

POWER AND POLITICS  
IN TUDOR ENGLAND

G.W. BERNARD

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# Power and Politics in Tudor England

Essays by G.W. Bernard

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\* \* \*

Chapter 2 is a substantially reworked development of 'The Tudor nobility in perspective', from G.W. Bernard (ed.), *The Tudor Nobility* (Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 1–48, and also draws on G.W. Bernard, *The Power of the Early Tudor Nobility: a study of the fourth and fifth earls of Shrewsbury* (Harvester, 1985).

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# 1

## Introduction

At the heart of the essays in this volume lies an interest in the nature and expression of power, defined quite straightforwardly as the ability to take and to enforce a decision. My first researches focused on the power of the nobility in Tudor England, a choice of subject that was in itself a critique of the then dominant emphasis – it is sufficient to cite Sir Geoffrey Elton here – on the institutions of central government as the key to the location and the effective operation of power. Yet much writing on the politics of early modern continental countries suggested rather the continuing importance of noblemen, despite the myth of rising royal absolutism; it seemed worth exploring the sources to determine more fully the role of the nobility in England. Chapter 2 here offers my latest reflections on this subject, drawing on my *The Power of the Early Tudor Nobility* (1984), an introductory essay to *The Tudor Nobility* (1992) and a paper in *History Review* (1995), but developing and expanding the arguments there in several places.

My claims are multiple. The nobility remained powerful, socially, economically, politically and ideologically. That power was generally applied in the service of the monarchy and the monarch's policies. In consequence, historians have tended to underestimate it, since noblemen were not normally opponents of the Crown: they did not see themselves as having a duty to rebel. The nature, extent and limits of noble power are explored in detail in Chapter 7 on the downfall of Sir Thomas Seymour: the depositions made in connection with his trial illustrate these themes with a remarkable richness of detail. Chapter 8, treating Amy Robsart, apart from the fascination of a mysterious death, may also be read as an exploration of the ambitions of a courtier-noble, Robert Dudley. In moments of crisis, rare though they were, the power of the nobility, indeed of individual noblemen, could, nonetheless, be crucial. The loyalty shown by George Talbot, fourth earl of Shrewsbury, against the Pilgrimage of Grace in autumn 1536 saved Henry's break with Rome and associated religious policies. Tudor monarchs were not omnipotent, and there were significant limits to royal power. Nor were the nobility the only brakes: taxpayers lower down the social scale effectively prevented the development of financial demands at the monarch's whim when they refused the Amicable Grant in 1525, a sequence of events I studied in *War, Taxation and Rebellion in Early Tudor England* (1986).



That background of local power, of government depending on informal as well as formal relationships between local elites and kings, counsellors and courtiers, in short a sort of unwritten convention among the ruling classes, is important too in the proper understanding of high politics, the theme of several of the essays here, notably those which take issue with the fashionable notion of 'faction'. The idea of faction has become commonplace in writing on Tudor political history. In Sir Geoffrey Elton's textbook, *Reform and Reformation* (1977), struggles between factions serve as an organising framework for the narrative. Elton had, in one of his earliest articles published in 1951, explained the fall of his hero Thomas Cromwell in 1540 as the victim of a plot by a conservative faction led by the third duke of Norfolk and Stephen Gardiner, bishop of Winchester;<sup>1</sup> he later substantially developed such a factional interpretation under the influence of his pupil David Starkey.<sup>2</sup> Eric Ives is another historian who has been emphasising the role of faction: in an Historical Association pamphlet, *Faction in Tudor England* (1979, revised 1987), in his biography of *Anne Boleyn* (1986), and in recent essays on 'Henry the Great?', and 'Henry VIII: the political perspective'.<sup>3</sup> If Elton, Starkey and Ives have been the most eloquent and influential exponents of factional ideas, these are widely, sometimes unconsciously, shared. In *English Reformations* (1993), for example, Christopher Haigh draws heavily on the swirl of faction to account for what he sees as shifts in religious policy.

Historians who emphasise faction are engaged in an attempt to characterise early Tudor politics as essentially a conflict – a contest for power, for influence, for favours and for policies. Perez Zagorin offers a characteristic description: Henry VIII's court was 'a perilously unstable world in which power and honours were always at risk'; 'every shift of royal policy in these years was attended with factional intrigue and the possibility of disgrace and death for those on the wrong side'.<sup>4</sup> For David Starkey, faction is 'the name given to the groups formed by courtiers and councillors the better to pursue their restless struggles for power and profit'.<sup>5</sup> Ives has claimed that 'the faction battle was endemic, inherent in the realities of kingship, court and royal personality, a never-ceasing groundswell of competition to secure favour, office, wealth and influence': 'what has to be recognised is how constant the element of faction is throughout the reign' of Henry VIII.<sup>6</sup> Such struggles could be between equals or groups of equals competing for office or for decisive influence, or between a leading minister or a royal favourite on the one hand and those who disliked his power and tried to bring him down on the other. This view of politics as factional struggle tends to diminish the position of the king. It is usually accepted that the personal decisions of the monarch were important – as Ives concedes, 'policy was what the king decided' – but what appear on the face of it to have been the personal decisions of monarchs are seen by the factional school of historians as in reality the result of factional manipulation. 'The object of a faction,' says Ives, 'was ... to influence the king as he made his

decision and hence to be rewarded with the duty to implement it. Instead of Henry VIII governing according to his own autonomous will, government emerged from the shifting political and individual context around him'. 'The more contentious the issue, the more the full battery of tactics might be tried: restricting access to the king, the claue, the innuendo, the bribe, the diversion. These brought Wolsey down, Anne Boleyn down, Cromwell down and the Howards and Gardiner'.<sup>7</sup> Monarchs are seen as vulnerable in a variety of ways to such factions. What mattered was the manipulation of the king. Factions might seek to control members of the privy chamber, the close body servants of the king, who saw him more often and for longer than anyone else, and so could press for favours and policies for the faction to which they belonged. Factions might seek to use the king's bed, by introducing the king to attractive young women who would then further the interests of the political factions who sponsored them. Malicious charges might be brought against enemies, or attention drawn to what was true but damaging. Sometimes such struggles were purely about office, purely personal; sometimes they might acquire an ideological flavour from divisions over religion or over policies, especially foreign alliances. Such is the model of political explanation that has become so fashionable in the past generation.

