run madding back to the year 1647'.⁵⁶ Needham insisted that the 'true' author behind these incendiary publications could easily be mistaken 'for a *Leveller* by his language for he labours under a disease of words . . . that became Epidemical in the year 1647'.⁵⁷

At the same time, Needham countered rumours of dissent in the Army with soothing words about the Protector's regard for Parliamentary authority and the harmonious relationship between the two. Criticism was, he claimed, based 'upon a wretched supposition, that single Persons in Power will be mad senseless Tyrants, and Parliaments very feeble Cowards'. He suggested rather, 'there is like to be constant happy harmony between them, when the interests of Protector and Parliament *in the Militia*, doe counterpoise each other and are [not] divided between them'.⁵⁸ Here Needham identified the problems of the Army with attempts to undermine the 'happy harmony' between Cromwell and the House. Included here were unauthorised reports from Parliament of conflict over attempts to alter the nature of the succession. Because many of the military conspirators of the Wildman Plot were also members of

Parliament, denying the authorship of prominent opposition pamphlets served both to allay fears of a divided Army and to defuse the trail of opposition and hostility which led to the House.

Though the image of partnership cultivated by Cromwell and his supporters helped limit the fallout from his intervention on 12 September, the October debate on the succession and Garland's offer of the crown, seepage of damaging information continued. The members' revision of the *Instrument* evoked conflicting responses from the Army which many interpreted as signs of weakness and instability; and Cromwell's attempts to display himself as a legitimate authority continued to alienate his most loyal supporters. It is worth speculating whether royalists took heart from the signs of discord. Perhaps they were encouraged to push on with their plans for insurrection – plans the Protector himself cited in January to justify dissolving the House. Certainly, as we shall see in the next section, advocates of kingship saw the instability as fertile ground for their own ideas.

The Debate over Kingship

Most, including Cromwell himself, believed that the meeting of Parliament offered the prime opportunity for settling the nation's woes. Advocates of kingship argued that a crown offered by the House was the answer. The frequency and urgency of such proposals multiplied the longer the session continued. As noted earlier, many historians view Garland's abortive attempt in December to have Parliament offer Cromwell the crown as an isolated incident without much significance. Yet similar proposals were popular points for discussion in the pamphlet literature. This contrast emphasises again the closed, ritualised character of those sources which document debate in Parliament. The stifling of Garland's motion demonstrates once more that strategy of exclusion discussed earlier. Not only were reports of the incident kept from the news-books, but the dominant group within the House moved quickly to quash further discussion. Outside the assembly, however, advocates of kingship were not so easily silenced. They fastened quickly on to growing evidence of friction between Parliament and the Army, evidence which Cromwell himself had inadvertently helped to create.

Most advocates of kingship believed that Parliamentary cooperation was essential to any lasting settlement. Few, however, were agreed on just what that cooperation would entail. People as diverse as Walter Gostellow, a visionary and eccentric, and Lord Broghill who was later a prime mover behind the *Petition and Advice*, believed that Cromwell, in conjunction with the House, should work towards a Stuart restoration. Only a week before the dissolution Gostellow published a pamphlet revealing a dream in which God gave his blessing to such a scheme.⁵⁹ Still apparently ignorant of the growing tension between the assembly and the Protector, he handed Cromwell an

open letter as he was leaving the chamber on 22 January, calling on him, in partnership with the House, to invite the Stuarts to resume the monarchy.⁶⁰ Broghill (who featured in Gostellow's dream) is also reported to have informed Cromwell of similar expectations which, he claimed, commanded wide support in the general community. It was allegedly believed that Frances Cromwell, the Protector's daughter, would marry Charles II as part of a plan to bring back the Stuarts. Cromwell reportedly took the idea seriously, but protested it would not work because Charles held him responsible for his father's death.⁶¹

Suggestions for reinstating the Stuarts represented an extreme response to the problem of the succession which, as indicated above, was being debated in the Parliament during mid-October. Whether that debate sparked speculation in the press or *vice versa* is impossible to tell; but Cromwell and the Council were certainly anxious to curtail a public trading of ideas between those inside and those outside the House. The whole strategy discussed above, of constructing an image of partnership between Protector and Parliament, served also to isolate an uncooperative House from public support in the broader community.

