

Oliver Cromwell's republic survived his death in 1658 by a mere 19 months.

Martyn Bennett charts the events that led to its collapse and asks if Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba is destined to suffer a similar fate now that the ailing leader has retired

FIDEL CASTRO, the charismatic leader of Cuba for half a century, finally relinquished the reins of power to his brother, Raul, earlier this year. It is anticipated that his retirement as head of state will bring dramatic changes for the country – and the fall of the post-Cromwell republic in Britain and Ireland may hold lessons for post-Castro Cuba 350 years later.

The collapse of the Cromwellian regime in 1660 is associated closely with the death of Oliver Cromwell 19 months earlier, perhaps because the political system he had established and

A tale of two republics

led had not been robust enough to survive his death. Alternatively, it may have been that Cromwell's personality was so dominant that he was as much 'the republic' as Louis XIV of France was 'the state', and the two could not exist apart. Such impressions are, I believe, flawed, for Cromwell did all he could to ensure the security of the state.

Fidel Castro too has done all he can to secure a successful succession. Yet, just as Cromwell's death in 1658 was followed by the fall of the republic and the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II, so many commentators believe that Castro's retirement after 50 years in power might threaten Cuba's socialist republic. After all, Castro is identified as closely with his country's government as Cromwell was his.

Oliver Cromwell's rise to power was as spectacular as it was unprecedented. The former Huntingdonshire gentleman and MP led the parliamentarian forces to crucial victories at Marston Moor (1644) and Naseby (1645) in the English Civil War and played a key role in the trial and execution of Charles I. In 1650, he masterminded the defeat of Charles Stuart's supporters in Scotland.

By 1653, Cromwell – now the most powerful man in England – was deeply frustrated at the failure of the parliament of the new regime to instigate further political and religious change. His reaction was to expel it. By the end of the year, he had become head of state as lord protector – a post he held until his death in 1658.

Ironically, Cromwell's power base was cemented by an attempt on his life. In early 1657, he survived an attempted assassination, known as the Sindercombe Plot. Parliament, despite being in a divisive dispute with Cromwell over his role in government, welcomed his survival. Soon, it had drafted the *Humble Petition and Advice*, which had at its heart three important additions to the existing constitution, *The Instrument of Government*. These were: a crown for Cromwell, hereditary succession and a second chamber for the parliament.

Cromwell quickly spurned the former proposal. He had, it seems, long been purged of his faith in a monarchy, having rejected a system that God had "blasted", perhaps as early as 1648.

Could Castro suffer Cromwell's fate?

He was, however, far more amenable to proposals two and three. A successor chosen by Cromwell (as the head of state) would, after all, prevent any break in government should a future assassination attempt succeed. And a second chamber might have prevented the persecution of religious radical James Naylor by the single chamber parliament (Naylor was convicted of blasphemy for re-enacting the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem), a policy to which Cromwell was deeply opposed.

Yet Cromwell knew that had he made his position clear from the outset, the *Humble Petition and Advice* might have been killed off straight away. So he appeared to prevaricate for several weeks before rejecting the crown, while expressing great enthusiasm for the other two main tenets of the petition. His actions preserved the republic, and the reformed constitution helped the state on its way to maturity, making strides away from the revolutionary and military aspect it wore hitherto.

The pain of decimation

Unfortunately, despite Cromwell's best efforts, the changes were not welcomed universally by the factions within the political nation. Some of those 'promoted' to the second chamber refused to sit because they opposed its creation; some former royalists were still smarting from the pain of the decimation tax that had been levied on them specifically to pay the major generals; others were just not yet ready to admit that monarchy was dead.

The fact is, the 'New Model Monarchy' offered by the *Humble Petition and Advice* arrived 20 years too late. It would have solved the problems of 1637–1641 when the Civil Wars began by creating a truly mixed monarchy with institutionalised, rather than customary, checks and balances. But by 1657 it was doomed: there had been a long and bitter war, which had unleashed new political ideas and energy into its participants. That energy was not yet fully worked through and the different factions had not coalesced. In time they might have, but time was the one thing that was not there in the system, or in Oliver's genes. When parliament's session ended, the healing was not yet complete.

