Chapter 3: The Wars of the Three Kingdoms: September 1643–August 1645

Covenant and Cessation: the Reaction at Westminster

The cessation and the Covenant helped to transform what had been a number of largely discrete, if causally interlinked, conflicts, into something not far short of a single archipelagic war. The king received his first shipment of troops from Ireland in October 1643; a Covenanter army under Leven entered northern England in January 1644; and six months later a party of ‘Scotch Irish’ embarked from Ireland for the western Highlands and a blood-soaked campaign that its leader, the Marquess of Montrose, hoped would topple all of Scotland into the king’s hands. In time these developments would change the face of the English Civil War. But it was at Westminster that the cessation and, more especially, the Covenant had their most immediate impact.

Between them, the Covenant and cessation broke and recast the political mould at Westminster. To the Northumberland–Holles grandees, the intervention of the Scots portended the utter ruin of England, and several of them contemplated going into exile rather than witness the spectacle. Yet for others, the actions of the king and his advisers represented an even more alarming prospect. The defection of the Earl of Holland and the other peace peers in August had presented the court with the perfect opportunity to put on a statesmanlike show of magnanimity and moderation. But instead of welcoming the peers as lost sheep returned to the fold, Charles and his courtiers had either cold-shouldered or openly reviled them, obliging those such as the earls of Northumberland and Pembroke who had been contemplating going
to Oxford, to reconsider. Then came news of the king’s cessation with the
Confederates’ Catholics, which to some of the peace grandees had even
more dreadful implications than Parliament’s Scottish alliance – the Scots
were at least Protestants – and ruled out any prospect of a negotiated
settlement. With Northumberland himself among their number, they
threw in their lot with Saye and the man who replaced the ailing John
Pym (who died that December) as the perceived leader of the pro-Scots
interest in the Commons, Oliver St John.

Travelling in the opposite direction that autumn were several groups
that had been closely aligned with the Saye–Pym interest, notably Essex
and his staff officers. Essex’s victories at Gloucester and Newbury had
raised his stock to its old height, giving him the authority and confidence
to revive the scheme he had toyed with in the summer – that is, of using
his army to broker a moderate peace. The main threat to his plans was
the imminent arrival of the Scots. Essex disliked the Scots’ religious
demands as much as any man at Westminster. Moreover, once the Scots
had entered the war, he would no longer command Parliament’s largest
field army, nor, in consequence, the clout to impose a settlement. The
goal of a moderate, and exclusively English, settlement was of course
shared by Holles and other stalwarts of the peace interest, and during
the autumn the two groups – Essex’s and Holles’s – rapidly converged in
common opposition to the Saye–St John faction and the Scots. Joining the
Essex–Holles interest were Sir John Clotworthy and other Anglo-Irish
MPs, angered that the supporters of the Scottish alliance had conceded
supreme command of the British forces in Ireland to the Scots. It was here
in reaction to the Covenant and cessation – not, as is generally assumed,
in the reversal of alliances that was to occur a year later – that the future
leaderships of the Independent and Presbyterian factions coalesced.

The new factions differed in important respects from their prior incarn-
ations. Whereas most of the more peace-minded members had formerly
questioned all military expenditure, they now tended to support the
upkeep of Essex’s army as the best means to ‘command a peace’ against
the war-mongers at Westminster or Oxford. On the other hand, the heirs
of the Saye–Pym group, having supported Essex’s army in the past, were
now eager to join the City militants in clipping its wings. Distrusting its
ambitious yet irenic commander, they preferred to re-direct Parliament’s
resources to the armies of Waller, Manchester, and above all the Scots,
which would fight for outright victory. But both factions remained small,
bicameral groups with an uncertain following among the mass of non-
aligned members. Like the old Northumberland–Holles interest, the