James Howell, another contributor in the exchange, also favoured restoration, portraying it as the only guard against the threat of civil war which would inevitably follow the Protector's death. Such ideas, whilst couched in courteous language, were potentially most divisive. Howell accepted the argument put forward by Cromwell's supporters, that his eminence and virtue had guaranteed his election but, Howell warned, in the future there would be many less remarkable men vying for the job and elective processes were poorly suited to selecting between such mediocre rivals. Virtue alone was simply not enough. Howell characterised these rivals as military men who could call upon loyal soldiers to support their respective claims. Only an hereditary succession vested in a 'natural' dynasty like the Stuarts could prevent violent conflict between candidates competing for election.⁶² 'Natural' in this context was indicated by the title 'king' itself located in the 'natural' order by Divine appointment. Simply making the Protectorship hereditary would not solve the problem because, at base, Cromwell's regime was a dislocation and disruption of 'nature'.⁶³

These concerns about the succession and the possibility of a return to civil war via a deadlocked election were not always accompanied by calls for Stuart restoration. The anonymous *A Copy of a Letter* of December 1654 reproduced central elements of Howell's argument but to support an hereditary Protector and oppose Stuart restoration.⁶⁴ This marked a fundamental shift in ideas about personal government. Both Howell and *A Copy of a Letter* sought criteria sanctioned by God which would transcend the politics of personalities – what Cromwell and his supporters had praised as the foundation for Protectoral authority. Howell put his faith in a title blessed by God; *A Copy of a Letter*, by ignoring the sensitive issue of the title, offered a more

radical alternative which dealt not only with divisions in the Army but also with growing anxieties about the constitutional pretensions of Parliament. For this reason, it presented Cromwell with a more substantial challenge.

A Copy of a Letter argued that ‘election’, rather than promoting ‘liberty’ would lead to ‘tyranny’ because the victor of the civil war that would inevitably follow, would hold authority as a conqueror unfettered (as Cromwell was) by an inner strength of Godly virtues.⁶⁵ From this perspective, claims that Cromwell’s virtue permitted a return to ‘single person’ government without the attendant risk of ‘tyranny’ were totally irrelevant. This was part of an extremely controversial argument resonant with earlier debates about the legal status of the ‘conqueror’ Parliamentary government which had won the civil war and executed the king: the so-called ‘engagement controversy’ of 1649–51.⁶⁶ Then, as in 1654, the merits of elected as opposed to hereditary authority had been the central concern. Supporters of the conqueror Parliament emphasised its capacity as an elected body to off-set suggestions that a sovereign assembly, unchecked by a separate executive, might itself exercise an arbitrary power. Memories of those disputes lay behind attempts, initiated when Cromwell became Protector, to demonstrate his devotion to the Parliamentary tradition. When Cromwell denounced efforts in October to make his office hereditary, he recited the same arguments to ward off continuing suspicions that he sought arbitrary power.

A Copy of a Letter turned those ideas on their head:

there was a time indeed when Monarchy and Tyranny, Parliament and Liberty were thought to be the same, but the experience of our condition under that long, long, long, Parliament, and that little one since, hath rectified our judgements. . . .⁶⁷

Election, rather than ensuring the rule of law and the liberty of the individual, was now cast as a source of ‘tyrannous’ personal power; and inheritance, formerly identified instinctively with ‘tyranny’, now served as the guarantor of stability and security.

