Erskine May, Vol. II, Chapter VIII, pp. 189-206

Parties, from Canning to Peel

Canning's Ministry

While these changes were silently at work, the illness and death of Lord Liverpool suddenly dissolved the union of the great Tory party. He had represented the policy and political system of the late king, and of a past generation; and his adherents in the cabinet outnumbered the advocates of more advanced principles. Mr. Canning, the member of the cabinet most eminent for his talents, and long the foremost champion of the Catholics, was now called to the head of affairs. The king did not entrust him with the power of carrying the Catholic question: but his promotion was the signal for the immediate retirement of the Duke of Wellington, Lord Eldon, Mr. Peel, Lord Bathurst, Lord Melville,(1) and their high Tory followers. Lord Palmerston, Mr. Huskisson, and Mr. Wynn remained faithful to Mr. Canning; and the accomplished Master of the Rolls, Sir John Copley, succeeded Lord Eldon, who, at length, had ceased to be one of the permanent institutions of the country. Differences of opinion on the Catholic question were the avowed ground of this schism in the Tory party, and whatever personal considerations of ambition or jealousy may have contributed [190] to this result, there can be no doubt that the open Catholic question, which had been the principle of Lord Liverpool's ministry, contained the seeds of disunion, rivalry, and conflict. Mr. Canning and his friends had contended in debates and divisions against their own colleagues, and had obtained the warmest support from the opposition. And now the personal pretensions and the cause of the first minister, alike repelled that section of his colleagues who had adopted a narrower policy than his own.

The same causes naturally attracted to Mr. Canning the friendy support of the Whigs. They differed with him upon the subject of parliamentary reform, and the repeal of the Test Act; but had long fought by his side on behalf of the Catholics: they approved his liberal foreign policy, and hailed his separation from the high Tory connection as a happy augury of good government, upon enlarged and generous principles. An immediate coalition was not desirable, and was discountenanced by Earl Grey and other Whig leaders: but the cabinet was soon joined by Lord Lansdowne, Lord Carlisle, and Mr. Tierney; while the Whigs, as a body, waited to defend him against the acrimonious attacks of the Tory seceders. Such was the commencement of that union between the liberal Tories and the Whigs, which was destined to lead to the most important political consequences.

Goderich and Wellington

[191] In a few months, Mr. Canning was snatched from the scene of his glory and his trials.(2) His old friends and associates had become his bitterest foes: his new allies, however sincere, were estranged from him by their connections, by a life-long parliamentary opposition, and by fundamental differences of opinion. His broken health succumbed to the harassing difficulties of his position. Had he lived, he might have surmounted them: mutual concessions might have consolidated a powerful and enlightened party, under his guidance. But what his commanding talents might possibly have accomplished, was beyond the reach of his successor, Lord Goderich. That nobleman,—after a provisional rule of five months,—unable to reconcile the claims and pretensions of the two parties, resigned his hopeless office. The complete union of the Whigs with the friends of Mr. Canning was soon to be

accomplished: but was reserved for a more auspicious period.

The resignation of Lord Goderich was followed by the immediate revival of the old Tory party, under the Duke of Wellington. The formation of such a ministry was a startling retrogression. A military premier, surrounded by his companions in arms, and by the narrowest school of Tory politicians, could not fail to disappoint those who had seen with hope the dawn of better days, under Mr. Canning.(3) At first, indeed, the [192] Duke had the aid of Lord Palmerston, Mr. Huskisson, and other friends of Mr. Canning:(4) but the general character of the ministry was ultra-Tory; and within a few months, all the Liberal members seceded.(5) It was too late, however, for an effete school to prevail over principles of liberty and justice; and its temporary revival served to precipitate its final overthrow.

The first assault upon the stronghold of the Tory party was led by Lord John Russell, who carried against the government his motion for a bill to repeal the corporation and test acts. The Duke, once fairly overcome, retreated from his position, and suffered the bill to pass through both houses, amid the execrations of Lord Eldon, Lord Winchilsea, and the ultra-Tories.(6)

