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John Watts

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## 1

INTRODUCTION: IDEAS AND POLITICS IN  
FIFTEENTH-CENTURY HISTORY

WHAT WAS THE character of public life in fifteenth-century England? That is the biggest question which this book seeks to answer – or to answer, at least, in some measure. Old-fashioned as it sounds, it is actually quite a new question, for the simple reason that until recently fifteenth-century England was thought to possess very little which could be described in such terms. Instead, it has been traditional to argue that in this period the attentions of public figures were focused mainly on their private concerns, their personal interests and those of their lords and servants; and that the framework of public institutions and ideas they had inherited – the ‘constitution’, as it came to be known – was at best neglected by them, and at worst unpicked. Even before 1500, political commentators and historians were bemoaning the corruption of public life by the private interests of leading politicians. To many of these contemporaries, it appeared that the public good, or ‘common weal’, faced destruction at the hands of men who put the claims of self, family or party before those of king and community; who abandoned the old political virtues and sought their own material satisfaction instead.<sup>1</sup> Centuries later, the first academic historians took a similar tack. When, in 1878, William Stubbs came to write the third volume of his *Constitutional History*, it seemed to him that the history of England in the fifteenth century contained ‘little else than the details of foreign wars and domestic struggles’.<sup>2</sup> The ‘parliamentary institutions’ which he took to be the natural forum for public affairs had been reduced to ‘insignificance among the ruder expedients of arms, the more stormy and spontaneous forces of personal, political and religious passion’. It was not, he thought, going to be easy ‘to trace the continuity of national life through this age of obscurity and disturbance’.

Nowadays, the one-time ‘cinderella century’ is one of the most widely

<sup>1</sup> See below, pp. 40–2.

<sup>2</sup> For this quotation and the succeeding ones, see Stubbs 1875–8: III, pp. 2, 4.

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researched periods of the middle ages, but the broad lines of its political and constitutional history have changed less than one might have expected.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps because the focus of historical interest has shifted away from the areas to which the Victorians gave priority, their thinking still exerts a significant influence over our views of the nature of government in later medieval England.<sup>4</sup> In many accounts, for example, it remains implicit that the proper venues for the promotion of public interests were the formal structures of the embryonic state: parliament, the law, the king's council; and the king himself only if he was guided by these.<sup>5</sup> Public life and public responsibility continue to be the property of public institutions; yet the whole world of 'the public' is, as before, peripheral to the political story of the fifteenth century. On the whole, modern political histories, like earlier ones, have centred on a different kind of politics, a politics which was not primarily concerned with matters of public policy, but which turned instead on more 'private' affairs: essentially, the struggles of kings, nobles and gentlemen to advance their personal interests and those of their allies.<sup>6</sup> Appropriately enough, this 'private' politics was conducted in 'private' places: the households of the king and other lords; the by-ways and meeting-places of shires and towns.<sup>7</sup> And the key to political success lay in 'private' means and methods: above all, the skilful distribution of 'patronage' – grants of favour, money, lands or offices – to the eager members of this 'hard, mercenary and shamelessly acquisitive society'.<sup>8</sup>

As far as the history of the centre is concerned, 'State' and 'Society' are thus as disjoined in modern writing as they are in any nineteenth-century work: all that has happened is that our interest has shifted from the former to the latter.<sup>9</sup> In many ways, therefore, Stubbs' belief that 'there is no

<sup>3</sup> S. B. Chrimes' appealing phrase (Chrimes, Ross and Griffiths (eds.) 1972: p. vii). For comment on the explosion of research in fifteenth-century history, see Guth 1977 and Carpenter 1983a.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell 1988: pp. 7, 12–14; Powell 1994: p. 2; Carpenter 1992: pp. 3, 6–7.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Brown 1989: esp. pp. 1–3; Griffiths 1981: pp. 28, 284, 562, 592–4; and note the comments of Carpenter 1992: pp. 282–3.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. McFarlane 1972: p. 87. It is interesting to note that in DeLloyd Guth's survey of recent historiography (1977), 'Constitutional History' is lumped in with 'Administrative History' to make a single category covering legal and administrative institutions, while 'Political History' is another category, covering kings, households, nobles and rebels (p. 12).

