

## Robert Parsons: a Jesuit for today?

Joe Egerton

400 years ago tomorrow, on 15 April 1610, Robert Parsons SJ died in Rome. Joe Egerton suggests that faced with today's theological, political and social challenges we should reappraise the superior of St Edmund Campion, advocate of a free Parliament and founder of Stonyhurst.

Evelyn Waugh, in his great biography of Edmund Campion, described Robert Parsons as the exemplar of the sinister Jesuit of popular imagination. Stonyhurst ignores its founder; it celebrates Campion day instead.<sup>1</sup> For a century after his death, Parsons remained 'the great enemy', the most reviled man in England.<sup>2</sup> The 1913 edition of the Catholic Encyclopaedia summed him up thus: 'Though his services in the mission field, and in the education of the clergy were priceless, his participation in politics and in clerical feuds cannot be justified except in certain aspects.'<sup>3</sup> Seldom has an individual's reputation been so comprehensively trashed. The time has come for a re-appraisal.

### *The historical background to Parsons*

Government by consent dates from the seventh century in England.<sup>4</sup> By 1300, the shires and towns sent representatives to Parliament.<sup>5</sup> By 1386, Richard II was reduced to a constitutional monarch, with Lords Commissioners (a cabinet) running England with the support of the Commons. In 1399, Richard, having reasserted himself, was deposed by the Lords and Commons who conferred the crown on the Duke of Lancaster. During the early years of Henry VI, Parliament effectively governed England. In 1459, Parliament determined the succession to Henry VI and in 1461 Edward IV 'toke upon him the crowne of Ingland by the avysses of the lordys spiritual and temporalle, and by the elexyon of the commons'.<sup>6</sup>



Robert Parsons SJ

Although Edward IV diminished the power of Parliament, it was emasculated under the Tudors. Henry VII's is known as 'the obedient Parliament'. In 1529, Henry VIII summoned a Parliament that was to last until 1536 while he made himself Supreme Head of the Church of England, requiring all to swear an oath accepting this title and dissolving the monasteries.<sup>7</sup> When a new Parliament assembled in 1536, its very organisation was altered

to emphasise the royal supremacy. The King – previously sitting with the Lords Spiritual and Temporal around him – sat in isolation on his raised throne. The Lords Spiritual sat below a layman, the King's vice gerent; the Lords Temporal regardless of precedence below the chief ministers. Meanwhile the King's commissioners were destroying the monasteries that had provided welfare for the people of England, leaving 'the whole face of the country for a century [as] that of a land recently invaded by a ruthless enemy'.<sup>8</sup>

Henry VIII had sought to be his own Pope but left the liturgy intact. Under Edward VI radical change was made, only to be reversed under Mary. On 17 November 1558, Mary and Cardinal Pole died, Elizabeth ascended the throne and, despite strong resistance from the bishops, the lower clergy and the universities, secured a new Act of Supremacy, making her supreme governor of the Church in England. 'Increasingly however historians of English Christianity speak of ...a settlement that settled very little.'<sup>9</sup>

By the 1580s, the regime is reliant on its spy masters, pursuing a religious policy at odds with the old established culture and with poverty increasingly evident. The prosperity of one half of the nation is at the expense of the other. There is demand for better education and a collective memory of an effective Parliament. England is ready for a coherent, political programme based on the beliefs of the majority of the nation. Enter Robert Parsons.

### *The formation of Parsons*

Robert Parsons was the son of a farming family in West Somerset. His enemies were later to claim that he was the illegitimate son of the parish priest, a former monk who secured the young Robert a place at Taunton school. We may infer that he was flogged savagely, because he later proposes to ban severe corporal punishment in schools. From Taunton, Robert goes to Balliol College, Oxford in 1562 and becomes a Fellow in 1568. In 1558 at the death of Mary Tudor and Cardinal Pole,<sup>10</sup> Oxford was Catholic through and through. The Elizabethan regime found this slow to reverse, although Parsons seems to have been more associated with the Protestantism than his near contemporary Edmund Campion. In 1574, Parsons was forced to resign his fellowship – his enemies allege that this was due to disreputable reasons. Journeying on the continent he met an English Jesuit, Fr William Good, and in 1575 he became a Jesuit himself. He completed his novitiate (including the Spiritual Exercises) and held positions of increasing trust in Rome until 1580, when he was selected to lead the Jesuit mission to England.

Elizabeth's government reacted strongly to the mission, executing Edmund Campion. After the martyrdom of Edmund Campion, Parsons became engaged in political projects, although never to the exclusion of the spiritual. While in England he had conceived the project of a book that would provide a guide in English to those seeking to exercise Ignatian Spirituality, in light of persecution of mounting ferocity that denied the possibility of guided or preached Exercises. This led to the *The Christian Directory*, described by Evelyn Waugh as a book of sturdy piety, and shamelessly plagiarised by protestants.

