**Faction: Clientage and Party: English Politics, 1550-1603**

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Changes in the structure of the Court and the emergence of religion as a major political issue curbed the influence of faction in the later Tudor period. But it was not eliminated; the last decade of Elizabeth's reign, argues Simon Adams, saw the greatest faction-struggle of the sixteenth-century.

'Faction', either as a noun or in its adjectival form 'factious', was one of the most over-used words in the Elizabethan political vocabulary. What was meant by it, on the other hand, was less clear. 'I have never loved or favoured factious dealing, nor have used it in my whole course of this action' declared Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Chancellor of Oxford, in a letter to the convocation of the University in April 1577, defending (at great length) his role in the recent disputed election to the rectorship of Lincoln College. He went on to accuse two of the Fellows of having rigged the election for their personal advantage. The term was used in a similar sense by Sir Henry Sidney in 1572, when he stated that J.P.s should execute their offices 'uncorruptly without partiality or faction'. But it could also refer to a mere personal enmity or a refusal to co-operate: 'a very unsound and factious fellow' was how Leicester described the Cambridge don Everard Digby during the course of another University *cause* *cère* in 1588. At times it was used in something approaching the modern sense of a political alliance or following. In 1572 Thomas Digges argued that the delay in executing the Duke of Norfolk following his trial for treason 'augmenteth his well-willers and increaseth his faction'; a decade later Leicester considered that the recent revival of Catholicism had created 'a manifest faction in [the) realm'. Yet on other occasions, when we might have expected 'faction' to be used, Sir William Cecil would describe alliances and followings simply as 'friends'.

The widespread contemporary use of the term creates difficulties for the historian. 'Faction' clearly implied that personal advantage or connection were being placed above equity, a greater good, or straight-forward behaviour. Faction was the dark side of the system of personal loyalties and dependence that the society prized so much. But when did an otherwise legitimate or even politically neutral connection become a faction, and an act of patronage become factious? Obviously, it was something one's opponents did: faction was a term of abuse, similar to the contemporary use of the word 'Puritan'. Just as few advanced Protestants accepted the description Puritan, so would few Elizabethan politicians have considered themselves as the leaders of factions.

For some years there has been a running debate over whether a broad or a narrow definition of a Puritan is the more accurate; the current interest in factional politics has, as Dr Starkey has suggested, raised similar questions about the use of 'faction' (November issue). There is a great danger of trivialising contemporary political disputes by considering them all to have been factional. Ultimately one must decide whether to use the term loosely or strictly. I shall argue here for a narrow definition. A faction was not the same thing as a clientage; nor was it the exercise of patronage; nor was it the taking of sides on a major political issue: a faction was a personal following employed in direct opposition to another personal following. A faction struggle could involve disputes over patronage or debate over matters of state, but its essence was a personal rivalry that over-rode all other considerations.

At the risk of appearing to explain the entire phenomenon away, I would argue further that there were only two periods in the later sixteenth century in which English politics was dominated by faction struggles: the middle years of Edward VI's reign (1548 to 1552) and the 1590s. Factional struggles occurred at these points for very specific reasons; and the factions involved were quite distinct from other forms of political and social association. Much of the confusion over the role of faction in Tudor politics has been caused by the fact that the relationship between court politics and local politics underwent significant changes during the course of the sixteenth century. Dr Starkey has focused his article on the changing institutional structure of the court of Henry VIII and the dramatic turnover in its personnel. In his portrait of faction-struggle at court, the older picture of a battle between the crown and the territorial nobility, the 'over-mighty subject' of legend, has completely disappeared. Significantly, few of the greater noble families – the Howards provide the main exception – played much of a role in court politics. The great families that fell foul of Henry VIII were a limited group: the Percies (for whom the Tudors entertained an undying suspicion – they were never able to do anything right), the northern families implicated in the Pilgrimage of Grace and those families who had the misfortune to possess royal blood: the Staffords, Courtenays and Poles. The great majority of noble families – the Stanleys, Earls of Derby, Talbots, Earls of Shrewsbury or Somerset, Earls of Worcester, for example – continued to rule in their 'countries'. The substructure of their territorial power – the loyalty and allegiance of the country gentlemen, who, in turn, acted as local magistrates and JPs – once known as 'bastard. feudalism' also underwent little change. The earlier practice of retaining may have declined during the course of the century, but the underlying patron-client relationship remained intact.

