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Parties, to the Death of Liverpool

The Whigs in Office

This disruption of the Tory party restored the Whigs to office, for a short time,—not indeed as an independent party, for which they were far too weak,—but united with the Grenvilles, Lord Sidmouth, and the king's friends. A coalition with the liberal followers of Mr. Pitt would have been the more natural and congenial arrangement:(1) but the peculiar relations of Lord Sidmouth to the late administration,—the number of his friends,—his supposed anxiety for peace,—and his personal influence with the king, suggested the necessity of such an alliance. No single party could stand alone,—a coalition was inevitable; and Lord Sidmouth, being estranged personally from Mr. Pitt's followers, was naturally led to associate himself with Lord Grenville and Mr. Fox; while the latter, being himself distasteful to the king, was glad to co-operate with the leader of the king's [178] friends. It was a coalition between men as widely opposed in political sentiments and connections as Mr. Fox and Lord North had been three-and-twenty years before: but it escaped the reproaches to which that more celebrated coalition had fallen a victim.

The signal failures of Mr. Pitt's war administration, and the weariness of the nation under constantly increasing taxation, afforded to the Whigs,—who had consistently urged a more pacific policy,—an opportunity of recovering some portion of their former influence and popularity. Their brief reign was signalled by the abolition of the slave trade, and other wise and useful measures. But they had not the confidence of the king:(2) they failed even to conciliate the Prince of Wales:(3) they mismanaged the elections:(4) they were weakened by the death of Mr. Fox:(5) they were unsuccessful in their [179] negotiations for peace; and fell easily before the king's displeasure, and the intrigues of their opponents.(6)

The Tories Reunited and the Whigs Revived

It was now evident that the party which Mr. Pitt had raised to such greatness, was not to be cast down by his death. It had been disorganised by the loss of its eminent leader, and by the estrangement of his immediate followers from Lord Sidmouth and the king's friends. It possessed no statesman of commanding talents to inspire its disheartened members with confidence; and there were jealousies and rivalries among its ablest statesmen. But the king was its active and vigilant patron, and aided it with all the influence of the crown; while the war-cries of 'The church in danger,' and 'No popery,' were sufficient to rally all the forces of the party. Even those ministers who favoured the Catholic claims were content to profit by the appeals of Mr. Perceval and his friends to the fanaticism of the people. Such appeals had, on other occasions, been a favourite device of the Tories. They had even assumed the Church to be in danger on the accession of George I., as a pretence for inviting a popish pretender to the throne. Mr. Pitt had fallen before the same prejudice in 1801; and [180] in 1807, the Duke of Portland and Mr. Perceval proved its efficacy in restoring strength and union to their party.

Even the Dissenters, swayed by their intolerant sentiments against the Catholics, often preferred the Court and High-church candidates to the friends of religious liberty. Nor did the Whigs generally gain popular support: the crown and the great Tory nobles prevailed against them in the counties, and more democratic candidates found favour in the populous towns.

The Whigs were again routed: but they had gained strength, as an opposition, by their brief restoration to power. They were no longer a proscribed party, without hope of royal favour and public confidence. If not yet formidable in divisions against the government, their opinions were received with tolerance; and much popular support, hitherto latent, was gradually disclosed. This was especially apparent in Scotland. The impeachment of Lord Melville, the idol of the Scottish Tories, had been a severe blow to that party; and the unwonted spectacle of their opponents actually wielding, once more, the power and patronage of the state, 'convinced them,'—to use the words of Lord Cockburn,—'that they were not absolutely immortal.' Their political power, indeed, was not materially diminished: but their spirit was tempered, and they learned to respect, with decent moderation, the rights of the minority. [181] Lord Melville was replaced in the administration of the affairs of Scotland by his son, Mr. Robert Dundas, who, with less talents than his father, brought to the office of leader of a dominant party much good sense and moderation.

Younger men of the Whig party were now rising into notice, in literature and at the Scottish bar. Brougham, Francis Horner, Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, Cockburn, and Murray were destined to play a conspicuous part in the politics and literature of their age; and were already beginning to exercise an important influence upon the hopes and interests of their party. Among their most signal services was the establishment of the Edinburgh Review,(7)—a journal distinguished for the combination of the highest literary merit, with enlarged views of political philosophy far in advance of its age,—and an earnest but temperate zeal for public liberty, which had been nearly trodden out of the literature of the country.

