



The Man **HIMSELF** Richard III IN PARLIAMENT

MATTHEW LEWIS

Richard III oversaw only one parliament during his reign. It had initially been planned for November 1483 but had to be postponed because of the October Rebellions. Richard's parliament opened on 23 January 1484 and closed on 20 February, sitting for one session of 29 days. The laws passed during that period have, in spite of other aspects of Richard's reputation down the centuries, remained celebrated for their value.

Richard's fiercest detractors insist either that the work of parliament was disconnected from the king and no more than the machinery of government grinding away parallel to his rule, or that it was a desperate bid for popularity meant only to keep him on the throne. One way or another, he can't have done any good. I believe the reverse is true: the actions of this parliament are directly aligned with Richard's interests and activities as duke of Gloucester. Not only that but far from a desperate bid for popularity to prop up his regime, it was a contributory factor in his downfall.

The surviving drafts of Bishop Russell's planned speech as Lord Chancellor at the opening of parliament speak clearly to Richard's demonstrable interest. The notion that 'no membre, be he never so nobile, that may sey to the leste or to the vilest of them all, I have no nede of thee' sounds like Richard. As duke of Gloucester, he had championed the social underdog consistently and defied the accepted norms of livery and maintenance. He had sent retainers to jail to face accusations of violence and murder, had supported husbandmen against members of the gentry in disputes and withdrawn support for those in his service when they acted illegally. The draft also contains the intriguing observation that 'There be many children, many menne of divers condicions and estates, yn thys Reame of England whoyse body muste be preservyd.' Cryptic, but off-subject.

Parliament dealt first with taxation, setting a rate for English merchants and a higher one for foreign traders. Income from tax had all but ceased with Edward IV's death, drastically affecting royal income for almost a year. Traditionally, a willing grant of taxation was a sign of parliament's confidence in the monarch, and often a preference for war. There was little of concern on display here regarding Richard's kingship thus far.

The main body of parliament's business can be divided into private bills (those that affect individuals) and public bills (affecting the whole kingdom).

Private bills

The first private measure was *Titulus Regius*, the familiar recital of Richard's title and his claim to the throne based

on what had been put before him in June 1483. It offered a scathing attack on Edward's kingship as 'delitying in adulation and flattery, and lede by sensuality and concupiscence'. There was perhaps little novel in the berating of the previous reign of an unseated king, but for Richard to slam his deceased brother so vehemently, casting his counsellors as 'personnes insolent, vicious, and of inordinate avarice', was shocking. If Richard's parliament was to be an urgent firming up of establishment support for him, tearing at the fabric of the last 20 years of that institution was hardly an auspicious start. And this is the critical point. If parliament was an exercise in shoring up Richard's fledgling regime, who did he need to aim his appeals at? The establishment, the council, the senior nobility, the layers of administrators who kept the wheels of royal government and finances turning with minimal creaking. Here, in the first private bill before parliament, Richard harangued these very men.

Next, parliament addressed the issue Richard saw in the title to the Exeter lands that had come to his sister Anne through her marriage to Henry Holland, duke of Exeter. In typical fashion, Edward had twisted the laws of inheritance to keep these rich properties in the royal family. After Anne and Henry had been divorced (or their marriage annulled), she had married again, to a knight in Edward's service named Thomas St Ledger. Anne and Thomas had a daughter, named Anne, who had, as a result of Thomas's petitioning of Edward IV, been given the Exeter lands in a cynical corruption of the laws of inheritance. Thomas had sweetened the deal with the king by assigning part of the Exeter lands to Edward's younger stepson Sir Richard Grey. Richard undid all of this inequitable tinkering at a stroke. Holland was dead without an heir, so the lands came into royal hands. It's possible to see a grab for the cash here, but easier to see Richard correcting perceived wrongs. He had already given John Howard the duchy of Norfolk which Edward's manoeuvres had deprived him of, thereby divesting the crown of the lands and titles that might have been resumed from Edward's younger son Richard, duke of York. Unravelling Edward's shady business didn't make friends. Plenty

had profited from Edward's approach and they all stood to lose out now. Necessarily, they were men of power who would not be well disposed toward Richard. No craven bid for the kind of popularity that made a king so far.

