From Feud to Faction: English Politics 1450-1550

By David Starkey | Published in History Today Volume: 32 Issue: 11 1982

David Starkey looks at the early Tudor period.

In 1509 John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, delivered one of the greatest sermons of the century on one of its most notable women: Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII.

She was hailed as the model of the active female life as opposed to the contemplative, Martha not Mary. And like Martha, she busied herself with her household. In particular,

"if any factions or bands were made secretly among her head officers, she with great policy did bolt (i.e. sift) it out, and likewise if any strife or controversy, she would with great discretion study the reformation thereof."

This, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* , is the first use of the word 'faction' in English. It was not of course the first appearance of the thing. England had long had a mixed constitution, in which the nobility played a predominant role. And (as Charles I observed in 1641) 'the ill of aristocracy is faction and division', just as its 'good ... is the conjunction of counsel in the ablest persons of a state for the public benefit'.

It has taken historians many years to recognise the truth of Charles's remark. But the recognition once made, there has been a Gadarene rush to find faction everywhere. Faction has become the key to the 'new' narrative history of the early modern period – whether to the politics of the Reformation (for John Guy), or to the Jacobean Parliaments (for Conrad Russell and Kevin Sharpe). With the general thrust of this I do not quarrel, but the word is in danger of being blunted by too much use. It is time in fact to return to the specificity and precision of Fisher's coinage, and to see faction not as a universal, but rooted in certain institutions; and not as a constant, but flourishing or being repressed in accordance with the character and policies of certain crucial figures – and the monarch above all.

In the later fifteenth century – the period of the 'refoundation of the Crown', in Sir John Fortescue's phrase – there was a marked change in the structure of politics and hence in the nature and role of faction also: a politics of many centres became a politics of one. To begin with, in the feebly obstinate grasp of Henry VI the monarchy had descended into being one noble faction among many – and not necessarily the strongest. The fact became manifest from 1456 when the King abandoned the government of the kingdom: the court withdrew from London to Coventry in the heart of the Lancastrian lands, and the national revenues were diverted from the Exchequer and used directly – like the income of any other lord – to pay for the royal household and the royal retainers. Henry was now effectively only Duke of Lancaster and he was soon to lose that.

Under Edward IV the crown recovered from the worst of this degradation. But still there remained many nobles great enough to lead factional groupings of their own, and even as the most troublesome of these – Warwick and Clarence – were eliminated, the King's own (and much strengthened) court and following were riven by bitter factional disputes – essentially

between the Woodvilles, the family of Edward's Queen, and the rest. The usurpation of Richard of Gloucester (himself the greatest and most powerful noble) effected a brutal simplification as rival power-broking nobles and the leaders of court factions alike were executed or fled into exile. The odium of this blood-letting fell on Richard himself, but the benefit was reaped by Henry, Earl of Richmond, whose victory at Bosworth in 1485 made him first king of the House of Tudor.

And the circumstances of the battle strengthened his hand still further: the one great noble Richard III had created, the Duke of Norfolk, was killed, as were Richard's own household men, slaughtered like house-carls in a Saga round the body of their lord. On the other hand, the very fact that no great noble had supported Henry meant that he (unlike all other fifteenth-century usurpers) had no jealous and insatiable king-maker to contend with. So while the Wars of the Roses had not destroyed the aristocracy, they had destroyed aristocratic faction – or at least aristocratic faction as a force in central politics. And Henry VII's policies of bonding and fining his nobility (two-thirds of whom were in the King's financial clutches by the end of the reign) ensured that there was no revival.

But this centralization of politics meant that the King's handling of the centre itself mattered more than ever. Just how he went about it Francis Bacon – his perceptions sharpened by the problems of counselling a King like James I, who was Henry's almost exact antithesis – put with his usual precision: the key was the 'keeping of distance, which indeed he did towards all; not admitting any near or full approach, either to his power or to his secrets: for he was governed of none'. Henry 'kept his distance' politically, by having a large, diffuse Council that met as a series of administrative sub-committees (each reporting back directly to the King) and not as a single executive 'cabinet'; he kept his distance socially by never participating in court entertainment (like jousts and revels) but instead being 'a princely and a gentle spectator' (and, it could be added, a remote one); and he 'kept his distance' institutionally by reforming the royal household.

