

Erskine May, Chapter I, pp. 92-102

Pitt, Addington, and the Catholic Question

At length Mr. Pitt's fall, like his rise, was due to the king's personal will; and was brought about in the same way as many previous political events, by irresponsible councils. There is reason to believe that Mr. Pitt's unbending temper,—increased in stubbornness by his long-continued supremacy in Parliament, and in the [93] cabinet,—had become distasteful to the king.(1) His Majesty loved power at least as much as his minister, and was tenacious of his authority, even over those in whom he had confidence. Mr. Pitt's power had nearly overshadowed his own; and there were not wanting opinions among friends of the king, and rivals of the statesman, that the latter had 'an overweening ambition, great and opiniative presumption, and perhaps not quite constitutional ideas with regard to the respect and attention due to the crown.'

While this feeling existed in regard to Mr. Pitt, his Majesty was greatly agitated by events which at once aroused his sensitive jealousy of councils to which he had not been admitted, and his conscientious scruples. Mr. Pitt and his colleagues thought it necessary to inaugurate the Union of Ireland, by concessions to the Roman Catholics; and had been, for some time, deliberating upon a measure to effect that object. Upon this question, the king had long entertained a very decided opinion. So far back as 1795, he had consulted Lord Kenyon as to the obligations of his coronation oath; and though his lordship's opinions were not quite decisive upon this point,(2) his Majesty was persuaded that he was [94] morally restrained, by that oath, from assenting to any further measures for the relief of the Roman Catholics. Long before the ministers had so far matured their proposal as to be prepared to submit it for his Majesty's approval, he had been made acquainted with their intentions. In September, 1800, Lord Loughborough had shown him a letter from Mr. Pitt upon the subject; and the Archbishop of Canterbury, at the suggestion of Lord Auckland, had also informed the king that a scheme was in contemplation, which was represented as dangerous to the church. In December, the lord chancellor communicated to his Majesty an elaborate paper against the Roman Catholic claims; and Dr. Stuart, Archbishop of Armagh,—a son of the king's old favourite, Lord Bute,—increased his Majesty's repugnance to the measure which the ministers were preparing. The king immediately took counsel with some of the opponents of the Catholic claims; and without waiting for any communication from Mr. Pitt, lost no time in declaring his own opinion upon the measure. At the levee on the 28th January, 1801, he told Mr. Windham, the Secretary-at-War, 'that he should consider any person who voted for it, as personally indisposed towards him.'(3) On the same occasion he said to [95] Mr. Dundas, 'I shall reckon any man my personal enemy, who proposes any such measure. The most Jacobinical thing I ever heard of!' On the 29th, he wrote to Mr. Addington, the Speaker, desiring him to 'open Mr. Pitt's eyes on the danger arising from the agitating this improper question.' Mr. Addington undertook this commission, and thought he had dissuaded Mr. Pitt from proceeding with a measure, to which the king entertained insuperable objections. But if at first inclined to yield, Mr. Pitt, after consulting the cabinet and other political friends, determined to take his stand, as a responsible minister, upon the advice he was about to tender to the king. Mr. Canning is said to have advised Mr. Pitt not to give way on this occasion. It was his opinion, 'that for several years so many concessions had been made, and so many important measures overruled, from the king's opposition to them, that government had been weakened exceedingly; and if on this particular occasion a stand was not made, Pitt would retain only a nominal power, while the real one would pass into the hands of those who influenced the king's mind and opinion, out of sight.'

Pitt's Resignation

[96] Whether sharing this opinion or not, Mr. Pitt himself was too deeply impressed with the necessity of the measure, and perhaps too much committed to the Catholics, to withdraw it.(4) It appears, however, that he might have been induced to give way, if he could have obtained an assurance from his Majesty, that ministers should not be opposed by the king's friends in Parliament. On the 1st February, he made the formal communication to the king, which his Majesty had, for several days, been expecting. The king, aware of Mr Pitt's determination before he received this letter, had wished Mr. Addington, even then, to form a new administration. By Mr. Addington's advice, however, a kind but most unbending answer was returned to Mr. Pitt, in which his Majesty declared that a ' principle of duty must prevent him from discussing any proposition tending to destroy the groundwork of our happy constitution.'(5) The intensity of the king's feeling on the subject was displayed by what he said, about this time, to the Duke of Portland: 'Were he to agree to it, he should betray his trust, and forfeit his crown; that it might [97] bring the framers of it to the gibbet.' His trusty counsellor replied: 'he was sure the king had rather suffer martyrdom, than submit to this measure.' In vain did Mr. Addington endeavour to accommodate these differences. Mr. Pitt, as inflexible as the king, resigned; and Mr. Addington was entrusted with the task of forming an anti-Catholic administration; while an active canvass was undertaken by the courtiers against the Catholic cause, as a matter personal to the king himself.

