PART III

EARLY MODERNITY
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“A Water-Spout Springing from the Rock of Freedom”?
Corruption in Sixteenth- and Early-Seventeenth-Century England

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CORRUPT COURTIERS AND MINISTERS?

Nestling in the fold of the gentle hills west of Banbury, some twenty-five miles north-west of Oxford, is the picture-book early Tudor country house of Compton Wynyates, built by Sir William Compton, early Tudor courtier (c.1482–1528). Compton came from respectable but not wealthy origins. Where could he have found the resources necessary to build so magnificent a house? The answer lies in his exploitation of royal favor. When his father died in 1493, Compton became a ward of the crown, and may have become a page to the then young Prince Henry (c. 1491–1547). Once Henry came to the throne in 1509, Compton’s rise was spectacular. In 1510 he became groom of the stool, and later chief gentleman of the king’s bedchamber—posts which required attendance on the king morning and night. The grooms were responsible for the king’s clothing and the various possessions he took with him as he travelled from palace to palace. Compton played dice and jousted with Henry, who entrusted him with delicate tasks such as arranging Henry’s extra-marital encounters or arresting an unsuspecting duke of Buckingham.

More significantly for our purposes, Compton also received, held and spent money on the king’s behalf. In 1515, for example, some £18,000 was received by him for the king’s petty expenses. Did Compton succumb to the temptation of misusing such funds? Had over the years Compton held on to some of the moneys that had been transferred to him? Had he made money by lending the king’s treasure and pocketing the interest? Had he sometimes pocketed the principal as well? On 31 August 1527, Compton, musing on his will, sent his fellow courtier Sir Henry Guildford a letter “written in haste”. Compton had, he said, received money and jewels for the king’s use which he had failed to deliver. Despite having had a royal pardon, he was troubled in his conscience and requested Guildford and his executors to pay 1,000 marks (£666), a suspiciously round number, in recompense to the king. The reference to a pardon hints at some legal action against him, but
there is no clear or full evidence of any charges of embezzlement or theft. More broadly, did Compton exploit his proximity to the king to favor suitors seeking his assistance at court? Some miscellaneous notes record how he received six shillings and eight sixpence from John Cheyne, sheriff of Bedfordshire, for "getting the byll assynyd for the tayle of reward of bxx li".

The evidence is fragmentary and tantalizing. And his wealth can be explained in other ways. The king rewarded him with a mass of grants: he was appointed as constable of castles, as bailiff and as steward of royal manors. Compton also vigorously purchased land. He lent to noblemen in financial difficulties (perhaps with an eye to securing their estates) and he was ready to use force locally (perhaps trusting that his royal favor would protect him). By the end of his life he had become a landed magnate. He held lands in Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, Gloucestershire and Worcestershire. His great house at Compton Wynyates declared his arrival into the social elite. If he had not died of sweating sickness in 1528 he would very likely have been ennobled. His grandson, Henry Compton, was ennobled as Lord Compton in Elizabeth's reign. What drove Compton was personal service to the king—and self-enrichment. What he did was to convert the rewards and opportunities of royal service—which were by their very nature likely to be temporary and almost certainly would not last longer than his own lifetime—into a permanent landed patrimony that would both provide for him and his family in retirement or after disgrace, and, even more importantly, serve as a basis of a lasting landed endowment for his descendants.2 In all that, Compton was far from unique. Similar stories lie behind the building of a great many courtier-administrators' houses in the sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries.

Compton was essentially a courtier, not a politician. He held posts with financial responsibilities and opportunities, but he was not someone who made policy. Yet those who made policy, those who were undoubtedly what we would call politicians, were no less adept at enriching themselves. Thomas Cromwell, Henry's minister, was presented by the historian Sir Geoffrey Elton (c. 1921–94) as the disinterested visionary architect of "The Tudor Revolution in Government". Yet no less than Compton, Thomas Cromwell enriched himself. Just like Compton he turned the potentially temporary rewards of office and favor into what would, if he had not fallen for treason in 1540, have become a permanent landed patrimony. He built up estates in Sussex and the south-eastern home counties, especially from 1538.3 Cromwell was gifted the former monastery of Lewes in 1538 and would be gifted twenty-three manors by the king in 1540 when he was created earl of Essex. But much land was purchased. Where did the funds for that come from?

