

# Propaganda in the Prepared Parliamentary Speeches of 1455-1461

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Propaganda, perceived by many as a twentieth-century phenomenon, has permeated recorded history. The mass propaganda of the world wars and cold war linger most in present memory, due not only to its chronological proximity, but also its potency. Earlier uses of propaganda can easily be overshadowed, in many cases considered mere bias. Yet it has always existed, and in England developed particularly in the years from 1455 to 1485, which saw a growth in the awareness for the need of propaganda to stabilise or undermine the regime in power. Many historians have made reference to propaganda in the prepared speeches in the parliamentary records for 1455-61, but few have scrutinised them as a whole as I intend to do here.

As an important aspect of the wars of the Roses, historians have looked at the development of propaganda in its various mediums and intensities. Colin Richmond has claimed that during the wars of the Roses the output of propaganda began as a reaction or catalyst to particular crises, then after 1470 became part of an ongoing policy.<sup>1</sup> Propaganda came mainly in the form of proclamations, which according to Alison Allan, became more carefully worded during the reign of Edward IV.<sup>2</sup> From his reign, propaganda became essential to English kingship. Charles Ross has pointed out how inept the late Lancastrians were with propaganda, praising the shrewdness of its use by the Yorkists.<sup>3</sup> They were followed by the equally perceptive Tudors. Propaganda existed in many popular forms that relied on the power of language — news bills, ballads, proclamations and poems — and were usually issued in public places where they could reach a wide audience.

Speeches given in parliament are a relatively unexplored area of propaganda, possibly since they would have reached the ears of so few. They were recorded verbatim or paraphrased in the official records, the parliamentary rolls, but their real impact would have been in the verbal presentation itself.<sup>4</sup> Then, as now, persuasion depended on how convincing a speaker was, and on the words he used. In times of heightened political tension, or for the proposal of a controversial measure, these words had to be very carefully chosen, and were often written down for the speaker and copied into the rolls later.

The impact of these prepared speeches would rely as much on the speaker (his tone, gestures, reputation, etc) as the speech itself. Rhetorical technique was used to play down or exaggerate issues and bias was always present in a controversial speech. The link between bias and propaganda is inextricable, and in these early stages of the wars of the Roses bias is more prominent than the lies used later. Fifteenth-century MPs would not have seen factional conflict as in the country's interest. This, along with official restrictions, probably meant that hyperbole in parliament had to be limited. Bearing in mind the relatively small size of the assembly, one might wonder why politicians spent so much time planning parliamentary speeches.

Parliament ranked among the most influential and important institutions in the country. It was the ability to legally attain, execute, or depose people that made it the perfect place for factional revenge in the 1450s, and dynastic settlement in 1460 and 1461. Decisions made in parliament had the force of law, and a permanence that would reassure the prevailing faction of its own predominance.<sup>5</sup> Making a speech recommending or condemning certain legislation was not enough to guarantee success, so the choice of words and the speaker were important. It was best to find speakers with political credibility, who could use their influence and rhetorical technique to argue for such radical actions as the attainder

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Richmond, 'Propaganda in the Wars of the Roses', *History Today*, vol. 7 (1992), pp. 12-18.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Allan, 'Royal Propaganda and the Proclamations of Edward IV', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol. 59 (1986), pp. 146-54.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Ross, 'Rumour, Propaganda and Popular Opinion During The Wars of The Roses', in *Patronage, the Crown and the Provinces*, ed. Ralph Griffiths, Gloucester, 1981, pp. 15-32.

<sup>4</sup> *Rotuli parliamentorum; ut et petitiones, et placita in parlamento* (6 volumes) ed. J Strachey *et al*, London, 1783, henceforward abbreviated to RP.

<sup>5</sup> A useful introductory article to parliament in this period is A.R. Myers, 'Parliament 1422-1509', in *The English Parliament in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. Davies and J. Denton, Manchester 1981, p. 180.

(disinheritance) of high-ranking nobles. Sometimes these speeches failed in their intent, such as the Commons' request of 1459 to have Lord Stanley attainted (for his military inaction at Ludford), although in this instance it was the king himself who decided to spare him.<sup>6</sup>

The late 1450s are particularly interesting, as the factions led by the duke of York, the earls of Warwick and Salisbury on the one hand, and by the dukes of Somerset and the queen on the other, both claimed to be opposing one another for the king's good. At this point the wars of the Roses were factional, under the unquestioned sovereignty of Henry VI, although the factions were effectively fighting for control of him.<sup>7</sup> Therefore the prepared speeches to parliament in 1455 and 1459, each after a decisive military confrontation, had to demonstrate that those being condemned had attempted to assert undue control over Henry VI, even 'entend[ed]...to destroye' him.<sup>8</sup> During the 1460 parliament, the duke of York laid claim to the throne, changing the nature of the wars of the Roses from factional squabbles to a dynastic struggle. In the following year his son took possession of the crown and held a parliament in his own name. Accordingly, the nature, strength and focus of the rhetoric and propaganda employed was altered. It is these changes that will be examined here.