But these notions have also been vigorously challenged by several historians, including Peter Gwyn in his study of Cardinal Wolsey, *The King's Cardinal* (1990), Greg Walker, most recently in *Persuasive Fictions* (1996), and by myself in several of the essays reprinted here. A very different view of politics is offered, one in which Henry VIII was very much in charge, ruling as well as reigning, and in which factional interpretations are simply unnecessary. By looking *in depth* at events – in the way I have tried to do for the falls of Anne and Wolsey in Chapters 3 and 4<sup>8</sup> – and at the relationship of king and minister – as in Chapter 5 on 'Elton's Cromwell' – very different conclusions impose themselves.

It is worth adding here that while examination of particular events is vital, and often illuminates much more than the events themselves, a broad understanding of the nature of power demands the exploration of ideas and attitudes as well as events. Chapter 2 on the nobility includes a discussion of attitudes to nobility, in particular contemporary reflections on how inequality of wealth could be reconciled with God's order for the world. The nobility, I contend, derived enormous sustenance from the widely-voiced conviction that such a hierarchical society was both just and necessary. Chapter 9 on architecture explores how far Tudor buildings can be understood as reflections of power and so illumine our understanding of Tudor society. But while ideas and architecture – and literature and art – should be no less part of the political historian's scope than specific events, care must be taken not simply to read into them pre-formed interpretations from the world of politics, narrowly defined.

Although some factional historians have responded to criticism by reasserting or in small ways recasting their claims,<sup>9</sup> the most fashionable response has been to concede that those of us who have criticised them have shown up the crudity of their explanatory model but that we are ourselves guilty of similar over-simplification. 'I understand your irritation with those who reduce Henry VIII to the status of a hosepipe, which squirts in different directions depending on who is holding the nozzle. But surely it is possible to construct a more sophisticated account of the origins of policy than in effect reversing this simplistic metaphor and saying that the nozzle was self-directed'.<sup>10</sup> But my claim that Henry VIII was the driving force in the politics and policies of his reign is not an attempt 'to construct a more sophisticated account of the origins of policy' but rather what my study of the evidence has led me to conclude, and my criticism of factional historians is not that their approach is unsophisticated or simplistic, but that it is not supported by the evidence, their theories too often being erected on a literal reading of a single remark drawn out of context. By and large the advocates of 'faction' have been less careful, and less inclined to explain from where they have taken their evidence and to justify their deployment of it, than those of us who have emphasised the role of the king. Too often literary sources, especially Polydore Vergil's *Historia Anglica*, George Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey*, William Tyndale's *Practice of Prelates*, and John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, have been relied upon heavily, and above all unthinkingly, by factional historians. Evanescent gossip reported as such by foreign ambassadors has been seized upon as the key to the mysteries of the politics of the reign, even though it is contradicted in the same letter. All this is not to say that those sources are valueless, only that they must be read critically, and never in isolation. And if they are read aright, it is my contention that the sources do point to the dominant role of Henry VIII.

Several historians have tried to reconcile that claim with the arguments of the factional historians. It is not an either/or dichotomy, they claim: these two interpretations can be combined perfectly satisfactorily. Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, for example, notes 'the current debate over the structure of government rages between supporters of the old, pre-Eltonian view of decision-making controlled – albeit capriciously – by an unreconstructed "strong monarch", and opponents who see the crown as embedded in a court environment in which the pressure of contending factions determined policy': he then goes on roundly to assert that 'these opposing camps can be reconciled: most court structures have a powerful decision-maker at their core and factions struggling to control access to him'.<sup>11</sup> Jim Alsop, reviewing Greg Walker's collection of essays, declared that 'there remains room for powerful (not necessarily dominant) factions *and* a strong, self-confident sovereign who needed to be counseled, petitioned, cajoled, and at times manipulated'. 'It is a pity', he continued, 'that the 1950s debate over the responsibility for the royal supremacy, "king or minister", has been succeeded by an equally sterile "king

or faction?'''.<sup>12</sup> Whether the debate has been 'sterile' is perhaps not a judgment a participant should make, but the subject – the way in which power was exercised – is surely of fundamental importance. Neither Fernandez-Armesto, in a preface, nor Alsop, in a review, had the opportunity of offering further and detailed illustrations of how what might be considered logically contradictory propositions – that Henry VIII was manipulated by factions and that Henry VIII was a dominant king – could be reconciled. Two historians have, however, attempted to do that, and their efforts rather confirm any such attempts are to follow a will-o'-the-wisp.

