

What kind of ruler was Oliver Cromwell?

Case study 1: Cromwell in his own words – Source 5

A speech by Cromwell to MPs, responding to the ‘Humble Petition and Advice’, 3 April 1657

(W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The writings and speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, Vol. III, pp.445-46. Published by Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1947)

What is this source?

These extracts come from a speech that Cromwell made to a Committee of MPs in April 1657.

He was responding to the ‘Humble Petition and Advice’, which set out a new constitution or plan for ruling the country. It also offered to make him king.

What’s the background to this source?

In 1657 Cromwell and the MPs agreed a new constitution for ruling the country called the ‘Humble Petition and Advice’. Cromwell accepted this constitution, but he refused their offer to become king.

Most MPs wanted Cromwell to become king and most of the army did not. Some historians think Cromwell refused the crown because he wanted to avoid causing more arguments and fights. Other historians think it was because he thought too much pride and ambition would offend God.

It’s worth knowing that ...

In the years after the wars Cromwell and Parliament were anxious to achieve stability and peace in the country. However, Cromwell often clashed with MPs on the issues of liberty (freedom) and being tolerant (allowing people to have different ideas and ways of doing things).

MPs were terrified of returning to the chaos and damage of the Civil War years. They believed that any religious or political ideas that were even slightly unusual should be crushed to stop them causing more problems to society.



If Cromwell had sided with MPs on this issue, he could have gained a lot of popularity and support. However, he did not. He thought stability was important, but he thought religious freedom and civil liberty were important as well. He would not simply crush all groups whose views were unusual.

Cromwell believed that people could find God in their own ways – not just by belonging to the Church of England and obeying its laws and rules. He defended the right of smaller Protestant groups to worship God in their own ways. He even tolerated Catholics as long as they did not cause trouble. During Cromwell's reign Jews were allowed back into England for the first time since the Middle Ages.

Your turn: What can we learn from this source?

1. What did Cromwell say were the main concerns in the world?
2. What does this source show us about Cromwell's relationship with Parliament?
3. Study the notes that support this source. Why did Cromwell's beliefs often cause him to disagree with MPs?
4. Why was Cromwell such a strong supporter of civil liberty (freedom)?
5. Some critics accused Cromwell of greed and ambition. Does this source support that accusation?
6. What overall impression does this source give of Cromwell?



Source 5

you have been zealous of the two greatest concerns that God hath in the world. The one is that of Religion, and of the preservation of the professors of it; to give them all due and just liberty, and to assert the truths of God, which you have done in part in this paper, and do refer it to be done more fully by yourselves and me hereafter. And as to the Liberty of men professing Godliness under a variety of forms amongst us, you have done that which never was done before,

The other thing cared for is, the Civil Liberty and Interest of the Nation. Which though it is,—and indeed I think ought to be, subordinate to a more peculiar interest of God,—yet it is the next best God hath given men in this world;

You have testified your value and affection as to my person, as high as you could; for more you could not do! I shall always keep a grateful memory of this in my heart, and by you I give the Parliament this my grateful acknowledgment.