

Erskine May, Chapter I, pp. 26-39

The Grenville and Rockingham Ministries

The ministry of Mr. Grenville was constituted in a manner favourable to the king's personal views; and was expected to be under the control of himself and his favourite. And at first there can be little doubt that Mr. Grenville found himself the mere agent of the court. 'The public looked still at Lord Bute through the curtain,' said Lord Chesterfield, 'which indeed was a very transparent one.' But Mr. Grenville was by no means contented with the appearance of power. He was jealous of Lord Bute's superior influence, and complained to the king that his Majesty's confidence was withheld from his minister. As fond of power as the king himself,—and with a will as strong and imperious,—tenacious of his rights as a minister, and confident in his own abilities and influence, he looked to Parliament rather than to the crown, as the source of his authority.

Failure to Form an Alternative Ministry

The king finding his own scheme of government opposed, and disliking the uncongenial views and hard temper of his minister, resolved to dismiss him on the first convenient opportunity. Accordingly, on the death of Lord Egremont, he commissioned Lord Bute to open negotiations with Mr. Pitt, for the formation of a new administration. And now the king tasted the bitter fruits of his recent policy. He had [27] proscribed the Whig leaders. He had determined 'never upon any account to suffer those ministers of the late reign, who had attempted to fetter and enslave him, to come into his service, while he lived to hold the sceptre.' Yet these were the very ministers whom Mr. Pitt proposed to restore to power; and stranger still,—the premier in whom the king was asked to repose his confidence was Earl Temple, whose patronage of Wilkes had recently aroused his bitter resentment. His Majesty was not likely so soon to retract his resolution, and refused these hateful terms: 'My honour is concerned,' he said, 'and I must support it.' The Grenville ministry, however distasteful, was not so hard to bear as the restoration of the dreaded Whigs; and he was therefore obliged to retain it. Mr. Grenville now remonstrated, more strongly than ever, against the influence of the favourite who had been employed to supplant him: the king promised his confidence to the ministers, and Lord Bute retired from the court. Though George III. and Mr. Grenville differed as to their relative powers, they were but too well agreed in their policy. Both were arbitrary, impatient of opposition, and resolute in the exercise of authority. The chief claims of the Grenville ministry to distinction [28] were its arbitrary proceedings against Wilkes, which the king encouraged and approved, and the first taxation of America, which he himself is said to have suggested. In overawing opponents the king was more forward than his ministers. Earl Temple's friendship for Wilkes was punished by the erasure of his name from the list of privy councillors, and by dismissal from the lord-lieutenancy of his county. General Conway, Colonel Barré, and Colonel A'Court, were, for their votes in Parliament, deprived of their military commands,(1) and Lord Shelburne of his office of aide-de-camp to his Majesty.

The privileges of Parliament afforded no protection from the king's displeasure. To guard against the arbitrary interference of the crown, freedom of speech had been asserted for centuries. It was an acknowledged constitutional doctrine that the king should be deaf to reports of debates in Parliament, and that no member should suffer molestation for his speeches. Nor had any king of the house of Hanover been present [29] at the deliberations of the legislature. Yet during the proceedings of the Commons against Wilkes, his Majesty found a faithful reporter in Mr. Grenville. Watching the debates and divisions, he kept a jealous eye

upon the opinions and votes of every member; and expressed his personal resentment against all who did not support the government. It was he who first proposed the dismissal of General Conway, 'both from his civil and military commissions:' it was he who insisted on the removal of Mr. Fitzherbert from the Board of Trade, and of all placemen who took a different view of parliamentary privilege from that adopted by the court. Mr. Grenville endeavoured to moderate the king's severity: he desired to postpone such violent measures till the proceedings against Wilkes should be concluded; and in the meantime, opened communications with General Conway, in the hope of averting his dismissal. But at length the blow was struck, and General Conway was dismissed not only from his office of groom of the bedchamber, but from the command of his regiment of dragoons.(2) [30] Mr. Calcraft was also deprived of the office of deputy muster-master.(3)

To commit General Conway or Colonel Barré to prison, as James I. had committed Sir Edwin Sandys, and as Charles I. had committed Selden and other leading members of the House of Commons, could not now have been attempted. Nor was the ill-omened venture of Charles I. against the five members likely to be repeated: but the king was violating the same principles of constitutional government as his arbitrary predecessors. He punished, as far as he was able, those who had incurred his displeasure, for their conduct in Parliament; and denied them the protection which they claimed from privilege, and the laws of their country. Yet the Commons submitted to this violation of their freedom, with scarcely a murmur.

