

Erskine May, Vol. II, Chapter VIII, pp. 131-146

Parties, up to the American War

Importance of Parties

[131] WE have surveyed the great political institutions by which the state is governed; and examined the influence which each has exercised, and their combined operation. That a form of government so composite, and combining so many conflicting forces, has generally been maintained in harmonious action, is mainly due to the organisation of parties,—an agency hardly recognised by the constitution, yet inseparable from parliamentary government, and exercising the greatest influence, for good or evil, upon the political destinies of the country. Party has guided and controlled, and often dominated over the more ostensible authorities of the state: it has supported the crown and aristocracy against the people: it has trampled upon public liberty: it has dethroned and coerced kings, overthrown ministers and Parliaments, humbled the nobles, and established popular rights. But it has protected the fabric of the government from shocks which threatened its very foundations. [132] Parties have risen and fallen: but institutions have remained unshaken. The annals of party embrace a large portion of the history of England:(1) but passing lightly over its meaner incidents,—the ambition, intrigues, and jealousies of statesmen,—the greed of place-hunters, and the sinister aims of faction,—we will endeavour to trace its influence in advancing or retarding the progress of constitutional liberty, and enlightened legislation.

The parties in which Englishmen have associated, at different times, and under various names, have represented cardinal principles of government,(2)—authority on the one side, popular rights and privileges on the other. The former principle, pressed to extremes, would tend to absolutism,—the latter to a republic: but, controlled within proper limits, they are both necessary for the safe working of a balanced constitution. When parties have lost sight of these principles, in pursuit of objects less worthy, they have degenerated into factions.(3) The divisions, conspiracies, and civil wars by which England was convulsed until late in the [133] sixteenth century must not be confounded with the development of parties. Rarely founded on distinctive principles, their ends were sought by arms, or deeds of violence and treason. Neither can we trace the origin of parties in those earlier contentions,—sometimes of nobles, sometimes of Commons, with the crown, to which we owe many of our most valued liberties. They marked, indeed, the spirit of freedom which animated our forefathers: but they subsided with the occasions which had incited them. Classes asserted their rights: but parliamentary parties, habitually maintaining opposite principles, were unknown.

Origins of Parties under Elizabeth

The germs of party, in the councils and Parliament of England,—generated by the Reformation,—were first discernible in the reign of Elizabeth. The bold spirit of the Puritans then spoke out in the House of Commons, in support of the rights of Parliament, and against her prerogatives, in matters of Church and State.(4) In their efforts to obtain toleration for their brethren, and modifications of the new ritual, they were countenanced by Cecil and Walsingham, and other eminent councillors of the queen. In matters of state, they could expect no sympathy from the court; but perceiving their power, as an organised party, they spared no efforts to gain admission into the House of Commons, until, joined by other opponents of prerogative, they at length acquired a majority.

[134] In 1601, they showed their strength by a successful resistance to the queen's prerogative of granting monopolies in trade, by royal patent. Under her weak successor, James I., ill-judged assertions of prerogative were met with bolder remonstrances. His doctrine of the divine right of kings, and the excesses of the High Church party, widened the breach between the crown and the great body of the Puritans,(5) and strengthened the popular party. Foremost among them were Sandys, Coke, Eliot, Selden, and Pym, who may be regarded as the first leaders of a regular parliamentary opposition.

Conflict under the Stuarts

The arbitrary measures of Charles I., the bold schemes of Strafford, and the intolerant bigotry of Laud, precipitated a collision between the opposite principles of government; and divided the whole country into Cavaliers and Roundheads. On one side, the king's prerogative had been pushed to extremes: on the other, the defence of popular rights was inflamed by ambition and fanaticism, into a fierce republican sentiment. The principles and the parties then arrayed against one another long retained their vitality, under other names and different circumstances.

Charles II., profiting little by the experience of the last reign,—nay, rather encouraged by the excesses of the Commonwealth to cherish kingly [135] power,—pursued the reckless course of the Stuarts: his measures being supported by the Court party, and opposed by the Country party.

