

William Cecil's Dilemmas

Political and Religious Change 1547-1558

These dozen years saw three different regimes. Under the child-king, Edward VI, England was ruled first by the Duke of Somerset and then by the Duke of Northumberland. Edward was then succeeded in 1553 by his sister, Mary. Each regime had different political and religious policies, forcing those in government to make choices. This activity follows the early career of William Cecil who later became Elizabeth's chief adviser, the man she trusted above any other. Yet Cecil's career could have ended before it began. What would you have done in the situations he faced between 1547 and 1558?

Cecil's Early Life

The Cecil family's rise began with William's grandfather, a Welsh gentleman called David Syssil or Sitsilt. David joined Henry Tudor in 1485 and may have fought for Henry in the battle of Bosworth. Afterwards he became one of Henry's private bodyguard, an MP and was given lands in Stamford in Lincolnshire. David's son served Henry VIII, gaining more land after the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

William was born in 1520 and educated at Grantham Grammar School and Cambridge University, where he studied law. In 1541 he married his first wife, Mary, but she died only two years later, leaving him with a young son. His second wife, Mildred, was the daughter of Sir Anthony Cooke, Prince Edward's governor, which suggests that William was winning support at court. Mildred was a formidable character, speaking fluent classical Greek, and was a good match for William. He entered Henry VIII's service, reputedly because he was overheard defending the King's supremacy against two visiting Irish priests. As he had been 14 at the time of the Act of Supremacy in 1534 William had grown up accepting the Church of England and had no adult experience of loyalty to Roman Catholicism.

Decision 1

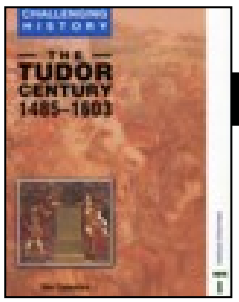
Edward VI was 9 when he became king so the government was led by a Lord Protector until Edward reached adulthood. Cecil became private secretary to the Protector, Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset. However Somerset's power began to crumble in 1549. Widespread risings that summer gave Somerset's opponents the chance to force him from office. Somerset and Cecil were imprisoned but then released. The new leader of the Council, the Duke of Northumberland, readmitted Somerset to the Council but the two men were clearly still rivals for power.

What should Cecil do?

a. accept the opportunity to work for Northumberland?

b. refuse to work for Northumberland and continue to work for Somerset in the hope that Somerset will recover power?

c. stay out of government office and try to reconcile the two men privately?



Cecil's Choice - Decision 1

Cecil, as a Tudor servant, would have had no difficulty in deciding to work for Northumberland’s new regime as he was still serving his king, Edward VI. Refusal might have created suspicions and he had little to gain personally by supporting Somerset. Out of office he would have had little chance of acting as a go-between but in fact he did his best to reconcile the two men while serving Northumberland.

Decision 2

Cecil's efforts to reconcile Somerset and Northumberland were to no avail. Somerset's scheming only led to his re-arrest in 1551 and execution. After this, Northumberland's government continued efficiently and Cecil became the junior of the king's two secretaries, putting into practice the orders of the council.

Early in 1553 the previously healthy Edward fell ill and it rapidly became clear that he was dying. His heir was his sister, Mary, a devout Catholic, but neither Edward nor Northumberland wanted a Catholic ruler. They wanted England to continue to be a Protestant country. There was no time to call parliament to alter the succession so Edward and Northumberland launched a scheme to change the succession in favour of Lady Jane Grey, who did have a claim to the throne and was also the Duke's daughter-in-law.

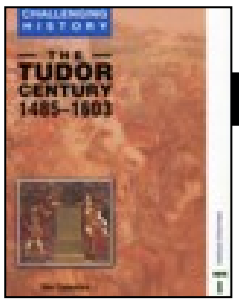
Cecil was asked to sign the document agreeing to change the succession from Mary to Jane Grey. Should he:

a. sign the document, obeying Northumberland, who was expected to imprison or even execute opponents?

b. refuse to sign because the process was unlawful and it meant disinheriting Mary, the rightful Tudor heir?

c. flee to join Mary and hope she would be successful?

Think about Cecil’s family history, his own religious beliefs and his first decision.



Cecil's Choice - Decision 2

Cecil and nearly all the other councillors, despite their own Protestantism, wanted to support Mary, the Catholic princess. They found it impossible to ignore their duty to the Tudor dynasty. Mary had been declared next in line to Edward by their father, Henry VIII. Therefore Cecil refused to agree to change the succession, although a letter to his wife reveals that he expected execution.

Then the decision was taken out of his hands because he was ordered by the king to sign the document changing the succession. Again, as a good Tudor servant, Cecil had no choice but to sign.

Decision 3

As a result of following King Edward's orders, Cecil was therefore embroiled in the attempt to prevent Mary gaining the throne. However Northumberland had little support and, when Mary began to gather support, he was quickly defeated and arrested. The plot against Mary seemed over but there was still much to worry Cecil and the members of the council.

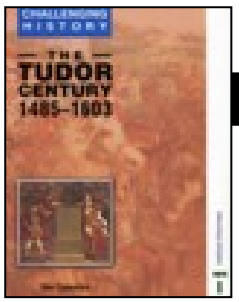
Mary was intent on restoring Catholicism and did not trust her brother's councillors, who were tainted by their pro-Protestant policy and their involvement in Northumberland's scheme. Once Mary had triumphed the council decided to send Cecil, its secretary, to the Queen to proclaim their loyalty to her and ask for her forgiveness.

Should he:

a. go to meet Mary, declare his loyalty and beg for mercy?

b. escape into exile abroad just in case Mary took vengeance?

c. refuse and return to his estates and live quietly in retirement?



Cecil's Choice - Decision 3

Cecil did travel to meet Mary on behalf of the council and was forgiven after he told the Queen his story. He may have stressed that as an official he had even less choice in obeying Edward VI than had the councillors. He may also have told her that he had used his influence in his home area to prevent Northumberland raising troops.

However Mary did not appoint him to any government office, even though she used most of Edward's councillors because she needed their experience and skill.

Cecil was too loyal to the Tudors to oppose Mary despite his disagreement with her religious policy. He lived on his estates until Mary's death but also worked as surveyor of Princess Elizabeth's lands, a post he had held since 1550. He returned to government when Elizabeth became queen in 1558.

Talking Points

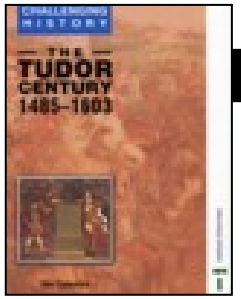
What have you learned from Cecil's choices about

a) William Cecil himself?

b) Religious changes under Edward and Mary?

c) Why this period is often known as the 'mid-Tudor crisis'?

d) Attitudes to the Tudor dynasty?



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Timeline for 1547-1558

1547	1548	1549	1550	1551	1552	1553	1554	1555	1556	1557	1558
January Accession of Edward VI		Summer major rebellions				July Death of Edward VI	Wyatt's Rebellion	First burnings of Protestants	Worst harvest of century		Death of Mary (Nov)
Edward Seymour Duke of Somerset Lord Protector		October Fall of Somerset	Northumberland rules as Lord President		Second Prayer Book	'Reign' of Jane Grey Accession of Mary	Mary's marriage to Philip of Spain		Execution of Archbishop Cranmer	War with France	Loss of Calais (Jan)