Traditionally the royal household had fallen into two departments, corresponding to the broad distinctions of place and function in the layout of the royal palace. The 'below-stairs' area of the Hall and Kitchens, etc. was run by one group of servants under the Lord Steward; the 'above-stairs' private apartments by another group under the Lord Chamberlain. Originally, the private apartments had consisted of just one room – the Chamber – in which (as in a grandiose bedsit) a whole range of activities, from the most formal, like meetings of the Council, to the most personal, like sleeping, had taken place. But in the later middle ages a more complex private lodging had developed in which the functions of the old unitary Chamber were divided out among a sequence of specialized apartments, each more private than the preceding. What Henry VII did, probably around 1495, was to bring the organization of the Household into line with this changed geography. The inmost, and so most private, apartment – the Privy Chamber – was cut off from the rest and given a staff of its own. Its head was the Groom of the Stool, who was in charge of the King's close-stool or commode, and waited on him while he relieved himself on it. Under the Groom were half a dozen other Grooms and Pages of modest gentry backgrounds. No one else, of whatever rank, was ordinarily allowed to enter the room. The new style of personal service was an amenity, which enabled Henry to enjoy a privacy impossible when the King was attended by knights and nobles as before; it was also a supremely effective way of 'keeping distance'. The firmly closed door of the Privy Chamber protected him both from the political pres- sure that the court nobility could ordinarily bring to bear, and equally from the time-consuming

ceremonial that their service entailed. Which left him free instead to devote himself to the long, lonely hours of toil on which his uniquely effective control of government depended.

So under Henry VII faction was not a factor in politics. Fines and the axe had quelled it among the nobility at large; while at the centre, in court and council, the King's universal and rigorously preserved distance deprived it of any breeding ground. In this respect, as in many others, the styles of the King and his mother were the same. Which made Fisher's sermon not merely an act of individual remembrance, but rather a requiem for an age.

In April 1509 Henry VII died and the young Henry VIII came to the throne. His first act was to send two of his father's most trusted ministers to the block; just as his first thought after his grandmother's death (which followed soon after his father's) was to try to break the enormous charitable provisions in her will. And his whole style of kingship displayed the same rejection of the immediate past. His disinclination for business (in contrast to his father's devotion to affairs) led to the swift reappearance of a small, executive Council, which became moreover a battleground for factional disputes between the rump of the old King's councillors, led by Bishop Fox of Winchester, and an aristocratic war party, led by the Earl of Surrey.

At court the change was even more dramatic. In January 1510 a tournament was held at Richmond, to which two unidentified knights turned up and won great praise by their prowess. One however was 'hurt sore and like to die'. Whereupon 'one person there was, that knew the King, and cried "God save the King" '. And indeed the uninjured stranger-knight was Henry VIII; while his wounded companion was Sir William Compton, the new Groom of the Stool. At a stroke therefore the taboo on the King's participation in court entertainment was broken, and the nature of Privy Chamber service transformed: Henry VII's Groom of the Stool was a faceless body servant and bureaucrat; Henry VIII's a boon companion. On both accounts 'distance' was lost. A king who jousted acquired jousting partners, and a Privy Chamber staffed with royal boon companions (probably indeed the same men as the King jousted with) ceased to be a barrier protecting the monarch from pressure and faction, and instead became the prime point of pressure and the very cockpit of faction. Fisher's new coinage of "faction' showed every sign of being in hot and immediate demand.

But it was not to be so yet. The accession of the new King had brought about a political revolution. But a counter revolution followed with the rise of Thomas Wolsey, Cardinal, Chancellor and alter rex ('the second king').

Wolsey had first been brought to the King's attention by Bishop Fox as his secret weapon in his struggle with Surrey. That Wolsey quickly became the cuckoo-in-the-nest, who drove not only Surrey but his erstwhile patrons from power is well known. Less understood though is that Wolsey did indeed salvage (for his own purposes) much of Henry VII's practice of government. He was both Chief Councillor, in charge of the day-to-day running of administration, and principal favourite, unrivalled in his ability to manage the erratic King. As Chief Councillor he put paid to the Council's pretensions to an executive role and hence to its capacity to germinate faction; and as principal favourite he would tolerate no rivals in the Privy Chamber.

At first Wolsey had it relatively easy. The Council buckled under and Compton, 'more attentive to his profit than public affairs', made the best of a bad job. But within a few years a new twist of events meant that Wolsey had not one Compton but a whole depart- ment to cope with.

By 1515 Henry VIII, the *jeune premier* of Christendom, was approaching the threshold of (Tudor) middle age. Naturally he did not like it. The setting of masques – 'presses of fine gold and flowers ... under [which] was written «jamais » – proclaimed in execrable visual puns 'that the flower of youth could not be oppressed'. And the King did his best to translate the motto into reality by choosing a new set of boon companions who were mere boys of fifteen. They were high born, high spirited and outrageously indulged by Henry, who wholly identified himself with his 'minions' (or 'pretty boys'), as they were known. Not surprisingly they took full advantage of the licence and, 'not regarding his estate or degree were so familiar and homely with him and played such light touches with him that they forgot themselves'.

