

Taming the Many-Headed Monster: Understanding Charles I's Personal Rule

Jenni Hyde

Despite a reputation for being petty, vindictive and mean, recent research suggests that Charles I's main problem might have been that he was too successful for his own good.

Charles I (Figure 1) remains one of our most contested monarchs despite the 400 years that have passed since his accession. Even the early years of his reign were marked by controversy, with disagreements between king and parliament over the extent of royal power; the influence of royal favourites; and taxation. These problems were tied up with concerns about the king's religious beliefs. He had a Catholic wife, and many people feared that he planned to return England to the Catholic faith. In 1629, Charles dissolved Parliament when it passed the Three Resolutions condemning his religious and financial policies. He didn't call another English Parliament until 1640. Did he plan to create an authoritarian regime? Was it a knee-jerk reaction to an unco-operative parliament? Did Charles simply think he could do better by himself?

First, we should note that it wasn't particularly unusual for a monarch to govern without parliament. Parliament was the king's great council. He could summon and dissolve it at will, but it had no direct involvement in governing the country. It represented the people's grievances to the monarch; helped the crown to pass laws (statutes); and most importantly, voted taxes (subsidies) for the king. It was only when there were financial problems - usually war - that repeated parliaments were needed. Second, we should remember that Charles thought his subjects were a 'many-headed monster' with differing opinions that only he was wise enough to control.

Understanding why Charles's decision to rule without parliament from 1629 to 1640 was so unpopular with his subjects is crucial to understanding the Civil War and, ultimately, the execution of the king. So what went wrong?

Interpretations

The different interpretations of the period are summed up in the two terms that have been used to describe it. 'Whig' historians, such as S.R. Gardiner, called the period the Eleven Years Tyranny, implying an **absolutist** style of government. In the early 17th century, the kings of Catholic France and Spain reduced the power of their political assemblies and moved towards absolutism. It is true that by 1629 there were fears that Charles was trying to restore Catholicism and establish an absolute monarchy in England, encouraged by his queen Henrietta Maria (Figure 2) and his advisors. For Whigs, rule without parliament, coupled with Charles' alarmingly Catholic tendencies, was an unpleasant bump on the road from Reformation to Empire.

Revisionists, however, argue that Charles cannot have aimed for absolutism because he did little to centralise legal powers or to undermine the government. He made no attempt to create a standing army – a necessity if you wanted to enforce your power without a parliament to help you. It's also notable that although Charles didn't call an English parliament, the Scottish and Irish parliaments were both summoned between 1629 and

1640. This shows that he was not against parliament in itself. Furthermore, Charles was just as vulnerable when he finally recalled parliament because he'd done little to strengthen his own position.

Revisionist interpretations, such as that of Kevin Sharpe, call the period the Personal Rule, suggesting that Charles ruled in the way that *he* thought was best for the country. Paintings such as the portrait by the artist Van Dyck (Figure 3) show us how Charles himself wanted to be seen during the 1630s. To the left are the crowned arms of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales – symbolic of his peaceful rule over all four kingdoms. Charles is riding through a Roman-style triumphal arch. These were built to commemorate important events, victorious generals, or, significantly, to mark the accession of a new emperor. The arch was a metaphor for good government, with the monarchy as the keystone that held it together. Consequently, it presents Charles as the embodiment of the successful, **benevolent, paternal** governor. The painting presents the king as a caring father-figure looking after the best interests of his country.

And although Charles might have been ruling without parliament, he wasn't without advice. All the key decisions in the 1630s were debated and agreed upon by the privy council. His letters show how well he understood complex policy details, such as 'Thorough' – the attempt to overhaul government by applying existing rules and regulations more efficiently. It is arguable, therefore, that it was the very success of Charles's Personal Rule that made it so unpopular.

Finance

One significant achievement was the balancing of the king's budget. Charles's finances were handled by his treasurer, Weston, and chancellor of the exchequer, Cottington, who were successful in increasing revenues through monopolies; the implementation of old laws; enforcing rules around rents, illegal enclosure and intrusion on royal forests; increased fees for court and fines; and customs duties called 'tonnage and poundage' and 'impositions'. But the most famous aspect of Charles's financial policy during the Personal Rule was ship money, levied to pay for much-needed improvements to the navy.

Though a traditional means of naval finance and appealing because the burden of administration fell on the local justices of the peace rather than the government, ship money was not well suited to Charles's needs. Traditionally raised only in emergencies, ship money was normally paid in ports where ships might be found. Now expanded to include the entire nation, it was bound to attract criticism simply because of its scale, but the fact is that it was also collected quite successfully despite the complaints.

Religious policy

But Charles's religious policy was less successful. There was one divide between Protestants and Roman Catholics. But among Protestants, there was a developing split between Puritans who wanted greater freedom for local congregations to develop their own style of worship; **Arminians** like Charles and his archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud (Figure 5), who wanted to ensure full obedience to prayer book; and Anglicans who favoured a middle way.

Arminians believed in free will – that God’s saving grace was open to everyone and that if you lived according to biblical rules and worshipped God, you would go to heaven. In contrast, many people in 17th century England believed in **predestination** and that the priesthood’s main responsibility was to preach. Arminianism placed much less weight on the bible and preaching. Instead, it emphasised ceremony and the sacraments, which looked suspiciously Catholic to people who believed in predestination.

