

Erskine May, Chapter VI, pp. 376-390

Bribes, Loans, Lotteries and Contractors

Bribery of Members

[376] But the independence of Parliament was formerly corrupted by grosser expedients than places and pensions. Vulgar bribes were given,—directly and indirectly,—for political support. Our parliamentary history was tainted with this disgrace, from the reign of Charles II. far into that of George III. That Charles, himself unscrupulous and corrupt, should have resorted to bribery, is natural enough. His was a debased reign, in which all forms of corruption flourished. Members were then first systematically exposed to the temptation of pecuniary bribes. In the reigns of the Tudors and the first two Stuarts, prerogative had generally been too strong to need the aid of such persuasion;(1) but after prerogative had been rudely shaken by the overthrow of Charles I., it was sought to support the influence of the crown by the subtle arts of corruption. Votes which were no longer to be controlled by fear, were purchased with gold. James II., again,—secure of a servile Parliament, and bent upon ruling once more by prerogative,—disdained the meaner arts of bribery.

The Revolution, however favourable to constitutional liberty, revived and extended this scandal; and the circumstances of the times unhappily favoured its development. The prerogative of the [377] crown had been still further limited: the power and activity of Parliament being proportionately increased, while no means had yet been taken to ensure its responsibility to the people. A majority of the House of Commons,—beyond the reach of public opinion,—not accountable to its constituencies,—and debating and voting with closed doors,—held the political destinies of England at its mercy. The constitution had not yet provided worthier means of influence and restraint; and William III., though personally averse to the base practices of Charles II., was forced to permit their use. His reign, otherwise conducive to freedom and national greatness, was disgraceful to the character of the statesmen, and to the public virtue of that age.(2)

The practice of direct bribery notoriously continued in the three succeeding reigns; and if not proved by the records of Parliament, was attested by contemporary writers, and by the complaints openly made of its existence. Under the administration of Sir Robert Walpole, it was reduced to an organised system, by which a majority of the House of Commons was long retained in subjection to the minister. It is true that, after all, his enemies failed in proving their charges against him: but the entire strength of the court, the new ministry, and [378] the House of Lords, was exerted to screen him. The witnesses refused to answer questions; and the Lords declined to pass a bill of indemnity, which would have removed the ground of their refusal. Nor must it be overlooked that, however notorious corruption may be, it is of all things the most difficult of proof.

This system was continued by his successors, throughout the reign of George II.; and is believed to have been brought to perfection, under the administration of Mr. Henry Pelham.

Bribery under George III

In approaching the reign of George III., it were well if no traces could be found of this political depravity: but unhappily the early part of this reign presents some of its worst examples. Lord Bute, being resolved to maintain his power by the corrupt arts of Sir Robert

Walpole, secured, by the promise of a peerage, the aid of that minister's experienced agent, Mr. Henry Fox, in carrying them out with success. The office entrusted to him was familiarly known as 'the management of the House of Commons.'

In October, 1762, Mr. Grenville had impressed upon Lord Bute the difficulties of carrying on the business of the House of Commons, 'without being authorised to talk to the members of that house upon their several claims and pretensions;' and these difficulties were effectually overcome. Horace Walpole relates a startling tale of the purchase of [379] votes by Mr. Fox, in December, 1762, in support of Lord Bute's preliminaries of peace. He says, 'A shop was publicly opened at the Pay Office, whither the members flocked, and received the wages of their venality in bank-bills, even to so low a sum as £200 for their votes on the treaty. £25,000, as Martin, Secretary of the Treasury, afterwards owned, were issued in one morning; and in a single fortnight, a vast majority was purchased to approve the peace!' Lord Stanhope, who is inclined wholly to reject this circumstantial story, admits that Mr. Fox was the least scrupulous of Walpole's pupils, and that the majority was otherwise unaccountable. The account is probably exaggerated: but the character of Mr. Fox and his parliamentary associates is not repugnant to its probability; nor does it stand alone. A suspicious circumstance, in confirmation of Horace Walpole, has also been brought to light. Among Mr. Grenville's papers has been preserved a statement of the secret-service money from 1761 to 1769; whence it appears that in the year ending 25th October, 1762, £10,000 had been disbursed to Mr. Martin, Secretary to the Treasury. and in the following year, to which the story refers, no less than £41,000.