Michael Everett has shown convincingly that Cromwell's wealth almost doubled between 1529 and the end of 1532; in his will of 1529 he bestowed £900 in cash, in that of 1532 over £1,830.4 Everett also found records of the annuities that Cromwell received. Between March 1525 and June 1534 ninety-four are recorded, the earliest in 1525 soon after Cromwell started rising in Wolsey's service. Between 1525 and 1529, Cromwell was granted thirteen separate annuities, ranging from twenty shillings to thirteen pounds, six shillings and eightpence; in 1531 alone he received nine (ranging from thirteen shillings and fourpence to twenty pounds),
in 1532 twenty-one, in 1533 thirty-three. The annual totals rose from fifty-four pounds in 1529 to ninety-four pounds in 1531, £129 in 1532 and no less than £437 in 1533. In the single month of October 1537, Cromwell would receive £500. These annuities quickly mounted up. Annuities were usually simple payments. Cromwell was also a recipient of gifts: for example in 1532 he received twenty-four partridges and six plovers along with a request “to obtain the king’s signature.” In 1534 Cromwell was offered one hundred pounds and the stewardship of the monastic house at Wilton, together with a yearly fee of ten pounds, if he advanced a candidate to succeed as abbess there.\(^5\) Such gifts were clearly intended to influence Cromwell’s actions and reward him appropriately. Everett highlights a striking example. When Wolsey was dissolving two-dozen smaller monasteries in the late 1520s, an annual annuity of twenty-six shillings and eightpence was granted to Cromwell, then Wolsey’s servant, by the prior of Shulbrede, Sussex, so that “they maye . . . dwell all rest with owte trowbill & continue styll yn ther house.” Was this annuity they bestowed on Cromwell the price they paid to escape dissolution? Everett thinks it is even worse than that. Shulbrede was not on the list of the monasteries chosen for dissolution but Cromwell accepted an annuity from the monastery anyway.\(^6\)

Elton’s last published paper was a communication, “How corrupt was Thomas Cromwell?”\(^7\) If Elton conceded that Cromwell “probably did on occasion take what to modern eyes would look like straightforward bribes,” he denied that Cromwell was regularly receiving payments of money intended to buy favorable decisions, including grants to the person offering the bribe of offices or positions of profit. Cromwell did, as Elton notes, frequently receive all sorts of gifts—food, birds, horses, luxurious clothing—and he also expected a range of fees for issuing writs and sealing documents—fees that were levied. But all that was standard and not corrupt, Elton insisted (Felicity Heal’s reaction to this was that her former supervisor did protest too much).\(^8\)

Everett has gone deeper, concluding that Cromwell was “certainly capable of acting dishonestly for his own financial gain.”\(^9\) So was Cromwell corrupt? There are a handful of cases where payments were offered or made with very specific matters in mind, though in most cases the payments, notably the annuities, were more general gifts rewarding past favor and offering an inducement for future favor. “Does this make Cromwell an unscrupulous and corrupt minister?” Everett asks, concluding: “ultimately, yes; he took bribes and probably made considerable sums when doing so.”\(^10\) As he rose in royal favor and dealt with more and more of the king’s business, the sums involved grew too. And yet just pronouncing Cromwell corrupt does not get us very far.

First, Cromwell was not unique. As far as we know, all courtiers and officials behaved as Cromwell did, if on a smaller scale. Second, it is exceptionally difficult to find detailed evidence that would conclusively condemn him. Third, it is pretty much impossible to show that Cromwell did something that he would not otherwise have done (or that he did not do something that he otherwise would have done) because he received a payment. Cromwell charged fees and accepted annuities but it is hard to show what changed as a result. Fourth, although
Cromwell would be accused rather generally of bribery in the Act of Attainder (a bill of accusations brought before parliament and turned into an act)—he had allegedly “acquired and obtained into his possession by oppression bribery extort power and false promises ... innumerable sums of money and treasure,”11—no evidence was cited, and bribery was just the kind of general charge that could be thrown into the pot in such circumstances. Two years earlier, in 1538, Cromwell was accused by one George Poulet of being “a great taker of money. For he woll speak solicit or do for no man but all for money.”12 Cromwell’s annuities suggest that Poulet was right, but his jibe was not backed up with any details. And in the years that Cromwell was Henry’s leading minister, there was very little talk of that kind. If he had indeed been taking vast sums, especially unusually high sums, and making unjustifiable decisions in consequence, then it is very likely that his critics would have accused him of that. The Pilgrims of Grace in autumn 1536 were very hostile to Cromwell but that was because they saw him as the author of religious changes they hated and feared: they did not attack him for corruption.