'Distance' had been lost indeed. And the fact was institutionalized in autumn 1518. A party of the court cronies of Francis I of France (also called minions) arrived in London for the signing of the treaty of London, and to give the English minions parity with the French they were given the same office: Gentleman of the Privy Chamber. The borrowing of the new office from France and the appointing to it en masse of the minions – so different in character and origins from Henry VII's obscure Grooms and Pages – completed the transformation of the Privy Chamber. It became what it was to remain for the rest of the reign, a centre of political power and initiative second only to the minister himself.

Already some of the minions had successfully challenged Wolsey's monopoly of patronage. Mrs Vernon, widow of the owner of Haddon Hall in Derbyshire, whom Wolsey had intended to remarry to his own servant Tyrwhit, was snatched from under his nose by one of the minions, William Coffin, aided and abetted by another, Nicholas Carew. 'At this', Compton smugly reported, 'my Lord Cardinal is not content withal'. While the whole group, after their return visit to France (where they had behaved rather like a Rugby tour, riding with 'the French King... daily disguised through the streets of Paris, throwing eggs, stones, and other foolish trifles at the people') began to exercise a dangerously pro-French influence in foreign policy.

The following spring Wolsey struck back by reversing his whole style of management of the King. Hitherto the minister had encouraged him in his pleasures. Now he plunged Henry into business. He produced a package of reform measures – including improved public auditing, Exchequer reorganization, job-creation, frontier security, the settling of the Irish question and the better protection of the royal person – that were both glossy enough to attract the King's attention and also imposed enough detailed administration to keep him busy at his desk. With Henry in this rare mood of self-sacrificing (and self-righteous) devotion to the public weal it was easy to blackguard the minions as worthless young wastrels. The ploy worked and in May 1519 almost the whole group were packed off to exile in Calais (the early Tudor India), which they found 'sore displeasant'.

For contemporaries the expulsion of the minions was an event 'of as vital importance as any that has taken place for many years'. For us its real interest lies not in the fact but the method of Wolsey's victory: that he had been able to fight off the new challenge of court faction without becoming a faction leader himself.

Instead, rightly confident in his own direct relationship with Henry, he did not pack the court; rather he neutralized it, by removing any who – like the minions – threatened that relationship. In 1519 he had deployed the excuse of reform; between 1519 and 1525 frantic diplomatic and military activity provided plenty of plausible reasons for sending unwanted

courtiers off to remote places on dangerous missions; and in 1526, with the coming of peace, Wolsey once more played the reform card and used the Eltham Ordinances as a cover for another political purge of the Privy Chamber.

The break in the pattern (which also broke Wolsey's ministry and the whole mould of politics) did not come till 1527 with the advent of Anne Boleyn. This remarkable woman, whom even her worst enemy had to admit had 'sense, wit and courage', had the opposite effect of Lady Margaret Beaufort and bred faction. Right from the start she had (unlike her predecessor, Catherine of Aragon) her own faction in the King's Privy Chamber, of which she was the much more than nominal leader. But the story does not end there. Her rise also, by unlocking Wolsey's grasp on power, allowed the ex-minions to return to the Privy Chamber, where (ungratefully) most of them lined up behind Queen Catherine and the Princess Mary as the second, 'Aragonese', faction. And, most important, Anne finally forced a change of style on Wolsey himself. His enemies were flooding back to court. But – his special relationship with Henry ruptured by Anne – the Cardinal could no longer purge them. Instead, now reduced to onefaction leader among others, he had to insinuate his own men into the Privy Chamber and rely on them (as the third faction there) to shore up his position. Much the same happened in the Council. Released from Wolsey's grip, it reassumed executive powers and refactionalized – though, since it was dominated by a noble clique led by the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, on rather different lines from the court.

So in the late 1520s (and not before) faction became the principal element in politics. The fact was a symptom of Wolsey's decline; its first result was to complete his ruin. This was effected by a general alliance of opposites – Boleyns, Aragonese, and aristocrats – against the Cardinal. But the Cardinal gone, the alliance had no further grounds for unity, and split particularly on both the issue and the handling of the Divorce. The time was ripe for a fresh alignment. It was made possible by the fact that though Wolsey had fallen his followers (as was by no means uncommon) had survived. They still remained a powerful party in the Privy Chamber and the party soon found a leader in Thomas Cromwell, Wolsey's former man-of-affairs. Cromwell was able to do what no one else could and proffered a policy that cut the Gordian knot of the Divorce. The result was the*renversement d'alliances* of the early 1530's: the new 'in' grouping was the Boleyns and the ex-Wolseyians; the 'outs' the Aragonese and the aristocrats.

