

## Erskine May, Chapter I, pp. 9-17

### Character of George III

The young king, George III., on succeeding to the throne, regarded with settled jealousy the power of his ministers, as an encroachment on his own; and resolved to break it down. His personal popularity was such as to facilitate the execution of this design. Well knowing that the foreign extraction of his predecessors had repressed the affections of their people, he added, with his own hand, to the draft of his first speech to Parliament, the winning phrase, 'Born and educated in this country, I glory in the name of Briton.'<sup>(1)</sup> The Stuarts were now the aliens, and not the Hanoverian king. A new reign, also, was favourable to the healing of political differences, and to the fusion of parties. In Scotland, a few fanatical non-jurors may still have grudged their allegiance to an uncovenanted king. But none of the young king's subjects had plotted against his throne; and few could be suspected of adherence to the fallen cause of the Stuarts, which had been hopelessly abandoned since the rebellion of 1745. The close phalanx of the Whig party had already been broken; and Mr. Pitt had striven to conciliate the Tories, and put an end to the bitter feuds by which the kingdom had been distracted. No party was now in disgrace at court: but Whigs, Tories, and Jacobites thronged to St. James's, and vied with [10] each other in demonstrations of loyalty and devotion.<sup>(2)</sup>

The king was naturally ambitious, and delighted in the active exercise of power; and his education, otherwise neglected,<sup>(3)</sup> had raised his estimate of the personal rights of a king in the government of his country. So far back as 1752, complaints had been made that the prince was surrounded by Jacobite preceptors, who were training him in arbitrary principles of government. At that time, these complaints were discredited as factious calumnies: but the political views of the king, on his accession to the throne, appear to confirm the suspicions entertained concerning his early education.

His mother, the Princess Dowager of Wales, herself ambitious and fond of power,<sup>(4)</sup>—had derived her views of the rights and authority of a sovereign from German courts; and encouraged the prince's natural propensities by the significant advice of 'George, be king.' Lord Waldegrave, who had been for some time governor to the prince, describes [11] him as 'full of princely prejudices contracted in the nursery, and improved by the society of bedchamber-women and pages of the back-stairs.'

### Lord Bute

His groom of the stole, Lord Bute,—afterwards so notorious as his minister,—had also given the young prince instruction in the theory of the British constitution; and knowing little more than the princess herself, of the English people and government, had taught him that his own honour, and the interests of the country, required the extension of his personal influence, and a more active exercise of his prerogatives. The chief obstacle to this new policy of the court was found in the established authority of responsible ministers, upheld by party connections and parliamentary interest. Accordingly, the first object of the king and his advisers was to loosen the ties of party, and break down the confederacy of the great Whig families. The king desired to undertake personally the chief administration of public affairs, to direct the policy of his ministers, and himself to distribute the patronage of the crown. He was ambitious not only to reign, but to govern. His will was strong and resolute, his courage high, and his talent for intrigue considerable. He came to the throne determined to exalt the kingly office; and throughout his long reign he never lost sight of that paramount object.

[12] Lord Bolingbroke had conceived the idea of a government under 'a patriot king,' who

should 'govern as soon as he begins to reign,'—who should 'call into the administration such men as he can assure himself will serve on the same principles on which he intends to govern,'—and who should 'put himself at the head of his people in order to govern, or, more properly, to subdue all parties.' But it had been no part of Lord Bolingbroke's conception, that the patriot king should suffer his favourites to stand between him and his 'most able and faithful councillors.' Such, however, was the scheme of George the Third.

### **The King and the Newcastle Ministry**

The ministry whom the king found in possession of power at his accession, had been formed by a coalition between the Duke of Newcastle and Mr. Pitt. The former had long been the acknowledged leader of the great Whig connection, and enjoyed extended parliamentary interest: the latter, by his eloquence and statesmanship, had become the most popular and powerful of the king's subjects. The ministry also comprised the Grenville and Bedford sections of the Whig party. It was so strong in Parliament, that for some years the voice of opposition had been scarcely heard; and so long as it continued united, its position was impregnable.

But, strong as were the ministers, the king was resolved to wrest all power from their hands, and to exercise it himself. For this [13] purpose he called to his aid the Earl of Bute, and other secret counsellors, drawn from all parties. The greater number were of the Tory party, whose views of prerogative were Jacobite. According to Horace Walpole, 'they abjured their ancient master, but retained their principles.' It was the king's object not merely to supplant one party, and establish another in its place, but to create a new party, faithful to himself, regarding his personal wishes, carrying out his policy, and dependent on his will. This party was soon distinguished as 'the king's men,' or 'the king's friends.' Instead of relying upon the advice of his responsible ministers, the king took counsel with this 'double' or 'interior cabinet.' Even his first speech to Parliament was not submitted to the cabinet council. It had been drawn up by himself and Lord Bute; and when Mr. Pitt took exception to some of its expressions, the king long resisted the advice of his minister. It had been usual for ministers to rely upon the support of the crown in all their measures. They now found themselves thwarted and opposed; and the patronage, which they had regarded as their own, they saw divided by the king among his new adherents and their connections. This 'influence behind the throne' was denounced by all the leading statesmen of that time,—by Mr. Grenville, Lord Chatham, the Marquess of Rockingham, the Duke of Bedford, and Mr. Burke. Occasionally denied, its existence was yet so notorious, and its agency so [14] palpable, that historical writers of all parties,—while taking different views of its character—have not failed to acknowledge it. The bitterness with which it was assailed at the time was due, in great measure, to political jealousies, and to the king's selection of his friends from an unpopular party: but, on constitutional grounds, it was unquestionably open to the gravest objections.