So if courtiers such as Compton and leading ministers such as Cromwell were receiving gifts and annuities—to the extent that they became extremely wealthy, could buy land and build great country residences—what does that tell us about early modern politics and political morality?

**ATTITUDES TO “CORRUPTION”**

Was this “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”—a formulation borrowed from Mark Knights citing *Transparency International*,13 but a notion going back to Plato and Aristotle? Or was it that there was a large grey area between what was clearly unacceptable and what was perfectly fine? And, more directly in relation to the themes of this volume, where was “anticorruption”—that is to say, administrative and legal measures intended to root out and prevent corruption—in all this?

Corruption that took the form of outright theft was readily condemned and clearly thought indefensible. Straightforward embezzlement was prosecuted and punished. This was not described as “anticorruption”, but for our purposes such laws and prosecution for those who broke them can be seen as such. John Beaumont, receiver-general of the court of wards under Edward VI, was convicted in 1552. He had committed two sorts of offences. First, he did not record receipts as such, but rather as payments in arrears, and pocketed the receipts (amounting to £11,823); second, he invested the sums he received (£9,765), repaying the crown by the due date, but keeping the interest and returns from speculative ventures for himself. It was his successor who seemingly uncovered the first of these. No one would have approved of such outright theft and his condemnation can be seen as a vindication of contemporary standards of public honesty.14

It could also be argued that if only a very small number of officials were ever prosecuted for embezzlement that was because it was a very rare offence. For centuries the financial administration had made the prevention of such frauds its priority. From the twelfth century, financial officers were visibly accountable for the
moneys that came their way (accountability is not an exclusively modern idea).\textsuperscript{15}
And it could be concluded that in the face of large-scale fraud, measures that we would call “anticorruption” were effective in dealing with those senior administrators who stole from the crown and in deterring those who might have been tempted to steal but did not. The difficulty with such a line of reasoning is that it could be argued that, far from being unusual, Beaumont was typical, and that his case was unique only in that he was found out.

High standards of probity were also expected of judges. Above all judges were not to sell justice. Here various royal instructions and parliamentary statutes can be taken for our purposes as examples of anticorruption. The Provisions of Oxford of 1258, reinforced by later statutes, made that plain, limiting any gifts to food and drink. Judges were expected to refuse greater gifts. Direct evidence that judges were offered gifts and made judgments in favor of the donors of gifts is very hard to find. Does that mean that anticorruption measures had succeeded, that judges had internalized the values of anticorruption? But if it is hard to show that gifts affected judgments, it seems clear that giving gifts to judges was commonplace. That Sir Thomas More and Sir John Fitzjames were praised for refusing all gifts might perhaps be thought to show that the acceptance of gifts was the norm. Thomas Hobbes in the \textit{Leviathan} would write of “the frequent corruption and partiality of judges,”\textsuperscript{16} though without citing evidence. Yet perhaps looking at this in terms of corruption or anticorruption is to miss the true significance of what was going on. Perhaps the key here is that judges had already enriched themselves as lawyers before they became judges, and found their senior status sufficient reward and came to believe sincerely in their rhetoric of the public good. Moreover, it is easy to convince yourself (quite sincerely) that you are impartial; and you may indeed be impartial, despite accepting gifts. The initiative for giving gifts may well have come from the parties in dispute, not from the judge. And it might be that both sides in a legal action would provide the judge with gifts so that the judge would have no reason for favoring one party over the other, rather than with any more specific intention. Perhaps independently wealthy judges are themselves a form of anticorruption. Does, as Aristotle supposed, wealth make you incorruptible?