John Guy, who has on occasions, especially in his study of *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* (1980), adopted a strongly factional interpretation, recently put forward what appears to be an attempt to combine both approaches.<sup>13</sup> In places the king is still weak or led. Henry VIII 'was relatively manipulated by women and intimates'; he was 'less attentive to mundane affairs of state' than his father or Elizabeth I; 'the young Henry intervened less in politics before 1527 (possibly 1525)'; and he allowed Cromwell to make the running in religious policy in the mid and late 1530s until 1539, at which time 'the king had resumed command of his religious policy', a comment that implies that he had earlier relinquished command of it for a time. But in other places Guy says of Henry, 'yet always he was king'; 'his voice was dominant in politics; his merest whisper could dictate the fundamental decisions of the reign'; 'he always retained the right to have the last word'; in summer 1527 'Henry personally seized the initiative from an absent Wolsey in soliciting support and orchestrating the debate' over the divorce; 'the king might intervene or change his mind at will'. If Guy concedes an ultimate superiority to the king – 'it was the king who ruled and not his ministers', 'what mattered in Henrician politics was the king's unqualified trust' – and follows the claims I made in *War, Taxation and Rebellion* in calling the relationship between Henry and Wolsey a partnership, nonetheless he sees Wolsey as winning the king's favour by being the most earnest and readiest to advance his pleasure, and as maintaining his position by settling policy with the king before he consulted other councillors. Guy also sees faction in operation generally, with noblemen and councillors and advisers jostling between themselves in a variety of ways: Henry VII's councillors against Wolsey in the first years of the reign; Wolsey against noblemen and other councillors in the 1520s; Cromwell against his enemies in the 1530s. Guy offers a factional interpretation of the fall of Anne Boleyn, 'the putsch of 1536'. 'When Henry repudiated Anne Boleyn in the spring of 1536, Cromwell was deft enough to obtain the evidence to destroy both Anne and her court allies in order that Henry might marry Jane Seymour. But he also took the opportunity to drive his own political opponents from court on the grounds that they had plotted to restore Princess Mary to the succession'. Thereafter Cromwell's power was 'sustained by factional politics rather than the king's unqualified trust'; efforts were made to topple Cromwell in

the Pilgrimage of Grace; Cromwell's evangelical religious policies were challenged by 'Cromwell's enemies'; and in 1540 Henry 'threw Cromwell to the wolves', presumably meaning his factional enemies; Cromwell was executed in 1540 'a victim of faction politics'. Each of these quoted sets of claims is on its own a plausible description, but I do not see how they can all be true: the attempt to pick and mix ends in contradiction and confusion. This simply serves to show that if you attempt to combine factional and non-factional approaches, you end up with a muddle.

A similarly fruitless attempt was made by Steven Gunn. To the question who, king or ministers, was in charge, Gunn, exploring what he terms the structures of Tudor politics, answers 'it all depends': some of our sources say that Henry was manipulated, others suggest that he was dominant.<sup>14</sup> But that shirks the issue. It is an answer answerless to the great conundrums of the reign of Henry VIII: it seems to say that all sources are equivalent, even that all historians' arguments are of equal value. The flaw is that while source criticism is essential, it is not in itself sufficient. Gunn takes as the point of departure of his essay historians' sharply differing views of the fall of Anne, but his method does not enable him to offer any view of his own. Examining in turn ambassadors' letters, Lancelot de Carles's verse life of Anne, the indictments, Sir William Kingston's letters from the Tower, Cromwell's letters, and so on, as types of source, entertains more than it enlightens. Yet if one is to say anything definite about Tudor politics, one does have to come to a decision on, say, the fall of Wolsey or the fall of Anne Boleyn. And trying instead to accept 'both the king's position as initiator and arbitrator of policy and the possibility of independent initiative and lobbying from those around him' does not lead Gunn to a more nuanced interpretation than one that sees Henry as in command of his counsellors. If it means that Henry was manipulated by his lobbying counsellors, then he was not initiator or arbitrator; if it means that he did determine policy, then any lobbying must have had very clear limits. Gunn's essay is inconclusive.

Another attempt to reconcile these interpretations has been made by C.S.L. Davies (in private correspondence). Davies at first accepts that Henry was in charge, that there is no question but that Henry was ultimately responsible for policy, and that he took a keen personal interest in policy-making, especially in religious policy, and he concedes that such policy may have been rather more consistent than is often allowed. But almost immediately he raises doubts that undermine what he has just conceded. Did Henry always know which way he was going, was he really that consistent, is it possible to believe in anybody being *totally* impervious to influence from those around them? The faction debate, he claims, pushes everything into an either/or dichotomy and approaches everything too mechanically.

Yet in any political situation, influence flows in every direction; the leading figures have strong views of their own, and are able to enforce them, but that does not exclude the point that they are nonetheless open to influence, that it is possible to affect the navigation by leaning a bit on the tiller; nobody makes decisions in a vacuum, multilateralism is inherent in any decision-making process.

Henry VIII '*is* plainly somebody who needs to be persuaded, ... he has strong views, prejudices, which have to be overcome, but ... he is singularly lacking in any creative input, reactive not pro-active, reluctant to make up his mind completely, finally'. And Davies seizes on what he sees as evidence that different religious groups did manoeuvre round Henry, that they did have some input into the finished product, that Henry's position did vary, though within certain limits, according to circumstances; that contemporaries (foreign observers, Thomas Cromwell, Thomas Cranmer, Norfolk, Gardiner) felt the king was open to influence; that participants and other observers did see a religious struggle taking place, a struggle to determine just where Henry would come down; that if religious policy was broadly consistent, nonetheless the wobbles en route were significant; that policy was influenced by Henry's perceptions of events, which in turn depended on how and by whom information was processed. In short, the king's volatility meant that 'he reacts to circumstances, which leaves room for a certain degree of presentation'. Davies denies that this reasoning makes him a factional historian. Indeed, he has here subtly shifted the subject under debate. What he is defending is not the factional historians' claims that Henry was *manipulated* by factions, but rather the much more reasonable proposition that Henry, like all rulers, was open to *influence*, though Davies seems to verge on saying that Henry was more vulnerable to influence, because of weaknesses of character, than most rulers. And when in a recent published essay he writes of 'the way in which the religious future of the country came to hang on the outcome of attempts to turn Henry against his current queen',<sup>15</sup> his argument has further evolved from a would-be neutral stance (a king who is both dominant and influenced) to what is almost wholly an endorsement of the factional position – exactly what Elton, Starkey, Guy (in factional mode) and Ives would claim.