The relative stability of the greater nobility was as much a part of Henrician politics as the tumult at court. Provided that there was reasonably competent governance on the part of the crown, that their legitimate interests were safeguarded and that no attempt was made (as by Cardinal Wolsey on several occasions) to undercut them, the greater nobility were content to let the court run itself. Nor was their power a cause of instability in the regions. This was more likely to be the product either of two great families in a single county – Leicestershire, where the battles between the Greys and the Hastings can be traced from the 1550s to the Civil War, provides a classic example – or of the absence of nobleman of weight altogether. Thanks to the researches of Dr Alan Hassell Smith, we know a great deal about the politics of Elizabethan Norfolk and its bitter feuds and rivalries. Often overlooked, however, (though not by Dr Smith) is that after the execution of the 4th Duke of Norfolk in 1572 the country was run solely by its gentry and could fairly be described as a gentry republic. Despite the traditional picture of the belligerent nobleman, the gentry were as much, if not more, to blame for instability as the nobility: the tail very often wagged the dog. The origins of the early-Tudor concern with retaining, livery and maintenance lay not so much in the fear of noble factions as in the danger that personal disputes among the gentry would be settled by the intervention of noblemen, obliged to maintain their reputations as lords and patrons, rather than by process of law.

During the second half of the sixteenth century this pattern of politics became increasingly transformed by the Protestant Reformation. On the one hand the self-identification of Protestants as 'the godly' created a new type of social allegiance, while at the same time Protestantism tended to reduce the differing degrees of the ruling society into a single class of 'magistrates', who were all expected to execute their offices in the advancement of God's cause. The court, council and parliament took on a new importance, for they now became the means through which a godly policy would be formulated. Who would define God's cause in a given situation was a moot point, but there emerged a novel pressure group of Protestant divines and evangelical laymen more than willing to give kings and magistrates advice. A new type of client – the ideologically committed – was created, and the danger of the nobleman being led by his followers took on a new significance. The evangelical impact was first felt during the reign of Edward VI. The Dukes of Somerset and Northumberland were barraged by sermons from Hugh Latimer and other popular preachers. At the time of his overthrow in October 1549, Somerset was considered to have been led into unsound policies by a group of evangelical intellectuals. Northumberland was faced with the thankless task of trying to resolve the growing tension in the church between Archbishop Cranmer and hot gospellers like John Hooper and John Knox.

During the reign of Elizabeth the now 'Puritan' pressure group became far more active and there was real danger of the magistrate losing control entirely. The Puritan lawyer Robert Snagge made the first open parliamentary attack on the Church Settlement of 1559 in the House of Commons in 1572; at the time he was also the Earl of Leicester's steward at Kenilworth. It is extremely doubtful that Snagge was following Leicester's instructions; rather, the incident shows that even Leicester could not fully control his own household servants. What strengthened the position of the advanced Protestants was the further fact that the Reformation had also introduced a new definition of loyalty – 'soundness in religion' – and they could thereby wrap themselves in the flag of being the Queen's most loyal subjects.

