Erskine May, Chapter I, pp. 51-60

Dunning's Resolutions and the Fall of Lord North

In the meantime, the increasing influence of the crown, and the active personal exercise of its prerogatives, were attracting the attention of the people and of Parliament. In the debate on the address at the opening of Parliament, on the 26th November, 1779, Mr. Fox said: 'He saw very early indeed, in the present reign, the plan of government which had been laid down, and had since been invariably pursued in every department. It was not the mere rumour of the streets that the king was his own minister: the fatal truth was evident, and had made itself evident in every circumstance of the war carried on against America and the West Indies.' This was denied by ministers; but evidence, not accessible to [52] contemporaries, has since made his statement indisputable.

Early in the following year, numerous public meetings were held, associations formed, and petitions presented in favour of economic reforms; and complaining of the undue influence of the crown, and of the patronage and corruption by which it was maintained. It was for the redress of these grievances that Mr. Burke offered his celebrated scheme of economical reform. He confessed that the main object of this scheme was 'the reduction of that corrupt influence, which is itself the perennial spring of all prodigality and of all disorder; which loads us more than millions of debt; which takes away vigour from our arms, wisdom from our councils, and every shadow of authority and credit from the most venerable parts of our constitution.'

On the 6th April, Mr. Dunning moved resolutions, in a committee of the whole House, founded upon these petitions. The first, which is memorable in political history, affirmed 'that the influence of the crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished.' The Lord Advocate, Mr. Dundas, endeavoured to diminish the force of this resolution by the prefatory words, 'that it is necessary to declare' but Mr. Fox, on behalf of the opposition, at once assented to this amendment, and the resolution was carried by a majority of eighteen. A second resolution was agreed to, without a division, affirming the right of the House [53] to correct abuses in the civil list expenditure, and every other branch of the public revenue; and also, a third, affirming 'that it is the duty of this House to provide, as far as may be, an immediate and effectual redress of the abuses complained of in the petitions presented to this House.' The opposition, finding themselves in a majority, pushed forward their success. They would consent to no delay; and these resolutions were immediately reported and agreed to by the House. This debate was signalised by the opposition speech of Sir Fletcher Norton, the Speaker, who bore his personal testimony to the increased and increasing influence of the crown.(1) The king, writing to Lord North, on the 11th April, concerning these obnoxious resolutions, said: 'I wish I did not feel at whom they were personally levelled.' The same matters were also debated, in this session, in the House of Lords. The debate on the Earl of Shelburne's motion, of the 8th February, for an inquiry into the public expenditure, brought out further testimonies to the influence of the crown. Of these the most remarkable was given by the Marquess of Rockingham; who asserted that since the accession of the king, there had been 'a fixed determination to govern this country under the forms of law, through the influence of the crown.' 'Everything within and without, whether in cabinet, Parliament, or elsewhere, carried about it the most [54] unequivocal marks of such a system: the whole economy of executive government, in all its branches, proclaimed it, whether professional, deliberative, or official. The supporters of it in books, pamphlets, and newspapers, avowed it, and defended it without reserve. It was early in the present reign promulged as a court axiom,

'that the power and influence of the crown alone was sufficient to support any set of men his Majesty might think proper to call to his councils.' The fact bore evidence of its truth: for through the influence of the crown, majorities had been procured to support any men or any measures, which an administration, thus constituted, thought proper to dictate.'

Intimidation of Peers

This very motion provoked the exercise of prerogative, in an arbitrary and offensive form, in order to influence the votes of peers, and to intimidate opponents. The Marquess of Carmarthen and the Earl of Pembroke had resigned their offices in the household, in order to give an independent vote. Before the former had voted, he received notice that he was dismissed from the lord-lieutenancy of the East Riding of the county of York; and soon after the latter had recorded his vote, he was dismissed from the lord-lieutenancy of Wiltshire,—an office which had been held by his family, at different times, for centuries.(2) This flagrant exercise of prerogative could not escape the [55] notice of Parliament; and on the 6th March, Lord Shelburne moved an address praying the king to acquaint the House whether he had been advised, and by whom, to dismiss these peers 'from their employments, for their conduct in Parliament.' The motion was negatived by a large majority: but the unconstitutional acts of the king were strongly condemned in debate; and again animadversions were made upon the influence of the crown, more especially in the administration of the army and militia.

On the meeting of Parliament, on the 27th November, 1781, amendments were moved in both Houses, in answer to the king's speech, when strong opinions were expressed regarding the influence of the crown, and the irregular and irresponsible system under which the government of the country was conducted. The Duke of Richmond said, 'that the country was governed by clerks,—each minister confining himself to his own office,—and, consequently, instead of responsibility, union of opinion, and concerted measures, nothing was displayed but dissension, weakness, and corruption.' The 'interior cabinet,' he declared, had been the ruin of this country. The Marquess of Rockingham described the system of government pursued since the commencement of the reign as 'a prospective system,—a system of favouritism and secret influence.' Mr. Fox imputed all the defeats and disasters of the American war to the influence of the crown.

Commons Motions Aganst the War

[56] The king. was never diverted, by defeat and disaster, from his resolution to maintain the war with America: but the House of Commons was now determined upon peace; and a struggle ensued which was to decide the fate of the minister, and to overcome, by the power of Parliament, the stubborn will of the king. On the 22nd February, 1782, General Conway moved an address deprecating the continuance of the war, but was defeated by a majority of one. On the 27th, he proposed another address with the same object. Lord North begged for a short respite: but an adjournment being refused by a majority of nineteen, the motion was agreed to without a division.

