

'During the latter years of Elizabeth's reign, England became an unstable Kingdom, menaced by crisis.' Assess the validity of this view. (45)

There has been much debate amongst historians on the last 15 years of Elizabeth's reign. Christopher Haigh shows the most sceptical of all views saying Elizabeth's reign was '30 years of mediocrity, followed by 15 years of disaster.' However, in my opinion, the final 15 years of Elizabeth's reign weren't at all menaced by crisis as all supposed crises were dealt with effectively and efficiently.

The only area of Elizabeth's reign that could be seen as 'menaced by crisis' in the latter years is the overall government of the kingdom. This is mainly due to the fact that her main councillors, that had served loyally from the start of her reign, began to die in the late 1580s and early 1590s. These included Hatton, Leicester and Walsingham. Furthermore, Elizabeth's most trusted minister, Burleigh, became less influential in the final stages of her reign as his health deteriorated. He passed on many of his own duties to his son Sir Robert Cecil whose political ability wasn't as good as his fathers and whose dealings with the patronage system caused discontent, not only among the gentry but also with his colleague the Earl of Essex.

The factional rivalry between Cecil and Essex, in the words of Haigh, left Elizabeth 'politically bankrupt'. This could be seen as true, especially when considering the reign as a whole. We then see a stark contrast between the efficiency and effectiveness of government in the first 30 years and that of the final 15.

However, did the factional rivalry actually lead to crisis? I personally believe it did not, which is on the contrary to the view of Haigh. He believes that Essex's rebellion in 1601 shows a crisis stemming from the factionality. But this view doesn't take into account how poorly organised the rebellion was and how easily it was put down. In the words of Penry Williams, Essex's supporters 'had disastrously exaggerated his support', which can be seen by the fact that only 300 people came to support the rebellion which led to Essex's execution.

The war with Spain and their presence in Ireland could also be seen as a crisis, both in terms of national security and financially. Firstly, although the war with Spain and their presence in Ireland did pose a threat to national security, it never turned into a threat inside England's borders. It was largely fought in the Netherlands and in the 'New World' and the only time it seemed to be gaining and real momentum towards England's borders was in 1588 during the Spanish Armada. However, this was easily put down. Secondly, the issue surrounding the Earl of Tyrone and Ireland was only a crisis because of Essex's incompetence and readiness to disobey orders. He proceeded to try to negotiate with Tyrone when he was told by the Queen to rid Ireland of his presence. As soon as word reached the Queen that this was happening she recalled Essex and send Lord Mountjoy who dealt with the Earl of Tyrone ruthlessly at Kinsale in 1601. These two events show why the War with Spain and their presence in Ireland was never a crisis that made it to the English borders as they were both effectively dealt with. This is a view shared by Wrexham who states that 'if the main aim of foreign policy was to prevent invasion and protect national security then was a success.'

Next we come onto the financial strains placed on the Crown by the war with Spain. These strains were large especially considering that there had been a decrease in revenue from taxation and no attempt to revise the Marian Book of Rates. Therefore, it came down to subsidies granted by parliament to fund the war. During the monopolies issue, in which John Guy describes relations between parliament and Crown as being 'the most fractious' of Elizabeth's reign, the crown had to compromise to save the subsidy. Monopolies were a very unpopular policy as the increased prices and decreased quality. Therefore, the Crown decided to revoke the most popular monopolies by proclamation, including Essex's on sweet wine which contributed to his rebellion, in order to keep the subsidy that they desperately needed.

Although the monopolies issue was in my opinion as close as Elizabeth came to a 'crisis', it was soon rectified by her 'Golden Speech'. In this speech she praised the MPs and stressed their importance in governing the country. This speech ensured their support for the rest of her reign, making England a stable kingdom. This can be seen by the passing of the 1597 and 1598 poor laws which stayed intact until 1834. Penry Williams shares my view that the poor laws had an 'impressive record of achievement.'

Lastly, there is the issue surrounding religion and the opposition to her protestant Church of England. This is where Elizabeth succeeds in the latter part of her reign and sees no crisis. The execution of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587 after the Babington Plot ensures that there are no other revolts against Elizabeth as there is no longer a Catholic figurehead in England. The Catholic threat is further halted by legislation passed in 1585, that made any Catholic Priest guilty of treason, and the Archpriest Controversy of 1594. Furthermore, Henry Barrow, John Perry and John Greenwood were all executed under the act against Seditious Sectaries and with them the Puritan threat declined. The Martlepathe tracts also ended any Presbyterian threat as although they were supposed to increase support for the Presbyterian movement they instead alienated those whose support they were trying to obtain. All of this meant that the Church of England was secure and this was further consolidated by the Lambeth Articles in 1595. Penry Williams comments on the Church security by saying that it 'had won control of the commanding heights of society.'

There is certainly sufficient evidence to state that the last 15 years of Elizabeth's reign weren't as stable or effective as the first 30 years. However, to say that the final 15 years were 'menaced by crisis' is simply incorrect. Yes there were problems that took longer to deal with than others, such as the Earl of Tyrone in Ireland, but all problems were dealt with before they could amount to anything that could resemble a crisis. Furthermore, in terms of religion and legislation the last 15 years were a huge success. In these years Elizabeth consolidated the Church of England and caused the birth of the welfare state through the poor laws. This period also contained only one rebellion, or two if you count the Oxfordshire Uprising, which were both put down extremely quickly due to a lack of popular support. For these reasons I do not believe the latter years of Elizabeth's reign were menaced by crisis or that England was an unstable Kingdom.