Introduction
The 1590s: The second reign of Elizabeth I?

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This book is about the politics and political culture of the 'last decade' of the reign of Elizabeth I, interpreted to mean the years from 1585 to 1603. It will open with a proposition, which goes like this: there were two reigns of Elizabeth I, each with distinctive features. Her 'first' reign ended about 1585 with the dispatch of an English expeditionary force to the Netherlands. This seemingly dramatic reversal of the queen's non-interventionist foreign policy was followed by the trial and execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, and by the outbreak of war with Spain and her ally, the French Catholic League. Mary's execution resolved one political and constitutional crisis, but precipitated another. For the war engulfed multiple theatres: English forces were deployed in France, the Netherlands, the Atlantic and latterly Ireland. Costs and casualties were high. England was several times threatened with encirclement by the superior forces of the Counter-Reformation.

The physical and emotional strains were acute. In politics the anxiety of courtiers fused with the poverty of the crown and the competition for patronage to kindle factionalism, self-interest and instability which – in the shape of Essex's frustrated ambition – sparked an attempted *coup*. In the country xenophobia, war-weariness, and the turmoil created by rising prices, bad harvests and outbreaks of plague and influenza, fomented particularism and resistance to the crown's fiscal and military demands. All this, in turn, triggered an authoritarian reaction from privy councillors and magistrates, whose emphasis on state security, the subversiveness of religious nonconformity, and the threat of 'popularity' and social revolt became obsessional.

We need to look no further than the Court to see a transition in train. A traditional mystique surrounds the history, and in particular the definition, of the Elizabethan Court, and this should be dispelled. In its physical aspect the Court was the royal household, comprising perhaps 1,700 people. Eighty to one hundred – chiefly nobles, privy councillors and intimate body servants – were permitted routinely to enter the privy apartments, and some 500–600 others had access to the public rooms 'above stairs'. Another 1,000

or so lived or worked 'below stairs', performing duties in the royal palaces or their environs as servants in the kitchens, pantry, bakehouse, spicery, laundry, stables, falconry, etc. In this sense the 'Court' was like a luxury hotel, though if so, it was a hotel on wheels, since it remained peripatetic until 1625 because of its needs in respect of victualling, sanitation and recreation. In particular, the summer progresses of Elizabeth were designed as occasions when *tableaux vivants*, aquatic pageants, triumphal arches and civic spectacles could promote nationally the cult of Astraea and the 'imperial' Virgin.

The Court was politically fluid and culturally polycentric. As well as peregrinating more or less systematically between Whitehall, Greenwich and Windsor between September and May, and visiting the houses of the nobility and other locations within roughly a 100 mile radius of London during the queen's summer progresses, it spilled over into the West End of London, where the nobility were increasingly building city mansions, and to the Inns of Court where revels were staged at Christmas in honour of the queen.[1] To the fixed elements of personnel and location must also be added that of time. The Court as a political nexus comprised the queen and those significant persons – nobles, office-holders and privy councillors – who attended her presence *at the particular moment in question*. Simple to define in theory, this entity was in practice kaleidoscopic, since it fluctuated continuously as councillors and office-holders oscillated in the queen's favour or migrated between the Court and their estates, or departed, sometimes for years at a time, on military or naval expeditions, or were despatched on embassies abroad. In this respect the Court was a hydra, constantly sprouting new heads. It was in a constant state of flux. Poets and dramatists described it as 'constant only in its inconstancy', and invoked a wide range of metaphors – not to mention gossip and innuendo – to describe the whirlpool of relationships in which the queen and her favourites lay at the vortex.

Yet a clear change of personnel delineates the transition from Elizabeth's 'first' to her 'second' Court. Between 1588 and 1590 occurred the deaths of four doyens of the first-generation establishment: Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester (1588), his brother Ambrose, earl of Warwick (1590), Sir Walter Mildmay (1589) and Sir Francis Walsingham (1590). Leicester was the queen's first favourite. His influence had balanced, and complemented, if not rivalled, that of Burghley in the Privy Council since 1562. Moreover, all four were linchpins of protestantism. In particular, Leicester and Walsingham had championed the European protestant cause. Their deaths altered the balance of opinion in politics and the Privy Council.