Under this new pressure the nature of aristocratic clientages began to change and they became more openly religious in orientation, a trend which was increased by the tendency of Protestants to intermarry. The followings of both Somerset and Northumberland in the 1540s and 1550s already possessed a markedly evangelical bias. During the reign of Mary, the tensions created by the Queen's decision to embark on the active persecution of heretics brought the system of religiously neutral clientages to the breaking point. The story of how Sir John Perrot came to blows with his patron, the Earl of Pembroke, over his refusal to enforce the statutes against heresy may be apocryphal; but the grovelling letter of Sir Thomas Gargrave to his patron the Earl of Shrewsbury, apologising for voting against the Crown's bill for confiscating the lands of exiles in 1555, survives. The process quickened during Elizabeth's reign. By the 1580s, Leicester's clientage, originally inherited from his father, was beginning to adopt something of a party ethos; loyalty to the Earl himself was increasingly overshadowed by his identification with the cause. In 1581 the fervent Puritan Sir Richard Knightley informed him that

you have lightened many a godly man's heart and I am sure you have thereby gotten you such friends as would be ready to venture their lives with your lordship in a good cause, even such as would not do it so much in respect of your high calling, as for that they espy in your lordship a zeal and care for the helping and relieving of the poor church.

The impact of these changes in the broader context of politics was, in turn, very much conditioned by significant transformations in the structure of the court during the reigns of Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth. These made it very difficult to play one part of the court off against another and prevented it from becoming the battleground for religiously-based factions. Most deeply affected was the Privy Chamber, which ceased to be an independent political body. During the reign of Edward VI its composition reflected the balance of power in the council. During the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth its personnel were largely female, occasionally reflecting outside male influences, but incapable of acting as political figures in their own right. Important changes also occurred in the relationship between the household and the council. As we know from Dr Dale Hoak's work, the Edwardian council ruled supreme in a way that it had neither before nor since. Mary and Elizabeth, on the other hand, had extensive experience in running independent households as princesses. It is not surprising that, when they came to the throne, the personnel of their princely households became the core of the royal household. The household, as a body of trusted intimate servants and friends, retained a continued importance.

The continued importance of the household had a significant effect on the role of the council. Since the emergence of the Privy Council in the early decades of the sixteenth century, household and council had overlapped, for a substantial proportion of councillors were always household officers. But in Mary's reign there was a distinct difference between her relationship to such household officers as Sir Robert Rochester and Sir Henry Jerningham and the leading officers of state. The latter were mainly former Henrician and Edwardian councillors, whom she never really liked nor trusted. This was particularly the case with the most active of the officers of state, William, Lord Paget. The tension between household and council was widely observed; but, while there were major personal clashes and disputes over policy, factional struggles did not result. In part this was due to Philip II's desire to mediate the disputes in the interests of stability; but it was also the case that the major political issues of the reign (the Habsburg marriage and alliance and the attack on heresy) cut across institutional boundaries.

For the greater part of Elizabeth's reign this potential tension was resolved, whether by accident ar design, through her reliance upon men who were both leading household officers and major political figures. The central position was held by Sir William Cecil, Secretary of State until 1572 and then Lord Treasurer, who combined the roles of household servant (he had first been appointed to her household in 1550) and principal administrator. Moreover, Cecil never attempted to convert the secretaryship into an independent power-base but exercised it very much in household terms. His well-known refusal to come down decisively on major issues was in part due to his desire to act as the Queen's advisor and mouthpiece rather than as a policy-maker like Wolsey or Cromwell. But Cecil was not the only key figure: Leicester too combined personal intimacy, household office and a significant political role. The traditional picture of Leicester as a courtier-adventurer who rose to great heights through the Queen's misguided affection is based on a fundamental misconception. From the earliest years of the reign he was the inheritor of his father's following, and it was this that gave significance to his position as intimate and potential consort. Throughout the first three decades of the reign (until Leicester's death in 1588) the relationship between Cecil, Leicester and the Queen remained more or less unchanged. In the mid-1570s Sir Francis Walsingham, Sir Christopher Hatton and, until his death in 1583, the 3rd Earl of Sussex became part of this inner ring, although Cecil and Leicester remained the most important councillors. The existence of a stable inner ring deprived the council as a body of decisive influence, as was revealed by the failure of attempts to play the council off against the Queen (most notably by Mr. Secretary Davison over the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587). Conciliar votes counted for little: policy was made by the Queen in consultation with her intimates.