Even Anglicans were frightened by the number of Catholics around the king and the scarily Catholic-looking ceremonial of his church. Charles I and Laud believed that the church was an essential pillar of royal government and viewed differences in religious belief as undermining kingly power. He simply doesn’t seem to have understood the way in which his religious policy made people afraid of a return to Catholicism. Critics of Arminianism also thought the church was being used to promote belief in **divine right** and therefore help the king rule without parliament.

Ireland

Irish society was also divided: between the native Catholic old Irish, the Catholic old English who had been there since before the Reformation, and the new English, who were Protestant settlers. But Sir Thomas Wentworth's implementation of Thorough as Lord Deputy of Ireland strengthened royal rights. He managed the Irish parliament, tightened administration through the Court of Castle Chamber and reformed the Irish church along Arminian lines. After decades of draining the royal treasury, Wentworth (Figure 4) managed to run Irish government at a profit, returning tens of thousands of pounds to London. This, in reality, was an attack on the new English who had benefitted financially from the loose administration of previous lord deputies.

Unfortunately, Thorough united the old and new English as well as the Irish against Wentworth. The historian David Scott comments that ‘Wentworth’s remarkable success in uniting previously antagonistic groups in common opposition to his rule was a particularly ominous development.’ Wentworth’s success with Thorough in Ireland, along with Charles’s English financial policy, made MPs fear that the king had found a long-term solution to the problem of finance and with it, independence from parliament. English people began to believe that Charles might rule without parliament indefinitely, leaving them with no means to raise their grievances.

Scotland

David Scott notes that seventeenth-century rulers believed that ‘any prince who failed to impose uniformity in religion upon his subjects was asking for trouble.’ Charles’s attempt to promote Arminianism in Scotland by making every congregation use the same prayer book provoked a fatal crisis for his Personal Rule. The Scottish kirk, as the church was known, was **Presbyterian** and emphasised preaching rather than ceremony. Although the new prayer book had been drafted by a committee of Scottish bishops and only then vetted by the king, it was immediately regarded as an English imposition. It led to the Bishops’ Wars.

Charles was certain that the Scottish **Covenanters** were engaged in rebellion by disobeying his proclamations and joining together to defend the way they worshipped. Parliament had to be recalled in 1640 to pay to stop the rebellion.

Conclusion

Perhaps the real problem was that until the Bishops' Wars meant that Charles needed to pay for a war, the Personal Rule had been frighteningly successful. But Charles was out of touch with his people, not just in terms of their religious beliefs but also regarding the roles of king and parliament. Although Charles believed he knew what was best for his subjects, many people were beginning to see government as a partnership between king, nobles and commons, represented by parliament. By denying MPs a voice for so long, Charles made the parliaments of 1640 much more difficult to deal with. This began the slide to civil war.

TEXT BOX:

Whig History

The term 'Whig' describes history that was written in the 19th century at the height of the British Empire. It was written from a viewpoint where British rule over the Empire was seen as normal and right. Whig history is a story of the supposedly inevitable rise of Protestant parliamentary democracy.

Glossary:

Absolute monarchy – form of government where all power is vested in the monarch.

Benevolent - kind and compassionate.

Paternal - fatherlike.

Arminianism - form of Protestantism based on the ideas of the Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius, who rejected predestination. In England it was closely associated with Archbishop Laud.

Predestination – the belief that God had decided who would go to heaven or hell before they were born.

Divine Right – the belief that a monarch is appointed by God.

Presbyterian – a church run by committees of ministers rather than bishops.

Covenant - formal agreement to carry out a task.

Who's Who:

Charles I: acceded to the throne in March 1625, but was executed for treason in 1649.

William Laud: archbishop of Canterbury (head of the Church of England) from 1633 until his execution in 1645.

Thomas Wentworth: ruled Ireland on the king's behalf as Lord Deputy, became the earl of Strafford in 1640 and was executed in 1641.

Points for Discussion:

1. Why did the success of Charles's financial policy make him independent of parliament?
2. How useful are sources such as the Van Dyke portrait for understanding Charles's Personal Rule?
3. Why might Charles have been able to argue that Ship Money should be paid by everyone, not just port towns?

Further Reading

Stuarts Online: <https://stuartsonline.com> - films, biographies and learning resources for the whole Stuart period.

Mark Kishlansky, *Charles I: An Abbreviated Life* (Penguin, 2018) – short but radical reappraisal of the king's life.

Ruling Without Parliament – Charles I:

<https://www.worldturnedupsidedown.co.uk/podcast/ruling-without-parliament-charles-i/> - podcast featuring Prof. Richard Cust, a leading expert on Charles I

Exam Links

AQA 1D Stuart Britain and the Crisis of Monarchy, 1603–1702

OCR Unit Y108: The Early Stuarts and the Origins of the Civil War 1603–1660

Edexcel Option 1C: Britain, 1625–1701: conflict, revolution and Settlement

About the author

Jenni Hyde is Lecturer in Early Modern History at Lancaster University and a Trustee of the Historical Association.