Having turned the world symbolically up-side-down, *A Copy of a Letter* could then cast aspersions on the elective authority of Parliament. Readers were reminded of the ‘arbitrary’ rule by the House which had ended only with Cromwell’s intervention in April 1653. With Cromwell out of the way, however, ‘why is it not to be feared, that they may not proceed to election [of a new Protector] at all; but, by a kind of complot, keep it in their own hands’.⁶⁸ The long Parliament, which had allegedly planned to prolong its sitting by carefully manipulating projected elections, was thus charged with seeking a parallel to hereditary rule. In this scenario, without the stabilising influence of an hereditary chief magistrate, first anarchy and then tyranny would follow immediately on Cromwell’s death. Constant reminders in the popular press about Parliamentary tinkering with the *Instrument* served only to accentuate these fears. By warning the public about the threat of civil war presented by rivalry between untrustworthy officers and, then, by suggesting

that a weak Army gave room for hot-heads in Parliament to seize unlimited authority, monarchists also exploited rumours of instability in the military. In their view, the only alternative was an hereditary succession.

Curiously, most were not concerned (as they were in 1657) about the title 'king' itself.⁶⁹ Apart from Howell, the only exception in 1654 was John Hall of Richmond. Hall is often regarded as the major contributor to theories of kingship during the Interregnum, but his work was quite removed from the concerns raised even by Howell. Hall envisaged an elected official bearing the title 'king'. For him taking the title was an emancipatory move which, by grounding Cromwell's authority in the law, would free him from deference to Army ideology.⁷⁰ But Hall was writing before the Parliament met and, hence, before news of instability in the military emerged in the press. Accordingly, he still clung to election as a guard against 'tyranny'. From September 1654, however, advocates of kingship were exploiting perceptions of conflict between factions in the Army. By ignoring or even rejecting the title they undercut those who used it to arouse fears about 'liberty in danger' and, hence, for justifying extreme measures by the Army and the Council; at the same time they warned against undue confidence either in the current constitutional scheme or Parliamentary amendment to the *Instrument*.

Cromwell and the Council's response to this sort of challenge appeared, once again, in Needham's editorials for the *Observer*. He followed the basic contours of his earlier contribution, refuting calls for monarchy by lauding the Army's stability and reliability, and by praising the 'happy harmony' between the Protector and Parliament. Yet, though this complied with general Council policy, the *Observer* lasted only two editions before it too was shut down. Internal evidence suggests that Needham himself expected the assignment to continue. Closer inspection, however, reveals points at which his defence of the Protector laid bare certain ambiguities in the dominant ideas of authority, ambiguities which lay at the heart of Cromwell's attitude to kingship.

At several points Needham claimed that those who criticised Cromwell for monarchical ambitions had misinterpreted the original attack upon 'single person' government put forward during 1647. Those pamphlets and declarations by the Army had, he claimed, remonstrated only against the 'unlimited' power or 'tyranny' of a particular king – Charles Stuart – and not against kingship *per se*.⁷¹ For him, all contrary arguments were mere quibbling over words – specifically the word 'king' itself – which, he declared, was part of a more general 'cloak for knavery' devised by critics of the Protectorate. But by denying that all 'single persons' were necessarily 'tyrants', Needham also reduced the rhetorical impact of arguments against kingship. Praising the Protector because his was an elected and, hence, legal office had been the main plank of Cromwell's defence against accusations of 'tyranny'. Needham now reduced these arguments also to rhetorical quibbling over words in much the same way as a *Copy of a Letter*. But while from that position he could make the mandatory attack upon 'arbitrary'

rule, he could not specify just what the advantages of an elected Protector might be. After all, if the whole dispute was merely an exercise in semantics then so were objections to the title king itself: Cromwell could as easily take the title as reject it. At a time when the Army seemed so unstable, reinterpreting its renowned declarations in this manner could not be tolerated.

Conclusion

During the first Protectorate Parliament, the succession was a contentious and factious issue. Cromwell's intervention on 12 September was a warning, and the House responded by cloaking its discussion in courteous language that combined deference to the Protector with ritual affirmation of its own ancient authority. Cromwell wanted a legitimate government free from the Army. He had spent the preceding months attempting to cultivate support amongst the lawyers, aldermen and merchants of the city. An assembly prepared to accept his authority and work for the 'healing and settling' of the nation was an important part of this project. His direct intervention, however, only extracted an appearance of cooperation from the House which continued with its examination of the *Instrument*. Moreover, those expelled from the Parliament joined with disgruntled sections of the Army to publish pamphlets and broadsheets condemning Cromwell's 'tyranny'. Thus his failure to bring the Parliament to heel also provoked hostility and instability in the Army itself. Unable to secure substantial support in the general community, Cromwell appeared to be losing the confidence of the military as well.