When compiling the most important speeches the Yorkist or Lancastrian leaders would no doubt have enlisted the help of their cleverest councillors, clerks, and perhaps lawyers. Often there were many weeks between parliament being summoned, and its opening, which allowed these men time to assess the severity and acceptability of their proposals, and adjust the potency and tone of the rhetoric accordingly. Needless to say, as the wars of the Roses progressed, the invective in the speeches grew stronger.

Although factional politics meant that parliament could be partly 'packed', the assemblies were still collectively concerned with doing what they thought was best for the king and country. For this reason, the Lords and Commons had to be convinced in 1455 and 1459 that it was in the best interests of the king and country to persecute important members of the political community. This is where the need for propaganda in parliament arose; to convince the mediating and pacific majority that the opposing faction had been greedy, belligerent and harmful to the nation's prosperity and security. In order to secure a satisfactory amount of support, the ascendant faction had to prove its own righteousness, and decry the actions of their enemies as harmful to the king. In the 1461 parliament however, the new king, Edward IV, asserted that it was the reign of Henry VI and his Lancastrian forbears, not the factions beneath them, that had personally brought ruin and war on the country.

It was the job of the clerks in parliament to record such speeches, and the nature of the impending debates, into the permanent record, the rolls of parliament. J.S. Roskell has said these clerks were 'inconsistent and capricious' in what they recorded.<sup>9</sup> It is evident that the more sparse sections of the record stem from impromptu discussions about petitions or speeches, paraphrased because the speed of debate made it impossible to record fully. However, the prepared speeches appear to have been copied verbatim from the documents the orators read from. The clerks probably tended to record debates objectively, almost all attendant bias being contained in the discussions themselves. The speeches would have been planned, written, rehearsed and delivered very carefully in order to allow no ambiguity of meaning. They had a dual purpose: first to get proposed legislation enacted, and convince people of its justification, and secondly to record the proceedings for later reference. The Lords would have been considered the most important targets for rhetoric, since they delivered the final judgements, although the attitude of the Commons often influenced them. The most important prepared speeches probably opened the proceedings, setting the tone for what was to follow, though some were petitions introduced after the parliament had commenced.

### **The Roll of the Parliament of 1455**

After more than five years of ill-feeling between the duke of York and the duke of Somerset, they met in battle at St Albans on 22 May 1455, Henry VI being present in support of the latter. Somerset was killed, and the injured king sheltered in the abbey, where the duke of York joined him after the battle. Here York apologised for bringing his forces against the king, and promised his continued loyalty. He had

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<sup>6</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 369, article 38

<sup>7</sup> John Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 9-82, explains fully the relationship between the king and his subjects, and the nature of 'accreaching' the royal prerogative.

<sup>8</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 348, article 14

<sup>9</sup> J.S. Roskell, *The Commons and Their Speakers in English Parliaments 1376-1523*, Manchester 1965, p. 3

come very close to treason in opposing royal troops, and wished to prove to the country that his motives had never been traitorous. On 26 May, a writ of summons was issued for a parliament to be held at Westminster, to legitimate and maintain the victory by blaming the battle on Somerset, and praising Yorkist virtues.<sup>10</sup>

Parliament assembled on 9 July, giving the Yorkists ample time to prepare speeches favourable to themselves and which attacked Somerset and his followers. Attendance among the Lords was average, sixty-two out of a hundred and one peers were present, the duke of Exeter and Henry Beaufort, the new duke of Somerset, prominent among those absenting themselves, though every lord had been invited.<sup>11</sup> Such absences may have made it slightly easier for the Yorkists to pass their statutes, yet could reduce the apparent legitimacy of the acts. For some time the Commons had been sympathetic to the Yorkists and were probably easier to woo than the Lords, who wished on the whole to avoid factionalism and maintain harmony among the nobility. One of the main Yorkist strengths was the support of the Commons, whom the Yorkist lords actively courted in their official common weal policy, which had opposed Somerset's government. The English public had been disenchanted by Somerset's inability to maintain England's French possessions, and by his influence over Henry VI. The duke of York exploited these feelings, particularly in the early fifties, by acting as a spokesman for the public against Somerset. Having been suspected by the nobility for such close affiliation with the commons at large, York had loosened his ties to the latter, but still maintained and made use of them, since as yet, his noble support was thin on the ground.

