Erskine May, Vol. II, Chapter VIII, pp. 163-177

The Supremacy of Pitt

Effects of the French Revolution upon Parties

[163] The Whigs were still a considerable party. However inferior, in numbers, to the ministerial phalanx, they were led by men of commanding talents, high rank, and social influence: their principles were popular, and they were generally united in sentiment and policy. But events were impending which were destined to subvert the relations of parties. The momentous incidents of the French Revolution,—new and unexampled in the history of the world,—could not fail to affect deeply the minds of every class of politicians. In their early development, the democrats hailed them with enthusiasm,—the Whigs with hopeful sympathy,—the king and the Tories with indignation and alarm. Mr. Fox foresaw the spread of liberty throughout Europe. Mr. Pitt, sympathising with freedom more than any of his party, watched the progress of events with friendly interest. Mr. Burke was the first statesman who was overcome with terror. Foreseeing nothing but evil and dangers, he brought the whole force of his genius, with characteristic earnestness, to the denunciation of the French Revolution, its principles, its actors, and its consequences.(1) In his excitement [164] against democracy, he publicly renounced the generous and manly friendship of Mr. Fox, and repudiated the old associations of his party.

Society was becoming separated into two opposite parties,—the friends and the foes of democracy. For a time, the Whigs were able to stand between them,—maintaining liberty, without either encouraging or fearing democracy. But their position was not long tenable. Democrats espoused parliamentary reform: their opponents confounded it with revolution. Never had there been a time so inopportune for the discussion of that question, when the Society of the Friends of the People was founded. Mr. Fox, foreseeing the misconstructions to which it would be exposed, prudently withheld his support: but it was joined by Mr. Sheridan, Mr. Erskine, Mr. Grey, Mr. Tierney, and other leading Whigs, who, for the sake of the cause they had espoused, were willing to co-operate with men of democratic opinions, and even with members of the Corresponding Society, who had enrolled themselves among the Friends of the People. When Mr. Grey gave notice of his motion for reform, the tone of the debate disclosed the revulsion of feeling that was arising against popular questions, and the widening schism [165] of the Whig party. While some of its members were not diverted from their purpose by the contact of democracy, others were repelled by it, even from their traditional love of liberty. A further breach in the ranks of the opposition was soon afterwards caused by the proclamation against seditious writings. Mr. Fox, Mr. Whitbread, and Mr. Grey condemned the proclamation, as designed to discredit the Friends of the People, and to disunite the opposition.(2) On the other hand, Lord North, Lord Tichfield, Mr. Windham, and Mr. Powys thought the proclamation necessary, and supported the government. Whether Mr. Pitt designed it or not, no measure could have been more effectual for dividing the Whig party.

An attempt was now made, through Mr. Dundas, Lord Loughborough, Lord Malmesbury, and the Duke of Portland, to arrange a coalition between Mr. Pitt and Mr. Fox. Both were, at this time, agreed in viewing the revolutionary excesses of France with disgust, and both were alike anxious for neutrality and peace: but the difficulties of satisfying the claims of the different parties,—the violent opposition of Mr. Burke, the disunion of the Whigs, and little

earnestness on either side,—ensured the failure of these overtures.(3) Their [166] miscarriage had a serious influence upon the future policy of the state. The union of two such men as Mr. Pitt and Mr.Fox would have ensured temperate and enlightened counsels, at the most critical period in the history of Europe. But Mr. Fox, in opposition, was encouraged to coquet with democracy, and proclaim, out of season, the sovereignty of the people; while the alarmist section of the Whigs were naturally drawn closer to Mr. Pitt.

The advancing events of the French Revolution,—the decree of fraternity issued by the French Convention,—the execution of the king,—the breaking out of the revolutionary war,—and the extravagance of the English democrats, completed the ruin of the Whig party. In January, 1793, Lord Loughborough passed from the opposition benches to the woolsack. He was afterwards followed, in the House of Lords, by the Duke of Portland,—the acknowledged leader of the Whigs,—Lord Spencer, Lord Fitzwilliam, and Lord Carlisle; and in the Commons, by Mr. Windham, Mr. Thomas GrenvilIe, Sir Gilbert Elliot, many of the old Whigs, and all the adherents of Lord North, who were henceforth the colleagues or firm supporters of Mr. Pitt. Even Mr. Grattan and the Irish patriots sided with the government. [167] The small party which still clung to Mr. Fox numbered scarcely sixty members; and rarely mustered more than forty in a division.(4) In the Lords, Lord Derby, Lord Lansdowne, Lord Stanhope, and Lord Lauderdale constituted nearly the entire opposition.(5) Mr. Burke, having commenced the ruin of his party, retired from Parliament when it was consummated, to close his days in sorrow and dejection.