<sup>7</sup> Starkey 1981: esp. pp. 225, 263; Guth 1977: p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ross (ed.) 1979: pp. 9–10, quoting McFarlane. See also Griffiths 1991b: p. 11; Hicks 1991a: pp. xii, pp. 41–2; Richmond 1983: p. 59; Carpenter 1992: pp. 4, 6; and Powell 1994 for the tendency of political history to focus on the distribution of patronage in this period.

<sup>9</sup> For this disjuncture, see Kaminsky and Van Horn Melton 1992: pp. xvii–xviii. See Powell 1994: pp. 11–12 for a similar point about the opposition in modern work on fifteenth-century England between the worlds of 'bureaucracy' (government) and

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unity of public interest, no singleness of political aim, no heroism of self-sacrifice' among the politicians of the later middle ages has resurfaced in today's accounts.<sup>10</sup> There is no real disagreement with his diagnosis that 'when the pride of wealth and pomp took the place of political aspirations, personal indulgence, domestic tyranny, obsequious servility followed': it is merely doubted that what Stubbs called 'political aspirations' had been of much significance earlier on. Meanwhile, the observation that Richard II's reign saw 'the baronage . . . divided against itself, one part maintaining the popular liberties but retarding their progress by bitter personal antipathies, the other maintaining royal autocracy, and although less guilty as aggressors, still more guilty by way of revenge' might almost be a résumé of modern interpretations of what was going on in the 1450s: one would only need to add the suggestion that the maintenance of either 'popular liberties' or 'royal autocracy' was unlikely to be anything but a cover for the advancement of more private interests.<sup>11</sup>

The idea that, at some level, we are still approaching the world of fifteenth-century politics and government from a Victorian perspective may seem almost unbelievable. The assaults of medievalists on what K. B. McFarlane called 'the Stubbsian framework' began within years of Stubbs' death, and an aversion to the assumptions of 'Constitutional History' has been a central characteristic of most twentieth-century writing on the English past.<sup>12</sup> However, as several writers have recently suggested, this aversion could actually be the source of some of the unexpected continuities in fifteenth-century history.<sup>13</sup> Scepticism about Victorian views of the constitution and of its productive role in the politics of periods other than the later middle ages has led political historians to reject the whole notion of an integrated, national and self-conscious political body which the constitutional approach assumes. The result, as McFarlane famously noted in 1938, was that the collapse of the 'Stubbsian framework' was followed not by the erection of 'a new order', a new model for the understanding of contemporary political and governmental arrangements, but instead by a state of 'anarchy'.<sup>14</sup> In many respects, this state persists today. We may look more sympathetically and searchingly at the social networks and practices which earlier historians regarded as corrupt and disruptive, but we are only just beginning to explore their public qualities, to reconsider their place in relation to the

'patronage', and Harriss 1993 for an important discussion of the relationship between government and society in later medieval England.

<sup>10</sup> For this quotation, and others in this paragraph, see Stubbs 1875–8: II, pp. 625–6; III, pp. 269, 542. For examples of modern writing which tend to echo the judgements quoted here, see e.g. Lander 1969: ch. 7; 1980: pp. 217–21; Griffiths 1981: pp. 592–7.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Jones 1989a. <sup>12</sup> McFarlane 1973: pp. 279–80.

<sup>13</sup> Carpenter 1992: pp. 5–6; Powell 1994: pp. 8–10. <sup>14</sup> McFarlane 1973: p. 280.

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world of government and of ideas about government; and to revise our sense of this world in the light of what we have found.<sup>15</sup> McFarlane himself, of course, did go on to develop a coherent and comprehensive new interpretation of political society in later medieval England, but, despite its manifest influence on succeeding generations, it has not redeveloped our understanding of national politics in the period. In part, this is because McFarlane's ideas prompted a significant redirection of scholarly effort towards the affairs of the localities, but it is also a result of the Namierite thread that runs through his writing.<sup>16</sup> Albeit with a certain ambivalence, McFarlane lent encouragement to the idea that medieval politics were mainly concerned with the competition for status and influence, and he emphasised that the key to understanding these politics was to explore the lives of leading politicians and the webs of interest which connected them.<sup>17</sup> In the end, therefore, a paradoxical result of his work has been to confirm the limited and broadly negative views of fifteenth-century political culture which Stubbs and others had left behind. Until very recently, the constitutional history of the period has barely advanced.<sup>18</sup> Its political history has focused mainly on the exploration of private networks and connections. The outcome of these trends is a rather aimless and unenlightening politics, free of development, devoid of public pressures, and often detached from the formal institutions and publicly acknowledged principles which surrounded it.

