

# Oliver Cromwell and the English Civil War

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## Introduction: Cromwell in Context

**Oliver Cromwell was a man who acquired greatness unexpectedly.**

He was a **gentleman by birth and upbringing**, but a long way from the circles of power which centred on the royal court.

He was (like many of his fellows) a **Godly Protestant**, of the kind usually known as **Puritan**, and this explains much of his behaviour.

He **took up arms for the parliament**, convinced that Charles's personal government, and the Laudian church which it promoted, was a thin disguise for popery.

He was also **convinced that the parliament of England embodied the consent of the nation**, without which no process of government could be lawful.

**The King was an officer, or Chief Executive, to whom no kind of Divine aura was attached.**

Without any formal training, he turned out to be an **exceptionally gifted cavalry commander**, and it was that quality which brought him into political prominence.

**It was precisely because he was Godly, and had no connection with the power structures of the king's personal government, that he had the confidence of those radical officers and NCOs who formed the political opinions of the New Model Army.**

**It was the New Model Army, not the parliament, which won the civil war, and Cromwell was its most effective and committed commander.**

In so far as he had a **political philosophy** it was based on the **sovereignty of the people, and of the Common Law** which was an expression of the will of the community.

However, this was **qualified in two important ways.**

**The will of the people must serve the purposes of God, and  
The people must be under the guidance of their natural leaders – the gentry.**

This made him a **religious radical and a social conservative.**

When it became obvious in 1648 that Charles would not accept the consequences of the defeats which had been inflicted upon him, **Cromwell was the leader of those who were prepared to grasp the nettle.**

**He had not sought either execution of the king nor the abolition of the monarchy**, but when it became clear that Charles would not negotiate in good faith, and that there was **no chance of his implementing any concessions** which he might be forced to make, then he was **prepared to face the logic of the situation which resulted.**

**He steeled himself for this by convincing himself that it was the Will of God.**

The execution of the king involved manipulating the interpretation of treason in a manner for which no precedent provided justification, and that meant arguing from first principles.

For this he **needed the support of the army**, and he judged its mood correctly, accepting its radical political agenda, but **not the radical social agenda of its Leveller minority, whom he suppressed**.

**The army, like himself, was prepared to go where it believed that God was leading, and that did not embrace a ‘world turned upside down’.**

**One of the main reasons why he emerged as the leader in this crisis was because he had judged the prevailing mood of the army so accurately.**

In theory the **King was executed by a court** operating in the name of the people of England, but in practice it was **operating on behalf of the army**, and could not have been established without Cromwell’s consent.

Once the king had been imprisoned, the Executive authority rested in the hands of a Committee of Safety, which was pretty much independent of parliament, and of which Cromwell was a leading member.

The parliament (or rather the House of Commons) wanted to go on negotiating with the King, but was purged by the army in December 1648, and thereafter ceased to play any independent role.

### **The King’s death created a political vacuum.**

Both the monarchy and the House of Lords were abolished by resolution of the Rump parliament, which declared itself (mendaciously) to be the sovereign authority.

**Having put down the Leveller mutiny in May, Cromwell then went off to Ireland.**

**He had as yet no executive authority**, other than as a member of the Council of State.

**He did not even become Lord General** (that is, commander of the armed forces) **until June 1650.**

That position, however, came him the formal pretext for his next political move.

In April 1653 he expelled the Rump, leaving army control without a shred of constitutional respectability.

Cromwell was then forced to look for whatever civilian consent he could find, and experimented with a nominated assembly of religious Independents – the so-called **‘Barebones parliament’**.

This had no sort of mandate at all, and functioned only from July to December 1653.

It was then replaced with a written constitution, the **‘Instrument of Government’**, which declared the **Union of the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland**, and provided for an elected parliament.

Cromwell for the first time assumed official responsibility as **Lord Protector**.

**The formal union of the states was proclaimed in April 1654.**

**The first Protectorate parliament met in September 1654**, and immediately attacked the Protector's policy of religious toleration – a policy which Cromwell felt that he owed to the Independents, both civilian and military, who had supported him throughout.

Although elected on a reformed franchise, which excluded all former royalists, the new single **chamber parliament was still unwilling to give its consent to the policy which meant most to the Lord Protector.**

He dismissed the assembly in January 1655, to protect the Instrument of Government from further attacks, and **continued to rule, as before, with the consent of the army.**

There were minor royalist rebellions in the summer of 1655, and despairing of civilians, in October he **reinforced military rule by the introduction of the Major Generals.**

These were army officers, backed by troops, who took over many of the executive responsibilities of the county Committees on a regional basis.

The committees were not functioning very well because they were boycotted by most of the traditional elite, and forced to rely on members who had no administrative experience.

Cromwell was in a cleft stick. Because of his social conservatism, he left most of the gentry elites in place (except for obvious royalists), and would not countenance a Leveller programme of equalisation.

However, these gentry would not collaborate with a regime based on the army – and without the army Cromwell had no power base.

**In an attempt to salvage some constitutional propriety, he reconvened the parliament in September 1656, and immediately faced renewed attacks on religious toleration – and also this time on the Major Generals.**

Meetings continued until June 1657, at which point the major generals were removed.

The County Committees, however, continued to struggle. **'I am as much for government by consent as any man'** Cromwell is alleged to have said, **'but where am I to find the consent?'**

It was clear by the summer of 1657 that Cromwell's inexorable sense of duty had led him into an unsustainable position.

The Instrument of Government had already conferred upon him many of the powers and responsibilities previously exercised by the monarch, although without any suggestion that these came directly from God.

**In May 1657 an attempt was made to recognise the logic of this situation in the Humble Petition and Advice.**

The language in which this was couched was significant, because it **offered Cromwell the crown.**

The Lord Protector accepted a few more prerogative powers, but declined to call himself king.

His sense of duty required him to exercise the powers, because it was only by doing so that some of the ideals of the 'Good Old cause' – most notably religious toleration – could be preserved.

The second parliament called under the Instrument was dissolved in June, and the new constitution outlined in the Humble Petition was accepted.

When a new session of parliament was convened in January 1658, it had an unelected Second Chamber made up largely of Cromwellian grandees and army officers.

**The trouble was that this Second Chamber, like the Protectorate itself, had no mandate except that conferred by the army.**

No sort of freely conducted election would have endorsed it.

**Cromwell was now king in all but name,** but without any of the traditional authority associated with that office, and he had a House of Lords without any scrap of legitimacy.

**In effect his religious and political idealism had run him into an impasse.**

Had he been prepared to follow a Leveller agenda of social revolution, he might have been able to create a new power base independent of the army, but he was not, and he could not.

His confused state of mind is reflected in the fact that he exercised his authority to declare an hereditary **succession to the Lord Protectorship, and nominated his elder son, Richard, to succeed him, in preference to his younger son, Henry, who had the confidence of the army.**

**When Oliver died in September 1658, Richard was accepted as Lord Protector, but had none of the qualities which had made his father so formidable.**

**Richard resigned in May 1659,** and the army made a final attempt to cover its nakedness by recalling the Rump.

In the disputes which followed, the army divided and that opened the way for General Monck to take control of the situation.

**The regime had finally run out of ideas – and ideals – most of which had died with Oliver Cromwell.**