**The Last Decade**

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An ageing regime: Paul E.J. Hammer looks at Elizabeth I and her government in the 1590s.

When the Spanish ambassador to England reported to his master in December 1558 about Queen Elizabeth and her newly established government, he lamented that ‘the kingdom is entirely in the hands of young folks, heretics and traitors’. By the 1590s, the situation had changed radically. Although the Spanish still believed that Elizabeth’s Protestant regime comprised heretics and traitors, England was no longer in the hands of ‘young folks’. Indeed, in the eyes of men and women who were born in the 1560s and ’70s, Elizabeth’s government now felt more like a gerontocracy, run almost entirely by grey-beards and presided over by an aged queen whose continuing hold on life and power seemed both remarkable and disconcerting.

The Queen turned fifty-seven in 1590. This hardly seems old today, but Elizabeth lived in an age which lacked adequate dental care, modern medicines and a balanced diet – differences which mean that fifty-seven years of age in 1590 was perhaps equivalent to sixty-seven in modern terms. The Queen’s advancing age had at least two important consequences in the 1590s. Firstly, it underscored the continuing uncertainty over the royal succession, since Elizabeth had no children and had always refused to nominate a successor. Secondly, Elizabeth’s increasing dotage encouraged members of a younger generation to feel impatient at their sovereign’s conservatism and to resent the continuing sway of the elderly men and women who monopolised virtually all the key positions around her.

Elizabeth proved to be a remarkably lively old woman, but few of her contemporaries expected her to survive nearly as long as she did. Although many dreaded the prospect, it seemed inevitable that she must soon sicken and die, and rumours to this effect circulated regularly from the 1580s. Elizabeth’s courtiers and councillors during the 1590s always had to reckon on this likelihood and shaped their actions accordingly, even if they usually kept their preparations low-key for fear of angering the Queen and raising awkward questions about their loyalty to her – acting too precipitately might ruin their career and even expose them to charges of treason. Nevertheless, calculations about who might next rule England and how to win their favour were never far from the minds of the realm’s political elite during these years.

Elizabeth was far too shrewd to be unaware of these concerns and effectively turned a blind eye to the inevitable manoeuvring of her leading courtiers (especially in the closing years of her reign), as long as they veiled their preparations and did not allow their actions to compromise their loyalty to her while she remained alive. Those who breached this unwritten code, however, suffered the consequences of her anger. When Bishop Rudd delivered a sermon at court in March 1596 which urged the Queen to settle the succession because of the likely imminence of her death, he was briefly confined for his presumption. A far harsher penalty was meted out to the out-spoken Puritan Peter Wentworth (1524-97), who was imprisoned in the Tower in 1593 and detained there until his death in 1597. Although Wentworth’s captivity was not unduly harsh, attempts to secure his release failed because he was effectively a repeat offender (he had been imprisoned twice before) and continued to press for the public settling of the succession even during his confinement. Ironically, Wentworth’s gaoler, Sir Michael Blount, the Lieutenant of the Tower, was himself dismissed and imprisoned in late 1595 for stockpiling arms in anticipation of the Queen’s death. While Wentworth championed James VI of Scotland as Elizabeth’s successor, Blount supported the rival claim of the Seymour family.

Despite the efforts of Elizabeth and her councillors to stifle public discussion about the succession and who might have the best claim, the whole matter became embarrassingly public during the latter part of 1595 because of the publication of A*Conference about the next succession to the crowne of England* . Printed in the Low Countries during the previous year and secretly smuggled into England, this treatise was written under the pseudonym of ‘Doleman’ (probably by the Jesuit Robert Persons) and asserted the right of Elizabeth’s Catholic subjects to resist her authority and try to depose her. Similar arguments had been made, in one form or another, for several decades, but the second part of the book compounded this incendiary theme by openly considering who should replace the Queen. Elaborate genealogies were constructed to undermine the credentials of each of the leading claimants to the English throne – including James VI – and to advance the case for the Infanta of Spain. This suggested that Doleman’s book was intended to clear the way for Philip II to claim Elizabeth’s throne for the Habsburgs. In many ways, the *Conference* proved to be a public relations disaster for the Catholic cause in England and helped to reinforce the growing split between those English Catholics who hoped for the succession of James VI (as the heir of Mary, Queen of Scots) and those who looked to Spain for relief from Elizabeth’s Protestant regime. Nevertheless, despite Elizabeth’s best efforts to silence all talk on the matter, the continuing secret circulation of the *Conference* and the writing of various Protestant replies to Doleman’s work ensured that the unsettled royal succession, and the terrible political uncertainties which it entailed, bubbled away throughout the remainder of the reign.

