

## Erskine May, Chapter II, pp. 138-145

### William IV and Parliamentary Reform

Hitherto we have seen the influence of the crown invariably exercised against a liberal policy and often against the rights and liberties of the people. But the earlier years of the reign of William IV. presented the novel spectacle of the prerogatives and personal influence of the king being exerted, in a great popular cause, on behalf of the people. At various times, small expedients had been tried with a view to restrain the influence of the crown: but the reform bill, by increasing the real power of the people in the House of Commons, was the first great measure calculated to effect that object; and this measure, it was everywhere proclaimed that the king himself approved. The ministers themselves announced his Majesty's entire confidence in their policy, and his [139] determination to support them; and the advocates of the cause, in every part of the country, declared that the king was on their side.

Yet, in truth, the attitude of the king in regard to this measure, at first resembled that which his royal predecessors had maintained against a progressive policy. When ministers first proposed to introduce it, he regarded it with dislike and apprehension: he dreaded the increasing influence and activity of the Commons, and,—alarmed by the spirit in which they had investigated the expenditure of his civil list,—he feared lest, strengthened by a more popular representation, they should encroach upon his own prerogatives and independence. The royal family and the court were also averse to the measure, and to the ministers. But when his Majesty had given his consent to the scheme submitted by the cabinet, he was gratified by its popularity,—in which he largely shared,—and which its supporters adroitly contrived to associate with his Majesty's personal character, and supposed political sympathies.

#### The King's Support of the Ministry

He was still distrustful of his ministers and their policy; yet while the tide of popular favour was running high, and no political danger was immediately impending, he gave them his support and countenance. On their side, they were not slow to take advantage of the influence of his name: they [140] knew that it would be a great aid to their cause; and, sensible of the insecurity of his favour, they took care that it should be widely proclaimed, as long as it lasted. Politicians like Lord Eldon, who, for forty years, had relied upon the influence of the crown to resist every popular measure,—even when proposed by its own responsible ministers,—were now scandalised by this 'unconstitutional' cry. Yet what did this cry, in truth, import? The state of parties in Parliament, and of popular feeling in the country, had brought into the king's service a ministry pledged to the cause of Parliamentary reform. To this ministry he had given his confidence. George III., by some bold stroke or cunning manoeuvre, would soon have set himself free from such a ministry. George IV., after giving a doubtful assent to their policy, would have reserved his confidence and his sympathies for their opponents: but William IV. at this time, took a part at once manly and constitutional. His responsible ministers had advised the passing of a great measure, and he had accepted their advice. They were now engaged in a fierce parliamentary struggle; and the king gave them,—what they were entitled to expect,—his open confidence. So long as they enjoyed this confidence, he exercised his prerogatives and influence according to their counsels. His powers were used in the spirit of the constitution,—not independently, or secretly,—but on the avowed advice and responsibility of his ministers.

[141] The king was called upon, at a critical period, to exercise his prerogative of dissolving Parliament. In 1831, a new Parliament was yet in its first session: but having been assembled

under the auspices of the late administration, before the popular feelings in favour of parliamentary reform had been aroused, it had become evident that a reform ministry, and this Parliament, could not exist together. The ministers, having been twice defeated in three days, had no alternative but to resign their offices, or to appeal from the House of Commons to the people; and they urged the necessity of an immediate dissolution. The time was full of peril, and the king hesitated to adopt the bold advice of his ministers; but when at length he yielded his assent, the prerogative was exercised at once, and by the king in person. If there was something unseemly in the haste with which this was done, and unusual in the manner of doing it, the occasion was one demanding the promptest action. Lord Wharncliffe had given notice of a motion for an address to the king, remonstrating against a dissolution; and his motion was actually under discussion in the House of Lords, when the [142] king arrived to prorogue Parliament. Both houses would probably have joined in such an address, had time been allowed them, and would have interposed embarrassing obstacles to the exercise of the king's prerogative. By this sudden appeal to the people, ministers at once deprived their opponents of the vantage-ground of parliamentary opposition.

### **Second and Third Reform Bills**

The dissolution resulted in an overpowering majority of the new House of Commons, in favour of the government reform bill. And now the House of Lords, exercising its constitutional right, rejected it. So important a measure was trying all the powers of the state, to their utmost tension. The popular excitement was so great that it was impossible for ministers to yield. The king, though disturbed by increasing apprehensions,—still upheld them, and the Commons supported them by a vote of confidence. All the political forces of the country were thus combined against the House of Lords.

After a short prorogation, a third reform bill was passed by the Commons. The position of the Lords was now too perilous not to cause some wavering; and the second reading of the bill was accordingly agreed to, by the small majority of nine. This concession, however, was followed by an adverse vote in Committee. A graver question of prerogative had now to be considered. An appeal from the House of [143] Commons to the people had been decisive: but what appeal was there from the House of Lords? None, save to the crown, to which that body owed its existence. A creation of peers was the *ultima ratio*, which, after serious doubts and misgivings, ministers submitted to the king. His Majesty's resolution had already been shaken by the threatening aspect of affairs, and by the apprehensions of his family and court; and he, not unnaturally, shrank from so startling an exercise of his prerogative. The ministers resigned, and the Commons addressed the king, praying him to call such persons only to his councils as would promote the passing of the reform bill.(1) The Duke of Wellington having failed to form a government of declared anti-reformers, ready to devise a measure of reform at once satisfactory to the people and to the House of Lords, the ministers were recalled.

### **Possible Creation of Peers**

Another pressure was now brought to bear upon the House of Lords,—irregular and unconstitutional indeed, but necessary to avert revolution on the one hand, and to save the peers from harsh coercion, on the other. The king having at length agreed to create a sufficient number of peers to carry the bill,—yet anxious to [144] avoid so extreme a measure,—averted the dangers of a great political crisis, by a timely interference. Some of the most violent peers were first dissuaded from proceeding to extremities; and on the 17th May, the following circular letter was addressed, without the knowledge of ministers, to the opposition peers:—

"MY DEAR LORD,—I am honoured with his Majesty's commands to acquaint your lordship, that all difficulties to the arrangements in progress will be obviated by a declaration in the House to-night from a sufficient number of peers, that in consequence of the present state of affairs, they have come to the resolution of

dropping their further opposition to the Reform Bill, so that it may pass without delay, and as nearly as possible in its present shape. I have the honour to be, etc.,  
HERBERT TAYLOR."

The peers took this suggestion, and yielded. Had they continued their resistance, a creation of peers could not have been avoided. This interference of the king with the independent deliberations of the House of Lords was, in truth, an act no less unconstitutional than a creation of peers,—the one being an irregular interference of the crown with the freedom of Parliament,—the other an extreme exercise of an undoubted prerogative. But it was resorted to,—not to extend the authority of the crown, or to overawe Parliament,—but to restore harmonious action to those powers of the state, which had been [145] brought into dangerous opposition and conflict.(2) In singular contrast to the history of past times, this greatest extension of the liberties of the people was now obtained, in the last resort, by the personal influence of the crown.

#### **Footnotes.**

1. See also *infra*, [Chap. V.](#)
2. The Duke of Wellington writing to the Earl of Derby in 1846, said, 'this course gave, at the time, great dissatisfaction to the party: notwithstanding that, I believe, it saved the existence of the House of Lords, at the time, and the constitution of the country.'

[Next](#)

[Contents](#)

[Previous](#)