



1. Explain why Henry VIII wished to divorce Catherine of Aragon.

2. 'In spite of his best efforts, Wolsey's attempts between 1527 and 1529 to obtain a divorce for the King stood no hope of success.' How far do you agree with this view?

plans, which came to nothing, to free Clement VII from Charles V. Secondly, to get the Pope to set up a commission in England that would give Wolsey the necessary powers to make a judgement on the divorce, which would need no further appeal to Rome. However, Wolsey neglected to keep up good contacts at Rome and ignored Lorenzo Campeggio, the Cardinal-Protector of England, just when he might have been most useful. This meant that Wolsey had to work through diplomats who had little influence or by sending occasional embassies which were unsuccessful.

However, in the summer of 1528 Pope Clement finally agreed to set up a commission. He appointed Wolsey and Campeggio to try the case jointly. In September 1528, the Italian Cardinal finally arrived in England but carefully concealed Clement's private instructions to him to see that the commission was never used when it came to the judgement. The Pope was tired of the bullying of the English envoys, hence the commission. He was not so stupid as to know that in the last event he dared not offend Charles V.

Once in England, Campeggio delayed events as much as he could and tried to get Catherine to enter a nunnery, which would have solved the whole problem. However, on 15 June 1529 the legatine court, with Wolsey and Campeggio presiding, opened at Blackfriars in London. From the first Catherine refused to recognise the court and on 18 July, Pope Clement recalled the case to Rome. The news of this did not reach England until early August, by which time Campeggio had already adjourned the court, following normal church practice. Also, on 5 August, France and the Empire made peace at Cambrai, so that Wolsey's chances of further influencing the Pope were lost. Wolsey's own dismissal would soon follow.

### **How far was faction responsible for Wolsey's downfall?**

Wolsey had always been aware that his survival as Henry VIII's chief minister depended on his keeping the King's favour. For much of his time in power (1515–27) Wolsey managed to outsmart his opponents, not least by the fact that none of them enjoyed the King's trust and affection as much as he. However, with the rise of Anne Boleyn there was a rival for the King's affections which Wolsey could do little to overcome. From the Cardinal's viewpoint, her connections with his enemies on the Council, such as the Duke of Norfolk, did little to help. Also Anne and her family had sympathy with the religious views of the reformers. The ambitions and pretensions of Wolsey, the arch-pluralist, would have had little appeal for them. It appears that at first Anne may have had little personal dislike for the chief minister and may have hoped that he could obtain the divorce. But as events between 1527 and 1529 unfolded, she and her supporters were quick to blame Wolsey for every setback.

By 1527, Anne Boleyn clearly had Henry under her influence and she knew how to exploit this. According to the historians Eric Ives and David Starkey, Anne's rise saw the revival of factional politics. Wolsey had to become the leader of a faction to maintain his power. David Starkey's view is that faction was concentrated in the Council and the Privy Chamber where the gentlemen lined up in support of either Anne Boleyn or the Cardinal, who quickly grasped the new circumstances. As Starkey wrote:

The cardinal understood the implications immediately and started to pack the Privy Chamber with clients like Sir Richard Pace his former

chamberlain and Thomas Heneage, lately the head of Wolsey's own Privy Chamber. Anne replied by restoring supporters of her own, like her cousin, Sir Francis Bryan and her brother George Boleyn, to their former offices in the department. While even adherents of Catherine of Aragon, like Sir Nicholas Carew, managed with the sudden weakening of the cardinal's control to get their jobs back too. In the course of a few months in 1527–28 the Privy Chamber had been repoliticalised.

This revival of 'faction' can be seen in the appointment of a new Abbess of Wilton in 1528. Wolsey wished to appoint his own candidate but Anne Boleyn had another in mind. In the event, Wolsey went ahead and appointed his own choice. The result was a massive ticking off from Henry for not appointing the person the King wished. Then Wolsey made the situation worse by pretending that he did not know what Henry's views were on the matter. In the end Wolsey managed to smooth the matter over, but it was a sign that times were changing. The Council was now meeting increasingly at Court. When present, Wolsey had to fight his own corner there too. The great concerns of 1529 were the divorce and whether Wolsey stayed as the King's chief minister.

As the divorce campaign started to fail in July–August 1529, councillors began to line up against Wolsey. The nobles' representatives, the dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, who were no lovers of the minister, united with the followers of Anne Boleyn and those who sympathised with Catherine to bring down the Cardinal. Together they worked on Henry's anger about the failure of the divorce to get Wolsey dismissed. In the last resort, given his unforgiving nature towards those who failed him, the King probably needed little persuasion. Henry VIII had set his heart on the divorce. Wolsey had failed him, so he had to pay the price.

In October 1529 Wolsey was dismissed from the Lord Chancellorship and prosecuted in the King's bench on a charge of *praemunire*. He surrendered himself and his possessions into the King's hands. Wolsey's fate now depended on Henry VIII. The Cardinal was allowed to retire to his house at Esher and was restored to his archbishopric of York. However, Henry kept the remainder of his wealth, including the riches of York Place. At this stage, Henry, in spite of humiliating Wolsey, kept his hopes alive – he might have his future uses.

In April 1530 Wolsey retired to his archdiocese, but he could not stop hoping for a comeback. He started to correspond with French and Imperial agents. No doubt this was known to his enemies. They began to persuade Henry VIII that the fallen minister was plotting treason and in early November he was arrested. Wolsey began his slow journey south to face a trial for treason and perhaps execution, but death intervened. He died at Leicester Abbey on 29 November.

Wolsey's career was a remarkable one. Both at the time and since its significance has been much argued over. To people at the time, the Cardinal's career would have seemed a good example of the wheel of fortune. Wolsey had risen high from humble beginnings, but his greed, pride and ambition had led to the wheel humbling him by throwing him back into the dust. As the next section of the chapter will argue, historians have tended to look beyond the vagaries of chance in assessing the significance of Wolsey's years as Henry VIII's chief minister.

**Praemunire:** This was a law that made any introduction or acknowledgement of papal jurisdiction in England illegal.



1. What actions did Anne Boleyn take between 1527 and 1529 to gain influence over Henry VIII?

2. To what extent was the role of faction rather than his failure to obtain the divorce the key factor in explaining Wolsey's downfall?