



History 7042
Specimen Question Paper 2B (A-level)
Question 02 Student 5
Specimen Answer and Commentary

V1.0

Specimen answer plus commentary

The following student response is intended to illustrate approaches to assessment. This response has not been completed under timed examination conditions. It is not intended to be viewed as a 'model' answer and the marking has not been subject to the usual standardisation process.

Paper 2B (A-level): Specimen question paper

02 'The ambition of Richard Duke of York was the main reason for instability in England in the years 1450 to 1461.'

Assess the validity of this view.

[25 marks]

Student response

Richard of York was a wealthy and powerful noble. He was a major 'prince of the blood' with a proud lineage. He asserted his ambition forcefully up to the moment of his death in 1460 and instability did result. His rivals, Somerset and Queen Margaret also contributed to the instability and the two factions fed off mutual insecurity. Ultimately, however, it was absence of Henry VI's kingship which created the situation and was most responsible for the instability between 1450 and 1461.

Richard of York was a highly ambitious man. His actions can be seen as the cause of much instability between 1450 and 1461. His descent from Edward III through the Mortimer arguably gave him a stronger claim to the throne than Henry VI. His descent from both the second and fourth sons of Edward III made him an important 'prince of the blood' regardless of any possible claim to rule. Richard demonstrated his ambition to dominate government as early as 1450 when he returned from Ireland in violation of commands to do otherwise and marched to London at the head of a large force. His claims to be representing the 'commonweal' or 'communitas' of the realm mirrored the demands of the recent Jack Cade's rebellion. His demands that Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, be charged with treason represented an ambitious power grab. His failure led him to repeat this act in 1452 when he again returned from Ireland without permission and led an army to London seeking to remove Somerset from government and install himself as the king's principal minister. During the first protectorate that followed Henry VI's period of insanity he demonstrated his own ambition. He immediately sent his rival Somerset to the Tower of London and made himself Captain of Calais, a position held by Somerset that he had wanted. He also rewarded his friends, most notably the Nevilles, and he made the Earl of Salisbury chancellor. Richard's ambition led him to militarily attack the king's army at the First Battle of St Albans in 1455 and to kill Somerset. This allowed him to regain control of government and establish the second protectorate. Finally he tried to raise an army against the government in 1459 and in exile in Ireland he usurped royal authority to plot his return. When he and his supporters returned in 1460 he formally claimed the throne itself and his family's claim was recognised in the Act of Accord.

Although Richard of York appears to have been highly ambitious, and therefore destabilising in England between 1450 and 1461, there are significant limitations to this argument. York's supporters who were involved in Cade's rebellion specifically ruled out that they wished to make him king. Richard captured the king himself at the First Battle of St Albans and yet did not take the opportunity to permanently remove a 'dynastic rival'. Indeed there is no evidence that he was seeking to replace Henry VI until 1460 itself. Until 1453 he merely wanted to be seen as

Henry VI's heir and he, arguably, had every right to be recognised as such. In addition, the first and second protectorates showed him as even-handed and effective. He put justice ahead of his own interest when he punished one of his few noble allies, Devon, for his actions against Lord Bonville in 1454, and he made major efforts to reform the finances of the government.

The actions of those who dominated the royal household and government were arguably more responsible for the instability in England between 1450 and 1461. Between 1450 and 1455 this role was fulfilled by Edmund Beaufort, the Duke of Somerset. After his death government was dominated by the Queen, Margaret of Anjou, herself. Somerset's household-based government undoubtedly regarded York as a threat and took actions against him that were highly provocative. Attempts by York to clarify the succession, not unreasonably given the king's lack of children, were dismissed. One of York's followers, the MP Thomas Young was even sent to the Tower of London in 1451 for seeking acknowledgement that York was the heir of Henry VI. Somerset also saw to it that York's followers were heavily punished for their support of the duke in 1450 and again in 1452 despite claims of a general pardon. The indictment of Sir William Oldhall in 1452 and his attainder in 1453 were highly provocative. Somerset's action against York may have been motivated by his own ambition as the Beaufort family also had a claim to succeed the childless Henry VI through their common ancestor John of Gaunt. Margaret actively supported Somerset and it was her that insisted on his reinstatement after the first protectorate as well as the removal of other Yorkists. This act arguably led to York's attack at the First Battle of St Albans. After the battle she encouraged the blood feud that developed between the sons of Somerset, Northumberland and Clifford that led to even more instability between 1459 and 1461. It is alleged that Margaret also deliberately played up the disputes in the manner by which she organised the failed 'Loveday' event of 1458. She was the major instigator of the so-called 'Parliament of Devils' in 1459 in which the Yorkist lords were attainted as traitors. In doing so she made a military response from the Yorkist lords inevitable. This act also gave Richard of York nothing to lose by claiming the throne itself, so in many ways she created the unstable situation that she feared the most. Her killing of York at Wakefield in 1460 only poured fuel on the fire and led to the battle of Towton in 1461 in which her husband was replaced by York's son, Edward IV.

However, although Somerset and Margaret undoubtedly did contribute to the instability of the period they were, in many ways, merely, responding to the actions of others, especially Richard of York. York's attacks on Somerset and his repeated attempts to have the duke tried and executed for treason left Somerset little option but to reply in kind. Likewise York was undoubtedly a dynastic threat to Margaret and her family. Jack Cade's adoption of the name 'Mortimer' in 1450 reinforced this. York was almost certainly the source of dangerous rumours alleging that her son Prince Edward was the illegitimate child of Somerset. Furthermore, the blood feud had been started by the military actions of the Yorkists themselves. The Act of Accord resulting from the Yorkist invasion of 1460 left her with little option but to militarily resist and York arguably had been responsible for his own demise.

Medieval English government was centred upon the person of the king. Therefore, it is impossible to avoid Henry VI's personal responsibility for the unstable situation between 1450 and 1461. He, ultimately, was most to blame. There is wide agreement that he was unsuited to rule. He had little interest in government and allowed himself to be easily dominated by those that he did. The argument that his weak kingship was key to the instability is one most strongly promoted by McFarlane and his supporters. Henry VI was uninterested in war and her personal piety was regarded as excessive. His peace policy with France and the resultant loss of the war

was highly significant as it was the main stated grievance between York and Somerset, as York blamed Somerset for the losses. Henry's response to Cade's rebellion had been weak (he had fled to Warwickshire) and he went along with Somerset's actions between 1451 and 1453. His insanity led to York's assumption of power in 1454 and from 1455 he effectively became a possession for the warring factions to fight over rather than an independent actor. Had he been at all effective then neither Somerset nor York would have been able, or felt the need, to step into his shoes and rule. Margaret's inversion of traditional male/female leadership roles (which was highly resented) would also have been unnecessary. Although blame has been placed by some, such as Storey, on the escalation of private feuding between the gentry it is hard not to draw the conclusion that this resulted from Henry's lack of competence.

In conclusion, Richard of York was a highly ambitious man whose actions greatly contributed to the instability of the years between 1450 and 1461 but ultimately he, like Somerset and Margaret, only acted because the king was incapable of doing so. Like Suffolk before, they all sought to provide alternative leadership and yet could not do so in a way that avoided more instability because they were not the king. There was no substitute for an ineffectual king and Henry VI was a highly ineffective king. Instability was the inevitable result until his removal in 1461.

Commentary – Level 5

This is a very strong answer. It is consistently focused on the question and offers a balanced assessment throughout, with a clear conclusion offering a convincing judgement. Supporting information is appropriately selected and corroborates the points made. It is a top Level 5 answer, despite very occasional syntactical errors!