The Whigs had become, once more, a great and powerful party. Abandoned a few years before by many men of the highest rank and influence, they had gradually recovered the principal Whig families. They were represented by several statesmen of commanding talents; and their numbers had been largely recruited since 1793. But they were not well led or organised; and were without concert and discipline. When Lord Howick was removed to the House of [182] Lords, by the death of his father, the rival claims of Mr. Whitbread and Lord Henry Petty brought forward Mr. Ponsonby, an Irishman, as leader of a party with whom he had little acquaintance or connection.(8) In 1809, they were further divided by the embarrassing inquiry into the conduct of the Duke of York. And for several years, there was little agreement between the aristocratic Whigs who followed Earl Grey, and members who acted with Mr. Whitbread or Sir Francis Burdett.

The administrations of the Duke of Portland and Mr. Perceval were formed upon the narrowest Tory principles. They were the governments of the king and his friends. Concessions to Catholics were resisted as dangerous to the church.(9) Repression and coercion were their specifics for ensuring the safety of the state: the correction of abuses and the amendment of the laws were resisted as innovations.(10)

Ministry of Lord Liverpool

On the death of Mr. Perceval, the last hopes of the Whigs, founded upon the favour of the Prince Regent, were extinguished;(11) and the Tory rule was continued, as securely as [183] ever, under Lord Liverpool: but the basis of this administration was wider and more liberal. The removal of Catholic disabilities was henceforth to be an open question. Every member of the government was free to speak and vote independently upon this important measure;(12) and the divisions to which such a constitution of the cabinet gave rise, eventually led to the dissolution of the Tory party. The domestic policy of this administration was hard and repressive.(13) They carried out, as far as was practicable in a free state, the doctrines of absolutism. But victories and glory crowned their efforts, and increased their strength; while the Whigs, by condemning their foreign and military policy, exposed themselves to the reproach of unpatriotic sentiments, which went far to impair their popularity.

But, notwithstanding the power of ministers, the great force of the Tory party was being gradually undermined. The king, indeed, was on their side: the House of Lords was theirs, by connection and creations: the House of Commons was theirs, by nomination and influence: the church was wholly theirs, by sentiment, interest, and gratitude. But the fidelity of their followers could not always be relied on; and great changes [184] of sentiment and social conditions were being developed in the country. The old squires were, perhaps, as faithful as ever: but their estates were being rapidly bought by wealthy capitalists, whom the war, commerce, manufactures, and the stock-exchange had enriched.(14) The rising generation of country gentlemen were, at the same time, more open to the convictions and sympathies of an age which was gradually emancipating itself from the narrow political creed of their fathers.

Meanwhile commercial and manufacturing industry was rapidly accumulating large populations, drawn from the agricultural counties. Towns were continually encroaching upon the country; and everywhere the same uniform law prevailed, which associates activity and enterprise with a spirit of political progress, and social inertness with sentiments opposed to political change. The great industrial communities were forcing the latent seeds of democracy: the counties were still the congenial soil of Toryism. But the former were ever growing and multiplying: the latter were stationary or retrograde. Hence liberal opinions were constantly gaining ground among the people.(15)

[185] A Tory government was slow to understand the spirit of the times, and to adapt its policy to the temper and condition of the people. The heavy burthens of the war, and the sudden cessation of the war expenditure, caused serious distress and discontent, resulting in clamours against the government, and the revival of a democratic spirit among the people. These symptoms were harshly checked by severe repressive measures, which still further alienated the people from the government; while the Whigs, by opposing the coercive policy of ministers, associated themselves with the popular cause.(16) There had generally been distrust and alienation between the democrats, or Radicals,(17) and the aristocratic Whigs. The latter had steadily maintained the principles of constitutional liberty, but had shown no favour to demagogues and visionaries. But the events of 1817 and 1819 served to unite the Whigs with the democratic party—if not in general sympathy, yet in a common cause; and they gained in weight and influence by the accession of a more popular following. Cobbett, Hunt, and other demagogues denounced them for their moderation, and scoffed at them as aristocratic place-hunters;(18) mobs scouted their [186] pretensions to liberality; but the middle classes, and large numbers of reflecting people, not led by mob-orators or democratic newspapers, perceived that the position of the Whigs was favourable to the advancement of constitutional liberty, and supported them. In leaning to the popular cause, however, they were again separated from Lord Grenville and his friends, who renewed their ancient connection with the Tories. Meanwhile, on the death of Mr. Ponsonby, the leadership of the opposition had at length fallen upon Mr. Tierney.