The Remains of the Opposition

The great Whig party was indeed reduced in numbers and influence: but all their ablest men, except Mr. Burke and Mr. Windham, were still true to their principles. Mr. Fox was supported by Mr. Sheridan, Mr. Erskine, Mr. Grey, Mr. Whitbread, Mr. Coke of Norfolk, Mr. Lambton, Lord John and Lord William Russell; and soon received a valuable auxiliary in the person of Mr. Tierney.(6) They were powerless against ministers in divisions: but in debate, their eloquence, their manly defence of constitutional liberty, and their courageous resistance to the arbitrary measures of the government, kept alive a spirit of freedom which the disastrous events of the time had nearly [168] extinguished. And the desertion of lukewarm and timid supporters of their cause left them without restraint in expressing their own liberal sentiments. They received little support from the people. Standing between democracy on the one side, and the classes whom democracy had scared, and patriotism or interest attracted to the government on the other, they had nothing to lean upon but the great principles and faith of their party. Even the Prince of Wales abandoned them. His sympathies were naturally with kings and rulers, and against revolution; and, renouncing his friends, he became a fickle and capricious supporter of the minister.(7) The great body of the people, whom the democrats failed to gain over, recoiled from the bloodthirsty Jacobins, and took part with the government, in the repression of democracy.

Strength of Pitt

If such was the prostration of the Whigs, what was the towering strength of Mr. Pitt? Never had any minister been so absolute [169] since England had been a constitutional state, governed by the instrumentality of parties. Never had a minister united among his supporters so many different classes and parties of men. Democracy abroad had threatened religion; and the clergy,—almost to a man,—were with the defenders of 'Church and King.' The laws and institutions of the realm were believed to be in danger; and the lawyers pressed forward to support the firm champion of order. Property and public credit were menaced; and proprietors of the soil; capitalists, fund-holders, confided in the strong-handed minister. And above all, the patriotism of the nation was aroused in support of a statesman who was wielding all the

resources of the state in a deadly war.

Such were the political causes which attracted men of all parties to the side of the minister, whose policy was accepted as national. Motives less patriotic, but equally natural, contributed to the consolidation of his power.

Many of the largest proprietors of boroughs were now detached from the Whig party, and carried over their parliamentary interest to the other side. Their defection was not met by the minister with ingratitude. They shared his influence; and were overloaded with honours, which he himself despised. Boroughs in the market also rapidly fell into the hands of the dominant party. To supporters of the government, the purchase of a borough was a promising investment: to opponents it offered nothing but disappointment. The close corporations were filled with Tories, who secured the representation of [170] their cities for their own party. None but zealous adherents of the government could hope for the least share of the patronage of the crown. The piety of a churchman brought him no preferment, unless his political orthodoxy was well attested. All who aspired to be prebendaries, deans, and bishops sought Tory patrons, and professed the Tory creed. At the bar, an advocate might be learned and eloquent, beyond all rivalry,—eagerly sought out by clients,—persuasive with juries,—and overmastering judges by his intellect and erudition; but all the prizes of his noble profession were beyond his reach, unless he enrolled himself a member of the dominant party. An ambitious man was offered the choice of the fashionable opinions of the majority, with a career of honour and distinction, or the proscribed sentiments of a routed party, with discouragement, failure, and obscurity. Who can wonder that the bar soon made their choice, and followed the minister?

