

Was there a 'revolution in government' in England as a result of the work of Cromwell? A case study in Historical interpretation



In studies of Tudor history written before 1950, Thomas Cromwell was not seen as having a particularly important role in the governing of England after the death of Wolsey. However, historian Geoffrey Elton argues in his book *Tudor Revolution in Government* that Cromwell changed the nature and direction of the way in which England and Wales were governed so fundamentally that they amounted to a 'revolution' in government.

Elton's basic argument is this. He maintains that Cromwell ended the old medieval way in which England had been governed, where the actual government of the country was little more than the monarch himself with a few servants and an itinerant (travelling from place to place) court and bureaucracy with no central base. The administration of the country was performed by men who were personal servants of the monarch, in almost daily attendance. They served the king's personal needs as well as the needs of the country – in fact, there was little actual difference between the two. Elton asserts that Cromwell transformed and modernised the system of government into one recognisable today. Although the purpose of government was still to reflect the will of the king, and no servant of Henry VIII would dare to think otherwise, there would be a central and well-coordinated base in the capital, London, with oversight of the local areas and proper records.

There would be a clear difference between the personal servants who organised the Royal Household with its essentially domestic needs, and those who served the King as the head of the executive of England and Wales. At the head of this more permanent and centralised administration would be the Privy Council, on which would serve the principal ministers of the day. This would include those involved in military matters, the Church finance, law and administration. Its role would be to serve the monarch and administer the kingdom on his or her behalf if need be. Its rulings would have the force of law, and therefore it could run the country in the event of a royal illness or absence abroad. It could also deal with the day-to-day administration if there was a monarch such as Henry VIII who had little interest in detail.

There were many other parts to Cromwell's work which, Elton argues, amounted to a 'revolution'. He transformed the financial administration of the country, restoring authority to the Exchequer and making the Chamber merely a small spending department which ran the Royal Household. The fact that Cromwell had a key post in the old Chamber system as well as being Chancellor of the Exchequer shows how he did this. With his key role on the Council he ensured that business was transacted there. Being Principal Secretary – with direct access to the King – he had the ability to set agendas as well as coordinate the whole business of government. Given the fact that he also had key positions in the Church (Vice-Regent) and in the principal legal and record keeping areas as Master of the Rolls, Cromwell was in himself an amazing piece of centralisation. What makes Cromwell so unusual was that he did not seem to see the collection of these offices (and presumably their salaries) as a means in themselves, but as a way to get a coordinated, centralised and efficient system of government in England.

The list of his work could go on. He was the central manager of the King's religious and divorce business in Parliament. There are many other areas of his involvement, such as reforming the Councils of the North and Wales and in setting up new administrative systems in Wales and the North. Parts of the protests which lay behind the Pilgrimage of Grace were not only religious, but against the centralising and taxing tendencies of London (Cromwell again). He also set up completely new systems to administer monastic incomes such as the Court of Augmentations and the Court of First Fruits and Tenths (a tax that had been payable to Rome but which now went to the English crown) which were capable of managing on their own, with their own jurisdictions and powers. Cromwell installed a new breed of efficient royal servants and revised traditional areas of government such as the Court of Wards, which dealt with the affairs of minors (children). The similarity with the modern government agency is strong!

Cromwell also involved himself and the government in many other areas, such as exports and imports. So it is easy to understand why Elton argues that put together his work amounts to a 'revolution'. The way in which England was administered, who administered it and the degree of centralisation and efficiency were all remarkable. The fact that it was pushed through by one man in a short space of time (1532-40) makes it even more remarkable. As is the fact that huge religious changes were also happening in the country and the role of Parliament was altering as well. Cromwell was also to play a huge part in the law-making process. The nature, extent and speed would amount to 'revolutionary' changes – so Elton argues.

Taken from *England 1485 – 1603 – Flagship History series, Derrick Murphy et al, Collins Educational, 1999.*