The October 1483 rebels were dealt with next. Buckingham carried the most substantial portion of the blame, no doubt because, like Guy Fawkes just over a century later, he was the man the regime had caught and could blame, and see punished. Three bishops were stripped of their temporal holdings but spared any further retribution because of their office. This was what tradition required, but it did nothing to shore up Richard's position. In fact, it did the opposite. The most striking example of this came next. An entire Act of Attainder was prepared, presented to parliament, and then refused royal assent by Richard. Lady Margaret Beaufort's part in the October Rebellions was laid out plainly enough, but Richard refused to enact the attainder. She was a woman, and the capital punishment of women was not yet the routine Lady Margaret's grandson would make it, but she had been proven to be neck-deep in treason. Perhaps it owed something to concern about Lord Stanley's reaction, but Richard had shown in 1470 at Hornby and in the duchy of Lancaster that he cared little for such sensitivities. If Richard was a desperate man who needed to clear the decks of threats, letting off Margaret Beaufort makes little sense. How many other attainders were brought before parliament only to be refused royal assent?

Other private bills dealt with odd matters concerning the archbishop of Canterbury's lands, correction of an ancient fine against Francis Lovell's family and the return of some property to James Tyrell's wife. Richard also permitted the return of any Percy lands still out of the family's hands after their rebellion against Henry IV 80 years earlier. Maybe this was aimed at placating Percy, courting some of that favour we hear so much about, but it was perhaps also, like the Exeter and Norfolk matters, about putting things right, whatever the personalities and family links. Richard could have done much more in the north to keep Northumberland happy, but instead bolstered the Council of the North, headed up by other men. This was scant compensation.

Public bills

It is in the public bills of his parliament that much of the meat exists, and also most of the claims that he sought popularity to keep him on the throne. It is here that I would suggest he did most to alienate the support he needed, and that the favour he showed spilt further down the social ladder to those who could do nothing to offer the king political security. Since this had to be at the expense of those nearer the top of the ladder, it cost Richard vital support rather than buying him any.

The abolition of benevolences is perhaps the easiest place to see a bid for political backing. They were a

hated form of taxation – effectively requiring a gift to the crown – invented by Edward IV in the lead-up to his abortive French invasion of 1475. The old king had kept them as a convenient way to raise cash without having to go through the hassle, and associated accountability, of asking parliament for taxation. Removing them from the royal playbook was undoubtedly popular with the wealthy, the kind of men a king needed support from. It was also financially dangerous, though parliament approved of the clear statement of the king's aims to live within his means.

The reasons for abolishing benevolences are more nuanced than a simple snatch at easy popularity with the elite. They were inequitable – entirely at the whim of the king in timing and amount demanded – and I believe that equity was of paramount importance to the legally talented and socially aware Richard. He had taken a stand against fishgarths in the north for the same reason; they were inequitable and indiscriminate. There, he had challenged the will of those who operated them, exclusively the wealthier gentry and nobility at the expense of the poorer man downstream and those trying to navigate waterways. Here, his interests happened to align with those of more affluent subjects but were still a continuation of his broader interest in justice. Edward had used benevolences to circumvent parliament and its pesky demands for reform and accountability. Here was Richard removing that easy avenue, promising that he would take the harder road of working with the Commons. If powerful men were relieved by the new law, it was a coincidence.

Other public bills dealt with trade and justice. English merchants would see plenty to like in Richard's parliament, but they weren't the people a king traditionally relied on to keep him on his throne. An act to deal with the length, breadth and dyeing of cloth sought to root out corruption in shoddy merchandise. A ban introduced by Edward IV on the import of a raft of items from lace and silk to caps and bottles was extended for a further ten years. Italian merchants were singled out for particularly harsh treatment, required by law to sell all of their goods at cost price to English subjects, then to spend all of the proceeds from the sales on English merchandise, then to go home to Italy. English merchants would prosper, kickstarting the economy at the expense of foreigners, especially the Italians. Was this because of their importing of low-quality bow staves that Richard claimed threatened national security or, their banks' funding of Edward's regime? Maybe a bit of both. No desperate bid for support from the political establishment here though. Interestingly, too, Richard excluded the book trade from any of these anti-alien measures.

