Erskine May, Chapter IV, pp. 234-244

Civil List of George III: Economical Reform

Hereditary Revenues Surrendered

On the accession of George III., the king consented to make such a disposition of his interest in the hereditary revenues of the crown in England, as Parliament might think fit. Hitherto the crown had enjoyed certain revenues which were calculated by Parliament to produce a sufficient income; but now the king agreed to accept a fixed amount as his civil list, 'for the support of his household, and the honour and dignity of the crown.' This was the first time that the direct control of Parliament over the personal expenditure of the king had been acknowledged; and it is not a little curious that so important a change in the relations of the sovereign to Parliament, should have been introduced at the very period when he was seeking to extend his prerogatives, and render himself independent of other influences in the state. It soon appeared, however, from the debts incurred, that his Majesty was not inclined to permit this concession to diminish the influence of the crown.

The money arising out of the hereditary revenues, secured by various acts of Parliament to the king's predecessors, was now carried to the 'aggregate fund,' out of which the annual sum of £723,000 was granted to his Majesty, during the continuance of [235] the existing annuities to the Princess Dowager of Wales, the Duke of Cumberland, and the Princess Amelie; and as these charges ceased, the amount of the civil list was to be increased until it reached £800,000 a year. He thus accepted the minimum civil list of his predecessor; and relinquished all claim to the surplus, which for the first eight years of his reign amounted, upon an average, to £100,000 a year.

Other Sources of Revenue

But the king enjoyed other sources of income, independent of Parliamentary control. He derived a considerable amount from the droits of the crown and Admiralty, the 4½ per cent. duties, and other casual sources of revenue in England. He was in possession of the hereditary revenues of Scotland; and of a separate civil list for Ireland. He retained the rich Duchies of Cornwall and Lancaster. With these additions to the civil list, Mr. Burke estimated the total annual income of the crown at little less than a million; exclusive of the revenues of Hanover, and the Bishopric of Osnaburgh. During this long reign, the droits of the crown and Admiralty, and the casual revenues, which were wholly withdrawn from the cognisance of Parliament, amounted to the large sum of £12,705,461: out of which, however, he voluntarily contributed £2,600,000 to the public service: while £5,372,834 were appropriated as the expenses of captors, and payments to persons concerned in taking prizes. The surplus actually enjoyed by the crown, [236] after making these deductions, amounted, therefore, to £4,732,627. George III. also succeeded to £172,605 which the late king,—more frugal than any prince since Henry III.,—had saved out of his civil list.

But great as were these revenues, the burthens on them were still greater. Places and pensions were multiplied, until the royal income was inadequate to provide for their payment. On the accession of George III., the greater part of the late king's household was retained; and, at the same time, numerous personal adherents of his Majesty were added to the establishment. But while the expenditure of the civil list was increased, the king and his family were living, not

only with economy, but even with unkingly parsimony. In 1762 he purchased Buckingham House, and settled it on the queen; 'St. James's,' according to Horace Walpole, 'not being a prison strait enough.' Here he lived in privacy, attended only by menial servants, and keeping up none of the splendour of a court.(1) 'In all this,' said Burke, 'the people see nothing but the operations of parsimony, attended with all the consequences of profusion. Nothing [237] expended—nothing saved. . . . They do not believe it to be hoarded, nor perceive it to be spent.'

While practising this apparent economy, the king was engaged in that struggle to increase the influence, and establish the ascendency of the crown, which has been described elsewhere.(2) The large expenditure of the civil list could not fail, therefore, to be associated with the fidelity and subserviency of the court party in Parliament. The crown was either plundered by its servants; or Parliamentary support was purchased by places, pensions, and pecuniary corruption.(3)

Debts upon the Civil List

In February, 1769, before the king had yet been nine years upon the throne, the arrears of the civil list amounted to £513,511; and his Majesty was obliged to apply to Parliament to discharge them. This demand was made at an untimely moment, when the people were exasperated by the persecution of Wilkes,—when the policy of the court was odious, and the king himself unpopular. But if the country was discontented, Parliament was held in safe subjection. Inquiry was demanded into the causes of the debt, and explanatory accounts were sought: but all investigation being resisted by ministers, the amount was granted without information. In the following year, motions for inquiry into the expenditure of the civil list were renewed, with no better success.(4) Lord Chatham avowed his [238] conviction that the civil list revenues were expended in corrupting members of Parliament; and the civil list expenditure,—and the withholding from Parliament such an explanation of its causes, as had been customary in former reigns,—formed a prominent topic in Mr. Burke's celebrated pamphlet on 'the Causes of the Present Discontents.'