The general expenditure for secret service, during Lord Bute's period, also exhibits a remarkable excess, as compared with other years. In the year ending 25th October, 1761, the secret-service money [380] had amounted to £58,000. Lord Bute came into office on the 29th May, 1762: and in this year, ending 25th October, it rose at once to £82,168. In the next year, —Lord Bute having retired in April,—it fell to £61,000. In 1764, it was reduced to £36,837: and in 1765, to £29,374.(3)

The Grenville ministry distributed bribes or gratuities with less profusion than Lord Bute, yet with so little restraint, that a donation to a member of Parliament appears to have been regarded as a customary compliment. It might be offered without offence: if declined an apology was felt to be due to the minister. In the Grenville Papers we find a characteristic letter from Lord Say and Sele, which exemplifies the relations of the minister with his parliamentary supporters.

'London, Nov. 26th, 1763.

'Honoured Sir,—I am very much obliged to you for that freedom of converse you this morning indulged me in, which I prize more than the lucrative advantage I then received. To show the sincerity of my words (pardon, Sir, the perhaps over niceness of my disposition), I return inclosed the bill for £300 you favoured me with, as good manners would not permit my refusal of it, when tendered by you.

'P.S.—As a free horse wants no spur, so I stand in need of no inducement or douceur, to lend my small assistance to the king, or his friends in the present administration.'(4)

[381] Mr. Grenville, however, complained,—and apparently with justice,—'that the secret-service money was by a great deal less than under any other minister.'

Throughout the administration of Lord North, the purchase of votes in Parliament, by direct pecuniary bribes, was still a common practice. The king's complicity,—always suspected,—is now beyond a doubt. Writing to Lord North on the 1st March, 1781, his Majesty said:—'Mr.

Robinson sent me the list of the speakers last night, and of the very good majority. I have this morning sent him £6,000 to be placed to the same purpose as the sum transmitted on the 21st August.'⁽⁵⁾ No other conclusion can be drawn from this letter, than that the king was in the habit of transmitting money, to secure majorities for the minister, who was then fighting his battles in the House of Commons. Again, on the retirement of Lord North in 1782, the king writing on the 18th April, said:—'I shall make out also the list paid by Mr. Robinson to Peers, and shall give it to the first Lord of the Treasury; but I cannot answer whether, under the idea of influence, there will not be a refusal to continue them. Those to members of the House of [382] Commons cannot be given; they may apply, if they please, to Lord Rockingham: but by what he has said to me, I have not the smallest doubt he will refuse to bring their applications, as well as those of any new solicitors in that House.'⁽⁶⁾

So far there was a hope of improvement; and it seems that the system of direct bribery did not long survive the ministry of Lord North.⁽⁷⁾ It may not have wholly died out; and has probably been since resorted to, on rare and exceptional occasions. But the powerful and popular administration of Mr. Pitt did not need such support. The crown had triumphed over parties,—its influence was supreme,—and Mr. Pitt himself, however profuse in the distribution of honours to his adherents, was of too lofty a character, to encourage the baseness of his meaner followers.

Loans and Lotteries

Another instrument of corruption was found, at the beginning of this reign, in the raising of money for the public service, by loans and lotteries. This form of bribery, though less direct, was more capable of proof. A bribe could [383] be given in secret: the value of scrip was notorious. In March, 1763, Lord Bute contracted a loan of three millions and a half, for the public service; and having distributed shares among his friends,—the scrip immediately rose to a premium of 11 per cent. in the market! So enormous a miscalculation of the terms upon which a loan could be negotiated, is scarcely to be reconciled with honesty of purpose; and according to the practice of that time, the minister was entirely free from control in the distribution of the shares. Here the country sustained a loss of £385,000; and the minister was openly charged with having enriched his political adherents at the public expense. The bank-bills of Mr. Fox had been found so persuasive, that corruption was applied on a still larger scale, in order to secure the power of the minister. The participation of many members, in the profits of this iniquitous loan could not be concealed; and little pains were taken to deny it.