Is this dispiriting picture of the fifteenth-century polity justified? Certainly, the notion of an entirely unprincipled and unconstitutional society demands suspicion: as one scholar has recently remarked, 'all societies have a constitution, even if ... it consists largely of the unspoken assumptions of the politically aware about what may or may not be done'.<sup>19</sup> Even if fifteenth-century England *was* nothing more than an aggregate of private connections, and there is every reason to doubt this, some public phenomena – principles, institutions, places for debate – must surely have grown up to co-ordinate them. The whole, in effect, must have been more than the sum of its parts, and that is

<sup>15</sup> See Carpenter 1992: pp. 3–4, 282–3; also Horrox 1992: pp. 391–2, 398–9, for some interesting comment along similar lines.

<sup>16</sup> Many of the points made in this paragraph are explored at more length in Powell 1994.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. McFarlane 1972: p. 87; 1973: pp. 119–21, 296–7; 1981: pp. 19–21.

<sup>18</sup> Together with one or two others, those named in n. 22, below, have, since the 1980s, been producing work which develops our understanding of the later medieval constitution. See, in particular, Powell 1989; Carpenter 1983b and 1992; Harriss (ed.) 1985; and also, in a slightly different way, Horrox 1989. Before this, Harriss 1975 stands almost alone in English scholarship as a revision of older constitutional history: it breaks off before the fifteenth century, however. My debt to these works, and in most cases to their authors, will be obvious from everything written here.

<sup>19</sup> Carpenter 1992: p. 5.

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full of significance for the way in which historians ought to approach the discussion of each. Not only can we not understand the political history of the realm unless we explore its ruling framework of ideas and institutions, we cannot understand the political activity of any part of it – least of all that of the co-ordinating part: the community of kings and great lords which occupied centre stage – without doing the same thing. McFarlane once remarked that constitutional history is ‘not something distinct from political history; it is political history’, but this well-known observation clearly cuts both ways.<sup>20</sup> Whilst he apparently intended to suggest that political structures and ideas were shaped by men and their needs, his comment invites the response that the needs of men (or, at least, the ways in which those needs were expressed) were also shaped by the surrounding political ideas and structures.<sup>21</sup>

In the last few years, a number of historians have called for a ‘new constitutional history’ of fifteenth-century England as a means of producing a more satisfying account of politics by reintegrating the study of political events and relationships with the study of government and of ideas about government.<sup>22</sup> They have argued that the reason why nineteenth-century historians, and several earlier commentators for that matter, found a lot of fifteenth-century politics to be distasteful, or amoral, or unconstitutional was that these politics did not correspond to what they understood to be the political morality, or constitution, of the time. It was the failure of fifteenth-century kings and noblemen to conform to the anachronistic demands of ‘a contractual monarchy beholden to a parliament of estates representing “the kingdom”’ which accounts for a large part of Victorian hostility to fifteenth-century practice.<sup>23</sup> The appropriate response for us, it is suggested, is not to follow the assumption that ‘constitutional’ behaviour is inherently lawful, consultative and parliamentary, as these properties were understood in the nineteenth century, but to explore an alternative possibility: namely, that fifteenth-century politics were indeed governed by a ‘constitution’, but that this was something rather different, in content and perhaps in structure, from the frameworks which earlier historians envisaged.<sup>24</sup> From a historiographical point of view, there is clearly a lot to recommend

<sup>20</sup> McFarlane 1973: p. 280.

<sup>21</sup> The extent to which shared ideas in public discourse actually shaped people’s *private* perceptions of their needs is a difficult question, which I do not propose to tackle (but see, for example, Pocock 1973: esp. pp. 30–1).