And it might be worth making distinctions within gifts. It is very clear that suitors seeking favors, whether specific or general, routinely offered gifts to their hoped-for patrons. Special or rare delicacies such as quails, sturgeon or venison pies, wines, horses, greyhounds and hawks feature prominently in the correspondence of Arthur Plantagenet, Viscount Lisle, Henry VIII’s deputy (effectively viceroy) in Calais in the 1530s. Clearly John Hussee, Lord Lisle’s London agent, believed that such gifts mattered, urging that a firkin of sturgeon be sent to the Lord Chief Justice or Lord Chancellor. But evidence of such remarks is rare, and, whatever Hussee believed, it is hard to show that decisions were actually taken as a result of such gifts or some suitors were favored over others. Maybe what such gifts ensured was that your case was not unduly delayed. But, again, if both sides were making gifts, it is hard to see who could gain an advantage. Paradoxically a world in which everyone offered gifts can be seen as less corrupt than one in which only some offered gifts. Gifts could in that sense even be seen as measures of anticorruption. And in many
senses gifts were given because gifts were given. Not to do so would make you stand out, raise doubts about your trustworthiness, about whether you were ‘a good chap’. It makes more sense to see them as a kind of performance than as necessarily corrupting.

Asking for and accepting monetary fees was evidently universal. There is nothing to show that this practice was seen as wrong, as corrupt, and nothing to suggest that it was deplored or that attempts were made to eradicate it as part of a program of anticorruption. There was no such program. An obvious explanation of the practice, and of the acceptance of the practice alike, is that while crown officers were paid salaries, these salaries were very low (and were not adjusted in line with later sixteenth-century inflation). Consequently, officials had long charged individuals and bodies for whom they performed services fees and kept those fees for themselves. Modern administrative departments do often charge fees for services rendered—for example, fees are charged when you renew a passport or seek probate of a will—but, crucially, these fees do not go into the pocket of the officer who is doing the administrative work for you. In the sixteenth century they did. Nor, today, would offering a larger or additional payment or giving the officer a present be tolerated or produce more rapid service (though it is worth noting in passing that you can pay double, have your application form checked at the Post Office and receive your passport much more quickly than if you pay the standard amount).

It is hard to show that paying fees made a difference (though perhaps not paying a fee might have done). So the payment of fees should be seen as conventional—more like modern tipping of taxi-drivers and waiters, rather than as attempts to bribe officials into doing something they otherwise would not have done or something illegal. It was not about securing some special favor or unusual attention. Most officials would not have made a huge fortune from such payments; it would be the very small number of leading courtiers such as Compton and leading politicians such as Cromwell who would benefit substantially. And arguably kings and queens, rather than embarking on any sort of anticorruption program, readily went along with this. It was, from the monarch’s perspective, an excellent way of rewarding their most important advisers lavishly without having to find the rewards from the revenues of crown estates or from taxation.

During much of the medieval period monarchs had exploited the church, rewarding their closest advisers with appointments as bishops and deans and abbots; the revenues of the richest sees were comparable to those of lay noblemen. In effect the church had been subsidizing the costs of government. With the increasing use of lay officials in the sixteenth century, the costs of the rewarding them for their labors now fell more exclusively on those who had dealings with those officials. The modern alternative has been officials paid by salaries funded from taxation and borrowing. The early modern method was perhaps not so different in spirit. And perhaps, though this is hard to demonstrate, a system of fees and annuities kept officials on their toes. In so far as fees were paid for specific services to be rendered, then officials who failed to do what had been agreed or what was expected would soon receive complaints.

Many leading ministers received pensions from foreign powers. Thomas Wolsey, Henry VIII’s great minister, received £7,500 from Francis I, king of France, in
1527. But scrutiny of Wolsey’s diplomatic activities hardly supports any interpretation except that throughout his decade-and-a-half in office he was pursuing what would be most to the king’s honor; and Henry’s close involvement in diplomacy makes any suggestion that Wolsey was acting independently of the king in the greedy and selfish pursuit of foreign pensions far-fetched. Receiving sums of money from foreign powers was fairly routine, with no larger significance. It was not seen as corrupt nor were any anticorruption measures introduced to combat it. In some circumstances accepting pensions from foreign powers was seen as a problem, but not because a leading minister was accepting money—rather because he was being disloyal to the monarch. And if ministers were prosecuted for accepting pensions it was on the grounds not that they were corrupt, but that they had committed treason.

