

Advice to Elizabeth

450 years ago this month, the young Elizabeth became queen of England. Norman Jones looks at evidence from the state papers, newly available online from Cengage, to show how those close to her viewed the challenges faced in the early days by Elizabethan England.



One of the earliest depictions of Elizabeth as queen illuminates an indenture of 1559 (National Archives)

Mary Tudor (r.1553-58), the last Catholic monarch of England, died early on the morning of November 17th, 1558, at St James's Palace in London. Several miles away at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire, her half-sister Elizabeth was expecting word of Mary's death but she could not be sure of her passing until her own servant brought her the ring Philip II had given his wife, removed from the late queen's finger.

As soon as Elizabeth was certain that she had inherited the kingdom, a carefully prepared succession plan swept into action.

That Elizabeth would survive as queen to gain her glorious reputation required luck, a great deal of political skill and self-assured action in the first months of her reign. Conservative, imperious and frugal from the outset, Elizabeth knew who she was and what her duties were. Only twenty-five, she was sure of her God-given place as queen, of her responsibilities as the 'handmaiden of the Lord', and of the monarch's prerogatives. Responsible to God for her people, she would be careful never to let them challenge her authority, even though many, seeing her as a weak woman in need of male guidance, tried.

As wife of Philip II of Spain, Mary had involved England in Spain's conflict with France and Scotland, costing England Calais, its last French possession, in January 1558. Since the twelfth century the main Staple Port for wool, the loss of Calais seriously disrupted the export of this mainstay of the economy.

Edward VI (r.1547-1553) and Mary had financed their military adventures by debasing the coinage, replacing good silver with bad copper, creating trade problems and contributing to rampant inflation, prompting Sir Thomas Gresham, royal agent in the Netherlands, famously to observe to the queen in 1558 that bad money drives out good. Consequently, the Crown was poor; landed gentlemen and merchants were suffering; and social divisions were widening.

The first Elizabethans were unsure what would happen when the young queen assumed power. They knew that the kingdom faced serious problems and this is reflected in the surviving pieces of 'advice' written in the earliest days of the reign. One, the anonymous *Distresses of the Commonwealth* identified a number of issues facing Elizabeth and her new council:

The Queen poor; The realm exhausted; The nobility poor and decayed; Want of good captains and soldiers; The people out of order; Justice not executed; Justices of peace unmeet for the office; All things dear; Excess in meat, drink and apparel; Division among ourselves; Wars with France and Scotland; The French king bestriding the realm having one foot in Calais and the other in Scotland; Steadfast enemies but no steadfast friendship abroad.

Punning that little was 'weal' in the common weal, the author despairingly remarked that he did not think most of the problems could be remedied. Things were bad.

The most worrying division was over religion. Everyone was aware that Elizabeth would probably return England to Protestantism, but how could this be achieved without sparking a religious civil war? The *Distresses* said religion was

to be warily handled, for it requireth great cunning, and circumspection, both to reform religion, and to make unity between the subjects, being at square for the respect thereof.

In early December 1558, Richard Goodrich (c.1508-62) took up the question of religious change in a memorial to the queen, *Divers Points of Religion Contrary to the Church of Rome*. An eminent Protestant lawyer, Goodrich began with a quotation from Henry de Bracton's thirteenth-century *de legibus anglicae*, setting out a legal argument for the supremacy of English kings over the Church. The gist of Goodrich's paper was that the queen must remove herself from the false jurisdiction of the papacy, but that she must use Parliament to do it. Until Parliament met, she should keep everyone guessing about her intentions – 'dissemble with all'. She could 'wink at the married priests so they use their wives secretly' and she could allow the use of homilies in English and the preaching of the gospel by men who would not attack any sect except Anabaptists and Arians.

Goodrich feared a pro-Catholic rebellion, so he recommended that Elizabeth imprison the principal bishops, and place Mary's 'addicted friends' under house arrest. Elizabeth arrested no one, but the Privy Council ordered a round-up of weapons from the bishops in December 1558, under the pretence that they had been lent for the temporary purpose of suppressing the Wyatt Rebellion in 1554.

Fortunately for those who supported the return to Protestantism, Cardinal Pole, Archbishop of Canterbury and the leader of the restored Catholic faith in England, died on the same day as Queen Mary. Almost providentially, several other Catholic bishops also died around the same time, depleting the opposition leadership.

Goodrich's advice was echoed in the *Device for Alteration of Religion*, which appeared in the first month of the reign. Its author is unknown, but he certainly expected religion to change and had thought hard about how this should best be achieved without resistance. Restoring

Protestantism would complicate foreign relations because, he expected, the pope would excommunicate Elizabeth. This would encourage France and Scotland to redouble the war against heretical England, and religiously disaffected Englishmen would support them. The Irish would rebel, because their clergy were 'so addicted to Rome'.