The success of this expedient was not likely to be soon forgotten. Stock-jobbing became the fashion; and many members of Parliament were notoriously concerned in it. Horace Walpole, the chief chronicler of these scandals, states that, in 1767, sixty members were implicated in such transactions, and even the chancellor of the Exchequer himself. Another contemporary, Sir George Colebrooke, gives an account quite as circumstantial, of [384] the monstrous corruption of the time. He says, 'the Duke of Grafton gave a dinner to several of the principal men in the city, to settle the loan. Mr. Townshend came in in his nightgown, and after dinner, when the terms were settled, and every one present wished to introduce some friend on the list of subscribers, he pretended to cast up the sums already subscribed, said the loan was full, huddled up his papers, got into a chair, and returned home, reserving to himself, by this manoeuvre, a large share in the loan.'

A few years later, similar practices were exposed in another form. Lotteries were then a favourite source of revenue; and it appeared from the list of subscribers in 1769 and 1770, that shares had been allotted to several members of Parliament. On the 23rd of April, 1771, Mr. Seymour moved for the list of persons who had subscribed to the lotteries of that year, alleging that it appeared from the list of 1769, that twenty thousand tickets had been disposed of to members of Parliament, which sold at a premium of nearly £2 each. His motion was

refused. On the 25th April, Mr. Cornwall moved to prohibit any member from receiving more than twenty tickets. He stated that he was 'certainly informed,' that fifty members of Parliament had each subscribed for five hundred tickets, which would realise a profit of £1,000, and secure the minister fifty votes. His motion also was rejected.

[385] Again, in 1781, the very circumstances of Lord Bute's flagitious loan were repeated under Lord North. A loan of £12,000,000 was then contracted, to defray the cost of the disastrous American war, of which lottery tickets formed a part. Its terms were so favourable to the subscribers, that suddenly the scrip, or omnium, rose nearly 11 per cent.(8) The minister was assailed with injurious reproaches, and his conduct was repeatedly denounced in Parliament as wilfully corrupt. These charges were not made by obscure men: but by Lord Rockingham, Mr. Fox, Mr. Burke, Mr. Byng, Sir G. Savile, and other eminent members of opposition. It was computed by Mr. Fox, that a profit of £900,000 would be derived from the loan; and by others, that half the loan was subscribed for by members of the House of Commons. Lord Rockingham said, 'the loan was made merely for the purpose of corrupting the Parliament, to support a wicked, impolitic, and ruinous war.' Mr. Fox declared, again and again, that a large sum had been placed in the 'hands of the minister to be granted as douceurs to members of that House, . . . as a means of procuring and continuing a majority in the House of Commons, upon every occasion, and to give strength and support to a bad administration.'(9)

[386] The worst feature of this form of corruption was its excessive and extravagant cost to the country. If members of Parliament were to be bribed at all, bank-notes, judiciously distributed, were far cheaper than improvident loans. Lord Bute had purchased a majority, on the preliminaries of peace, with thirty or forty thousand pounds. Lord North's experiment laid a burthen upon the people of nearly a million. It was bad enough that the representatives of the people should be corrupted; and to pay so high a price for their corruption was a cruel aggravation of the wrong.

In 1782, Lord North, in raising another loan, did not venture to repeat these scandals: but disappointed his friends by a new system of close subscriptions. This arrangement did not escape animadversion: but it was the germ of the modern form of contracts, by sealed tenders. Mr. Pitt had himself condemned the former system of jobbing loans and lotteries; and when he commenced his own financial operations, as first minister of the crown, in 1784, he took effectual means to discontinue it. That the evil had not been exaggerated, may be inferred from the views of that sagacious statesman, as expounded by his biographer and friend Dr. Tomline. Mr. Pitt 'having, while in opposition, objected to the practice of his predecessors in distributing beneficial shares of loans and lottery tickets, under the [387] market price, among their private friends, and the parliamentary supporters of the government, adopted a new plan of contracting for loans and lotteries by means of sealed proposals from different persons, which were opened in the presence of each other; and while this competition ensured to the public the best terms which could be obtained under existing circumstances, it cut off a very improper source of showing favour to individuals, and increasing ministerial influence.'(10) The lowest tenders were accepted, and Mr. Pitt was able to assure the House of Commons that not a shilling had been reserved for distribution to his friends.

