

Erskine May, Chapter I, pp. 71-83

The Younger Pitt and the Crisis of 1783-4

Pitt Appointed to Office

But the battle was not yet won. The king had struck down his ministers, though supported by a vast majority of the House of Commons: he had now to support a minister of his own [72] choice against that majority, and to overcome it. Mr. Pitt no longer hesitated to take the post of trust and danger, which the king at once conferred upon him. His time had now come; and he resolved to give battle to an angry majority,—under leaders of great talents and experience,—smarting under defeat, and full of resentment at the unconstitutional means by which they had been overthrown. He accepted the offices of first lord of the Treasury and chancellor of the Exchequer; and the king's sturdy friend, Lord Thurlow, was reinstated as lord chancellor. Mr. Pitt had also relied upon the assistance of Earl Temple,(1) whose zeal in the king's service was much needed in such a crisis; but that nobleman resigned the seals a few days after he had received them, assigning as his reason a desire to be free to answer any charges against him, arising out of his recent conduct.

The contest which the youthful premier had now to conduct, was the most arduous that had ever devolved upon any minister, since the accession of the House of Hanover. So overpowering was the majority against him, that there seemed scarcely a hope of offering it an effectual resistance. His opponents were so confident of success, that when a new writ was moved for Appleby, on his acceptance of office, the motion was received with shouts of derisive laughter. And while the presumption of [73] the boy minister was ridiculed,(2) the strongest measures were immediately taken to deprive him of his authority, and to intimidate the court, whose policy he supported. Many of Mr. Pitt's advisers, despairing of his prospects with the present Parliament, counselled an immediate dissolution; but the same consummate judgment and foresight which, a few months earlier, had induced him to decline office, because the time was not yet ripe for action, now led him to the conviction that he must convert public opinion to his side, before he appealed to the people. Though standing alone,—without the aid of a single cabinet minister, in the House of Commons,—he resolved, under every disadvantage, to meet the assaults of his opponents on their own ground; and his talents, his courage, and resources ultimately won a signal victory.

Attempts to Prevent a Dissolution

Secure of their present majority, the first object of the opposition was to prevent a dissolution which they believed to be impending. They could withhold the supplies, and press the king with representations against his ministers. His Majesty had the unquestioned prerogatives of appointing his own constitutional advisers and dissolving Parliament. The last appeal of both was to the people: and this appeal the Commons sought to [74] deny the king. The day after the dismissal of the late ministers, the opposition insisted on the postponement of the third reading of the Land-tax bill for two days, in order, as Mr. Fox avowed, that it might not 'go out of their hands until they should have taken such measures as would guard against the evils which might be expected from a dissolution.' On the 22nd December, the House went into committee on the state of the nation, when Mr. Erskine moved an address to the crown representing 'that alarming rumours of an intended dissolution of Parliament have gone forth:' that 'inconveniences and dangers' were 'likely to follow from a prorogation or dissolution of the Parliament, in the present arduous and critical conjunction of affairs;' and beseeching his

Majesty 'to suffer his faithful Commons to proceed on the business of the session, the furtherance of which is so essentially necessary to the prosperity of the public; and that his Majesty will be graciously pleased to hearken to the advice of his faithful Commons, and not to the secret advices of particular persons, who may have private interests of their own, separate from the true interests of his Majesty and his people.'⁽³⁾ Notwithstanding assurances that Mr. Pitt had no intention of advising a dissolution, and would not consent to it if advised by others, the address was agreed to, and presented to the king by the whole House. In his answer the king assured them that he would 'not interrupt [75] their meeting by any exercise of his prerogative, either of prorogation or dissolution.' This assurance, it was observed, merely referred to the meeting of Parliament after the Christmas recess, and did not remove the apprehensions of the opposition. On the 24th of December, a resolution was agreed to, that the Treasury ought not to consent to the acceptance of any more bills from India, until it should appear to the House that there were sufficient means to meet them.

These strong measures had been taken in Mr. Pitt's absence; and on his return to the House, after Christmas, the opposition resumed their offensive attitude. Mr. Fox went so far as to refuse to allow Mr. Pitt to deliver a message from the king; and being in possession of the House, at once moved the order of the day for the committee on the state of the nation. In the debate which ensued, the opposition attempted to extort a promise that Parliament should not be dissolved: but Mr. Pitt said he would not 'presume to compromise the royal prerogative, or bargain it away in the House of Commons.' This debate was signalled by the declaration of General Ross that he had been sent for by a lord of the Bedchamber, and told that if he voted against the new administration on the 12th January, he would be considered as an enemy to the king. Unable to obtain any pledge from the minister, the opposition at once addressed themselves [76] to devise effectual obstacles to an early dissolution. The House having resolved itself into the committee on the state of the nation, at half past two in the morning, Mr. Fox immediately moved a resolution, which was agreed to without a division, declaring it to be a high crime and misdemeanour to issue, after a dissolution or prorogation, any money not appropriated by Parliament.⁽⁴⁾ He then moved for 'accounts of the several sums of money issued, or ordered to be issued, from the 19th December, 1783, to the 14th January, 1784,' for 'services voted in the present session, but not appropriated by any act of Parliament to such services.' He also proposed to add, 'that no moneys should be issued for any public service, till that return was made, nor for three days afterwards;' but withdrew this motion, on being assured that it would be attended with inconvenience. He further obtained the postponement of the Mutiny Bill until the 23rd February, which still left time for its passing before the expiration of the annual Mutiny Act.