<sup>22</sup> Powell 1989: pp. 6–9; 1994: pp. 10–13; and Carpenter 1992: pp. 5–13. See also Horrox 1992: pp. 391–3.

<sup>23</sup> Quotation from McKenna 1979: p. 482.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 485–7 discusses the problems historians have had with the term ‘constitution(al)’.

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the return to a more structural, or ‘constitutional’ approach. It could restore an explanatory framework to a political history which is increasingly detailed, but also – one might argue – increasingly difficult to understand at a global level. It would enable us to identify the defining characteristics of politics in our period and to make comparisons with those of other periods; to negotiate, in fact, a new place for the fifteenth century in the national history which, for one reason or another, we continue to wish to understand. It would permit us to explore the connections between central and local government more effectively than at present: we have gone much further in revising our understanding of the latter than we have our understanding of the former, and the two no longer fit together very well. And besides all this, we may emerge with an enriched understanding of fifteenth-century politics themselves. If they were, at some level, shaped by commonly held principles and commonly accepted practices, then they and the politicians who made them may have been quite different from how they have conventionally been presented. Above all, perhaps, it will be possible to re-evaluate the relationship between politics and public interests, once it is recognised that these interests may have been expressed and mediated in different ways: ways which earlier commentators overlooked. How, then, should we proceed?

The obvious starting-point for any attempt to reinterpret the fifteenth-century constitution must be the political and constitutional ideas of contemporaries, because it is only by placing political society in its proper ideological context that we may understand it fully.<sup>25</sup> We know that fifteenth-century men and women possessed a wide range of ideas concerning the workings of their polity, and it can be relatively easily shown that these ideas were a significant feature of their political discourse: indeed, an attempt to show this for a portion of political society in Henry VI’s reign is made below.<sup>26</sup> But how can we be sure that a discourse of this kind actually affected political behaviour? After all, the idealistic statements of fifteenth-century politicians have generally been seen as camouflage for more mundane, and often self-interested, designs. Fortunately, the nature of the relationship between ideas, language and action has been explored at some length by the so-called ‘Cambridge School’ of historians of political thought, and their work is full of

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Skinner 1978: I, p. xii; Carpenter 1992: pp. 3–4, 7–9, and note the comments of Marc Bloch, cited by Guenée 1971: p. 339: ‘the full significance of monarchical institutions, of political institutions in general, cannot ... be understood unless their dependence on the undercurrents of ideas – and sentiments as well – beneath them is clearly established’.

<sup>26</sup> Below, pp. 56–74.

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significance for the project before us here.<sup>27</sup> In particular, the question of whether or not the principled language of politicians provides any key to their behaviour has been tackled by Quentin Skinner, with specific reference, interestingly enough, to the debate over Namier's reading of eighteenth-century politics which so influenced McFarlane and many of his successors. The essence of the 'Namierite' critique, Skinner argues, was that politicians' professions of principle are no more than '*ex post facto* rationalisations', providing no guide to the 'underlying realities' of politics and therefore of little consequence to political historians. Skinner's response is that the genuineness of individual professions of principle is not the important question: what matters in the analysis of political language is what principles were chosen and with what effect. It does not matter whether individuals are moved by materialistic concerns or by ideas, or – more plausibly – by some amalgam of the two: the point is that each political society is governed by a matrix of ideas to which all its politicians must make reference.<sup>28</sup> People engaging in any behaviour which is not plainly endorsed by prevailing morality, or which for other reasons requires public justification, are forced to justify themselves in terms of principle. The range of available principles therefore determines the range of available actions, so that a political 'agent's professed principles invariably need to be treated as causal conditions of his actions'. As a result, 'the explanation of political action essentially depends on the study of political ideology': in effect, we need to look at the ideas circulating in the fifteenth-century polity because these *were* the 'underlying realities' of its politics.

