**Faction in the reign of Elizabeth I**

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Will Saunders examines the diverse and changing interpretations of the Queen's relations with her Councillors.

In his television series on the reign of Elizabeth I, David Starkey described the Queen as 'a bright star who dazzled both the nation and the world'. He then went on to claim that, whereas most stars fade in time, Elizabeth's luminescence 'has lasted for nearly four centuries'. It is easy to see why such a claim can be made. In the autumn of 2002 Elizabeth I was voted one of the ten greatest Britons of all time; the only monarch to feature in that list. She is still popularly perceived as a strong leader whose church settlement brought religious divisions to an end and whose foreign policy defeated the Spanish Armada, whilst allowing Francis Drake and the other maritime adventurers to sow the seeds of the British Empire.

However, whilst Elizabeth's reputation seems secure in the minds of the public, many academics have been rather more critical of the self-styled 'Gloriana'. In fact, some have argued that Elizabeth only had a tenuous grip on power through her reign and highlight the role of her Councillors in shaping the policies she is remembered for. The concept of faction has been particularly debated by successive generations of historians with regard to Elizabeth, and opinions have ranged from dismissing the whole validity of the term to arguing that Elizabeth was overwhelmed by faction-fighting at key points in her reign, with dangerous repercussions for the stability of the kingdom.

**What does Faction mean?**

One of the major problems in assessing the impact of faction during Elizabeth's reign is deciding what is in fact meant by the word, as different writers have used the term in a variety of ways both during and since the Tudor era. The historian Eric Ives, writing in the 1980s, defined faction as 'a group of people which seeks objectives that are seen primarily in personal terms'; and he goes on to argue that a faction could work in a positive way, by gaining privileges, grants or jobs for its members, or in a negative way, by denying such things to its rivals. In Tudor terms, therefore, this inevitably meant controlling the distribution of patronage.

The monarchs in 16th-century England needed to recruit a large number of royal servants to facilitate the smooth running of their kingdom. A powerful figure at the centre of politics would attempt to distribute government posts to his own followers, in order to prove his own power and reputation to other figures at the Court by the size of his following. The distributor of this patronage would also expect economic rewards from those who received patronage from him. In this way a pyramid of individuals would be created, with the apex offering positions to the layers below, which in turn offered loyalty and money to those above them. The power that the distribution of patronage gave to any dominant individual meant that inevitably others would try and wrest control of this privileged position in order to reward their own followers and benefit themselves.

However, for faction to be truly politically significant it must include more than a struggle for economic rewards. Ives goes on to argue that a particular faction might hold a 'recognisable ideological approach' and a faction might work to pursue a certain policy rather than just achieve personal gain. This must be a central tenet of the faction debate in Elizabeth's reign. The struggle for economic rewards would make faction of interest to a surveyor of the Court during the reign of Elizabeth, but in order for the concept to be relevant to a wider understanding of the reign faction must have influenced some of the decisions made by Elizabeth.

Another historian, Sheppard, has defined faction as 'a political group whose members are bound to a leader by a variety of personal, informal ties and which vies for power with other, similar groups'. Hence the connection between faction and the seizure of political power seems an essential element in deciding how influential factions were at Elizabeth's Court. This debate has been addressed by a number of writers since the period itself.

**Early Interpretations**

During Elizabeth's reign, accusations that one faction controlled her, namely that of the Earl of Leicester, were put into circulation. In a 1570s pamphlet, Leicester's Common-wealth, it was claimed that Leicester's 'own creatures' controlled the Privy Chamber and access to the Queen. It went on to argue of Leicester that

His reign … is so absolute in this place, and likewise in all other parts of the Court, as nothing can pass, but by his admission, nothing can be said, done or signified, whereof he is not particularly advertised; no bill, no supplication, no complaint, no suit, no speech can pass from any man to the Prince … but by his good liking.

The pamphlet went on to claim, in a highly critical manner, that not only did the Earl of Leicester hold sway over the Queen but that he encouraged and supported the placing of Puritans in the country. As a result his 'puritan faction' dominated England and allowed him to advance his own political ends.

In Stuart times the idea that faction existed at the Elizabethan Court was also expounded, although in a way that presented a more positive image of Elizabeth's ability to rule over her Court. Robert Naunton wrote the Fragmenta regalia in 1633 and claimed that 'The principal note of her reign will be, that she ruled much by faction and parties, which herself both made, upheld and weakened, as her own great judgement advised.' According to Naunton, Elizabeth was not the puppet of a faction but actively used them to help her govern.

