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Parties, from the American to the French Revolution

Principles Tested by the American War

The American War involved principles which rallied the two parties, and displayed their natural antagonism. It was the duty of the government [147] to repress revolt, and to maintain the national honour. Had the Whigs been in power, they would have acknowledged this obligation. But the Tories,—led by the king himself,—were animated by a spirit of resentment against the colonists, which marked the characteristic principles of that party. In their eyes resistance was a crime: no violation of rights could justify or palliate rebellion. Tories of all classes were united in a cause so congenial to their common sentiments. The court, the landed gentry, and the clergy insisted, with one voice, that rebellion must be crushed, at whatever cost of blood and treasure. They were supported by a great majority of the House of Commons, and by the most influential classes in the country. The Whigs, on the other hand, asserted the first principles of their party in maintaining the rights of all British subjects to tax themselves, by their representatives, and to resist oppression and injustice. But in their vain efforts to effect a reconciliation with America, they had a slender following in Parliament; and in the country had little support but that of the working classes,—then wholly without influence,—and of the traders, who generally supported that party, and whose interests were naturally concerned in the restoration of peace.(1)

[148] Such were the sentiments, and such the temper of the ruling party, that the leading Whigs were not without apprehension that, if America should be subdued, English liberty would be endangered.

The First Whig Secession

Having vainly opposed and protested against the measures of the government, in November, 1776, they seceded from Parliament on American questions,—desiring to leave the entire responsibility of coercion with ministers and their majority. It can scarcely be denied that their secession—like earlier examples of the same policy(2)—was a political error, if not a dereliction of duty. It is true that an impotent minority, constantly overborne by power and numbers, may encourage and fortify, instead of restraining, their victorious opponents. Their continued resistance may be denounced as factious, and the smallness of their numbers pointed at as evidence of the weakness of their cause. But secession is flight. The enemy is left in possession of the field. The minority confess themselves vanquished. They even abandon the hope of retrieving their fallen cause, by rallying the people to their side. Nor do they escape imputations more injurious than any which persistence, under every discouragement, could bring upon them. [149] They may be accused of sullen ill-temper,—of bearing defeat with a bad grace,—and of the sacrifice of public duty to private pique.

The latter charge, indeed, they could proudly disregard, if convinced that a course, conscientiously adopted, was favourable to their principles. Yet it is difficult to justify the renunciation of a public duty, in times of peril, and the absolute surrender of a cause believed to be just. The Whigs escaped none of these charges; and even the dignity of a proud retirement before irresistible force was sacrificed by want of concert and united action. Mr. Fox and others returned after Christmas, to oppose the suspension of the Habeas Corpus

Act,(3) while many of his friends continued their secession. Hence his small party was further weakened and divided,(4) and the sole object of secession lost.(5)

The fortunes of the Whig party were now at their lowest point; and, for the present, the Tories were completely in the ascendant.(6) But the disastrous incidents of the [150] American war, followed by hostilities with France, could not fail to increase the influence of one party, while it discredited and humbled the other. The government was shaken to its centre; and in the summer of 1778, overtures were made to the Whigs, which would have given them the majority in a new cabinet under Lord Weymouth, on the basis of a withdrawal of the troops from America, and a vigorous prosecution of the war with France. Contrary to the advice of Mr. Fox, these overtures were rejected; and the Whigs continued their opposition to the fruitless contest with our revolted colonists. A war at once so costly, and so dishonourable to our arms, disgusted its former supporters; and the Whigs pressed Lord North with extraordinary energy and resolution, until they finally drove him from power. Their position throughout this contest,—the generous principles which they maintained, and the eloquence and courage with which they resisted the united force of the king, the ministers, and a large majority of both Houses of Parliament,—went far to restore their strength and character as a party. But, on the other hand, they too often laid themselves open to the charge of upholding rebels, and encouraging the foreign enemies of their country, a charge not soon forgotten, and successfully used to their prejudice.(7)

In watching the struggles of the two great parties, another incident must not be overlooked. The American contest fanned the latent embers of democracy throughout Europe; and in England a democratic party was formed, which, a few years later, exercised an important influence upon the relations of Whigs and Tories.

