

Does Oliver Cromwell merit a statue outside the Houses of Parliament?

Whilst they have no power themselves, statues symbolise many things within our society. Besides from representing power, status, and significance, statues solidify the values between individuals by strengthening both collective and national identities. Equally emblematic, though both functional and active, the Houses of Parliament embody the British values of democracy, liberty, and freedom of speech. Thus it would seem that the functions of both statues and parliament, in that they enhance both national and collective identities, intersect to a large extent. It is at this intersection that controversy surrounding the statue of Oliver Cromwell, situated outside of Parliament, begins to manifest.

It is widely accepted that Cromwell is one of the most significant figures in British history, and as such it is also accepted that he deserves to be remembered. Whilst this point is undisputed, many are critical that Cromwell should be commemorated outside Parliament, as the values which both have come to symbolise greatly differ. Parliament is revered by many Britons as a beacon of both democracy and equality, whereas Cromwell is seen as controversial, largely due to his legacy in Ireland. Despite this, the historical significance of Cromwell largely outweighs this difference. It appears that our most remarkable figure does merit a statue outside of our most remarkable institution.

Prior to the outbreak of Civil War in August 1642, little is known about Cromwell's life. In 1628 Cromwell was elected to Parliament as an MP for Huntingdon, though his limited contribution provides little insight into his beliefs during the early stages of his career. In 1628 Cromwell held no objection to the economic policies adopted by Charles, an obvious contrast to his opposition towards the King's demands for Parliament to raise taxes for war against Scotland in 1640. This difference in attitude has been attributed to Cromwell's religious experiences between 1629 and 1640. By 1640 Cromwell considered the 16th Century Reformation incomplete, and was committed to further religious reform. It seems that the motivating force behind his desire to remove Charles was his belief that religious reformation would follow a consolidation of parliamentary power, thus suggesting that his desire to fight for parliamentary power was driven by his own religious self interest, rather than an inclination to develop the power held by parliament. However, this does not change the fact that he became a leading opposition figure who demanded the surrender of royal power to parliament. Ultimately, therefore, this supports the view that Cromwell does merit a statue outside Parliament as, despite his motives, he played a key part in triggering the Civil War, and the subsequent devolution of power from King to Parliament.

By contrast, it appears that after the First Civil War Cromwell realised that an advancement in parliamentary power would not directly lead to religious reform. Cromwell endorsed two

divergent trends of the time; the wish to further the Reformation, and the desire for the monarch to call regular parliaments, and thus increase parliamentary power at the expense of his own tyrannical tendencies. By 1648, Cromwell had to choose between the two. As Coward states: 'Cromwell had to choose between the two 'causes' for which he had striven since 1640, and reluctantly he sacrificed the parliamentary cause for the godly cause'[1].

Cromwell's decision to prioritise the godly cause over the parliamentary cause casts doubt over whether, he merits the statue, as this decision would directly affect his actions in the future. After Cromwell returned to Westminster from defeating Prince Charles' army at Worcester in September 1651, his determination to bring about the godly reformation grew ever stronger. As a consequence he became disillusioned with the Rump's failure to cooperate with himself and the army, provoking him to use military force against them. In April 1653 Cromwell ordered armed soldiers to close Parliament, stating that 'You have sat too long for any good you have been doing lately'[2]. Whilst this implies Cromwell does not merit a statue outside Parliament, as he actively worked against the interest of democracy (which parliament has come to signify) to further his own religious ambitions in an act of Machiavellian realpolitik, his actions after the dissolution of the Rump show he held no desire for permanent military dictatorship.

It should be noted that Cromwell would have strongly disagreed with the modern concept of democracy which is largely based upon Nineteenth Century principles formed long after the life of Cromwell, who would not have believed that all persons should have a right to vote. Nonetheless, Cromwell was an advocate of Parliament as a representative body that spoke for the people, in a system alongside the monarch. In this sense, Cromwell would have preferred for Charles to have agreed to a new constitutional system, rather than setting up the Protectorate: exemplified by his contribution to the Putney Debates. Cromwell's objection was to Charles' abuse of power at the expense of Parliament, and for this reason it is valid to consider Cromwell as a key figure in the growth of parliamentary power.

Whilst it is unlikely that after dissolving the Rump Cromwell had a clear plan of action, it is likely that he did not want to implement a permanent military dictatorship. Cromwell is quoted as stating that parliament 'is only suspended, tis a sword taken out of the hands of a mad man's hand, til he recover his senses'[3]. This highlights that forceful action was taken against the Rump due to the precarious position of his godly reformation, as opposed to a contempt for parliamentary democracy. This view is further reiterated by the nature of the Instrument of Government, where power over major decisions, such as spending state finances and declaring war were not held by the Protector alone. Authority over these issues fell to the Protector, Parliament, and Council of State, in a system of checks and balances designed to limit the power of the executive (a very similar system to that of the US constitution drafted in 1789). An example of this system in practice is the decision taken to send a military expedition to attack

Spanish colonies in the Caribbean, as it was decided to ally with France in the continental war. In difference to the foreign policy of Charles, this decision was not solely made by the Protector, showing a clear progression in both consensual decision-making and parliamentary power under the Protectorate. As Cromwell was central to this progression, it seems that he does deserve a statue outside Parliament, an institution which developed largely due to his efforts.