The opening sermon of the 1455 parliament courted the Commons and the Lords with language designed to endear the Yorkists; the Lords were assured that the Yorkists wished to promote domestic harmony among the nobility, the Commons that loyalty and the common weal always took priority. It was delivered ostensibly in a first person narrative of the king himself, though it was spoken, and no doubt compiled, by others. Although it is not clear who delivered the sermon, it is likely to have been the chancellor, Thomas Bouchier Archbishop of Canterbury, or the newly elected Commons' speaker, Sir John Wenlock. Bouchier had recently demonstrated a genuine wish to heal the factional divide, having mediated at Dartford in 1452 (where York had been arrested), though as a relation of York he may have been pro-Yorkist.<sup>12</sup> Although Wenlock had fought on the king's side at St Albans, he was forging links with the Bouchiers, and was later to become a peer under Edward IV.<sup>13</sup> In unequivocal terms, the speech blamed the battle of St Albans on Somerset, William Joseph and Thomas Thorpe, who had apparently misled the king into thinking York, Warwick and Salisbury were gathering with rebellious intent. Somerset had been York's official rival since 1451 when the Yorkists chose him as a figurehead representing the corrupt associates of the king.<sup>14</sup> Joseph was used to represent the king's household, and Thorpe, who had prepared articles against York for parliament in January 1454, was a personal enemy. Thorpe was also unpopular in the country, having been indicted by the Kentish rebels in 1450; this could have made it easier for York to attain him.

The first part of Henry's speech alluded to the intention of Somerset, Thorpe and Joseph to destroy Henry VI's 'well beloved Cousins' York, Warwick and Salisbury. The former 'moved and sollicited us by diverse meanes to mistruste our seid Cousins', misleading Henry so far as to conceal from him written professions of loyalty from the Yorkists. Somerset is represented as having encroached on the king's power to further his feud with York, and to have falsely persuaded Henry of York's disloyalty in bringing a retinue to St Albans. The king said he now knew, as he had not then, that the Yorkists felt themselves at risk from Somerset, and had merely come 'the better accompanied for their suertee'.<sup>15</sup>

The speech recalled that, to reassure the king, York, Warwick and Salisbury had written two letters, one on 20 May to Thomas Bouchier as chancellor, the other dated the next day to Henry VI himself. Both were then read before parliament to prove the honourable intentions of the Yorkists. After suitably humble greetings, the first letter explained to Bouchier that 'a greet rumour and wondre is hadde of oure

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<sup>10</sup> *Handbook of British Chronology*, ed. E.B. Fryde, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, London 1986.

<sup>11</sup> J.S. Roskell, 'The problem of the attendance of the Lords in medieval parliaments', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol. 29 (1956), p. 193.

<sup>12</sup> Ralph Griffiths, *The Reign of Henry VI: the Exercise of Royal Authority 1422-1461*, London 1981, p. 798.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, *Henry VI*, p. 750.

<sup>14</sup> John Watts in *The Politics of Fifteenth-Century England: John Vale's Book*, ed. Margaret L. Kekewich, Colin Richmond, Anne F. Sutton, Livia Visser-Fuchs and John Watts, Stroud 1995, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 281, article 18.

commynge', a rumour without substance, fathered by the unsavoury characters placed about the king.<sup>16</sup> The archbishop was promised these tales were false, that the Yorkist lords had no rebellious motives, and had approached the king only to join him and the other lords of the realm to help them to govern prudently. The Yorkists came to Henry as loyal vassals, 'leiyng therefore apart oure owne particuler quarrels, which we shall never preferre afore the duetee, trowth, love and affection that we owne unto oure seid Sovereine Lord.'<sup>17</sup> Bouchier was asked in the letter to inform the king of the intent of the three Yorkist lords, to intercede for peace. The second letter, to Henry, reiterated the same sentiments, addressing him respectfully, then denouncing the slanders regarding Yorkist honour, perpetuated by those 'such as abide and kepe them self undre the wyng of youre Mageste Roiall'.<sup>18</sup>

One of few historians to have carefully analysed sections of the parliamentary speeches is Jean-Philippe Genet. He examined the first letter, sent to Bouchier by York, comparing the language used with other speeches and tracts from the wars of the Roses. He states that the letter 'betrays a pedestrian style ... [that] is reminiscent of the clerk or notary and suits the written document better than the delivered speech'.<sup>19</sup> The letters had probably not been altered for the sake of the speech, and if they appeared to be unsuited to parliamentary rhetoric, they emphasised the authenticity of the quoted letters as correspondence, rather than fictions concocted for the speech. Genet points out that the persistent use of the word 'said' (for example, 'his seid Highnesse'), though more frequently used in letters anyway, indicates the archbishop 'is called as a witness to observe a political space the two poles of which are the king and the duke himself, with the lords moving between them'.<sup>20</sup> The speech inferred that the space had been created by Beaufort's party, and corrupted the usual friendship between York and the king.

The tone permeating the letters was one of extreme piety and loyalty, tempered by a legitimate wish to be heeded. They were read out as concrete proof that rebellion had never been York's intent, and that he had taken great pains to clarify his honourable intent before the battle. Henry's speech went on to state that he would have been in no doubt of Yorkist loyalty had he seen these letters, but that Somerset, Thorpe and Joseph had concealed them by design, 'to th'entent that we shuld not knowe the [Yorkist's] true and feithfull disposition'. Somerset's men come across as cowardly, deceitful, keen on defeating their enemies at the expense of the inherently good, if easily influenced, king. They are shown as taking the lead in arraying forces against the Yorkists, freely calling the latter traitors when they knew otherwise. When the battle was won, the Yorkists were finally able to tell the king of their loyalty in person, with 'notable, humble and true devoir and acquietaille'.<sup>21</sup> Next, Henry requested parliament that throughout the realm the Yorkists be reputed as honest, loyal subjects, and that no action be taken against them for giving battle.

