

Erskine May, Chapter II, pp. 163-167

Domination of Politics by the 'Great Families'

Present Position of the Crown

From this time no question has arisen concerning the exercise of the prerogatives or influence of the crown, which calls for notice. Both have been exercised wisely, justly, and in the true spirit of the constitution. Ministers, enjoying the confidence of Parliament, have never claimed in vain the confidence of the crown. Their measures have not been thwarted by secret influence, and irresponsible advice. Their policy has been directed by Parliament and public opinion, and not by the will of the sovereign, or the intrigues of the court. Vast as is the power of the crown, it has been exercised, throughout the present reign, by the advice of responsible ministers, in a constitutional manner, and for legitimate objects. It has been held in trust, as it were, for the benefit of the people. Hence it has ceased to excite either the jealousy of rival parties, or popular discontents. This judicious exercise of the royal authority, while it has conduced to the good government of the state, has sustained the moral influence of the crown; and the devoted loyalty of a free people, which her Majesty's personal virtues have merited, has never been disturbed by the voice of faction.(1)

[164] But while the influence of the crown in the government of the country has been gradually brought into subordination to Parliament and public opinion, the same causes, which, for more than a century and a half, contributed to its enlargement, have never ceased to add to its greatness. The national expenditure and public establishments have been increased to an extent that alarms financiers: armies and navies have been maintained, such as at no former period had been endured in time of peace. Our colonies have expanded into a vast and populous empire; and her Majesty, invested with the sovereignty of the East Indies, now rules over two hundred millions of Asiatic subjects. Governors, commanders-in-chief, and bishops attest her supremacy in all parts of the world; and the greatness of the British empire, while it has redounded to the glory of England, has widely extended the influence of the crown. As that influence, constitutionally exercised, has ceased to be regarded with jealousy, its continued enlargement has been watched by Parliament without any of those efforts to restrain it, which marked the parliamentary history of the eighteenth century. On the contrary, Parliament has met the increasing demands of a community rapidly advancing in population and wealth, by constant additions to the power and patronage of the crown. The judicial establishments of the country have been extended, by the appointment of more judges in the superior courts,—by a large staff of county court judges, with local jurisdiction,—and by numerous [165] stipendiary magistrates. Offices and commissions have been multiplied, for various public purposes; and all these appointments proceed from the same high source of patronage and preferment. Parliament has wisely excluded all these officers, with a few necessary exceptions, from the privilege of sitting in the House of Commons: but otherwise these extensive means of influence have been entrusted to the executive government, without any apprehension that they will be perverted to uses injurious to the freedom, or public interests of the country.

The 'Great Families'

The history of the influence of the crown has now been sketched, for a period of one hundred years. We have seen George III. jealous of the great Whig families, and wresting power from

the hands of his ministers; we have seen ministers becoming more accountable to Parliament, and less dependent upon the crown: but as in the commencement of this period, a few great families commanded the support of Parliament, and engrossed all the power of the state,—so under a more free representation, and more extended responsibilities, do we see nearly the same families still in the ascendant. Deprived, in great measure, of their direct influence over Parliament,—their general weight in the country, and in the councils of the state, had suffered little diminution. Notwithstanding the more democratic tendencies of later times, rank and station had still retained the respect and confidence of the people. When the aristocracy enjoyed too exclusive an influence in the government. they aroused jealousies and hostility: [166] but when duly sharing power with other classes, and admitting the just claims of talent, they prevailed over every rival and adverse interest; and,—whatever party was in power,—were still the rulers of the state.

In a society comprising so many classes as that of England, the highest are willingly accepted as governors, when their personal qualities are not unequal to their position. They excite less jealousy than abler men of inferior social pretensions, who climb to power. Born and nurtured to influence, they have studied how to maintain it. That they have maintained it so well, against the encroachments of wealth,—an expanding society, and popular influences, is mainly due to their progressive policy. As they have been ready to advance with their age, the people have been content to acknowledge them as leaders: but had they endeavoured to stem the tide of public opinion, they would have been swept aside, while men from other classes advanced to power.

Footnotes.

1. A most touching memoir has revealed how wise and faithful a councillor her Majesty found in her beloved Consort,—' the life of her life,'—whose rare worth was not fully known until it was lost to his country. Speeches, etc. of the Prince Consort, 55, 62, 68-74.

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