

STUART GOVERNMENT, 1660-1714

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Stuart government in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century rested upon a number of constitutional pillars re-established at the Restoration in 1660. They came under some strain in 1688, and in the 1690s, but essentially survived in the same form into the eighteenth-century. We can, initially, observe these at work in the state papers as the traditional 'points of contact': Court, Privy Council and Parliament, as well as other bureaucratic and organisational elements. In what remained a multiple kingdom, central offices and structures of government were, of course, located not only in London, but also in Dublin and Edinburgh, while local government operated at the county, town and parish levels. Additionally the legal, as well as the diplomatic world, was re-launched in 1660.

Institutions

The central institutions of the later Stuart government can be conveniently divided into an executive (the monarch, the Privy Council, secretaries of state, officers of the signet, Privy and Great Seals, Master of Requests, Exchequer, Treasury and the postal service); a legislature (parliament); and a judiciary (law courts in London and elsewhere). The individual monarch's presence is everywhere in the papers, for in theory, and sometimes in fact, all writs ran in his or her name. We can even see some of the royal correspondence in SP 8/3 and SP 8/4 where we find James, Duke of York's correspondence with William of Orange. Yet it is the more the general executive papers, the Stuart government's life blood, that can be found in SP29 (Charles II, some 450 volumes illustrating the length and complexity of this reign); SP 31 (James II); SP32 (William and Mary) and SP34 (Queen Anne).

The royal household did not lose all of its ties with administration on its re-establishment in Whitehall in May 1660. However, as the reign of Charles II progressed, we can see it facing new rivals in political importance in the shape of genuine administrative departments, parliament and, eventually, political parties. Despite this, until at least the reign of William and Mary, the court still remained a centre of power where patronage, faction and a place of access to a set of Stuart monarchs, whose roles were still primarily those of a governor, active policy maker and trend

setter, took place. At court, the Lord Chamberlain's office ran the Household above stairs and the Lord Steward had control of the Household below stairs, while the office of Master of the Horse dealt with the court when it went out of doors. In the Stuart household the most significant development in patronage had been the emergence of the office of Groom of the Stole, with its control of the royal Bedchamber as the most intimate office next to the monarch.

However, administration found its focus with the secretaries of state. They, while retaining a base in both camps (court and administration), and split between southern and northern areas of Europe for diplomatic purposes, rapidly became an important focal point for the direction of both domestic and foreign policy. The state papers are rich in letter and administrative documents that reflect their province from warrants to correspondence, to commissions to petitions; to much secret work on the regime's security (SP29/426 covers the Rye House plot for example). Conversely the Privy Council, despite Clarendon's efforts, was to become ever more negligible in the face of monarchs who tended to favour small committees and counsels to undertake the drafting of policy. The Council remained overly large numerically (forty members by 1678-1679) and lost out to small cabinet councils such as that of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (located in SP104/178 is the journal for this committee from March 1672 to May 1677). In the meanwhile the financial departments of the Stuart state had grown apace and were especially significant post-1660 as money, increasingly lacking post-1660, the impact of European war, with its 'fiscal- military' state and a burgeoning economy in the shape of a 'financial revolution' took hold post-1688. Some of this movement can be seen in SP33 which includes Exchequer assessments from counties who were providing aid to the crown in 1692. The Treasury above all was to remain a key department in government. Indeed understanding the role of the Treasury is essential to understanding the acts of government throughout the period; although so weighty an office as Lord Treasurer was periodically placed into commission, when the mechanics of personality and policy demanded it. Taxes, both in customs and excise, replaced feudal revenues and their gathering became an ever more important area of government with a consequent expansion of government offices. Lastly, there were the other central departments of state: the Mint, ordnance, the Tower, the Navy Office, and a standing army with its guards and garrisons. For the latter two areas the historian can also turn to SP41 State Papers Military and SP 42 State Papers Naval which cover the period 1689 to 1782, while SP34 covers the minutiae of warrants,

passes and lists of the emergent post 1689 army at war. See for example SP38/20 for a typical list of officers who were absent from their posts.

Paralleling these central institutions was the administration of the Church of England, facing increased pressure with alarms over dissent and Catholicism, but which eventually survived strengthened. One particularly valuable resource on dissent in this collection is from the abortive Declaration of Indulgence of 1672: lists and indexes of the licenses issued to dissenting preachers and ministers under of that year can be found in SP44/38/A/B, and an index, for non-conformist ministers who took up the offer is also located there.