One substantial attempt to sidestep Victorian assumptions and recover the true 'political ideology' of fifteenth-century England has, of course, already been made. In 1936, S. B. Chrimes, rejecting the 'Lancastrian Constitution' described by Stubbs and others as a Whiggish anachronism, wrote an analytical survey of what he called 'the spirit of the constitution' in the fifteenth century.<sup>29</sup> This he took to be 'opinions, ideas and assumptions as to the nature and distribution of governmental rights', a definition which, in the event, restricted Chrimes to the limited range of material which consciously assigned rights and duties to recognised parts of the political landscape, rather than the much broader array of sources which took the structures of government as given and commented on their performance.<sup>30</sup> To some extent, Chrimes reproduced the old

<sup>27</sup> See Pocock 1972 and, in particular for the points made in this paragraph, Skinner 1974 and 1988: esp. pp. 108–11.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Hicks 1991b, which concentrates more on the idealism of individuals than the action of ideas on society as a whole (and the results of that action for the individual).

<sup>29</sup> Chrimes 1936: p. xx.

<sup>30</sup> Quotation from *ibid.*, p. xx. This may be compared with another statement of his aims on



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assumption that the constitution was an entity in itself, distinct from politics and best described by specialists, above all, lawyers.<sup>31</sup> This did little to heal the growing rift between ‘constitutional’ and ‘political’ history, and it is interesting to note that McFarlane condemned the work as ‘unnecessarily narrow and legalistic’.<sup>32</sup> Chrimes’ portrait of the ‘constitution’ was a one-sided one: it emphasised legal opinion concerning the most formal and global dealings of king and realm – parliaments, coronations, the succession, the king and the law – at the expense of other views and other relationships. Like earlier works of constitutional history, moreover, it dealt only with arrangements at the ‘centre’, but the focus of scholarly interest would soon be shifting towards the localities. Far from encouraging a more integrated history, therefore, it cleared the way for the modern tendency to regard the ‘constitution’ as a body of public law and precedent dealing with a limited range of specific and mostly rather large-scale matters; a body which can safely be excluded from discussions of a politics dominated by personal, factional and local transactions.<sup>33</sup>

What is needed now is not so much a study of public law, but an investigation of the patterns and principles governing public life; and, in fact, a reinterpretation of what ‘public life’ involved. Law, parliament and the formal offices of government were only a part of the fifteenth-century constitutional framework, not the whole of it.<sup>34</sup> What we must do in particular, if we are to restore a sense of structure to the political history of our period and to understand its real meaning, is to look more closely at the ideological and institutional context of those areas of the polity which we have identified as being most important. Since McFarlane, if not before, these have been the affairs of the king and the nobility, ‘the natural supports of monarchy’.<sup>35</sup>

Over the last thirty or forty years, it has become clear that, notwithstanding his traditional presentation in constitutional histories as a limited monarch, the later medieval king was very much the leader of political

p. xvi: to get at ‘the half-expressed concepts and ideas behind the machinery of government ... assumptions that called for no statement’ – an enterprise which more closely resembles what is being attempted here. Cf. Oakley 1973, which argues that medieval literature on politics was generally far more concerned with the performance of those in authority than with the distribution of powers on which their authority rested, and that historians ought to take account of these priorities in their analyses.

<sup>31</sup> In Kern 1939: p. xiii, Chrimes argued that constitutional history was ‘a branch of legal history’ and his account drew heavily on legal sources: notably the Year Books and the works of Fortescue. Whether or not the constitution should be regarded as the province of lawyers had been a matter of vigorous debate in the nineteenth century (Burrow 1981: pp. 133–4).

<sup>32</sup> McFarlane 1938 (quotation from p. 708). <sup>33</sup> See below, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> See Harriss 1993; Carpenter 1983b for an important discussion of the position of law in this respect; and Watts 1991: pp. 279–80 for some comments on the relative constitutional importance of ‘counsel’ and ‘the council’.

<sup>35</sup> McFarlane 1972: p. 59.



