

Erskine May, Chapter IV, pp. 244-253

Crown Revenues Since 1820

Civil List of George IV

King George IV., on his accession, expected a larger civil list than he had enjoyed as Prince Regent: but yielding to the persuasion and remonstrances of his ministers, he stated in his speech from the throne, that so far from desiring any arrangement which would lead to the imposition of new burdens upon his people, he had no wish to alter the settlement adopted by Parliament in 1816.(1)

[245] The civil list being now free from the expenses of the late king, was fixed by Parliament at £845,727. But during the whole of this reign the king enjoyed, in addition to this income, the hereditary revenues of Scotland, amounting on an average to £109,000, and the civil list for Ireland of £250,000. He also received the droits of the crown and Admiralty, the 4½ per cent. duties, the West India duties, and other casual revenues, which were still vested in the crown, and independent of Parliament.(2)

Civil Lists of William IV and Victoria

King William IV., on his accession, for the first time surrendered the interest of the crown in all these sources of revenue; and accepted a civil list of £510,000. The future expenditure of this amount was divided into five different classes, to each of which a specific annual sum was appropriated, including a Pension List of £75,000. At the same time, the civil list was still further relieved from charges, which more properly belonged to the civil government of the state. These charges included judicial salaries,—which had been paid partly out of the civil list, partly out of the Consolidated Fund, and partly out of the fees of the Courts,—the salaries and pensions of the diplomatic service,—and numerous miscellaneous expenses.(3)

These arrangements were not concluded until the accounts of the civil list expenditure had been referred [246] to a select committee of the House of Commons, and freely investigated. The Wellington ministry resisted this investigation, and fell: when the settlement of the civil list was left to the Whig ministry of Earl Grey. The committee, in their inquiries, not thinking it consistent with the respect due to his Majesty to scrutinise the details of his domestic household, nevertheless recommended several reductions in the salaries of the officers of state, amounting in the aggregate to £11,529. The king, however, remonstrated with his ministers against the proposed reduction, saying:—'If the people, according to the new (reform) bill, are really to govern the House of Commons, and the House of Commons is to decide upon the amount of salary I am to give to my servants, then the prerogatives of the crown will in reality pass to the people, and the monarchy cannot exist.' The ministers yielded to this remonstrance, and induced the House of Commons to restore the civil list to the amount originally proposed.

The civil list of Queen Victoria was settled on the same principles as that of William IV., and amounted to £385,000: the only material variation being that in lieu of the Pension List of £75,000, her Majesty was empowered to grant pensions annually to the extent of £1,200. The crown was thus finally restricted to a definite [247] annuity for the support of its dignity, and for the personal comfort of the sovereign. It may be added, as at once a proof of the wisdom of these arrangements, and of the improved administration of our later sovereigns, that neither

in the reign of Her Most Gracious Majesty, nor in the reigns of George IV. and William IV., has any application been made to Parliament for the discharge of debts upon the civil list.

While the civil list has been diminished in amount, its relief from charges with which it had formerly been incumbered, has placed it beyond the reach of misconstruction. The crown repudiates the indirect influences exercised in former reigns, and is free from imputations of corruption. And the continual increase of the civil charges of the government, which was formerly a reproach to the crown, is now a matter for which the House of Commons is alone responsible. In this, as in other examples of constitutional progress, apparent encroachments upon the crown have but added to its true dignity, and conciliated, more than ever, the confidence and affections of the people.

Other Revenues of the Crown

Until the accession of her Majesty, every previous sovereign of her royal house had also enjoyed the revenue of the Kingdom of Hanover, which was now detached from the crown of England. Former sovereigns had also inherited considerable [248] personal property from their predecessors: but her Majesty succeeded to none whatever. The crown, however, still retains the revenues of the Duchies of Lancaster and Cornwall. The former are the property of the reigning sovereign; the latter the independent inheritance of the Prince of Wales, as Duke of Cornwall. The estates of both these duchies have been largely augmented by judicious management, and by vigilant attention to the interests of the crown.

At the commencement of her Majesty's reign, the gross revenue of the Duchy of Lancaster amounted to £23,038, and the charges to £14,126, leaving a net revenue of no more than £8,912. In 1859, the gross revenue had increased to £45,436, and the net revenue to £31,349, of which £25,000 were paid to her Majesty's Privy Purse.