Even if they did not rebel, many people would be discontented, especially those who had governed under Mary. They could not hope for placement in the new régime and they would do all they could to restore the old order. There were also those who wished to change religion, but who would not think Elizabeth's new church was going far enough, calling it, he suggested, 'a cloaked papistry or a mingle mangle'.

The tightrope described by the author of the *Device* could be navigated, if the queen took care to discredit Mary's supporters with a propaganda campaign. At the same time, incentives could be held out for conformity of the clergy. Lesser men could be Justices of the Peace, too; men whose new status depended upon the queen were more likely to support her cause.

Those who thought the reform did not go far enough – people later known as Puritans – were to be repressed by 'straight laws' and 'severe execution', for it was better that they suffer than that the Commonwealth should shake.

The *Device* ended with a practical discussion of how to carry out the reform. It recommended that a committee of learned men be created to draft a 'plat or book' that the queen could send to Parliament for approval.

Though wonderful in its detail, the trouble with the *Device* is that we do not know who wrote it, who received it, or whether it had any weight. Although there is no evidence of a meeting of a committee to draft the book, much of what is recommended accurately describes what was later carried out. It is particularly striking that the author clearly knew that Elizabeth intended to send a religious reform to Parliament that would not please all the Protestants, because he warned of their discontent.

All of this advice, however, meant nothing unless Elizabeth and the men she chose to run her government agreed with it. Monarchical government required that the queen grant her favour, and the right to use her authority, to men who could be trusted to act in general accord with her will.

The last surviving set of suggestions for policy, known as *Sir Nicholas Throckmorton's Advice*, was much more concerned with who could be put into the new government than what it should do. The Advice of Throckmorton (1515/16-1571), first elected to Parliament in 1545, though agnostic in its recommendations, foresaw the continuance of churchmen in places of power. At Mary's death the Archbishop of York, Nicholas Heath, was also the Lord Chancellor of England and Throckmorton thought he might continue in that position. In fact Heath's last act as Chancellor was to proclaim Elizabeth in the House of Lords.

With a new queen, a new set of favourites would grace the court and Mary's friends would lose their influence. The question confronting the realm on November 17th, 1558, was 'what will Elizabeth do?' It was a moment of both great possibility and great anxiety. The Spanish

ambassador reported that Mary's privy councillors were 'extremely frightened of what Madame Elizabeth will do to them', since some of them had participated in Elizabeth's imprisonment in the Tower, tried to marry her to a foreign prince to get her out of the realm, and even urged her death.

Changes to religious worship, the court and the Privy Council could be expected, but most contemporaries assumed these would be guided by Elizabeth's husband. In 1558 no one could imagine that the queen would remain unmarried and childless all her life. It was assumed that she would marry, provide an heir to the throne and be governed by her husband. The political world speculated about when she would play what one diplomat called 'the card of our negotiations' by choosing her consort.

Mary's body was scarcely cold before Elizabeth began putting her own people into place. She had already formed a sort of shadow cabinet led by two old friends and servants who would become the workhorses of the new regime, Sir Thomas Parry and Sir William Cecil. The two of them instantly began to prepare for the changes that were coming, roughly dividing the work between the court, which Parry handled, and the political, which Cecil oversaw.

Parry (c.1515-60) had become Princess Elizabeth's financial manager in the late 1540s. In the months before Mary's death, he had secretly organized military support for Elizabeth in the event of resistance to her accession. He joined the Privy Council on November 18th and two days later became Controller of the Queen's Household. In January she made him Treasurer of the Household and Master of the Court of Wards. Each time he replaced one of Mary's men.

William Cecil, 1st Baron Burghley, (1520/21-1598) had been the principal secretary of Edward VI, a role he reassumed immediately for Elizabeth. The queen and Cecil knew one another well and were well attuned by temperament and education. A learned man, Cecil had left Cambridge without taking his degree – probably because he married his tutor's sister, Mary Cheke, in 1541. Trained in law, he did not become a lawyer but was quickly employed by Edward VI as a bright, hardworking Protestant. Like Elizabeth, he conformed to Catholicism under Mary and their common experience as Nicodemites, people who compromised their religious beliefs in order to survive, informed the way they dealt with religious change. William Cecil was a managerial genius who knew that ideological ideals could not be achieved without careful politics.