The invective in the speech was intentionally limited; the king's own words ought not to seem gratuitously spiteful. Indeed, the Yorkist motive was to transfer the blame for all strife to Somerset, Thorpe and Joseph, to attain the latter two as an example, and to attempt to *heal* the wounds previously caused by faction. York did not wish to alienate the Beaufort circle, he wanted to restore unity among the nobility whilst maintaining maximum control over them. Therefore he was represented as a worthy man, driven to battle by belligerent opponents. In the speech Henry stressed his kinship with the Yorkists and showed that he understood his previous companions had hindered the well-being of the realm by their dishonesty. It is probable that the Yorkists compiled the speech in its entirety, and then put it before the king for approval. They almost certainly put some pressure on him to accept it, though the hope of future peace and noble unity would also have influenced his decision. In their fervour to end factional problems, many of the Lords too must have passed the attainder of Thorpe and Joseph in hope of future peace. Some lords would have been uncertain whether or not the Yorkists were a threat to stability, for by fighting against the king's forces they had certainly pushed loyalty to its limits. The rhetoric was aimed at the Lords; not that the Commons were insignificant. The more people who were convinced of Yorkist merit, the better.

The first session of the 1455 parliament seemed a success for York, and when he was appointed

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<sup>16</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 281, article 19: see also Jean-Philippe Genet, 'New Politics or New Language? The Words of Politics in Yorkist and Early Tudor England', in *The End of the Middle Ages? England in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. John L. Watts, Stroud 1998, pp. 23-65.

<sup>17</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 280, article 19.

<sup>18</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 281, article 20.

<sup>19</sup> Genet, 'New Politics', p.52.

<sup>20</sup> Genet, 'New Politics', p.52.

<sup>21</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 282, article 22.

parliamentary lieutenant, and subsequently protector in the second sitting, his faction must have felt secure. Nevertheless Yorkist fortune was to wane, because as useful as parliament was to this populist faction, it was not always in session. The old Beaufort clique revived, and was soon led by the queen and the young duke of Somerset. As an intermittent institution, parliament was not capable of upholding judgements it had been pressurised to make in the first place.

### The Roll of the Parliament of 1459

The effects of the Yorkist victory ebbed away during 1456 as the queen fostered the recovery of the Somerset faction, with the result that by 1459 another battle loomed, in which the Yorkists bordered on rebellion. The earl of Salisbury gave battle and killed Lord Audley at Blore Heath on 23 September, and joined with York and Warwick to prepare for another at Ludford. In the face of superior royal forces and desertion of his own men, on 13 October York fled to Ireland, Salisbury and Warwick to Calais, accompanied by York's son, Edward, Earl of March. Four days previously the queen had issued writs for parliament, which was to meet at Coventry on 20 November. The four leading Yorkist lords were not summoned, which contrasts with the universal summons that the Yorkists had issued in 1455, and shows how prejudicial she intended the session to be. Her unambiguous intentions were to pass statutes against these lords, their guilt and dishonour appearing all the more manifest after their flight. She had to do no more than ensure that the absent Yorkists remained in exile, without means to return, and exact revenge for the death and disgrace of Edmund Beaufort in 1455. She was determined to crush and discredit York's friends, planning their attainder in the approaching parliament, deliberately called to the staunchly Lancastrian city of Coventry.

J.S. Roskell has shown that the attendance of the Lords in 1459 was the highest of any Lancastrian parliament, sixty-seven peers out of the ninety-seven summoned.<sup>22</sup> The parliament came to be known as the 'Parliament of Devils' for its partisan composition and harsh acts; it was in no way conciliatory, as that of 1455 had attempted to be. Historians are divided as to what degree the 1459 parliament was 'packed'. Attendance was monitored to some extent, but there was probably equivocal support for the queen. The assembly as a whole still had to be convinced it was not playing a factional role, that the Yorkists had purposely put Henry at mortal risk, and deserved attainder as traitors to the crown. Whilst disapproving of York's *methods* in attempting to have more say in government, many, however, might have agreed with him in principle.

The rhetoric the Beaufort party planned over October and November emphasised and embellished York's political misdemeanours, constructing a chronology of his treachery. The speeches delivered to parliament in 1459 were to outstrip anything that had preceded them, but J. Lander was of the opinion that before this a 'new, mean, vicious note to Yorkist propaganda' had also developed.<sup>23</sup> Since the parliament of 1455 factionalism had intensified and both groups used more propaganda, the Yorkists in particular because they opposed the status quo. The prepared speeches of 1459 were partly a reaction to this.

