

Erskine May, Chapter I, pp. 1-9

Sources and Limits of Royal Influence

[NOTE: The view of George III taken by Erskine May in this chapter is in the classic tradition of the "Whig Interpretation". The view of more recent historians is that George's interventions in government were not greatly different from those of his predecessors; and that the idea of "ministerial responsibility", in the full sense, having been established in 1689 is anachronistic.]

THE growth of the influence of the crown, at a period in the history of this country when government by prerogative had recently been subverted, and popular rights and liberties enlarged, attests the vital power of the monarchy. At the Revolution, the arbitrary rule of the Stuart kings finally gave way to parliamentary government, with ministerial responsibility. Such a change portended the subjection of future kings to the will of Parliament; but it proved no more than a security for the observance of the law. While the exercise of the royal authority was restrained within the proper limits of the constitution, the crown was shorn of none of its ancient prerogatives; but remained, as it had ever been, the source of all power, civil and ecclesiastical,—'the fountain of honour,'—the first and paramount institution of the state. Its powers, indeed, were now exercised by ministers responsible to Parliament; and the House of Commons was no longer held in awe by royal prerogative. Yet so great were the attributes of royalty, and so numerous [2] its sources of influence, that, for more than a century after the Revolution, it prevailed over the more popular elements of the constitution. A Parliament representing the people little more than in name, and free, in great measure, from the restraint of public opinion,—which had not yet the means of being intelligently formed, or adequately expressed,—promoted the views of rival parties, rather than the interests of the people. This popular institution, designed to control the crown, was won over to its side, and shared, while it supported, its ascendancy. The crown now governed with more difficulty, and was forced to use all its resources for the maintenance of its authority: but it governed as completely as ever.

Meanwhile every accession to the greatness of the country favoured the influence of the crown. By the increase of establishments and public expenditure, the means of patronage were multiplied. As the people grew more wealthy, considerable classes appeared in society, whose sympathies were with 'the powers that be,' and who coveted favours which the crown alone could bestow. And thus the very causes which ultimately extended the power of the people, for a long time served to enlarge the influence of the crown.

Vast and various were the sources of this influence. The crown bestowed everything which its subjects most desired to obtain; honours, dignities, places and preferments. Such a power reached all classes, and swayed constituents, as well as Parliaments. The House of Lords has ever been more [3] closely associated with the crown and its interests than the House of Commons. The nobles of every land are the support and ornament of the court; and in England they are recognised as an outwork of the monarchy,—a defence against the democratic elements of our institutions. The entire body is the creation of the crown. The temporal peers, or their ancestors, have all been ennobled by royal favour: many have been raised to a higher dignity in the peerage; and others aspire to such an elevation. A peerage of the United Kingdom is an object of ambition to Scotch and Irish peers. The spiritual lords owe their dignity to the crown, and look up to the same source of power for translation to more important sees. Nearly all the highest honours and offices are engrossed by the nobility.

The most powerful duke, who has already enjoyed every other honour, still aspires to the Order of the Garter. The lord-lieutenancy of a county,—an office of feudal grandeur,—confers distinction and influence, of which the noblest are justly proud.(1) Other great appointments in the state and royal household are enjoyed exclusively by peers and their families; while a large proportion of the state patronage is dispensed by their hands. Their rank also brings them within the immediate reach of court favour and social courtesies, by which the most eminent peers naturally become the personal friends of the reigning sovereign. Accordingly, with some [4] rare exceptions, the House of Lords has always ranged itself on the side of the crown. It has supported the king himself against his own ministers; it has yielded up its convictions at his word; and where party connections have brought it into conflict with a ministry enjoying the confidence of the crown, its opposition has been feeble or compliant.(2) Nor has its general support of the throne been inconsistent with the theory of the constitution.

The House of Commons and the People

The Commons, on the other hand, representing the people, are assumed to be independent of the crown, and jealous of its influence. How far these have been their actual characteristics, will be examined hereafter: (3) but here it may be briefly said, that until the reform in the representation of the people in 1832, the counties were mainly under the influence of great and noble families—as they still are, to a considerable extent: a large proportion of the boroughs were either the absolute property of peers and their connections, or entirely under their control; while in many other boroughs the interest of the government was paramount at elections. The cities and large towns alone had any pretensions to independence. Except on rare occasions, when all classes were animated by a strong public opinion, the representation of the people and popular interests was a constitutional theory, rather than an active political force. Had there been no party distinctions, there could scarcely have been an ostensible opposition to any ministers whom the king might have chosen to appoint. Members of [5] Parliament sought eagerly the patronage of the crown. Services at elections, and support in Parliament, were rewarded with peerages, baronetcies, offices and pensions. Such rewards were openly given: the consideration was avowed. There were other secret rewards of a grosser character, which need not here be noticed.(4) Nor were constituents beyond the reach of the same influence. The collection and expenditure of an enormous and continually increasing public revenue provided inferior places,—almost without number,—which were dispensed on the recommendation of members supporting the government. Hence to vote with the ministers of the day was the sure road to advancement: to vote against them was certain neglect and proscription.