Contracts

One other form of parliamentary corruption yet remains to be noticed. Lucrative contracts for the public service, necessarily increased by the American war, were found a convenient mode of enriching political supporters. A contract to supply rum or beef for the navy, was as great a prize for a member, as a share in a loan or lottery. This species of reward was particularly acceptable to the commercial members of the House. Nor were its attractions confined to the members who enjoyed the contracts. Constituents being allowed to participate in their profits,

were zealous in supporting government candidates. Here was another source of influence, for which again the people paid too dearly. Heavy as their burthens were becoming, they were increased by the costly and improvident contracts, which this system of parliamentary jobbing [388] encouraged. The cost of bribery in this form, was even greater and more indefinite than that of loans and lotteries. In the latter case, there were some limits to the premium on scrip, which was public and patent to all the world: but who could estimate the profits of a contract loosely and ignorantly—not to say corruptly—entered into, and executed without adequate securities for its proper fulfilment? These evils were notorious; and efforts were not wanting to correct them.

In 1779, Sir Philip Jennings Clerke obtained leave to bring in a bill to disqualify contractors from sitting in Parliament, except where they obtained contracts at a public bidding: but on the 11th of March, the commitment of the bill was negatived. Again, in February 1780, Sir Philip renewed his motion, and succeeded in passing his bill through the Commons, without opposition: but it was rejected by the Lords on the second reading. In 1781 it was brought forward a third time, but was then lost in the House of Commons.

Meanwhile, Lord North's administration was falling: the opposition were pledged to diminish the influence of the crown, and to further the cause of economic reform; and in 1782, Sir Philip Clerke was able to bring in his bill, and carry the second reading. In committee, Mr. Fox struck out the exception in favour of contracts obtained at a public bidding, and extended the measure to existing as [389] well as future contracts. Immediately afterwards, the Rockingham ministry coming into office, adopted a measure so consonant with their own policy, and, under such auspices, it was at length passed.(11) It was another legislative condemnation of corrupt influences in Parliament.

Weighing the Evidence

In weighing the evidence of parliamentary corruption, which is accessible to us, allowance must be made for the hostility of many of the witnesses. Charges were made against the government of the day, by its bitterest opponents; and may have been exaggerated by the hard colouring of party. But they were made by men of high character and political eminence; and so generally was their truth acknowledged, that every abuse complained of was ultimately condemned by Parliament. Were all the measures for restraining corruption and undue influence groundless? Were the evils sought to be corrected imaginary? The historian can desire no better evidence of contemporary evils than the judgment of successive Parliaments, —pronounced again and again, and ratified by posterity.(12) The wisdom of the legislature averted [390] the ruin of the constitution, which the philosophical Montesquieu had predicted, when he said, 'Il périra, lorsque la puissance législative sera plus corrompue que l'exécutrice.'(13)

Such was the state of society in the first years of the reign of George III. that the vices of the government received little correction from public opinion. A corrupt system of government represented but too faithfully, the prevalent corruption of society. Men of the highest rank openly rioted in drunkenness, gambling, and debauchery: the clergy were indifferent to religion: the middle classes were coarse, ignorant, and sensual: and the lower classes brutalised by neglect, poverty, and evil examples. The tastes and habits of the age were low: its moral and intellectual standard was debased. All classes were wanting in refinement, and nearly all in education. Here were abounding materials for venal senators, greedy place-hunters, and corrupt electors.

Footnotes.

1. According to Lord Bolingbroke, Richard II. obliged members, 'sometimes by threats

and terror, and sometimes by gifts, to consent to those things which were prejudicial to the realm.'—Works, iii, 173. Mr. Hallam dates the bribery of members from James I. —Const. Hist., ii. 95. Such bribery, as a system, however, cannot be traced earlier than Charles II.