Lastly, there was parliament. It might be said that the struggle over Parliament's role in government was to change everything. Yet if the form of government post-1688 was in the end that of legal or limited monarchy resting on a constitution, the central core was still a monarchical authority, but curbed by a 'superstructure' of (newly won) limitations on that authority'.¹ This fact and the emergence of party politics shaped the pattern of later Stuart government. By 1702 the constitution rested upon a 'firm basis of law' and while still at the centre of politics the monarchy was now unable to detach itself from the political parties operating in the system and attempting to appropriate the crown's authority for themselves. The presence of Parliament and frequent elections in the 1690s were to become battlefields for seizing the levers of the machinery of the state and for settling local disputes or promoting personal ambitions.² Intent on moving Stuart government forward on a number of levels monarchs and ministers had now to come to terms with this new reality and with the idea of 'party'. To do so they needed mediators. Consequently, in Whitehall, the employment of 'managers' or 'undertakers' by the government has often been seen as a 'third force' in government from 1690 to 1714. To some extent at least William III had chosen this route in government, while for Queen Anne it was necessitated by ill health and a world where gender was still a considerable bar to a public political life. The managerial system prefigured developments to come in the eighteenth century, yet monarchy was still monarchy, sometimes in political decline certainly, but still a crucial driver to the machinery of government, even though party and parliament were now deeply embedded in the post-1688 system.³

It is clear that political life and government did not just end with the corridors of power of Whitehall and Westminster for there was a multitude of offices on the county and local level. The offices of Lord Lieutenant, Justice of the Peace and numerous local posts down to the lowly constable of the parishes can all be seen as part of Stuart government. In the other two Stuart kingdoms, Ireland and Scotland, we find equally noteworthy offices that also drew heavily upon the authority of monarchy for their power; the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Irish executive (effectively a viceregal court) and Irish parliament, as well as local offices there were matched by similar positions in the even more independent Scottish context. Imposed union in the 1650s had broken Scottish institutions, which were then restored in 1660. A separate parliament, Privy Council and executive offices were all brought back and if full union did not come until 1707, and for Ireland not until the 1800s, we find many of the dealings of government with these two countries in the state papers. One potential place to begin this sort of study is SP 8 (often called King William's Chest). It consists of documents gathered by William III and others on security matters, military and naval affairs, diplomacy (SP8/17 gives us papers on the Peace of Ryswick), and events in Ireland and Scotland in the course of the Nine Years War and the War of the Spanish Succession.

Lastly there were the growing overseas colonial possessions these were also to have an effect on later Stuart government as it coped with the idea of empire. So, the concept of government operated upon a multitude of levels and in a number of related institutions in the Stuart polity.

Governance

On the other hand it should not be thought that Stuart government was just institutions, it was also governance; it was a process. It was a system of belief and discourse, in which patronage and clientage was still significant. These were elements that remained throughout the period caught in a 'repeated exercise in compromise, co-operation, co-optation and resistance'.⁴ We may also find governance expressed in the civil exercise of power, in art, architecture and literature. Yet if there was a developing culture of governmental systems of belief and practice (statecraft) in the Stuart polity it was also necessary to repeatedly strengthen the idea of authority and governmental dignity which increasingly, as the century progressed, became subject to social, political, economic and military stresses. These stresses stemmed, in part, from changes in

the monarchical and patriarchal social order, ideas of power and religion, the aftermath of civil war, the external pressures of European war, an incipient world empire, economic burdens and fiscal development. Our ability to reconstruct all of these languages of power within the state cannot merely rest on describing office and the state papers give us some clear insight into how these multilateral elements interrelated and worked together to give what historians, for sake of a better short-hand term, call Stuart government.

The development of the state

We see in the period the beginnings of the idea of the state as an abstract entity. It was a body that could now be tied to individuals by ideas of duty and conscience. There is little doubt, though much discussion, that the later seventeenth century saw bigger and more active government than ever before. Institutional development and the expansion of the numbers of government posts took place, especially after 1690, as a result of war and degrees of centralising tendencies can be perceived in the system that emerged. The growth of litigation meant more use of the state's laws, and a potentially quicker rhythm to local administration.⁵ We see, in brief, the arrival of the 'early modern' state. That this state acquired 'social depth' and was dependent upon the co-operation of local officers for its central commands to work seems now to be a truism. Often these local networks were more informal than the mere local offices and government was now achieved as much through local brokers and local partnerships between central government and the gentry, as through the actual pronouncements of the state. These partnerships could also include individuals who were not formally part of the state, such as women for example, acting as brokers. So the state was not just what happened at the centre, but it also permeated through local social networks in which the discourses that occurred were not always the result of the traditional tension of centre vs. periphery, but often a process of social action in a 'participatory administration', underpinned by social obligation and consensus.

