Article from History Extra Edward Seymour: the fall of the dithering dictator

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With Henry VIII dead and his son, Edward VI, a mere boy, Edward Seymour assumed power, seeking to govern England as a radical autocrat. But, writes Derek Wilson, when two rebellions erupted, Seymour vacillated – and that was to cost him his life…

On 7 July 1549, Sir William Paget, secretary to the royal council, wrote a letter to Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset. “I see at hand the king’s destruction and your ruin,” Paget declared. “The people are out of discipline because of your softness… I know your good meaning but it is a pity it should have caused the present evil. Society is maintained by religion and laws: you have neither.”

As denunciations go, Paget’s was devastating. And it was made all the more damaging by the fact that he was merely communicating what had become an open secret in aristocratic circles: Edward Seymour – regent to the boy-king Edward VI, self-styled autocrat and the most powerful man in England – was heading for a fall.

How different things had seemed a couple of years earlier when King Henry VIII had breathed his last. Then Seymour had capitalised on his status as a powerful magnate, influential court insider, and brother of Henry’s beloved third wife Jane Seymour, to step seamlessly into the vacuum created by the old king’s death. With Henry’s son and heir, Edward VI, too young to rule in his own right, Seymour had himself appointed Protector of the Realm. For the next two years, he was the de facto ruler of England.

But by the time Paget dispatched his missive, Seymour’s fortunes had taken a nosedive. His powerbase was crumbling, the country was in revolt and his enemies were sharpening their knives. Within a few months he would be thrown into the Tower of London, languishing there while his fellow councillors decided what to do with him.

Festering divisions

So where did it all go wrong? The answer can probably be located in the divisions that festered in the second half of Henry VIII's reign. The religious reformation that Henry had begun sundered England into violently opposed religious camps. There were radical Protestants who wanted to push reform further, and conservatives who craved a return to the 'good old (Catholic) days'. There were also social reformers who opposed many of the new landlords who had acquired land during Henry's dissolution of the monasteries and were, it was claimed, riding roughshod over the rights of the common people.

At his death in 1547, Henry had left power in the hands of a moderately reformist body that was to act as Edward VI's council until he reached 18. However, in the back rooms of Whitehall where secret deals were done, it was agreed that much of that power should be concentrated in one man's hands: Seymour.

Over the centuries historians have offered many explanations as to why the councillors agreed to Seymour's power-grab – including the need for a strong government to fend off any conservative reaction, the fact that Seymour was Edward VI's uncle, and the dishing out of sweeteners to pliable supporters. Whatever the reason, Seymour was now Protector of the Realm. Soon, he was consulting the council less and less and ruling by decree in his nephew's name.

Hero of the have-nots

The historian Diarmaid MacCulloch has written of Edward Seymour that he "combined the reforming zeal of Thomas Cromwell, the chutzpah of Cardinal Wolsey and the flashy populism of Queen Elizabeth I's doomed Earl of Essex". At first, that "flashy populism" appears to have borne fruit. Declaring that he was committed to creating a fair society, Seymour appointed royal commissions to enquire into such agrarian grievances as the enclosure of the common land. In doing so, he made himself something of a hero among the disenfranchised: England's 'have-nots' genuinely believed that the 'Good Duke', as they called Seymour, was on their side.

Unfortunately for Seymour, a growing number of these 'have-nots' began interpreting his policies as a cue to take the law into their own hands. Following his lead – or so they thought – bands of iconoclasts started smashing up church windows and tearing down rood screens. Other malcontents uprooted the hedges and fences built by 'grasping' landowners – reclaiming land they thought was rightfully theirs.

It was now that Seymour betrayed a weakness that would continually undermine his attempts to dominate England's political landscape: an unwillingness to meet force with force. He issued pardons to offenders, promised new legislation and, as Paget later pointed out, only encouraged further lawlessness. So it proved when a rebellion broke out in the South West, where militant conservatives began protesting at the government's religious policy and the attempt to force an English Prayer Book on Devon and Cornwall. On 2 July 1549, 2,000 rebels laid siege to Exeter.

It was not only in the shires that Seymour faced problems. His autocratic style had alienated several members of the council in London, whose support he now needed. He did not dare leave the capital himself but he did not know which of his conciliar colleagues he could trust with an army. On 9 July, Lord Russell, sent to quell the western rebellion, halted at Honiton, refusing to advance on Exeter until Seymour sent reinforcements.

At the same time a commotion at Wymondham, Norfolk, involving the breaking of hedges, turned into a mass movement when Robert Kett, a landowner of moderate means, accepted the leadership of the rebels and set off to attack Norwich, then the second largest city in England. By 11 July he had

amassed a force of 16,000 followers and set up camp on Mousehold Heath, close by the city. When news of this and other disturbances reached London the following day, the city was placed under martial law. The capital was wracked by mounting fear of demonstrations of sympathy for the rebels.

Seymour, meanwhile, was with King Edward at Hampton Court and under virtual siege. Landowners demanded that he take action against unruly tenants, and his councillors urged him to send troops to the trouble spots to make examples of rebel ringleaders. Instead, he hesitated.

On the night of 21–22 July, Kett's 'army' attacked Norwich, bombarding the city with confiscated cannon. His men stormed through breaches in the wall and, fighting their way hand-to-hand through the narrow streets, reached the market place. Kett set up his own court, passing judgment on prisoners dragged before him and authorising foraging parties to commandeer provisions from houses and surrounding farms. He sent the government an ultimatum of 29 demands, insisting that they were in line with Seymour's policy, and directed only against landowners who were "enemies of king and commonwealth".