The sums that courtiers and administrators received by way of fees and annuities were not publicly recorded (though it should be noted that we are not in the world of overseas bank accounts and tax havens here). We may not know just how much courtiers and administrators amassed, but we do know that they spent lavishly on land and on building the grand residences that we so enjoy visiting today. There was nothing secretive about Compton Wynyates and many other comparable sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century residences. There was thus no need for any anticorruption commission to name and shame their builders. Compton was not worried that anyone seeing his house would have gone on to accuse him of corruption. Were contemporaries concerned by the sheer scale of such accumulated wealth as reflected in building? Did some courtiers go too far? Or was all this seen as entirely conventional? It is intriguing that Compton may at some point have felt uneasy in his conscience, securing a pardon and asking his executors to make restitution. Should fear of God, fear of your fate at the Last Judgment, be seen as an internalized form of anticorruption? Yet if Compton felt some qualms, what he offered by way of restitution did not affect the bulk of his fortune.

All this is not exactly “modern” government and fundamentally calls into question the claims that Elton made for a Tudor Revolution in Government and for Cromwell as the statesman who established modern and impersonal government. It also qualifies the claims of more recent scholars who write of developing state formation. Implicit in Elton’s idea of modern and impersonal government is the model of disinterested and honest civil servants. Implicit in ideas of state formation is the model of government free from privileged special interests. But that is too optimistic a view of early modern—or indeed of any—officials. That courtier-administrators were interested in their own enrichment does not necessarily mean that they were not good administrators, but it does add another dimension to any study of government and it must be taken into account in any characterization of that system of government. In particular, if government was more personal than Elton supposed, then the attitudes, the habits and the mentalities of those individuals who were doing the administering must be seen as a significant part of government. Interesting too is the sense that the term “courtier-administrators” seems the most apt nomenclature, rather than simply “officials,” much less “bureaucrats.” For these officials were servants of the crown, and, in a real sense, members
of the king’s or queen’s court. And this militates against the very sharp distinction that Elton made between “household” and “bureaucratic” government: the two overlapped too intimately. There was no rigid distinction to be made, as one suspects Elton would have wished, between creative and hard-working administrators who got on with things and courtiers who were frivolously wasting everyone’s time.

PATRONAGE

And there was another highly important sense in which government was not ‘modern’; a sense in which many modern commentators would think it corrupt. All courtier-administrators were appointed by patronage. Leading ministers and courtiers were chosen by the king, though in a highly personal and informal way. Ministers themselves chose those who assisted them. Everything depended on the favor shown by patrons. Jobs were not openly advertised. There was no system of competitive examinations and formal interviews. All that would largely be replaced in the mid/late-nineteenth centuries as far as what we call the civil service is concerned. But in the sixteenth century everyone who secured a post in the service of the crown did so through the exercise of patronage. Sometimes money changed hands. To modern eyes that seems corrupt. Appointments should be made on merit, we would argue. Yet sixteenth-century rulers and observers did not feel as we do, did not treat patronage as inherently corrupt and took no measures that we would call “anticorruption” policies. We ought to pause, suspend our assumptions, and ask whether patronage is necessarily bad, or inferior to competitive procedures.20 The performance of modern civil servants is less than wholly persuasive. A generation ago, stating that a civil service recruited on merit was the only honest and effective way of running a modern state would have seemed axiomatic. Now that we have all too much evidence from The Blunders of our Governments of grotesque and costly incompetence, that axiom no longer holds.21 And for all the modern anticorruption measures, patronage in effect survives much more than our rhetoric suggests. Senior posts are still largely filled by patronage since the talented have to be invited as they do not always apply.

If patronage was so obviously damaging in the early modern period, it is surprising that nothing much was done about it. Perhaps patronage should be viewed less unfavorably. The buying and selling of office at first glance appears unreservedly corrupt and wasteful. Clergy had long been required to refrain from simony (though it is by no means clear that they did refrain). But if an ageing official sold his post to a young man, perhaps he was simply seeking a pension to support his retirement. It was not so different from the way that modern medical doctors in some countries—Australia, New Zealand—buy and sell their medical practice today. And patronage made sense when what was required was not any deeply specialist knowledge or training but trustworthiness. If what was needed was someone reliable, then the best way of finding him was to ask those whom you knew for recommendations. In the modern world, as Patricia Crone has pointed out, people prefer to hire cleaning ladies on the basis of recommendations from
friends rather than unknown employers because the crucial question is not whether she can clean—anyone can—but whether she can be trusted to work unsupervised in your home. If trust was of overriding importance, then “nepotism was a virtue, not a sign of corruption.”

