

POLITICS AND DIVISION

There is turmoil in Parliament, with MPs on all sides trying to impose their will. The issues under debate are hugely divisive, not just for Parliament but for ordinary people. Divisions are exacerbated by inflammatory statements, and by the spin of the press in reporting events and opinions. No, I'm not talking about 2019; the year in question is 1625, and there's a Dorney man right in the thick of it.

The key issue of the day then was the future direction of the Church of England, and Bishop Richard Montague, born in Dorney, was not holding back in expressing his opinions.

Richard's father Laurence Montague came from a Boveney family and was vicar of Dorney when Richard was baptised there in 1577. Laurence died when Richard was a young child, and it's not known whether the boy was brought up with his father's family in Boveney or his mother's family in Wycombe. We do know that he was educated at Eton College and then went to King's College, Cambridge, after which he was ordained in 1604. His career as a clergyman progressed rapidly. He joined the staff of Wells Cathedral in 1609 and in addition Eton College appointed him as rector of Wootton Courtney in 1610. In 1613 he gave that up and was appointed by James I as rector of Stanford Rivers in Essex. He also became a Fellow of Eton College. The following year he resigned from Wells Cathedral, and two years later was installed as Dean and soon afterwards Archdeacon of Hereford Cathedral. At the same time, he was a canon of Windsor Chapel from 1617 to 1628, and in 1621 served as one of 48 royal chaplains. This role was seen a fast track to a bishopric, and sure enough Richard became Bishop of Chichester in 1628 and then Bishop of Norwich in 1638.

Although it was many years since the religious strife of the 1500s, there were still tensions in England between different factions within the Church of England. Richard tried to steer a middle path in his sermons and his published writing. Having started out as a scholar of Greek and Latin with an interest in church history, he claimed that he never intended to become a religious controversialist, but his views nevertheless attracted criticism from all sides.

The first signs of trouble came in a sermon he preached in front of the king in Windsor in 1621, when he defended the practice of praying to saints – something which did not sit well with current religious practice. In 1624, Richard published a response to an attack on the Church of England. He said that this was aimed at some of his parishioners, who he believed were being encouraged to become Roman Catholic. This upset both sides, but in particular his book was seen as being much too sympathetic to Catholicism, even though that wasn't his intention. He had expressed the view that holy pictures and images could be useful in church and he regarded many of the differences between the churches as relatively minor. This infuriated the House of Commons, who considered it undermined the Church of England and indicated that the king was leaning away from Calvinist principles. Richard was accused of publishing a seditious text. In his defence, published in 1625, Richard argued that he was simply a Christian, and did not want to be labelled as any particular sect. This simply fuelled the fire of acrimonious debate. Puritan politicians went into



print to accuse Richard of dishonouring the king, disturbing Church and State, and treating the rights and privileges of Parliament with contempt. He was questioned several times in the House of Commons, and a committee was set up to examine the case. The argument rumbled on for several years, although Parliament's attempts to prosecute Richard for heresy and schism were dismissed by Charles I when he came to power. The episode was however later considered to have contributed to the breakdown of the relationship between the king and Parliament.

The risks faced by Richard in seeking to uphold what he regarded as the truth were very real, and without support from the king he could have faced a sticky end. As it was, one of his appearances in Parliament was under arrest, and he was only allowed to return to his parish in Essex after putting up bail of £2,000. (The bail bond was signed by the king's adviser, the Duke of Buckingham, whose relative Barbara Villiers later married Roger Palmer of Dorney Court before becoming the mistress of Charles II.) Royal patronage did not stop Richard's books from being ordered to be burned. Conflicts over religion did not rage only in Parliament but also among ordinary people, and during Richard's confirmation ceremony as bishop of Chichester, held in London, objections were raised by a stationer called Jones. The day Richard was consecrated as bishop, news was received that the deeply unpopular Duke of Buckingham had been stabbed to death. His killer was hanged, only for his body to become an object of public veneration when it was put on display. Feelings were clearly running high.

Once he became a bishop, Richard largely devoted himself to work in his diocese. However, disputes over religious leanings could arise at local as well as national level. Towards the end of his life, the residents of a Norwich parish sent a petition complaining about his actions towards their parson. This was the start of the time when many puritan parishioners exercised their will to secure a vicar whose views matched theirs and to eject those they didn't like.

Richard was still Bishop of Norwich when he died in 1641. In a book published after his death, he continued to be controversial, writing that good works were acceptable to God even in pagans – the complete opposite of the prevailing view that only adherence to puritanism would result in salvation. Richard was summed up by Archbishop Laud as “*a very good scholar and a right honest man*”, who expressed his views strongly and sharply. The year after his death, the religious divides and the conflict between the king and Parliament resulted in the start of the Civil War.

Arcane theological debate may be less topical today, but passions are no less strong, in Parliament or the general public, about issues of how we are governed. Brexit has divided opinion in families just as the Civil War did. Thankfully, this time we seem to be reaching an outcome without the bloodshed which that conflict involved.

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