These resolutions were followed by another, proposed by the Earl of Surrey, 'that in the present situation of his Majesty's dominions, it is peculiarly necessary that there should be an administration that has the confidence of this House [77] and the public.' This being carried, he proceeded to another, 'that the late changes in his Majesty's councils were immediately preceded by dangerous and universal reports: that his Majesty's sacred name had been unconstitutionally abused to affect the deliberations of Parliament; and that the appointments made were accompanied by circumstances new and extraordinary, and such as do not conciliate or engage the confidence of this House.' All these resolutions were reported immediately and agreed to; and the House did not adjourn until half-past seven in the morning.

The Commons Vote No Confidence

Two days afterwards the attack was renewed. A resolution was carried in the committee, 'that the continuance of the present ministers in trusts of the highest importance and responsibility, is contrary to constitutional principles, and injurious to the interests of his Majesty and his people.' The opposition accused the minister of reviving the distracted times before the

Revolution, when the House of Commons was generally at variance with the crown; but he listened to their remonstrances with indifference. He brought in his India Bill: it was thrown out after the second reading. Again, he was goaded to declare his intentions concerning a dissolution; but to the indignation of his opponents, he maintained silence.⁽⁵⁾ At length, on the 26th [78] January, he declared that, in the present situation of affairs, he should not advise a dissolution. At the same time, he said that the appointment and removal of ministers did not rest with the House of Commons; and that as his resignation would be injurious to the public service, he still intended to retain office. The House passed a resolution affirming that they relied upon the king's assurances, that the consideration of the affairs of the East India Company should not be interrupted by a prorogation or dissolution.

Meanwhile, several influential members were endeavouring to put an end to this hazardous conflict, by effecting an union of parties. With this view, a meeting was held at the St. Alban's Tavern; and even the king consented to a negotiation for the reconstruction of the ministry upon a wide basis. To further this scheme of union, General Grosvenor moved a resolution: 'that the present arduous and critical situation of public affairs requires the exertion of a firm, efficient, extended, united administration, entitled to the confidence of the people, and such as may have a tendency to put an end to the unfortunate divisions and distractions of this country.' This being carried, was followed by another, proposed by Mr. Coke of Norfolk: 'that the continuance of the present ministers in their offices, is an obstacle to the formation of such an administration as may [79] enjoy the confidence of this House.' This, too, was agreed to, on a division.⁽⁶⁾ It pointed too distinctly at the retirement of Mr. Pitt himself, to favour any compromise. As these resolutions had no more effect than previous votes, in shaking the firmness of the minister, they were ordered, on the following day, to be laid before his Majesty.

The Lords Support the King

The House of Lords now came to the aid of the king and his minister. On the 4th February, they agreed to two resolutions proposed by the Earl of Effingham. The first, referring to the vote of the Commons concerning the acceptance of bills from India, affirmed, 'that an attempt in any one branch of the legislature to suspend the execution of law by separately assuming to itself the direction of a discretionary power, which, by an act of Parliament, is vested in any body of men, to be exercised as they shall judge expedient, is unconstitutional.' The second was that 'the undoubted authority of appointing to the great offices of executive government is solely vested in his Majesty; and that this House has every reason to place the firmest reliance on his Majesty's wisdom, in the exercise of this prerogative.' They were followed by an address to the king, assuring him of their Lordships' support in the exercise of his undoubted prerogative, and of their reliance upon his wisdom in the choice of his ministers. To this address he returned an answer, 'that he had no object in the choice of ministers, but to call into his [80] service men the most deserving of the confidence of his Parliament, and of the public in general.'

To these proceedings the Commons replied by inspecting the Lords' Journal for their obnoxious resolutions,—by searching for precedents of the usage of Parliament,—and, finally, by declaring that the House had not assumed to suspend the execution of law;—and that they had a right to declare their opinion respecting the exercise of every discretionary power, and particularly with reference to public money. They justified their previous votes, and asserted their determination to maintain their own privileges, while they avoided any encroachment on the rights of either of the other branches of the legislature.

