

Why had the policies of Charles I and his ministers aroused

[History](#)



Charles I's reign up to 1640 has created widespread and heated academic debate as to what caused, if any, opposition from public, church and government. Historians such as Barry Coward see events such as the personal rule, vast religious changes as well as pressures from governing three kingdoms as contributing to opposition towards the Caroline court. Others such as John Morrill take a more precise view that it was the religious changes alone that caused the worst opposition.

This essay seeks to evaluate these numerous critiques on a volatile period of British history, in order to form some understanding as to why Charles I's policies caused such widespread public dissatisfaction. In particular the personal rule, Laudianism and the kingdoms of Scotland and Ireland will be addressed amongst other areas in order to form a valid opinion on the issue in question. William Laud's promotion to Archbishop of Canterbury was one of the most controversial acts of Charles I's reign and set the scene for much religious paranoia and ultimately conflict.

The following changes Laud introduced, commonly known as Laudianism, created widespread rage amongst the population that was ignored in its entirety by Charles. Indeed the religious changes concocted by the Caroline court caused much aggravation in many other areas that could otherwise have been avoided, as will be discussed later. The 'Popish plot to subvert England's religious law'¹ was also felt across the other kingdoms of the island of Britain.

The puritanical masses within the nation saw Laud's changes as a return to Catholicism. The fact that the King was wed to a Catholic, who had her own

private church as well as Catholics in her court, 2 did little to put minds at ease as to the religious direction of the country. As a result an undercurrent of resistance was formed, and continued to form as England came to odds with Scotland and Ireland over the issue of religion. Laud's attempts at religious conformity were an attempt at creating a united nation, united by religion³.

James VI/I had attempted to create balance in his kingdoms, yet Charles' arrogance and refusal to compromise led to an extreme attempt at unity, forced and unnatural. This perception that religious conformity was to be force-fed was not accepted and strengthened opposition greatly, as well as the growing paranoia of a "Popish Plot". England, having spent almost half a century under clear Protestant rule, faced what was seen as a sneaky transition to an alignment with Rome. One of the most enduring features of the period leading to 1640 was the personal rule of Charles I.

Often cited as the "Eleven Years Tyranny" by Whig historians, recent revisionists have attempted to redress the universally accepted view of a tyrannical period of British History. Indeed, analysis of the period shows that one of Charles's few tyrannical acts in the period was numerous religious reforms. Kishlansky suggests that far from being an attempt by Charles to rule almost as dictator, it was in fact a desire for peace and harmony in his kingdom, albeit unsuccessful in its execution.

Both sides were unprepared for any kind of rebellion⁴ or indeed civil war. However the outward compliance towards numerous changes and taxes often concealed inner anger that would later become apparent - Indeed John

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Morrill has termed this as the 'Coiled Spring Effect'⁵. The growing sense of distance between court and people was only heightened by the religious differences. For example payment of Ship money regularly exceeded 90 percent up to 1638, making the crown vast sums of money that the public felt were being used to create a safety net in the event of war.

When it became clear that funds were to be used in a religious war in Scotland, payment of ship money became considerably more difficult to extract. The religious overtones of the personal rule created not a solid opposition, but a fractured and dismembered one. This created tension beneath the surface. The slow roasting over the 11 years ultimately ended in considerable outbursts across the kingdoms as paranoia over the Popish plot and religious change came to a tee as war was waged on Scotland. The personal rule caused opposition due to Charles continued attempts at forcible religious reform.

The desire for peace and harmony failed because this perfect world was inconceivable to Charles unless Laudianist policies were in place across his domain. The importance of religion to the monarch seemed to be more important than his public - the privacy of his court along with its gradual alignment with Catholic supporters led to growing feelings of unease between court and country. This social division only reiterated the religious differences between the majority and the king, the coil slowly began unravelling over a period of 11 years.

Of course the personal rule gave Charles little choice in terms of raising capital other than through coercive, backdoor means. Funding three

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kingdoms was a difficulty, and academic decision is split as to the level of resentment the various taxes issued on the public caused. Medieval laws were resurrected in order to raise capital rapidly.

The 1630s saw fines issued to those holding land worth more than £40 p. a. or more who had not received a knighthood⁶, using laws all but forgotten since the early 16th century. Fines could be as high as £10, and taxation on the landed gentry and merchants was relentless. But this is where the likes of Kishlansky or Coward have missed a crucial point - the gentry did not make up all of the country. They were a mere percentage compared to the peasantry. Of course they would resent the king for suddenly taxing them highly, but to use this to generalise the entirety of the country cannot be logical. As Hibbert notes, the benefits to the country as a whole throughout the 1630s as a result of these taxes was considerable.