Much modern anticorruption is concerned with rulers and officials stealing from the state—government as kleptocracy—with all sorts of concessions granted to friends on the one hand and to those believed to be dangerously powerful on the other. Patronage, on that view, is seen as an instrument by which the crown cynically increased its power, sharing the crown’s wealth and revenues with a favored few. Effective kingship, on that view, involved the skilful management of such patronage. Poor rulers were those who did not manage their patronage effectively. Much writing on patronage reifies the practice. Sir John Neale rather assumed that Queen Elizabeth and her leading minister William Cecil, Lord Burghley, ruled by granting men appointments. Hugh Trevor-Roper saw the intensification of patronage as on the one hand over-burdening the crown’s financial resources and on the other hand dangerously inflaming the jealousies of the “outs” as a parasitic court seized more and more.

Yet few historians writing in this vein have actually demonstrated the supposedly political working of patronage. The objection to this kind of analysis is that the posts to which men were appointed in the crown’s service were not sinecures—that is to say simply titles with no responsibilities or duties. That was not the case in the sixteenth century (though, intriguingly, it does seem to have been quite significantly the case in the later eighteenth century). The mass of stewardships, constableships and bailiffs to which Sir William Compton was appointed were all real responsibilities. Assuredly Compton would not carry out the duties associated with them himself: he would appoint deputies and pay them a fraction of the payments he received. But someone had to collect rents, sort out leases, deal with local disputes. And no patron would benefit if his deputy was unsuitable, incompetent or damagingly corrupt.

So patronage was an instrument of administration, rather than a matter of politics and power. It was not some grand system of outdoor relief for landowners. Lurking behind the notion that politics at this time was all about patronage is the assumption that there was a store of treasure that rulers could distribute to buy and to consolidate support. That was true only to a very limited extent. Early modern England was not an economy dependent on a single raw material that foreign companies extracted and exported. There was no easy “rent” for the ruling groups to extract. The nearest was probably to be found in sheep. Sheep, it is fair to note, yielded wool that was a lucrative export trade for a long period, and clothiers, merchants, landowners and the crown manifestly did well from it. Some individuals and families benefited hugely (as, for example, the memorial brasses of clothiers in Northleach church, Gloucestershire, bear eloquent witness). Monarchs also benefited from taxes on wool and cloth. If all that could in some senses be seen as “rent-seeking”, none of it really amounted to corruption, not least as much hard labor and mericulous organization was involved. And no one considered taking any action in the name of anticorruption.
The conference at which I was invited to give an earlier version of this chapter took as its theme not so much corruption but *anticorruption* over the centuries and in different countries. That posed me some challenges since corruption and patronage do not strike me as significant and constant political concerns in early modern England. One of the delegates at the conference observed that what I demonstrated was the *success* of corruption. Yet it would not be right to take the success of corruption as evidence of the failure of measures of anticorruption. The word failure is ambiguous. Contrary to many of the chapters in this volume, I argue that it was not that rulers tried to root out corruption but failed; rather, it was more that rulers largely failed even to try (chiefly because they did not see corruption as a great evil). But I agree with the other contributors in this volume that we must not assume that concern over corruption was constant and unchanging. It is perhaps revealing that, if the *Oxford English Dictionary* may be believed, the word “corruption” was not clearly used in its modern sense in the sixteenth century, but was instead confined to the rotting of fruit or to moral corruption. Hobbes’s use, already quoted, and a broad charge against Francis Bacon in 1621, seem to be the earliest deployment of the word in its modern sense, but it is not till much later, in the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth that it became commonplace.

**CORRUPTION AS A POLITICAL ISSUE**

In the reigns of Henry VII, Henry VIII, Mary and Elizabeth, corruption was simply not a political issue, with one important exception to which I shall return. Before the last years of Elizabeth’s reign there was little significant concern at anything of the kind that we would call corruption. It would be hard, for instance, to find many inquiries into allegedly corrupt behavior by judges or officials. And yet practices which I would unhesitatingly call corrupt seemingly abounded. Was this because in the age of Machiavelli, rulers grasped that values clash, that effective government involved the recognition of human nature and that not just the use of force and dishonest dealing but also measures that we (but not they) call corrupt were effective weapons in any rulers’ armory, whatever their professed ideals and however much they might claim to be honestly pursuing the public good? Was corruption seen as a necessary and unavoidable evil? Henry VIII and the rulers of England in Edward VI’s reign had plundered the church. In Henry’s reign, ex-monastic lands were mostly sold off at market prices but in Edward’s reign the residual ex-monastic lands and chantry properties were granted on long leases and at low rents to those in power and in favor. There are signs of resentment but nothing substantial.