The country gentlemen formed the natural strength of the Tory party. They joined it heartily, without any inducement save their own strong convictions: but their fidelity was rewarded by a generous monarch and a grateful minister. If a man's ambition was not entirely satisfied by the paternal acres,—let him display zeal at the elections. If he would not see his rivals outstrip him in the race of life,—let him beware of lukewarmness in the Tory cause. A Whig country gentleman could rarely aspire even to the commission of the peace: a dissenter could not hope for such a trust. Ambition [171] quickened the enthusiasm of Tories, and converted many an undecided and hesitating Whig. The moneyed classes, as we have already seen, had been gradually detached from the Whig interest, and brought over to the king and the Tories; and now they were, heart and soul, with Mr. Pitt. If the people were impoverished by his loans and war-taxes,—they, at least, prospered and grew rich. Such a minister was far too 'good for trade' not to command their willing allegiance. A vast expenditure bound them to him; and posterity is still paying, and will long continue to pay, the price of their support.

Another cause contributed to the depression of the Whigs. There was a social ostracism of liberal opinions, which continued far into the present century. It was not enough that every man who ventured to profess them should be debarred from ambition in public and professional life: he was also frowned upon and shunned in the social circle. It was whispered that he was not only a malcontent in politics, but a freethinker or infidel in religion. Loud talkers at dinner-tables, emboldened by the zeal of the company, decried his opinions, his party, and his friends. If he kept his temper, he was supposed to be overcome in argument: if he lost it, his warmth was taken as evidence of the violence of his political sentiments.

In Scotland, the organisation of the Tory party was stronger, and its principles more arbitrary and violent, than in England. All [172] men of rank, wealth, and power, and three-fourths of the people, were united in a compact body, under Mr. Dundas, the dictator of that kingdom. Power, thus concentrated, was unchecked by any popular institutions. In a country without freedom of election,(8)—without independent municipalities,—without a free press,—without public meetings,—an intolerant majority proscribed the opposite party, in a spirit of savage persecution. All Whigs were denounced as Jacobins,—shunned in society,—intimidated at the

bar, and ruthlessly punished for every indiscretion as public speakers or writers in the press. Their leaders were found at the bar, where several eminent men, at great sacrifice and risk, still ventured to avow their opinions, and rally the failing hopes of their party. Of these, the most remarkable in wit, in eloquence, and political courage, was the renowned advocate, Henry Erskine.(9) Let all honour be paid to the memory of men who, by their talents and personal character, were able to keep alive the spirit and sentiment of liberty, in the midst of a reign of terror!

Lord Cockburn thus sums up a spirited account of the state of parties under the administration of Mr. Dundas: 'With the people put down and the Whigs powerless, government was the master of nearly every individual in Scotland, but especially in Edinburgh, [173] which was the chief seat of its influence. The infidelity of the French gave it almost all the pious; their atrocities all the timid; rapidly increasing taxation and establishments, all the venal: the higher and middle ranks were at its command, and the people at its feet. The pulpit, the bench, the bar, the colleges, the parliamentary electors, the press, the magistracies, the local institutions, were so completely at the service of the party in power, that the idea of independence, besides being monstrous and absurd, was suppressed by a feeling of conscious ingratitude.'(10)

It is one of the first uses of party to divide the governing classes, and leave one section to support the authority of the state, and the other to protect the rights of the people. But Mr Pitt united all these classes in one irresistible phalanx of power. Loyalty and patriotism, fears and interests, welded together such a party as had never yet been created; and which, for the sake of public liberty, it is to be hoped will never be known again.

Second Whig Secession

Under these discouragements, the remnant of the Whig party resisted the repressive measures of Mr. Pitt,(11) and strove earnestly to promote the restoration of peace. But it was vain to contend against the government. Arguments and remonstrances were unavailing: divisions merely exposed the numerical weakness of the minority, and at length, in 1798, Mr. Fox and many of his friends resolved to protest against the minister, and absolve themselves from the [174] responsibility of his measures, by withdrawing from the debates, and seceding from Parliament. The tactics of 1776 were renewed, and with the same results. The opposition was weakened and divided and, in the absence of its chiefs, was less formidable to ministers, and less capable of appealing, with effect, to public opinion. Mr. Tierney was the only man who profited by the secession. Coming to the front, he assumed the position of leader; and with great readiness and vigour, and unceasing activity, assailed every measure of the government. The secession was continued during three sessions. As a protest against the minister, it availed nothing: he was more absolute, and his opponents more insignificant, than ever.(12)

