



Government Policy under Richard III: Contemporary Sources

As you read each of these passages, make a note of the answers to any of the following questions that you can.

- Is this a source created by government or a later description about government?
- Who is it meant to be read by?
- What actions does it say were taken by Richard's government?
- What might the effects of these actions be?
- Does the source suggest Richard's motives? What do you think they might be?
- Do we know anything about the person who wrote (or dictated) this and how that might affect their opinion or the things they think are worth reporting? (And are there any parts of this that we know from other evidence must be inaccurate?)
- How does this evidence compare with the historians' views that you have already read?

1. Extracts from the Kings' Signet Book 1483-5

British Library Harleian Manuscript 433, ed. Rosemary Horrox and P. W. Hammond (1979)

II:49 "Proclamation proclaimed in Kent": the king's highness is fully determined to see due administration of Justice throughout this his Realm to be had. And to reform, punish and subdue all extortions and oppressions in the same. And for that cause wills that at his coming now into this his said County Kent that every person dwelling within the same that find him grieved, oppressed or unlawfully wronged do make a bill of his complaint and put it to his highness and he shall be heard and without delay have such convenient remedy as shall accord with his laws. For his grace is utterly determined all his true subjects shall live in rest and quiet and peaceably enjoy their lands, livelihoods and goods according to the laws of this his land. (December 1483)

II:194 A commission directed to Thomas Danyell to seize and take for us and in our name within this our realm as many masons, bricklayers and other workmen as shall be thought necessary for the hasty expedition of our works within our Tower of London and our Palace of Westminster. (December 1484)

II:207 Master Walter Field has a warrant directed to John Hayes to content and pay unto him towards the building of the Church within the King's College at Cambridge the sum of £300 of the revenues of the temporalities of the bishopric of Exeter. (February 1485)

[Note: Walter Field was provost of King's College, Cambridge; John Hayes was one of the king's receivers – an important administrator. Why might the king have access to the bishop of Exeter's finances at this time?]

III:71 Instructions given to Northumberland Herald by the Kings grace at Nottingham [13 April 1484 before a meeting with Scottish ambassadors]. The King wills that if the said Northumberland by the said Ambassadors be certified there that their prince is agreed and concluded to have an Abstinence of War both by Sea and land to endure to Christmas or All Hallows Tide at the least, then the said Northumberland to commune and cause a certain day to be appointed that the same abstinence . . . be proclaimed.

III:107 These Articles following be ordained and established by the kings grace to be used and executed by my lord of Lincoln and the lords and other of his Council in the North parts for his surety and wealth [*wellbeing*] of the inhabitants of the same.

First the king wills that no lord nor other person appointed to be of his Council, for favour, affection, hate, malice or bribery, do speak in the Council otherwise than the king's laws and good conscience shall require.

. . . if there be any matter in the said Council moved which touches any lord or other person of the said Council, then the same lord or person in no way to sit or remain in the said Council during the time of the examination and ordering of the said matter unless he be called

. . . that our said Council, for great Riots done and committed in the great lordships or otherwise by any person, commit the said person to ward in one of our Castles near where the said Riot is committed. For we will that our Castles be our gaol.

. . . that all letters and writings by our said Council . . . be made in our name, and the same to be endorsed with the hand of our Nephew of Lincoln, underneath to be these words "by the Council of the King".

2. Statutes from Richard III's Parliament

The Statutes of the Realm, ed. A. Luders et al (1816) II:477-9

Richard, by the Grace of God, King England and France, and Lord of Ireland, the Third after the Conquest, To the Honour of God and of Holy Church, and for the common Weal [*wellbeing*] of his Realm of England . . . hath ordained and established for the Quietness of his People, certain Statutes and Ordinances in Form following.