Whigs and Tories

The contest of these parties upon the Exclusion Bill, in 1680, at length gave rise to the well-known names of Whig and Tory. Originally intended as terms of reproach and ridicule, they afterwards became the distinctive titles of two great parties, representing principles essential to the freedom and safety of the State.(6) The Whigs espoused the principles of liberty,—the independent rights of Parliament and the people,—and the lawfulness of resistance to a king who violated the laws. The Tories maintained the divine and indefeasible right of the king, the supremacy of prerogative, and the duty of passive obedience on the part of the subject. Both parties alike upheld the monarchy: but the Whigs contended for the limitation of its authority within the bounds of law: the principles of the Tories favoured absolutism in Church and State.(7)

[136] The infatuated assaults of James II. upon the religion and liberties of the people united, for a time, the Whigs and Tories in a common cause; and the latter, in opposition to their own principles, concurred in the necessity of expelling a dangerous tyrant from his throne. The Revolution was the triumph and conclusive recognition of Whig principles, as the foundation of a limited monarchy. Yet the principles of the two parties, modified by the conditions of this constitutional settlement, were still distinct and antagonistic. The Whigs continued to promote every necessary limitation of the royal authority, and to favour religious toleration: the Tories generally leaned to prerogative, to High-church doctrines, and hostility to Dissenters; while the extreme members of that party betrayed their original principles, as Non-jurors and Jacobites.

The two parties contended and intrigued, with varying success, during the reigns of William and of Anne; when the final victory of the Whigs secured constitutional government. But the stubborn principles, disappointed ambition, and factious violence of Tories disturbed the reigns of the two first kings of the House of Hanover, with [137] disaffection, treason, and civil wars. The final overthrow of the Pretender, in 1745, being fatal to the Jacobite cause, the Tories became a national party; and, still preserving their principles, at length transferred their hearty loyalty to the reigning king. Meanwhile the principles of both parties had naturally

been modified by the political circumstances of the times. The Whigs, installed as rulers, had been engaged for more than forty years after the death of Anne, in consolidating the power and influence of the crown, in connection with parliamentary government. The Tories, in opposition, had been constrained to renounce the untenable doctrines of their party, and to recognise the lawful rights of Parliament and the people.(8) Nay, at times they had adroitly paraded the popular principles of the Whig school against ministers, who in the practical administration of the government, and in furtherance of the interests of their party, had been too prone to forget them. Bolingbroke, Wyndham, and Shippen had maintained the constitutional virtues of short parliaments, and denounced the dangers of parliamentary corruption, the undue influence of the crown, and a standing army.(9)

Social Class and the Parties

[138] Through all vicissitudes of time and circumstance, however, the distinctive principles of the two great parties were generally maintained;(10) and the social classes from which they derived their strength were equally defined. The loyal adherents of Charles I. were drawn from the territorial nobles, the country gentlemen, the higher yeomanry, the Church, and the universities: the Parliament was mainly supported by the smaller freeholders, the inhabitants of towns, and Protestant nonconformists. Seventy years afterwards, on the accession of George I., the same classes were distinguished by similar principles. The feudal relations of the proprietors of the soil to their tenantry and the rural population,—their close connection with the Church,—and their traditional loyalty, assured their adherence to the politics of their forefathers. The rustics, who looked to the squire for bounty, and to the rector for the consolations of religion and charity, were not a class to inspire sentiments favourable to the sovereignty of the people. Poor, ignorant, dependent, and submissive, they seemed born to be ruled as children, rather than to share in the government of their country.

On the other hand, the commercial and manufacturing towns,—the scenes of active enterprise [139] and skilled handicraft,—comprised classes who naturally leaned to self-government, and embraced Whig principles. Merchants and manufacturers, themselves springing from the people, had no feelings or interests in common with the county families, from whose society they were repelled with haughty exclusiveness: they were familiarised, by municipal administration, with the practice of self-government: their pursuits were congenial to political activity and progress. Even their traditions were associated with the cause of the Parliament and the people against the crown. The stout burghers among whom they dwelt were spirited and intelligent. Congregated within the narrow bounds of a city, they canvassed, and argued, and formed a public opinion concerning affairs of state, naturally inclining to popular rights. The stern nonconformist spirit,—as yet scarcely known in country villages,—animated large bodies of townsmen with an hereditary distrust of authority in church and state.