Party Consequences of Catholic Emancipation

Ireland was the Duke's next difficulty. Affairs in that country had, at length, reached a crisis which demanded present concessions, or a resort to the sword.(7) The narrow policy of ministers could no longer be maintained; and they preferred their duty to the state, to the [193] obligations of party. To the consternation of the Tories, the leaders whom they trusted suddenly resolved upon the immediate removal of the civil disabilities of the Catholics. The Duke and Mr. Peel were, doubtless, induced to renounce the faith which had gained them the confidence of their party, by a patriotic desire to avert civil war: but how could they hope to be judged by their followers, their opponents, and the people? Tories who conscientiously believed that the church, and the Protestant constitution of their ancestors were about to be sacrificed to political expediency, loudly complained that they had been betrayed, and their citadel treacherously surrendered to the enemy. Never had party spirit been inflamed to a higher pitch of bitterness and exasperation. The great body of the Tories,—sullen, indignant, and revengefu1,—were wholly alienated from their leaders. Men who had no sympathy with that party could not deny that their complaints were well founded. According to all the ethics of party, they had been wronged, and were absolved from further allegiance.

Ministers were charged with sinning against political morality, in another form. The Whigs and followers of Mr. Canning, allowing their tardy resolution to be wise and statesmanlike, asked if they were the men to carry it into execution. If they were convinced that the position they had held so stubbornly could no longer be defended, should they [194] not have capitulated, and surrendered the fortress to the besieging force? If a just and conciliatory policy was, at length, to be adopted, the principles of the opposition had prevailed; and to that party should be confided the honourable privilege of consummating the labours of a political life. Men who had maintained power for thirty years, by deferring to the prejudices of their party, were not entitled to its continuance when they had accepted the policy of the opposition. If the Catholics were to be emancipated, they should owe their privileges to their own steady friends, and not to their oppressors.(8) Nor was this opinion confined to the opposition. The Tories themselves,—fiercely as they condemned the conversion of their leaders,—condemned no less fiercely their retention of office. Had ministers resigned, the united body of Tories might have shown a formidable front against a Whig government, though aided by the Tory supporters of the Catholic cause: but they were powerless against their own leaders, who retained the entire influence of the government, and could further rely upon the support of the opposition.

The friends of Mr. Canning observed that, two years ago, the Duke of Wellington and Mr. Peel had refused to serve with that eminent man, lest they [195] should give countenance to

the Catholic claims; and had pursued him with relentless hostility. And now these very men were engaged in carrying a measure which Mr. Canning himself would have been restrained, by the conditions under which he took office, from promoting. Men of all parties looked with astonishment at the sudden abandonment, by ministers, of the distinctive principles of their party. Some doubted the honesty of their former professions: others deplored an inconsistency which had shaken the confidence of the people in the character and statesmanship of public men. All saw plainly that the Tory party could not long survive the shock. The question which had first broken the consolidated strength of that party in 1801, and had continued to divide and weaken it, throughout the regency and the reign of George IV., had at length shattered it to pieces. The Catholic Relief Bill was passed: but time did not abate the resentment of the Tories. Henceforth the government were kept in power by the friendly support of the opposition, who at the same time, prepared the way for their own eventual accession, by the advocacy of economic and parliamentary reform, the exposure of abuses, and the assertion of popular principles.

The Whigs Restored to Power

In 1830, the ministers, thus weakened and discredited, were forced, by the death of George IV., to appeal to the people;—when their own unpopularity,—the [196] resentment or coolness of their friends,—the increased activity and spirit of the Whigs and Radical reformers,—popular discontents at home, and revolutions abroad, combined further to disturb the ministerial majority at the elections.(9) The Duke of Wellington's imprudent handing of the question of parliamentary reform speedily completed his ruin.(10) He fell; and at length the Whigs were restored to power, at a time most favourable to the triumph of their principles, and the consolidation of their strength. The ministry of Earl Grey comprised the most eminent Whigs, together with the adherents of Mr. Canning who had separated from the Duke of Wellington, and were now united with the reformers. This union was natural; and it was permanent. Its seeds had been sown in 1801, when differences first arose amongst the Tories; it had grown throughout the administration of Lord Liverpool; it had ripened under Mr. Canning; and had been forced into maturity by the new impulse of reform.