Postponement of Supplies

In the meantime, no answer had been returned to the resolutions which the Commons had laid before the king. When this was noticed, Mr. Pitt was silent; and at length, on the 10th

February, on the report of the ordnance estimates, Mr. Fox said that the House could not vote supplies, until they knew what answer they were to receive. Mr. Pitt engaged that the House should be informed what line of conduct his Majesty intended to pursue; and the report, instead of being agreed to, was recommitted. On the 18th, Mr. Pitt acquainted the House 'that his Majesty had not yet, in compliance with the resolutions of the House, thought proper to dismiss his present ministers; and that his Majesty's ministers had not [81] resigned.' This announcement was regarded as a defiance of the House of Commons, and again the supplies were postponed for two days: though the leaders of the opposition disclaimed all intention of refusing them. On the 20th, another resolution and an address were voted,(7) expressing reliance upon the royal wisdom to remove 'any obstacle to the formation of such an administration as the House has declared to be requisite.' The address was presented by the whole House. The king replied, that he was anxious for a firm and united administration: but that no charge had been suggested against his present ministers: that numbers of his subjects had expressed satisfaction at the late changes in his councils; and that the Commons could not expect the executive offices to be vacated until such a plan of union as they had pointed out, could be carried into effect. This answer was appointed to be considered on the 1st March, to which day the House adjourned, without entering upon any other business; and thus again the supplies were postponed. On the motion of Mr. Fox, the House then presented a further address to the king, submitting 'that the continuance of an administration which does not possess the confidence of the representatives of the people, must be injurious to the public service,' and praying for its removal. Mr. Fox maintained it to be without [82] precedent for a ministry to hold office, in defiance of the House of Commons. Mr. Pitt retorted that the history of this country afforded no example of a ministry being called upon to retire untried, and without a cause. The king, in his reply, took up the same ground, and affirming that no charge, complaint, or specific objection had yet been made against any of his ministers, again declined to dismiss them. And thus stood the king and his ministers on one side, and the House of Commons on the other, arrayed in hostile attitude,—each party standing firmly on its constitutional rights: the one active and offensive,—the other patiently waiting to strike a decisive blow.

Final Triumph of the Ministers

The Mutiny Bill was now postponed for some days, as its passing was expected to be the signal for an immediate dissolution; and one more effort was made to drive the ministers from office. On the 8th March, 'a representation' to the king was moved by Mr. Fox,(8) to testify the surprise and affliction of the House on receiving his Majesty's answer to their last address,—reiterating all their previous statements,—comparing the conduct and principles of his advisers with those which characterised the unfortunate reigns of the Stuarts,—justifying the withholding of their confidence from ministers without preferring any charge, as it was their removal and not their punishment which was sought,—and taking credit to themselves for their [83] forbearance, in not withholding the supplies. This was the last struggle of the opposition. When their encounters with the ministry began, their majority was nearly two to one. This great disproportion soon diminished, though it was still, for a time, considerable. On the 12th January, their majority was fifty-four; on the 20th February, it was reduced to twenty. On the 1st March it fell to twelve: on the 5th it was only nine; and now, on this last occasion, it dwindled to one. The parliamentary contest was at an end. The king and his ministers had triumphed, and were about to appeal from Parliament to the people. The Mutiny Bill was passed: large supplies were voted rapidly, but not appropriated: on the 24th March Parliament was prorogued, and on the following day dissolved.

Footnotes.

1. He was intended to lead the House of Lords.—Tomline's Life of Pitt, i. 232.
2. Pitt, to use the happy phrase of Erskine, was 'hatched at once into a minister by the

heat of his own ambition.'—Parl. Hist., xxiv.277. In the Rolliad, his youth was thus ridiculed: -

'A sight to make surrounding nations stare,
A kingdom trusted to a schoolboy's care.'

3. The last paragraph of the address was taken from an address to William III. in 1693.
4. Com. Journ., xxxix. 858. These grants were re-voted in the next Parliament,—a fact overlooked by Dr. Tomline, who states that the Appropriation Act of 1784 included the supplies of the previous session, without any opposition being offered.—Life of Pitt, i., 507.
5. The king and others were pressing Mr. Pitt to appeal to the people at this time, but he resisted their counsels.—Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt, i. 181.
6. By 223 against 204.
7. While in the lobby, on the division on the resolution, Mr. Fox proposed to his supporters to move an address immediately afterwards, which was agreed to at five o'clock in the morning.
8. On this occasion strangers were excluded, at the instance of Sir James Lowther, who had failed in gaining admission to the gallery for a friend. The debate is not therefore fully reported.

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