Rockingham and Shelburne

The Whigs, restored to power under their firm and honest leader, Lord Rockingham, appeared, once more, in the ascendant. The king, however, had taken care that their power should be illusory, and their position insecure. Lord Rockingham was placed at the head of another coalition ministry, of which one part consisted of Whigs, and the other of the Court party,—Lord Shelburne, Lord Thurlow, Lord Ashburton, and the Duke of Grafton. In such a cabinet, divisions and distrust were unavoidable. The Whig policy, however, prevailed, and does honour to the memory of that short-lived administration.(8)

The death of Lord Rockingham again overthrew his party. The king selected Lord Shelburne to succeed him; and Mr. Fox, objecting to that minister as the head of the rival party in the Coalition, in whom he had no confidence, and whose good faith towards himself he [152] had strong reasons to doubt, refused to serve under him, and retired with most of his friends.

This was a crisis in the history of parties, whose future destinies were deeply affected by two eminent men. Had Mr. Fox arranged his differences with Lord Shelburne, his commanding talents might soon have won for himself and his party a dominant influence in the councils of the state. His retirement left Lord Shelburne master of the situation, and again disunited his own inconsiderable party. Mr. William Pitt, on his entrance into Parliament, had joined the Whigs in their opposition to Lord North. He was of Whig connections and principles, and concurred with that party in all liberal measures. His extraordinary talents and ambition at once marked him, in his early youth, as a leader of men. His sympathies were all with Lord Rockingham: he supported his government; and there can be little doubt that he might have been won as a member of his party. But he was passed over when the Rockingham ministry was formed;(9) and was now secured by Lord Shelburne as his Chancellor of the Exchequer. Henceforth the young statesman, instead of co-operating with Mr. Fox, became his successful rival; and as his fortunes were identified with the king's [153] friends and the Tories, he was permanently alienated from the Whig connection. Who can tell what two such men, acting in

concert, might have accomplished for the good of their country and the popular cause!(10) Their altered relations proved a severe discomfiture to the Whigs, and a source of hope and strength to the Tories.

The Fox-North Coalition

There were now three parties,—Lord Shelburne and the Court,—Lord North and his Tory adherents,—and Mr. Fox and his Whig followers. It was plain that the first could not stand alone; and overtures were therefore made, separately, to Lord North and to Mr. Fox, to strengthen the administration. The former was still to be excluded himself, but his friends were to be admitted,—a proposal not very conciliatory to the leader of a party. The latter declined to join the ministry, unless Lord Shelburne resigned in favour of the Duke of Portland,—a suggestion not likely to be agreeable to the premier. These overtures, consequently, failed: but Lord North, fearing a junction between Mr. Fox and Mr. Pitt, and the [154] destruction of his own party, was inclined to listen favourably to suggestions for uniting with Mr. Fox, and overpowering the party of Lord Shelburne, to whom both were opposed. The singular coalition of these two statesmen, so long opposed in principles, in connections, and in party strife, was brought about by the arts of Lord Loughborough, Mr. Eden, Mr. Adam, Colonel Fitzpatrick, and Mr. George North.

The immediate occasion of their alliance was a coincidence of opinion, adverse to the preliminaries of peace. The concessions made by Lord Shelburne to the enemy were such as fairly to provoke objections; and a casual agreement between parties, otherwise opposed, was natural and legitimate. To restrain the influence of the crown was another object which Mr. Fox had much at heart; and in this also he found his facile and compliant ally not indisposed to co-operate. The main cause of their previous differences, the American war, was at an end; and both were of too generous a temper to cherish personal animosities with sullen tenacity. What Mr. Fox said finely of himself, could be affirmed with equal truth of his former rival, '*Amicitiae sempiternae, inimicitiae placabiles.*' But the principles of the two parties were irreconcilable; and their sudden union could not be effected without imputations injurious to the credit of both. Nor could it be disguised that personal ambition [155] dictated this bold stroke for power, in which principles were made to yield to interest. It was the alliance of factions, rather than of parties; and on either side it was a grave political error. Viewed with disfavour by the most earnest of both parties, it alienated from the two leaders many of their best followers. Either party could have united with Lord Shelburne, more properly than with one another. The Whigs forfeited the popularity which they had acquired in opposition. Even Wilkes and the democratic party denounced them. Courtiers and mob-orators vied with one another in execrating the 'infamous coalition.' So long as coalitions had served to repress the Whigs, advance the Tories, and increase the personal authority of the king, they had been favoured at court: but the first coalition which threatened the influence of the crown was discovered to be unprincipled and corrupt, and condemned as a political crime.