The time was also propitious for enlisting, on the side of the Whigs, the general support of the people. Hitherto they had fallen, as an aristocratic party, between the dominant Tories on one side, and the clamorous Radicals on the other. Notwithstanding the popularity of their principles, they had derived little support from democracy. On the contrary, democracy had too often weakened their natural influence, and [197] discredited their efforts in the cause of liberty. But now the popular voice demanded a measure of parliamentary reform; and the reform ministry became at once the leaders of the people. Even democracy,—hitherto the terror of every government,—was now the turbulent and dangerous, but irresistible ally of the king's ministers. Such was the popular ferment, that it was even able to overcome the close electoral system of the unreformed Parliament. The Tories indeed, forgetting their recent differences, were suddenly re-united by the sense of a common danger. The utter annihilation of their power was threatened: and they boldly strove to maintain their ground. But they were routed and overthrown. The ascendency of landlords in counties,—the local influence of patrons in boroughs, were overborne by the determined cry for reform; and the dissolution of 1831, when none of the old electoral abuses had yet been corrected, secured a large majority for ministers, in the House of Commons. The dissolution of 1832, under the new franchises of the Reform Acts, completed their triumph. Sad was the present downfall of the Tories. In the first reformed Parliament they numbered less than one hundred and fifty.(11) The condition of the Whigs, in 1793, had scarcely been more hopeless. Their majority in the House of Lords was, indeed, unshaken; but it served merely to harass and hold in check their opponents. [198] To conquer with such a force alone was out of the question.

The two first years after the Reform Act formed the most glorious period in the annals of the

Whig party. Their principles had prevailed; they were once more paramount in the councils of the state; and they used their newly acquired power in forwarding the noblest legislative measures which had ever done honour to the British Parliament. Slavery was abolished; the commerce of the East thrown open: the church in Ireland reformed: the social peril of the poor-laws averted.

State of Parties After the Reform Act

But already, in the midst of their successes, their influence and popularity were subsiding; and new embarrassments were arising out of the altered relations of parties. While they were still fighting the battle of reform, all sections of reformers united to support them. Their differences were sunk in that great contest. But when the first enthusiasm of victory was over, they displayed themselves in stronger relief than ever. The alliance of the Whigs with democracy could not be permanent; and, for the first time, democracy was now represented in Parliament. The radical reformers, or Radicals, long known as an active party in the country, had at length gained a footing in the House of Commons, where they had about fifty representatives. Without organisation or unity of purpose, and with little confidence in one another, they were often found in combination against the [199] government. And in addition to this body, the great towns recently enfranchised, and places suddenly released from the thraldom of patrons and close corporations, had returned a new class of reformers, having little sympathy with the old Whigs. These men had sprung from a different source: they had no connection with the aristocracy, and no respect for the traditions of the constitutional Whig party. Their political views were founded upon principles more democratic; and experience of the difficulties, restraints, and compromises of public affairs had not yet taught them moderation. They expected to gather, at once, all the fruits of an improved representation; and were intolerant of delay. They ignored the obstacles to practical legislation. The nonconformist element was strong amongst them; and they were eager for the immediate redress of every grievance which dissenters had suffered from the polity of a dominant church. On the other hand, Earl Grey and his older aristocratic associates recoiled from any contact with democracy. The great object of their lives had been accomplished. They had perfected the constitution, according to their own conceptions: they looked back with trembling, upon the perils through which it had recently passed; and dreaded the rough spirit of their restless allies, who,—without veneration for the past, or misgivings as to the future,—were already clamouring for further changes in church and state. His younger and more hopeful colleagues had faith in the vital energies of the constitution, and in its power of self-adaptation to every political and social [200] change. They were prepared to take the lead, as statesmen, in furthering a comprehensive policy, in harmony with the spirit of the times: but they desired to consummate it on safe principles, with a prudent regard to public opinion, the means at their disposal, and the opposition to be overcome.(12) Such has ever been the policy of wise statesmen, in our balanced constitution. None but despots or democrats expect instant submission to their will. Liberty not only tolerates, but respects the independent judgment of all free citizens.

The social pretensions of these two sections of the Liberal party were not less distinct than their political sentiments. The Whigs formed an aristocracy of great families, exclusive in their habits and associations, and representing the tastes of the old regime. The new men, speaking the dialect of Lancashire and the West Riding,—with the rough manners of the mill and the counting-house,—and wearing the unfashionable garb of the provinces,—were no congenial associates for the high-bred politicians, who sought their votes, but not their company. These men, and their families,—even less presentable [201] than themselves,—found no welcome to the gay saloons of the courtly Whigs: but were severed, by an impassable gulf, from the real rulers of the people, whose ambition they promoted, but could not hope to share. The Whigs held all the offices, and engrossed every distinction which

public service and aristocratic connections confer. The Radicals, while supporting the government against the Tories, were in no better position than that of a despised opposition. A hearty union between men with sentiments, habits, and fortunes so diverse, was not to be expected; and jealousies and distrust were soon apparent in every debate, and disagreement in every division.