It was at the very end of Elizabeth’s reign that favored courtiers were granted or sold monopolies. Originally intended to support substitution of imports, and to subsidize start-ups of new companies, grants of monopolies from the 1570s were increasingly used as rewards—rewarding crown servants and courtiers who were granted monopolies of established trades and manufactures and who could then
raise prices. In effect this was an indirect tax on consumers. Why did the crown allow this? Partly under pressure from suitors and partly as a financial expedient in difficult years. And monopolies did provoke significant resentment and political opposition. But this was a single objectionable practice and protests were neutralized when the queen promised not to repeat it. The resistance to monopolies could be seen as an anticorruption campaign, but that was not really how contemporaries saw it.23

It was in James I’s reign that corruption became a lively contemporary issue. The crown inescapably made outright grants and gifts, and in the reign of James I these may well have become damaging politically and financially. The special circumstances of James’s accession to the English throne amply explain his favor to Scottish courtiers. It is far from clear that such patronage was in fact politically helpful to the king as it provoked English jealousies. And while, arguably, corruption and the abuses of patronage reached new depths in his reign—vividly captured in attacks on the authors and beneficiaries of such corruption—we should nonetheless be wary of believing that such attacks amounted to a program of “anticorruption” or of accepting at anything like face value the charges that were made against royal ministers and favorites during his reign. Corruption was too easy a polemical weapon. Few, if any, ministers and favorites could have claimed to have been incorruptible. And courtiers and ministers who accused others of corruption were not engaged in a moral crusade intended to purify public life, but rather were out to seize a moral advantage and to embarrass their rivals, especially when those rivals were already on the way down because they had lost the monarch’s favor: “Those who came forward against Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor, in 1621 did so not because of some high-minded hatred of bribery but because they had been frustrated.”24 Believing that corruption explains your failure is a consoling thought. In this sense cries of “corruption” are no more than losers mendaciously crying foul against the referee. Perhaps they are nonetheless a sign that things are thought to be going wrong, and more likely to be found at times of military failures, fiscal pressures and political quarrelling.

There are nonetheless tensions in how historians have presented corruption under James I. Joel Hurstfield argued convincingly that efforts by courtiers and ministers to enrich themselves by accepting gifts, fees and annuities were endemic; he exonerated his hero Robert Cecil, marquess of Salisbury, but then went on to excoriate Robert Carr and George Villiers, successively James I’s great favorites—“it was only then that the system was indeed distorted into corruption ... national interests were sacrificed to a decadent court”—though without really showing how their behavior was qualitatively worse than that of others at the time or earlier.25 Menna Prestwich at one point presented Lionel Cranfield as making heroic efforts to restrain royal extravagance, but also showed him as no less personally ambitious than those he moralizingly criticized.26 And Neil Cuddy has suggestively argued that the accusations of corruption in James’s reign were not so much proportionate responses to courtiers’ and ministers’ behavior as a broader reaction to the great long-run problems of royal finance which he sees as coming to a head in James’s reign.27

Some scholars have argued that we should concentrate on analyzing the form and the rhetoric of attacks against corrupt ministers, but my strong objection to that is
that we need to know whether those ministers were actually acting corruptly in
order to pronounce safely on what those who attacked ministers for corruption
really intended. If Bacon and others really were guilty of what we would call
corruption on a grand scale, then the attacks on them will be understood in a
very different way than if they were innocent or doing no more than those who
accused them. What makes concern over corruption in James’s reign so perplexing
is that such concerns quickly and largely dissipated under Charles I when the bones
of contention were rather different. Thus it is hard to see concern over corruption as
a constant. And if, at least in the eyes of contemporaries, there was no continuing
chronic problem of corruption, it is not surprising that there was also no program
of anticorruption measures.

