Erskine May, Chapter I, pp. 60-71

The Fox-North Coalition

Rockingham's Second Ministry

On the retirement of Lord North, the king submitted, with a bad grace, to the Rockingham administration. He found places, indeed, for his own friends, but the policy of the cabinet was as distasteful to him as were the persons of some of the statesmen of whom it was composed. Its first principle was the concession of Independence to America, which he had so long resisted: its second was the reduction of the influence of the crown, by the abolition of offices, the exclusion of contractors from Parliament, and the disfranchisement of revenue officers. Shortly after its formation, Mr. Fox, writing to Mr. Fitzpatrick, said: 'provided we can stay in long enough to give a good stout blow to the influence of the crown, I do not think it much signifies how soon we go out after.' This ministry was constituted of materials [61] not likely to unite,—of men who had supported the late ministry, and of the leaders of the parliamentary opposition,—or, as Mr. Fox expressed it, 'it consisted of two parts, one belonging to the king, the other to the public.'(1) Such men could not be expected to act cordially together: but they aimed their blow at the influence of the crown, by passing the contractors' bill, the revenue officers' bill, and a bill for the reduction of offices.(2) They also suffered the former policy of the court to be stigmatised, by expunging from the journals of the House of Commons, the obnoxious resolutions which had affirmed the disability of Wilkes. A ministry promoting such measures as these, was naturally viewed with distrust and ill-will by the court. So hard was the struggle between them, that the sur1y chancellor, Lord Thurlow,—who had retained his office by the express desire of the king, and voted against all the measures of the government,—affirmed that Lord Rockingham was 'bringing things to a pass where either his head or the king's must go, in order to settle which of them is to govern the country.' The king was described by his Tory friends as a prisoner in the hands of his ministers, and represented in the caricatures of the day, as being put in fetters by his gaolers. In the same spirit, ministers were termed the 'Regency,' [62] as if they had assumed to exercise the royal authority. In a few months, however, this ministry, was on the point of breaking up, in consequence of differences of opinion and personal jealousies, when the death of Lord Rockingham dissolved it.

Shelburne's Ministry

Mr. Fox and his friends retired, and Lord Shelburne, who had represented the king in the late cabinet, was placed at the head of the new administration; while Mr. William Pitt now first entered office, though little more than twenty-three years of age, as Chancellor of the Exchequer. The secession of the popular party restored the king's confidence in his ministers, who now attempted to govern by his influence, and to maintain their position against a formidable combination of parties. Horace Walpole represents Lord Shelburne as 'trusting to maintain himself entirely by the king;' and such was the state of parties that, in truth, he had little else to rely upon. In avowing this influence, he artfully defended it, in the spirit of the king's friends, by retorting upon the great Whig families. He would never consent, he said, 'that the king of England should be a king of the Mahrattas; for among the Mahrattas the custom is, it seems, for a certain number of great lords to elect a Peishwah, who is thus the creature of the aristocracy, and is vested with the plenitude of power, while their king is, in fact, nothing more than a royal pageant.'

The Combination of Fox and North

[63] By breaking up parties, the king had hoped to secure his independence and to enlarge his own influence; but now he was startled by a result which he had not anticipated. '*Divide et impera*' had been his maxim, and to a certain extent it had succeeded. Separation of parties had enfeebled their opposition to his government; but now their sudden combination overthrew it. When the preliminary articles of peace with America were laid before Parliament, the parties of Lord North and Mr. Fox,—so long opposed to each other, and whose political hostility had been embittered by the most acrimonious disputes,—formed a 'Coalition,' and outvoted the government, in the House of Commons.(3) Overborne by numbers, the minister resigned; and the king alone confronted this powerful coalition. The struggle which ensued was one of the most critical in our modern constitutional history. The royal prerogatives on the one side, and the powers of Parliament on the other, were more strained than at any time since the Revolution. But the issue illustrated the paramount influence of the crown.