In the light of this prevailing anxiety about who would follow Elizabeth on the throne and how much longer she might survive, it is tempting to see many portraits of the Queen which appeared in the 1590s as exercises in denying the inevitable. While some works (such as the portrait attributed to John Bettes the Younger) effectively ignored the effects of age upon the Queen by recycling facial patterns from old paintings of the 1570s, other portraits deliberately created a new ageless image of Elizabeth, as if attributing to her the ability to step outside time and suspend the approach of death itself. In Marcus Gheeraerts’ famous ‘Ditchley portrait’ of 1592, this ageless Elizabeth is endowed with the power to transcend the forces of nature, bestriding the realm like a colossus and holding even the sun and storm at her command. As the Queen’s continuing survival became more and more remarkable, the efforts of artists to reflect her enduring grasp on power produced extraordinary images in which the Queen – though approaching seventy by 1600 – appears almost like a young girl. In a bizarre return to the days of her youth, Elizabeth is repeatedly shown surrounded by the flowers of spring and sporting long tresses of golden hair which, in reality, had long since faded to grey wisps which had to be hidden under a bright red wig. The extent to which these idealised depictions of Elizabeth diverged from reality can be seen by comparison with Isaac Oliver’s far less flattering sketch of c.1592. Although crudely drawn, Oliver’s drawing clearly hints at the ravages of time on Elizabeth’s aged body.

The passing years also weighed heavily upon the men and women who served the Queen, kept her company and, in the case of privy councillors, administered the realm in her name. By the end of the 1580s, the councillors who had run her government over the preceding decades were dying off with alarming speed. Leicester – the most important man in Elizabeth’s life – died in 1588, while Sir Ralph Sadler died in 1587, Sir Walter Mildmay in 1589, and Sir Francis Walsingham, Sir James Croft and the earls of Warwick and Shrewsbury in 1590. Even Sir Christopher Hatton, who had caught the Queen’s eye by his gallant dancing in the early 1570s, grew old under the weight of government business and died in 1591. Only Sir Francis Knollys and Sir William Cecil (Lord Burghley since 1571) survived from the group of men who had formed Elizabeth’s original privy council in 1558, and Knollys was increasingly out of favour because of his outspoken support for Puritans.   
   
The loss of so many stalwarts of the Elizabethan regime significantly changed the nature of the Privy Council during the early 1590s and set the scene for political instability in the years that followed. Previously, political influence had always been shared among a number of councillors who enjoyed roughly similar standing and comparable ability to win the Queen’s support for their views. In mid-1587, Elizabeth recognised the special importance of her three most influential councillors by appointing Leicester as Lord Steward and Hatton as Lord Chancellor, effectively aligning them with Burghley’s office of Lord Treasurer. How-ever, the deaths of Leicester (in 1588) and Hatton (in 1591)soon broke up this new triumvirate of great officers and left the council severely unbalanced. By December 1591, Burghley enjoyed a position of pre-eminence among the Queen’s advisers which had no parallel earlier in the reign. He also held an extraordinary concentration of offices, simultaneouslyserving as lord treasurer, master of the court of wards, acting secretary of state and chancellor of the University of Cambridge, as well as steward of numerous towns, boroughs and parks. Routine actions by the Privy Council, such as the authorisation of government expenditure, had traditionally required the signatures of three, four or five members of the Council, but Burghley now began to authorise a growing number of actions entirely by himself. This was partly a concession to the demands of his extraordinary work load, but it also reflected his unprecedented new status as the Queen’s *de facto* chief minister.

Burghley’s unique status created its own kind of succession crisis. Thirteen years older than Elizabeth and suffering from increasingly poor health, Burghley was determined to establish a political career for his younger son, Sir Robert Cecil (1563-1612). With Hatton’s aid, he won a seat for Cecil on the council in 1591. However, Burghley’s plans for his son ran into powerful obstacles. As she grew older, Elizabeth found it increasingly difficult to appoint new men to replace old servants as they died. When she did make appointments, the man chosen was often the son of the former office-holder and invariably middle-aged. In her eyes, men born after she came to the throne still seemed too young for serious advancement. This caused much frustration among men in their thirties, who believed they were fully ready for major government office. Francis Bacon (1561-1626), for example, was repeatedly rebuffed in his attempts to win promotion in the 1590s. Elizabeth’s willingness to grant Cecil a place on the council at the youthful age of twenty-eight represented a striking concession, but she rejected his bid to fill the vacant secretaryship of state. As a junior councillor without obvious portfolio, Cecil instead became his father’s assistant.

