

Erskine May, Chapter I, pp. 17-26

The Bute Ministry

The King's Friends

The dissolution of Parliament, shortly after his accession, afforded an opportunity of strengthening the parliamentary connection of the king's friends. Parliament was kept sitting while the king and Lord Bute were making out lists of the court candidates, and [18] using every exertion to secure their return. The king not only wrested government boroughs from the ministers, in order to nominate his own friends, but even encouraged opposition to such ministers as he conceived not to be in his interest.(1)

At the meeting at the Cockpit,(2) the night before the assembling of the new Parliament, to hear the king's speech read, and to agree upon the choice of a speaker, not only the Whigs and parliamentary supporters of the government attended; but also, the old Tories, in a strong body, though without any invitation from ministers. The speaker selected by Lord Bute was Sir John Cust, a country gentleman and a Tory.

Lord Bute, the originator of the new policy was not personally well qualified for its successful promotion. He was not connected with the great families who had acquired a preponderance of political influence: he was no parliamentary debater: his manners were unpopular: he was a courtier rather than a politician: his intimate relations with the Princess of Wales were an object [19] of scandal; and, above all, he was a Scotchman. The jealousy of foreigners, which had shown itself in hatred of the Hanoverians, was now transferred to the Scottish nation, whose connection with the late civil war had exposed them to popular obloquy. The scheme was such as naturally occurred to a favourite: but it required more than the talents of a favourite to accomplish. While only in the king's household, his influence was regarded with jealousy: remarks were already made upon the unlucky circumstance of his being a 'Scot;' and popular prejudices were aroused against him, before he was ostensibly concerned in public affairs. Immediately after the king's accession, he had been made a privy councillor, and admitted into the cabinet. An arrangement was soon afterwards concerted, by which Lord Holdernesse retired from office with a pension, and Lord Bute succeeded him as secretary of state.

Resignations of Pitt and Newcastle

It was now the object of the court to break up the existing ministry, and to replace it with another, formed from among the king's friends. Had the ministry been united, and had the chiefs reposed confidence in one another, it would have been difficult to overthrow them. But there were already jealousies amongst them, which the court lost no opportunity of fomenting. (3) A breach soon arose [20] between Mr. Pitt, the most powerful and popular of the ministers, and his colleagues. He desired to strike a sudden blow against Spain, which had concluded a secret treaty of alliance with France, then at war with this country. Though war minister, he was opposed by all his colleagues except Lord Temple. He bore himself haughtily at the council,—declaring that he had been called to the ministry by the voice of the people, and that he could not be responsible for measures which he was no longer allowed to guide. Being met with equal loftiness in the cabinet, he was forced to tender his resignation.(4)

The king overpowered the retiring minister with kindness and condescension. He offered the barony of Chatham to his wife, and to himself an annuity of £3,000 a year for three lives.(5)

The minister had deserved these royal favours, and he accepted them, but at the cost of his popularity. It was an artful stroke of policy, thus at once to conciliate and weaken the popular statesman, whose opposition was to be dreaded,—and it succeeded. [21] The same Gazette which announced his resignation, also trumpeted forth the peerage and the pension, and was the signal for clamours against the public favourite.

On the retirement of Mr. Pitt, Lord Bute became the most influential of the ministers. He undertook the chief management of public affairs in the cabinet, and the sole direction of the House of Lords. He consulted none of his colleagues, except Lord Egremont and Mr. George Grenville. His ascendancy provoked the jealousy and resentment of the king's veteran minister, the Duke of Newcastle. For years he had distributed all the patronage of the crown, but it was now wrested from his hands, nor was he consulted as to its disposal. The king himself created seven peers, without even acquainting him with their creation. Lord Bute gave away places and pensions to his own friends, and paid no attention to the recommendations of the duke. At length, in May 1762, his grace, after frequent disagreements in the cabinet, and numerous affronts, was obliged to resign.(6)

[22] And now, the object of the court being at length attained, Lord Bute was immediately placed at the head of affairs, as First Lord of the Treasury. Rapid had been the rise of the king's favourite. In thirteen months he had been groom of the stole, a privy councillor, ranger of Richmond Park, secretary of state, and premier;(7) and these favours were soon followed by his installation as a Knight of the Garter, at the same time as the king's own brother, Prince William. His sudden elevation resembled that of an eastern vizier, rather than the toilsome ascent of a British statesman. But the confidence of his royal master served to aggravate the jealousies by which the new minister was surrounded, to widen the breach between himself and the leaders of the Whig party, and to afford occasion for popular reproaches. It has been insinuated that he was urged forward by secret enemies, in order to insure his speedier fall; and it is certain that, had he been contented with a less prominent place, the consummation of his peculiar policy could have been more securely, and perhaps more successfully, accomplished.

'Proscription' of the Whigs

The king and his minister were resolved to carry matters with a high hand;(8) and their arbitrary attempts to coerce and intimidate opponents disclosed their imperious views of prerogative. Preliminaries of a treaty of peace with France having been agreed upon, against [23] which a strong popular feeling was aroused, the king's vengeance was directed against all who ventured to disapprove them.

The Duke of Devonshire having declined to attend the council summoned to decide upon the peace, was insulted by the king, and forced to resign his office of Lord Chamberlain. A few days afterwards the king, with his own hand, struck his grace's name from the list of privy councillors. For so great a severity the only precedents in the late reign were those of Lord Bath and Lord George Sackville; 'the first,' says Walpole, 'in open and virulent opposition; the second on his ignominious sentence after the battle of Minden.' No sooner had Lord Rockingham heard of the treatment of the Duke of Devonshire, than he sought an audience of the king; and having stated that those 'who had hitherto deservedly had the greatest weight in the country were now driven out of any share in the government, and marked out rather as objects of his Majesty's displeasure than of his favour,' resigned his place in the household.