The prerequisite to the attainders of 1459 was the petition requesting them, which ranks as one of the best pieces of Lancastrian propaganda, much longer than most petitions of the period. York, Warwick and Salisbury were represented as men who had been given lavish gifts by the king, but lusted after more, willing to place York on the throne in the pursuance of material gain. York himself, whose person embodied the dynastic threat, was singled out and his actions from 1450 onwards were rehearsed in detail. In that year he had arrived from Ireland without summons, at the time of Jack Cade's rebellion in Kent. The petition focussed on the rebels' demand that York be given a greater influence in government, implying in no uncertain terms that they had proposed to make the duke king. Thwarted in this plan, 'in dyvers Parliamentis' the duke had attempted to avail himself of royal power, and failing again, tried to 'acheve his purpos by myght'. In 1452 York had come in force, supported by Kentish men, to Dartford to demand the impeachment of Edmund Beaufort, but the petition implied York came 'colored under a pretense [my italics] of a wele' to destroy *Henry*. In the same way the 1455 parliament had implied that Beaufort sheltered under Henry, that of 1459 stated that York sheltered under, and misused, popular opinion.<sup>24</sup> The Yorkist tenet of the common weal, which had so long been their main source of support,

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<sup>22</sup> Roskell, 'Problems of attendance', p. 193.

<sup>23</sup> J.R. Lander, *The Wars of the Roses*, Stroud 196, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2000, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 346, article 8

was implied to have been dangerous, and rather than *representing* the common weal, York used it to further his own ends. The Lancastrians must have been hoping to divorce the Yorkist party from their popular support, by showing the public (in this case the Commons in parliament) that any support they had lent York had been abused.

Following his humiliating arrest at Dartford, York had sworn before a sizeable congregation in St Paul's Cathedral not to 'gader eny Rowtes, or to make eny assemble of youre people, without youre [the King's] commaundement'.<sup>25</sup> This oath was read to the 1459 parliament to show that York should not have taken another wrong step. However, he went on to combine with Warwick and Salisbury, assembling at St Albans in 1455 where 'they falsely and traitorously rered Werre ayenst You, by the which youre Roiall persone was sore hurte'. It is interesting to compare the accounts of St Albans given in the parliaments of 1455 and 1459: the former had told of the defensive, loyal motives for bringing a retinue, the latter of rebellious, treasonous motives. The 1459 account dwelt more upon the damage done, detailing Henry's arrow wound, the deaths of Somerset, Lord Clifford and the earl of Northumberland, and robbing and despoiling of the king's men by the Yorkists. The 1455 account had not mentioned these facts, in the same way that the 1459 version ignored the letters sent by York. Both accounts threw doubt on the allegiances of the men being castigated.

The 1459 petition continued that, despite the king's forgiveness, and the renewal of their oaths, the three Yorkist lords

... falsely and traiterously conspired and sought the tyme and meanes of accomplishment of their insaciat wille and desire, of destruction of You, Soverayne Lord, the Quene oure Soverayne Lady, and youre Succession...<sup>26</sup>

Henry VI is presented in the speech as having taken the (unlikely) role of heroic king. As preparations were made for Ludford he exerted himself against the rebels, giving rousing speeches and generally acting honourably. In contrast, York is shown as assembling his troops by the lure of money, and pretending that the king was dead in order to make them willing to fight the royal army. Yorkist effrontery apparently reached its pinnacle when after all this 'they stale away oute of the Felde' and fled to Wales and Calais as soon as it became evident the king would win.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the petition the language reads like a dramatic chronicle, pouring scorn on the Yorkists and exalting Henry VI, the man they intended to depose. The language in 1455 had been biased but on the whole restrained — an explanation of Yorkist motive with only a hint of vengeance. In 1459 the language was slanderous and unrestrained, a condemnation of four leading nobles and many of their followers. The propaganda achieved its aim in the attainder of York, Warwick, Salisbury, March, and others, yet the very punitive nature of the 'Parliament of Devils' almost acted as propaganda *against* the unforgiving faction of the queen. There must have been many people who thought that the Yorkists had been harshly treated, especially since their actions at Ludford might have been viewed as self-defence. As one contemporary chronicle put it, 'the more parte of thys londe hadde pytte that ...[the Yorkists] were attaynte and proclaimed trayters by the Parlement'.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that news of what went on in parliament did reach a wider audience. The electorate was kept informed of the progress of their representatives by letters, and by meetings held on their return. Paul Murray Kendall studied the close contact kept between John Shillingford, Mayor of Exeter, and his aldermen when he was in London negotiating for his city in 1447-8; Commons representatives would likewise have kept their electorate informed.<sup>29</sup> It is probable that rumour was much more influential than such official feedback

### **The Roll of the Parliament of 1460**

In June 1460, the three lords who had taken refuge in Calais landed in Kent and took London amidst a formidable propaganda campaign, which once more claimed the Yorkists remained loyal to Henry and

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<sup>25</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 346, article 9

<sup>26</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 348, article 13

<sup>27</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 349, article 19

<sup>28</sup> 'William Gregory's Chronicle of London', ed James Gairdner, in *The Historical Collections of a Citizen of London in the Fifteenth Century*, Camden Society Second Series, vol. 7 (1876), p. 206.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Murray Kendall, *The Yorkist Age*, 2001 edition Bath, pp. 91-116.

