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The Tudors: Charismatic Leaders Versus the People

by Kathy Emery

When I was in high school, my mother got me hooked on historical novels. She did this by telling tales of our illustrious past. For example, my mother periodically proclaimed that her great, great, great . . . grandfather fought for the Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo and was rewarded with a tract of land in the New World, and that is how her family came to Canada. I think I became a history major in college because I was fascinated to find out whether her versions of the past bore any semblance to reality. I ended up getting a B.A. in European History with a focus on Tudor England. I became fascinated with Elizabeth I, in part, because, in 1975, she was one of the few strong women I knew of.

This, perhaps, explains why, when Showtime started airing BBC's *The Tudors* two years ago, I became hooked. The third season of *The Tudors* began last month with Henry VIII on his third of six wives, having divorced his first wife and beheaded his second. This was political, not personal as Henry was motivated by the desire for a male heir above all else. Divorcing his first wife, Catherine, and marrying his second wife, Anne, necessitated divorcing the Church of England from the Pope's authority (Henry made himself head of the Church of England). This cataclysmic religio-political rupture with the Pope and his allies caused tremendous political headaches for Henry. Yet it also gave the English King the opportunity to dissolve the wealthy English monasteries, using their wealth to avoid relying on Parliament for new taxes and solidifying his political support through patronage.

During episode #302, there is a popular uprising of the northern gentry and peasants called the Pilgrimage of Grace. Over 10,000 farmers gather and start marching towards London to persuade Henry to stop looting and destroying their churches and monasteries, restore the authority of local decision-making (i.e., no taxation without representation) and get rid of those ministers who had been advising him to pursue his current policies. Henry is in real trouble. His commanders can't summon an opposing force fast enough to put down the rebellion. So, Henry engages in subterfuge and betrayal instead. Taking advantage of the naiveté of the rebels, Henry orders his commanders to negotiate. Henry promises to accede to the rebels' demands if they disperse. They disperse and Henry then has the leaders arrested and executed. End of rebellion, end of the power of the people.

As with all history, one can find modern echoes in the history of the Pilgrimage of Grace. The power that rulers have, whether democratically elected or not, rests upon the consent of the governed. When the people withdraw their consent, such as Northern England did in 1536, rulers also lose their power. This is the only way "people power" can defeat "money power" or "violence power." When the 1536 rebel leaders decided to disperse their followers, they gave up their power. They did so because they were still under the thrall of the myth of the charismatic leader. They believed that King Henry was a good, wise and merciful king—for that is what they had been taught. They believed his promises.

It was depressing to watch this historical re-enactment. It is infuriating to watch this process happen again and again in my own lifetime. People organize. People present their demands to the government. The government, shaking in its boots, agrees to the demands. The people go home. The government reneges on its promises. Maybe someday, the people will not disperse and stay organized and in power.

