THE **HISTORY** ESSAY

Anthony van Dyck's portrait of Charles I, who tried to take on a series of problems facing the nation "that needed to be addressed"

HAS HISTORY BEEN HARD ON CHARLES I?

For all his undoubted flaws, we should recognise that the much-maligned monarch was handicapped by his father's failings and chronic bad luck

By Tim Harris

I n early October 1640 Charles I, based temporarily at York following defeat at the hands of the Scottish Covenanters, sat down to a game of chess with the Marquess of Winchester. As Charles pondered how to play his bishop, Winchester quipped: "See, Sir, how troublesome these Bishops are?" Charles said nothing, but "looked very grim".

Defeat in the second of the two Bishops' Wars – in which a power struggle over the future of the Scottish church led to violent clashes between the king's forces and his opponents in Scotland – was the beginning of the end for Charles I. Having fallen out with his parliaments in the late 1620s, he had embarked on a period of personal rule from 1629, and pursued an ambitious policy of reform in church and state in all three of his kingdoms: England, Scotland and Ireland.

The stalemate of the first Bishops' War finally led him to recall parliament in the spring of 1640, but he dissolved it after only three weeks rather than agree to its demands for reform. Defeat in the second Bishops' War forced Charles to call what became known as the Long Parliament and to negotiate with it.

In October 1641, as Charles worked towards a settlement with the Scots, the Catholics in Ireland decided to launch a rebellion of their own. Disagreement over who should control the army needed to put down the Irish rebellion led ultimately to both parliament and the king raising their own forces and going to war with each other in 1642. Defeat in the ensuing civil wars – there were two – resulted in Charles being tried and executed for treason (a crime that can only be committed *against* kings) in January 1649.

Why did things go so disastrously wrong for Charles? Few would now accept the older characterisation of him as a tyrant whose personal rule was a high road to civil war and revolution. Some even regard the personal rule as a period of constructive and welcome reform in England, arguing that his regime was toppled only as a result of the prior revolts in Scotland and Ireland.

Must revolutions have great, long-term causes? Was Charles's fall an inevitable consequence of his political inheritance? Or was it the result of bad luck, political miscalculation, even accident? Do we blame Charles or the situation in which he found himself?

Charles's father, James VI of Scotland, had united the crowns in 1603 when he succeeded Elizabeth to the thrones of England and Ireland as James I. England had its problems – a seriously under-financed crown and deep-seated religious tensions dividing various types of Protestants among themselves (Calvinists and anti-Calvinists, Puritans and anti-Puritans). James now also found himself ruling three kingdoms with different religious complexions: Anglican England, Presbyterian Scotland and Catholic Ireland (albeit that the church establishment in Ireland was Protestant and the Catholic majority were divided ethnically between the native Gaelic and the Old English). Ireland posed further security problems as a Catholic island off the coast of Protestant England that had the tendency to rebel against English rule. During Tyrone's rebellion of the 1590s, which was only finally put down in 1603, the Gaels of Ulster had even offered the crown of Ireland to the king of Catholic Spain.

James VI and I is normally seen as a skilful politician who managed this problematic multiple-kingdom inheritance reasonably well. He calmed religious tensions in England, and under his rule Scotland and Ireland were quieter than they had been for a long time.

Yet James stored up a hornets' nest of problems for his son. He had enraged many Scots by reviving episcopacy (a hierarchical structure in which the chief authority over a local church is a bishop) north of the border. It was also James who had first moved to introduce a more Anglican style of worship into the Scottish Kirk, thereby upsetting the Presbyterians. It is true that he took care to work through the general assembly of the Kirk and the Scottish parliament. But he used a considerable amount of bullying and intimidation to force his reforms through and Scottish Presbyterians never accepted the assemblies that had backed James's initiatives as legitimate.

James's solution to the security problem in Ireland was to declare the land of six of the counties of Ulster forfeited to the crown and to plant the province with Protestants from England and Scotland. Both the Scottish Covenanters of the late 1630s and the Irish rebels of 1641 traced the roots of their grievances back to his reign.

Nor did things always go smoothly for James in England. He had disagreements with his parliaments over revenue and foreign policy, and himself ruled without parliament from 1610 to 1621 – the assembly that met for nine weeks in 1614 was deemed not to have been a parliament because it enacted no legislation.

James never solved the problem of an under-financed crown. He encountered severe problems with the Puritans towards the start of his reign, and whatever peace he brought to the

King James VI and I, seen here in a c1619 portrait, left Charles "a hornets' nest of problems"

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church in his middle years seemed to be breaking down by the early 1620s as he turned against the Calvinists for criticising his policy of appeasing Spain following the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War in Europe (1618–48) and began to look for support from the anti-Calvinists.