A more general proscription of the Whig nobles soon followed. The Dukes of Newcastle and Grafton, and the Marquess of Rockingham, having presumed, as peers of Parliament, to express their disapprobation of the peace, were dismissed from the lord-lieutenancies of their counties. The Duke of [24] Devonshire, in order to share the fate of his friends and avoid the affront of dismissal, resigned the lieutenancy of his county.

Nor was the vengeance of the court confined to the heads of the Whig party. Not only were all parliamentary placemen, who had voted against the preliminaries of peace, dismissed: but their humble friends and clients were also proscribed. Clerks were removed from public offices, and inferior officers from the customs and excise, and other small appointments, for no other offence than that of having been appointed by their obnoxious patrons. While bribes were lavished to purchase adhesion to the court policy, the king and his advisers determined to discourage opposition with unsparing severity. Great lords must be humbled, parties overborne, and Parliament reduced to subjection.

The preliminaries of peace were approved by Parliament; and the Princess of Wales, exulting in the success of the court, claimed, 'Now my son is king of England.' But her exultation was premature. As yet there had been little more than a contention for power, between rival parties in the aristocracy: but these stretches of prerogative served to unite the Whigs into an organised opposition. Since the accession of the House of Hanover, this party had supported the crown, as ministers. It now became their office to assert the liberties of the people, and to resist the [25] encroachments of prerogative. Thus the king's attempt to restore the personal influence of the Sovereign, which the Revolution had impaired, so far from strengthening the throne, advanced the popular cause, and gave it powerful leaders, whose interests had hitherto been enlisted on the side of the crown. Claims of prerogative became the signal for the assertion of new rights and liberties, on the part of the people.

Fall of Bute

The fall of the king's favoured minister was even more sudden than his rise. He shrank from the difficulties of his position,—a disunited cabinet,—a formidable opposition,—doubtful support from his friends,—the bitter hatred of his enemies,—a libellous press,—and notorious unpopularity.(9) Afraid, as he confessed, 'not only of falling himself, but of involving his royal master in his ruin,' he resigned suddenly,—to the surprise of all parties, and even of the king himself,—before he had held office for eleven months. But his short administration had indulged the king's love of rule, and encouraged him to proceed with his cherished scheme for taking a dominant part in the direction of public affairs.

Nor did Lord Bute propose to relinquish his own power together with his office. Having negotiated the appointment of Mr. George Grenville as his successor, and arranged with him the nomination of the cabinet, he retreated to [26] the interior cabinet, where he could direct more securely the measures of the court.

Footnotes.

1. The Duke of Newcastle thus wrote at this time to Lord Rockingham:—'My Lord Anson has received orders from the king himself to declare to the docks (at Portsmouth) that they may vote for whom they please at the Hampshire election, even though the Chancellor of the Exchequer is a candidate.' Lord Bute complained to the First Lord of the Admiralty, that he had disposed of the Admiralty boroughs without acquainting the king.—Dodington's Diary, 433; Rockingham Mem., i. 61-64.
2. Formerly the cockpit of the ancient palace of Whitehall. At this period, it was a public building, on the site of the present Privy Council office, in which were the Council Chamber and the offices of the first Lord of the Treasury. It was here that the Parliamentary supporters of the Government were invited to meet.—See Cunningham's London, 133; Knight's London, 290.
3. Lord Hardwicke said, 'He (Lord Bute) principally availed himself with great art and finesse of the dissensions between the Duke of Newcastle and Mr. Pitt: he played off one against the other till he got rid of the popular minister, and when that was compassed he strengthened himself in the cabinet, by bringing in Lord Egremont and Mr. Grenville, and never left intriguing till he had rendered it impracticable for the old

- duke to continue in office with credit and honour.'—Rockingham Mem. i. 6. See the Duke's own letters, *ib.*, 102-109.
4. Ann. Reg., 1761 [43], Grenville Papers, i. 391, 405. Mr. Pitt, in a letter to Mr. Beckford, October 15, 1761, says, 'A difference of opinion with regard to measures to be taken against Spain, of the highest importance to the honour of the Crown, and to the most essential national interests, and this founded on what Spain had already done, not on what that court may further intend to do, was the cause of my resigning the seals.'—Chatham Corr., ii, 159.
 5. Mr. Pitt said, 'I confess, Sir, I had but too much reason to expect your Majesty's displeasure. I did not come prepared for this exceeding goodness. Pardon me, Sir, it overpowers, it oppresses me,' and burst into tears.—Ann. Reg.; Grenville Papers, i. 413.
 6. The personal demeanour of the king towards him evinced the feeling with which he had long been regarded. The duke complained of it in this manner: 'The king did not drop one word of concern at my leaving him, nor even made me a polite compliment, after near fifty years' service and devotion to the interests of his royal family. I will say nothing more of myself, but that I believe never any man was so dismissed.'—Letter to Lord Rockingham, May 19th, Rockingham Mem., i. 111. Yet Lord Bute, in a letter to Mr. Grenville, May 25th, 1762, says, 'The king's conduct to the Duke of Newcastle to-day was great and generous.'—Grenville Papers, i. 448.
 7. His countess also received an English barony.
 8. Walpole Mem., i. 44. 'The king, it was given out, would be king,—would not be dictated to by his ministers, as his grandfather had been. The prerogative was to shine out: great lords must be humbled.'—Walp. Mem., i. 200.
 9. He was hissed and pelted at the opening of Parliament, 25th Nov., 1762, and his family were alarmed for his personal safety.

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