The leaders of the coalition naturally expected to succeed to power; but the king was resolved to resist their pretensions. He sought Mr. Pitt's assistance to form a government; and with such a minister, would have braved the united forces of the opposition. But that sagacious statesman, [64] though not yet twenty-four years of age,(4) had taken an accurate survey of the state of parties, and of public opinion; and seeing that it was not yet the time for putting himself in the front of the battle, he resisted the solicitations of his Majesty, and the advice of his friends, in order to await a more fitting opportunity of serving his sovereign. In vain did the king endeavour once more to disunite the coalition, by making separate proposals to Lord North and the Duke of Portland. The new confederacy was not to be shaken,—and the king found himself at its mercy. It was long, however, before he would submit. He wrote to Lord Weymouth ' to desire his support against his new tyrants;' and 'told the Lord Advocate that sooner than yield he would go to Hanover, and had even prevailed upon the queen to consent.' From this resolution he was probably dissuaded by the rough counsels of Lord Thurlow. 'Your Majesty may go,' said he, 'nothing is more easy: but you may not find it so easy to return, when your Majesty becomes tired of staying there.' It was not until the country had been for seventeen days without a government, that the king agreed to Lord North's scheme of a coalition ministry. But further difficulties were raised; and at length the House of Commons interposed. After several debates,—in one of which Mr. Fox accused the king's secret friends of breaking off the negotiation,—the House [65] addressed his Majesty to form 'an administration entitled to the confidence of his people.' The address was graciously answered; but still no ministry was formed. Again the king pressed Mr. Pitt to become his premier, who again firmly and finally refused.(5) At length, after an extraordinary interval of thirty-seven days, from the 24th February to the 2nd April, 1783, the coalition ministry was completed under the Duke of Portland.(6)

Such are the vicissitudes of political life, that Lord North, who for years had been the compliant and obsequious minister of the king, was now forcing his way into office, in alliance with Mr. Fox, the king's most dreaded opponent, and lately his own. While the king was yet holding them at bay, the new friends were concerting measures for restraining his future influence. As no one had submitted to that influence so readily as Lord North, we cannot intrude into their secret conferences without a smile. Mr. Fox insisted that the king should not be suffered to be his own minister, to which Lord North replied: 'If you mean there should not be a government by departments, I agree with you. I think it a very bad system. There should be one man, or [66] a cabinet, to govern the whole, and direct every measure. Government by departments was not brought in by me. I found it so, and had not the vigour and resolution to put an end to it. The king ought to be treated with all sort of respect and attention: but the appearance of power is all that a king of this country can have. Though the government in my time was a government by departments, the whole was done by the

ministers, except in a few instances.'

The King's Hostility

But whatever were the views of ministers regarding the king's future authority, he himself had no intention of submitting to them. He did not attempt to disguise his repugnance to the ministry which had been forced upon him: but, avowing that he yielded to compulsion, gave them to understand that they need expect no support from him, and that he would not create any British peers upon their recommendation. He told Lord Temple 'that to such a ministry he never would give his confidence, and that he would take the first moment for dismissing them.' The coalition had not found favour in the country; and no pains were spared, by the king's friends, to increase its unpopularity. Meanwhile the king watched all the proceedings of his ministers with jealousy, thwarted them whenever he could, criticised their policy, and openly assumed an attitude of opposition. Thus, writing to Mr. Fox, who, as [67] secretary of state, was negotiating the peace, in August, 1783, he said: 'I cannot say that I am so surprised at France not putting the last strokes to the definitive treaty, as soon as we may wish, as our having totally disarmed, in addition to the extreme anxiety shown for peace, during the whole period that has ensued, since the end of February, 1782, certainly makes her feel that she can have no reason to apprehend any evil from so slighting a proceeding.'

Use of the King's Name

An opportunity soon arose for more active hostility. Mr. Fox's India Bill had been brought into the House of Commons; and, in spite of the most strenuous opposition, was being rapidly passed by large majorities. It was denounced as unconstitutional, and as an invasion of the prerogatives of the crown: but no means had been found to stay its progress. The king now concerted with his friends a bold and unscrupulous plan for defeating the bill, and overthrowing his ministers. Instead of requiring the withdrawal or amendment of the bill,—as he was entitled to do,—his name was to be used, and an active canvass undertaken by his authority, against the measure of his own ministers. Though this plan was agreed upon eight days before the bill reached the House of Lords, it was cautiously concealed. To arrest the progress of the bill in the Commons was hopeless; and the interference of the crown, in that House, would have excited dangerous resentment. The [68] blow was therefore to be struck in the other House, where it would have greater weight, and be attended with less danger. Lord Temple,—who had suggested this plan, in concert with Lord Thurlow, and to whom its execution was entrusted,—having had an audience with his Majesty, declared himself authorised to protest against the bill in the king' s name. And in order to leave no doubt as to his commission, the following words were written upon a card: -

> 'His Majesty allows Earl Temple to say that whoever voted for the India Bill, was not only not his friend, but would be considered by him as an enemy; and if these words were not strong enough, Earl Temple might use whatever words he might deem stronger, and more to the purpose.'

With these credentials, Lord Temple proceeded to canvass the peers,—with what success was soon apparent. On the first reading, supported by Lord Thurlow and the Duke of Richmond, he gave the signal of attack. The peers assumed a threatening attitude,(7) and on the 15th December, placed the ministers in a minority, on a question of adjournment. Little secrecy or reserve was maintained by the king's friends, who took care to proclaim his Majesty's wishes. The use made of the king's name was noticed by the Duke of Portland, the Duke of [69] Richmond, and Earl Fitzwilliam: and was not denied by Lord Temple.