As a result, faction on the council was not an issue; nor did it really appear in the court itself (if we except hostile comments on Leicester or Cecil). The true courtiers of the reign – men who rose from obscurity through royal favour alone – were Hatton and Sir Walter Raleigh. Neither possessed more than a microscopic following; their positions were purely individual ones. Sussex might have played the role of faction leader, and may briefly have tried to in 1565, but in the main he too possessed a very small following. The Duke of Norfolk was perhaps in the strongest position to do so, for he possessed a regional base, a wide aristocratic connection and the prestige of his house. However, to the despair of those who, like the Spanish ambassadors, wanted him to take up the leadership of a conservative alliance, Norfolk, until his last years, was not really interested in high politics and preferred a domestic life. A widespread conservative coalition was certainly in the making in 1568-1569, but Norfolk's indecision prevented it from rallying under his banner and the most vulnerable members, the Northern Earls, were left to rise in rebellion alone.

Any serious discussion of faction at Elizabeth's court in this period must, therefore, revolve around the question of whether the relationship between Leicester and Cecil was a factional one. Sir John Neale certainly believed it was, but in his essay The Elizabethan Political Scene all he could produce in the way of evidence were a few comments from that notoriously unreliable libel Leicester's Commonwealth. Indeed, most of his evidence for faction at all was drawn from the 1590s. The relationship between the two was certainly a complicated one, There were serious political disagreements – over Elizabeth's marriage, over the fate of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1568-1569 and over foreign policy in the later 1570s and 1580s – although in the main they agreed over the broader aims of a Protestant policy. Neither may have liked the other greatly, but the evidence for warm and sympathetic relations is more substantial than generally acknowledged. The evidence for Leicester's attempt to overthrow Cecil at the beginning of 1569 is suspect and must be regarded with scepticism. In recent years there has been a tendency to see a difference over religious policy, with Cecil patronising the conformists and Leicester the Puritan radicals, but the distinction has been very much overdrawn. Many of Leicester's clerical proteges proceeded to impeccably respectable careers, while Cecil can be found patronising such men as the former separatist Robert Browne and the presbyterian theorist Walter Travers.

More significantly, there is little evidence for competing patronage, whether lay or clerical, at any level. Both men acted as patrons to the same broad body of advanced Protestants. 'In these cases I take you to be as one' wrote Henry Killigrew, a life-long Dudley partisan and Cecil's future brother-in-law, to Dudley in 1562. The relationship had its symbiotic elements. Cecil may have been at the centre of the administration but he lacked noble rank and a wider connection. This Leicester provided. Only by the 1580s, did the relationship undergo something of a transformation. After he entered the peerage himself as Baron of Burghley in 1571, Cecil appears to have changed his view of his own position. More importantly, the extended debate over intervention in the Netherlands polarised opinion and Cecil appears to have acted as a protector for those who opposed it, while Leicester championed the interventionist cause.

The tensions in the Cecil-Dudley relationship do not, however, add up to a factional conflict and the distinction becomes apparent when the real faction-struggles are examined. Edward VI's reign contains many still unexplained political events: chief amongst them is the origin of the factional struggle between Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset and the future Duke of Northumberland, then Earl of Warwick, between 1549 and 1551. Recent research has made clear the disagreements between Somerset and the more conservative councillors in 1549: the disasters attending his foreign policy, the bankrupting of the crown, his liberal religious policy, apparent tolerance of peasant rebellion and high-handed manner of government. Less understandable was why Warwick, who shared Somerset's religious views and was an old friend (as one contemporary put it, 'being fellows together with the Cardinal and after was made knights in France'), joined in the *coup* against him. Whether or not Warwick had, as some contemporaries alleged, been plotting against the Seymours for some time, by 1549 there is evidence of personal antagonism and disputes over patronage.