It was to such communities as these that the Whig ministers of the House of Hanover, and the great territorial families of that party, looked for popular support. As landowners, they commanded the representation of several counties and nomination boroughs. But the greater number of the smaller boroughs being under the influence of Tory squires, the Whigs would have been unequal to their opponents in parliamentary following, had not new allies been found in the moneyed classes, who were rapidly increasing in numbers and importance. The superior wealth and influence of these men [140] enabled them to wrest borough after borough from the local squires, until they secured a parliamentary majority for the Whigs. It was a natural and appropriate circumstance, that the preservation and growth of English liberties should have been associated with the progress of the country in commercial wealth and greatness. The social improvement of the people won for them privileges which it fitted them to enjoy.

Ruin of the Tories under George I and George II

Meanwhile, long-continued possession of power by the Whigs, and the growing discredit of the Jacobite party, attracted to the side of the government many Tory patrons of boroughs. These causes, aided by the corrupt parliamentary organisation of that period,(11) maintained the ascendancy of the Whig party until the fall of Sir Robert Walpole; and of the same party, with other alliances, until the death of George II. Their rule, if signalised by few measures which serve as landmarks in the history of our liberties, was yet distinguished by its moderation, and by respect for the theory of constitutional government, which was fairly worked out, as far as it was compatible with the political abuses and corruptions of their times. The Tories were a dispirited and helpless minority; and in 1751, their hopes of better times were extinguished by the death of the Prince of Wales and Bolingbroke. Some were gained over by the government; and others cherished, [141] in sullen silence, the principles and sympathies of their ruined party. But the new reign rapidly revived their hopes. The young king, brought up at Leicester House, had acquired, by instruction and early association, the principles in favour at that little court.(12) His political faith, his ambition, his domestic affections, and his friendships alike attracted him towards the Tories; and his friends were, accordingly, transferred from Leicester House to St. James's. He at once became the regenerator and leader of the Tory party. If their cause had suffered discouragement and disgrace in the two last reigns, all the circumstances of this period were favourable to the revival of their principles, and the triumph of their traditional policy. To rally round the throne had ever been their watchword: respect for prerogative and loyal devotion to the person of the sovereign had been their characteristic pretensions. That the source of all power was from above, was their distinctive creed. And now a young king had arisen among them who claimed for himself their faith and loyalty. The royal authority was once more to be supreme in the government of the state: the statesmen and parties who withstood it, were to be cast down and trampled upon. Who so fit as men of Tory principles and traditions to aid him in the recovery of regal power? The party which had clung with most fidelity to the Stuarts, and had defended government by prerogative, were the [142] natural instruments for increasing,—under another dynasty and different political conditions,—the influence of the crown.

Their Revival under George III

We have seen how early in his reign the king began to put aside his Whig councillors: and with what precipitation he installed his Tory favourite, Lord Bute, as first minister.(13) With singular steadiness of purpose, address, and artful management, he seized upon every occasion for disuniting and weakening the Whigs, and extending the influence of the Tories. It was his policy to bring men of every political connection into his service; but he specially favoured Tories, and Whigs alienated from their own party. All the early administrations of his reign were coalitions. The Whigs could not be suddenly supplanted: but they were gradually displaced by men more willing to do the bidding of the court. Restored for a short time to power, under Lord Rockingham, they were easily overthrown, and replaced by the strangely composite ministry of the Duke of Grafton, consisting, according to Burke, 'of patriots and courtiers, king's friends and Republicans, Whigs and Tories, treacherous friends and open enemies.' On the retirement of Lord Chatham, the Tories acquired a preponderance in the cabinet; and when Lord Camden withdrew, it became wholly Tory. The king could now dispense with the services of Whig statesmen; and accordingly Lord North was placed at the head of the first ministry of this [143] reign, which was originally composed of Tories. But he seized the first opportunity of strengthening it, by a coalition with the Grenvilles and Bedfords.