The only constant in this kaleidoscope of political strategy and conflict was the issue of kingship. Though largely absent from records and accounts compiled by the House itself and by its officers and agents, this was the central point of contention in the relationship between Parliament, the Protector and the Army. Cromwell's varied opponents agreed on one thing: he coveted the kingly title. Unlike 1657, a strong majority of members were adamantly opposed to the possibility of a 'King Oliver'.

Cromwell's actual attitude to the possibility of himself becoming king, however, remains contentious. An important dimension of my argument is that the evidence typically cited by historians to document his consistent opposition to a kingly title for himself, supports a dubious interpretative logic.⁷² Just as the accusations of his opponents that he craved royal authority were rhetorical constructions which can be decoded only in context, so his own claims of innocence should not be read simply as windows on his true intentions. Cromwell, as known to historians, was himself a paradigm of self-fashioning. The contradictions in his image indicate not just personal intensity but also an acute sensitivity to the shifting demands of political life.

Notes

- 1 For example see, Richard Wilkins, 'Oliver', *History Review*, 27 (1997), 7–12; Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford, 1997); J. S. Morrill (ed.), *Revolution and Restoration: England in the 1650s* (London, 1992); A. H. Woolrych, *England Without a King 1649–60* (London, 1983).
- 2 C. Durston, 'The Fall of Cromwell's Major-Generals', *English Historical Review* (hereafter *EHR*), 123 (1998), 18–38.
- 3 C. H. Firth, 'Cromwell and the Crown', *EHR*, 17 (1902), 429–42; *Ibid.*, 18 (1903), 52–80; Firth, *The Last Years of the Protectorate, 1656–1658*, 2 vols (New York, 1964) I, 61. See also S. R. Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, 1649–56*, 3 vols (New York, 1965), III, 200–01, 225.
- 4 J. M. Wallace, *Destiny his Choice: the Loyalism of Andrew Marvell* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 110–44. For another work which questions the orthodoxy, see B. Worden, 'Oliver Cromwell and the Sin of Achan', in D. Beales and G. Best (eds), *History, Society and Churches: Essays in Honour of Owen Chadwick* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 125–45.
- 5 Mr H. Wawker, 'A News-letter, 28 December 1654', Clarke MSS (Worcester College, Oxford, 25–8 50), XXVII, fol. 179.
- 6 W. C. Abbott (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (hereafter Abbott), 3 vols (Cambridge, 1937–47), III, 587. There is evidence, however, that the first draft of *The Instrument of Government*, presented to Cromwell at the end of November 1653, favoured the kingly title (*The Protector (so called) in Part Unveiled* (London, 1655), pp. 11–12). He claimed later, before an audience of military officers and confidants, to have derisively spurned that 'feather in a hat' (Abbott, IV, 417).
- 7 Abbott, III, 589.
- 8 J. S. Morrill, 'King Oliver', *Cromwelliana* (1982), 20–5.
- 9 *A Declaration of his Highness the Lord Protector upon his Actual Dissolution of the Parliament. With Grounds and Reasons which Moved thereunto* (London, 1655).
- 10 'A News-letter, 28 December 1654', Clarke MSS (Worcester College, Oxford, 25–8 50), XXVII, fol. 179; letter from Lorenzo Paulucci the Venetian Secretary in England to Giovanni Sagredo the Venetian Ambassador in France, 8 January 1655, in A. B. Hinds (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian*, (hereafter *CSPV*), vols 29–31 (London, 1929–31), XXX, 6.
- 11 The Dutch Ambassadors in England to the States General, 30 October 1654, in T. Birch (ed.), *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe esq* (hereafter *Thurloe*), 7 vols (London 1742), III, 684; message written in lemon juice on the back of a letter from Philip Mayo to Mr Tyndale at Antwerp, 8 December 1654, Clarendon MSS (Bodleian, Oxford, 47–9), 49, fol. 201b. See also, letters from Bordeaux the French Ambassador in England to Count Brienne in Paris, and to Chanut the French Ambassador in Holland, 29 and 30 October 1654, *Thurloe*, III, 681–2, 685; letters from Paulucci to Sagredo, 2 and 7 November 1654, *CSPV*, XXIX, 273, 275.
- 12 Abbott, III, 585; *A Representation Concerning the Late Parliament in the Year 1654: to Prevent Mistakes* (London, 1655), pp. 13–14.
- 13 See for example, Anon., *The Protector (So Called) in Part Unveiled* (London, 1655); J. Spittlehouse, *Certaine Queries Propounded to the Most Serious Consideration of*

