

## The Origins of the Long Parliament in the English Civil War.

There has been much debate about the origins of the Long Parliament during the English Civil War. What has not been sufficiently realised is the importance of the nature of parliamentary constituencies and the way they affected the nature of Members of Parliament.

In 1603 there were 462 Members of the Commons, 90 of which were knights of the shire and 372 burgesses [town representatives] from the boroughs.<sup>1</sup> These boroughs were dominated by corporations which are known to have been strongly associated with puritanism. For example, a Durham cleric urged the king in 1640 not to ‘suffer little towns to grow big and anti-monarchy to boot, for where are all these pestilent nests of Puritans hatched, but in corporations.’<sup>2</sup> Consistent with this statement was Clarendon’s conclusion that the chief opposition to the king lay in ‘great towns and corporations ... not only the citizens of London ... but also the greatest part of all other cities and market towns of England.’<sup>3</sup>

Contemporaries were unanimous that the inhabitants of the towns of England were the chief supporters of parliament during the civil war, and that tradesmen were some of their most ardent supporters. For example, this was the conclusion of Parker in his *Discourse of Ecclesiastical Politie*. He wrote that

‘tis notorious that there is not any sort of people so inclinable to seditious practices as the trading part of a nation ... And, if we reflect upon our late miserable distraction, tis easy to observe how the quarrel was chiefly hatched in the shop of tradesmen and cherished by the zeal of prentice-boys and city gossips.’<sup>4</sup>

Baxter claimed that tradesmen explained their support for Parliament ‘because they say the Tradesmen have a Correspondency with London, and so are gown to be more intelligent sort of Men.’<sup>5</sup> He also claimed that religious awareness was particularly strong ‘among tradesmen and corporation inhabitants.’<sup>6</sup>

Given the importance of borough constituencies in the electoral process, and their links with puritanism, Pym’s tour of these constituencies in 1640 involving the promotion of puritanism, becomes significant.<sup>7</sup> Cromwell’s appointment as Member of Parliament for Cambridge at this time can be seen as a result of this process. He at this time was only of a modest status as a local farmer<sup>8</sup>, but appears to have been nominated by puritans on the local Cambridge council.<sup>9</sup>

The role of corporations in the membership of the Long Parliament is confirmed by events after the ending of the civil war. In 1661, the Cavalier Parliament passed the Corporation Act, designed to exclude Presbyterians from office, and stipulating that ‘no person could legally be elected to any office relating to the government of a city or corporation, unless he had within

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<sup>1</sup> UK Parliament Online.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Hirst, *The Representative of the People? – Voters and Voting in England under the Early Stuarts*, 1975, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Hyde, *The History of the Rebellion*, Volume 2, 1888, pp. 236, 238.

<sup>4</sup> C. Hill and E. Dell (eds), *The Good Old Cause: The English Revolution of 1640-1660, Its Cause, Course and Consequences*, 1969, p. 238.

<sup>5</sup> R. Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, Part 3, 1696, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Hirst, *The Representative*, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> John Morrill, *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, 1990, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Personal correspondence from the Cromwell Museum.

the previous twelve months received the sacrament of the “Lord’s Supper” according to the rites of the Church of England.’<sup>10</sup>

This confirms the importance of boroughs and corporations in the Parliamentary cause, a topic which can only be explored further when the *Parliament of England* completes its website for the period 1640-1660.

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<sup>10</sup> *Corporation Act 1661*, Wikipedia.