The riots and popular discontents of this period ought to have convinced the king that his statesmanship was not successful. He had already sacrificed his popularity to an ill-regulated love of power. But he continued to direct every measure of the government, whether of legislation, of administration, or of patronage; and by means of the faithful reports of his minister, he constantly assisted, as it were, in the deliberations of Parliament.(4)

Lord Bute Excluded from Influence

[31] In 1765, differences again arose between the king and the Grenville ministry. They had justly offended him by their mismanagement of the Regency Bill,(5)—they had disputed with him on questions of patronage and expenditure,—they had wearied him with long arguments in the closet; and, in the month of May, he intimated his intention of dispensing with their services. But the king, after vain negotiations with Mr. Pitt through the Duke of Cumberland, finding himself unable to form another administration, was again compelled to retain them in office. They had suspected the secret influence of Lord Bute in thwarting their counsels; and to him they attributed their dismissal.(6) The first condition, therefore, on which they consented to remain in office, was that Lord Bute should not be suffered to interfere in his Majesty's councils, 'in any manner or shape whatever.' To this the king pledged himself,(7) and though suspicions of a secret correspondence with [32] Lord Bute were still entertained, there is every reason for believing that he adhered to his promise.(8) Indeed, he had already acquired so much confidence in his own aptitude for business, that he no longer relied upon the counsels of his favourite. He was able to rule alone; and wanted instruments, rather than advisers. The second condition was the dismissal of Mr. Stuart Mackenzie, Lord Bute's brother, from the office of privy seal in Scotland, and from the management of the affairs of that country. In this, too, the king yielded, though sorely against his will, as he had promised the office for life.(9) Meanwhile the breach between the king and his ministers became still wider. They had been forced upon him by necessity: they knew that he was plotting their speedy overthrow, and protested against the intrigues by which their influence was counteracted. The Duke of Bedford besought the king 'to permit his authority and his favour to go [33] together;' and these remonstrances were represented by the king's friends as insolent and overbearing. An outcry was raised against the ministers that they 'desired to enslave the king,' who was now determined to make any sacrifices to get rid of them.

The negotiations for a new ministry were again conducted on behalf of the king, by his uncle

the Duke of Cumberland. Such was the popular hatred of Lord Bute and his countrymen, that the Duke's former severities against the Scotch, which had gained for him the name of the 'butcher,' were now a claim to popular favour. The rebellious Scots had been treated as they deserved; and he who had already chastised them, was not the man to favour their pretensions at court. These negotiations were protracted for seven weeks, while the country was virtually without a government.(10) Mr. Pitt was again impracticable: the further continuance of the Grenville ministry could not be endured; and, at length, the king was reduced to the necessity of surrendering himself once more to the very men whom he most dreaded.

The Rockingham Ministry

The Marquess of Rockingham, the leader of the obnoxious Whig aristocracy,—the statesman whom he had recently removed from his lieutenancy,—the king was now obliged to accept as premier; and General Conway, whom [34] he had deprived of his regiment, became a secretary of state, and leader of the House of Commons. The policy of proscription was, for a time at least, reversed and condemned. Mr. Pitt, when solicited by the Duke of Cumberland to take office, had named as one of his conditions, the restoration of officers dismissed on political grounds. This the king had anticipated, and was prepared to grant. The Rockingham administration insisted on the same terms; and according to Mr. Burke 'discountenanced, and it is hoped for ever abolished, the dangerous and unconstitutional practice of removing military officers, for their votes in Parliament.'