To these sources of influence must be added the loyalty of the British people. He must indeed be a bad king, whom the people do not love. Equally remarkable are their steady obedience to the law, and respect for authority. Their sympathies are generally on the side of the government. In a good cause their active support may be relied upon; and even in a bad cause, their prejudices have more often been enlisted in favour of the government than against it. How great then, for good or for evil, were the powers of a British sovereign and his ministers. The destinies of a great people depended upon their wisdom, nearly as much as if they had wielded arbitrary power.

Ministerial Government

But while these various sources of influence [6] continued to maintain the political ascendancy of the crown, the personal share of the sovereign in the government of the country was considerably restricted. William III., the most able statesman of his day, while representing the principles of the Revolution, was yet his own minister for foreign affairs,

conducted negotiations abroad, and commanded armies in the field. But henceforward a succession of sovereigns less capable than William, and of ministers gifted with extraordinary ability and force of character, rapidly reduced to practice the theory of ministerial responsibility.

The government of the state was conducted, throughout all its departments, by ministers responsible to Parliament for every act of their administration,—without whose advice no act could be done—who could be dismissed for incapacity or failure, and impeached for political crimes; and who resigned when their advice was disregarded by the crown, or their policy disapproved by Parliament. With ministers thus responsible, 'the king could do no wrong.' The Stuarts had strained prerogative so far, that it had twice snapped asunder in their hands. They had exercised it personally, and were held personally responsible for its exercise. One had paid the penalty with his head: another with his crown; and their family had been proscribed for ever. But now, if the prerogative was strained, ministers were condemned, and not the king. If the people cried out against the government,—instead of a revolution, there was merely [7] a change of ministry. Instead of dangerous conflicts between the crown and Parliament, there succeeded struggles between rival parties for parliamentary majorities; and the successful party wielded all the power of the state. Upon ministers, therefore, devolved the entire burthen of public affairs: they relieved the crown of its cares and perils, but, at the same time, they appropriated nearly all its authority. The king reigned, but his ministers governed.

To an ambitious prince, this natural result of constitutional government could not fail to be distasteful; but the rule of the House of Hanover had hitherto been peculiarly favourable to its development. With George I. and George II., Hanoverian politics had occupied the first place in their thoughts and affections. Of English politics, English society, and even the English language, they knew little. The troublesome energies of Parliament were an enigma to them; and they cheerfully acquiesced in the ascendancy of able ministers who had suppressed rebellions, and crushed pretenders to their crown,—who had triumphed over parliamentary opposition and had borne all the burthen of the government. Left to the indulgence of their own personal tastes,—occupied by frequent visits to the land of their birth,—by a German court, favourites and mistresses,—they were not anxious to engage, more than was necessary, in the turbulent contests of a constitutional government. Having lent their name and authority to competent ministers, they acted upon their advice, and aided them by all the means at the disposal of the court.

Political Parties

[8] This authority had fallen to the lot of ministers connected with the Whig party, to whom the House of Hanover mainly owed its throne. The most eminent of the Tories had been tainted with Jacobite principles and connections; and some of them had even plotted for the restoration of the Stuarts. From their ranks the Pretender had twice drawn the main body of his adherents. The Whigs, indeed, could not lay claim to exclusive loyalty: nor were the Tories generally obnoxious to the charge of disaffection: but the Whigs having acquired a superior title to the favours of the court, and being once admitted to office, contrived,—by union amongst themselves, by borough interests, and by their monopoly of the influence of the crown,—to secure an ascendancy in Parliament which, for nearly fifty years, was almost unassailable. Until the fall of Sir Robert Walpole the Whigs had been compact and united; and their policy had generally been to carry out, in practice, the principles of the Revolution. When no longer under the guidance of that minister, their coherence, as a party, was disturbed; and they became divided into families and cliques. To use the words of Lord John Russell, this 'was the age of small factions.' The distinctive policy of the party was lost in the personal objects of its leaders; but political power still remained in the same hands; and, by alliances rather than by union, the 'great Whig families,' and others admitted to a share of their power, continued to engross all the high offices of state, and to [9] distribute among their

personal adherents the entire patronage of the crown.

Footnotes.

1. Though the office of Lord-Lieutenant does not date earlier than the reign of Edward VI, it resembles the ancient dignity of 'Comes.'
2. See [Chap V., Peers and Peerage.](#)
3. See [Chap. VI.](#)
4. See [Chap. VI.](#)

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