How the coalition, having triumphed for a time, was trampled under foot by the king and Mr. Pitt, has been already told.(11) It fell amidst groans and hisses; and has since been scourged, with unsparing severity, by writers of all parties. Its failure left it few friends: Lord North's followers were soon lost in the general body of Tories who supported Mr. Pitt; and Mr. Fox's party was again reduced to a powerless minority. But the errors and ruin of its leaders have, perhaps, brought [156] down upon them too harsh a judgment. The confusion and intermixture of parties, which the king himself had favoured, must not be forgotten. Every administration of his reign, but that of Lord North, had been a coalition; and the principles and connections of statesmen had been strangely shifting and changing. Mr. Fox, having commenced his career as a Tory, was now leader of the Whigs: Mr. Pitt, having entered Parliament as a Whig, had become leader of the Tories. The Grenvilles had coalesced with Lord Rockingham. Lord Temple had, at one time, consorted with Wilkes, and braved the

king; at another, he was a stout champion of his Majesty's prerogative. Lord Shelburne and Mr. Dunning, having combined with Lord Rockingham to restrain the influence of the crown, had been converted to the policy of the court. Lord Thurlow was the inevitable chancellor of Whigs and Tories alike. Wilkes was tamed, and denied that he had ever been a Wilkite. Such being the unsettled condition of principles and parties, why was the indignation of the country reserved for Mr. Fox and Lord North alone? Courtiers were indignant because the influence of the crown was threatened: the people, scandalised by the suspicious union of two men whose invectives were still resounding in their ears, followed too readily the cry of the court. The king and his advisers gained their end; and the overthrow of the coalition ensured its general condemnation. The consequent ruin of the Whigs secured the undisputed domination of the crown for the next fifty years.(12)

Pitt's Coalition

[157] That the prejudices raised against coalitions were, in a great measure, a pretence, was shown by the composition of Mr. Pitt's own ministry, which was scarcely less a coalition than that which he had overthrown and covered with opprobrium, for their supposed sacrifice of principle and consistency. He had himself contended against Lord North, yet his government was composed of friends and associates of that minister, and of Whigs who had recently agreed with himself and Mr. Fox. Having deserted his own party to lead their opponents, he was willing to accept support from every quarter. And when it became doubtful whether he could hold his ground against the opposition, negotiations were entered into, by the king's authority, for the reconstruction of the government, on the basis of a new coalition. Yet Mr. Pitt escaped the censure of those who were loudest in condemning the late coalition. Both arrangements, however, were the natural consequence of the condition of parties at that period. No one party being able to rule singly, a fusion of parties was inevitable. Lord Shelburne, unable to stand alone, had sought the alliance of each of the other parties. They had rejected his offers and [158] united against him; and Mr. Pitt, in his weakness, was driven to the same expedient, to secure a majority. A strong party may despise coalitions: but parties divided and broken up, are naturally impelled to unite; and to reprobate such unions, unconditionally, is to condemn the principles upon which the organisation of parties is founded. Members of the same party cannot agree upon all points: but their concurrence in great leading principles, and general sympathy, induce them to compromise extreme opinions, and disregard minor differences. A coalition of parties is founded upon the same basis. Men who have been opposed at another time, and upon different questions of policy, discover an agreement upon some important measures, and a common object in resisting a third party. Hence they forget former differences, and unite for the purpose of carrying out the particular policy in which they agree.