When Charles succeeded his father in 1625 there was general rejoicing everywhere, for "the uncertainties of the late rule had wearied all men". Charles had served his political apprenticeship in the parliaments of 1621 and 1624 where he had emerged as a popular patriot hero for supporting parliament's calls for war against Spain.

This 'Prince bred in Parliaments', however, soon fell out with parliament once king. The main bone of contention was money. Charles felt that since parliament had pressed for war against Spain they had an obligation to fund it properly. Yet, as the conflict went badly – and England simultaneously got sucked into hostilities with Catholic France – parliament demanded the impeachment of the king's leading minister, the Duke of Buckingham, before it would vote further taxation. Charles opted to stand by his favourite and tried to raise the money by means of a forced loan.

Politically, this proved a costly move, for it led to parliament's Petition of Right of 1628, condemning arbitrary taxation. However, it was more evidence of an inexperienced king panicking when he found himself at war with Europe's two major powers without adequate financing than of a desire to subvert the constitution.

By 1629, Buckingham had been removed from the scene by an assassin's blade but still parliament continued to criticise the crown's fiscal and religious policies. When Charles decided to break with parliament that year, he did so because he felt parliament was preventing him from fulfilling his divinely ordained duty to rule for the public good.

Having broken with parliament, Charles moved quickly to end the wars with France and Spain, promoted social and economic reforms at home (to help the poor and boost trade and industry), and set about reforming the militia and navy. Compared to what was going on in Europe at the time, during the height of the Thirty Years' War, or the turmoil that England, Scotland and Ireland were to experience during the following decade, the 1630s in England seemed to be a time of relative peace and prosperity.

The policies Charles pursued were undoubtedly controversial. He financed the government through a series of fiscal expedients – grants of monopolies, forest fines and distraint of knighthood. He also enforced prerogative levies such as ship money, an emergency measure to supply the navy at times of national danger. However, these were neither illegal nor unprecedented: the king's right to impose ship money was upheld in a test case of 1637–38, and 90 per cent of the returns actually came in, an extraordinary achievement by 17th-century standards. Moreover, extended periods of rule without parliament were neither unconstitutional nor necessarily unwelcome, given that one of parliament's main jobs was to vote taxation.

Charles's most controversial policies were, however, reserved for the church. He advanced so-called Arminians (men who challenged Calvinist teachings on predestination and who favoured a more ceremonialist style of religious worship) to all the leading episcopal sees. Under his archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, Charles encouraged the repair and beautification of parish churches, with stained-glass windows and a railed-in altar at the east end – before which parishioners would have to kneel to receive communion – and clamped down on Puritan dissent.

Critics complained that Charles was taking the church back towards Rome. Yet the rise of the Arminians had begun under James, and people had long been predicting that if something were not done to solve the Puritan problem there would be civil war. And, although many opponents of Laudianism complained of persecution, Charles deprived only about 30 Puritan ministers during his reign. James, by contrast, had deprived about 80 at the beginning of his.

It is true that the prerogative court of Star Chamber meted out brutal punishments – branding, mutilation, heavy fines and perpetual imprisonment – to Puritan critics such as Leighton, Burton, Bastwick and Prynne. These men were, however, extremists, guilty of stirring up sedition against the government. The fact is, less than half a per cent of the population upped sticks and headed to the New World to escape Charles's regime.

This is not to say that Charles's initiatives did not provoke opposition. But Charles's policies had their logic. The king set out to

During his reign, Charles promoted social and economic reforms at home, to help the poor and boost trade and industry

Parliamentarians and royalists come to blows in 1648's battle of Preston, a Civil War clash that ended in defeat for Charles's forces

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confront problems that needed to be addressed and both his diagnoses and his proposed solutions seemed not unreasonable at the time. All heads of government who embark on a policy of radical reform are bound to ruffle some feathers – James VI and I certainly did – but most do not succumb to revolution. Discontent does not mean a regime is bound to fail. Politics is about managing that discontent.

Why, then, did things fall apart under Charles? The story is a complex one but a number of broader explanations suggest themselves. Charles lacked his father's ability to back down graciously when under pressure. James could inflame tensions with parliament by his overdrawn rhetoric and confrontational style, but he also knew when to retreat. Charles had a tendency to tell his parliaments off when they did not back him.

