

## UNIT

# 3 The structure of government: the role of Wolsey

## Key questions

- How did Wolsey rise to power under Henry VIII?
- How did Wolsey maintain his position?
- Why did Wolsey fall from power in 1529?

## Timeline

1473	Wolsey born in Ipswich
1498	Ordained as a priest
1502	Chaplain to Archbishop Deane of Canterbury
1507	Appointed chaplain to Henry VII
1509	Appointed Dean of Lincoln and Royal Almoner
1510	Appointed a royal councillor
1513	Organises Henry VIII's successful expedition to France Appointed Bishop of Tournai
1514	Appointed Bishop of Lincoln and Archbishop of York
1515	Created a Cardinal by Pope Leo X and made Lord Chancellor by Henry VIII
1518	Appointed <i>Legate a Latere</i> and Bishop of Bath and Wells Diplomatic success of Treaty of London
1520	Organises meeting between Henry VIII and Francis I at Field of the Cloth of Gold
1521	Treaty of Bruges with Charles V against France
1524	Appointed Bishop of Durham (exchanged for Bath and Wells)
1525	Failure of Amicable Grant and widespread unrest as a result
1526–27	Diplomatic revolution sees Wolsey ally with France against Charles
1527–29	Failed attempts to resolve the Great Matter with cooperation of Rome
1529	Bishop of Winchester (exchanged for Durham); resigns as Lord Chancellor
1530	Dies at Leicester Abbey.

Wolsey's last words on his deathbed in 1530

*If I had served God as diligently as I have done the King, he would not have given me over in my grey hairs.*

## Questions

- 1 What do these words suggest about Wolsey's career?
- 2 How do we know that Wolsey uttered these words?

John Skelton's infamous words hint at the importance of a man who would serve Henry VIII as chief minister for fifteen years. Thomas Wolsey (1473–1530) remains one of the most intriguing and colourful characters of the Tudor court. His political importance as the king's main adviser and personal servant is indisputable and the fact that he served Henry for so long suggests that the king was more than satisfied with Wolsey's efforts. Yet Skelton's words also highlight one of the traditional reasons cited for Wolsey's unpopularity and ultimate downfall, namely the lavish nature of his court combined with his political pre-eminence. Wolsey built palaces such as Hampton Court and York Palace (now the Palace of Westminster). Such was his importance that many contemporaries and indeed historians believed that he held real power at court, not Henry VIII. Wolsey's monopoly of political power gained him the title of *Alter Rex*, or second King and, as Skelton suggests, Wolsey's wealth was greater and his household more lavish than that of the king himself.

### How did Wolsey rise to power under Henry VIII?

Wolsey's rise to political pre-eminence under Henry VIII was down to a combination of luck and skill. Undoubtedly he was able and ambitious, but he was also fortunate in that many of the important ministers from Henry VIII's reign were ageing and ready to settle for a quieter life, leaving Wolsey free to win the new king's favour and trust.

That said, Wolsey possessed a fine mind highlighted by the fact that he went on to take holy orders in 1498 and his first post was as chaplain to Henry Deane, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Sir Richard Nanfan, deputy lieutenant of Calais, brought him to the attention of Henry VII, who appointed him as a chaplain in 1507. Therefore Wolsey came to notice during the last years of Henry VII's reign when he went on to serve Bishop Foxe of Winchester. He was employed on small diplomatic missions to the Netherlands and Scotland, where he stood out as an efficient administrator. Yet it was Henry VII's death in 1509 that gave Wolsey a chance to really shine.

The new regime brought with it a vibrant new feeling of hope and optimism characterised by the immediate and popular arrests of Henry VIII's hated ministers Empson and Dudley (see page 9). Henry VIII was seventeen years old, muscular, athletic and able. He soon grew tired of the old councillors from Henry VII's reign who surrounded him in 1509, viewing them as his father's men rather than his own. They appeared cautious and unwilling to act decisively, keen to follow the same old policies that had characterised the reign of Henry VII. Wolsey was given the chance to prove his worth and he took it. In 1509 Wolsey became **Royal Almoner**, a post that automatically made him a member of the **Royal Council**. This was crucial because the success of a minister in sixteenth-century England depended upon winning the

#### Source A

Why come ye not to court?

To which court?

To the king's court, or

Hampton Court?

For Hampton Court is the

finer . . .

John Skelton, *Why come ye not to court?*, 1522

#### Source B

The choice of a ruler's

ministers is a very

important matter;

whether they are good or

not depends on the

ruler's shrewdness.

Machiavelli,

*The Prince*, 1513

#### Definitions

**Royal Almoner**

A royal official whose task

it is to distribute the

king's alms (charity).

**Royal Council**

The king's main advisory

body, made up of the

most important political

figures in the land.

trust of the King and serving him personally. Regular access to the King in person combined with the opportunity to shine were key aspects of ministerial success and Wolsey had both at the beginning of Henry VIII's reign.

In 1509 Henry VIII was young, politically inexperienced and more interested in sporting pursuits such as hunting. Henry was largely disinterested in mundane, administrative matters of state. His energetic almoner was more than willing to take on such routine bureaucratic tasks and in the process make himself indispensable to Henry VIII. Wolsey worked exceptionally hard over the course of 1512–13 in organising the expeditionary force to invade France. He ensured that the logistics of this complex campaign ran smoothly, allowing an English army of over 12,000 to set sail for Gascony.

Henry VIII had found someone who could get things done quickly and efficiently. Wolsey showed remarkable skill and energy in carrying out the King's will. It was of course inevitable that in the process Wolsey would cross other key political figures in his bid to get things done quickly and efficiently. Throughout 1512 and 1513 Wolsey was ruthless in sidelining anyone who tried to disrupt his plans or objectives. Henry did not care because he had found someone both willing and capable.

Over the next years Wolsey was rewarded with multiple offices and titles:

- in 1514 he became Bishop of Tournai and of Lincoln;
- later that year he was made Archbishop of York;
- in September 1515 he became a Cardinal;
- later in 1515 Henry appointed him Lord Chancellor, the top political position in the royal government.

The year 1515 was a key turning point for Wolsey because now he actually held the senior office of state, making it very difficult for other nobles to challenge his decisions. Moreover, in being made a Cardinal Wolsey also bolstered his power over the Church, although William Warham remained Archbishop of Canterbury and technically the most powerful churchman in England. However, that changed in 1518 when Wolsey was appointed **Legate a latere** by the Pope giving him the authority to reform the Church and **appoint to benefices**. By 1518 Wolsey was the most powerful man in England.

### Was Wolsey's rise down to luck or skill?

#### *Wolsey's luck*

Wolsey had been the right man for Henry at the right time and in this respect he was fortunate. Henry VIII grew tired of the inner council made up of his father's men and was on the lookout for someone who could represent his interests and carry out the everyday paperwork of state. Wolsey was that man. He was also willing and able to carry out duties that he knew the King could not be bothered with.

### Definitions

#### **Legate a latere**

A personal representative of the Pope, deputed for important diplomatic missions on the papacy's behalf.

#### **Appoint to benefices**

Wolsey now had the authority, through Rome, to make clerical appointments in England.