Erskine May, Chapter I, pp. 39-51

The King, Lord Chatham, and Lord North

At length, in July, 1766, they [the Rockingham ministry] were ungraciously dismissed; and his Majesty now expected, from the hands of Mr. Pitt, an administration better suited to his own views and policy. Mr. Pitt's greatness had naturally pointed him out as the fittest man for such a task; and there were other circumstances which made him personally acceptable to the king. Haughty as was the demeanour of that distinguished man in the senate, and among his equals, his bearing in the royal presence was humble and obsequious. The truth of Mr. Burke's well-known sarcasm, that 'the least peep into that closet intoxicates him, and will to the end of his life,' was recognised by all his [40] contemporaries.(1) A statesman with at least the outward qualities of a courtier, was likely to give the king some repose, after his collisions with the two last ministries. He now undertook to form an administration, under the Duke of Grafton, with the office of privy seal, and a seat in the Upper House, as Earl of Chatham.

For another reason also, Lord Chatham was acceptable to the king. They agreed, though for different reasons, in the policy of breaking up party connections. This was now the settled object of the king, which he pursued with unceasing earnestness. In writing to Lord Chatham, July 29th, 1766, he said, 'I know the Earl of Chatham will zealously give his aid towards destroying all party distinctions, and restoring that subordination to government which can alone preserve that inestimable blessing, liberty, from degenerating into licentiousness.' Again, December 2nd, 1766, he wrote to the Earl of Chatham: 'To rout out the present method of parties banding together, can only be obtained by withstanding their unjust demands, as well as the engaging able [41] men, be their private connections where they will.' And again, on the 26th June, 1767: 'I am thoroughly resolved to encounter any difficulties rather than yield to faction.'

Continuing Influence of the King

By this policy the king hoped to further his cherished scheme of increasing his own personal influence. To overcome the Whig connection, was to bring into office the friends of Lord Bute, and the court party who were subservient to his views. Lord Chatham adopted the king's policy for a very different purpose, Though in outward observances a courtier, he was a constitutional statesman, opposed to government by prerogative, and court influence. His career had been due to his own genius: independent of party, and superior to it, he had trusted to his eloquence, his statesmanship, and popularity. And now, by breaking up parties, he hoped to rule over them all. His project, however, completely failed. Having offended and exasperated the Whigs, he found himself at the head of an administration composed of the king' s friends, who thwarted him, and of other discordant elements, over which he had no control. He discovered, when it was too late, that the king had been more sagacious than himself,—and that while his own power and connections had crumbled away, the court party had obtained a dangerous ascendency. Parties had been broken up, and prerogative triumphed. The leaders of parties had been reduced to insignificance, while the king directed public affairs according to his own will, and upon [42] principles dangerous to public liberty. According to Burke, when Lord Chatham 'had accomplished his scheme of administration, he was no longer minister.' To repair the mischief which had been done, he afterwards sought an alliance with the party which, when in power, he had alienated from him. 'Former little differences must be forgotten,' he said, 'when the contest is *pro aris et focis*.'

Meanwhile, other circumstances contributed to increase the influence of the king. Much of

Lord Chatham's popularity had been sacrificed by the acceptance of a peerage; and his personal influence was diminished by his removal from the house of Commons, where he had been paramount. His holding so obscure a place as that of Privy Seal, further detracted from his weight as a minister. His melancholy prostration soon afterwards, increased the feebleness and disunion of the administration. Though his was its leading mind, for months he was incapacitated from attending to any business. He even refused an interview to the Duke of Grafton, the premier, and to General Conway, though commissioned by the king to confer with him. It is not surprising that the Duke of Grafton should complain of the languor under which 'every branch of the administration laboured from his absence.' Yet the king, writing to Lord Chatham, January 23rd, 1768, to dissuade him from [43] resigning the Privy Seal, said: 'Though confined to your house, your name has been sufficient to enable my administration to proceed.' At length, however, in October, 1768, completely broken down, he resigned his office, and withdrew from the administration.(2)

The absence of Lord Chatham, and the utter disorganisation of the ministry, left the king free to exercise his own influence, and to direct the policy of the country, without control. Had Lord Chatham been there, the ministry would have had a policy of its own: now it had none, and the Duke of Grafton and Lord North,—partly from indolence, and partly from facility,—consented to follow the stronger will of their sovereign. On his side, the king took advantage of the disruption of party ties, which he had taken pains to promote. In the absence of distinctive principles, and party leaders, members of Parliament were exposed to the direct influence of the crown. According to Horace Walpole, 'everybody ran to court, and voted for whatever the court desired.' The main object of the king in breaking up parties, had thus been secured.