As is the case with much of this debate, Cromwell's merit in regards to the statue reverts back to his decision to prioritise the godly reformation over the parliamentary cause. The Instrument of Government greatly expanded the power of Parliament by declaring that they were to be elected every three years and sit for a minimum of five months before they could be dissolved. These developments reflect Cromwell's continuing dedication to the parliamentary cause, for which he had risked so much in 1642. Despite this, the Instrument infringed on parliamentary liberties. Cromwell had a certain level of distrust for free parliaments, as they had previously shown hostility to both the army and the godly cause. Therefore, within the Instrument the Council of State were able to dismiss elected MPs at the start of each session, and the Protector and the Council was permitted to legislate in the breaks between Parliaments. The paradox is once again clear: Cromwell was prepared to accept a constitution which infringed upon parliamentary liberties, the same liberties that he had risked his life for, due to his overwhelming desire for the godly reformation. While this does not entirely discredit his statue outside of Parliament, it does question whether Cromwell's actions were always directed by his desire for religious, rather than parliamentary, reform.

W.C Abbott referred to the Protectorate as a 'new and powerful dictatorship'[4], and it becomes increasingly difficult to refute this claim when, in 1655-56, Cromwell adopted an authoritarian stance. In alignment with the trend of Cromwell's political career, this decision was taken when the godly reformation was at risk. The First Protectorate Parliament was critical of the Instrument of Government, and Cromwell's position as Protector. It was believed that the Protectorate was a direct attack on parliamentary liberties, but in addition to this, many MPs were still furious at the forced dissolution of the Rump, only two years before. The hostility felt towards Cromwell was the culmination of a belief that he had been 'driven by selfish ambition to have abandoned the parliamentary cause', as reiterated by Coward.

Cromwell's decision to adopt a military dictatorship in the years following the dissolution of the First Protectorate Parliament shares many similarities with his earlier episodes of military action, most notably the dissolution of the Rump. However, there was one striking difference between the dissolution of these parliaments: in 1653 Cromwell had very promptly returned to the policies of constitutional respectability, whereas in 1655 policies of authoritarianism were adopted over a prolonged period. It is possible that Cromwell's adoption of authoritarianism

was, at the time, warranted. Government agents reported Royalist plots against the regime. Although with hindsight we can see that the threat posed to the Protectorate by the Royalists was minute, in 1655, without this knowledge, Cromwell's actions are justifiable. Moreover, it is not uncommon for the Head of State, in times of emergency or perceived threat, to adopt an authoritarian style: the Weimar Constitution drafted in 1919 allowed the President, under Article 48, to take emergency measures without the consent of the Reichstag. This was used 136 times by Friedrich Ebert between 1923 and 1925. Therefore, Cromwell was perhaps not dismissing the importance of parliament, but rather acting as he saw best for the interests of the country, and the above cannot be seen as a credible reason to discredit Cromwell's statue outside of Parliament.

It is not only Cromwell's actions in relation to the parliament that contribute to the debate, but also his legacy in Ireland. Cromwell was sent to Ireland by the Rump Parliament to suppress discontent as the Irish Catholic Confederation, who seized control of Ireland in the Irish Rebellion of 1641, allied with the English Royalists. The principal claims against Cromwell stem from his actions in Drogheda and Wexford, where thousands were murdered in cold blood at his commands. Cromwell justified the murders by suggesting they served as retribution for the Irish massacre of Protestants in 1641: 'Those massacrers have ripped the bellies of women with child and took the infants'[5]. At this point the debate reverts back to the fundamental purpose of a statue - to contribute to the development of a national identity. Due to Cromwell's actions in Ireland, his statue outside Parliament truly does not perform this purpose. Though the conquest of Ireland was certainly both contemptible and cruel according to modern standards, Cromwell was a man of his time and it is perhaps unfair to judge his actions by today's ethical standards, as many generals would have acted more harshly.

In relation to these ideas of moral subjectivity, the changing historiography of Cromwell also contributes to his statue's merit. Controversy surrounding the statue is not a recent issue. The statue was unveiled in 1899, and received instant criticism from the House of Lords. Yet views of Cromwell are ever-changing. In the 19th Century Cromwell was praised as the godfather of British colonialism, whilst at the start of the 20th Century, as Fascist dictators like Hitler and Mussolini gained power, Cromwell was portrayed in a more negative light, with the focus on his short stint of authoritarianism. Collingwood stated that 'all history is present history'[6]; if taken literally this questions whether the present should have the authority to determine whether or not Cromwell does merit a statue outside Parliament, as those in the past have already determined that he does.

Therefore, the question reverts back to the fundamental purpose of a statue. Evidently, Cromwell's statue outside Parliament does not strengthen national identity, rather than uniting public opinion it does quite the opposite. Perhaps this is unimportant as national identities are

formed upon values, which are themselves highly relative. Despite this, in a historical sense Cromwell does merit a statue outside Parliament as his contribution to the institution itself was immense. In addition, whilst Cromwell may not succeed in creating a unified identity for Britain, he is most certainly one of our most influential figures, and therefore deserves representation outside Parliament, an institution to which he gifted so much.

2085 Words

Bibliography

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[2] Oliver Cromwell quoted in Coward, Barry, *Cromwell: Profiles in Power*. (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 1991).

[3] Oliver Cromwell quoted in Coward, Barry, *Cromwell: Profiles in Power*. (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 1991).

[4] Abbott, W.C, *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1937).

[5] Oliver Cromwell quoted in Coward, Barry, *Cromwell: Profiles in Power*. (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 1991).

[6] Collingwood, R.G, *The Idea of History: Revised Edition*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).