A further element of discord among the ministerial ranks was found in the Irish party, under the leadership of Mr. O'Connell. They were reformers, indeed, and opposed to the persons and policy of the Tories: but no sooner did the government adopt coercive measures for the maintenance of peace in Ireland, than Mr. O'Connell denounced them as 'bloody and brutal;' and scourged the Whigs more fiercely than he had assailed the opponents of Catholic emancipation.

After the union, the members representing Ireland had generally ranged themselves on either side, according to their several political divisions. Some were returned by the influence of great Whig [202] landowners: but the large majority belonged to the Protestant and Orange connection, and supported successive Tory administrations. The priests and the Catholic Association wrested, for a time, from the Protestant landlords their accustomed domination, in some of the counties: but the disfranchisement of the 40s. freeholders in 1829 restored it. Soon, however, the Catholic relief act, followed by an enlarged representation, overthrew the Tory party in Ireland, and secured a majority for the Whigs and reformers.

But these men represented another country, and distinct interests, sympathies, and passions. They could not be reckoned upon, as members of the Liberal party. Upon several measures affecting Ireland, they were hotly opposed to government: on other questions they were in close alliance with the Radicals. In the struggles of the English parties, they sometimes voted with the reformers; were often absent from divisions, or forthcoming only in answer to pressing solicitations: on some occasions, they even voted with the Tories. The attitude and tactics of this party were fraught with embarrassment to Earl Grey , and succeeding ministers; and when parties became more evenly balanced, were a serious obstacle to parliamentary government. When they opposed ministers, their hostility was often dangerous: when they were appeased and satisfied, ministers were accused of truckling to Mr. O'Connell.

The Conservative Party

While the Liberal party were thus divided, their opponents were united and full of hope. A few old Tories still distrusted their leaders: [203] but the promise of future triumphs to their party, hatred of the Whigs, and fear of the Radicals, went far to efface the memory of their wrongs. However small the numbers of the Tory party in the House of Commons, they were rapidly recovering their local influence, which the reform crisis had overcome. Their nomination boroughs, indeed, were lost: the close and corrupt organisation by which they had formerly maintained their supremacy was broken up: but the great confederation of rank, property, influence, and numbers was in full vigour. The land, the church, the law, were still the strongholds of the party: but having lost the means of controlling the representation, they were forced to appeal to the people for support. They readily responded to the spirit of the times. It was now too late to rely upon the distinctive principles of their party, which had been renounced by themselves, or repudiated by the people. It was a period of intelligence and progress; and they were prepared to contend with their rivals, in the race of improvement.

But to secure popular support, it was necessary to divest themselves of the discredited name of Tories. It was a name of reproach, as it had been 150 years before; and they renounced it. Henceforth they adroitly adapted the title of 'Conservatives;' and proclaimed their mission to be the maintenance of the constitution against the inroads of democracy. Accepting recent changes as the irrevocable will of Parliament and the country, they were prepared to rule in the spirit of a more popular [204] constitution. They were ready to improve institutions, but

not to destroy or reconstruct them.(13)

The position which they now assumed was well suited to the temper of the times. Assured of the support of the old Tory party, they gained new recruits through a dread of democracy, which the activity of the Radicals encouraged. At the same time, by yielding to the impulses of a progressive age, they conciliated earnest and ardent minds, which would have recoiled from the narrow principles of the old Tory school.

Fall of the Whigs

Meanwhile the difficulties of the Whigs were increasing. In May, 1834, the cabinet was nearly broken up by the retirement of Mr. Stanley, Sir J. Graham, the Duke of Richmond, and the Earl of Ripon, on the question of dealing with the revenues of the Church in Ireland. The causes of this disunion favoured the approach of the seceding members of the cabinet to the Conservative party. Mr. Stanley and Sir J. Graham retired to the benches below the gangway; and though accompanied by a very small body of adherents, their eminent talents and character promised much future advantage to the Conservative party. In July the government was dissolved by the [205] resignation of Earl Grey; and the Reform ministry was no more.