wanted only to have good governance.<sup>30</sup> The Yorkists captured the king at Northampton in July, and while the queen and Henry Beaufort gathered strength in the north, Warwick issued writs, in the name of the king, for a parliament to meet at Westminster on 7 October.<sup>31</sup> This allowed time for the duke of York, who had as yet played no part in the campaign of 1460, to arrive from Ireland. The parliament opened two days before York arrived in London, and the scene was set for revenge for the Coventry attainders in the form of a petition from the Commons to the king, presented on 7 October. The 1460 parliament was in no way as conciliatory as that of 1455, whilst not appearing, at this stage, to have quite such a punitive approach as 1459. It wanted to undo the actions of the Coventry parliament and return the property and offices confiscated from the Yorkists the year before.

The speech, again a Commons petition, was addressed to the king, requesting that the Coventry parliament 'be voided, and taken for noo Parlement'.<sup>32</sup> Manifold reasons were given to prove its illegitimacy and inappropriate character. The petition began by telling how 'dyvers seditious and evill disposed persones [the queen's adherents]' had for two reasons called a parliament to Coventry. The first reason was to 'distroy certayne ... true Lordes' regarded by the Lancastrians with 'grete rancour, hate and malice', and the second was to seize the lands of the Yorkist lords, which were viewed with 'insatiable covetysse'. Whereas the 1459 parliament had claimed to attain rebellious lords, its real motive as implied by the petition of 1460 had been to condemn innocents purely through hate and covetousness. It was claimed that, as in 1455, Henry had been used for personal gain by those around him, and that the Coventry parliament had not been for his advantage but their own.

The reasons for convening at Coventry having thus been besmirched, the legitimacy of the composition of the 1459 parliament itself was questioned; it had, after all, been well-attended. The petition intimated that many knights and burgesses had been returned to the parliament 'without dieu and free election' or 'without any election', and because 'there were fewe Acts or Ordynance in the seid last Parlement holden at Coventree, made for the wele of you, ne of youre seid Realme', it asked the king that the parliament and all its acts be 'of noo force ne effect'.<sup>33</sup> Although not referring to them specifically, it was the attainders of the Yorkist lords that the petition wanted reversed, and it was clearly intended to prepare the way for revenge on Beaufort, and perhaps the queen. For now only the acts of the 1459 parliament were annulled. Awaiting York, the parliament did little for the two days until he arrived. Members no doubt presumed that Henry would remain a Yorkist figurehead in the punishment of the Beaufort faction.

On 9 October 1460, the duke of York entered into the presence of the Lords, where he made to sit on the throne. This gesture was not well-received, so he decided to make a formal claim through the parliament using legal arguments. York's arrival changed the emphasis of the civil war from factional to dynastic in one sweeping action; rather than join his fellows in rallying Henry VI against Beaufort, he claimed the crown for himself in an act which, it appears, shocked even Warwick, Salisbury and March. It is not clear whether the Yorkists covertly collaborated with the change in policy York initiated, but publicly they abhorred it.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, to continue supporting him remained a better option for the Yorkists than to defect to the queen's faction. Immediately the business of the assembly shifted from avenging the Coventry attainders to defending the right of Henry VI to his own throne against the duke of York.

Although there was little invective used in York's claim, it was a charged piece of propaganda. It set out the claim that York was the rightful living heir to Richard II, who had been deposed and usurped 'unrightwysely' by Henry IV in 1399.<sup>35</sup> Propaganda had been necessary in parliamentary speeches for the factional nature of politics in the previous five years, but was not needed by York for what was an appeal to the law instead of an attempt to win support. York must have thought that if the parliament judged him to be the rightful king, it would have to support him regardless, so he might have thought propaganda was not needed in the claim. Another reason for its absence was the nature of parliaments in the fifteenth century, which were called for the good of the king, the realm and justice. Clearly, the duke could only claim to be working for the good of the latter two, as he wished to depose the king. Henry

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<sup>30</sup> Ross, 'Rumour', p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Handbook of British Chronology*, p. 532.

<sup>32</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 374, article 8.

<sup>33</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 374, article 8.

<sup>34</sup> Watts, *Politics of Kingship*, p. 351.

<sup>35</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 375, article 11.

still ruled, however, so he deserved respect and could not be ridiculed. At this point it was only his grandfather Henry IV who was tentatively criticised for 'his seid unrightwise and violent usurpation'.<sup>36</sup>

After animated discussions and attempts at passing the issue onto other legal authorities, the Lords were themselves forced to consider whether the duke could assume the crown or not. No evidence could be found to refute York's right, and though the record indicates the Lords were reluctant to dispense with the Lancastrians, they were legally cornered. The best they could do was insist in the 'Act of Accord' that Henry retained the throne for tenure of his life, with York as his heir; on his death the crown would revert to York and his heirs. To York this was at once a victory over the queen by disinheriting her son, and a defeat because he needed to assume the throne immediately if he wished to defeat them permanently.