**The Twentieth Century**

This image was accepted and expanded on by the most influential writer on Elizabeth of the middle years of the twentieth Century, John Neale. He painted a picture of a Court obsessed with the 'vast amount of patronage' at the disposal of the Queen. Suitors thronged to the Court to obtain their share of this patronage but had to deal with 'members of the inner ring of the Court … with access to the Privy Chamber'. This access to the personal rooms of the Queen, Neale argued, gave the leading Courtiers, men such as Leicester and William Cecil (Lord Burghley), great authority and they were able to use satisfied suitors to build substantial power-bases in the country. However, the major Courtiers had constantly to struggle to maintain their hold over the Queen's attention and distribution of patronage, for as the Earl of Essex bemoaned as he fell from favour with the Queen, 'Who will be desirous to come under a roof that threateneth ruin?'

Once suitors realised that a Courtier no longer had the ear of the Queen, they would no longer use that man to advance their request, and stop offering the Courtier rewards and service. Personal access to the Queen was obviously crucial, as Elizabeth herself appeared to realise when she mocked Leicester, teasing, 'You are like my little dog; when people see you, they know I am nearby.' Neale argued that the rewards available to successful courtiers meant that 'the competition at Court was ceaseless. Success not only meant power: it meant money. On it depended the quality and size of a statesman's faction' and subsequently strength in the Court and country.

Yet Neale did not feel that this constant striving amongst Courtiers for access to the Queen in order to gain patronage for themselves and their followers harmed Elizabeth, at least until the 1590s. In fact the various factions at Court helped the Queen to rule well because she could always rely upon a variety of sources of information to help her make decisions. As Neale claimed, 'Court factions were essential to the well-being of the governmental system; there could be no greater disaster than single-faction rule'. One of Elizabeth's greatest strengths, for the first 30 years of her reign, was her ability to manage the factions at Court. 'She allowed no monopoly, but played the factions one against the other'. In this way she was able to divide and conquer those who would push her into following a particular policy against her better judgement. Indeed Elizabeth was so adept at managing the factions at Court that, 'If she suspected deceit or perceived that the factions were in unholy alliance to secure some appointment … a common device of hers was to fall back on delays'. In this way Elizabeth ensured that her will prevailed, even against a unified front of Courtiers or Councillors.

In 1988 Christopher Haigh published a much more critical biography of the Queen. Like earlier writers he still acknowledged the existence of factions at the Elizabethan Court, based on the distribution of patronage, as 'lesser men attached themselves to courtiers who might secure them offices or grants, and the great channelled rewards to those whose support was worth having.' Haigh particularly identified Burghley and Leicester as being 'constantly besieged by suitors' due to their standing with the Queen; and he painted a picture of Burghley being protective over his position at Court and admonishing those who sought an alternative route to the Queen. 'Burghley's vigorous activity was partly to prevent Leicester achieving a monopoly of influence, for since the Earl always stood highest in Elizabeth's affections he was potentially the most effective patron'.

Unlike earlier writers, however, Haigh argued that Elizabeth was unable to control these factions and, as a result, the 'rivalries sometimes threatened disaster'. The disputes between, on one hand, the Howard faction of the Duke of Norfolk and the Earl of Sussex, and, on the other, the Earl of Leicester are highlighted as a dangerous factional feud that threatened to escalate into open conflict during 1565-66. Haigh describes how Leicester's followers wore purple ribbons at Court and Sussex's wore yellow and the rivalry constantly threatened to plunge the Court into physical violence. The Queen brokered an end to the feud in 1566 but not before 'civil war had seemed the likely outcome'. Haigh saw faction feuding, therefore, as a serious threat to the stability of the reign, although he grudgingly acknowledges that she was able to assert her authority over her unruly courtiers before open warfare ensued and was able to preside over 'an uneasy truce between Leicester, Burghley and Sussex' in the 1570s.