'Men, Not Measures'

Meanwhile, it was the fashion of the court to decry all party connections as factions. Personal capacity was held up as the sole qualification for the service of the crown. This doctrine was well calculated to increase the king's own power, and to disarm parliamentary opposition. It served also to justify the gradual exclusion of the Whigs from the highest offices, and the substitution of Tories. When the Whigs had been entirely supplanted, and the Tories safely established in their place, the doctrine was heard of no more, except to discredit an opposition.

The rapid reconstruction of the Tory party was facilitated by the organisation of the king's friends.⁽¹⁴⁾ Most of these men originally belonged to that party; and none could be enrolled amongst them, without speedily becoming converts to its principles. Country gentlemen who had been out of favour nearly fifty years, found themselves courted and caressed; and faithful to their principles, could now renew their activity in public life, encouraged by the smiles of their sovereign. This party was also recruited from another class of auxiliaries. Hitherto the new men, unconnected with county families, had generally enrolled themselves on the opposite side. Even where their [144] preference to Whig principles was not decided, they had been led to that connection by jealousy of the landowners, by the attractions of a winning cause, and government favours: but now they were won over, by similar allurements, to the court. And, henceforth, much of the electoral corruption which had once contributed to the parliamentary majority of the Whigs, was turned against them by their Tory rivals and the king's friends.

Principles of the Two Parties

Meanwhile, the Whigs, gradually excluded from power, were driven back upon those principles which had been too long in abeyance. They were still, indeed, an aristocratic body: but no longer able to rely upon family connections, they offered themselves as leaders of the people. At the same time, the revival and activity of Tory principles, in the government of the state, re-animated the spirit of freedom, represented by their party. They resisted the dangerous influence of the crown, and the scarcely less dangerous extension of the privileges of Parliament: they opposed the taxation of America: they favoured the publication of debates, and the liberty of the press: they exposed and denounced parliamentary corruption. Their strength and character as a party were impaired by the jealousies and dissensions of rival families. Pelhams, Rockinghams, Bedfords, Grenvilles, and the followers of Lord Chatham too often lost sight of the popular cause, in their contentions for mastery. But in the main, the least favourable critic of the Whigs will scarcely venture to deny their services in the cause of liberty, from the [145] commencement of this reign, until the death of Lord Rockingham. Such was the vigour of their opposition, and such the genius and eloquence of their leaders,—Lord Chatham, Mr. Fox, Lord Camden, Mr. Burke. and Mr. Sheridan,—that they exercised a strong influence upon public opinion, and checked and moderated the arbitrary spirit of the court party. The haughty pretensions to irresponsibility which marked the first ministers of this reign, became much lowered in the latter years of Lord North's administration. Free discussion prevailed over doctrines opposed to liberty. Nor was the publication of debates already without its good results upon the conduct of both parties.

But while the Tories were renouncing doctrines repugnant to public liberty they were initiating a new principle not hitherto characteristic of their party. Respect for authority, nay, even absolute power, is compatible with enlightened progress in legislation. Great emperors, from Justinian to Napoleon, have gloried in the fame of lawgivers. But the Tory party were learning to view the amendment of our laws with distrust and aversion. In their eyes change was a political evil. Many causes concurred to favour a doctrine wholly unworthy of any school of statesmen. Tory sympathies were with the past. Men who in the last generation