The Whig leaders were not less jealous of the influence of Lord Bute, than the ministry whom they displaced; and before they would accept office, they insisted 'that the thought of replacing Mr. Mackenzie should be laid aside; and also that some of the particular friends of the Earl of Bute should be removed, as a proof to the world that the Earl of Bute should not either publicly or privately, directly or indirectly, have any concern or influence in public affairs, or in the management or disposition of public employments.' These conditions being agreed to, a ministry so constituted was likely to be independent of court influence: yet it was soon reproached with [35] submission to the 'interior cabinet.' Mr. Pitt said, 'Methinks I plainly discover the traces of an overruling influence;' and while he disavowed any prejudice against the country of Lord Bute, he declared that 'the men of that country wanted wisdom, and held principles incompatible with freedom.' This supposed influence was disclaimed on the part of the government by General Conway: 'I see nothing of it,' said he, 'I feel nothing of it: I disclaim it for myself, and as far as my discernment can reach, for the rest of his Majesty's ministers.'

Whether Lord Bute had, at this time, any influence at court, was long a subject of doubt and controversy. It was confidently believed by the public, and by many of the best informed of his contemporaries; but Lord Bute, several years afterwards, so explicitly denied it, that his denial may be accepted as conclusive.(11) The king's friends, however had become more numerous, and acted under better discipline. Some held offices in the government or household, yet looked for instructions, not to ministers, but to the king. Men enjoying obscure, but [36] lucrative appointments, in the gift of the king himself, and other members of the royal family, voted at the bidding of the court. But the greater number of the king's friends were independent members of Parliament, whom various motives had attracted to his cause. Many were influenced by high notions of prerogative,—by loyalty, by confidence in the judgment and honesty of their sovereign, and personal attachment to his Majesty; and many by hopes of favour and advancement. They formed a distinct party; and their coherence was secured by the same causes which generally contribute to the formation of party ties. But their principles and position were inconsistent with constitutional government. Their services to the king were no longer confined to counsel, or political intrigue: but were organised so as to influence the deliberations of Parliament. And their organisation for such a purpose, marked a further advance in the unconstitutional policy of the court.

The King's Influence in Parliament

The king continued personally to direct the measures of his ministers, more particularly in the disputes with the American colonies, which, in his opinion, involved the rights and honour of his crown.⁽¹²⁾ He was resolutely opposed to the repeal of the Stamp Act, which ministers thought necessary for the conciliation of the colonies. He resisted this measure in council; but [37] finding ministers resolved to carry it, he opposed them in Parliament by the authority of his name and by his personal influence over a considerable body of parliamentary adherents. The king affected, indeed, to support his ministers, and to decline the use of his name in opposing them. 'Lord Harcourt suggested, at a distance, that his Majesty might make his sentiments known, which might prevent the repeal of the act, if his ministers should push that measure. The king seemed averse to that, said he would never influence people in their parliamentary opinions, and that he had promised to support his ministers.'⁽¹³⁾ But, however the king may have affected to deprecate the use of his name, it was unquestionably used by his friends; and while he himself admitted the unconstitutional character of such a proceeding, it found a defender in Lord Mansfield. In discussing this matter with the king, his lordship argued 'that, though it would be unconstitutional to endeavour by his Majesty's name to carry questions in Parliament, yet where the lawful rights of the king and Parliament were to be asserted and maintained, he thought the making his Majesty's opinion in support of those rights to be known, was fit and becoming.' In order to counteract this secret influence, Lord Rockingham obtained the king's written consent to the passing of the bill.

[38] Ministers had to contend against another difficulty, which the tactics of the court had created. Not only were they opposed by independent members of the court party; but members holding office,—upon whose support ministers were justified in relying,—were encouraged to oppose them; and retained their offices, while voting in the ranks of the opposition. The king, who had punished with so much severity any opposition to measures which he approved, now upheld and protected those placemen, who opposed the ministerial measures to which he himself objected. In vain ministers remonstrated against their conduct: the king was ready with excuses and promises; but his chosen band were safe from the indignation of the government. Nor was their opposition confined to the repeal of the Stamp Act,—a subject on which they might have affected to entertain conscientious scruples: but it was vexatiously continued against the general measures of the administration. Well might Mr. Burke term this 'an opposition of a new and singular character,—an opposition of placemen and pensioners.' Lord Rockingham protested against such a system while in office; and after his dismissal, took occasion to observe to his Majesty, that 'when he had the honour of being in his Majesty's service, the measures of administration were thwarted and obstructed by men in office, acting like a corps; that he flattered himself it was [39] not entirely with his Majesty's inclination, and would assure him it was very detrimental to his service.' This system, to use the words of Mr. Burke, tended 'to produce neither the security of a free government, nor the energy of a monarchy that is absolute.'

