



## Government Policy under Richard III: Historians' Verdicts

As you read each of these passages, make a note of the answers to the following questions. Then you can compare the approaches of the different historians.

- What actions were taken by Richard's government?
- Was policy conservative or innovative?
- What external forces shaped the decisions taken?
- What motives were behind Richard's policy?
- What was Richard trying to achieve as king?

### **Charles Ross, *Richard III* (1981)**

Richard III's reign was too short to allow him to make much significant change in the ways in which his realm was governed, even had he wished to do so. Political necessities forced upon him certain innovations, but for the most part his government was essentially conservative in character. He had no choice but to rely on the tried and proven methods developed by his brother over the previous twenty years.

. . . Certainly, he was much concerned that justice be seen to be done, even if this wish be interpreted as no more than a part of his campaign to present himself to his subjects in a favourable and beneficent light, and he made every effort to give full publicity to these good intentions.

. . . Within the administrative framework he inherited from his brother, Richard and his advisers strove to tighten and improve existing procedures. In some degree, this also involved further centralization, forced upon him by his acute shortage of reliable manpower. Many tasks could only be given to men close to the king and fully trusted by him . . . Richard's efforts towards administrative improvement are especially noticeable in financial affairs. . . .

Richard reacted, sensibly and intelligently, to the immediate demands of his own political circumstances, as a usurper who was given little breathing-space to affirm his good intentions as king, and for whom an immediate appeal to the good will of his subjects was of overall importance.

. . . a major objective of Richard's diplomatic relations with the continental princes [was] to secure their benevolence and persuade them not to lend support to the earl of Richmond. In this task he was to prove ultimately unsuccessful.

**Anne Sutton, “A Curious Searcher for our Weal Public”: Richard III, Piety, Chivalry and the Concept of the “Good Prince”, in P. W. Hammond, *Richard III. Loyalty, Lordship and Law* (1986) pp. 58-90**

Princes were aware of the obligation of their position and they sought advice almost as assiduously as their clergy and servants offered it to them. . . . To Richard loyalty was the stabilising element in society binding all men and the king. The medieval conviction that duties and obligations were reciprocal was a fundamental one. . . . Richard’s [religious] foundations are an impressive record of his continuous good intentions throughout his adult life to maintain the priesthood, one of the objectives of a ‘good prince’ . . . Richard’s concern for peaceful arbitration and judicial solutions continued when he was king, shown above all by his continuation of his ducal council in the north under the Earl of Lincoln . . . A comparable exercise was Richard’s extension of the royal council’s existing responsibility to hear the suits of the poor and friendless . . .

Richard’s parliamentary legislation concerned with the law was of the same order . . . statutes allowed bail for persons imprisoned for felony on suspicion, encouraged justices of the peace to inquire into all such arrests, raised the standard of juries . . . and facilitated the correction of dishonest officials at pie powder courts. These last three statutes benefited the king’s lowest and least sufficient subjects and were aimed primarily at corruption in the legal system. This is so predominantly and generally the concern of Richard’s administration that it cannot really be doubted that it was he who gave this legislation its character . . .

On the preceding evidence I would argue that Richard conformed to the models presented to him of the ‘good prince’ and consciously initiated policies in that image as both duke and king. It was an image directed to the common weal. If such an image was propaganda as we are told (and all governments have their propaganda) then it was admirable propaganda, and there is no evidence to make us suppose it insincere. It can be found before his accession and after it. It was not initiated to retrieve a lost reputation as Polydore Vergil and Professor Ross assert, rather the loss of reputation was Richard’s one failure in his active policy of being a ‘good prince’.

**Keith Dockray, *Richard III: A Source Book* (1997) pp. 95-6**

Since he reigned for so short a time, it is difficult to judge Richard III’s potential qualities as a ruler or draw meaningful conclusions about his government as king; also, what looks like good kingship and firm government may, in reality, be nothing more than Richard trying to widen and deepen his basis of support. Nevertheless, he does seem to compare not unfavourably with Edward IV and Henry VII (neither of whom, incidentally, would have much of a reputation if they had to be assessed merely on their early years in power): indeed, if we are to believe the *Rous Roll*, Richard III ruled his subjects ‘full commendably, punishing offenders of his laws,