When George, Prince of Wales, came of age in 1783, the income of the Duchy of Cornwall was less than £13,000 a year. On the accession of her Majesty, the gross income was £28,466, and the payments were £12,670, leaving a net income of £15,786. In 1859, the gross income had increased, under the admirable management of the Prince Consort, to £63,704, and the net revenue to £50,777; of which no less than £40,785 were paid over to the trustees and treasurer of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. Former sovereigns had themselves appropriated the income of the [249] duchy, during the minority of the heir-apparent: but her Majesty generously renounced it; and out of this ample revenue, accumulations exceeding half a million, were invested for the future benefit of his Royal Highness.(4)

Private Property of the Sovereign

In addition to these public revenues, the rights of the crown to its own private property have been secured. The alienation of the land revenues of the crown having been restrained by the 1st Anne, a doubt subsequently arose, whether the restrictions of that Act extended to the private property of the sovereign, acquired by purchase, gift or devise, or by descent, from persons not being kings or queens of the realm. But such restrictions being without any colour of justice, an Act was passed, in 1800, declaring that property so acquired, could be disposed of like the property of subjects.(5) On the accession of George IV., however, doubts were suggested whether this Act applied to property acquired, by the reigning sovereign, before he had succeeded to the throne, which were set at rest by statute in 1823.(6)

Other Members of the Royal Family

While the civil list has been ample for the support of the personal dignity of the crown, Parliament has also provided liberally for the maintenance of the various members of the

royal family. A separate annuity to the Queen [250] Consort, with a large dowry in case of the death of the king,—annuities to the brothers, sisters, and other relatives of his Majesty,—establishments for each of his children on coming of age, and even allowance for their education and maintenance,—marriage portions for princesses of the royal house,—such are the claims which have been made upon the liberality of Parliament, in addition to the civil list. To these must be added, in the reign of George III., the debts of the Prince of Wales.

The prince came of age in 1783,—a time ill-suited for heavy demands upon the public purse. The people were still suffering under the accumulated burthens of the American War; and the abuses of the civil list had recently undergone a rude exposure. But the prince's Whig friends in the Coalition ministry, overlooking these considerations, proposed a settlement of £100,000 a year. They were glad to have this opportunity of strengthening their political connection with the heir-apparent. But the king was more sensible than they, of the objections to such a proposal at that time; and being tenacious of his own power,—loving his son but little, and hating his ministers much,—he declined an arrangement which would have secured the independence of the prince, and drawn him still more closely to the party most obnoxious to himself. He agreed, therefore, to make the prince an allowance of £50,000 a year out of his civil list, which had already proved unequal to his own expenditure; and limited his demand [251] upon Parliament to an outfit of £60,000. To a prudent prince such an allowance would have been ample: to the spendthrift and the gamester it was a pittance. The prince was soon in difficulties; and his 'debts of honour' to the blacklegs of Newmarket, and the sharpers of St. James's, left little for the payment of the royal tradesmen. On the revision of the civil list in 1786, another effort was made by the prince's friends to obtain for him a more liberal settlement: but Mr. Pitt was cold, and the king inexorable. The prince broke up his establishment, yet failed to pay his debts.

In 1787 his affairs had become desperate, when the heir-apparent was saved from ruin by the friendly intervention of a London alderman. Mr. Alderman Newnham having given notice, in the House of Commons, of an address to the king on the subject of the prince's debts, and being supported by the friends of his Royal Highness, the king thought it better to arrange a compromise. This resulted in the addition of £10,000 a year to the income of the prince out of the civil list; and the voting of £161,000 for the payment of his debts, and £20,000 for the buildings at Carlton House. No less than £63,700 were afterwards granted by Parliament, at different times, for the completion of this costly palace,(7) which, after being the scene of tinsel [252] splendour and bad taste for little more than twenty five years, was rased to the ground to make room for metropolitan improvements.

The king assured the House of Commons that the prince had promised to confine his future expenses within his income; yet so little were these good intentions carried out, that in 1792 his Royal Highness confessed to Lord Malmesbury that his debts then amounted to £370,000. In 1796 they had increased to the extraordinary sum of £660,000; when he was extricated from these embarrassments, by his ill-fated marriage with Caroline of Brunswick. To propose a grant for the payment of these debts, was out of the question: but an additional annuity of £65,000 was settled upon him, of which nearly the whole was appropriated, for many years, to the gradual discharge of his incumbrances. In 1803, an addition of £60,000 was made to his income, and his debts were ultimately paid off. After a youth of excess and extravagance, the spendthrift prince,—though still fond of building and enlarging palaces at the public expense,—learned, in his old age, to husband his own resources, with the caution of a miser.

Parliament has since cheerfully granted every suitable provision for members of the royal family but its liberality has not been discredited by any [253] further application for the payment of their debts.

Footnotes.

1. Twiss's Life of Eldon, ii. 363; Hans. Deb., 2nd Ser., i. 11. This concession, 'if report be true, was obtained by nothing but the most determined refusal of the ministers to do more.'—Mr. T. Grenville to the Marquess of Buckingham, May 4th, 1820.
2. Report On Civil Government Charges, 1831: 1 Geo. IV. c. 1.
3. Report on Civil Government Charges, 1831; Report on Civil List Charges, 1833.
4. The country had the full benefit of this royal generosity and foresight, on the Prince's marriage. Report of the Council of the Prince of Wales, 1863; Debate on Prince of Wales' Annuity Bill. Feb., 23rd, 1863.
5. 39 and 40 Geo. III, c. 88.
6. 4 Geo IV, c. 18; Hans. Deb., 2nd Ser., viii. 509, 651.
7. Viz., £36,000 in 1759, £3,500 in 1791, and £27,500 in 1795.

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