To claim, as I do, that Henry was very much the dominant force in the politics and policy-making of his reign is not to claim that he could do whatever he liked. That would be a caricature of the arguments of those who have made that case. My argument is directed against those historians who have claimed that Henry was *manipulated* by factions. It is not my claim that Henry was somehow totally immune from influence. Rather, the influences upon Henry are best explored in different ways. We know less about his early and adolescent years than would be necessary to make confident claims, and too often, influences must be inferred from actions and outcomes. But manifestly Henry grew up and was greatly influenced by contemporary chivalric attitudes, as his love of jousting and his zealous, if intermittent and strategically cautious,

pursuit of war suggests; and that chivalric culture was also reflected in Henry's friends and closest companions in the 1510s. Henry was obviously influenced by religion, attached to the mass, interested in theology, but sympathetic to Erasmian criticisms of 'traditional' religion and to the need for purifying reformation. Once adult, Henry's attitudes, like most men's attitudes, were largely formed, and they would, like most men's attitudes, not easily be changed. What 'influenced' the mature Henry VIII was not the supposedly manipulative genius of Wolsey or Cromwell or whoever, but rather the interplay between Henry's attitudes and the hard facts of the situations in which Henry found himself. Henry did shift from defence of papal authority against Luther in 1521 to repudiation of the usurped power of the bishop of Rome after 1533. But from the start Henry's papalism was more conditional than that formulation would suggest: he was already capable of asserting his authority in grandiose terms. And it was the growing realisation that the pope would not grant him his divorce that led Henry inexorably towards the break with Rome, not the insinuations of some scheming courtier. Reginald Pole, who spurned the king's offer of the archbishopric of York on condition that he assisted the king in his divorce, recalled how he had grasped in late 1530 that 'there was butt one gate open to enter in to the kynges fauor att that tyme which was by fauoreng the mattier off dyuorse'.<sup>16</sup> On the subsequent development of religious policy, my claim is that what happened – the formulations of faith, the dissolution of monasteries, the ending of pilgrimages – essentially reflected the king's wishes and was more consistent than is usually allowed. That in turn makes it unnecessary to see the more radical aspects of policy – the dissolution, the pulling down of shrines – as the work of radical councillors, and the retention of old practices, notably the mass, as the work of conservatives. Both were rather the preference of the king, more or less successfully imposed.<sup>17</sup> It is very hard to show in any detail that Henry changed his opinion or his policy on the divorce or on the royal supremacy or on religion. The timing of developments reflects external matters, not fluctuations in Henry's mind. Do those historians who claim that Henry was open to persuasion really believe that he could have been persuaded to change his mind on the divorce after 1527 or on the royal supremacy after 1534?

To claim that Henry was dominant is not, however, to say that he was all-powerful. In the years of the divorce, Henry found that some bishops were less willing to support him than others, John Fisher of Rochester least of all. Gradually the king could put pressure on them to acquiesce, and take advantage of vacancies to appoint those more sympathetic to his concerns. For all that, from the mid-1530s on, it seems unlikely that any bishop wholly agreed with Henry's religious policy. Some tried to defend pilgrimages and images, and probably secretly regretted the break with Rome, though they firmly supported the king's refusal to abandon the mass and adopt the Lutheran Confession of Augsburg. Others welcomed the break with Rome and attacks on idolatry,

but would have wished to go much further. What is plain is that none of them altered Henry's course – there was no reconciliation with Rome, no safeguarding of pilgrimages, no reprieve for monasteries; but there was also no justification by faith, no Confession of Augsburg, no change to the mass. Not only did none of the churchmen change Henry's policy, but there is little evidence that any of them tried to persuade the king to do so. From time to time – in 1536, 1537 and 1540, for example – bishops and theologians were asked to give their opinions on various matters of contention, which they did forcefully and seemingly freely. But once the formal debates were over, it is much harder to show any attempt to persuade or influence the king, except when the king explicitly asked for comments. At the end of 1537, for example, the king asked Cranmer to comment on his marginal comments on the Bishops' Book: Cranmer did so vigorously; but there is not much evidence that at other times Cranmer ever sought to convince the king, let alone succeeded in doing so. Bishops well knew which of their colleagues were conservatives and which radicals (though they would have had to allow for individual ambiguities and contradictions), but they were not modern-style campaigning politicians, and if they sought to influence the king, it was no doubt by private prayer. There simply is no evidence that they did any more or went any further. In their dioceses, of course, they could prevent or encourage reforming ideas, practices and preachers, though at some risk of being denounced by those of opposite persuasions as subverters of the king's 'middle way'. But that hardly counts as influencing the king.

Secular noblemen and councillors were much less likely than bishops to have influence over religious policy. Noblemen doubtless had views, though they were not graduates in theology, and for the most part they kept them to themselves. Conservative nobles may have grumbled in private or lamented the state of the world to Chapuys, the imperial ambassador, but there is little to suggest that they tried to change the king's policies by argument or by manipulation – and there is certainly nothing to show that those policies changed. It was not the nobility or the gentry who began the rebellions in the north of England in 1536. The king's councillors might appear more plausible as men who influenced the king, but once again it is hard to show that they tried or ever succeeded in deflecting his purpose. Much of such a case rests on the unargued assumption that policies such as the break with Rome, the dissolution of the monasteries, the dismantling of pilgrimage shrines could not have been Henry's policy – because he was too stupid to have thought of them or too conservative to have willingly agreed to them – and that he must therefore have been manipulated and influenced into adopting them. But if those policies were fully Henry's, his councillors appear more as partners and executors than as authors. Sometimes councillors may have been enthusiastically behind those policies because they sincerely believed in them, sometimes they may have followed orders fearfully or reluctantly, sometimes they may simply have



convinced themselves that the policies of the moment were indispensable and obviously right, as apparatchiks always do, only to be found enforcing opposed policies with equal conviction and rectitude in a later reign.

It is possible occasionally to gain some glimpses of these relationships between king and councillors: what they reveal is very different from what the factional historians suppose. Where the king's counsellors might persuade him to change his mind was over tactics and timing, not over the broad lines of policy. A nice example is how the council persuaded the king that his passionate desire to exempt at least some ringleaders from the general pardon that his commanders were likely to be compelled to grant to the Pilgrims of Grace was quite unrealistic.