Things were improving though: there had been a drift towards settlement; Cromwell's daughters were marrying into old parliamentarian and

CASTRO AND Cromwell's republics were born of revolution. Cromwell's was established in 1649 when England/Wales and Ireland declared themselves to be a free state after the abolition of the monarchy and House of Lords. In 1959 the socialist state of Cuba was created after the overthrow of Batista's military government.

Both republics involved partial recreations of older regimes: Cromwell's through the *Humble Petition and Advice* (see below), which offered him the crown; Castro's with a promise to restore the 1940 constitution.

Fidel Castro's first 17 years of government saw the sole power resting with the Council of Ministers and it was only in 1976 that Cuba gained a functioning constitution putting sovereign power in the

hands of the people with a legislative National Assembly of Peoples' Power. However real power in Cuba still rests with the Communist Party, centred on Fidel and his brother. As such, it reflects Cromwell's centrality three and a half centuries earlier.

Oliver Cromwell died in 1658, naming his son Richard as successor, while Fidel retired in early 2008, handing power over to his brother Raul. Speculation continues as to whether the regime will be strong enough to survive the Castro brothers. Many commentators believe that change, when it happens, will occur in the medium to long term. They consider the prospect of the rapid collapse of the socialist state an unlikely one. However, that scenario can't be ruled out, as the events of 1660 show.

royalist families. The monarchy and the Stuart family was becoming less and less relevant. Taxes were falling, government, in England and Wales at least, was in the hands of traditional organisations, and the four countries of the republic were enjoying the benefits of peace for the first time in nearly 20 years. And then Cromwell died.

Richard Cromwell, the Lord Protector's third son and anointed successor, suddenly found himself

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pitched into a political battle where, though he had no enemies, he likewise had no particular allies. And when the army tipped the Cromwell baby out of government it threw out the bath water too, dissolving the protectorate and with it the stability Oliver had introduced. The army recalled the parliament that Oliver had forcibly expelled in 1653, but it too failed to learn the lessons of the past and set about ruling as if the Cromwellian Protectorate had never existed. In the end government collapsed and monarchy was restored as a way out of a political impasse.

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The fault lay not with Oliver, or his untimely death, but with the bickering minorities that continued old struggles and ignored the healing process.

So what lessons could the demise of Cromwell's republic hold for 21st-century Cuba? It is always tempting to compare England's Lord Protector with later figures: Fidel Castro has widely been interpreted as being integral to the socialist republic's survival and it is expected that his departure from the centre of government will bring about change – just as Cromwell's did.

Life after death

One significant difference between Castro and Cromwell, however, is longevity. Since overthrowing Fulgencio Batista's military regime in 1959, Castro had almost 50 years to ensure that a mature state would survive his death. What's more, the graduation to a settled constitution took considerably longer to kick-start than was the case with Cromwell's republic. However, Fidel's succession has certainly taken on a Cromwellian (or monarchical) aspect in so far as the only solution has been for Fidel to hand over power to his brother Raul.

Fidel Castro's success in founding a socialist state in America's backyard and his determination to develop close ties with the Soviet Bloc (to America's great ire) led to nuclear weapons being sited on Cuban soil, a move that provoked the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The crisis, which was one of the major confrontations of the Cold War, was soon resolved but relations between the USA and Cuba have remained largely deadlocked ever since – and American attempts to isolate Castro have never been wholly successful.

Could all that be about to change? Could Cuba return to the fold of capitalist nations? Could it even once again become a playground for Americans – accompanied by the ending of the communist Puritanism that has marked Castro's nation state for half a century.

We can draw numerous parallels between modern-day Cuba and 17th-century England. Of all of them, the prospect of the US government looking on gleefully as the socialist republic totters and falls – just as exiled Royalists watched from the continent as Cromwell's republic imploded – is the one that Castro will least enjoy. **II**