[1] See also Linda Levy Peck, *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 3–12.

Leicester's death created a double vacuum. His voice in support of the protestant cause was silenced. He also lacked a legitimate heir; hence the members of his affinity were forced to seek a new patron and many gravitated towards Essex. Whereas Leicester's protestant zeal had hitherto held Burghley's fear of fiscal and military overextension in equilibrium, now caution and conservatism prevailed. Burghley (unlike his client Lord Buckhurst) was in tune with moderate puritanism, but he consistently favoured *realpolitik* over religion in the making of foreign policy. At home he worked pragmatically, if sometimes uncomfortably, with those who shared the queen's abhorrence of nonconformity: Sir Christopher Hatton until his death in 1591 and Archbishop Whitgift. In some respects Burghley became a Polonius-figure in the 1590s: he was the supreme political survivor. Yet this should not be exaggerated. Whatever view is taken of his rôle in the fall of Sir John Perrot in Ireland (perhaps the murkiest episode in which Burghley became embroiled), he retained his political edge.[2] He lacked the energy and conviction he had displayed in the 1550s and 1560s. This was inevitable; but unlike Polonius his authority as Lord Treasurer was unsurpassed.

From the vantage-point of the reign of James VI and I, Francis Bacon recalled how Elizabeth had 'allowed herself to be wooed and courted, and even to have love made to her', observing that these 'dalliances detracted but little from her fame and nothing at all from her majesty'.[3] In these remarks Bacon put his finger on the essence of Elizabethan politics: first, that to succeed at Court politicians had to pretend to be in love with the queen; secondly, that the conduct of the 'game' of courtship was Elizabeth's most effective tool of policy. For the dithering, prevarication and generally dismissive behaviour which was understood to be archetypical of the conventional 'mistress' provided Elizabeth with her weapons of political manipulation and manœuvre. In order to beat her male courtiers at their own game, she changed the rules and capitalized on the power granted to her by virtue of her gender.

Hatton was Elizabeth's second favourite. After his death, Sir Walter Ralegh seemed most likely to succeed. As captain of the guard he had untrammelled access to the privy chamber, gaining influence to the point where others felt threatened. But Elizabeth banished him from Court (briefly sending him to the Tower!), when he seduced her maid. Sexual jealousy was widely suspected: Elizabeth's vanity was the one constant force of her reign. Ambassadors in the 1590s noted her extravagant attire and low-cut dresses, yet she could barely ride, she wore a wig, her teeth were

[2] See below, pp. 109–25.
[3] Catherine Bates, *The Rhetoric of Courtship in Elizabethan Language and Literature* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 45–88.

bad, and she placed a perfumed silk handkerchief in her mouth before receiving visitors. When her third and last favourite, Essex, failed in Ireland, his most flagrant offence was not to desert his post – though that was heinous enough – but to burst unannounced into her presence at ten o'clock in the morning before she had applied cosmetics. By his recklessness he became the only courtier (other than the bedchamber servants) to have seen the 'imperial' Virgin stripped of the veil of state. This was *lèse-majesté* and condemned him to disgrace.

In her 'second' reign Elizabeth's grip on events slackened markedly. In her 'first' reign she knew her mind even when she procrastinated; her judgement was not infallible, but her instinct was shrewd: often shrewder than that of her privy councillors. As the 1590s advanced, her inaction led to political marginalization as her mind and body aged. From 1585 onwards, England was at war, the conduct of which required strategic planning and instant reflexes. Since Elizabeth persistently dithered, decisions were taken on her behalf, and for the first time she tacitly condoned the fact. Never before had the queen allowed her councillors to seize the initiative, and when they had done so covertly – for example in 1563, 1566, 1572, and most sensationally in 1587 over the dispatch of the warrant for the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots – she had reacted furiously. The danger in the 1590s was that a disappointed councillor – such as Essex – having subverted his instructions in favour of his own ambition and yet still failed, would pose a direct threat to her monarchy.