Albeit we thought the graunting of suche a free pardon shuld not be honorable for us, but a meane to put these rebelles in great pride, and an occasion to cause others to attempt like rebellions hereafter, *yet giving place to thadvise of our counsail therein* we haue not only sent suche a pardon to our said cousin [the duke] of Norff[olk] as is free and general to be neuertheles retayned in his handes and in no wise graunted vnto them vnles very extremitie shall enforce the same.<sup>18</sup>

Henry yielded – but to the military realities of the rebellion, rather than any factional manipulation.

In autumn 1538, when Henry Pole, Lord Montagu and Henry Courtenay, marquess of Exeter, were arrested and convicted of treason, Lord Delaware also fell under suspicion. The king's councillors were evidently quickly persuaded of his loyalty and did not want to hold him in the Tower. But they were fearful of the king's reaction. On 1 December they wrote to Henry VIII. Their salutation, 'our most bounden duties right humbly remembered to your most excellent maiestie', might at first seem mere convention; their insistence that 'we your most humble subiectes and obedient seruantes have this present daye employed all our most diligence, industrie and actiuitie' no more than a statement of the obvious; but when they went on to defend their actions 'most humbly prostrate at your maiesties fete', and implored the king 'not to be offended therewith but to pardone vs', it is clear that they were anxiously hoping that the king would approve of what they had done. On trying out 'the veray bottom and pith of suche thinges as the Lorde Lawarre hath ben detected to have offended your maiestie', they could 'as yet . . . fynde no sufficient grounde to committe hym to pryson into your graces Towre'. They had ordered him to make a written declaration, and not to talk to anyone else under suspicion, but they informed the king that 'we fynde as yet no sufficuent mater agenst hym'. Accordingly, 'havyng respect aswell to your mercyfull clemencye as also to your graces honor that wold not have hym vpon a weak grounde (wherof he myght clere hym self afterward) to be extremely handled we have respyted his imprisonment'. This letter was signed by Audley, the dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, Cromwell, the earls of Sussex, Hertford and Southampton. It is not written in the language of factional manipulation – and the signatories,

including the supposed factional rivals Norfolk and Cromwell, are hard to turn into a faction along the lines favoured by factional historians.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, despite the council's evident unwillingness, Delaware *was* imprisoned the very next day,<sup>20</sup> suggesting that the king was not amused by his councillors' actions, though Delaware's subsequent release without trial, on a hefty bond, suggests that the councillors may well have been right on the substantive point of Delaware's innocence.<sup>21</sup> But the impression left is very much that of the nervous courtiers of a tyrant, struggling to uphold the due process of law, but fearful of the royal wrath.

A similar impression is left by developments at the very end of the reign. The fall of the Howards – the third duke of Norfolk and his son the earl of Surrey – is often seen as the work of the rising Seymour faction, who subsequently doctored the dying king's will on order to establish themselves as dominant after Henry VIII died. But there is no need to invoke factional intrigue – what Ives sees as 'a characteristic struggle between alliances of courtiers and ministers seeking to persuade the king to act in their favour' – to explain the fall of the Howards. They fell simply because of what the young earl of Surrey had foolishly done, quartering his family arms with those of the king, asserting his family's claims to control Prince Edward if he were still a minor after Henry's death, actions that followed on incompetence and irresponsibility displayed in the most recent military campaign in France. As Ralph Houlbrooke has neatly put it, Surrey was thus 'the victim of his own arrogance, impetuosity, overweening ambition and lack of judgment'.<sup>22</sup> It was perhaps harsh to hold that to be treason, but it was understandable that Henry VIII should take it to be so. That it was the king, and not any political faction, that pressed the charges against the Howards emerges from the way in which the duke of Norfolk was treated. Both Norfolk and his son were convicted of treason. Surrey was duly executed on 19 January. Norfolk was condemned by act of attainder which received the royal assent on 27 January; he was due to be executed the next day. But then Henry VIII died. If Norfolk was the victim of some factional coup spearheaded by the Seymours because they saw him as a political obstacle to their ambitions, there was every reason why he should have been put to death. He had already been convicted. If some legal technicalities arising from the king's death created problems, it would have surely have been possible to have secured (say) another act of attainder in parliament. Yet Norfolk was not executed. His life was spared and he remained in the Tower for the whole of Edward VI's reign. Does that not suggest that it was Henry, rather than the Seymours or anyone else, who had taken so hostile a view of the Howards' behaviour?

Ten years earlier it was Henry VIII himself who refused to allow Norfolk to return home in April 1537. Norfolk had been sent north in January, and (from the king's point of view) his efforts to restore the king's rule after the rebellions of the previous year had been remarkably successful. Now Norfolk wanted to

come back. Henry, however, was not yet convinced that the north was fully pacified and wrote at length reproving Norfolk for seeking to leave. In the letter the king marvelled that he ‘woll make soo lyght of matiers that be soo weightie’ and assured him if he thought that ‘youe be stayed of our presence ... without greate groundes therunto moving vs, youe take the matier amysse and torment yourself without cause’. Norfolk, he insisted, was wrong to think that absence from the king’s presence would harm any of his suits before the king. ‘This writen from oure mouthe’, the king continued, ‘is more thenne sufficient to cause youe to quiet yourself for this tyme’. Henry was intending to go to the north himself by Michaelmas and he reminded Norfolk of his earlier offer to ‘serve vs there without remuneration tyll the tyme of wynter and soo lenger if we shuld thynke it so convenient’. He made it quite plain that he wanted Norfolk to stay in the north. And from that revealing phrase – ‘this writen from oure mouthe’ – we can imagine Henry dictating this letter (and, dare one extrapolate, many others) to his secretary, Thomas Wriothesley, in whose hand the surviving draft is written. Norfolk was not being held in the north by some faction anxious to keep him from the king, however much Norfolk might have harboured doubts. He had been sent to the north, and was now being told to remain there, as serious and as heavy a responsibility as any nobleman could have. And his instructions came personally and directly from the king.<sup>23</sup>