Mr. Fitzpatrick, writing to Lord Ossory on the 15th December, said: 'the proxies of the king's friends are arrived against the bill. The public is full of alarm and astonishment at the treachery, as well as the imprudence, of this unconstitutional interference. Nobody guesses

what will be the consequences of a conduct that is generally compared to that of Charles I., in 1641.'

Confrontation Between King and Commons

Before the success of the court measures was complete, the Commons endeavoured to arrest them. On the 17th December, Mr. Baker, after denouncing secret advice to the crown, against its responsible ministers, and the use of the king's name, moved a resolution, 'that it is now necessary to declare, that to report any opinion, or pretended opinion, of his Majesty, upon any bill, or other proceeding, depending in either House of Parliament, with a view to influence the votes of the members, is a high crime and misdemeanour, derogatory to the honour of the crown,—a breach of the fundamental privileges of Parliament, and subversive of the constitution.'

In vain did Mr. Pitt contend that the House could not deal with rumours, and that the hereditary councillors of the crown had always a right to give advice to their sovereign. Mr. Fox replied in a [70] masterly speech, full of constitutional arguments, and eloquent with indignant remonstrances.(8) The resolution was voted by a majority of seventy-three; and the House resolved to go into committee on the state of the nation, on the following Monday. But this was not enough. It was evident that the king had determined upon a change of ministers; and lest he should also attempt to overthrow the obnoxious majority by a sudden dissolution, the House, on the motion of Mr. Erskine, agreed to a resolution affirming the necessity of considering a suitable remedy for abuses in the government of the British dominions in the East Indies; and declaring 'that this House will consider as an enemy to his country, any person who shall presume to advise his Majesty to prevent, or in any manner interrupt, the discharge of this important duty.' The Commons had a right to protest against the irregular acts of the king's secret advisers: but the position assumed by ministers was indeed anomalous. It was not for them level censures against the king himself. They should either have impeached or censured Lord Temple, or, protesting against the abuse of his Majesty's name, should have tendered their own resignation.

[71] But the strange spectacle was here exhibited, of a king plotting against his own ministers,—of the ministers inveighing against the conduct of their royal master,—of the House of Commons supporting them, and condemning the king,—and of the king defying at once his ministers and the House of Commons, and trusting to his influence with the Peers. The king's tactics prevailed. On the very day on which the Commons agreed to these strong remonstrances against his interference, it was crowned with complete success. The bill was rejected by the House of Lords,(9) and the next day the king followed up his advantage, by at once dismissing his ministers.(10) To make this dismissal as contemptuous as possible, he sent a message to Lord North, and Mr. Fox, commanding them to return their seals by their under-secretaries, as an audience would be disagreeable to his Majesty. Earl Temple, who had done the king this service, was entrusted with the seals for the purpose of formally dismissing the other ministers: the man who had been the king's chief agent in defeating them, was chosen to offer them this last affront.

Footnotes.

1. Fox Mem., i. 292; Lord John Russell's Life of Fox, i. 284, et seq. Lord John Russell says: 'It must be owned that the composition of the Rockingham ministry was a masterpiece of royal skill.'—Ibid. 285; Wraxall's Mem., iii. 10-18.
2. See Chap. VI.
3. 17th and 21st Feb., 1783.
4. Mr. Pitt was born 28th May, 1769.
5. 24th March.
6. The king availed himself of his freedom from ministerial restraint, to fill up the vacant

see of Canterbury. The translation of Dr. Moore, Bishop of Bangor, was completed on the very day on which the coalition ministry was finally installed.—Wraxall's Mem, iii. 349.

7. Many of them withdrew their proxies from the ministers a few hours before the meeting of the House.—Parl. Hist., xxiv. 211.
8. Mr. Fox cited the words reported to have been used by Lord Temple, and challenged a contradiction; upon which Mr. W. Grenville said, he was authorised by his noble relative to say that he had never made use of those words. This denial, as Mr. Fox observed, amounted to nothing more than that these had not been the precise words used.—Parl. Hist., xxiv. 207, 225. And see Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt, i. 154.
9. 17th Dec., 1783. By a majority of 19.—Parl. Hist., xxiv. 196.
10. Mr. Fox, writing immediately afterwards, said: 'We are beat in the House of Lords by such treachery on the part of the king, and such meanness on the part of his friends in the House of Lords, as one could not expect either from him or them.'—Fox Mem., ii. 221, 253.

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