Identification with the Stuart state could therefore be both more composite and more complex and more often the subject of interest rather than mere polarities. In this period the state also began to be seen as a resource; something people in the newly emergent public space could begin to turn to for aid, as well as something that dictated the course of their lives. It could, for example, give reasonably neutral arbitration and resolution to their problems or assist in

economic changes and in litigation. The result was a much more pragmatic view in which the state's actions were not imposed upon its people in an autonomous fashion, but used as a means to deal with the everyday problems of life. It may be that, as Braddick suggests, this development really is the 'long revolution' historians have been searching for, stretching back to the 1610 Great Contract and forward to settlements of 1689 and beyond.⁶ Certainly in the end the result was a partnership between crown and gentry that used the organisation of 'social power' to cement the hierarchy of society.

Languages of power

There is also little doubt that the languages of government used by contemporaries were based, at least in part, on previous humanist conventions on the principles of the common law, on patriarchal family groups, on religious ideas of providence and ideas of honour, as well as the vocabularies of citizenship.⁷ If the latter was often in conflict with ideas of 'descending government' which had been a ready standby of the Tudor and the early Stuart regimes, the events of 1649 and 1688 certainly damaged that claim of government. Grammar school and University education led to the use of Cicero and his supposed ideas of participation in government by the gentry and 'middling' sort to express their ideals of government. Alternatively the ideas of Tacitus and Machiavelli, with their reason of state and obedience and resignation were equally commonplace. Moreover the search for the legitimation of government action had also entered into the 'public sphere', a growing arena of discussion that saw an unprecedented explosion of media forms: pamphlets, print, pulpit, street performance, manuscript newsletters and the newspaper. There were peaks and troughs in this due to frequent government attempts at censorship but, post-1688, policy issues on religion, constitution, national interests and economic ideas all now found themselves in the public domain and therefore subject to wider debate as never before.

The obligation of the ruled and the responsibility of the ruler had long been linked to idea of the common good (the mutual relations each member of society had with one another), whereas 'public good' was seen as the use of power to bring in order and security and often distinguished as the government's prerogative.⁸ Alongside this, however, was a particular tradition of active participation and the frequent delegation of power into ideas of corporation and legitimacy.

Additionally the use of common law in both rhetorical and real terms was now reflected in a multi-layered society.

Absolutist Monarchy

Another side to this is the arguments over increasing centralisation in the Stuart context. Was this the high road to absolutism only broken by 1688? Centralisation stemmed in part from problems of government security and the compliance of local populations with royal authority. In reality the only one of these themes which the Stuarts seem to have won was on central taxation. It has been argued that post-1660 we see a 'triumph of the gentry' and the increasing strength of localism. This was a response to the supposed threats of central control, perceived by some as 'absolutism', that ended with negotiated responses on the ground to general directives and orders. Indeed the fear of arbitrary government, imposed uniformity and integration, met an ideology of conservatism and a need to maintain support and consent from the political nation. This, as well as the actual personalities of the Stuart monarchs themselves, kept any absolutist tendencies in check. Additionally the idea that central policies that confirmed consensus were generally obeyed, but any that might cause problems locally were quietly elided seem to have been common enough on the ground levels of government. That there was occasional tension between centre and periphery in later Stuart Britain there is no doubt, but as the period progressed it was often superseded by a milieu of compromise and consensus, with negotiation and the deployment of levels of power in its wake. To some extent the state's claim to authority in the end remained a cultural creation. This was largely through participation or the continued incorporation of the middling groups and gentry into increased roles in the wider state. Bolstered by the ubiquity of the forms of common law, social and political practices, effective government under the Stuarts therefore ultimately depended on the willing commitment of men on the ground.

Participation and Office holding

However, the Stuart state was not a democracy, indeed such a phrase would have been frowned upon by most contemporaries, but it was flexible enough to contain a myriad of office holding and participatory elements within its structures that enabled it to genuinely claim to be representative by 1700. We can measure this representation though its varied forms which both

distributed and exercised power, from its judicial processes, through to its participatory politics in the street or in elections, to the emergence of voluntary organisations that enabled a civil society to thrive, often independently of the official state. Above all a multitude of offices were available to the majority of men from formal representation in the lowest parish to the parliamentary structure. This 'unacknowledged republic' could be said to be a 'series of overlapping, superimposed communities which were also semi-autonomous, self-governing political cultures' in a polity that was to grow ever more complex and sophisticated over the century.⁹

Citation

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Further Reading

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Notes

¹ G. Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (Revised edition, London, 1987), p. 186.

² *Ibid*, p. 186.

³ *Ibid*, pp.189, 193-194.

⁴ The phrase is Cynthia Herrup's quoted in S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c.1550-1640* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 24

⁵ Hindle (see note 4 above), p. 3.

⁶ M. J. Braddick, 'State Formation and Social Change in Early Modern England: a problem stated and approaches suggested', *Social History*, 16 (1991), p. 15.

⁷ Hindle (see note 4 above), pp. 25-26

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 26

⁹ P. Collinson quoted by M. Goldie, 'The Unacknowledged Republic: Office-holding in Early Modern England' in T. Harris, *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500-1850* (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 176.