Only after the Act of Accord had been signed were the Yorkists able to get on with other business, York being appointed to suppress 'the grete rebellions, murdres, riottes, unlawfull and felenouse spulyng of his [Henry's] subgetts'. The 'rebels', of course, were the queen's forces in the north, towards whom York soon headed with an army and ample purse to 'represe, subdue and apese them'.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Roll of the Parliament of 1461**

On 30 December 1460 York, his son the earl of Rutland, and the earl of Salisbury were killed in a sally against the queen's forces outside Sandal Castle. Led by Edward, the new duke of York, and the earl of Warwick, the Yorkists fought on. At Mortimer's Cross on 3 February 1461 Edward scored a great military victory, not greatly reduced by Warwick's defeat at St Albans a fortnight later in which the king escaped and joined the queen. The conflict had gone beyond all possibility of a negotiation or accommodation, and the Yorkists abandoned Henry as a lost cause, proclaiming Edward the new king on 4 March. They staged a meeting in London where Edward was hailed and proclaimed as king by the people, in order to confirm his right to the crown. This also demonstrated the continued link of Yorkist policies with the common weal.

The first parliament called in Edward's name, summoned on 23 May, was to meet in July, but was postponed until 4 November as military activities took priority. Only four of the peers summoned to Henry's parliaments were invited to this assembly, but the creation of many new peers, including John Wenlock, made for a well-attended House of Lords. Its purpose was to depose Henry and to attain the leading Lancastrians, and place Edward firmly on the throne. Nobody still loyal to Henry VI would have been elected to this parliament, which made legislation easy for Edward and gave him the opportunity to use as much propaganda as he wanted. The roll for the 1461 parliament contains invective as strong as that of 1459, but at greater length and with more significant consequences. A.R. Myers has observed that the bills for attainder presented to this parliament were the first to have the enactments precisely worded in order to prevent the Commons altering the terms.<sup>38</sup>

The important speeches were made by the Commons' speaker, James Strangways, addressed to, and in high praise of, the king. Henry VI had always been addressed with due ceremony in his parliaments, but Edward IV was plied with 'sycophantic excesses of dynastic love'.<sup>39</sup> The speech praised him as 'Moost Christen Kyng, Right high and mighty Prynce' and went on to tell of Edward's virtuous dedication in pursuing the right to his crown, despite the grief induced by his father's death. Piety and concern for the common weal was cited as his motivation. Henry VI himself for the first time came under fire in parliamentary propaganda. He was said to have personally tried to suppress the right of the house of York, and to have allowed 'Extorcion, Murdre, Rape, effusion of innocent Blode, Riot and Unrightwiseness' during his reign.<sup>40</sup>

Edward's hereditary claim was read in almost exactly the same form as York's of 1460, adding anti-Lancastrian rhetoric that would have been impossible in that year. Henry IV was bombarded for 'the violent takyng, enprisonyng, unrightwise usurpation, intrusion, and horrible cruell murder' of Richard II in 1399-1400, and his descendants tainted as usurping and dangerous kings. Henry V, one of the most successful medieval kings, was difficult to criticise, but the (outwardly) dynastic Southampton plot by

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<sup>36</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 377, article 17.

<sup>37</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 382, article 32.

<sup>38</sup> Myers, 'Parliament 1422-1509', p. 180.

<sup>39</sup> Genet, 'New Politics', p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 462, article 7.



York's father, the earl of Cambridge, in 1415, and Henry's swift execution of the earl, was used to discredit him. Henry VI was the one who had to be most thoroughly maligned; though not guilty of precipitating the conflicts of the 1450s, he was blamed for them, facilitated by the close relationship Henry had with York's enemies, mainly the queen. Now Edward was king, all the bad aspects of Henry's reign could be attributed to the usurping house of Lancaster, and promises for a better future offered from the renewed 'Plantagenet' dynasty.

If the Yorkist right to the throne was considered so inalienable, it was prudent to explain, even to the 1461 parliament, why the duke of York's claim had not been pressed fully the previous year. If he were rightful king, it was difficult to explain why he had made the 1460 accord with Henry VI, which had effectively endorsed the usurper.<sup>41</sup> Strangways explained this to the Lords and Commons by stressing that the duke had not wished to disturb the peace or disrupt the realm, and had condescended to allow Henry tenure of his throne. In this way, what might have been taken as a sign of unbecoming weakness in the duke was explained in terms that showed he placed the welfare of his subjects before his personal gain, a very kingly and pious act. In dramatic contrast, Henry was portrayed as having never wished to adhere to the act of Accord, engineering 'the fynall destruction, murder and deth of the seid Richard' instead.<sup>42</sup> By procuring Richard of York's death (so the speech accused), and later by deserting the earl of Warwick at St Albans, Henry was shown to have broken the terms of the Act of Accord, and had even gone so far as to ally against Edward with Scotland, by tradition an enemy of England.