Sworn in as the queen's Principal Secretary within hours of her accession, Cecil was central to advising and leadership in the Privy Council. Cecil was, as he said of himself, 'an artificer of practises and co[un]suls', which made him the manager of Elizabeth's policies. His notes from the early days of the reign are full of things to be done. One of his first lists calls for bestowing the offices of Lord Chancellor, Vice Chamberlain, Controller and Secretary on men 'meet for counsel'. In a monarchy, government drew its strength and took its orders from the queen, so good counsel for Elizabeth was essential. Her government had to be led by people she trusted to understand and support her will.

Lots of academic ink has been spilt over what Elizabeth's intentions were and whether they came from herself, from Cecil, or from the Privy Council. Certainly, she was not bossed about

by the men who served her. They might advise and seek to persuade and manipulate, but they did not decide. On the other hand, enforcing her decisions required political and administrative skill – and that was their job. Policy and action had to meet in real space and time or nothing could be done.

In the early days of the reign the Privy Council was busy with managerial tasks, but the general direction was set by the queen. A series of practical issues had to be resolved immediately: the accession had to be proclaimed throughout the realm, including Ireland; ambassadors needed dispatching abroad; the royal jewels had to be secured; Mary's funeral had to be arranged; a new Constable was needed for the Tower; and the coronation had to be planned. A Parliament was needed quickly, so a summons had to be prepared.

Matters of policy, however, waited on the queen's will and she kept her intentions well hidden. All the surviving advice urged a degree of caution, for, as one said, bottles with small necks could not be filled suddenly. Elizabeth did not really need such advice, since her political instincts had already told her as much. Would she change the religion of England back to Protestantism? She did not say. Whom would she marry? She would not choose. Would she continue the alliance with Spain against France and Scotland? She was thoughtful. But, as the first months of her rule passed, she began to reveal her intentions.

She handled religion with scrupulous care, issuing an accession proclamation ordering her subjects to:

keep themselves in our peace, and not to attempt upon any pretense the breach, alteration or change of any order or usage presently established ...

Catholicism was safe for the moment. Meanwhile, the Council quietly began to move against the bishops, disarming them, releasing suspected heretics and stopping the hunt for more. The English ambassador was withdrawn from Rome.

Cecil took steps to control preaching, too, noting the need for safe preachers for Paul's Cross, the lectern outside St Paul's Cathedral, lest they 'stir any dispute touching the governance of the realm'. It was difficult to control them all. At Mary's funeral Bishop White of Winchester solemnly warned against the wolves of heresy that were coming in to prey on English sheep. White was arrested. Protestants were causing trouble, too. Because Elizabeth was being so careful not to permit Protestantism before Parliament allowed it, they were impatient. On Christmas morning a mob broke into the Italian Church and harangued its preachers railing against the errors introduced by Mary and Cardinal Pole. A few Protestant preachers were arrested, but none seems to have been punished for their infractions.

Elizabeth was encouraging Protestants. As Richard Goodrich had suggested, she was turning worship in her own chapel back to the English form of what was legal in the last days of Henry VIII. Just before she went to mass on Christmas Day, she ordered the Bishop of Carlisle, who was officiating, not to elevate the consecrated Host for adoration. He refused and she dramatically arose and left during the offertory. Her coronation mass was performed by the dean of her chapel because all of the bishops refused to do it without elevation. Elizabeth was

rejecting the central Catholic belief in the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

Soon after Christmas, a royal proclamation legalized the English litany used in her chapel, while forbidding seditious preaching. That must have cheered her Protestant subjects. And when the torch-bearing monks of Westminster Abbey met her as she came to her coronation, she dismissed them, another hint that she was not going to continue with religion as usual.

Believing in the importance of law, Elizabeth would not allow a formal change in religion until Parliament approved one. Parliament convened on January 25th. In the second week of February bills were presented in the Commons to restore the royal supremacy over the church and establish a 'uniform order of religion'. The bills, soon united into one, proposed to make the realm Protestant again, annulling the heresy laws.

As the queen and her advisers feared, the attempt to change religion ran into effective opposition in the Lords, where all of the bishops opposed it. The Lords rewrote the bill, refusing to annul the heresy laws. In a panic, the Commons passed a bill exempting those who worshipped from Edward VI's prayer book from prosecution for heresy. The queen, accepting defeat and, thinking she would send Parliament home before Easter, prepared a proclamation allowing communion in both forms, giving Protestants a sop.

At that point the queen and her counsellors changed strategies. A debate between Catholics and Protestants was held at Westminster Hall on March 31st, 1559. After the first day of the scheduled three, the Catholics were held to be in contempt and enough bishops were placed under house arrest to change the balance of power in the Lords. After Easter, Parliament granted Elizabeth the royal supremacy, though it was modified to call her the 'Supreme Governor', rather than 'Supreme Head', since neither Catholics nor Protestants wanted a woman to be head of the church. The vote to make England use the Protestant Book of Common Prayer was very close. By a majority of only three, the 'Elizabethan Settlement of Religion' became a legal reality in April 1559.