I suspect that Richard may well have been looking to set a fire under the economy, to get it burning again after decades of stagnation, but Edward had been doing well in this aspect by the end of his reign. I wonder

whether Richard didn't have a grander scheme in mind. Building up the merchant class would offer a new, self-made and driven pillar on which government could be rested, rather than the old nobility who had caused so many of the century's troubles. It's what Henry VII would ultimately do, and perhaps he knew what Richard did – that the nobility was the problem, not the cure.

Reforms of the justice system

This theory gathers a bit of traction when we consider the rest of the legislation enacted by this parliament, covering matters of justice. Richard's concern for the common man is a thread that had run through his time as duke of Gloucester and appears genuine because he gained nothing from it. He had sent his own retainers to jail and to face charges in York, taken on local gentry about fishgarths and given judgements that backed common men against their social superiors. Imagine what a threat that was to the establishment!

Bail reforms (not invention) sought to root out corruption by addressing local officials who were arresting people on often flimsy charges and denying them bail. Justices of the peace were given authority to rectify this wherever it was discovered. The act also made it illegal to seize goods before a guilty verdict. It appears arrests on flimsy charges were being used to take possessions – the tools of a man's trade, his winter stocks perhaps, enough to ruin him and his family. If he was found innocent, there was no obligation to return the seized goods. Wholly inequitable, and clearly on Richard's radar, but who benefited from this lax attitude and ignored corruption? The same local officials and regional representatives of Edward's crown who had rebelled in October and would seek out Henry Tudor. Coincidence? Maybe, or perhaps they didn't like having their lined pockets turned out.

Jury composition received attention too. The act claimed that juries were frequently bribed or bullied into reaching false verdicts. The new law sought to prevent this by making sure that jurists were worth enough money that they couldn't (easily, at least) be bribed or bullied. A juror had to hold freehold land worth 20s a year, or copyhold worth 26s 8d, in the same county as the jury was to sit. Anyone appointing a member who didn't meet these requirements would be

fined 40s for each unfit juror. Who did this help? The common man, who couldn't afford to rig the system in his favour. He was now protected. Who did it harm? Who was the common man protected from? The wealthy, and the regional officials who thrived on corruption. If Richard wanted political support for his new regime to help keep him on the throne, he behaved as though he wanted the exact opposite. Once more, is it a surprise these were the sort of men involved in the October Rebellions and the Yorkists who ended up at Henry Tudor's side? They were losing out in Richard's England in a way they weren't willing to tolerate.

Conclusion

A king who wanted to ingratiate himself with those with the power and authority to keep him on the throne could easily use parliament to do it. All he had to do was

bolster the nobility, turn a blind eye to the local corruption that kept the rich bullies in power and in the king's pocket. Richard did the opposite. There is nothing in his one parliament that panders to the nobility. The abolition of benevolences might have appealed to them, but that's not why Richard did it (I believe). Otherwise, Richard had a long track record of defying the accepted norms (corruptions) of the system of livery and maintenance that had allowed over-mighty noblemen to direct politics in England in the fifteenth century. It was easily enough to make them nervous.

Richard's demonstrable interest in justice and equity extends into the action of this parliament, and that was to the detriment of the other essential foundation of medieval government; the local gentry. Turning a blind eye kept them sweet. Richard wasn't interested. His parliament was never about a desperate bid for support. It was about fairness, equality, and, well, I'll use the word once more; equity. These ends were pursued even though they would alienate from the king the precise classes he needed support from. It was admirable, but a mistake, a miscalculation that probably cost Richard his crown and his life. The parliament of 1484 was about many things but was not a calculated bid to prop up a floundering king.

Matthew Lewis is the Society's Education Officer and is the author of a biography of the king, Richard III: loyalty binds me, which is available to purchase from the Society's Shop.

'I wonder whether Richard didn't have a grander scheme in mind. Building up the merchant class would offer a new, self-made and driven pillar on which government could be rested, rather than the old nobility who had caused so many of the century's troubles. It's what Henry VII would ultimately do, and perhaps he knew what Richard did – that the nobility was the problem, not the cure.'