- those Persons Now in Power* (London 1654); and J. Rogers, *To his Highnesse, the Lord General Cromwell, the Lord Protector . . . The humble Cautionary Proposals of John Rogers* (London, 1653).
- 14 The prime example was the anonymous *A True State of the Case of the Commonwealth* (London, 1654), pp. 28, 33, 46–7. But see also Johannes (Cornubiensis), *The Grand Catastrophe: or the Change in Government* (London, 1654); E. M. esq., *Protection Persuading Subjection* (London, 1654).
 - 15 On Protectoral symbolism see, R. Sherwood, *The Court of Oliver Cromwell* (Totowa, NJ, 1977). M. J. Seymour, *Pro-government Propaganda in Interregnum History* (unpublished Ph.D thesis, Cambridge University, 1986), adds considerably to Sherwood’s study and modifies many of his conclusions.
 - 16 Paulucci to Sagredo, 20 September 1654, CSPV, XXIX, 260.
 - 17 An Act for Abolishing the Kingly Office in England and Ireland, and the Dominions thereunto belonging, 17 March 1649, in C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait (eds), *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum: 1642–1660* (hereafter Firth and Rait), 3 vols (London, 1911), II, 18–20.
 - 18 See the record of the Putney debates and the other literature gathered in A. S. P. Woodhouse (ed.), *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates (1647–9) from the Clarke Manuscripts with Supplementary Documents* (London, 1938).
 - 19 Abbott, III, 585.
 - 20 Guibbon Goddard, ‘Parliamentary Journal’, in J. T. Rutt (ed.), *The Diary of Thomas Burton esqu*, 4 vols (London, 1828), I, xxv–xxvi.
 - 21 Goddard, pp. xxvii, xxxi–xxxii. Bulstrode Whitelocke’s diary follows a similar pattern, giving barely a mention of conflict between the House and the Protector from 12 September to the dissolution (R. Spalding (ed.), *The Diary of Bulstrode Whitelocke, 1605–1675* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 395–9).
 - 22 Letter from Bordeaux the French ambassador in England to Cardinal Mazarin, c. 25 October 1654, *Thurloe*, II, 674–5.
 - 23 Goddard, pp. xxvi, lxxxi, lxxxii.
 - 24 Goddard’s journal actually ends in mid-sentence a short time before Garland’s motion.
 - 25 Though the journal does not record proceedings in grand committee, it does record where committee discussions from 19–20 September were finally reported to the House (7 November, *Journal of the House of Commons* (hereafter *Commons Journal*), VII, 383).
 - 26 An Act against Unlicensed and Scandalous Books and Pamphlets, and for the better regulating of Printing, 20 September 1649, Firth and Rait, II, 245–54. This act was revived on 7 January 1653 (Firth and Rait, II, 696–9) though regulated by the Council rather than the Stationer’s Company. The Barebones Parliament made its own declaration against unlicensed reporting on 21 July 1653 (*Commons Journal*, VII, 288). The Protectorate itself made no official attempt to control the press until 28 August 1655 (*Orders of His Highness the Lord Protector . . . for Putting in . . . Execution the Laws . . . against Printing Unlicenced and Scandalous Books and Pamphlets, and for the Further Regulating of Printing* (London, 1655)).
 - 27 See J. Frank, *The Beginnings of the English Newspaper* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), pp. 201–3. Scobell’s news-book was also known at various times as *Several Proceedings of State Affairs* and *Perfect Proceedings of State Affairs*. It was licensed by John Rushworth, Secretary to the New Model Army.