Nor is it the case that Henry was so weak a king that he could be insulted to his face without reproach. Here the interesting example often cited has been Sir George Throckmorton. As Elton tells it:

What then are we to make of the scene, some time around 1533, when Sir George Throckmorton, a knight of the reformation parliament who had consistently opposed the crown’s bills touching religion and the church, was summoned to the royal presence to explain himself? Being told, mildly enough, that the king was sorely troubled about his marriage to his brother’s widow, Sir George riposted that marriage to Anne Boleyn would come to trouble him similarly, ‘for it is thought you have meddled with the mother and the sister’ – relations which created the same canonical impediment as that alleged to exist in the Aragon marriage. Here was a man of neither standing nor significance, with a record of opposition, accusing the king to his face of multiple adultery as well as hypocrisy: surely the royal wrath struck him dead? What Henry VIII actually said, in some embarrassment, was only ‘never with the mother’, a reply so naively revealing as to infuriate Cromwell, who, standing by, interjected, ‘nor never with the sister either, so put that out of your mind’.<sup>24</sup>

On the face of it Henry looks a weak king, humiliated by a mere Warwickshire knight and rescued from complete disaster only by Thomas Cromwell. But we must stand back and reflect more carefully upon the source. We know about all this because Sir George made a deposition in October 1537. We do not know exactly why he was under suspicion then. It may have been because of the activities of his brother Michael, in service with the exiled Cardinal Reginald Pole who had denounced Henry as a tyrant and called upon Charles V and Francis I to combine and depose the schismatic king of England. It may have

been because it was just then that the authorities had learned something new and damaging about him: a few years earlier Sir George Throckmorton had publicly opposed the break with Rome in parliament, and it is not at all surprising that anything discovered against him should have been taken seriously. Sir George evidently decided to make a clean breast of things, and gave a lengthy account of his earlier dissent, claiming that he had then been blinded by false counsels and that he had now seen the error of his ways. It was from his statement that Elton and other historians have drawn the tale, now familiar from retelling, of how Sir George told Henry that he had meddled both with Anne's mother and sister. But those historians who have retold it (including myself) have been insufficiently attentive to the detail. When these are carefully examined, great doubts are raised as to whether Sir George ever spoke to the king's face the words so often quoted. What Sir George recalled was not the interview he had with the king but rather a conversation he had had with a friend, Sir Thomas Dingley. Sir George declared how some years ago he met Dingley and how they discussed 'the parliament matters'. Dingley was surprised that the Act of Appeals and others had passed 'so lytly': he had, he continued, heard how Sir George had spoken much. Sir George admitted it: 'And I said true yt ys, I haue spoken some thinge yn thact of appeylys'. He added that thereupon 'the kinges grace dyd sende for me and spake with me yn dyuers matters', incidentally offering a picture of an ever-vigilant king, responding at once to any hint of criticism of royal policy in the House of Commons. The syntax of Sir George's deposition is then a little unclear; some of it is addressed directly to the king ('yor grase'), some of it refers to the king in the third person ('his grace'); and the tenses sometimes switch from past to present: the deposition we have is evidently an edited version. Sir George continued, 'and that I parseyue hys gracys concyens ys troubled'. What troubled the king's conscience, Sir George recalled, was 'that he hath maryd hys brothers wyfe and he thynketh god ys not pleysyd therwith'. Henry had presumably repeated to Sir George his standard justification for the divorce. But Sir George then recalled how he had told Dingley what he had replied to the king.

And I seyde to hym [Dingley] that I tolde yor grase [the king], I feyred if ye did marye quene Anne, yor consyens olde [= would] be morys troubled at length, for that hyt ys thought ye haue medyled bothe with the modere and the syster. And his grase seyde never with the moder And my Lorde Privey Seyle [Cromwell] standyng by seyde: nor never with the sister nether, and therfor putt that out of yor mynde. And thys ys all I seyde to hym or he to me or wordes myche lyke to the same effect to my remembrance, as god schall juge me at my moste nede.

What is striking here is that what Sir George is admitting is that he told this tale to Dingley: he told Dingley that he spoke these words to the king. But nothing here is evidence that Sir George actually said all this to Henry. Referring to his words, Sir George protested that 'I thowth no harme to yor grase yn the speking

of theym'. He went on, 'for that I ever spake thiyes wordes to hym [Dingley] or to any other man was to lamente what I thouth olde folowe of the mariage to yor grase and to yor reyme in tyme to come'. And he then declared 'the verye yntente wherapon I spake yt', namely 'I thynke yn my consiyens a pon a proude and vayne gloryouse mynde, as who seyth, they that I dyd tell yt to shulde note me to be a mane that durst speake for the commen welthe'.

In other words, summoned by the king after speaking out in parliament, Sir George had been intimidated and humiliated. Henry had repeated his justification of the divorce. Sir George, understandably, did not then stand up for his convictions. Desperate to avoid losing face, or perhaps, as he said, simply keen to be noted 'a mane that durst speake for the commen welthe', on returning from the king he boasted to his friends, especially to Sir Thomas Dingley, that he had spoken to the king the famous remarks about meddling with Anne's mother and sister. But he had not done so at all – and the king knew nothing of Sir George's supposed riposte. A few years later, in 1537, reports of what Sir George had then told Dingley and others evidently came to light – we do not know how – and he made his abject submission. Petrified, Sir George pleaded that 'seing thies wordes were spoken so long agoo and to no yll intent as I shall be saved at the days of dome And that it woll please your hyghnes to accept me into yor favor and mercy without the which I did not desire to live. Written with the moste sorowfullest hart and by the most vnhappy man that ever I thinke did live in this worlde'. But in the eyes of the authorities, Sir George's statement was thought insufficient, and in a remarkable set of interrogatories, he was pressed further on what he thought he had been saying. The tone of these interrogatories make it plain that his reflections on the king's sexual conduct were deemed wholly unacceptable, indeed seditious; it is revealing that the words themselves were not repeated. Did he think in his conscience that those words were true or not? If he said that he thought they were true, what documents or proofs did he have to lead him to think so? If he said that he did not reckon them true, did he not think 'that suche wordes spoken of any man were very sclaunderous and dymynisshing a manes good name and fame, moche more a princes?' Sir George's claim that he had simply sought to be seen as a 'defender of the commen weale' was then challenged. 'Where as he rekeneth that by spekyng of the said wordes he shulde haue ben counted to be a defender of the commen weale, howe dothe he take that the same shulde make any thing for the common weale? Or what did that make to the allowing or reproving of the statutes that were than in hande?' Had Sir George not been intending to stiffen opposition to the bills that the king was then putting through parliament? And was it 'expedient for the quiete of a commen weale' that the king's subjects 'shulde reken hym to be suche a greate offender ageinst god and his lawes as he rekened hym to be'? A pair of questions probed further. Did he think that a man who laboured to persuade the people to have a good opinion of their prince did the duty of a true subject? Did he reckon that 'a man that studies