In her 'second' reign Elizabeth declined to fill vacancies in the Privy Council or to reinforce the nobility. The vast majority of Court offices remained in the hands of her oldest friends and contemporaries. As mortality thinned the ranks, she refused not only to reward but even to replace those with whom she had surrounded herself. After Burghley's death in August 1598, the Privy Council was reduced to ten, fewer than half the number when she came to the throne. A memorandum of 1598 drew attention to 'Noblemen that have served in her Majesties warrs or borne publick places, not being now of the Council'.[4] Eight earls and eighteen barons were listed as candidates for promotion. Yet only after Essex's revolt did Elizabeth yield and promote the earls of Shrewsbury and Worcester to the Privy Council.

In January 1589 Burghley had written: 'Her Majesty, finding a great want of noblemen for Parliament, is minded to create some earls and barons.' But nothing was done. Unlike her successor James VI and I, whose generosity opened the floodgates, Elizabeth obstinately refused to use grants of honour as political rewards. She had resolved to maintain the peerage as a select

[4] See below, pp. 92–3.

caste for men of ancient lineage and to restrict its size in relation to the availability of estates. This reflected her social conservatism. Despite some claims to the contrary, Elizabeth's peerage creations more or less compensated for attainders and genetic failures in the male line. Yet the dynamic political issue was not the size of the peerage, but the unsatisfied ambition of the courtiers and military commanders who sought promotion during the long war with Spain and remained unrewarded.

Fiscal considerations partially explain the dearth of peerage creations, but it is less obvious why the lord lieutenancies were allowed to lapse after 1590. County government had been markedly strengthened by the lieutenancy system which had been reconstituted in 1585. The appointees assumed responsibility for musters, militia training and the levying of militia rates.[5] Later civilian duties were added: law and order, management of food supplies, collection of forced loans, detection of recusants, and enforcement of economic regulations. The military and administrative significance of the late-Elizabethan lieutenancies is obvious. Yet sixteen were left unfilled for as long as three years, seven for as long as ten years, and thirteen were vacant by 1603.[6] In districts where vacancies arose, commissioners for musters were appointed on an interim basis on the nomination of the Privy Council. Robert Cecil compiled a list of those districts with vacancies to draw attention to the need to make new appointments, but the queen declined to act.

Where patronage and finance were concerned, Burghley's influence was paramount after Leicester's death. The reservoir of patronage remained the queen, who always retained a keen interest in the specification of grants. However, bills for lands and leases required the signatures of the Lord Treasurer, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Attorney- and Solicitor-General, and in this process the Lord Treasurer's opinion was decisive. Again, Burghley exerted a dramatic influence on the manipulation of the customs revenues through farming, and on the exploitation of monopolies and concessionary interests. By 1585 it can be argued that a fundamental reconstruction of royal patronage was in train.[7] The main element of this policy was the shift from a system of patronage based on leases or alienations of the Crown lands to a system based on export concessions and grants of commercial licences or monopolies. Burghley was prominent as a patron of monopolies, both of imported commodities and domestic manufactures. Given the dearth of conventional forms of patronage after the outbreak of war, it was but a short step to the use of monopolies purely for

[5] Gladys Scott Thomson, *Lords Lieutenants in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1923); A. Hassell Smith, *County and Court: Government and Politics in Norfolk, 1558–1603* (Oxford, 1974).

[6] See below, pp. 93–4. [7] See below, pp. 36–41.

the purpose of rewarding courtiers, thereby shifting the costs of such rewards from the crown to the commonwealth.