2. See Lord Macaulay's instructive sketch of the rise and progress of Parliamentary corruption, Hist., iii. 541, 687. Ibid., iv. 146, 305, 427 478, 545, and 551.
3. There is an obscurity in these accounts; but it seems as if the secret-service money had been derived from different sources, the amount paid from one source, between 1761 and 1769, being £156,000, and from the other £394,507. The details of the latter sum only are given.
4. Grenville Papers, iii. 145.
5. King's Letters to Lord North; Lord Brougham's Works, iii. 107. Mr. Robinson, as Secretary to the Treasury, had the management of the House of Commons, and was the depository of the *Livre rouge*, supposed to contain the names of members retained by ministers.—Wraxall Mem., ii. 220. In a canvassing list of Mr. Robinson, found among Lord Auckland's papers, is this suspicious entry—'Herne, Francis, a friend of Mr. Rigby's, paid £4,000.'—MS. kindly lent me by Mr. Hogge, the editor of the Auckland Correspondence; see also Walpole's Journ., i. 280.
6. Corr. of Geo. III. with Lord North, ii. 422.
7. Mr. Hallam says that the practice of direct bribery of Members of Parliament 'is generally supposed to have ceased about the termination of the American War.'—Const. Hist., ii. 428. Mr. William Smith, one of the oldest members of the House of Commons, related the following anecdote of his own time:—A gentleman, being at Sir Benjamin Hammett's Bank heard a member, one of Lord North's friends, ask to have a £500 bill 'broken,' which was done; and upon the applicant leaving the bank. Sir B. Hammett saw a cover lying on the floor, which he picked up and put into his friend's hand, without comment. It was addressed to the member, 'with Lord North's compliments.' Mr. Amyatt, Member for Southampton, was reputed to be the last member in receipt of a pension for Parliamentary support.—Private Information.
8. Sir P. J. Clerke, on the 8th March, said it had risen from 9 to 11 in the Alley that day. Lord North said it had only risen to 9, and had fallen again to 7½. Lord Rockingham estimated it at 10 per cent.
9. Debates in the Commons, 7th, 8th, 12th, and 14th March, and in the Lords, 21st March, 1781; Parl. Hist., xxi. 1334-1386; Rockingham Mem., ii. 437. Lord J. Russell's Life of Fox, i. 235-241. Wraxall's Mem., ii. 360-375. Among the subscribers to this loan were seven members for £70,000; others for £50,000; and one for £100,000; but the greater number being holder's of scrip only, did not appear in the list.—Wraxall Mem., ii. 367.
10. Life of Pitt, iii 533.
11. The bill contained an exception in favour of persons subscribing to a public loan. It was said, however, that the loan was a more dangerous engine of influence than contracts, and ultimately the exception was omitted, 'it being generally understood that a separate bill should be brought in for that purpose,' which, however, was never done. This matter, as stated in the debates, is exceedingly obscure and inconsistent, and scarcely to be relied upon, though it was frequently adverted to, in discussing the question of Baron Rothschild's disability in 1855.
12. In painting the public vices of his age, Cowper did not omit to stigmatise, as it deserved, its political corruption.

'But when a country (one that I could name),
In prostitution sinks the sense of shame;
When infamous Venality, grown bold,
Writes on his bosom, "to be let or sold."—Table Talk.

13. Livre xi. c, 6. Lord Bolingbroke wrote in the same spirit: 'Whenever the people of Britain become so degenerate and base as to be induced by corruption,—for they are no longer in danger of being awed by prerogative,—to choose persons to represent them in Parliament, whom they have found by experience to be under an influence arising from private interest, dependents on a court, and the creatures of a minister; or others that are unknown to the people that elect them, and having no recommendation but that which they carry in their purses: then may the enemies of our constitution boast, that they have got the better of it, and that it is no longer able to preserve itself, nor to defend liberty.'—Works, iii. 274.

[Next](#)

[Contents](#)

[Previous](#)