But the same causes of excessive expenditure,—whatever they may have been,—continued without a check; and after the lapse of eight years, the king was again obliged to have recourse to Parliament, not only to discharge a debt of £618,340, but to increase his annual civil list to £900,000 a year. On this occasion, accounts explanatory of the arrears were laid before Parliament. Ministers no longer ventured to withhold them: but they were not deemed satisfactory by the opposition. Again the causes of increased expenditure were freely animadverted upon in Parliament. The income of the king was compared with that of his predecessors,—the large amount of secret-service money, and the increased pension list were noticed,—and insinuations made of covert influence and corruption. But Parliament acceded to the demands of the king. When the speaker, Sir Fletcher Norton, addressed the throne, on presenting the bill for the royal assent, he said, the Commons [239] 'have not only granted to your Majesty a large present supply, but also a very great additional revenue; great beyond example; great beyond your Majesty's highest expense.' The speaker's uncourtly address became the subject of remark and censure in the House of Commons: but his friend, Mr. Fox, having come to the rescue, he was thanked for expressing with 'just and proper energy, the zeal of this House for the support of the honour and dignity of the crown, in circumstances of great public charge.' His conduct, however, was not forgiven by the court; and in the next Parliament, he was punished by the loss of the speaker's chair.

Mr Burke and Economical Reform

Promptly as these demands of the crown were met, they yet excited lasting dissatisfaction. The public expenditure and the national debt had been prodigiously increased by the

American War, when the abuses of the civil list were again brought under the notice of Parliament. In 1779, the Duke of Richmond moved an address to the crown praying for the reduction of the civil list, which was rejected by a majority of more than two to one. But a few days afterwards Mr. Burke gave notice of his motion on economic reform, with which his name has since been honourably associated. On the 11th of February, 1780,—fortified, in the meantime, by numerous petitions,—he propounded his elaborate scheme. This embraced a considerable reduction of [240] offices, a diminution of expenditure, and improved administration and accounts in the various departments of the state; and in his masterly review, the expenditure of the civil list attracted a large share of his scrutiny. Describing the royal household, he pointed out the social changes which had taken place, and the obsolete character of many of the offices which were still retained. 'The royal household,' he said, 'has lost all that was stately and venerable in the antique manners, without retrenching anything of the cumbrous charge, of a gothic establishment.' Examples of profusion and abuse were given, —useless offices, and offices performed by deputy,—the king's turnspit being a member of Parliament,—jobbing, waste and peculation in every department, without restraint. He proposed the reduction and consolidation of offices, the diminution of the pension list to £60,000 a year, and the payment of all pensions at the Exchequer.

Mr. Burke obtained leave to bring in five bills to carry out these various objects: but his Establishment Bil1 was the only one which was considered in that session. It was read a second time, and several of its provisions were discussed in committee: but it was ultimately defeated by the government. The discussions, however, led to a proposition from Lord North, for a commission of Public Accounts.

In the following year, Mr. Burke resumed his [241] efforts, and again obtained leave to bring in his Establishment Bill. In advocating this measure he was boldly supported by young William Pitt, who then first offered himself to the notice of Parliament. The bill was lost on the second reading.

The Scheme Effected

But a sudden change soon took place in the prospects of this question. Lord Rockingham's administration acceded to office, pledged to economic reform, and resolved to carry it into effect. Lord Rockingham, in laying his plan before the king, explained 'that not a single article of the expense to be retrenched touches anything whatsoever which is personal to your Majesty, or to your Majesty's royal family, or which in the least contributes to the splendour of your court;' and that in fact he only intended to reduce the patronage and influence of ministers. On the 15th April, 1782, a message from the king was sent to both Houses, recommending economy in all branches of the public expenditure, and stating that he had already considered the reform and regulation of his civil establishment. Well might Mr. Burke congratulate the House of Commons and the country, on so favourable a change in the policy of the government, and on the attitude of the king towards his people. In both Houses this communication was cordially received and acknowledged. It was soon followed by another, which though not so [242] satisfactory, at least afforded convincing proof of the necessity of that economy which had been already recommended.