Mr. Pitt's popularity and success, at the elections of 1784, widened the basis of the Tory party. He was supported by squires and traders, churchmen and dissenters. He had gained over the natural allies of the Whigs; and he governed with the united power of the crown, the aristocracy, and the people. He had no natural connection with the party which he led, except as the king's minister. He had been born and educated a Whig. He had striven to confine the [159] influence of the crown, and enlarge the liberties of the people. But before his principles had time to ripen, he found himself the first minister of a Tory king, and the leader of the triumphant Tory party. The doctrines of that party he never accepted or avowed. If he carried them into effect, it was on the ground of expediency rather than of principle.(13) In advocating the rights of Parliament in regard to the Regency, and the abatement of impeachments, he spoke the sentiments and language of the Whig school. In favouring freedom of commerce, and restoring the finances, he stands out in favourable contrast with his great Whig rival, Mr. Fox, who slighted political economy, and the fruitful philosophy of Adam Smith. But called, at twenty-four years of age, to the practical administration of the

government,—possessing unbounded power,—of a haughty and imperious temper,—and surrounded by influences congenial to authority,—who can wonder that he became alienated from popular principles? Even the growth and expansion of his powerful intellect were affected by too early an absorption in the cares of office, and the practical details of business. A few more years of opposition [160] and study,—even the training of a less eminent office in the government, would have matured his powers, and enlarged his philosophy. Yet, notwithstanding these early trammels, he surpassed every statesman of his party in enlightenment and liberality.

Widely different was the character of Lord Thurlow. Long in the king's most secret counsels,—his chancellor in every administration, except the coalition, from Lord North's to Mr. Pitt's—he had directed the movements of the king's friends, encouraged his Majesty's love of power, and supported those principles of government which found most favour in the royal mind. He was in theory, in sympathy, and in temper, the very impersonation of a Tory of that period. For some years he exercised a sway,—less potential, indeed, than that of Mr. Pitt, in the general policy of the state, but scarcely inferior to that of the minister in influence with the king, in patronage, in court favours, and party allegiance. If Mr. Pitt was absolute master of the House of Commons, the House of Lords was the plaything of Lord Thurlow. It was not until Mr. Pitt resolved to endure no longer the intrigues, treachery, and insolent opposition of his chancellor, that he freely enjoyed all the powers of a responsible minister.

The Whigs and the Prince of Wales

The Whigs, proscribed at court, and despairing of royal favour, cultivated the friendship of the Prince [161] of Wales, who, in his first youth, warmly encouraged their personal intimacy, and espoused their cause. The social charms of such men as Fox, Sheridan, and Erskine, made their society most attractive to a young prince of ability and many accomplishments; and his early estrangement from the king and his ministers naturally threw him into the arms of the opposition. Even his vices received little reproof or discouragement from the gay members of the Whig party, who shared in the fashionable indulgences of that period. Young men of fashion drank deeply; and many wasted their health and fortunes at the gaming-table. Some of his Whig associates,—Fox and Sheridan among the number,—did not affect to be the most moral or prudent men of their age; and their association with the prince aggravated the king's repugnance to their party. How could he forgive the men whom he believed to be perverting the politics, alienating the affections, and corrupting the morals of the heir to his throne?

It was no new political phenomenon to see the court of the heir-apparent the nucleus of the opposition. It had been the unhappy lot of the Hanoverian family that every Prince of Wales had been alienated from the reigning sovereign. George I. hated his son with unnatural malignity; and the prince, repelled from court, became the hope of the opposition. Again, in the next reign, Frederick Prince of Wales, estranged from his father in domestic life, espoused the opinions and cultivated [162] the friendship of Bolingbroke, Chesterfield, Wyndham, Carteret, Pulteney, and other statesmen most vehemently opposed to the king's government.(14)

The Whigs being in office throughout both these reigns, the court of the heir-apparent fell naturally under the influence of the Tories. And now the first-born son of George III. was in open opposition to his father, and his father's chosen ministers; and the Tories being in the ascendant at court, the Whigs took possession of Carlton House. The prince wore the buff-and-blue uniform, and everywhere paraded his adherence to the Whig party. In 1784, after the Westminster election, he joined Mr. Fox's procession, gave fêtes at Carlton House in celebration of his victory, attended public dinners, and shared in other social gatherings of the party.

Their alliance was still more ostensible during the king's illness, in 1788. They openly

espoused the cause of the prince, and boasted of their approaching restoration to power;(15) while the prince was actively canvassing for votes to support them in Parliament. To the Earl of Lonsdale he wrote to solicit his support as a personal favour; and all his nominees in the House of Commons, though ordinarily staunch supporters of Mr. Pitt, were found voting with Mr. Fox and the opposition.