The king, meanwhile, had resolved to overthrow the Rockingham ministry, which was on every account distasteful to him. He disapproved their liberal policy: he was jealous of their powerful party, which he was bent on breaking up; and, above all, he resented their independence. He desired ministers to execute his will; and these men and their party were the obstacles to the cherished object of his ambition.

Footnotes.

1. Chatham Corr., ii. 275. Walp. Mem., ii. 65; Wraxall's Mem., iii. 164. In the late reign, the duke of Bolton and Lord Cobham having been removed from the command of their regiments, for opposing ministers, the opposition endeavoured to interdict such dismissals, except after a court martial, or an address from either House of Parliament, —a restraint upon prerogative more unconstitutional than the act against which this

- measure was aimed.—Parl.Hist., ix. 283.
2. Grenville Papers, ii. 296, 'Mr. Grenville never would admit the distinction between civil and military appointments.'—Grenville Papers, ii. 234, 507. It has been stated that General Conway voted once only against the ministry on General Warrants, having supported them in the contest with Wilkes (History of a late Minority, 291; Rockingham Mem., i. 178); but this was not the case. Mr. Grenville in his Diary, Nov. 15th, 1763, speaks of Mr. Conway's vote both times with the minority.—Grenville Papers, ii. 223.
 3. Grenville Papers, 231. The muster-masters were appointed to check frauds and false musters in the several regiments, and to secure the proper complement of efficient soldiers. The office was abolished in 1818.—Clode's Military Forces of the Crown, ii. 9, 10.
 4. Grenville Papers, iii. 4-15, 21-37. The king's communications were sometimes sufficiently peremptory. Writing May 21st, 1765, he says: 'Mr. Grenville, I am surprised that you are not yet come, when you know it was my orders to be attended this evening. I expect you, therefore, to come the moment you receive this.'—Grenville Papers. iii. 40.
 5. See [Chap. III](#).
 6. So great was the jealousy of Mr. Grenville and the Duke of Bedford of the influence of Lord Bute in 1764, that they were anxious to insist upon his remaining in the country, though he said he was tired of it, and had daughters to marry, and other business.—Mr. Grenville's Diary, 16th and 28th Jan., 1764; Grenville Papers, ii. 483, 488.
 7. 'At eleven o'clock at night the king sent for Mr. Grenville, and told him he had considered upon the proposals made to him: he did promise and declare to them that Lord Bute should never, directly nor indirectly, have anything to do with his business, nor give advice upon anything whatever.'—Diary; Grenville Papers, iii. 185.
 8. Mr. Grenville was still so suspicious of Lord Bute's influence, that being told in November, 1765, by Mr. Jenkinson, that Lord Bute had only seen the king twice during his illness in the spring, he says in his diary; 'which fact Mr. Grenville could not be brought to believe. He owned, however, to Mr. Grenville that the intercourse in writing between his Majesty and Lord Bute always continued, telling him that he knew the king wrote to him a journal every day of what passed, and as minute a one as if, said he, "your boy at school was directed by you to write his journal to you."—Grenville Papers, iii. 220. It was not until Dec., 1768, that Mr. Grenville seems to have been persuaded that Lord Bute's influence was lost. He then concurred in the prevailing opinion of 'the king being grown indifferent to him, but the princess being in the same sentiments towards him as before.'—Diary; Grenville Papers, iv. 408.
 9. He was afterwards restored in 1766 by the Earl of Chatham.
 10. July 1765.
 11. His son, Lord Mountstuart, writing Oct. 23, 1773, said: 'Lord Bute authorises me to say that he declares upon his solemn word of honour, he has not had the honour of waiting on his Majesty, but at his levee or drawing-room; nor has he presumed to offer any advice or opinion concerning the disposition of offices, or the conduct of measures, either directly or indirectly, by himself or any other, from the time when the late Duke of Cumberland was consulted in the arrangement of a ministry in 1765, to the present hour.'—Tomline's Life of Pitt, i. 462, n.
 12. The king said his ministers 'would undo his people, in giving up the rights of his crown; that to this he would never consent.'—Grenville Papers, iii. 370, 371.
 13. Mr. Grenville's Diary, Jan. 31, 1766. Grenville Papers, iii. 353.