to bring the people to haue an yll iudgement and opinion of their prince dothe contrarie to the duetie of a trewe subiect or no'? And was it not dangerous to make people think ill of the king? The final question asked 'whether he dothe not reken that yll opinion conceyved by subiectes of their prince mynnissheth there love towarde the same, and wante of love bringeth forth disobedience and the same bredeth sedicion and sedicion bringeth the prince into perill of his person and his crowne'.

All that makes the accepted version of the story - that Sir George had told the king to his face that he had meddled with Anne's mother and sister - most implausible. It is very hard to suppose that Henry would have allowed such remarks to pass without response in 1533 while later treating reports that they had been uttered so seriously. Moreover Sir George did not defend himself by saying that he had said these words to the king directly and that the king had not minded. Appealing to the king for mercy for the service he had done the king in the past, and not 'for thies lewde and vndyscrete wordys' which (he insisted) had meant no harm, Sir George remembered 'how good and gracyous lorde ye were to me at Grafton to pardone and forgyfe me al thynges paste consarnyng the parliment'. Sir George then added the phrase 'as al other spekyng and lewde demenor mysvsyd to yor hyghnes yn tyme paste'. That would suggest that on earlier occasions Throckmorton had spoken out against the king - but that the king had personally pardoned and forgiven him. If that pardon had included forgiveness for the telling of the story of Henry's meddling with Anne's mother and sister, then Sir George would surely have said so here. That he did not do so, but referred to 'al other spekyng and lewde demenor mysvsyd to yor hyghnes', suggests that the 'lewde and vndyscrete' words that were under investigation in 1537 had only recently come to light and had not been admitted by Sir George when he had earlier been forgiven by the king (or perhaps had been spoken after that earlier pardon).

Where had Sir George got the story from? He was a Warwickshire gentleman, not a prominent courtier, so what he told Dingley was not based on personal knowledge of the king's behaviour. Nor was Sir George a canon lawyer, so it is unlikely that he would have independently grasped just why any sexual relationship between Henry and Anne Boleyn's sister, let alone her mother, would have been so damaging to the king's case for an annulment. As his deposition reveals, Sir George owed the story to someone more familiar with the court and well versed in canon law, friar William Peto, provincial minister of the Observant Franciscans at Greenwich. At Easter 1532 Peto had preached defiantly in the king's presence against the divorce. Henry berated him for it afterwards in the garden, and a few weeks later had him placed under arrest at Lambeth Palace. It was at that time Peto asked Sir George to see him. Peto told Sir George about 'a longe commynycacyon that was between yor grase [the king] and hym [Peto] yn the garden after the sarmone', and how Peto had outlined to the king his objections to the divorce. Peto, Sir George

continued, ‘ferdere seyde that he dyd shewe yor grase that ye coude never marye Quene Anne for that it was seyde ye had meydld with the moder and the dowter’. That Peto should have remonstrated with the king in this way is entirely consistent given the fiery tone of his sermon. The story of Henry’s alleged meddling with Anne’s sister and mother was vivid and damaging. Is it fanciful to suppose that, warned off by the king for daring to oppose the Act of Appeals in the Commons, Sir George later should have boasted privately to his friends that he, Sir George, had spoken these words to the king’s face? On such a view modern historians been taken in by Sir George’s boasting.<sup>25</sup>

What is important is to read letters alertly for what they reveal of the king’s actions. Probably in early September 1535 Stephen Vaughan, the king’s agent in the Low Countries, wrote to Cromwell. Cromwell, replying, informed him ‘that being absent from the courte yor lettres addressed vnto me chaunced amongst others to com to the handes of the kinges highnes who in myn absence bothe opened and redde them and at my repaire ayen to the courte delyuered them vnto me willing me to answer you in this wise folowing ...’.<sup>26</sup> A king who would open and read letters addressed to one of his ministers and then instruct him on how to reply was no cipher.

It is remarkable how closely Henry followed diplomatic negotiations. Stray remarks might superficially suggest that Henry was lazy or inefficient – and it is on such quotations that factional historians build their edifice – but careful reading quickly disposes of any such interpretation. For example, on 10 November 1524, Louis de Praet, the imperial ambassador, wrote that ‘the king has never taken less interest in affairs than he does at present’, and that it was therefore important that Cardinal Wolsey should receive his pension, ‘for in truth he does everything here’. That appears very clear and seems good evidence for the view of Wolsey as *alter rex*, manipulating the monarch. Yet earlier in the very same letter, de Praet described how he had been with Henry at the beginning of the month. The king had spoken bitterly and in detail about the military campaign then being waged in Italy by the duke of Bourbon (the French nobleman in rebellion against the king of France and thus a potential ally for Henry in any war against the French), had blamed the imperialists for not giving more support, and had then drawn de Praet aside to ask for two detailed favours from Emperor Charles concerning the bishopric of Malta and the duke of Milan.<sup>27</sup> This is no idle monarch neglecting public affairs. Henry often saw ambassadors himself – for example, on at least seven occasions between June and November 1523 – and such interviews were often lengthy. Henry might be in the country hunting, but he always took a close and eager interest in important events: in autumn 1524, seeing letters in Thomas More’s hand, Henry interrupted him before he could begin to say what letters he was bringing, and guessed, wrongly, whom the letters were from, and then ‘he fell in meryly to the redyng of the lettres ... and all the other abstractes and wrytynges’.<sup>28</sup>