On the receipt of the king's answer, General Conway moved a resolution that 'the House will consider as enemies to the king and country all who shall advise, or by any means attempt, the further prosecution of offensive war, for the purpose of reducing the revolted colonies to obedience by force.' In reply to this proposal, Lord North astonished the House by announcing,—not that he proposed to resign on the reversal of the policy, to which he was pledged,—but that he was prepared to give effect to the instructions of the House! Mr. Fox repudiated the principle of a minister remaining in office, to carry out the policy of his opponents, against his own judgment ; and General Conway's resolution was agreed to. Lord North, however, persevered with his propositions for peace, and declared his [57] determination to retain office until the king should command him to resign, or the House should point out to him, in the clearest manner, the propriety of withdrawing. No time was

lost in pressing him with the latter alternative. On the 8th March, a motion of Lord John Cavendish, charging all the misfortunes of the war upon the incompetency of the ministers, was lost by a majority of ten. On the 16th, Sir J. Rous moved that 'the House could no longer repose confidence in the present ministers,' and his motion was negatived by a majority of nine. On the 20th the assault was about to be repeated, when Lord North announced his resignation.

Retirement of Lord North

The king had watched this struggle with great anxiety, as one personal to himself. Writing to Lord North on the 17th March, after the motion of Sir J. Rous, he said: 'I am resolved not to throw myself into the hands of the opposition at all events; and shall certainly, if things go as they seem to tend, know what my conscience as well as honour dictates, as the only way left for me.' He even desired the royal yacht to be prepared, and talked as if nothing were now left for him but to retire to Hanover. But it had become impossible to retain any longer in his service that 'confidential minister,' whom he had 'always [58] treated more as his friend than minister.' By the earnest solicitations of the king, Lord North had been induced to retain office against his own wishes: he had persisted in a policy of which he disapproved; and when forced to abandon it, he still held his ground, in order to protect the king from the intrusion of those whom his Majesty regarded as his personal enemies.(3) He was now fairly driven from his post, and the king, appreciating the personal devotion of his minister, rewarded his zeal and fidelity with a munificent present from the privy purse.(4)

The king's correspondence with Lord North gives us a remarkable insight into the relations of his Majesty with that minister, and with the government of the country. Not only did he direct the minister in all important matters of foreign and domestic policy, but he instructed him as to the management of debates in Parliament, suggested what motions should be made [59] or opposed, and how measures should be carried. He reserved to himself all the patronage,—he arranged the entire cast of the administration,—settled the relative places and pretensions of ministers of state, of law officers, and members of his household,—nominated and promoted the English and Scotch judges,—appointed and translated bishops, nominated deans, and dispensed other preferments in the church.(5) He disposed of military governments, regiments, and commissions; and himself ordered the marching of troops.(6) He gave or refused titles, honours, and pensions.(7) All his directions were peremptory. Louis the Great himself could not have been more royal:—he enjoyed the consciousness of power, and felt himself 'every inch a king.'

But what had been the result of twenty years of kingcraft? Whenever the king's personal influence had been the greatest, there had been the fiercest turbulence and discontent among the people, the most signal failures in the measures of the government, and the heaviest disasters to the state. Of all the evil days of England during this king's long reign, the worst are recollected in the ministries of Lord Bute, Mr. Grenville, the Duke of [60] Grafton, and Lord North. Nor had the royal will,—however potential with ministers,—prevailed in the government of the country. He had been thwarted and humbled by his parliaments, and insulted by demagogues: parliamentary privilege, which he had sought to uphold as boldly as his own prerogative, had been defied and overcome by Wilkes and the printers: the liberty of the press, which he would have restrained, had been provoked into licentiousness; and his kingdom had been shorn of some of its fairest provinces.

Footnotes.

1. See also Chap. IV.
2. His dismissal was by the personal orders of the king, who wrote to Lord North, 10th Feb:, 1780; 'I cannot choose the lieutenancy of Wiltshire should be in the hands of opposition.'

3. On the 19th March, 1782, the very day before he announced his intention to resign, the king wrote:—'If you resign before I have decided what to do, you will certainly for ever forfeit my regard.'
4. The king, in his letter to Lord North, says. ' Allow me to assist you with £10,000, £15,000, or even £20,000, if that will be sufficient.'—Lord Brougham's Life of George III.; Works, iii. 18. Mr. Adolphus states, from private information, that the present amounted to £30,000. In 1777 he had also offered Lord North, £15,000, or £20,000 if necessary, to set his affairs in order. Corr. of George III. with Lord North, ii. 82.
5. Corr. of George III. with Lord North, ii. 37, 212, 235, 368, et passim. Wraxall's Mem., ii. 148, Much to his credit, he secured the appointment of the poet Gray to the professorship of Modern History at Cambridge, 8th March. 1771.
6. 25th October, 1775: 'On the receipt of your letter, I have ordered Elliott's dragoons to march from Henley to Hounslow.'
7. 'We must husband honours,' wrote the king to Lord North on the 18th July, 1777, on refusing to make Sir W. Hamilton a privy councillor.

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