The king was now obliged to announce to Parliament another debt upon his civil list; but instead of proposing that it should be discharged, as on previous occasions, out of the general revenues of the state, he intimated that its liquidation was to be secured by intended reductions of the civil list establishment. Notwithstanding the recent additions to the civil list, the arrears now amounted to £296,877; and the proposed savings, instead of being available either to the king or to the country, would thus become immediately mortgaged for the payment of a debt, by annual instalments.

The Civil List Act of Lord Rockingham, though falling short of Mr. Burke's original proposal,

was nevertheless a considerable measure. Many useless offices were abolished, restraints were imposed upon the issue of secret-service money, the Pension List was diminished, and securities were provided for a more effectual supervision of the royal expenditure. And now, for the first time, the civil list expenditure was divided into classes, eight in number, which led to more important changes hereafter.

Further Debts and Reforms

But debt continued to be the normal condition of the civil list throughout the reign of George III. Again and again applications were renewed to Parliament; and the debts discharged at [243] different periods after 1782, exceeded £2,300,000. From the beginning to the end of this reign, the several arrears paid off by Parliament, exclusive of the debt of £300,000 charged on the civil list in 1782, amounted to £3,398,000.(5)

In defence of these continued excesses it was urged that they were more than defrayed by the surplus of the hereditary revenues, which the king had surrendered; and which, in 1815, exceeded by upwards of £6,000,000 the entire expenditure of the civil list since the accession of the king,—including all the debts which had been paid off by Parliament, and the charges from which the civil list had been relieved.

Meanwhile the civil list continued to comprise charges wholly unconnected with the personal comfort and dignity of the sovereign, from the salaries of judges, ambassadors, and other officers of state,—annuities to members of the royal family, and pensions granted for public services—all of which were more fairly chargeable to the state revenues, than to the civil list of the crown. [244] From many of these charges the civil list was, from time to time, relieved, —amounting, between the accession of George III. and 1815, to £9,561,396.

On the expiration of the first year of the regency, in 1812, the civil list was increased by £70,000 a year, and a special grant of £100,000 was voted to the prince regent. In 1816, the civil list was settled at £1,083,727, including the establishment of the king; and its expenditure was, at the same time, subjected to further regulation. It was relieved from some of the annuities to the royal family: the payments on account of the several classes of expenditure were defined and controlled; and the expenses of the royal household were subjected to the supervision and audit of a treasury officer,—the auditor of the civil list.

Footnotes.

1. The king continued this plain style of living throughout his reign.—Wraxall's Mem., i. 8-10. Mr. Addington, writing to his brother, 29th Dec. 1804, said he had just partaken of the king's dinner, which consisted of mutton chops and pudding.'—Life of Sidmouth, ii. 342. Similar examples are to be found in Twiss's Life of Lord Eldon, and in Madame D'Arblay's Memoirs.
2. Supra, Chap. I.
3. Infra, Chap, IV. [Note: the reference should be to Chap. VI.]
4. Parl. Hist., xvi. 843, 926; Walp. Mem., iii. 343; Rockingham Mem., ii. 90, 167. The Duke of Richmond, writing to Lord Rockingham as to a division in the Lords, says, 'The division of twenty-six on so courtly a point as paying his Majesty's debts, and enabling him to bribe higher, is, I think, a very strong one.'—Rockingham Mem., ii, 92.
5. Payments of Arrears on Civil List Debt

In 1769	£613,611
1777	£618,340
1784	£60,000
1786	£210,000

1802	£990,063	
1804	£691,842	
1806	£10,468	
l814	£118,567	
1814	£100,000	(extra expenses.)
1816	£186,000	
	£3,395,061	

Report on Civil List, 1815, p. 4; Speech of Mr. Spring Rice, Nov.23rd, 1837.—Hans. Deb., 3rd Ser., xxxix.144.

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