Once again, Seymour dithered. It was the 28th before he sent a mere 1,300 mercenaries and local levies, under the command of William Parr, Marquess of Northampton, to face Kett's vastly superior force. Parr had little military experience, and it showed. Soon after Parr's arrival, Kett's army attacked, inflicting on Parr a humiliating defeat. An eyewitness described the scene: "Lamentable and miserable was the state of the city at this time when nothing was seen or heard but lamentation and weeping… the clashing of weapons, the flames of the burning, the ruin and fall of houses, and many other fearful things which… struck with incredible sorrow the hearts and ears of all that heard it."

Too little, too late

Now, at last, Seymour seems to have stirred from his stupor. Fearing that Kett's army would march on London, he doubled the guard on the city gates, set up gibbets as a warning to disaffected citizens and instructed the bishop of London to preach at St Paul's that "those who resist temporal authority resist God's ordinance, and are utterly damned. The rebels deserve death as traitors and receive eternal damnation with Lucifer."

But for most members of the political class, Seymour's intervention was too little, too late. With the capital in a state of panic, several councillors now abandoned him, quitting Hampton Court and meeting in Westminster – to all intents and purposes a rival government.

However, better news for Seymour came from the West Country. Russell, having been granted reinforcements, defeated the rebels at Fenny Bridges, Clyst Heath and Clyst St Mary and raised the siege of Exeter. He arrived none too soon. A contemporary chronicle related the suffering of Exeter's besieged citizens: "Many assaults and sundry skirmishes were made, the gates set afire, the walls undermined, the suburbs burned and divers killed… the citizens, having no bread, were driven… to eat bread made of bran and worse and the prisoners in the gaol… were fed with horseflesh."

If William Parr was condemned for weakness at Norwich, Russell was soon being accused of undue brutality. At Clyst Heath the commander ordered 900 bound prisoners to have their throats cut. Russell pursued the king's enemies over a wide area and hanged those he hunted down in places as far away as Minehead and Bath. On entering Exeter, he unleashed vengeance so gruesome that it appalled even seasoned warriors. It is estimated that the Prayer Book Rebellion cost 5,500 lives.

Edward VI: the pitiless king

Did the young king revel in his uncle's disgrace?

We can't be sure what was going through Edward's mind as Seymour lurched from one disaster to the next in the autumn of 1549. But an extract from his diary gives us a clue. In it the king relates how the London councillors sent him "A very gentle letter… to declare [the Protector's] faults, ambitions, vainglory, entering into rash wars in my youth… enriching himself from my treasure, following his own opinions and doing all by his own authority, etc. [The next day] the lords came to Windsor, took him and brought him through Holborn to the Tower." Edward's tone is emotionless, with no suggestion of regret for his uncle's fate. So did he resent Seymour's control?

Edward was an orphan. The boy's only close relatives were his uncles, Edward and Thomas Seymour. In the game of thrones that was Tudor politics, they both played for the highest stakes. Thomas was a charmer. He married Henry VIII's widow, Katherine Parr, and had designs on Princess Elizabeth. He also courted the boy king's friendship by giving him money and pointing out how badly the protector treated him.

As for Edward Seymour, he kept young Edward on a tight rein, restricting access to his royal charge and planting spies in the royal household who informed him about everyone who approached the king.

The tactic may have worked in the short term. But Edward VI, no less than Seymour himself, took the wilful Henry VIII as his model. Now, it appears that he was ready to cast off Seymour's avuncular tutelage.

Rival armies

By now, order was also being restored in eastern England – though, unfortunately for Seymour, one of his greatest rivals would take the credit. At the end of August, John Dudley, Earl of Warwick – at the head of an army of 10,000 levies, fortified by a further thousand German mercenaries – seized Norwich, cut Kett's supply lines and confronted him at nearby Dussindale. In the resulting battle, hundreds of peasants were slain.

Dudley returned to London a hero. As his mercenaries set up camp outside the city, the "ruin" that William Paget had predicted for Edward Seymour in his letter of 7 July appeared an inevitability. Feeling himself increasingly isolated, Seymour ordered all armed levies to be stood down. The Westminster councillors ignored him.

The next few weeks saw the rival governments at Hampton and Westminster locked in stalemate. On 5 October, Seymour, now panicking, sent a flurry of messages to local officials ordering them to come to Hampton Court with as many armed men as possible, "to defend the king and the lord protector, against whom a most dangerous conspiracy has been attempted".

The accusation of treason galvanised Seymour's rivals into action. Astonished Londoners saw them processing through the city "weaponed and had their servants likewise weaponed, attending upon them in new liveries". Seymour responded by ordering the lieutenant of the Tower of London, Sir John Markham, to hold the fortress against the rebels. Instead, Markham handed it to the councillors. Seymour now fled by night with the king to Windsor, calling on all loyal Englishmen to come to his aid. It was a forlorn hope. The force was now decidedly with Seymour's opponents.

The protectorate was all but over and on 14 October Seymour was escorted to the Tower. But that wasn't the end of the story. In 1550, Seymour made a dramatic return to the council, and there he might have stayed if he had been content to accept a subordinate position to his old comrade-in-arms, John Dudley. He was not. Seymour was drawn into personal rivalries within the council – and

he lost. In January 1552, the man who had held England's fate in his hands just a few years earlier, was executed for trying to overthrow Dudley.

By any standards, Seymour's fall from grace was precipitous. Its root cause may have been his attempt to imitate Henry VIII's model of absolute rule. The trouble is, Seymour was not Henry. He lacked the king's legitimacy and, above all, his ruthlessness. Seymour was plagued by contradictions. He declared his opposition to money-grubbing landowners, but spent hugely on a new London palace – Somerset House – and other grandiose projects. He abhorred violence but was indirectly responsible for thousands of deaths. When firm action was required, he wavered. All this alienated England's political class. And when they withdrew their support, Seymour was doomed.

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