If, however, Burghley's was the dominant voice in patronage after Leicester's death, this does not mean there was a *regnum Cecilianum*. Burghley himself was irritated by the term, and considered himself maligned. No analysis of the politics of the 1590s will be entirely satisfactory until second-rank councillors like Buckhurst, Howard of Effingham (created earl of Nottingham, 1597), Sir Francis Knollys and Sir John Fortescue are put under the microscope and our knowledge of Court networks is enhanced. There is evidence of a political and social *modus vivendi* which broke down as a result of ideological and political disparities.[8] The earliest ideological fissures did not involve Essex, but rather Whitgift and (possibly) Buckhurst. The latter pair entered the Privy Council in 1586 at Burghley's nomination, but were less tightly aligned to Burghley in the 1590s.[9] Whitgift and Burghley differed fundamentally over the archbishop's anti-puritan campaign, which the Lord Treasurer several times compared to the 'Romish' or 'Spanish inquisition'. When in 1591 Lord Chancellor Hatton and Whitgift promoted the prosecutions in Star Chamber of Thomas Cartwright and the presbyterian leaders for sedition, Burghley was a conspicuous absentee.[10] Buckhurst was firmly attached to the Cecilians in matters of patronage, but was recruited by Whitgift as a judge in the Court of High Commission in 1588. He stood apart from Burghley on religious policy. Whitgift outlived Burghley, and was secure in royal favour until the queen's own death. He was rebuked in 1595 over his attempt to issue the Lambeth articles, but the setback was purely temporary; the queen's favour reached its zenith when Whitgift's private troops played a crucial rôle in the defence of Whitehall during Essex's revolt. It is conventional to observe that the Cecilians had a monopoly of influence in the 1590s, but as long as Whitgift enjoyed unrestricted access to the privy chamber, Burghley was pushed onto the sidelines where religion was concerned.

More generally, the politics of the 1590s were driven by the ambition and spectacular misjudgements of Robert Devereux, the dazzling but paranoid second earl of Essex. Essex's relationship with the Cecils soon became the motor of political strife. Yet the relationship was ambivalent until Burghley's death. Burghley had been one of Essex's guardians as a child and a mutual respect endured between them even when they came into conflict.[11] It is likely that the feud was primarily between Essex and Sir Robert Cecil, who were roughly the same age. Physical attributes also came into the

[8] See below, pp. 46–64, 65–86.
[9] It is noteworthy that Robert Cecil systematically rebuilt the relationship with Buckhurst in ecclesiastical politics *after* Burghley's death.
[10] See below, pp. 129–30. [11] See below, pp. 46–64, 65–86.

equation: Essex was tall and well proportioned; his aristocratic bearing and lofty disposition were legendary. By contrast, Cecil was only the second son of the Lord Treasurer, and he suffered from a deformed spine and diminutive height: Elizabeth called him her 'little elf'. Essex initially regarded Cecil as a 'friend', but had little difficulty in disparaging him once friction arose between them.

Essex was Leicester's stepson. He succeeded his stepfather as Master of the Horse, and within three years had staked his claim to the mantle of the European protestant cause. By 1591 he was said to be 'like enough, if he had a few more years, to carry Leicester's credit and sway'.[12] In 1593 he was admitted to the Privy Council. But he made mistakes. By the end of 1596 the feud between Essex and Robert Cecil had escalated into a factional battle to dominate the Privy Council and control both royal policy and the succession to the throne. Moreover, this battle was as disruptive as anything since the death of Henry VIII, because Essex pursued ideology as well as patronage. He embellished his chivalric protestantism with demands that the war be run by generals and not civilians. He urged the switch to an aggressive strategy in Europe and the Atlantic. By contrast, the Cecils, like Elizabeth herself, saw England's goals as essentially defensive; designed to keep the power of Philip II at bay and prevent Spain from seizing control of the French Channel ports or intervening in Ireland.

In his rhetoric Essex advocated the values of aristocratic 'honour', but in practice he displayed a preference for methods of government more easily adopted in Ireland than in England. By fighting duels and alluding to his rights under the 'law of nature', he proselytized his belief in the nobility's right to use violence in the defence of honour and the pursuit of political ends.[13] The writings of Sir Philip Sidney and the chivalric pageantry of the Accession Day tilts were crucial to Essex's self-fashioning, but the neo-feudal dimension may be deceptive. It can be argued that beneath the rhetorical smokescreen, Essex was the first politician since Richard III to equate control of royal patronage with factional power. His pressure on patronage at all levels created hostility even among those who were his friends. Whatever the truth of this, his tactics were inept. When he sought to build an affinity in the counties which disclosed elements of premeditated military purposefulness, he overreached himself. For the subordination of 'overmighty subjects' to the crown, and the conduct of civil government by law and not the sword, were shibboleths.

