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Revision

The impact of faction during the reign of Elizabeth I

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Consider the following question on the effect of factions during Elizabeth I's reign, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

Assess the impact of faction during the reign of Elizabeth I.

Student answer with commentary

Elizabeth I was very adept at managing and controlling factions and, as a result, she was able to use it to ensure that she received a variety of views from her councillors. According to a former servant of the Earl of Essex, 'a principle note of her reign will be that she ruled much by faction and parties, which she herself both made, upheld and weakened, as her own great judgement advised.' Unlike the reigns of both Henry VIII and Edward VI factional rivalry did not lead to executions, until the 1590s when Essex's rebellion resulted in his demise. On the major issues of the day, most notably the questions of the succession and marriage, it was Elizabeth's view that triumphed as ultimately it was the queen who decided policy, suggesting that the impact of faction on policy was limited.

The opening sentence offers a clear view as to the line of argument of the response. This is developed using a quotation from a contemporary and the line of argument is further developed in the remainder of the paragraph, with brief examples of major areas of policy to support the claim.

Until the 1590s Elizabeth was able to maintain a stable central government, using rewards and favour to control rival factions and ensure that no one group was so dominant that it was able to force its views on her. By maintaining a balanced council, until the 1590s when Robert Cecil became dominant, she was able to keep her policy options open. Through exploiting the mystique of monarchy, her use of court ritual and progresses, as well as exploiting her own femininity, she was able to maintain control. At times, she even promoted divisions among her councillors, encouraging them to compete for rewards, suggesting that she believed that there were benefits to be gained from factional disputes and that, if anything, its impact was positive.

The paragraph argues that faction provided the monarch with benefits, particularly as different groups offered her a variety of views from which she could decide policy. The paragraph explains how she was able to exploit this, but also notes that at the end of the period that one faction did become dominant and this limited the views she received.

At the start of her reign faction was limited, with far greater evidence of political unity among her councillors who were more concerned to ensure her survival than compete for favour. Although William Cecil had unrivalled political dominance at court, which during the 1560s made him a target for rival factions, Elizabeth was able to control this, aided by the fact that very often self-interest and short-term aims brought rival factions together. At times, Cecil and his most serious rival, the Earl of Leicester, found themselves on the same side and unlike the reign of Henry VIII neither wished to see the other harmed. Division between Cecil and Leicester in 1567 over Elizabeth's initial decision to marry the Catholic Archduke Charles caused the Queen to rethink and eventually abandon her plans. Although it appeared that it was factional division that caused Elizabeth to rethink, ultimately the decision not to marry was her own, further supporting the view that faction had little impact.

The paragraph argues that faction had little impact at the start of the period. Even though there were divisions, different groups often worked together to ensure stability. The answer is supported by precise examples and a judgment about the issue of marriage is reached.

If factional divisions had an impact on policy, it was on the issue of foreign policy where rivalry became serious. This was particularly apparent in the 1570s with serious factional splits in the Privy Council over whether to aid the Dutch rebels in their struggle against Spain. Initially it was those who wanted peace, including Cecil and the Earl of Sussex, who triumphed, but in part this was because Elizabeth herself wished to avoid war, but by the 1580s, when the situation had changed it was the pro-war party of Leicester and Walsingham who triumphed. However, this change of policy was because of the threat Spain posed to national security and not because one faction had become dominant.

A further example, where faction is often seen to have impacted is considered. However, the paragraph argues that it was not faction, but national security that dictated policy and again this is supported by a precise example and a judgement as to the impact is reached.

Even when factions were united and isolated the queen, as in the case of Mary Queen of Scots, it still took a long time before she sanctioned the execution of a fellow monarch. Elizabeth was able to resist the pressure until the Babington plot to blow her up was revealed and convinced her that her own life was in danger. Only then did she bow to pressure and it could be argued that having signed the death warrant she backtracked, seen in the sending of secretary William Davison to the Tower for sending the warrant without permission. However, although it appears as if a united group of councillors had forced the queen to change policy, her actions were more likely an attempt to show to foreign powers that she had been tricked into the execution. In reality, the impact on the queen was limited as she had recognised that she had little choice given the threat to her own security, further evidence that even when united they were unable to force the queen into doing something she did not want.

The counter argument over the impact of faction is considered with the issue of Mary Queen of Scots. However, the paragraph makes the point that what is more noticeable is not that faction triumphed, but how long it took for a united group to persuade the queen to abandon her policy and execute Mary. Even when faction did appear to triumph, Elizabeth still had the last word, suggesting that faction was again limited in its impact.

Although there were clashes between William Cecil and the Earl of Leicester, it was after the former's death in 1598 that factional clashes had the greatest impact and spilled over into armed conflict. This was the result of the clash between the Earl of Essex and Robert Cecil. Elizabeth was aware of Essex's ambitions and, as result, ensured that Cecil and his followers were given political favour and dominated patronage, even though she had considerable affection of Essex. Essex resented this dominance and became ever more reckless in his behaviour, even bursting into the Queen's

bedchamber to argue with her. His resultant loss of patronage ruined him financially and his attempts to regain his monarch's favour and secure a pardon failed. As a result, Essex decided that his only choice was to attempt to seize control of the government and the Queen herself. In particular, he was determined to remove his rival, Cecil, whom he blamed for his difficulties, and began to plot. However, not only was the plot discovered, but his attempts to rouse London failed and he was left to march on Whitehall with just a few thousand followers. The rebellion was defeated within hours, and Essex was arrested, put on trial and executed for treason. Faction had led to rebellion, and the defeat of the rebellion meant that Cecil's position was unrivalled. It could be argued that faction had created political instability, but the unrest was short-lived and Elizabeth's position was never seriously threatened. Instead it appeared as if Essex's move was the last attempt of a desperate man to recover his position.

The paragraph focuses on the 1590s and considers the extent to which the Essex rebellion suggests faction had an impact. However, once again there is a clear line of argument with the response suggesting the impact was, at best, limited. The unrest, caused by faction, appealed to few and was easily crushed. The response displays a good knowledge of events and is able to discuss the incident in some detail and reach a judgement as to the impact.

Although faction was present throughout Elizabeth's reign, its impact on politics and even the court was limited. Elizabeth was usually able to manipulate it to ensure that she received a variety of views. Its impact on policy was limited as ultimately it was the Queen who decided policy, seen most clearly in her decision not to marry. In most instances, factions were easy to control as their aim was to gain favour and therefore there was little potential to be disruptive. Only in the 1590s, when the older generation had died out and been replaced, did it appear as if factional conflict had an impact, but even in 1601, when Essex rebelled, it did not disrupt government and Elizabeth refused to allow her affection for Essex to cloud her political judgement.

The conclusion reaches a clear judgement and this follows from the line of argument established at the outset. In places the response would benefit from more examples, but this is a difficult topic and the answer avoids simply telling the story of factional unrest but attempts to address the actual question of impact, both on policy and the queen. There are interim judgements and these are used to form an overall judgement which maintains the line of argument outlined at the start of the response. As a result, a convincing argument is pursued.

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