Elizabeth’s growing difficulty in making high-level appointments meant that the Privy Council shrank markedly during the 1590s, while its membership became increasingly aged. By 1593, the average age of privy councillors was almost sixty. Only two were significantly younger than fifty. Elizabeth’s contemporaries were also highly conscious of the declining ‘quality’ of the council in the 1590s – in other words, the number of noblemen (and especially earls) who served on the council bench. From late 1593 until late 1597, there was just a single earl on the council, and the number only increased to two in 1597 because Lord Admiral Howard was promoted to become Earl of Nottingham. Two more were finally added in 1601. This dearth of great aristocrats mattered to contemporaries because it suggested that Elizabeth’s council no longer included the most illustrious and important families in the land. Some observers (especially Catholic exiles) even complained – unfairly – that Elizabeth and Burghley were deliberately trying to exclude the realm’s great men from government.

The great exception to the council’s drift down-market in social status and upward in age represented the second major obstacle to Burghley’s hopes for Cecil: Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex. Born in 1566, he was only a few years younger than Cecil, but occupied an altogether loftier social plane. Essex is often caricatured as a courtly dandy, but he was actually a genuinely substantial political figure. The stepson of Leicester, ward of Burghley and cousin to the Queen and much of the peerage, Essex was the ultimate insider in a regime which functioned like an extended family business. During the whole reign, only Hatton and Sir Walter Ralegh (1554-1618) made any serious impact at court as outsiders and, despite winning considerable favour with the Queen in the mid-1580s, Ralegh never quite succeeded in escaping his reputation as a provincial chancer. In the scramble to succeed Leicester and Hatton as the chief royal favourite, Essex won hands-down. However, Essex was not content to be merely an ornament of court.

Robert Devereux was educated to believe that failing to use one’s talents for the service of Queen and country was disgraceful. He saw himself as a soldier and was determined to pursue this vocation in the great war against Spain – in his mind, a crusade for Europe’s liberation from Spanish ‘tyranny’ as well as a struggle to ensure continued English independence. He signalled his intentions by abandoning life at court to join the ‘counter-Armada’ launched against Spain and Portugal in 1589, despite the Queen’s insistence that he stay at home. Elizabeth was furious and the expedition proved a disaster, but Essex’s determination not simply to dance attendance on his ageing sovereign captured the public imagination and won him a large following among soldiers. In 1591, Elizabeth finally gave him an army of his own for an expedition to Normandy. The campaign was a costly failure, but Essex emerged a wiser man and with his reputation surprisingly undiminished. Among the lessons he had learned was that effective military command required solid political support at home. Essex now aimed to convince Elizabeth he should have a place on the Privy Council, but his longer-term objective was to establish himself as her chief councillor after Burghley’s death.

Essex’s desire to become Burghley’s political successor caused frictions between the Earl and his former guardian, although they retained a certain respect for each other, even when they exchanged ‘household words’. Essex was less respectful towards his son. Although he may not have shared the common early misapprehension that Robert Cecil was simply Burghley’s cipher, Essex assumed he would be able to make Cecil do his bidding – or face political irrelevance – once Burghley died. This may perhaps have been the case if Burghley had died during 1593, as Essex expected, but the old treasurer survived until August 1598. Moreover, Cecil steadily emerged from his father’s shadow, becoming Secretary of State in his own right in 1596 and taking on a growing share of government business. By the time Burghley died, Cecil – not Essex – seemed the man most likely to grow into the role of Elizabeth’s pre-eminent councillor. Essex’s years of frustration consequently producedonly greater frustration.

These disappointments were all the more excruciating because Essex believed he was not simply struggling for his own advancement, but also for the chance to implement policies which he deemed essential if England were to win the war against Spain. Indeed, in many ways, he carried the hopes of a whole generation of men who aspired to fame and fortune by military service and believed that Protestant England should be an active member of Christendom. Essex was profoundly aware that Elizabeth disliked the war and mistrusted her Dutch and French allies. For several years, he managed to deflect her efforts to withdraw English troops from France, initially in combination with Burghley and other councillors, but later alone. Elizabeth finally enforced the withdrawal from France in early 1595, transferring the surviving troops (at Burghley’s urging) to Ireland. This was a major blow to Essex, who believed that the ‘real’ war had to be fought on the Continent and against Spaniards, not Irishmen. Unlike the fields of France or Spain, Ireland offered little prospect of glory and no possibility of establishing England at the centre of a new European political order. However, Elizabeth herself had no interest in such possibilities. While Essex’s generation had grown up to hate Spain and to covet the riches and prestige of Spain’s global empire, she and Burghley were old enough to recall that France was England’s traditional enemy. Elizabeth’s goal was not a new European order or to become ‘Queen of the Seas’, but a return to the old European order, in which the inveterate rivalry between France and the Habsburgs would enable England to play those two great powers off against each other for the least risk and maximum diplomatic benefit.