By circumspect handling of religion, Elizabeth and her advisers managed the change without the civil war they had feared. It would be a decade before the queen let her new church enact articles of faith, encouraging Catholics to remain loyal.

Elizabeth also played for time over the issue of her marriage. The most eligible woman in Europe at the time, she used her marital prospects to keep other powers friendly. Her prospective marriage and England's foreign relations were completely intertwined.

When Mary died, England was allied with Spain, ensuring Habsburg control of the sea route to the Spanish Netherlands. Philip II did everything he could to maintain the alliance, including proposing marriage to Elizabeth. However, by the time he proposed there were others in the field. Eric XIV of Sweden was ardently wooing her and the Duke of Holstein was interested. Both Lutherans, a union with them would be a clear Protestant step. Marrying Philip would clearly be pro-Catholic, as would marrying his relatives, the Archduke Ferdinand or his brother Charles. There were native candidates, too, and everyone was on his best behaviour.

The Spanish, in particular, did not want the pope to excommunicate Elizabeth and make it difficult for her to marry a Catholic. Elizabeth toyed with the Spanish ambassador about her willingness to marry Philip until the supremacy law passed the Commons. Then she told him, flatly, that she knew that Philip would not marry a heretic. Meanwhile, she hinted to the Duke of Holstein that she would embrace the Confession of Augsburg (1530), prompting discussions of a military alliance against the Catholics.

All this diplomatic dalliance strengthened England's position. The war with France and Scotland was not going well. The crown could not afford to continue it and there was expectation of an invasion from Scotland. The Spanish were equally anxious, but unwilling to abandon Elizabeth for a separate peace, since they needed the alliance and the possible marriage. This gave Elizabeth a strong hand in the peace negotiations at Cateau Cambrésis in spring 1559. She wanted Calais back and she told her representatives at the talks that she would have them beheaded if they made peace without it. Her demands dragged the negotiations on and on. Meanwhile, Cecil was promoting anti-French and anti-Catholic feelings among the Scots, urging them to rebel against the French army in Scotland, just as the Device had suggested. It was not until early April that the treaty was signed and Elizabeth gave up, temporarily, on Calais.

The war with France had been a precipitating factor in the immediate fiscal crisis, but rampant inflation was affecting everyone. The queen's experts told her that inflation could be stopped if the coins returned to a high standard of purity. Elizabeth herself had written a memo on the coinage. Endorsing the belief that debasement was the problem, analysing its effects on her revenue and the dangers of a recoinage, she concluded that for the good of the nation the debased coins had to be melted down and reissued in pure silver. People would complain, but she would respond; 'them, that being sick receive a medicine, and in the taking feel some bitterness, but yet thereby recover health and strength, and save their lives'.

By April 15th her commissioners had prepared a draft plan for a reform of the coinage. A German company was hired to do the work, beginning in 1560. Elizabeth and her advisers were convinced that putting the silver back into the coins would address the economic problems noted in the *Distresses of the Commonweal*.

Saving the economy from inflation, restoring the supremacy of the crown over the church, restoring the uniform order for Protestant worship, ending the war with France and Scotland and renegotiating England's place in the world were the major challenges facing Elizabeth when she came to the throne. Carefully rebuilding the government of England and the royal court, Elizabeth, working closely with Parry and Cecil, put in train a series of deftly handled moves. The change in religion nearly failed, but they pulled it off at the last minute. Her handling of her marital choices changed foreign relations. Her thoughtful economic policy did not work as well as she hoped, but she certainly took decisive action on the issues. Elizabeth, with good counsellors and political managers, had set the pattern for her reign.

Further Reading

- Norman Jones, *The Birth of the Elizabethan Age: England in the 1560's* (Blackwell, 1995)
- Norman Jones, *Faith by Statute: Parliament and the Settlement of Religion, 1559* (Royal Historical Society Studies in History, 1982)
- Wallace MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I* (Hodder Arnold, 1994)
- Wallace MacCaffrey, *The Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime. Elizabethan Politics 1558-1572* (Princeton University Press, 1968)
- Susan Doran, *Monarchy and Matrimony: The Courtships of Elizabeth I* (Routledge, 1996)
- David Starkey, *Elizabeth* (Vintage, 2001)

The state papers online Part 1 1509-1714 will be available from October 24th at <http://gale.cengage.co.uk/statepapers/>

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