The faction-struggle proper, however, followed on Somerset's release in 1550. Despite an attempt to repair the breach by a marriage between his daughter and Warwick's heir, Somerset was intent on revenge. Following the discovery of evidence that Somerset was planning a coup, Warwick made a pre-emptive strike which resulted in Somerset's trial and execution for felony in January 1552. The evidence for Somerset's attempted *coup* reveals the depths of the struggle, for it involved not only the creation of a faction against Warwick (which may have included plans for Somerset to exploit his popularity in the City of London) but also the use of the next parliament to call him to account. Warwick in turn was prepared to fabricate a capital charge against his rival, to which he confessed on the eve of his own execution in 1553 and, to clear his conscience, requested forgiveness from Somerset's sons. This posthumous element was not a formality, for despite Northumberland's attempts to win over Somerset's former followers (William Cecil, for example), many of them remained either openly unreconciled or, in his own moment of crisis in 1553, stood on the sidelines or defected to Mary.

The vendetta to some degree split the leadership of Edwardian Protestantism and showed signs of continuing into Elizabeth's reign. One of Elizabeth's first acts was to restore Somerset's son to his father's earldom of Hertford, and about him soon rallied the core of the surviving Seymour faction. A second round of the Dudley-Seymour feud might have resulted had not Hertford destroyed his chances of retaining royal favour by his un- or ill-advised marriage to Lady Catherine Grey in the winter of 1560-61. His fall left the Seymour partisans leaderless and by the later 1560s most of them are found in Leicester's following. One such was the future Sir William Pelham, who left England to enter the service of the Regent of the Netherlands after Somerset's second arrest, and later warned Mary against Northumberland. After an active military career under Elizabeth, he died in 1587 as one of the Earl's 'very good friends' and marshal of the camp to his army in the Netherlands.

The course of the faction-struggle of the 1590s is easier to follow. Its origins lay in the attempt of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, to take over Leicester's mantle as leader of the interventionist party. On Leicester's death, the well-known Puritan Sir Francis Hastings had urged him to

employ your whole forces both in honour and credit to advance God's truth...Now is the time come wherein you should put this in practice, in that He hath taken from us that honourable worthy gentleman, whom He used many times as a notable instrument.

About him rallied the former Leicesterians, partly out of personal loyalty and partly out of loyalty to the cause. As Sir Robert Sidney (Sir Philip's younger brother) put it,

For though I were in no way tied unto you for your own particular favours, as long as you have these ends you now have, you cannot separate me from following your course.

But Essex lacked the confidence of the Queen, and she and Burghley (who shared a deeply engrained suspicion of military over-extension) regarded sceptically his proposals for an offensive strategy on the continent. The failure of the Rouen campaign of 1591-92, in which Essex commanded the English contingent, marked the turning point of his career. He believed the failure to be due to lack of support at home or even, in his darker moments, deliberate sabotage. His response was to seek to take control of the court in order to provide himself with a firmer political base in the future. After 1593 he challenged every major court appointment: patronage became a factional issue. He met with almost total failure, which caused him to redouble his efforts, for patronage now became a demonstration of influence irrespective of the importance of the office. Local office also became the subject of his attentions and for the first time in Elizabeth's reign local disputes became closely linked to a factional contest at court. The patronage disputes also changed the complexion of the factions, for the pressure on officeholders created a pro-Cecilian alliance of 'ins', while Essex's following became something of a coalition of 'outs'.

By 1598-99 he had both split the court (though his following there was a clear minority) and created two factions whose influence had spread deep into the country. But any remaining hopes he may have had of winning the struggle were effectively destroyed by his ill-advised return from Ireland in 1599. The near total destruction of his influence led him to plot his *coup d'état* against Sir Robert Cecil; but at the same time it caused the more substantial members of his faction, particularly the old Leicesterians like Sidney, Lord Willoughby D'Eresby or Sir William Russell, to stand back. In 1599 Sidney was warned by one of his own clients that he was regarded at court as having been

for many year most inward and great in all secrecies and factiously great with the Earl of Essex... you are not to be trusted.