Essex’s desire to succeed Burghley – which threatened the latter’s plans for Cecil – therefore became further complicated by disagreements over how England should employ its limited military resources, and to what purpose. Essex’s refusal to accept Elizabeth’s decision as final, and his repeated efforts to push her into fresh operations in France, also raised troubling questions about how far a councillor might go in trying to change his sovereign’s mind. As Essex himself admitted, ‘I know I shall never do her service but against her will’. In 1596, he defied Elizabeth’s orders by trying to convert the victorious expedition against Cadiz into a permanent English lodgement in Spain itself. Even the military officers who eagerly backed his war policies in the hope of securing booty and continued employment soon realised this was going too far. The news caused shock at court and gave fresh impetus to a loose coalition of councillors and courtiers who took their cues from Burghley and Cecil and now felt determined to cut Essex down to size. For their part, Essex and his followers interpreted this opposition as the jealousy of small-minded civilians who did not understand military matters and unfairly sought to deny Essex and his officers the rewards of victory.

Elizabeth responded to Essex’s behaviour by appointing Cecil as secretary of state, but her fury gradually abated and she appointed Essex master of the ordnance and even gave him command of a new expedition against Spain in 1597. This sequence of events summed up her dilemma as Queen. Just as her advancement of Essex in the early 1590s can be seen partly as a move to create a counterbalance to Burghley, so her promotion of Cecil was intended to dent Essex’s political pretensions and remind him of her princely authority. However, she and the council still desperately needed Essex’s military expertise and dynamism. Moreover, the tensions between Essex and his rivals were now so divisive that Elizabeth’s ability to manage affairs by rewarding one side or the other without causing uproar was becoming increasingly limited. The personal nature of what was effectively an internal family feud also seemed bewildering to the Queen.

The simmering political tensions at court finally exploded in a blazing row between Essex and Elizabeth in 1598. When she refused to consider his views on the government of Ireland and cuffed him around the ear, he tried to draw his sword on her. Although it exposed the depths of Essex’s frustration over the collapse of his plans for a multi-national crusade against Spain and a greater role for military men in England’s government, this reaction was unforgivable and shattered the personal relationship between Elizabeth and her favourite. Despite this, Essex was given command in 1599 of the huge new expedition to regain control of Ireland, which involved the largest army which Elizabeth had yet put into the field. However, the Irish command was a poisoned chalice, and Essex knew it. If he could not win a decisive victory within a few months, he feared his rivals at home would turn the Queen against him for good. Politics required a speedy victory, even though his military sense warned him this was improbable. Essex’s gamble failed. When he made a truce with the Irish and rushed home to see the Queen, he was arrested and underwent a physical and nervous breakdown. Stripped of his offices and the royal grant which sustained his finances, he finally and famously launched an insurrection in the streets of London in February 1601 with some 200 of his remaining supporters. Significantly, many of them were members of famous old families and veterans of the wars, who felt aggrieved that their services were unappreciated by a queen who seemed to reward only older men. The failure of this insurrection cost Essex his head.

Essex’s final disastrous attempt to rally public support against his political enemies has been seen as the act of a mad man. In a sense it was, but at least some of Essex’s enemies genuinely wanted to destroy him, and had framed treason charges against him for precisely this purpose. Given his extraordinary record of recovering Elizabeth’s favour after periods of disgrace, only such a permanent knock-out blow could guarantee that Essex would not be able to seek revenge on his enemies in the future. This danger seemed all the more pressing because of the continuing uncertainty about the succession. Essex had long been the foremost English advocate of the claims of James VI, who was widely recognised as the most plausible candidate to succeed Elizabeth. This left the Earl’s rivals in a very ticklish position. If they could not eliminate Essex and ingratiate themselves with James before Elizabeth died, they would either have to find an alternative candidate or face the wrath of avengeful earl who could expect the backing of a grateful new king. In the event, Essex jumped into political oblivion before he could be pushed there by his enemies, leaving Elizabeth with no choice but to approve his execution. This cleared the way for Cecil and his allies to take over from Essex and prepare the way for James’ accession. By the time Elizabeth entered her final illness in March 1603, the secret alliance of Cecil and James had ensured there would be no succession crisis. As the old Queen lay dying, the burning question troubling her courtiers was not who would be the next sovereign of England, but who would be able to emulate Cecil and his closest allies in securing the new King’s favour.

**For Further Reading:**

Paul E.J. Hammer, *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics: the Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex* (Cambridge, 1999); J.Guy (ed.), *The reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge, 1995); W.T. MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I: War and Politics, 1588-1603* (Princeton, 1992).