### *The political agenda*

Parsons was closely involved – he always maintained with others – in writing *The Conference on the Next Succession*. The title was enough to cause the Queen to command the services of her rackmaster. The contents were even more scandalous: monarchs did not receive their office from God but by the consent of their subjects. These subjects could depose a monarch. When in 1601 the Earl of Essex signalled a revolt by staging Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Elizabeth shouted at her trembling counsellors: 'Know you not I am Richard?' *The Conference* was cited at the trial: Essex, running the line 'they're all at it', accused the chief minister Robert Cecil of having read this banned book.

Parsons was the sole author of *The Memorial on the Perfect Reformation of England*. This was the first election manifesto – the Catholic agenda for a sweeping reform of England.

Parsons believed in free elections. Serious Anglican historians today believe, like the Victorian A F Pollard, that a 16<sup>th</sup> century free election 'would have returned the Pope'.<sup>11</sup> So one dimension of *The Memorial* was institutional reform to place the government of England in the hands of the *Estates* that make up the English nation – the Lords Spiritual and Temporal and the Commons. The Privy Council that met sometimes twice a day to run Elizabeth's government, was to be transformed into a *Counsel of the Reformation*, a modern cabinet with an agenda set out in that manifesto which is *The Memorial*. The Commons was to be reformed. Only the shires and populous towns were to elect MPs, and elections were to be free. The business of the Commons was to be controlled not by the *Counsel* but by a Committee of the House itself. For every major measure the arguments for and against were to be set out – our modern idea of a Loyal Opposition. MPs should vote by casting coloured ballots – this would destroy the power of the Whips and their sixteenth century equivalents.

Parsons called for a massive programme of social reform of the English nation: a good secondary school in every town; a fifty percent increase in university places; laws to protect married women's property; overhauling the criminal justice system to give

defendants effective rights; the establishment of credit unions to free poor families from dependence on loan sharks. This programme was not to be achieved by a secular state. The bishops were to have a major role in promoting a decent society; so also were confraternities, our voluntary groups, although informed with a strong spirituality.

To finance his reforms he proposed to tax those who had taken possession of the abbey lands after the dissolution of the monasteries: the Cavendishes (now Dukes of Devonshire), the Russells (Dukes of Bedford) and the Thynnes (Marquesses of Bath). Parsons' fiscal assault had two objectives: it would finance the programme of educational and social reform; and it would reduce the power of the oligarchy. This was an act of supreme real politique. As Disraeli was to observe, in an analysis endorsed by his successor Macmillan, the entire course of English history for three centuries was determined by the determination of the oligarchs who had seized the abbey lands to cling to their ill gotten gains.<sup>12</sup> The monstrous rapine of Henry VIII – decried equally by Parsons and Disraeli – was to lead to the triple curse of oligarchic government, debt based public finance and near perpetual war with France.

Parsons thus set out a truly radical agenda of social, economic and political reform. He proposed to fill the poor with good things and to lift up the humble and meek. Little wonder the rich and powerful and their placemen fought to retain their seats.

### *The major critique of Parsons*

Parsons declared himself opposed in principle to religious toleration. He appears to favour an English Inquisition and restoring the Heresy Acts. A superficial reading causes us to recoil in horror. A closer reading suggests that Parsons, working in Spain and Italy, was kicking proposals for religious persecution into the long grass while avoiding offending the zealots of the local Inquisitions.

Parsons was very critical of the Marian counter-reformation. He rejected the immediate introduction of any form of persecution, proposing evangelisation and 'sweetness'.

*The Memorial* suggests that the freely elected Parliament might at some time consider Heresy Acts. MPs would have to listen to the arguments against and then have a secret vote. Parsons praised the Inquisition, and promptly says it would be necessary to decide which model of inquisition to follow – the Spanish, the Italian, or the Roman. Raising the question 'which model of inquisition?' is like asking: 'which model of PR?' – a sure way of ensuring that nothing is actually done!

If Parsons had advocated religious toleration in principle he would certainly have been arrested by the Inquisition and probably burned at the stake. But he defines toleration as a belief that religions are equally valid. As Pope John Paul II rejected the equal validity of religions in *Domine Jesu*, Parsons can properly do the same, while neatly ensuring that 'temporary' toleration continues indefinitely.

### *Parsons today*

The prosperity of half of England at the expense of the other half; a weak Parliament dominated by ministers in thrall to the wealthy and powerful; public policies designed to subvert our historic religious values; the hint even of persecution: might not Robert Parsons have something to say to us today about the need to listen to God and to respect the dignity and potential of every human being?

