

Erskine May, Chapter II, pp. 119-129

Paramount Influence of the Crown during the Regency

Character of the Prince Regent

THE Prince Regent differed too much, in character and habits, from his royal father, to be inclined to exercise the influence of the crown, with the same activity. George III., eager for power, had also delighted in business, to which he had trained himself from early youth. With greater abilities, and superior education, the prince was fond of ease and pleasure, and averse to business. His was not the temperament to seek the labour and anxieties of public affairs: nor had power devolved upon him, until the ambitious spirit of youth had ceased to prompt him to exertion. He loved the 'pomp and circumstance' of royalty, without its cares. But though disinclined to the daily toils which his father had undergone for fifty years,—and disposed, by indolence and indifference, to leave more discretion to his ministers, in the ordinary affairs of state: yet whenever his own feelings or interests were concerned, his father himself had scarcely been more imperative.

[120] The very qualities, however, which disinclined the prince to laborious activity, exposed him the more readily to the influence of his court. His father's will was strong, and full of energy: his own, inconstant and capricious. The father had judged for himself, with rude vigour and decision: the son,—impulsive, indolent, and without strength of principle or conviction,—was swayed by the advice of those nearest to his person. The early events of the regency displayed at once the preponderating influence of the crown, over all other powers of the state, and the subjection of the regent to the counsels of the court.

To politics, apart from their relations to himself, the prince was indifferent; and his indifference led to the same results, as the king's strong predilections. He readily gave up the opinions, as well as the political friends of his youth. As to his friends, indeed, he had been separated from them for many years, by the French Revolution:(1) the death of Mr. Fox had more recently loosened the tie which had bound them together: the part taken by them against the Duke of York, had further relaxed it; and the proud bearing of the great Whig leaders,—little congenial to the lighter manners of the court,—had nearly broken it asunder. But lately they had exerted [121] themselves strenuously against the restrictions upon the powers of the regent, which the Government, following the precedent of 1788, had proposed; and their general views of policy were supposed to coincide with his own.

The Prince and the Whigs

Other circumstances pointed strongly to their being now called to office. The Perceval administration, which had owed its origin to the king's dread of the Roman Catholic claims, was weak and disunited; and while the leading statesmen of all other parties were favourable to the Roman Catholic cause, the sole merit, of this ministry lay in their opposition to it. Mr. Perceval himself had been personally obnoxious to the prince, as the friend and adviser of his detested princess, Caroline of Brunswick: nor had the chancellor, Lord Eldon, been free from the same offence. The regent had also suspected the latter of keeping him at a distance from his father, and told his lordship afterwards 'that there was no person in the whole world that he hated so much, as for years he had hated him.'

The prince had further raised the expectations of the opposition, by confiding to Lord Grenville and Lord Grey the drawing up of his answer to the joint resolutions of the two

Houses on the conditions of the regency; and he, as suddenly, repressed these expectations by rejecting their draft for another,—the composition of himself and Mr. Sheridan. This proceeding, so contrary to the views of these noblemen, as [122] responsible advisers, drew from them a remonstrance, which, however constitutional in doctrine, was too lofty in its tone, and partook too much of the character of a lecture, to be altogether acceptable to the prince.

While the Regency Bill was passing through Parliament, the prince had frequent communications with the opposition. The plan of a new administration was concerted, and several of the principal places were allotted to the Whig leaders. So assured were they of their speedy accession to power, that, jealous of the influence of Lord Moira and Mr. Sheridan, they were already insisting that the prince should engage to consult none but his future ministers. Nor were ministers less persuaded of the impending change. The king himself, in his lucid intervals, was informed of it by his chancellor; and was prepared to restore his old servants when he recovered. But before the Regency Bill had received the royal assent, the queen addressed a letter to the prince, suggesting the serious consequences which a change of ministry might have upon the king's recovery. The prince accordingly acquainted Lord Grenville that the state of his Majesty's health prevented the removal of ministers: but that his [123] confidence was entirely with his lordship, Lord Grey, and his other friends.

When the restrictions upon the prince's power, as regent, were about to expire, and the king's recovery had become more improbable, it was still believed that he would, at length, form a new administration consisting of the opposition leaders. He contented himself, however, with proposing, through the Duke of York, that 'some of those persons with whom the early habits of his public life were formed,' should agree to strengthen Mr. Perceval's administration,—a proposal which they could scarcely have been expected to accept.(2) In suggesting this arrangement, he truly avowed that he had 'no predilections to indulge;' having now become as indifferent to the principles, as to the persons, of the Whig leaders.

Paramount Influence of the Crown

Restrained for a time, by the possibility of the king's recovery, from making any changes, he had easily become satisfied with existing arrangements,—his contentment being increased by a liberal civil list. This result was imputed to secret counsels,—to the persuasion of the queen, the Hertford family, and the court. [124] Parliament and the press resounded with denunciations of these covert influences.(3) But the events of this period had a deeper import than the intrigues of a court, and the disappointments of a party. They marked the paramount influence of the crown, in the government of the country. Here were the two great parties in the state looking to royal favour alone, as the source of their power. It was never doubted by ministers, that, if they retained the confidence of the prince regent, they would be able to command the support of Parliament. It was never doubted by the opposition, that, if invited to accept office, they would be able to maintain their position as firmly as those ministers whom they were seeking to displace. Both parties were assured, that the support of Parliament would follow the confidence of the crown. The Whigs had relied upon the personal friendship of the prince regent: but ministers, having supplanted their rivals in court favour, continued to govern the country with the acquiescence of an obsequious Parliament. There was no appeal, on either side, to political principles or policy, or to public service: but all alike looked upwards to the court. The Tory party happened to prevail; and the [125] government of the state was, therefore, conducted on Tory principles. If the Whig party had been placed in power, without any change in public opinion, Whig principles would have been in the ascendant.