Footnotes.

1. Lord Camden, writing to Lord Chatham, February, 1775, said: 'I am grieved to observe that the landed interest is almost altogether anti-American, though the common people hold the war in abhorrence, and the merchants and tradesmen, for obvious reasons, are altogether against it.'—Chatham Corr., iv. 401.—'Parties were divided nearly as they had been at the end of the reign of Queen Anne; the Court and the landed gentry, with a majority in the House of Commons, were with the Tories: the trading interest and popular feeling with the Whigs.'—Lord J. Russell's *Life of Fox*, i. 83; *Belsham's Hist.*, vi. 194.
2. The Tory opposition had seceded in 1722, and again in 1738.—*Parl. Hist.*, x. 1323; *Tindal's Hist.*, iv. 668; *Smollett's Hist.*, ii. 219, 364; *Coxe's Walpole*, iii. 519; *Marchmont Papers*, ii. 190.
3. This Act applied to persons suspected of high treason in America, or on the high seas.
4. He mustered no more than forty-three followers on the second reading, and thirty-three on the third reading.
5. The Duke of Richmond, writing to Lord Rockingham, said:—'The worst, I see, has happened,—that is, the plan that was adopted has not been steadily pursued,'—*Rockingham Corr.*, ii. 308; *Parl. Hist.*, xvi, 1229.
6. Burke, writing to Fox, 8th Oct. 1777, says:—'The Tories universally think their power and consequence involved in the success of this American business, The clergy are astonishingly warm in it, and what the Tories are when embodied and united with their natural head the Crown, and animated by the clergy, no man knows better than yourself. As to the Whigs, I think them far from extinct. They are, what they always were (except by the able use of opportunities) by far the weakest party in this country. They have not yet learned the application of their principles to the present state of things; and as to the Dissenters, the main effective part of the Whig strength, they are, to use a favourite expression of our American campaign style, "not all in force."—*Burke's Works*. ix, 148.
7. They were accused of adopting the colours of the American army,—'blue and buff,'—as the insignia of their party. It appears, however, that the Americans, in fact, borrowed the Whig colours.—*Wraxall's Mem.*, ii. 229; *Rockingham Corr.*, ii. 276; *Lord Stanhope's Miscellanies*, 116-122.
8. *Supra*, Vol. I. 60.
9. In an article in the *Law Magazine*, Feb. 1861, attributed to Lord Brougham,—on the *Auckland Correspondence*,—it is said, 'What mischief might have been spared, both to the party and the country, had not this error been committed!'
10. *Wraxall's Mem.*, iii, 152, 158, 176.—'I am indeed persuaded, that if Fox had been once confirmed in office, and acceptable to the sovereign, he would have steadily repressed all democratic innovations; as, on the other hand, had Pitt passed his whole life on the opposition bench, poor, and excluded from power, I believe he would have endeavoured to throw his weight into the scale of the popular representation. . . . It appeared to me, that Pitt had received from nature a greater mixture of republican spirit than animated his rival: but royal favour and employment softened its asperity.'—*Wraxall's Mem.*, iii, 98.
11. Vol. I. 63.
12. Mr. Fox, writing in 1804, said: 'I know this coalition is always quoted against us

because we were ultimately unsuccessful: but after all that can be said, it will be difficult to show when the power of the Whigs ever made so strong a struggle against the crown, the crown being thoroughly in earnest and exerting all its resources.'—Fox's Mem., iv. 40. Again, in 1805, he wrote: 'Without coalitions nothing can be done against the crown; with them, God knows how little!'—Ibid. 102.

13. 'His education and original connections must have given him some predilection for popular notions; and although he too often promoted measures of an opposite tendency, he was at great pains to do so on the ground of immediate expediency rather than of principle.'—Lord Holland's Mem., ii. 35.
14. Walpole's Mem, of Geo, II., i. 47; Lord Hervey's Mem., i. 235, 236, 271, 277. Hearing of their meeting at Kew, in September, 1731, the king said, 'They will all soon be tired of the puppy, for besides his being a scoundrel, he is such a fool that he will talk more fiddle-faddle to them in a day than any old woman talks in a week.'—Ibid., 442.
15. Supra, Vol. I. 193.

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