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*There will be a celebration of the life of Robert Parsons SJ at Corpus Christi, Brixton, at 6.45pm on Thursday 29 April 2010. For further information, email [joe@ignacity.info](mailto:joe@ignacity.info).*

<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> December – the anniversary of the martyrdom.

<sup>2</sup> In 1690, eighty years after Parsons' death, an Anglican clergyman called Gee obtained one of very few copies of a manuscript he had left at his death and published it under the title 'The Jesuit's Memorial for the Intended Reformation of England under their first Popish Prince'. Gee declared that in publishing it 'I am doing a greater service to the Protestant interest against Popery than anything I was able to do [in the reign of James II]'. Imagine if Lord Mandelson were to try to use a speech of Neville Chamberlain to convince the voters of the wickedness of David Cameron! That the protestant government of 1690 should have seen publishing Parsons as effective propaganda demonstrates the extent to which he was the embodiment of the Catholic challenge.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11729a.htm>

<sup>4</sup> The Dooms of King Wihtred of Kent, drawn up around 695, have a preamble 'the notables, with the consent of all, drew up these Dooms add them to the legal customs of the people of Kent' (Powell and Wallis, *The House of Lords in the Middle Age* (Powell), page 2. St Isidore (d. 636) states that law is created by the assent of the people – the *natu maiores* (notables) and the *plebs*. 200 hundred years later Alfred legislates on the advice of his Witan and approval of all. Ethelred II has gone to posterity as 'the Unready'; he was 'Unraed' which actually means 'uncounselled'. The Conqueror made a notable addition to the historic coronation service - the Archbishop of York asked in English if all present would have William for their lord; 'writes the Norman chronicler, "they joyfully gave their assent without the least hesitation, as if, by the inspiration of heave, they had been given one mind and one voice'.

<sup>5</sup> Apart from a mysterious reference in 1213, four knights from each shire were summoned to the Counsel (not yet called Parliament) from each shire in 1227 (Powell, p 180) In 1265 a Parliament is summoned with two knights from each shire and two 'lawful and good' citizens of the cities and boroughs. At around this time, St Thomas Aquinas, in the *Summa Theologiae*, affirms the definition of St Isidore. By 1290, we have the first clerk of the Parliaments in function if not in name, Gilbert of Rothbury. (Powell, p. 212 ) In 1301, there is a Parliament that makes a number of

demands – including the appointment of 'ministers by common consent'. A bill is presented to Edward I who later orders the arrest of the man who brought it – Henry of Keighley – who perhaps should be considered the first known Speaker of the Commons (Powell, p243).

<sup>6</sup> Powell p 505

<sup>7</sup> Powell p 563 et seq

<sup>8</sup> Disraeli's description in *Sybil* of what Parsons described as 'the monstrous rapine'. The full passage reads: 'It is war that created these ruins, civil war, of all our civil wars the most inhuman, for it was waged with the unresisting. The monasteries were taken by storm, they were sacked, gutted, battered with warlike instruments, blown up with gunpowder; you may see the marks of the blast against the new tower here. Never was such a plunder. The whole face of the country for a century was that of a land recently invaded by a ruthless enemy; it was worse than the Norman conquest; nor has England ever lost this character of ravage.'

<sup>9</sup> *Not Angels, but Anglicans, A History of Christianity in the British Isles* page 153: the author of the essay is Canon Judith Maltby of Corpus Christi College, Oxford

<sup>10</sup> The two died on the same day – 17 November 1558. Cardinal Pole was the last Catholic Chancellor until the election of Lord (Chris) Patten and had vigorously promoted the teaching of Catholic theology: see Eamon Duffy, *Fires of Faith*

<sup>11</sup> See chapters 16 and 17 of *Not Angels, but Anglicans*

<sup>12</sup> For Disraeli, see in particular the trilogy, *Coningsby*, *Sybil* and *Tancred*. There are repeated echoes of *The Memorial* ad in an autobiographical aside in *Coningsby*, a work that is warm in its praise of the Jesuits, Disraeli claims to have been educated by a Jesuit, Rebello. His father Isaac D'Israeli possessed one of the greatest private libraries in the world, containing a large collection of writings on the Stuarts on whose reigns – and religious policy – Isaac wrote. Isaac's little book on James I contains a clear reference to *The Conference*. The identification of Rebello with Parsons (whose works were also known to individuals closely associated to Young England in the 1840s) is pretty safe. For Macmillan, see *The Macmillan Diaries: The Cabinet Years 1950-1956*, edited by Peter Catterall, and in particular note 23 on page 229, quoting an entry for 5 August 1953.