Charges of what I would now call corruption were here mostly about the
enrichment of those who enjoyed royal favor. Corruption was not seen as an
instrument by which kings and leading ministers ruled. In various ways, and at
different times, the crown may have been using its powers of making grants to act
politically, to win support. But it is far from sure that it did so consistently or
particularly effectively. And what does not seem to have been the case in this period
is any obviously partisan use of patronage—the kind of practice that would have
provoked an outcry and, possibly, some coherent anticorruption measures in
response. A monarch might favor one nobleman rather than another and some
gentry could be left out of the commissions of the peace, but, overall, a monarch’s
room for manoeuvre was quite limited. And where there were real jobs to be done
there was no advantage for the monarch in having them done badly.28

Bill Doyle has claimed that the undoubtedly increased constitutional and
political importance of parliament from the 1690s—when it became vital for
governments to secure majorities in the House of Commons and from when the
Commons were needed not only to grant taxes but to underwrite rapidly expanding
public debt—stimulated much greater attempts by monarchs and leading politi-
cians to control parliament by “influence-peddling through the distribution of jobs,
sinecures, and pensions” and that what came by the late-eighteenth century to be
called ‘Old Corruption’ was the consequence. For much of the century it proved an
effective system. But when the American colonies were lost, “Old Corruption”
came to be blamed as a way to underscore progress. What was called “Economical
Reform” and what we might style “anticorruption”—an assault on the luxuriant
expenditure of patronage to secure political support—was the consequence. In that
context political parties and the development of the idea of the legitimacy of “His
Majesty’s Opposition” led to institutionalized watchfulness and denunciations of
anything that seemed like corruption, not least when scandals were publicly
revealed. Doyle endorses Philip Harling’s wry observation that the clamor against
Old Corruption “was never more loud than when the thing itself was rapidly
disappearing.”29

Doyle’s model of the initial triumph of Old Corruption is very much a top-down
model. Viewed from the perspective of supplicants, however, such posts appeared
as a reliable source of income, and ambitious young men, not least those trained in
the law, might well lobby for such appointments. A good deal of the momentum of patronage came from below, a point that deserves to be heavily emphasised. And that is what was behind Namier’s remark that “corruption was not a shower-bath from above, constructed by Walpole, the Pelhams or George III [I might add Henry VIII or Elizabeth or James I], but a water-spout springing from the rock of freedom to meet the demands of the People.” (And, by “the People”, Namier no doubt did not intend the poor commons but nonetheless a large political nation, including those who might turn out at the hustings on election day.) “Political bullying,” Namier added, “starts usually from above, the demand for benefits from below.” It was most often the supplicant who initiated the search for patronage. That was certainly the case in sixteenth-century England. The death or fall of a minister or courtier stimulated shameless requests for appointment to now vacant posts. And that has implications for any consideration of anticorruption. If a significant group saw patronage as an opportunity rather than as a problem, the absence — while Old Corruption seemed to be working — of any significant measures of anticorruption is readily understood.

CONCLUSION

Namier’s invocation of the “rock of freedom” suggests that he saw such a positive interpretation of corruption in broader constitutional terms. Perhaps Namier also had in mind the impact on his family of the Russian revolution and communist totalitarianism. A society in which bribery is possible is in some senses freer than a totalitarian society in which governments control all. Bribery, it seems, secured the release of my mother from a Gestapo prison in Prague 1940. Bribery is a mechanism; sometimes — perhaps especially in illiberal or totalitarian societies — it can lead to a good outcome.

Just as “anticorruption” is a hooray-word, so “corruption” is a boo-word, too often unthinkingly deployed as a term of abuse. Its employment implies that there are more honest and open and meritocratic and effective societies than early modern England, and, especially, that in the western world we now live in such societies. Such assumptions underlie much contemporary “anticorruption” writing but those assumptions need to be teased out and proved. Is the scope for corruption actually much greater in the modern world (I think of infrastructural projects involving governments and private contractors, of rich international companies able to offer politicians and civil servants rewards far greater than their salaries) than a simple model of beneficent modernity and carefully calibrated anticorruption policies vanquishing evil corruption would suggest? As the Introduction to this volume suggests, corruption is too readily presented as a sickness. Perhaps it is a symptom, rather than the underlying cause, of any illness; corruption and patronage were (and are) in many senses attempts to make things work. Did and do corruption and patronage make societies poor? Or is it in poor societies that corruption and patronage are more likely to be found? Is anticorruption necessarily
to be thought of as positive and as effective? Maybe it is more constructive to see
corruption more as a reflection of, and a creative response to, the human condition
as men (and women), and companies and corporations, strive to live within
political societies and resolve their disputes over wealth and power. Patronage
and the giving of gifts have, after all, been with us much longer than modern
bureaucratic states and certainly longer than modern notions of anticorruption.