Mr. Pitt has been justly blamed for having so long concealed his intentions from the king. His Majesty himself complained to Lord Grenville, that the question had been under consideration since the month of August, though never communicated to him till Sunday, the 1st of February—and stated his own belief, that if the unfortunate cause of disunion had been openly mentioned to him 'in the beginning, he should have been able to avert it entirely.' Whether this delay arose, as Lord Malmesbury has suggested, 'either from indolence,' or from want of a 'sufficient and due attention to the king's pleasure,' it was assuredly a serious error of judgment. It cannot, indeed, be maintained that it was Mr. Pitt's duty to take his Majesty's pleasure, before any bill had been agreed upon by the cabinet; but his [98] reticence, upon the general question, aroused the suspicions of the king, and gave those who differed from the minister an opportunity of concerting an opposition at court.

Pitt's Pledge to the King

Mr. Pitt had forfeited power rather than abandon a measure which he deemed essential to the welfare of the state. Yet a few weeks afterwards, he was so deeply affected on hearing that the king had imputed his illness to the recent conduct of his minister, that he conveyed an assurance to his Majesty, that he would not revive the Catholic question. Opposition was now disarmed; and the king alone was able to shape the policy of ministers and of Parliament.

Mr. Addington enjoyed the confidence, and even the affection of the king, whose correspondence at this period resembles—both in its minute attention to every department of business, foreign or domestic, and in its terms of attachment—his letters to his former favourite, Lord North.(6) His Majesty was rejoiced [99] to find himself free from the restraints which the character and position of Mr. Pitt had imposed upon him; and delighted to honour the minister of his own choice,—who shared his feelings and opinions,—who consulted him on every occasion,—whose amiable character and respectful devotion touched his heart,—and whose intellect was not so commanding as to overpower and subdue his own.

Fall of Addington

This administration,—formed under circumstances unfavourable to its stability, and beset, from its very commencement, with jealousies and intrigues, was upheld for three years, mainly by the influence of the crown. Feeble in parliamentary talent and influence, and

wanting in popular support, it was yet able to withstand the united opposition of Mr. Pitt and Mr. Fox. At length, however, Mr. Addington, overcome by embarrassments, resigned.(7) It was not without reluctance that the king found himself obliged to part with his favourite minister, and to submit himself [100] again to the loftier temper of Mr. Pitt: but he was persuaded to give up an impotent administration, in a time of public danger.

The King's veto on Mr. Fox

Mr. Pitt urged the necessity of forming a strong government, by an union with Lord Grenville and Mr. Fox; but such was his Majesty's repugnance to the latter, that he absolutely refused to admit him into the cabinet. So inveterate was his aversion to this statesman, aggravated, at this period, by mental disorder, that he afterwards declared 'that he had taken a positive determination not to admit Mr. Fox into his councils, *even at the hazard of a civil war.*' Mr. Fox being proscribed, the opposition would listen to no propositions for an arrangement, and Mr. Pitt was obliged to place himself at the head of an administration as weak as that which he had succeeded.

The 'King's Friends'

Meanwhile, Mr. Addington took up a position in the House of Commons, as leader of the 'king's friends,'—a party numbering sixty or seventy members. He was still supposed to be in communication with the king, and his supporters were sometimes ranged against the government. He professed personal adherence to his sovereign to be the rule of his [101] political conduct. Writing soon after his retirement from office, he says: 'I shall keep aloof from all parties, adhere to the king, and take a course that I can conscientiously justify to myself.' His attitude was so formidable, that Mr. Pitt was soon obliged to admit him and his followers to a share of the government. The king earnestly desired his union with Mr. Pitt, which the renewal of friendly intercourse between them easily brought about. He accordingly joined the administration, as Viscount Sidmouth, and president of the Council; and induced his friends, who had been lately voting against the government, to lend it their parliamentary support. But being dissatisfied with the share of influence conceded to himself and his allies in the cabinet, he shortly afterwards threatened to resign. And when, on the impeachment of Lord Melville, Mr. Hiley Addington and Mr. Bond, who had been promised places, spoke and voted against the government, differences arose between himself and Mr. Pitt, which led to his resignation. In this anarchy of parties, the chief support of ministers was the influence of the crown.