The King remembering how the commons of this his Realm by new and unlawful inventions and inordinate covetousness, against the law of this realm, have been put to great thraldom and insupportable charges and exactions, and in especial by a new imposition named a benevolence . . . the King wills it be ordained . . . that his subjects and the Commonality of this his Realm from henceforth in no wise be charged by none such Charge or imposition called benevolence.

. . . no Sheriff . . . nor any other person take or seize the goods of any person arrested [for suspicion of felony] before that the same person so arrested and imprisoned be convicted

[Note: These were printed, in French, probably by Caxton, shortly after the session in 1484]

3. John Rous, *History of the Kings of England* (written before 1492)

Quoted from A.Hanham, *Richard III and His Early Historians 1483-1535* (1975) pp. 121-3

This King Richard was praiseworthy for his building, as at Westminster, Nottingham, Warwick, York, and Middleham, and many other places, which can be viewed. He founded a noble chantry for a hundred priests in the cathedral of York . . . The money which was offered him by the peoples of London, Gloucester, and Worcester he declined with thanks, affirming that he would rather have their love than their treasure. . . .

The king then removed to Oxford and to Woodstock, where by popular request he disafforested a great area of the country which King Edward IV his brother had annexed and incorporated in the forest of Wychwood under forest law, against conscience and to the public damage. Thence he went to Gloucester, and for the ancient title of his dukedom, instituted a mayor and aldermen there. And then he went to Worcester, and finally Warwick, where the queen joined him from Windsor. There ambassadors from the King of Spain came to the king for a marriage between the king's only son and the daughter of the King of Spain . . . From here, after a stay of a week, the king moved to Coventry, Leicester, Nottingham, and Pontefract, where he instituted a mayor . . . the prince died a tragic death at Easter-tide. And in August next following the body of King Henry VI was disinterred and translated to the new college church at Windsor Castle, and honourably received there . . .

This King Richard, who was excessively cruel in his days, reigned for three years and a little more, in the way that Antichrist is to reign . . . Although his days were short, they were ended with no lamentation from his groaning subjects.

[Notes: 1. If a king annexed land into a royal forest then there were laws preventing ordinary people hunting and foraging there. 2. Instituting a mayor meant giving a town rights of self-government]

4. Polydore Vergil, *Anglica Historia* (1555 version)

Ed. Dana Sutton <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/polverg/25eng.html>

While Richard was thus in ill repute with all men . . . since he could not make amends for what had passed, he decided to erase this blot of infamy on his name by performing all duties, and creating such hope for himself that henceforth no calamity could befall the commonwealth by his fault . . . Therefore, either for that reason, or because (as contemporary popular belief ran) he now repented his evil deeds, he began to live a new life and display himself in the guise of a good man, so that he would be deemed more just, more mild, more a friend of the people, and more liberal, especially towards the poor. And thus he would first earn God's forgiveness for his wrongdoings, then lessen his unpopularity and return to grace among men. He began many works, both public and private, which he did not bring to completion, being cut off by an early death. At York he founded a college of a hundred priests. Likewise he was beginning to open his ears to his friends' good advice, when immediately thereafter it became clear as clear can be that it was fear (rarely a teacher of enduring dutifulness) rather than justice that had momentarily improved Richard, since a man's feigned goodness soon fails. And so all his counsels quickly began to come to naught. For first he lost his single son Edward, in the third month after he had been made Prince of Wales, and then a conspiracy was made against him by the doing of Duke Henry of Buckingham, although, when it came to light, he tried to suppress it before it grew great. . . .

Afterwards he convened a parliament, in which by decree of parliament all exiles were pronounced to be enemies of their country, then their goods were confiscated. Not content with that windfall, although it was a handsome one, he lastly imposed a heavy tax on the people. For to clear his name and gain popularity he had distributed so much largesse that he was beginning to be impoverished.

The full texts of all the sources above can be found online.

1. http://ricardianresources.online/1_harleian433.php
2. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000017915526&view=1up&seq=7>
3. <https://archive.org/details/richardiiihisear00hanh>
4. <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/polverg/>