Roads were improved, ale houses regulated, a postal service was introduced, and efforts to make local government efficient put in place⁷. Indeed, the sudden tightening of the purse forced Charles to end the wars with Spain and France by 1630, which was greatly appreciated. However there were signs of apprehension from social groups that had every reason to be content with these circumstances⁸. Ultimately the resentment came not from the sudden rise in highly specific taxes, but from the paranoid view that concentration of these taxes were on religious grounds.

Income from recusancy, or non-conformist, fines rose from £5,300 p. a. in the late 1620s to £26,866 in 1634⁹. Opposition to ship money did not become fully fledged until 1638, when it became clear this money would be

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used to fuel what some saw as a religious war in Scotland. The sense that this conformist attitude was threatening religion¹⁰ created an undercurrent of opposition that would take until the end of the 1630s to reveal itself. It was this undercurrent that manifested itself into the norm by the end of the 1630s.

The religious tensions caused through Laud merely tightened the general view that religion was under threat by a monarch at odds with the nation. Opposition did not stem from the taxes themselves, but what people felt these taxes were going towards. Wars against the king's own subjects were not what the people wanted to hear. His taxation ultimately alienated the people he needed support from - Charles I could govern, but not rule¹¹ without these people, and the religious opposition he felt in the kingdoms of Ireland and Scotland became fully formed crises.

And it was the attempt by Charles to force conformist, Laudianist doctrine on the kingdoms of Ireland and Scotland that led to further crises in England. Conrad Russell suggests that conflict stemmed from the lack of cohesion between the countries, that the monarch's absence and obsession with England caused the most part of the problems¹². However it was far more the efforts to coerce, indeed force, Scotland and Ireland to take on the doctrine suggested by Laud that led to resentment. By ignoring the different cultures, Charles immediately ostracised himself from a peaceful relationship with his kingdoms.

The fact the king was based in England was not the cause for concern -

James VI/I was never ousted from the throne due to this- but the fact Charles

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desperately tried to force feed his kingdoms the doctrine of English churches led to bitterness. While James sought to 'nudge' the kingdoms closer together, Charles was far more determined for a rapid osmosis of Anglicanism into all aspects of the other kingdoms' existences¹³. His coronation in Scotland in 1633 was seen as distinctly English in sentiment, and at odds with the Presbyterian nature of Scotland.

The pomp of the ceremony alienated Charles from Scotland, and reforms there created a very public sense of resentment. His introduction of a new book of Canons based on an English edition in 1637 caused widespread rioting across Scotland, and Charles's refusal to reach a compromise led to preparations for war within a year. His treatment of the Irish was no less abysmal. Indeed it is almost as if he forgot them, brushing Ireland aside under almost full command by the lord deputy Wentworth, appointed in 1633.

Despite imposing administrative efficiency¹⁴, problems once again rose from the attempts at reforming the church under Laudianist ideas. The gentrified classes particularly recoiled from this scheme, as it threatened their position as Protestants and promoted, seemingly, Catholicism. The sense from the kingdoms of forced English based ideas upon them tarnished future relations greatly. Indeed, the Scottish monarch became even more unpopular as a result. The religious tensions in the three kingdoms was led to paranoia of imminent war and revolution from all sides and did little to stop conflict from becoming almost inevitable by 1640.

This inevitability stemmed from the many years of a monarch who simply refused compromise on any issue. The personal rule was born out of this stubbornness, as were many of the most troubling of policies. The levies and taxes brought about along with growing opposition across the kingdoms from all walks of life were the product of growing religious tensions as a result of ridiculous enforcements. It was almost the exclusive policy of Charles to spread and enforce his fundamentalist values echoed by Laud no matter what the cost.

The public belief that fees from ship money and other taxations were being used as reserve in order to protect the nation from enemies was abruptly ruined when they discovered the only enemy came from within. The funding of a quasi-religious 'crusade' in Scotland was deeply unpopular, as was the growing feelings and paranoia of the reality of the Popish Plot. It was not indecision that led to Charles' unpopularity - it was his failure to accept any other opinion but his own. This inflexibility made his religious reforms particularly volatile across the nation, and they infiltrated each and every aspect of his reforms.

And it was this fundamentalist approach to religion, with vain attempts to create conformity across the three kingdoms that led to the deep-set unpopularity. Charles' distance from reality, aided by a contingency of ministers who told him what he wanted to hear, not what he ought to do, blinded him to the consequences of his actions. This blindness simply gave the people a sense of an arrogant monarch who showed no affection for his

people's happiness, and the undercurrent of anger quickly surfaced into an unquenchable desire for change.