The popular sentiments which were aroused by the proceedings against Queen Caroline again brought the Whigs into united action with the Radicals, and the great body of the people. The leading Whigs espoused her cause; and their parliamentary eminence and conspicuous talents placed them in the front of the popular movement.

Enlightenment of the People

While the Whigs were thus becoming more closely associated with popular sentiments, a permanent change in the condition of the people was gradually increasing their influence in public affairs. Education was being [187] rapidly extended, and all classes were growing more enlightened. The severities of successive governments had wholly failed in repressing the activity of the press: the fear of democracy had died out: the opposition speakers and writers had widely disseminated liberal principles: and public opinion was again beginning to assert

its right to be heard in the councils of the state. The Tory party could not fail to respond, in some measure, to this spirit; and the last few years of Lord Liverpool's administration were signalised by many wise and liberal measures, which marked the commencement of a new era in the annals of legislation.(19) In domestic and economical policy, Mr. Peel and Mr. Huskisson were far in advance of their party: in foreign policy, Mr. Canning burst the strait bands of an effete diplomacy, and recognised the just claims of nations, as well as the rights of sovereigns. But the political creed of the dominant party was daily becoming less in harmony with the sentiments of an enlightened people, whom the constitution was supposed to invest with the privileges of self-government. Men like Lord Eldon were out of date: but they still ruled the country. Sentiments which, in the time of Mr. Perceval, had been accepted as wise and statesmanlike, were beginning to be ridiculed by younger men, as the drivellings of dotards: but they prevailed over the arguments of the ablest debaters and public writers of the day.

And looking beyond the immediate causes which [188] contributed to the growth of democratic sentiment in England, we must embrace in our more distant view the general upheaving of society, throughout Europe and America, during the last fifty years. The people of the United States had established a great republic. The revolutionary spirit of France,—itself, again, the result of deeper causes,—had spread with epidemic subtilty over the civilised world. Ancient monarchies had been overthrown, and kings dis-crowned, as in a drama. The traditional reverence of the people for authority had been shaken: their idols had been cast down. Men were now taught to respect their rulers less, and themselves more: to assert their own rights, and to feel their own power. In every country,—whatever its form of government,—democracy was gaining strength in society, in the press, and in the sentiments of the people. Wise governments responded to its expansive spirit; blind and bigoted rulers endeavoured to repress it as sedition. Sometimes trampled down by despotism, it lay smouldering in dangerous discontent: sometimes confronted with fear and hesitation, it burst forth in revolution. But in England, harmonising with free institutions, it merely gave strength to the popular cause, and ultimately secured the triumph of constitutional liberty. Society was at the same time acquiring a degree of freedom hitherto unknown in England. Every class had felt the weight of authority. Parents had exercised a severe discipline over their children: masters a hard rule over their workpeople: everyone armed [189] with power, from the magistrate to the beadle, had wielded it sternly. But society was gradually asserting its claims to gentler usage and higher consideration. And this social change gave a further impulse to the political sentiments of the people.

Footnotes.