especially extortioners and oppressors of his commons' and won the 'love of all his subjects rich and poor'. Ricardians certainly draw attention to the statutes passed by the king's only parliament and with some justification: even if he was primarily concerned to enhance his popularity, he did sanction (and perhaps even encourage) measures – such as the act condemning benevolences – which clearly benefited his people . . . Richard's continued interest in the government of the north, and determination to maintain his authority there (even, if necessary, at the expense of border magnates such as Henry Percy Earl of Northumberland), is demonstrated by his retaining the wardenship of the west marches in his own hands . . . The king certainly identified himself strongly, too, with promoting justice and securing law and order in the provinces . . . Richard did make efforts to improve royal financial administration; and the need to provide for defence against an anticipated invasion by Henry Tudor in 1484-5 did not come cheap, even forcing the king to raise an unpopular national loan in the spring of 1485.

**David Hipshon, *Richard III* (2011) pp. 1-2, 143, 164-9**

Richard's reign had a lasting impact on the nature of monarchy and government in England. By continuing to use the methods his brother, Edward IV, employed in royal administration, the policy of making use of the royal household, particularly in the area of finance and the management of the crown lands to increase royal revenue was preserved. The promotion of loyal and trusted men from within the household, often of relatively humble origins, was another feature of Edward's reign that Richard adopted and accelerated . . . if Richard's aim in seizing the throne had been to preserve royal power untrammelled by magnate faction, this was certainly a consequence of it.

Richard began his reign with a splendid coronation in Westminster Abbey on 6 July 1483. Like his brother, Edward IV, he fully understood the importance of magnificent display . . . The message Richard aimed to promulgate was that monarchy was safe and that strong government would follow from good kingship. It was a skilful strategy aimed at obscuring the violent overthrow of the rightful king.

[After Buckingham's Rebellion] The fruits of the new policy of distancing the Ricardian regime from the Edwardian one became evident as soon as parliament met at the end of June 1484 . . . The *Titulus Regius* is as much a manifesto denigrating the previous government as a formal representation of a legal title to the throne. . .

As duke of Gloucester, Richard had built up a reputation for the impartial administration of justice promoted by his ducal council . . . This concern was reflected in the articles by which the new council [of the North] was to be governed. . .

There can be little doubt that Richard's concern for the welfare of the poor was genuine and sincere. Of course, there was a propaganda element in his proclamations to that effect as there was also a degree of self-interest. Injustice and disorder had a major debilitating effect on the ability of the king to administer the

realm effectively and, if it became endemic, on his capacity to remain secure on the throne . . .

Richard took care to maximise the revenue from the crown estates by more effective management and control, and ensured that the revenue thus generated came directly to him for his immediate use.

**Michael Hicks, *Richard III: The Self-Made King* (2019) pp. 332-46**

. . . surprisingly and almost out of period, King Richard was different. He did want change in many different areas. He launched major projects across the whole range of government activity. Characteristically they were as big and as lavish as possible and were to be fulfilled as rapidly as possible. . . . Duke Richard brought to his kingship a list of aspirations, an urge to codify them and to work them out in detail, and a willingness to invest lavishly that he could fortunately afford . . . Of course his projects were those expected of a fifteenth-century king: not the national health, social care, education, or transport to be expected today, but the castle-building and new colleges that were approved by even such a hostile contemporary as John Rous. Upgrading the militia and appointing a master of requests were other examples . . . He evaded Scottish overtures for peace and continued the war against Scotland, finding, however, that it was not easy to bring about a successful conclusion and managing inadvertently on 13 March 1484 to revive the Auld Alliance of Scotland and France against himself. . . . Richard's earliest actions indicate his dissatisfaction with the military organisation of his realm, his readiness to make changes, and in particular to bring England's armed forces directly under his control. . . . Richard did not wish to delegate his power base in the North, nor indeed to transfer his only professional force to a potential rival. Though his son remained in the North as a figurehead to his affinity there, there was no formal transfer of powers, but Prince Edward's death forced a change of plan . . . Richard settled [the earl of] Lincoln in the north with a substantial household funded by the crown and with the support of a council, as the focus of devolved authority. Another aspect where there was progress was the reorganisation of the heralds . . . Another structural change may have been in the funding of the royal family . . . The hostile *Crowland Continuator* was critical of Richard's expenditure . . . but he does not seem to have understood the whole picture and is perhaps not the best guide.

Consider where these historians agree and where they disagree. Can you suggest reasons for the differences? How can you examine their claims?