

Erskine May, Chapter II, pp. 154-163

Queen Victoria; The Bedchamber; Palmerston

Accession of Queen Victoria

Her Majesty, on her most auspicious accession to the throne, finding them [the Melbourne ministry] the ministers of the crown, at once honoured them with her entire confidence. The occasion was especially favourable for ministers to secure and perpetuate such confidence. The young queen, having no political experience, was without predilections; and the impressions first made upon her mind were likely to be lasting. A royal household was immediately to be organised for her Majesty, comprising not merely the officers of state and ceremony; but,—what was more important to a queen,—all the ladies of her court. Ministers appointed the former, as usual, from among their own parliamentary supporters; and extended the same principle of selection to the latter. Nearly all the ladies of the new court were related to the ministers themselves, or to their political adherents. The entire court thus became identified with the ministers of the day. If such an arrangement was calculated to ensure the confidence of the crown,—and who could doubt that it was?—it necessarily involved the principle of replacing this household with another, on a change of ministry. This was foreseen at the time, and soon afterwards became a question of no little constitutional difficulty.

The Bedchamber Crisis

The favour of ministers at court became a subject [155] of jealousy, and even of reproach, amongst their opponents: but the age had passed away, in which court favour alone could uphold a falling ministry against public opinion. They were weaker now, with the court on their side, than they had been during the late reign, with the influence of the king and his court opposed to them; and in May, 1839, were obliged to offer their resignation. Sir Robert Peel, being charged with the formation of a new administration, had to consider the peculiar position of the household. Since Lord Moira's memorable negotiations in 1812, there had been no difficulties regarding those offices in the household, which were included in ministerial changes: but the court of a queen, constituted like the present, raised a new and embarrassing question. To remove from the society of her Majesty, those ladies who were immediately about her person, appeared like an interference with her family circle, rather than with her household. Yet could ministers undertake the government, if the queen continued to be surrounded by the wives, sisters, and other near relatives of their political opponents? They decided that they could not; and Sir Robert Peel went to the palace to acquaint her Majesty that the ministerial changes would comprise the higher offices of her court occupied by ladies, including the ladies of her bedchamber. The queen met him by at once declaring that she could not admit any change of the ladies of her household. On appealing to Lord [156] John Russell on this subject, her Majesty was assured that she was justified, by usage, in declining the change proposed; and afterwards, by the advice of Lord Melbourne and his colleagues, she addressed a letter to Sir Robert Peel, stating that she could not 'consent to adopt a course which she conceived to be contrary to usage, and which was repugnant to her feelings.' Sir Robert Peel, on the receipt of this letter, wrote to her Majesty to resign the trust he had undertaken: stating that it was essential to the success of the commission with which he had been honoured 'that he should have that public proof of her Majesty's entire support and confidence, which would be afforded by the permission to make some changes in that part of

her Majesty's household, which her Majesty resolved on maintaining entirely without change' By a minute of the cabinet, immediately after these events, the ministry of Lord Melbourne recorded their opinion 'that for the purpose of giving to the administration that character of efficiency and stability, and those marks of constitutional support of the crown, which are required to enable it to act usefully to the public service, it is reasonable that the great offices of the court, and situations in the household held by members of Parliament, should be included in the political arrangements made on a change of the administration ; but they are not of opinion that a similar principle should be applied, or extended, to [157] the offices held by ladies in Her Majesty's household.'

In the ministerial explanations which ensued, Sir Robert Peel pointed out forcibly the difficulties which any minister must be prepared to encounter, who should leave about her Majesty's person the nearest relatives of his political opponents. It had not been his intention to suggest the removal of ladies,—even from the higher offices of the household,—who were free from strong party or political connection: but those who were nearly related to the outgoing ministers, he had deemed it impossible to retain. Ministers, on the other hand, maintained that they were supported by precedents, in the advice which they had tendered to her Majesty. They referred to the examples of Lady Sunderland and Lady Rialton, who had remained in the bedchamber of Queen Anne, for a year and a half after the dismissal of their husbands from office; and to the uniform practice by which the ladies of the household of every queen consort had been retained, on changes of administration, notwithstanding their close relationship to men engaged in political life. Ministers also insisted much upon the respect due to the personal feelings of her Majesty, and to her natural repugnance to sacrifice her domestic society to political arrangements.

The 'Bedchamber Question' saved Lord [158] Melbourne's government for a further term. Sir Robert Peel had experienced the evil consequences of the late king's premature recall of his party to office; and his prospects in the country were not even yet assured. The immediate result of the bedchamber question was, therefore, not less satisfactory to himself than to ministers. The latter gained no moral strength, by owing their continuance in office to such a cause; while the former was prepared to profit by their increasing weakness. The queen's confidence in her ministers was undiminished; yet they continued to lose ground in Parliament, and in the country. In 1841, the opposition, being fully assured of their growing strength, obtained, by a majority of one, a resolution of the Commons, affirming that ministers had not the confidence of the House; and 'that their continuance in office, under such circumstances, was at variance with the spirit of the constitution.' The country was immediately appealed to upon this issue; and it soon became clear that the country was also adverse to the ministers. Delay had been fatal to them, while it had assured the triumph of their opponents. At the meeting of the new Parliament, amendments to the address were agreed to in both Houses, by large majorities, repeating the verdict of the late House of Commons.(1)