The King and Lord North

On the resignation of the Duke of Grafton, the [44] king's ascendency in the councils of his ministers was further increased by the accession of Lord North to the chief direction of public affairs. That minister, by principle a Tory, and favourable to prerogative,—in character indolent and good-tempered,—and personally attached to the king,—yielded up his own opinions and judgment; and for years consented to be the passive instrument of the royal will.(3) The persecution of Wilkes, the straining of parliamentary privilege, and the coercion of America, were the disastrous fruits of the court policy. Throughout this administration, the king staked his personal credit upon the success of his measures; and regarded opposition to his ministers as an act of disloyalty, and their defeat as an affront to himself. In 1770, Lord Chatham stated in Parliament, that since the king's accession there had been no original (i.e. independent) minister; and examples abound of the king's personal participation in every political event of this period.

The King's Activity

While the opposition were struggling to reverse the proceedings of the House of Commons against Wilkes, and Lord Chatham was about to move an address for dissolving [45] Parliament, the king's resentment knew no bounds. In conversations with General Conway, at this time, he declared he would abdicate his crown rather than comply with this address, 'Yes,' said the king, laying his hand on his sword, 'I will have recourse to this, sooner than yield to a dissolution of Parliament.' And opinions have not been wanting, that the king was actually prepared to resist what he deemed an invasion of his prerogative, by military force.

On the 26th February, 1772, while the Royal Marriage Bill was pending in the House of Lords, the king thus wrote to Lord North: 'I expect every nerve to be strained to carry the bill. It is not a question relating to administration, but personally to myself: therefore I have a right to expect a hearty support from every one in my service, and I shall remember defaulters.' Again, on the 14th March, 1772, he wrote: 'I wish a list could be prepared of those that went

away, and of those that deserted to the minority (on division in the committee). That would be a rule for my conduct in the drawing-room to-morrow.' Again, in another letter, he said: 'I am greatly incensed at the presumption of Charles Fox, in forcing you to vote with him last night.'(4) . . . . . 'I hope you will let him know that you are not [46] insensible of his conduct towards you.' And the king's confidence in his own influence over the deliberations of Parliament, appears from another letter, on the 26th June, 1774, where he said, ' I hope the crown will always be able, in either House of Parliament, to throw out a bill; but I shall never consent to use any expression which tends to establish, that at no time the right of the crown to dissent is to be used.'

The king watched not only how members spoke and voted, or whether they abstained from voting ; but even if they were silent, when he had expected them to speak.(5) No 'whipper-in' from the Treasury could have been more keen or full of expedients, in influencing the votes of members in critical divisions. He was ready, also, to take advantage of the absence of opponents. Hearing that Mr. Fox was going to Paris, he wrote to Lord North, on the 16th November, 1776: "Bring as much forward as you can before the recess, as real business is never so well considered [47] as when the attention of the House is not taken up with noisy declamation.'

Military officers were still exposed to marks of the king's displeasure. In 1773, Colonel Barré and Sir Hugh Williams, both refractory members of Parliament, were passed over in a brevet, or promotion: and Colonel Barré, in order to mark his sense of the injustice of this act of power, resigned his commission in the army. The king, however, appears to have modified his opinions as to his right of depriving members of military commands, on account of their conduct in Parliament. Writing to Lord North, on the 6th March, 1779, he says : 'I am strongly of opinion that the general officers, who through Parliament have got governments, should, on opposing, lose them. This is very different from removing them from their military commands.' On the 9th March he writes 'I wish to see the list of the defaulters, who have either employments, or military governments.'

Failure to Recruit Lord Chatham

Not without many affronts, and much unpopularity, the king and his minister long triumphed over all opposition in Parliament, but in 1778, the signal failure of their policy, the crisis in American affairs, and the impending war with France, obliged them to enter into negotiations with Lord Chatham, for the [48] admission of that statesman and some of the leaders of opposition into the ministry. The king needed their assistance, but was resolved not to adopt their policy. He would accept them as instruments of his own will, but not as responsible ministers. If their counsels should prevail, he would himself be humiliated and disgraced.

In a letter to Lord North, on the 15th March, 1778, the king says: 'Honestly, I would rather lose the crown I now wear, than bear the ignominy of possessing it under their shackles.' And, again, on the 17th of March, he writes: 'I am still ready to accept any part of them that will come to the assistance of my present efficient ministers; but, whilst any ten men in the kingdom will stand by me, I will not give myself up to bondage. My dear Lord, I will rather risk my crown than do what I think personally disgraceful. It is impossible this nation should not stand by me. If they will not, they shall have another king, for I never will put my hand to what will make me miserable to the last hour of my life.' Again, on the 18th, he writes: 'Rather than be shackled by those desperate men (if the nation will not stand by me), I will rather see any form of government introduced into this island, and lose my crown, rather than wear it as a disgrace.' The failure of these negotiations, followed by the death [49] of Lord Chatham, left unchanged the unfortunate administration of Lord North.