**Simon Adams**

This negative view of a Court splintered by disputes and headed by a Queen who was barely able to control them has been challenged by Simon Adams. Adams, in a number of articles throughout the 1980s and 1990s, has thrown the whole concept of faction at the Elizabethan Court into doubt. He has challenged the views of Neale by dismissing the 17th-century sources that his work was based upon. Neale's interpretation of events at the Elizabethan Court appeared to mirror those expressed by Naunton during the reign of Charles I. Adams argues that Naunton wrote admiringly of how Elizabeth was able to control factions at her Court as a contrast to the rule of the Stuarts, and so Naunton was commenting as much on the failings of the Stuart monarchs as on the strengths of Elizabeth. Adams feels that these writers cannot be taken at face value as evidence of the internal workings of the Elizabethan Court. He also attacks the historical worth of Leicester's Commonwealth, arguing that although it was written during the reign of Elizabeth, it was produced by Catholic propagandists. They were determined to tarnish the authority of the Queen's religious policies towards the Catholics by claiming that they were the product of 'new men' who had seized control of the Queen and her policies and were undermining the 'ancient nobility' who had the real interest of the nation at heart.

Instead, Adam sees the leading figures of the Elizabethan Court as working closely together. He does acknowledge that 'Burghley may have disliked and feared' Leicester but argues that the two men were from a similar background as both families had prospered under the Protestant rule of Edward VI. They had 'a similar range of friends and associations' and worked to secure the security of the regime. Yet there were still tensions within the Court in the 1560s. These mainly focused on the failure of the Queen to marry and so produce a successor. In 1561 Cecil seems to have undermined the Queen's potential marriage with Dudley by floating rumours that he was having his wife poisoned.

Later in the 1560s Adams sees a struggle at Court between those who wanted Elizabeth to marry Archduke Charles of Austria, such as Norfolk and Sussex, and those who opposed the match, led by Leicester. However, he does not see these disputes as factional struggles, between powerful men with a pyramid of supporters beneath them, who could dominate the Queen and threaten the country with civil war if their aims were frustrated. Rather, he has shown that the Earl of Sussex had no personal following 'of any size' and that virtually all the members of Elizabeth's inner circle came from 'established Tudor Court families'. They had intermarried and had similar religious views, so their occasional disagreements cannot be seen as factional conflicts but merely the type of squabbles over policy that all politicians experience. The one figure who had the authority, wealth and following to destabilise the kingdom was the Duke of Norfolk, who was uninterested in Court politics in the early 1560s and then only acted very hesitantly before his execution in 1572.

Therefore, Adams sees the Elizabethan Court as a settled and peaceful one, and writes that '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'. Other challengers to the dominance of the Queen's most trusted Councillors were not powerful enough to destabilise the situation, since Christopher Hatton and Walter Raleigh only possessed a 'microscopic following' and rose purely due to the favour of the Queen. Indeed, Hatton was frequently dismissed as the 'dancing Chancellor', alluding to his talent that had originally caught the eye of Elizabeth. The revolt of the Netherlands, from 1567, and the case for England offering military assistance to the rebels, did polarise opinions on the Council during the 1570s. Leicester backed intervention and attracted the support of military men who wished to fight in the Netherlands whilst Cecil protected those who opposed war. However, despite this ideological split Adams still sees the Council as politically homogeneous, united against an internal Catholic threat and determined to safeguard the growth of Protestantism within England.

**Recent Developments**

In recent years, John Guy and Stephen Alford have built upon Adams's work to present a new interpretation of the tensions that existed in the Elizabethan Court. They focus on the importance of Elizabeth's gender. Although other writers have debated Elizabeth's status as a woman, Guy and Alford have argued that it had a crucial impact on how she was perceived by her Councillors. Like Adams, they do not see Elizabeth's Councillors as struggling to gain ascendancy over each other, and they present the Councillors as a relatively unified group, with similar ambitions.

Guy and Alford go on to highlight the religious backgrounds and intentions of the Council. They argue that the Council was dominated by a core of men who had already served on it under Edward VI. As Edward VI was a minor, the Council took on the task of governing the kingdom on his behalf. Whereas Henry VIII had been perceived by these men as an imperial monarch, with no bounds to his authority, the youthfulness of Edward saw him pictured as the young biblical figure, Josiah, who was determined to build a 'Godly Kingdom' but was handicapped by his age. The Council therefore saw themselves as 'Godly Men', essential for the building of a Protestant nation. This belief in their own central role was reaffirmed by the accession of Elizabeth, who, as a woman, could not be expected to rule in the authoritative way that her father had. Once again, the Councillors would have an essential role in creating a 'Godly Kingdom' on earth. Guy sees Cecil as the moving force behind the creation of the 1559 Church Settlement as well as the appointment of Elizabeth's first bench of bishops, who had spent Mary's reign in exile in Frankfurt and Geneva and who were determined to push England towards a Swiss-style Protestant Church. Cecil is portrayed almost as a republican in this interpretation, and it is argued that he used Parliament as another 'Godly instrument' in his attempts to mould the religious policy of the kingdom over the protests of the Queen.