A sense of *fin de siècle* is crucial to an understanding of Elizabeth's 'second' reign. Contradictory forces charged the atmosphere: ambition,

[12] *CSPD, Addenda, 1580–1625*, p. 320.
[13] M. E. James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 416–65.

apprehension, expectation, insecurity, authoritarianism, self-interrogation. In Parliament the speeches and draft legislative proposals of ordinary members revealed their deep-seated anxieties over crime, poverty and unemployment. Since relatively little that was *new* was accomplished by way of remedy even in the vastly overrated Elizabethan Poor Laws, it was unsurprising that discord and displacement aggression characterized the set-piece debates on purveyance, taxation and monopolies. The monopolies debates of 1597–8 and 1601 produced the ugliest parliamentary scenes before the revival of impeachment in the 1620s, signalling unequivocal resentment of the economic privileges and abuses promoted by courtiers and privy councillors solely for their private gain.

Faced by pungent criticism and demands for a committee of inquiry in 1597, Elizabeth neutralized the attack by promising a commission to investigate monopolies and by intimating that she would personally intervene to prevent dishonest patentees from invoking the royal prerogative to impede legal actions in the courts. But the promised reforms failed to materialize. After Parliament was dissolved in 1598, there were more new monopolies granted than old ones rescinded. Shortly before the 1601 Parliament assembled, Lord Treasurer Buckhurst and Cecil attempted a last-minute survey of monopolies in an effort to prune the worst of them before it was too late. But the task was not completed, and when the 1601 Parliament assembled, the outcome was a minor constitutional crisis.

Nor were the parliamentary allegations misplaced, since by 1601 venality permeated the régime. A 'black market' was well established at Court in which nominations to offices were overtly traded. For a minor post £200 would be offered, with competitive bids of between £1,000 and £4,000 for lucrative offices such as the receivership of the Court of Wards or the treasurership at war. There was even a queue for a minor Irish office that Burghley wished to suppress: hard cash was offered 'in the Chamber and elsewhere'. As Spenser quipped in 1591, 'For nothing there is done without a fee: / The Courtier needs must recompensèd be.'[14] And since bids were investments, extortion and embezzlement were rife. The royal household, the Exchequer, and the Court of Wards (where Burghley himself presided until his death) were all the subjects of spectacular scandals.

A list of Burghley's income as Master of the Wards during the last two and a half years of his life shows that he accepted £3,301 from suitors as 'arrangement fees' for eleven grants of wardship at a time when his official annual salary as master was £133. His profit tripled that of the crown, which gained a mere £906 from these transactions. It was the crown's receipts that were entered in the official records; Burghley's profits were listed in a paper

[14] *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, lines 515–16, in E. de Sélincourt (ed.), *Spenser's Minor Poems* (Oxford, 1960), p. 210.

endorsed: 'This note to be burned.' Yet Burghley was the least unscrupulous of his contemporaries. Gifts of plate to privy councillors and judges were frequent; the value of Burghley's own collection approached £15,000. Yet opinion thought this sum modest in relation to his opportunities.[15]

By contrast, it was said of Sir Thomas Heneage in 1592, 'I think your best friend unto him will be your £1,000.' And it was notorious that he accepted £60 as Chancellor of the Duchy for subscribing a bill for a minor official. When Sir John Carey learned that Elizabeth had criticized his wife for selling minor offices in the garrison at Berwick, he complained, 'If her Majesty would search into takers so narrowly ... she might find takers of another kind nearer hand, such as take more in one day than she [Lady Carey] hath done in all her life.' Again, when Sir Thomas Shirley, Treasurer at War, was accused in 1593 of misappropriating £30,000 per annum of the funds allocated for campaigns in the Netherlands, the charges were *inter alia* that he had 'infinitely bribed' Burghley's clerk to secure his ends; had speculated with the soldiers' pay; sold concessions to army victuallers; and operated as a moneylender. His income ranged between £3,000 and £16,000 per annum, yet his official salary was £365.[16] It was said of Robert Cecil, 'You may boldly write for his favour ... You paid well for it'! Whereas it took Burghley fifty years in office to build three houses and acquire a landholding appropriate to a peer, his son accumulated larger estates and built five houses in under sixteen years, even though Burghley received more land by way of outright gifts.[17]