would have restored the Stuarts, and annulled the Revolution, had little, in their creed, congenial to enlightened progress. The power which they had recovered, was associated with the influence of the crown, and the existing polity of [146] the state. Changes in the laws urged by opponents, and designed to restrain their own authority, were naturally resisted. Nor must the character of the men who constituted this party be forgotten. Foremost among them was the king himself,—a man of narrow intellect and intractable prejudices,—without philosophy or statesmanship,—and whose science of government was ever to carry out by force or management, his own strong will. The main body of the party whom he had raised to power and taken into his confidence, consisted of country gentlemen,—types of immobility,—of the clergy, trained by their trust and calling to reverence the past,—and of lawyers, guided by prescription and precedent,—venerating laws which they had studied and expounded, but not aspiring to the higher philosophy of legislation. Such men were content '*stare super antiquas vias*;' and dreaded every change as fraught with danger. In this spirit the king warned the people, in 1780, against 'the hazard of innovation.'⁽¹⁵⁾ In the same spirit the king's friend Mr. Rigby, in opposing Mr. Pitt's first motion for reform, 'treated all innovations as dangerous theoretical experiments.' This doctrine was first preached during the ministry of Lord North. It was never accepted by Mr. Pitt and his more enlightened disciples: but it became an article of faith with the majority of the Tory party.

Footnotes.

1. Mr Wingrove Cooke, in his spirited 'History of Party,' to which I desire to acknowledge many obligations, related the most instructive incidents of general history.
2. 'Party is a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.'—Burke's Present Discontents, Works, ii. 335.
3. 'National interests' . . . 'would be sometimes sacrificed, and always made subordinate to, personal interests: and that, I think, is the true characteristic of faction.'—Bolingbroke's Dissert. upon Parties, Works, iii. 15. 'Of such a nature are connections in politics; essentially necessary to the full performance of our public duty: accidentally liable to degenerate into faction.'—Ibid., Works, ii. 332.
4. D'Ewes' Journ., 156-175. Hume's Hist., iii, 497, 511, This author goes too far when he says, 'It was to this sect, whose principles appear so frivolous and habits so ridiculous, that the English owe the whole freedom of their constitution.'—Ibid., 520.
5. 'The principles by which King James and King Charles I. governed, and the excesses of hierarchical and monarchical power exercised in consequence of them, gave great advantage to the opposite opinions, and entirely occasioned the miseries which followed.'—Bolingbroke, Works, iii. 50.
6. Nothing can be more silly or pointless than these names. The supporters of the Duke of York, as Catholics, were assumed to be Irishmen, and were called by the Country party 'Tories,'—a term hitherto applied to a set of lawless bog-trotters, resembling the modern 'Whiteboys.' The Country party were called 'Whigs,' according to some, 'a vernacular in Scotland, for corrupt and sour whey;' and, according to others, from the Scottish Covenanters of the South-western counties of Scotland, who had received the appellation of Whiggamores, or Whigs, when they made an inroad upon Edinburgh in 1648, under the Marquess of Argyll.—Roger North's Examen, 320-324; Burnet's Own Times, i. 78; Cooke's Hist. of Party, i. 137; Macaulay's Hist., i. 256.
7. Filmer, representing the extreme views of this party, says: 'A man is bound to obey the king's command against law; nay, in some cases, against divine laws.'—Patriarchia, 100.
8. 'Toryism,' says Mr. Wingrove Cooke, 'was formed for government: it is only a creed for rulers.'—Hist. of Party, ii. 49.
9. 'Your right Jacobite,' said Sir R. Walpole in 1738, 'disguises his true sentiments: he

roars for revolution principles: he pretends to be a great friend to liberty and a great admirer of our ancient constitution.'—Parl. Hist., x. 401.

10. Mr. Wingrove Cooke says, that after Bolingbroke renounced the Jacobite cause on the accession of Geo. II., 'henceforward we never find the Tory party struggling to extend the prerogative of the Crown.' 'The principle of that party has been rather aristocratical than monarchical,'—a remark which is, probably, as applicable to one party as to the other until the period of the Reform Bill.—Hist. of Party, ii. 105.

11. Supra, Vol. I. 333 et seq.

12. Supra, Vol. I. 10.

13. Supra, Vol. I. pp. 18-22.

14. Supra, Vol. I. p. 12, 38.

15. Supra, Vol. I. 395.

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