Henry's actions, as a man unsuitable for the throne, had vindicated Edward as the more fitting candidate, in addition to Edward's prior hereditary right. Edward had only accepted the kingship *after* Henry had breached the Act of Accord, when it was most honourable and beneficial for the people to acclaim him; he had been encouraged, at least by the Londoners, to begin his rule.

The rhetoric played its part in securing the judgement of parliament that Edward had rightfully begun his reign, that the Lancastrian kings had been usurpers, and that they and all who had supported them would be attainted. The invective used was emotive, and the major themes, like the deposition of Richard II and the civil unrest that had pervaded the reign of Henry VI, were constantly repeated. These were accompanied by references to remind the listeners that the rule of the Lancastrians was entirely at an end. It was vital to emphasise that there was a new start, and that Edward was the first king of the fifteenth century who could be called a 'ryghtwise' ruler.

The phraseology is reminiscent of the language used in previous parliaments, but in addition it had a more pronounced narrative quality. It was not so well structured as 1459, but planned to evoke emotion and rouse support for the new regime. Although legislation was facilitated by the speeches, everyone in the parliament was a Yorkist already and knew they were there to see the attainders through. It can be suggested that this propaganda was less immediate in its objective and perhaps aimed at posterity.

### **The importance of the prepared speeches to parliament 1455-61**

A study that involves such narrow source material can lose sight of the importance of other influences. Poems, new-bills and proclamations had a more 'popular', though perhaps less politically important, influence than the rhetoric in parliamentary speeches. Historians have noted the increase in propaganda from 1455 to 1461, and the gradually more sophisticated use of rhetoric in parliament echoes this. This study shows that in different situations and under different restraints in the parliaments, speeches used varying tones and intensities, often with contrasts and similarities between each parliament. Both factions maintained an official theme. The Lancastrians always cast the Yorkists as a rebellious menace that manipulated the public, and the Yorkists emphasised the corruption of the Lancastrian court. The factions both changed over time in order to win support, as John Watts has shown, but they remained constant to these trends.<sup>43</sup>

The speech recorded in the 1455 parliament, although making scapegoats of the duke of Somerset, Thomas Thorp and William Joseph in order to undermine the past regime, mirrored the hope of the mid-fifties that the factions could be reconciled to make a peaceful new beginning for government. York's political role as the just and popular reformer was begun around 1450 and was given constancy in the

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<sup>41</sup> Watts in *John Vale's Book*, p. 34-7.

<sup>42</sup> *RP*, vol. 5, p. 466, article 13.

<sup>43</sup> Watts, *Politics of Kingship*, passim.

speech explaining his motives to the 1455 parliament.<sup>44</sup> Somerset had been his chief enemy for some years, and York might have felt in 1455 that Somerset's death would end the period of faction. Reflecting more turbulent times, the 1459 rhetoric showed a much less forgiving and more belligerent line of propaganda, that demonstrated the age of attempted conciliation was over as far as Beaufort's party was concerned. The war had re-opened, and remained undecided in November 1459, and the Yorkists had more support than before, so harsh treatment was needed to undermine them.

The first speech in the 1460 parliament, before York made his surprise claim to the throne, displayed a wish for vengeance on the procurers of the previous parliament, hinting at the need to rule them with an iron rod, if not to attain them. In some ways York came to prove the rhetoric of 1459 to be right in its fears of the Yorkist threat to the Lancastrian dynasty, and the official theme of loyalty to Henry was dramatically reversed. Yet the Yorkists maintained their common weal policy; Edward IV gathered strength from the Commons and based his authority on their support and his manipulation of them.

All four of these parliaments had peace as their ultimate object, so the speakers would have the members of parliament believe. 1455 aimed to achieve peace by conciliation, 1459 by annihilation, 1460 by retaliation and attempted assumption, and 1461 by deposition in favour of a better king. Despite the presence, and often success, of the rhetoric, the achievement of its aims cannot be wholly attributed to the potency of its content. Some members of parliament would have known exactly how they were going to think before hearing the speeches, whereas others might have been persuaded, or deterred, while listening to them. It is fascinating to note the muted sense of honour in the propaganda used in parliament by both the Yorkists and Lancastrians; notwithstanding their embellishments and interpretations of the truth. They predominantly shied away from telling overt lies.<sup>45</sup> In subsequent centuries, propaganda was to become synonymous with lies, but in the mid-fifteenth-century, honour, law and justice had to appear to be displayed in such places as parliament, however heated the political climate. The propaganda used in parliament was less powerfully phrased than much of the popular propaganda used in the fifteenth century. It was tailored to a different world than the more intense propaganda that would develop in later centuries. In perspective, 'propaganda' can perhaps be seen as too strong a word for the tendentious material in parliament at this time.

I would like to thank Professor Anne Curry for her guidance on this subject. This article is an abridged version of the dissertation I produced at Reading university in 2002.

First published in *The Ricardian* Vol. 14 2004.

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<sup>44</sup> Watts, *Politics of Kingship*, p. 269.

<sup>45</sup> Ross, 'Rumour', p. 26, holds the opinion that Richard III was the first to use character assassination in his propaganda.