Lord Melbourne's ministry, still further estranged from the Radicals, were losing ground and public confidence, when they were suddenly dismissed by William IV.(14) This precipitate and ill-advised measure reunited the various sections of the liberal party into an overwhelming opposition. Sir Robert Peel vainly endeavoured to disarm them, and to propitiate the good will of the people, by promising ample measures of reform.(15) He went so far in this direction, that the old school of Tories began to foresee alarming consequences from his policy:(16) but his opponents recognised the old Tory party in disguise,—the same persons, the same instincts, and the same traditions. They would not suffer the fruits of their recent victory to be wrested from them by the king, and by the men who had resisted, to the utmost, the extension of parliamentary representation. His ministry was even distrusted by Lord Stanley(17) and Sir James Graham, [206] who, though separated from the reformers, were not yet prepared to unite their fortunes with the untried Conservatives.

Footnotes.

1. Lord Melville concurred with Mr. Canning upon the Catholic question. Lord Bexley also resigned, but withdrew his resignation.
2. August 8th, 1827.
3. Mr. T. Grenville, writing to the Duke of Buckingham, Sept. 9, 1828, says: 'My original objections to the formation of a government concocted out of the Army List and the ultra-Tories, are quite insuperable on constitutional principles alone; neither is there any instance since the Revolution of any government so adverse, in its formation, to all the free principles and practice of our Constitution.'—Court and Cabinets of Geo. IV., ii. 380.
4. As first constituted, the administration comprised a majority favourable to the Catholic claims, viz., seven for and six against them.—Lord Colchester's Diary, iii. 535. Lord Palmerston, writing Jan. 18, 1828, said: 'I like them (the Whigs), much better than the Tories, and agree with them much more: but still we, the Canningites, if we may be so termed, did not join their government, but they came and joined ours.'—Bulwer's Life, i. 220.
5. See supra, Vol. I. 415.
6. See Chap. XIII.
7. See Chap. XIII.
8. Mr. Peel freely acknowledged that the measure was due to the efforts of the opposition. He said: 'The credit belongs to others, and not to me: it belongs to Mr. Fox,

to Mr. Grattan, to Mr. Plunket,—to the gentlemen opposite, and to an illustrious and right hon. friend of mine who is now no more. By their efforts, in spite of every opposition, it has proved victorious.'—Hans. Deb., 2nd Ser., xx. 1289: Guizot's Life of Peel, 39.

9. Supra. Vol. I. 417.
10. Supra, Vol. I. 418.
11. In 1834, Sir R. Peel said one hundred and thirty only.—Hans Deb., 3rd Ser., xxvi. 293. It appears, however, from statistics of the old and new Parliaments, in 'Courts and Cabinets of Will. IV. and Queen Victoria,' that there were 149 Conservatives against 509 Reformers of all descriptions, ii. 26.
12. The policy of the Whigs, as distinguished from the impatient tactics of the Radicals, was well expressed by Lord Durham, an advanced member of their party, in a letter to the electors of North Durham, in 1837. He announced his determination never to force his measures peremptorily and dogmatically on the consideration of the government or the Parliament. 'If they are (as in my conscience I believe them to be) useful and salutary measures,—for they are based on the most implicit confidence in the loyalty and good feeling of the people,—the course of events and the experience of every day will remove the objections and prejudices which may now exist: and ensure their adoption whenever they are recommended by the deliberate and determined voice of the people.'—Edinb. Rev., July 1837, p. 282.
13. In his Address to the Electors of Tamworth, Sir Robert Peel stated that he 'considered the Reform Bill a final and irrevocable settlement of a great constitutional question,—a settlement which no friend to the peace and welfare of this country would attempt to disturb, either by direct or by insidious means.'—Ann. Reg., 1834, p. 341; Guizot's Life of Peel, 60-66. See also Sir R. Peel's published speech at Merchant Taylors' Hall, May 11th, 1835
14. Supra, Vol. I. 146.
15. In his Address to the Electors of Tamworth, he said that he was prepared to adopt the spirit of the Reform Act by a 'careful review of institutions, civil and ecclesiastical, undertaken in a friendly temper. combining with the firm maintenance of established rights, the correction of proved abuses and the redress of real grievances.' He also promised a fair consideration to municipal reform, the question of church rates, and other measures affecting the Church and Dissenters.—Ann. Reg., 1834, p. 339.
16. Lord Eldon wrote, in March, 1835, the new ministers, 'if they do not at present go to the full length to which the others were going, will at least make so many important changes in Church and State that nobody can guess how far the precedents they establish may lead to changes of a very formidable kind hereafter.'—Twiss's Life of Lord Eldon, iii. 244.
17. By the death of his grandfather in Oct., 1834, he had become Lord Stanley.

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