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society. In practice, if not also in theory, he enjoyed considerable freedom in the management of his leading subjects, and it was his character and abilities, above all, which determined the fortunes of the polity during his reign.<sup>36</sup> This has been widely acknowledged, but the way in which contemporaries apprehended this reality – what they thought about it and what it meant for their views on politics and their beliefs about the political system – has barely been explored. At the same time, it has been generally recognised that the rule of large parts of the realm belonged in effect to the nobility. Even as lesser landowners filled the local offices of the royal administration and, together with urban and mercantile elites, took over the formal representation of the *communitas* in parliament, the dukes, earls and greater barons retained much of their ancient social and political dominance. In this still-hierarchical and deferential society, they continued to act as the principal mediators between king and people, between ‘centre’ and ‘locality’. So it is that the relationship between the king and the nobility has emerged as the backbone of the fifteenth-century polity.<sup>37</sup> There may have been other webs attaching king and people to one another – structures of public finance, of royal justice, of common defence, of economic association, and these have often been investigated – but it is the relationships, the structures, of royal and noble lordship which have dominated political histories, and in many ways, this seems justifiable.<sup>38</sup> The trouble is that these relationships have mostly been treated as if they were both private and, for the most part, ungoverned by public or constitutional principles. Once again, we need to consider the possibility that these relationships performed a recognised public function and to examine more closely what politically active contemporaries expected from the relationship between the king and the nobility, how they envisaged it working and what part they believed it to play in the normal apparatus of government. This book is an attempt to examine these issues and to make use of the results: in effect, to look at the interaction of a particular king and his leading subjects in the light of contemporary ideas about both kingship itself and the dealings of king and nobility.

In many ways, the reign of Henry VI is an ideal choice for an exercise of this kind. On the one hand, there is a lot of source material: the peculiar sequence of minority, ‘inanity’ and crisis meant that contemporaries

<sup>36</sup> See below, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> See below, pp. 74–80, and, for the points made here, e.g. Carpenter 1992: pp. 287–8, 347–54; Coss 1989; Given-Wilson 1987a: pp. 11–14, ch. 2.

<sup>38</sup> Harriss 1993 usefully discusses the links between a number of these webs of association.

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discussed and recorded their views on political and constitutional issues extensively. On the other hand, since Chrimmes, there has been no sustained attempt to use these materials to provide a structural treatment of what might be called the politics of kingship in the period.<sup>39</sup> Thanks to a number of important studies, the fiscal, military and diplomatic contexts of Henry VI's government are now well understood,<sup>40</sup> but the structures of authority which underpinned that government remain obscure. It is almost universally agreed that Henry himself was an inadequate ruler, and that his personal inadequacies go a long way to explaining the disasters which befell the polity in the 1450s, but there is much less certainty over what these inadequacies were and how they took effect, or precisely why and how much they mattered, or how they inter-related with other factors such as public finance or the situation in France; and indeed there *cannot* be much certainty on these matters until there is a better understanding of the constitutional context in which Henry and his subjects were operating. Why was Henry VI able to go on ruling so unsuccessfully for so long; and why did he consistently attract more support than 'oppositional' figures such as Gloucester and York? Why were the first twenty-eight years of the reign so much more peaceful than the last eleven? What were the leading subjects of the period – Gloucester, York, Bedford, Beaufort, Somerset, Suffolk and Queen Margaret – aiming to achieve? Were they, or any of them, or the nobility as a class, responsible for the descent into civil war at the end of the reign? Were the politics of the 1430s, 1440s and 1450s about anything more than faction and patronage? Were there real divisions over policy in France? How was England actually governed while Henry VI was king? It is not that these questions have not been addressed: it is that they cannot be answered fully and fairly without a detailed investigation of the norms of royal and noble power. We need to tackle them alongside an exploration of what kingship was and how it worked; what was actually expected of both the crown and the man who wore it; how the will of the king's government was composed and conveyed; and how authority was distributed, and interests satisfied, in the late medieval realm. The really interesting questions arising from Henry VI's reign concern the polity, as well as its actors. To answer them, we need to place the personalities and individual interests in the context of a wider politics, and politics itself in the context

<sup>39</sup> Note the comments in the preface to Griffiths 1981: p. vii. McFarlane's famous essay on the Wars of the Roses (1981f) is full of important insights in this area and, I feel bound to say that, in my view, it anticipates in sketch form many of the conclusions offered in this book.

<sup>40</sup> See especially Harriss 1986 and 1988; Griffiths 1981: chs. 6, 15–18; Wolffe 1971: chs. 4–5 and 1981: chs. 9–11; Keen 1989.