

The Reforms of Caesar

The Man of the People

Caesar spent little time in Rome, during the years in which he was master of Rome. Despite this, he managed to institute a large number of reforms in the short time he was granted.

Like all the other Populists, Caesar had used the people of Rome on his way to power. He was not alone in this. By his time, the citizens of Rome had evolved into a proletariat which subsisted on electoral bribery, feast, triumphs and above all the free corn dole. But although Caesar used the people, he never trusted them, being all too aware of how fickle they were. During the years of the Gallic Wars, he had often sent his soldiers home to vote during the elections.

In addition, people like Clodius and Milo had organized armed bands, organized in collegia (clubs), to disturb elections and terrorize the populace. The sum total of this was violence, unrest and social distress, and Caesar initiated radical reforms to deal with these problems.

He instituted a grand program of colonization to fulfil his goals: the social conditions in Rome were to be improved and the citizenship spread throughout the empire. He began by forbidding those collegia that were suspected of having political aims. The Jews were exempted from this, probably in thanks for their help during the Alexandrine Wars.

He then carried out a census of the civic lists, reducing the recipients of free corn from about 320,000 to 150,000. This was not so much to save money, as it was to prevent the citizens of Italia from coming to the city. Life in Italia and the provinces was to be made more attractive for the broad majority of citizens. To further this aim, a third of the workers on the large estates were freed -- slavery was to be reduced to decrease unemployment. As for the corn dole, families with children were given additional privileges. In general, Caesar attempted to carry out just reforms.

About 80,000 families were offered a new life in more than twenty newly founded roman colonies, among them the rebuilt Carthage and Corinth. To these settlers he added veterans of the civil wars, who were allotted farms and a bonus. At the same time he put in motion a comprehensive Romanization policy, particularly in the important provinces of Gaul, Spain and Africa, where he lavishly granted citizenship (and thereby a share in the benefits of the Empire) to a large number of people.

To round off this substantial work, he drew up laws affecting how these new towns were to be governed. This law, Lex Julia municipalis, would become the cornerstone and foundation not only for municipal but also provincial administration which were to last until the fall of the Empire.

The Empire

Alone among his contemporaries, Caesar seems to have realized that Rome as a city-state could no longer survive. It was no use confining the citizenship to the people of Rome; everyone should, sooner or later, be bound to Rome; not Rome the city, but Rome the Empire. To further this aim, Caesar enlarged the Senate from 600 to 900, including many new citizens from the provinces. As most of these new senators were supporters of his (and automatically his clients), this strengthened his control of the Senate by ensuring that he would always have a majority. In addition, he increased the number of praetores from eight to sixteen, aediles from four to six, and quaestores from twenty to forty.

He also took measures to prevent the provincial extortion of earlier times by introducing a new system of taxation in Asia Minor and Sicily, and further strengthening the extortion laws made in his consulship of 59. His increase in the number of praetors reduced the need for prolong the terms of governors in the provinces, and he drew up strict laws stipulating how long a governor could serve.

He also carried out economic reforms to solve the debt problems, which had bedevilled the Republic since its inception, as interests always went sky-high during times of war. He had interests lowered and arranged for one fourth of all debts to be cancelled. He also took steps to get more money into circulation, thus increasing liquidity. These precautions, taken to solve an immediate economic and social crisis, laid the ground work for the economic boom which occurred during the principate of Augustus, and three hundred years of monetary stability under the Empire.

A huge amounts of public works were carried out in Rome and Italy. The forum was overhauled with a rebuilding of the Senate building, the courts, and the speaker's platform. New temples and commercial centres were built in the Hellenistic style and a state library was created. To ensure that Rome would become a centre of culture, privileges were conferred on the teachers of philosophy and liberal arts.

Visions of the Future

Most famous of Caesar's reforms was his reorganization of the calendar. The republican calendar had been calculated by the phases of the moon, with the deficit made up by adding leap-days. But this had been done so randomly, that by Caesar's time, new year occurred in Autumn, and Autumn in Spring. To correct this, the year 46 BC was increased to 445 days. With the help of the Greek Alexandrian Sosigenes, Caesar changed the length of the year to 365 days, with every fourth year being a leap year. This reform lasted until Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 slightly adjusted the calendar to its current form.

Among other great projects Caesar considered was a codification of all Civil Laws and the digging of a canal through the Isthmus of Corinth:

...he proposed to dig through the isthmus on which Corinth stands; and appointed Anienus to superintend the work. He had also a design of diverting the Tiber, and carrying it by a deep channel directly from Rome to Circeii, and so into the sea near Tarracina, that there might

be a safe and easy passage for all merchants who traded to Rome. Besides this, he intended to drain all the marshes by Pomentium and Setia, and gain ground enough from the water to employ many thousands of men in tillage. He proposed further to make great mounds on the shore nearest Rome, to hinder the sea from breaking in upon the land, to clear the coast at Ostia of all the hidden rocks and shoals that made it unsafe for shipping and to form ports and harbours fit to receive the large number of vessels that would frequent them. (Plutarch) Caesar carried out his reforms in the traditional manner, in the centuriate and tribal assemblies, the senate and through edicts. He rarely tampered with the traditions of the Republic; only in his concepts of citizenship and the provinces did his visionary genius truly appear. Despite this moderation, people were more and more beginning to speak of Caesar the Tyrant or Caesar the King, though no grounds for such thoughts were visible in his reforms.