So already two things are clear. First in Tudor faction politics (as in modern, multi-party systems, like the Italian) the negative motive – doing somebody down – is at least as important in political alignment as the positive – getting something done. And second Cromwell, unlike Wolsey, was from the beginning both a faction leader and a court minister. All of which is writ large in the next faction crisis: the fall of Anne Boleyn.

Anne's fall, like the triumph of her marriage, was made possible by the survival of a third, 'out' faction at court. The key to her marriage had been the ex-Wolseyians; the key to her destruction was the Aragonese, who, despite the repudiation of Catherine and the bastardization of Mary, had clung onto both office and favour in the Privy Chamber. Almost always, therefore, it must be remembered that Henry was surrounded by a diversity of views and pressures, so that, as in a modern one-party state, the most likely source of opposition came not from the periphery or 'country' but from the very centre, the court itself. And that opposition became manifest in the winter of 1535-6. Catherine of Aragon died; Anne miscarried and mishandled the King; and fate put the chosen instrument into the hands of her opponents: Jane Seymour. Anne was strident and abrasive; Jane calm and soothing. The

Aragonese groomed her and introduced her to the King. Jane lived up to her type-casting. Henry was caughtand on St George's Day 1536 made his preference known. There were two candidates for election to the Garter: George Boleyn, Viscount Rochford, Anne's brother, and Sir Nicholas Carew, the leader of the Aragonese. Carew was chosen.

All this presented Cromwell with an appalling dilemma. True, his relations with Anne had become increasingly strained, but the Aragonese – religiously 'Catholic', politically conservative stood for everything he most detested and detested him in return. In the natural course of events therefore the minister's fall would follow the Queen's. Cromwell escaped by a characteristically bold change of front. He offered his support to the Aragonese and their allies, the Imperial ambassador Chapuys and Mary herself, and – thanks to their naivete and his skill (Mary was the only one to display proper caution) – persuaded them of his sincerity. He then took over the plot against Anne. The Aragonese had intended to get rid of her by charging her in effect with bigamy; Cromwell instead substituted an accusation of treason on grounds of multiple adultery. The former would have left Anne divorced but alive and with her court party intact. The latter involved both Anne and her supporters in a common and terrible death. After some problem with the evidence, the trials were fixed and Anne, her brother, Henry Norris, the Groom of the Stool, and three other members of the Privy Chamber were executed. Cromwell's master-stroke followed. He turned on his erstwhile allies the Aragonese, who found themselves accused, correctly, of seeking to restore Mary to the succession. They were saved from the block only by Mary doing what she had hitherto steadfastly refused to do and recognizing her own bastardy. But the salvation was only temporary and Cromwell picked them off at leisure in 1538-9. This double purge – of the Boleyns in 1536 and the Aragonese two years later – more than half emptied the Privy Chamber. In the vacant posts Cromwell placed his own men, who thus became by far the largest and strongest court faction.

So a proper understanding of faction shows Cromwell in a new light, He was not so much an administrator as a politician (the 'master Machiavel' of contemporary judgements); while his last office of Lord Great Chamberlain, which gave him control over the whole household-above-stairs, Chamber and Privy Chamber alike, was not a ceremonial irrelevancy but the crown of his career as a court minister.

Yet control of the court was not everything. Cromwell had it, but he fell all the same. For there was also the Council and Parliament. Increasingly Cromwell had controlled the Council by keeping his enemies there, Norfolk and Gardiner, absent on various pretexts (from the plague to diplomacy). But the *dévot* who gave her ladies-in-waiting Psalters and encouraged them to read them. On the other hand the opposing Aragonese faction were associated with 'Catholic' reform, while Cromwell's appointees to the Privy Chamber went all the way to a 'Protestant' position. These lines of divide were not absolute: Surrey, Norfolk's son, was a religious radical, which did not stop him supporting his father's political conservatism to the death; on the other hand, Sir Anthony Browne, a dyed-in-the-wool 'Catholic', helped the 'Protestant' Seymour destroy Norfolk, because – a creature of the Tudors – he feared the Howard's revanchist aristocratic pretensions more than he sympathized with Norfolk's religious position. Nevertheless the basic religious stances hold good, and these in turn took faction outside the court: Anne Boleyn and Cromwell were strong in Cambridge, the City and Kent; the conservatives were powerful in Oxford, the West and parts of East Anglia. The wheel had not turned back fully to the many-centred politics of the fifteenth century, but it was half way there.