Such vignettes of Henry's style of ruling are precious glimpses – particular moments vividly illuminated, yet more widely revealing and suggestive. There are no doubt more to be found. Beyond that, the most fruitful way to take understanding of Tudor politics further will lie in deeper explorations of the making of policy. An examination of diplomacy and of the making of war will allow a richer evaluation of the relative role of king and advisers. A reconsideration of the divorce and break with Rome will permit a reappraisal of the 'king or minister' debate. A close analysis of the evolution of religious policy, especially in the later years of Henry VIII's reign, will offer much scope for the detailed teasing out of influences. And much can be learned from attempting to set policy, especially religious policy, in the context of longer periods. Chapter 10 on 'The church of England *c.* 1529–*c.* 1640' extends the theme of royal power into the field of religion and into the early Stuart period, presenting the church of England as a 'monarchical church', the character of which cannot be understood without grasping the roles of successive monarchs; successive rulers, it is claimed here, pursued what were in many respects very similar policies.

Of course such explorations, particularly on the vexed question of 'faction', touch on more philosophical questions about the nature of historical truth. How can we know what we believe we know about the past, and with what degree of confidence do we make claims to knowledge? By what criteria do we critically assess our sources? Such issues underlie my exploration of the Amicable Grant of 1525. Factional historians have seemed to me so determinedly to seek to argue the opposite of what was said in the documents that I have felt compelled to observe with Trollope's Mrs Harold Smith that 'we are so used to a leaven of falsehood in all we hear and say, nowadays, that nothing is more likely to deceive us than the absolute truth'. In recent years several writers, usually not themselves historians, that is authors of historical books and articles in historical periodicals, but rather philosophers, or perhaps more accurately commentators on the activities that historians pursue, have been casting doubt on the possibility of objective truth in history. Like, I suspect, most practising historians, I have had little sympathy for such notions. But I have felt it necessary to articulate my reasons for rejecting them, and I present them here in Chapter 11, originally written as a lecture given to first-year students on an Approaches to History course, warning them against the seductive temptations of the postmodernist heresy. My experience is that of an historian, not a philosopher; my defence for venturing into these deep waters is that the study of all rigorous intellectual disciplines raises questions about the nature of knowledge and that it is proper for practitioners of them to offer their answers and responses, even if they are not formally trained philosophers. It would be reassuring to think that what is being attacked here is a straw man, but the quotations with which Chapter 11 begins sadly suggest that it is not. It would be reassuring to suppose that these notions are the now defunct modish



philosophical cul-de-sacs of earlier times – 1968? the 1970s? – but again that would be complacent. My quarrel is not so much directly with certain philosophers but with those who have presented their thought as a direct challenge to the study of history, and, at a different level, with the naive nihilism or relativism so often – unthinkingly – voiced by students. If these are essentially philosophical questions, my concern with them has arisen directly from my efforts to understand the politics of Tudor England, and that explains why I have included this essay in this collection.

## Notes

1. G.R. Elton, 'Thomas Cromwell's decline and fall', *Historical Journal*, x (1951), pp. 150–85 (reprinted in G.R. Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government* (Cambridge, 4 vols, 1974–93), i. pp. 189–230).
2. G.R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation* (1977).
3. E.W. Ives, 'Henry the Great?', *The Historian* (1994), xliii (1994), pp. 3–8; 'Henry VIII: the political perspective', in D. MacCulloch (ed.), *The Reign of Henry VIII: Politics, Policy and Piety* (1995), pp. 13–34.
4. P. Zagorin, 'Sir Thomas Wyatt and the court of Henry VIII: the courtier's ambivalence', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, xxxiii (1993), pp. 120–21.
5. D. Starkey, 'From feud to faction: English politics c.1450–1550', *History Today* (November 1982), pp. 16–22; idem, *The Reign of Henry VIII: Personalities and Politics* (1985).
6. Ives, 'Henry VIII: the political perspective', p. 30.
7. Ibid., p. 33.
8. See also Gwyn, *King's Cardinal*, pp. 159–72, for the fall of Buckingham; G. Walker, 'The "expulsion of the minions" of 1519 reconsidered', *Historical Journal*, xxxii (1989), pp. 1–16, reprinted as 'Faction in the Privy Chamber? The "expulsion of the minions", 1519', in *Persuasive Fictions: Faction, Faith and Political Culture in the Reign of Henry VIII* (1996), pp. 35–53.
9. E.g. E.W. Ives, 'Anne Boleyn and the early Reformation in England: the contemporary evidence', *Historical Journal*, xxxvii (1994), pp. 389–400 esp. 397–400.
10. I owe this formulation to T. Reuter.
11. 'Introduction' to Folio Society edition of G.R. Elton, *England under the Tudors* (1997), p. xviii.
12. *Sixteenth Century Journal*, xxix (1998), p. 268.
13. J. Guy, 'Henry VIII and his ministers', *History Review*, xxiii (1995), pp. 37–40.
14. S.J. Gunn, 'The structures of politics in early Tudor England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, v (1995), pp. 59–90 (cf. C. Haigh, 'Religion', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, vii (1997), p. 296).
15. C.S.L. Davies, 'The Cromwellian decade: authority and consent', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, vii (1997), p. 194.
16. Public Record Office [hereafter PRO] SP1/116 ff. 56–57v (*Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. J.S. Brewer, J. Gairdner and R.H. Brodie (1862–1392) [hereafter *LP*], XII i 444).
17. G.W. Bernard, 'The making of religious policy, 1533–1456: Henry VIII and the