### **Constitutional Objections to the King's Course**

A constitutional government ensures to the king a wide authority, in all the councils of the state. He chooses and dismisses his ministers. and this,—if it be his pleasure,—without the advice of any councillor. Their resolutions upon every important measure of foreign and domestic policy are submitted to his approval; and when that approval is withheld, his ministers must either abandon their policy, or resign their offices. They are responsible to the king on the one hand, and to Parliament on the other; and while they retain the confidence of the king, by administering affairs to his satisfaction, they must act upon principles, and propose measures, which they can justify to Parliament. And here is the proper limit to the king's influence. As he governs by responsible ministers, he must recognise their responsibilities. They are not his ministers only, but also the public servants of a free country. But an influence in the direction of public affairs thus limited, by no mean satisfied the

ambition of the king. His courtiers represented that he was enthralled by the [15] dominant party, which had become superior to the throne itself; and that in order to recover his just prerogative, it was necessary to break up the combination. But what was this, in effect, but to assert that the king should now be his own minister? that ministers should be chosen, not because they had the confidence of Parliament and the country, but because they were agreeable to himself, and willing to carry out his policy? And this was the true object of the king. It will be seen that when ministers, not of his own choice, were in office, he plotted and manoeuvred until he overthrew them. and when he had succeeded in establishing his friends in office, he forced upon them the adoption of his own policy.

The king's tactics were fraught with danger, as well to the crown itself as to the constitutional liberties of the people: but his personal conduct and character have sometimes been judged with too much severity. That he was too fond of power for a constitutional monarch, none will now be found to deny: that he sometimes resorted to crafty expedients, unworthy of a king, even his admirers must admit. But he had kingly virtues;—piety, courage, constancy, and patriotism. With a narrow understanding and obstinate prejudices, he yet laboured, honestly, for the good government of his country. If he loved power, he did not shrink from its cares and toil. If he delighted in being the active ruler of his people, he devoted himself to affairs of state, even more laboriously than his ministers. If he was jealous of the authority of the crown, [16] he was not less jealous of the honour and greatness of his people. A just recognition of the personal merits of the king himself, enables us to judge more freely of the constitutional tendency and results of his policy.

To revert to a polity under which kings had governed, and ministers had executed their orders, was in itself a dangerous retrogression in the principles of constitutional government. If the crown, and not its ministers, had governed, how could the former do no wrong, and the latter be responsible? If ministers were content to accept responsibility without power, the crown could not escape its share of blame. Hence the chief safeguard of the monarchy was endangered. But the liberties of the people were exposed to greater peril than the crown. Power proceeding from the king, and exercised by himself in person, is irreconcilable with popular government. It constitutes the main distinction between an absolute and a constitutional monarchy. The best and most enlightened of kings, governing from above, will press his own policy upon his subjects. Choosing his ministers from considerations personal to himself,—directing their acts,—upholding them as his own servants,—resenting attacks upon them as disrespectful to himself,—committed to their measures, and resolved to enforce them,—viewing men and things from the elevation of a court, instead of sharing the interests and sympathies of the people,—how can he act in harmony with popular influences?

The system of government which George III. found in operation was indeed imperfect. The [17] influence of the crown, as exercised by ministers, prevailed over the more popular elements of the constitution. The great nobles were too powerful. A Parliament without adequate representation of the people, and uncontrolled by public opinion, was generally subservient to ministers: but with all its defects, it was still a popular institution. If not elected by the people, it was yet composed of men belonging to various classes of society, and sharing their interests and feelings. The statesmen, who were able by their talents and influence to command its confidence, became the ministers of the crown: and power thus proceeded from below, instead above. The country was governed by its ablest men, and not by favourites of the court. The proper authority of Parliament was recognised; and nothing was wanting in the theory of constitutional government but an improved constitution of itself. This system, however, the king to was determined to subvert. He was jealous of ministers who derived their authority from Parliament rather than from himself, and of the parliamentary organisation which controlled his power. The policy which he adopted, and its results, are among the most critical events in the history of the crown.

## Footnotes.

1. The king himself bore testimony to this fact upwards of forty years afterwards.—Rose's Corr.. ii. 189.
2. The Earl of Lichfield, Sir Walter Bagot, and the principal Jacobites went to court, which George Selwyn, a celebrated wit, accounted for from the number of Stuarts that were now at St. James's.'—Walpole's Mem., i. 14.
3. Doddington's Diary. 171. The Princess of Wales said : 'His book learning she was no judge of, though she supposed it small or useless.'—Ibid., 357
4. Walpole says, 'The princess, whose ambition yielded to none.'—Mem., i. 12. The princess was ardently fond of power, and all its appanages of observance.'—Adolph. Hist., i. 12.

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