**Cromwellian England and the Instrument of Government**

The summer of 1642 saw the outbreak of the first [English Civil War](https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Origins-of-the-English-Civil-War/) between the Royalists, the supporters of King Charles I who claimed that the King should have absolute power as his divine right as king, and the Parliamentarians who favoured a constitutional monarchy and later the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords completely.

Colloquially, Royalists were also called Cavaliers in reference to the Latin caballarius, meaning horseman and in Henry IV, Part 2 [Shakespeare](https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/William-Shakespeare/) used the word to describe a haughty member of the gentry. Parliamentarians were referred to as ‘roundheads’ because many Puritan men wore their hair cropped in what would today be described as a ‘bowl cut’ in contrast to the long ringlets favoured by their royalist counterparts as dictated by courtly fashion of the day. Both names were used derisively by their opponents.

From the very beginning Cromwell was a committed member of the parliamentary army. He was swiftly promoted to second in command as lieutenant-general of the Eastern Association army, parliament’s largest and most effective regional army, followed by a further promotion to second in command of the newly formed main parliamentary army, the New Model Army in 1645.

When Civil War once again flared up in 1648 Cromwell’s military successes meant that his political influence had greatly increased. December 1648 saw a split between those MPs who wished to continue to support the King and those such as Cromwell (known as the ‘rump parliament’) who felt that the only way to bring a halt to the civil wars was through Charles’ trial and execution. Indeed Cromwell was the third of 59 MPs to sign Charles’ death warrant.

Following the King’s execution in 1649, The Commonwealth of England was introduced and lead by a Council of State to replace the monarchy. Cromwell led the English military campaigns to establish control of Ireland in 1649 and later Scotland in 1650. This resulted in the end of the Civil War with a Parliamentary victory at the Battle of Worcester on 3 September 1651 and the introduction of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland. Cromwell was appointment to Lord General, effectively commander in chief, of the parliamentary armed forces in 1650.

In December 1653, Cromwell became Lord Protector, a role in which he remained until his death five years later. Whilst he later rejected Parliament’s offer of the crown, preferring to describe himself as a ‘constable or watchman’ of the Commonwealth, Cromwell’s role as the first Lord Protector was akin to that of a monarch involving “the chief magistracy and the administration of government”. However, the Instrument of Government constitution decreed that he must receive a majority vote from the Council of State should he wish to call or dissolve a parliament, thus establishing the precedent that an English monarch cannot govern without Parliament’s consent, which is still upheld today.

Arguably the closest that Britain has ever experienced to military rule was at certain times during the period from 1647 to 1660. English forces conquered Ireland and Scotland in 1649-50 and 1650-1 respectively, and the two kingdoms were then forcibly ‘settled’ and incorporated into an English commonwealth. In England, meanwhile, the army repeatedly intervened to purge or disperse Parliaments: in 1647, 1648, 1653, 1654 and 1659 (twice). For about fifteen months, in 1655-7, England and Wales were governed by Major-Generals who exercised sweeping powers to enforce order, preserve security and enforce a ‘reformation of manners’.

The Instrument of Government

The Instrument of Government, the document which ratified the elevation of Oliver Cromwell to the office of lord protector on 16 December 1653, has a distinctive place in English political history. It was the nation's first written constitution. Except for the Humble Petition and Advice, which replaced it in 1657, it has been the only one. Perhaps the term ‘written constitution’, which might have been barely intelligible at the time, will seem too grand for either text, at least if it suggests either a start from scratch or a guarantee of static or permanent arrangements. Both documents took for granted the survival of some familiar constitutional practices. Neither of them questioned the supremacy of parliamentary statute or its capacity to amend the new arrangements. Nonetheless the Instrument's provision for the conduct of government by a single set of rules and procedures, laid down at a single time, was a bold conception. The document drew on two sets of constitutional proposals that had been formulated by the New Model Army in the later 1640s: the *Heads of Proposals* of 1647 and the *Agreement of the People* of January 1649. But whereas those texts had been drawn up for submission to parliament, the Instrument was a decree. Audaciously it was imposed not on one nation but on three, even though many of its provisions were irrelevant or ill-suited to the conditions of recently conquered Scotland and Ireland.