Death of Perceval—The Household

The assassination of Mr. Perceval made an unexpected opening for a new ministry. but the court appears to have been resolved that no considerable change should follow. Overtures

were made to Lord Wellesley and Mr. Canning, to strengthen a government to whose policy they were opposed: but—as had doubtless been expected—they refused such conditions. The old government would have been at once revived, had not the Commons addressed the regent, on the motion of Mr. Stuart Wortley, to take measures 'to form a strong and efficient administration.' Lord Wellesley was now commissioned to form a ministry: but none of the existing ministers would listen to his overtures; and the opposition declined to accept such a share of the cabinet as was offered to them; and thus his lordship's mission failed, as the court had, probably, intended.

At length Lord Moira—the intimate friend of the prince, and the unconscious tool of the court—was charged to consult with Lord Grey and Lord Grenville, on the formation of an [126] administration. He stated that he had received this commission without any restrictions upon the consideration of such points as they judged useful for his service. Nothing could exceed the apparent fairness of this proposal; but, as Lords Grey and Grenville had received information that no changes would be permitted in the royal household, they inquired whether they should be at liberty to consider appointments to those great offices in the household, which were usually included in political arrangements, on a change of ministry. Lord Moira, having obtained the prince's consent to part with the officers of the household, if he should advise it, had assured his royal highness, before he undertook this mission, 'that he should not part with one of them.' In execution of his promise, he now said that it would be impossible for him to concur in the necessity of changing the household on the formation of a new ministry; and upon this issue the negotiations were broken off. As the views of Lord Moira on the one side, and of the Whigs on the other, had been well known before Lord Moira received his commission, this proposal would seem to have been as illusory as those which had preceded it. But there was yet another artifice practised upon the opposition leaders. Though Lord Moira had determined not to agree to any alteration in the household, Lord Hertford, Lord Yarmouth, and other officers had resolved to resign their offices at [127] court, should the opposition undertake to form a government. But this important information was prevented, by court intrigues, from reaching the noble lords who were conducting the negotiations. They insisted upon the change in order to give 'to a new government that character of efficiency and stability, and those marks of the constitutional support of the crown, which were required to enable it to act usefully for the public service.' Lord Moira rested his resistance to a claim,—which, according to custom, could hardly have been opposed in any bona fide consultations,—on the ground that changes in the household would give countenance to the imputations which had been thrown upon the court. It need hardly be said that his conduct produced the very result which he had professed his anxiety to avert.

The leaders of the opposition were persuaded of the hollowness of all the proposals which had been made to them; and, knowing the hostility of the court, were as unwilling as their opponents that these overtures should lead to any result. Had they been less lofty and unbending, they might perhaps have overcome the obstacles which they dreaded. The regent had not the stubborn will of his royal father, and might have won over to their side again, if they had once established themselves at court. So thought many of their disappointed followers: but the great lords [128] judged otherwise, and proudly shrank from the ungracious task of combating the disfavour of the prince, and the intrigues of his courtiers. The prince, indeed, had now become so violent against the opposition, that we are reminded of George III. in the days of the coalition. 'He told Lord Wellesley that he had no objection to one or two of them individually, but as a body he would rather abdicate the regency than ever come into contact with them.' And again, after the failure of Lord Moira's mission 'three times that day, before dinner and after dinner, he declared that if Lord Grey had been forced upon him, he should have abdicated.'

These negotiations, meanwhile, had served their purpose. The old administration was immediately reconstituted, under the Earl of Liverpool; and when complaints were made in

the House of Commons, that a strong administration had not been formed, in compliance with their address, the blame was thrown upon the impracticable leaders of the opposition. Ministers were now safe, and gained an easy triumph over Mr. Stuart Wortley and Lord Milton, who endeavoured to unsettle the government, by further representations to the regent.

[129] Henceforth the ascendancy of Tory politics, which George III. had established, and which the regent had been expected to overthrow, was maintained more firmly than ever. By the influence of the crown it had been created; and by the same influence it was upheld during the regency, and throughout the reign of George IV. All opposition being thus defeated, and the ministers and the court party being agreed, the prince regent had no further need of personal interposition in the government of the country.

Footnotes.

1. Mr. Erskine, writing to Mr. Lee, 8th Feb. 1793, said: 'We are now plunging for nothing, or rather for mischief, into a calamitous war, in combination (not avowed) with the despots of the North, to restore monarchy in France. And as it is the cause of kings, our prince is drawn into it, and has taken his leave of all of us.'—Rockingham Memoirs, ii. 127.
2. Lord Grenville, writing to the Marquess of Buckingham, Feb. 13th, 1812, said: 'The whole will end, I doubt not, in the continuance of Perceval, with Castlereagh and Sidmouth to help him. And this, I believe, is what Lord Yarmouth means, whose intentions are those which are alone of any consequence.'
3. Mr. Lyttleton, May 4th, 1812, said: 'It was notorious that the regent was surrounded with favourites, and, as it were, hemmed in with minions.'

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