Approaches to the Whigs

Overtures, indeed, were made to the Whig leaders, to join a new ministry under Lord Weymouth, which were, perhaps unwisely, declined; and henceforth the king was resolved to admit none to his councils without exacting a pledge of compliance with his wishes. Thus, on the 4th February, 1779, writing to Lord North, he says: 'You may now sound Lord Howe; but, before I name him to preside at the Admiralty Board, I must expect an explicit declaration that he will zealously concur in prosecuting the war in all the quarters of the globe.' Again, on the 22nd June, 1779, he writes: 'Before I will hear of any man's readiness to come into office, I will expect to see it signed under his own hand, that he is resolved to keep the empire entire, and that no troops shall consequently be withdrawn from thence (i.e. America), nor independence ever allowed.' It was not without reason that this deplorable contest was called the king's war.

At this time it was openly avowed in the House of Commons by Lord George Germaine, that the king was his own minister. and Mr. Fox lamented, 'that his Majesty was his own unadvised minister.' Nor was it unnatural that the king should expect [50] such submission from other statesmen, when his first minister was carrying out a policy of which he disapproved, but wanted resolution to resist—and when Parliament had hitherto supported his ill-omened measures. Lord North did not conceal his own views concerning the continuance of the American war. In announcing to the king the resignation of Lord Gower, who was of opinion that the contest 'must end in ruin to his Majesty and the country,' he said: 'in the argument Lord North had certainly one disadvantage, which is that he held in his heart, and ha held for three years past, the same opinion as Lord Gower.' Yet the minister submitted to the stronger will of his royal master.

Again, however, the king was reduced to treat with the opposition; but was not less resolute in his determination that no change of ministers should affect the policy of his measures. On the 3rd December, 1779, he was prevailed upon to give Lord Thurlow authority to open a negotiation with the leaders of the opposition, and expressed his willingness 'to admit into his confidence and service any men of public spirit and talents, who will join with part of the present ministry in forming one on a more enlarged scale, provided it be understood that every means are to be employed to keep the empire entire, to prosecute the present just and unprovoked war in all its branches, with the utmost vigour, and that his Majesty's past measures be treated with proper [51] respect.' Finding the compliance of independent statesmen less ready than he desired, he writes to Lord Thurlow, on the 18th December, 'From the cold disdain with which I am treated, it is evident to me what treatment I am to expect from the opposition, if I was to call them into my service. To obtain their support, I must deliver up my person, my principles, and my dominions into their hands.' In other words, the king dreaded the admission of any ministers to his councils, who claimed an independent judgment upon the policy for which they would become responsible.

Footnotes.

1. Chase Price said, 'that at the levée, he (i.e. Lord Chatham) used to bow so low, you could see the tip of his hooked nose between his legs.'—Rockingham Mem., ii. 83. He had been in the habit of kneeling at the bedside of George II., while transacting business.—Wraxall's Mem., ii. 53. That he was ever true to his character, is illustrated by the abject terms of his letter to the king on resigning the office of privy seal, two years afterwards. 'Under this load of unhappiness, I will not despair of your Majesty's pardon, while I supplicate again on my knees your Majesty's mercy, and most humbly implore your Majesty's royal permission to resign that high office.'—14th October, 1768; Chatham Corr., iii. 314.
2. In his letter to the king, October 14th, he said, 'All chance of recovery will be precluded by my continuing longer to hold the Privy Seal.'—Ibid., iii. 314.

So little hath Lord Chatham's illness been assumed for political purposes, as it was frequently represented, that in August, 1777, he gave Lady Chatham a general letter of attorney, empowering her to transact all business for him.—Ibid., iii. 282.

3. Mr. Massey says, Lord North was 'the only man of Parliamentary reputation who would not have insisted' on the expulsion of the king's friends.—Hist., i. 424. Always in favour of power and authority, 'he supported the king against the aristocracy, the parliament against the people, and the nation against the colonies.'—Ibid., 425.
4. 15th February, 1774. In proceedings against printers of a libel on the speaker, Sir F. Norton.
5. King to Lord North, 7th Jan., 1770. 'Surprised that T. Townsend was silent.'—King to Lord North, 19th Dec., 1772. Ibid., 81. 'I should think Lord G. Germaine might with great propriety have said a few words to put the defence in motion.'—King to Lord North, 2nd Feb., 1778. Lord Brougham's Works, iii. 105.He was incensed against Dundas for the same reason, 24th Feb., 1778.—Ibid., 106.

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