It is fairly observed that late-Elizabethan political history has rarely been written in terms of the preoccupations of contemporaries. Crime, vagrancy and economic misfortunes, especially catastrophic harvest failures in 1596 and 1597, headed the immediate list of concerns, and it has long been debated whether or not these amounted to a 'crisis'. According to the *Guide Michelin* taxonomy adopted by Professors Wrigley and Schofield, the distress of the 1590s constituted a two-star, but not a three-star crisis.[18] The emergency was not uniform in its impact, nor was irreparable damage inflicted upon the agricultural and commercial infrastructures. Prices were high, but economic growth continued, if at a slower rate than before. For the

[15] J. Hurstfield, *The Queen's Wards: Wardship and Marriage under Elizabeth I* (London, 1958), pp. 266–9; J. E. Neale, *Essays in Elizabethan History* (London, 1958), pp. 63–4, 72.

[16] *CSPD, 1591–1594*, pp. 326–7; A. G. R. Smith, *Servant of the Cecils: The Life of Sir Michael Hickes, 1543–1612* (London, 1977), pp. 66–8; Neale, *Essays in Elizabethan History*, pp. 65–6; P. W. Hasler (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1558–1603* (3 vols., London, 1981), III, pp. 375–6.

[17] Lawrence Stone, *Family and Fortune: Studies in Aristocratic Finance in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 56–9; Neale, *Essays in Elizabethan History*, p. 75; Hasler, *The Commons*, I, p. 578.

[18] E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: A Reconstruction* (London, 1981), pp. 332–6, 645–85, and *passim*.

first time since the epidemics of Mary's reign, population growth slackened or was static, but mortality caused by starvation was concentrated in upland areas where population density was low and crops were grown under marginal conditions. By contrast, the plague and influenza epidemics that decimated the urban communities were concentrated in London, the larger towns, the mixed farming lowlands, and areas in the south and east of England with well-developed communications.

While this analysis is statistically correct, there is something reminiscently Thatcherite about an explanation that concentrates on economic growth at the expense of real people. Agricultural prices climbed higher in real terms in 1594–8 than at any time before 1615. Real wages plunged lower in 1597 than at any time between 1260 and 1950.[19] Perhaps two-fifths of the total population of four million fell below the margin of subsistence. Whole families were thrown onto parish relief, and the much-vaunted Poor Laws proved inadequate to stem the tide. Poor relief was meagre in material terms and operated chiefly as a *placebo*. Furthermore, it was administered by parochial officials in ways which underscored the economic dependence of the poor.

It is sometimes claimed that during the long war with Spain, Elizabethan government succumbed to a mixture of external pressure and internal structural decay. There was no slide to disaster in Elizabeth's 'second' reign; the régime held together and the problems of James VI and I had more to do with post-1603 events than with the legacy of Elizabeth I. Yet the key to political stability in the 1590s was the solidarity of the élite. Economic conditions accelerated a process of polarization between rich and poor which subverted traditional perceptions of order and degree yet which simultaneously fostered the values of authoritarianism and a class society.[20] The assize judges confronted a rising tide of property crime. It was no coincidence that sitting alongside privy councillors in the Court of Star Chamber, they took the criminal law into their own hands by remoulding and reinterpreting it to enable offences against private property to be punished as public crimes. Increasingly property-owners of whatever rank or position identified themselves with the prosperity of the gentry against the rabble. Lesser yeomen and tradesmen, whose ancestors had marched

[19] Joan Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV: *1500–1640* (Cambridge, 1967); E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables, Compared with Builders' Wage Rates', *Economica*, new series, 23 (1956), 296–314; C. G. A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England, 1500–1700* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1984); Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580–1680* (London, 1982); Steve Rappaport, *Worlds within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth Century London* (Cambridge, 1989); Ian W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge, 1991).

[20] See below, pp. 192–211.