- 28 *The Faithful Scout*, no. 201 (13–20 October 1654), 1608. Italics in the original.
- 29 Clarke MSS, xxvii, fol. 179.
- 30 John Hall, *Confusion Confounded* (London, 1654); L. D., *An Exact Relation of the Proceedings and Transactions of the Late Parliament* (London, 1654); J. Howell, *Som Sober Inspections* (London, 1655).
- 31 Their participation in the Lord Mayor's banquet in February, their favourable response to the western design and their loyalty to Cromwell in July 1655 are instructive in this respect. See G. F. Warner (ed.), *The Nicholas Papers: Correspondence of Sir Edward Nicholas, Secretary of State* (hereafter *Nicholas Papers*), 7 vols (London, 1897), III, 22–23; Clarke MSS, xxix, fol. 118.
- 32 *Faithful Scout*, no. 164 (3–10 Feb 1654), 1304; *Certain Passages of Every Dayes Intelligence*, no. 4 (3–10 Feb 1654), 31.
- 33 B. Taft, 'The Humble Petition of Several Colonels of the Army: Causes, Character and Results of Military Opposition to Cromwell's Protectorate', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 42 (1978), 15–41.
- 34 Fifth-monarchy men were prominent in this critique: see footnote 13 and J. Rogers, *Mene Tekel Perez* (London, 1654), pp. 2, 8–9; Spittlehouse, *Certaine Queries*; Spittlehouse, *An Answer to One Part of the Lord Protectors Speech, or a Vindication* (London, 1654).
- 35 *The Protector (so called) in Part Vnvailed*; A. Woolrych, 'The Cromwellian Protectorate: A Military Dictatorship', *History*, 75 (1990), 207–31; *Commonwealth to Protectorate* (Oxford 1982), pp. 363–4, 386–7.
- 36 Thurloe, III, 147–54. Gardiner (*Commonwealth and Protectorate*, III, 228, fn. 3), corrects some of Thurloe's notes.
- 37 There was also talk of a 'petition from the citty' assembled by Thomas Scott, John Bradshaw and Sir Arthur Hasilrigg, who had led the opposition to Cromwell in the first week of the Parliament: Thurloe, III, 147–8.
- 38 For details of the Wildman plot and its connection with Overton's activities in Scotland, see Taft, 'Humble Petition'.
- 39 Of extant petitions, two were published and three were hand written: Rawlinson MSS (Bodleian, Oxford), A21 fols 34–47, and A24 fols 390, 398.
- 40 Clarke MSS, xxvi, fols 164, 167–8; *Weekly Intelligencer* (21–8 November, 1654); Letter from John Thurloe to Mr Pell, November 1654, in: R. Vaughan, *The Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell and the State of Europe during the early part of the Reign of Louis XIV*, 2 vols (London, 1839), I, 80, 87; Gardiner, *Commonwealth and Protectorate*, III, 218–19.
- 41 Goddard, p. cxxxiv, fn.
- 42 Vaughan, I, 87–8.
- 43 Clarke MSS, xxvi, fols 164, 167; xxvii, fol. 16.
- 44 S. A. G. Taylor, *The Western Design: An Account of Cromwell's Expedition to the Caribbean* (The Hague, 1965).
- 45 *The Humble Petition of the Seamen* (London, 1654); Clarendon MSS, 49, fol. 84. Gardiner, *Commonwealth and Protectorate*, III, 215–17, suggests it was actually drafted by levellers.
- 46 'Record of Council proceedings', in C. H. Firth (ed.), *The Clarke Papers: Selections from the Papers of William Clarke*, 3 vols (London, 1904), III, appendix B, 207.
- 47 See D. Armitage, 'The Cromwellian Protectorate and the Languages of Empire', *History Journal*, 35 (1992), 531–55.