Charles failed to let others take the blame when things went wrong – a trait we might find admirable today, but which was disastrous in a personal monarchy, when the conventional wisdom was that "if any thing be done, not justifiable, or unfit to be allowed," kings were "to lay the blame upon the minister." James let Attorney General Francis Bacon and Lord Treasurer Middlesex fall in the early 1620s. Charles stuck by Buckingham in 1625–28, even when continuing to back him was clearly counterproductive. When parliament pressed Charles in 1628 to get rid of the Arminian clerics Richard Neile and William Laud, Charles responded by promoting them at the earliest opportunity to the two archiepiscopal sees of York and Canterbury!

Charles created opposition on too many fronts at the same time, and his policies had the tendency to unite his critics in a common cause. Not everyone disliked all of his policies, but he ended up upsetting a whole range of people for different reasons – and, crucially, he alienated the middle ground, as well as extremists.

Take the example of ship money. Even those who were willing to support Charles voluntarily resented the legal adjudication that it was a levy the king had the right to collect. Meanwhile, Charles's policy towards the church might have drawn support from some, but particular aspects of his ecclesiastical reforms offended a broad cross-section of the population – moderate as well as radical Puritans,

Catholics drive naked Protestants into the countryside in a depiction of the Irish Rebellion of 1641, which erupted in Charles's reign

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not to mention mainstream Protestants. He even managed to alienate those who didn't hold particularly strong religious beliefs by demanding that they pay for the refurbishment of parish churches and by attempting to enforce stricter church attendance on the Sabbath (which, ironically, the Puritans would have supported).

What made matters worse was the fact that the Laudians were so effective in enforcing their reforms, something only made possible in the first place because they did carry some support in the localities. This tendency to unite in opposition people who were not natural political bedfellows was exacerbated by the fact that Archbishop Laud had his finger in so many pies. He not only oversaw the reforms in the church, but also sat on Star Chamber, was involved in monopolies, and advised Charles on many other policies during the personal rule.

We find examples of people conscripted to fight against the Scots in 1639–40 who in the past had been in trouble with the church courts for immorality. They cannot be thought in any way of being inclined to Puritanism, yet nevertheless identified with the Puritan and Scottish Presbyterian opposition to Laud because they resented conscription.

A similar pattern can be discerned in Scotland and Ireland. Charles upset the Scottish nobility by his Revocation scheme of 1625 (the crown's attempt to recover lands that had been alienated during royal minorities) and by his blatant bullying of the Scottish parliament in 1633. He also enraged the Scottish Presbyterians by trying to foist on them new canons and a more English-style prayer book in 1636–37 without consulting with the general assembly or the Scottish parliament. Even those Scots who did not identify with the Presbyterians resented the way Charles was treating Scotland.

In Ireland, Charles's lord lieutenant, Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, made enemies of Catholics and Protestants, Gaels and English alike through his extension of the policy of plantation and the promotion of Laudianism.

Perhaps most seriously, Charles boxed himself into a corner over finance. Having failed to build a working relationship with the English parliament, and without having solved the problem of a structurally under-financed crown, Charles had left himself limited options for raising the money he needed to put down the Scottish revolt. It's not so much that the Covenanter rebellion destabilised an otherwise well-functioning regime in England. Rather, it exposed problems that already existed and highlighted just how fragile the regime was.

One final point. It has been suggested that Charles ran into trouble because he failed to see the need to appeal to public opinion or to explain his policies properly to his subjects. In fact, Charles's regime was quite sophisticated in its approach to the politics of spin. The problem was that people in the 1630s did not buy into that spin.

Things changed in 1641–42, when the Long Parliament overplayed its hand. Having addressed what it saw as the abuses of the personal

Charles I's stubborn support for Archbishop William Laud (shown in a c1635–37 portrait) enraged many of his subjects

rule, it now began to call for more far-reaching reforms in church and state, including the abolition of episcopacy and radical curtailments to the royal prerogative. Outside parliament, radical Puritans, frustrated by the slow pace of reform, began destroying altar rails and stained-glass windows and disrupting prayer book services.

Charles's response was brilliant: to position himself as a king who stood for the traditional constitution, the rule of law, and the church of bishops and prayer book, against the threat of political and religious extremism. In the process, he succeeded in turning a lot of people against parliament and the Puritans – not everyone, of course, since England became a divided nation, but enough to make it possible for him to contemplate fighting a civil war.

Ironically, the civil wars didn't erupt because Charles was no good at the politics of spin; they erupted because he was. **H**

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Next month's essay: Peter Watson explores the decline of religion in the 20th century