Meanwhile, the only matter on which Mr. Pitt and the king were at variance, was not suffered [102] again to disturb their friendly relations. Mr. Pitt had renewed the assurance which he had given the king in 1801, that he would not revive the question of Catholic emancipation, during his Majesty's life. Not satisfied with this assurance, the king required an explicit declaration of his minister's determination to resist even the smallest alteration of the Test Act. This latter pledge, indeed, Mr. Pitt declined to give: but he was careful to avoid the forbidden ground, and was even obliged to oppose others who ventured to trespass upon it. The minister had surrendered his own judgment; and the king alone dictated the policy of Parliament. Though Mr. Pitt recovered the king's confidence, his Majesty continued to form his own independent opinions, and to exercise a large influence in the government and patronage of the state.(8) He watched the debates with undiminished interest: noted the length of speeches, and the numbers in divisions; and even observed upon the shortcomings of the government whips.(9)

Footnotes.

1. 27th Feb., 1801. 'I was told this evening, by Pelham, that his Majesty had for a long time since been dissatisfied with Pitt's, and particularly with Lord Grenville's

- "authoritative manners" towards him, and that an alteration in his ministry had long been in his mind.'—Malmesbury Corr., iv. 24. See also Wraxall's Mem., iv. 483.
2. They were published by Dr. Phillpotts (afterwards Bishop of Exeter) in 1827.
 3. Malmesbury Corr., iv. 2. His Lordship in relating this circumstance states that Pitt had communicated the measure on the previous day; but it appears from Lord Sidmouth's Life, that this communication was not received by the king until Sunday the 1st Feb., though Lord Grenville and Mr. Dundas had already spoken to his Majesty upon the subject.—Pellew's Life of Lord Sidmouth. i. 285, 287.
 4. Insinuations that Mr. Pitt had other motives for retiring, apart from this measure, have been sufficiently answered; see Fox Mem., iii, 252; Edinb. Rev., ccx, 354; Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt, iii, 309.
 5. The king to Mr. Pitt, 1st Feb., 1801; Pellew's Life of Lord Sidmouth, i, 291. All the correspondence between the king and Mr. Pitt is published in Dr. Phillpott's Pamphlet, 1827, and in the Quarterly Review, xxxvi. 290, and part of it in Lord Sidmouth's Life; Rose's Corr., ii. 286, et seq., 303, 309, Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt, iii, App.
 6. Pellew's Life of Lord Sidmouth, i. 365, 387, 395, 410, 411. On the 13th Feb., 1801, the king writes: 'I mean to have his affection as well as his zeal.'—Ibid., 305. On the 5th March. he writes: 'The king cannot find words sufficiently expressive of his Majesty's cordial approbation of the whole arrangements which his own Chancellor of the Exchequer has wisely, and his Majesty chooses to add, most correctly recommended.'—Ibid., 353. Again on the 19th May, and on other occasions, he terms Mr. Addington *'his* Chancellor of the Exchequer.'—Ibid., 394. Sometimes he addresses him as 'My dear Chancellor of the Exchequer.'—Ibid., 395. On the 14th June, he writes: 'The king is highly gratified at the repeated marks of the sensibility of Mr. Addington's heart; which must greatly add to the comfort of having placed him with so much propriety at the head of the Treasury. He trusts their mutual affection can only cease with their lives.'—Ibid., 408. On the 8th July, he writes: 'The messenger who returned from Cuffnals, agreeable to order, called at Winchester that Mr. Addington might hear of his son.'—Ibid., 428.—See also Lord Colchester's Diary, i. 513.
 7. Pellew's Life of Lord Sidmouth, ii. 273, et seq. 'Mr. Addington resigned, a measure which he has since assured me that he resorted to from a fear of the King's health, much more than from a dread of his opponents.'—Lord Holland's Mem., i. 191; and see Earl Grey on Parliamentary Government, 95; and Lord Colchester's Diary, 501.
 8. Rose's Corr., ii. 122, 124, 141, 158, 160. Mr. Pitt was anxious that his friend and biographer, Dr. Tomline, Bishop of Lincoln, should be promoted to the See of Canterbury; but the king insisted upon appointing Dr. Manners Sutton, Bishop of Norwich, notwithstanding all the solicitations of his minister.—Rose's Corr., ii, 82, 91. etc.; Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt, iv. 233, 252, and App. passim.
 9. Correspondence with Mr. Pitt. Lord Stanhope's Life, iv. App. passim. In November 1805, his Majesty's loss of sight compelled him to resort to the aid of Col. Herbert Taylor, as his secretary and amanuensis; but prior to that time, he had kept up a constant correspondence with successive ministers, in his own hand.

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