The *coup* was mounted by only a rump of his old faction: a handful of personal intimates, like the Earl of Southampton, and former army officers who had nowhere else to turn.

Despite the fifty years that separated them, there are basic similarities between the two faction struggles. Both involved deep personal enmities, the creating of personal factions, and the attempt to rally the country against the court. Like Somerset, Essex counted heavily on his popularity in the city of London (which played an important role in his plans for the *coup d'état* ). He may also have hoped to employ parliament in the struggle. He certainly engaged in extensive borough-mongering, but occasion did not serve, for the only parliamentary session he might have employed occurred in 1597 when he was embarked on the expedition to the Azores. Like Somerset, Essex enjoyed a posthumous continuation of his popularity and the aura of having been unfairly, and through faction put to death. The Essex faction also survived. Raleigh's notorious advice to Robert Cecil to remove Essex entirely while he had the chance and not fear a future vendetta was, like much of Raleigh's advice, very wide of the mark. The reverberations of the Essex-Cecil feud continued long into the reign of James I – in 1613 Southampton was still trying to rally men through the use of Essex's name. Of this second phase, Raleigh, as the outcome of the Bye Plot of 1604 showed, was himself to be the first victim.

Perhaps the most significant parallel between Somerset and Essex, however, is found in their attitude towards the crown. They went to the block for having attempted *coups* against rivals, not against the crown directly. This distinguishes them from Norfolk, who was executed for a treasonable conspiracy against the crown itself. But the mere fact that they could expect to succeed in such a *coup* also reflects a weakness in royal leadership. In Somerset's case there was a boy king, who could be won over, in Essex's case Elizabeth's failure to make clear to him the limits of her tolerance encouraged him to believe that he might turn her against the Cecils. The weakness of the crown also explains the survival of factional struggles into the seventeenth century. The periods most dominated by faction, the reign of James I or the first decades of the Restoration, were precisely those in which the king was either indecisive or sufficiently ambiguous in his politics and in his relationship to his ministers to encourage a belief that a factional victory was possible.

By contrast, both Mary, and Elizabeth during the first three decades of her reign, were sufficiently stable in their personal relationships to discourage factional contests. The role of the weakness of the crown in factional struggles also provides the best counter to the argument that it was endemic. Clientages or party battles over issues were not in themselves factious, nor were gentry quarrels. In neither of the great sixteenth-century factional struggles were party issues of major importance; by the same token the semi-party association created under Leicester and Cecil was not of itself factious. Faction may have been widely considered a disease of the body politic, but it was a disease with very specific causes.

**For Further Reading:**

There are two excellent, if occasionally conflicting, studies of the politics of the reign of Edward VI: M.L. Bush, *The Government Policy of Protector Somerset* (Edward Arnold, 1975) and Dale Hoak, *The King's Council in the Reign of Edward VI* (Cambridge University Press, 1976). Extensive and up-to-date surveys of the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth (to 1588) are provided by D.M. Loades, *The Reign of Mary Tudor* (Ernest Benn, 1979), and Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *The Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime* (Princeton University Press and Jonathan Cape, 1969) and *Queen Elizabeth and the Making of Policy, 1572-1588* (Princeton University Press, 1981). A. Hassell Smith, *County and Court: Government and Politics in Norfolk, 1558-1603* (Oxford University Press, 1974) is a first-rate local study, while Peter Clark, *English Provincial Society from the Reformation to the Revolution: Religion, Politics and Society in Kent, 1500-1640* (Harvester Press, 1977), contains valuable chapters on the later sixteenth century. The author has published a study of one aspect of the Earl of Leicester's clientage, 'The Gentry of North Wales and the Earl of Leicester's Expedition to the Netherlands, 1585-86', *Welsh History Review* VII (1974) and has others in preparation.

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