1. Lord Holland says: 'The disunited rump of Mr. Pitt's ministry were no party, whereas Lord Sidmouth's friends, though few, formed a compact body; and if the leaders were inferior in talents to those of other political parties, their subalterns were more respectable than the clerks and secretaries of Mr. Pitt's and Lord Melville's school.'—*Mem. of Whig Party*, i. 209.
2. 'The king and his household were, from the beginning and throughout, hostile to the ministry.'—*Lord Holland's Mem.*, ii. 68.
3. The prince, in a letter to Lord Moira, March 30th, 1807 said: 'From the hour of Fox's death,—that friend towards whom and in whom my attachment was unbounded,—it is known that my earnest wish was to retire from further concern and interference in public affairs.' At the same time he complained of neglect on the part of the Grenville ministry,—'having been neither consulted nor considered in any one important instance;' and on the fall of that ministry, whom he had generally desired to support, he 'determined to resume his original purpose, sincerely prepared, in his own mind, on the death of poor Fox, to cease to be a party man.' This resolution he communicated to

- the king.—Lord Colchester's Diary, ii. 115; Lord Holland's Mem., ii. 68-72, 244.—'In his letters to Earl Grey, immediately after the death of Mr. Fox. there is no trace of such feelings.'—Life and Opinions of Earl Grey, 116.
4. Lord Holland's Mem., ii. 93.—'The king, who throughout his reign had furnished every treasury with £12,000 to defray election expenses on a dissolution, withheld that unconstitutional assistance from the administration of 1806.'—Ibid., 94.
 5. Lord Holland says: 'Had Lord Grenville, in the new arrangements (after Mr. Fox's death), sought for strength in the opposite party,—had he consulted the wishes of the court, rather than his own principles and consistency, he would have conciliated the king, fixed himself permanently in office, and divested every party in the state of the means of annoying him in Parliament.'—Mem. of Whig Party, ii. 50.
 6. Supra, Vol. I. 105 et seq.
 7. The first number of this journal was published in October, 1802.
 8. Lord Holland's Mem., 236-242. Lord H. says: 'Mr. Windham, Mr. Sheridan, Mr. Tierney, and Mr. T. Grenville were, from very different but obvious causes, disqualified' for the lead.—Ibid., 237.—Life and Opinions of Earl Grey, 174-189.
 9. Mr. Perceval said: 'I could not conceive a time or any change of circumstances which could render further concession to the Catholics consistent with the safety of the state.'—Hans. Deb., 1st Ser., xxi. 663.
 10. E.g. Mr. Bankes' Offices in Reversion bills, 1809 and 1810; Sir S. Romilly's Criminal Law bills, 1810, 1811; Earl Grey's Life and Opinions, 202-206.
 11. Supra, Vol. I. 125.
 12. It was announced by Lord Castlereagh, 'that the present government would not, as a government, resist discussion or concession,' . . . 'and that every member of the government would be free to act upon his own individual sentiments.'—Lord Colchester's Diary, 10th June, 1812, ii. 387. 'Lord Sidmouth, Lord Liverpool, and Lord Eldon would resist inquiry, meaning to resist concession; but Lord Harrowby, Lord Melville, Lord Bathurst, and Lord Mulgrave, would concede all. Vansittart would go *pendetentim*.'—Ibid., 403.
 13. See Chap. X.
 14. Lord Redesdale, writing to Lord Sidmouth, Dec. 11th, 1816, said: 'Many of the old country gentlemen's families are gone, and I have no doubt that the destruction of their hereditary influence has greatly contributed to the present insubordination. We are rapidly becoming,—if we are not already,—a nation of shopkeepers.'—Pellew's Life of Lord Sidmouth. iii, 162.
 15. 'Depuis que les travaux de l'intelligence furent devenus des sources de force et de richesses, on dut considérer chaque développement de la science, chaque connaissance nouvelle, chaque idée neuve, comme un germe de puissance, mis à la portée du peuple.'—De Tocqueville, Démocratie en Amér., i. 4.
 16. See Chap. X.
 17. In 1819, Hunt and his followers, for the first time, assumed the name of Radical Reformers.—Pellew's Life of Lord Sidmouth, iii. 247; Cooke's Hist. of Party, iii. 511.
 18. See Cobbett's Register, 1818, 1819, 1820, passim; Edinburgh Review, June 1818, p. 198. Mr. Tierney said, Nov. 23rd, 1819. 'It was impossible to conceive any set of men under less obligations to the Radicals than the Whigs were. True it was that ministers came in for a share of abuse and disapprobation; but it was mild and merciful compared with the castigation which their opponents received.'—Hans. Deb., 1st Ser., xli. 74; Remains of Mrs. Trench, 44.
 19. See Chap. XVIII.