Sir Robert Peel was now called upon, at a time of his own choosing, to form a government. Supported by Parliament [159] and the country, he had nothing to fear from court influence, even if there had been any disposition to use it against him. No difficulties were again raised on the bedchamber question. Her Majesty was now sensible that the position she had once been advised to assert, was constitutionally untenable. The principle which Sir Robert Peel applied to the household, has since been admitted, on all sides, to be constitutional. The offices of mistress of the robes and ladies of the bedchamber, when held by ladies connected with the out-going ministers, have been considered as included in the ministerial arrangements. But ladies of the bedchamber belonging to families whose political connection has been less pronounced, have been suffered to remain in the household, without objection, on a change of ministry.

Palmerston's Dismissal, 1851

In 1851, an incident occurred which illustrates the relation of ministers to the crown,—the discretion vested in them,—and the circumstances under which the pleasure of the sovereign is to be signified, concerning acts of the executive government. To all important acts, by which the crown becomes committed, it had been generally acknowledged that the sanction of the sovereign must be previously signified. And in 1850, her Majesty communicated to Lord Palmerston, the secretary of state for foreign affairs,—through Lord John Russell, her first minister,—a memorandum, giving specific directions as to the transaction of business between the crown and the secretary of state. It was in these words:—'The [160] queen requires, first, that Lord Palmerston will distinctly state what he proposes in a given case, in order that the queen may know as distinctly to what she is giving her royal sanction. Secondly, having once given her sanction to a measure, that it be not arbitrarily altered or modified by the minister. Such an act she must consider as failing in sincerity towards the crown, and justly to be visited by the exercise of her constitutional right of dismissing that minister. She expects to be kept informed of what passes between him and the foreign ministers, before important decisions are taken, based upon that intercourse: to receive the foreign despatches in good time; and to have the drafts for her approval, sent to her in sufficient time to make herself acquainted with their contents, before they must be sent off.'

Such being the relations of the foreign secretary to the crown, the sovereign is advised upon questions of foreign policy by her first minister, to whom copies of despatches and other information are also communicated, in order to enable him to give such advice effectually. In controlling one minister, the sovereign yet acts upon the counsels and responsibility of another.

Immediately after the coup d'etat of the 2nd December, 1851, in Paris, the cabinet determined that the government of this country should abstain from any [161] interference in the internal affairs of France; and a despatch to that effect, approved by the queen, was addressed to Lord Normanby, the British ambassador in Paris. But before this official communication was written, it appeared that M. Walewski, the French ambassador at the Court of St. James's, had assured his own government, that Lord Palmerston had 'expressed to him his entire approbation of the act of the president, and his conviction that he could not have acted otherwise than he had done.' This statement having been communicated to Lord Normanby by M. Turgot, was reported by him to Lord Palmerston. On receiving a copy of Lord Normanby's letter, Lord John Russell immediately wrote to Lord Palmerston requiring explanations of the variance between his verbal communications with the French ambassador, and the despatch agreed upon by the cabinet; and a few days afterwards her Majesty also demanded similar explanations. These were delayed for several days; and in the meantime, in reply to another letter from Lord Normanby, Lord Palmerston, on the 16th of December, wrote to his lordship, explaining his own views in favour of the policy of the recent coup d'etat. On receiving a copy of this correspondence, Lord John Russell conceived that the secretary of state was not justified in expressing such opinions without the sanction of the crown and the concurrence of the cabinet,—more particularly as these opinions were opposed to the policy of non-intervention upon which the cabinet had determined, and inconsistent with that moral support and sympathy, [162] which England had generally offered to constitutional government in foreign countries. The explanations which ensued were not deemed satisfactory; and Lord Palmerston was accordingly removed from office, on the ground that he had exceeded his authority as secretary of state, and had taken upon himself alone, to be the organ of the queen's government.

In defence of his own conduct, Lord Palmerston, while fully recognising the principles upon which a secretary of state is required to act in relation to the crown and his own colleagues, explained that his conversation with Count Walewski on the 3rd of December, and his

explanatory letter to Lord Normanby on the 16th, were not inconsistent with the policy of non-intervention upon which the cabinet had resolved: that whatever opinions he might have expressed, were merely his own; and that he had given no official instructions or assurances on the part of the government, except in the despatch of the 5th of December, which her Majesty and the cabinet had approved.

Though the premier and the secretary of state had differed as to the propriety of the particular acts of the latter, they were agreed upon the general principles which regulate the relations of ministers to the crown. These events exemplify the effective control which the crown constitutionally exercises in the government of the country. The policy and conduct of its ministers are subject to its active [163] supervision. In minor affairs the ministers have a separate discretion, in their several departments: but in the general acts of the government, the crown is to be consulted, and has a control over them all.

Footnotes.

1. In the Lords by a majority of 72, and in the Commons by a majority of 91.

[Next](#)

[Contents](#)

[Previous](#)