- 48 See Stowe MSS (British Library, London), 152, fol. 72; letter from Cologne, 29 September 1654, *Thurloe*, II, 613; Clarke MSS, xxvii, fols 111–13; letter from Peter Julius Coyet to Charles X, 20 July 1655, *Swedish Diplomats at Cromwell's Court, 1655–56*, M. Roberts (ed.), Camden 4th series, vol. 6 (London, 1988), 98–9.
- 49 *Vaughan*, I, 87–8.
- 50 Abbott, III, 844–51; *A Declaration of his Highness by the Advice of his Council Shewing the Reasons of their Proceedings for Securing the Peace of this Commonwealth* (London, 1655), pp. 17–8, 25–9.
- 51 *A True Account of the Late Bloody and Inhumane Conspiracy against his Highness the Lord Protector of this Commonwealth* (London, 1654).
- 52 Letter from Joseph Jane to Edward Nicholas, 16 October 1654, *Nicholas Papers*, II, 103.
- 53 *A Perfect Diurnall; or Occurrences of Certain Military Affairs* (London, 1654), p. 198.
- 54 Abbott, III, 585; *A Representation*, pp. 13–4.
- 55 This connection is generally missed. See for instance, J. Frank, *Cromwell's Press Agent: a Critical Biography of Marchmont Needham* (Lanham, Md, 1980).
- 56 *The Observer and Summary Intelligence*, no. 1 (24–31 October 1654), p. 11.
- 57 *Observer*, no. 2 (1–7 November 1654), p. 10.
- 58 *Observer*, no. 1, p. 13 (my italics).
- 59 W. Gostellow, *Charles Stuart and Oliver Cromwell: or, Glad Tidings of Peace to all Christendom* (London, 1655), pp. 31–44, 47.
- 60 W. Gostellow, *For the Lord Protector* (London, 1655).
- 61 Abbott, III, 524–5.
- 62 J. Howell, *An Admonition to My Lord Protector* (London, 1654), pp. 1–7.
- 63 *An Admonition*, pp. 3, 6–8.
- 64 *A Copy of a Letter concerning the Election of a Lord Protector; Written to a Member of Parliament* (London, 1654), pp. 25–6. The tract was reprinted in 1656 as *A Copy of a Letter Written to an Officer of the Army by a True Commonwealthsman and no Courtier, Concerning the Right Settlement of our Present Government* (London, 1656).
- 65 *A Copy of a Letter*, pp. 25–6.
- 66 M. Judson, *From Tradition to Political Reality: A Study of the Ideas Set Forth in Support of the Commonwealth Government in England, 1649–53* (Hamden, Conn., 1980), pp. 171–7; Wallace, *Destiny his Choice*, pp. 9–68; P. A. Knachel (ed.), 'Introduction', *The Case of the Commonwealth of England Stated* (Charlottesville, 1969), pp. 1–8; M. J. Lepine, *The Case of Conscience Unresolved: the Commonwealth of England's Engagement and Political Debate, 1649–52* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Auckland, 1984).
- 67 *A Copy of a Letter*, p. 36.
- 68 *A Copy of a Letter*, pp. 23–6, 32–33.
- 69 See Samuel Hunton, *His Highness the Protector Protected* (London, 1654), pp. 5–6, for an attack upon those who held to the sacredness of the title.
- 70 John Hall (of Richmond), *Of Government and Obedience* (London, 1654), pp. 119–25, 188–91.
- 71 *Observer*, no. 1, pp. 5–6; no. 2, pp. 12–13.
- 72 Morrill, 'King Oliver', pp. 24–5; Worden, 'Oliver Cromwell and the Sin of Achan', pp. 141–5.

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