Other writers have not accepted the idea that her Councillors, led by William Cecil, manipulated Elizabeth in this way. Susan Doran, amongst others, continues to argue that Elizabeth was a far more assertive monarch than the one Guy and Alford portray. The Queen saw herself as an imperial figure, in the same way that her father had been, and did not allow her Councillors to dominate her. She used a variety of tactics to help her hold sway over a male-dominated environment, ranging from prevarication to an aggressive assertion of her rights as monarch. In this way Elizabeth was rarely overruled by her Council, and possibly only the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, can be seen as a victory for them over the Queen.

**The Last Decade**

Despite the different interpretations that exist over the first 30 years of Elizabeth's reign, all historians, from Neale to Adams, agree that in the1590s, as Adams writes, 'the Court became a battleground for factional struggle'. Haigh identifies the tendency of Elizabeth to avoid promoting new men to her Council - once her trusted advisors, such as Leicester and Walsingham, had passed away - as a major weakness. Elizabeth became an increasingly aged and withdrawn figure, who placed more and more power in the hands of Robert Cecil, Burghley's son. The Earl of Essex attempted to take over Leicester's role as the champion of the military and proponent of war with Spain. Yet he lacked both Leicester's sensitivity and long-shared history with Elizabeth that had granted him a special place in her affections.

Essex competed vigorously on behalf of his supporters for every position available at Court, turning appointments into a test of the Queen's favour. Elizabeth frowned on these tactics and ignored Essex's suggestions, whilst still finding his flattery and attention amusing. Robert Cecil, meanwhile, strengthened his (and his faction's) grasp over the key positions at Court, achieving an apparent hold over government policy. Essex was unable to persuade the Queen to prosecute the war with Spain more aggressively and this political impotence made him increasingly desperate. He gathered around him men who also felt excluded from power, such as frustrated military captains, and appealed to the wider country for support. However, when Essex was given the opportunity to prove himself, his military campaign in Ireland in 1599 was little more than a fiasco and he returned to England to face the scorn of the Queen and financial disaster. The collapse of his wealth and status led Essex to rebel against the Queen in 1601.

It can be argued that the impetuous Earl was the architect of his own downfall, but historians are unanimously critical of Elizabeth's course of action in the 1590s. She allowed Robert Cecil to dominate the distribution of patronage in a way that had not been allowed to happen earlier in the reign and thus left those who could not secure his attention little option but to gravitate towards the frustrated Essex, poisoning the atmosphere at Court and finally provoking an unwanted, if barely threatening, revolt. Faction had finally come to dominate the Elizabethan Court.

**Conclusion**

The idea of faction and how it limited the authority of Elizabeth is a large and complex area of investigation. It has only been possible here to give a summary of some of the views that exist on the subject, and other historians, such as Conyers Read and Wallace MacCaffrey, have also presented interpretations on this area that are well worth exploring. Despite the size of the topic, however, it can give a fascinating insight into how Elizabeth's relationships with her Court and Councillors operated and also into how historians have interpreted and developed the evidence available to them over the past decades. Open admirers of the Queen, such as Neale in the 1950s and David Starkey more recently, have competed for our attention with more sceptical authors, such as Christopher Haigh. The enduring fame of the last of the Tudors means that she continues to attract attention from the academic community, and there is no reason to believe that the final words on the subject of faction have yet been written.

**Issues to Debate:**

* What grounds are there for believing that factions existed at Elizabeth's court?
* What issues divided councillors during the time of Burghley and Leicester? How serious were these divisions?
* Why was the final decade of Elizabeth's reign a distinct period of faction-fighting?

**Further Reading:**

* C. Haigh, *The Reign of Elizabeth* (Macmillan, 1984)
* C. Haigh, *Elizabeth I* (Longman, 2nd edn, 1998)
* J. Guy, *The Tudor Monarchy* (Arnold, 1997)
* Articles by S. Doran and S. Adams in *History Today*, May 2003

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