Division of the Tory Party in 1801

Mr. Pitt needed no further accession of strength; but the union with Ireland recruited his majority with an overwhelming force of Tories from the sister country. Yet, at the moment of his highest prosperity, this very union cast down the minister, and shook his party to its centre. It was far too powerful to be overthrown by the loss of such a leader; but it was [175] divided by conflicting counsels and personal rivalries; and its relations to other parties were materially changed. Mr. Pitt's liberal views upon the Catholic question and the government of Ireland were shared by his ablest colleagues, and by nearly all the Whigs; while the majority of his party, siding with the king, condemned them as dangerous to church and state. The schism was never wholly cured, and was destined, in another generation, to cause the disruption of the party. The personal differences consequent upon Mr. Pitt's retirement introduced disunion and estrangement among several of the leading men, and weakened the ties which had hitherto held the party together in a compact confederacy. Mr. Canning,—

brilliant, ambitious, and intriguing,—despised the decorous mediocrity of Mr. Addington,—derided 'the Doctor' with merciless wit,—ridiculed his speeches, decried his measures, and disparaged his friends.(13) With restless activity he fomented jealousies and misunderstandings between Mr. Pitt and his successor, which other circumstances concurred to aggravate,—until the great Tory leader and his adherents were found making common cause with the Whigs, against the Tory minister.(14) The Tory party was thus seriously [176] disunited, while friendly relations were encouraged between the friends of Mr. Pitt and the Whig members of the opposition. Lord Grenville and his party now separated from Mr. Pitt, and associated themselves with the Whigs; and this accession of strength promised a revival of the influence of their party. When Mr. Pitt was recalled to power in 1804, being estranged from the king's friends and the followers of Mr. Addington, he naturally sought an alliance with Lord Grenville and the Whig leaders, whose parliamentary talents were far more important than the number of their adherents. Such an alliance was favoured by the position of Lord Grenville, who, once a colleague of Mr. Pitt and now a friend of Mr. Fox, might fitly become the mediator between two parties, which, after a protracted contest, had at length found points of agreement and sympathy. The king's personal repugnance to Mr. Fox, however, frustrated an arrangement which, by uniting the more liberal section of the Tories with the Whigs, would have constituted an enlightened party,—progressive in its policy, and directed by the ablest statesmen of the age.(15) Lord Grenville, loyal to his new friends, declined to accept office without them, and allied himself more closely with the Whigs.(16) Mr. Pitt, thus weakened, was [177] soon obliged to make peace with Mr. Addington.(17) and to combine, once more, the scattered forces of his party. The reunion was of brief duration; and so wide was the second breach, that on the death of Mr. Pitt, the Addington party were prepared to coalesce with the Whigs.

Footnotes.

1. Prior's Life of Burke, ii. 42; MacKnight's Life of Burke, iii.274, et seq.; Burke's Correspondence, iii. 102, 183, 267 286.—'He loved to exaggerate everything: when exasperated by the slightest opposition, even on accidental topics of conversation, he always pushed his principles, his opinions, and even his impressions of the moment, to the extreme.'—Lord Holland's Mem., i. 7.
2. Lord Holland's Mem., i. 15; Parl. Hist., xxix. 1476, 1614. Before the proclamation was issued, 'Mr. Pitt sent copies of it to several members of the opposition in both Houses, requesting their advice.'—Lord Malmesbury's Diary, June 13, 1792; Tomline's Life of Pitt, iii. 347; Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt, ii. 156.
3. Lord Malmesbury's Corr., ii. 425-440. Lord Colchester's Diary and Corr., i. 13. 'It was the object of Mr. Pitt to separate Mr. Fox from some of his friends, and particularly from Sheridan. He wished to make him a party to a coalition between the ministry and the aristocratical branches of the Whigs. Mr. Fox, with his usual generosity, declined the offer.'—Lord Holland's Mem., ii. 46. Lord Campbell's Life of Lord Loughborough —Lives of Chancellors, vi. 221, et seq.
4. Feb. 18, 1792, 44 to 270; 43 to 284 on Parl. Reform; 40 on the breaking out of the war. —Lord Holland's Mem., i. 30; Parl. Hist., xxx. 59, 453, 925. They mustered 53 against the third reading of the Seditious Assembly Bill, Dec. 3, 1795; and 50 in support of Mr. Grey's motion in favour of treating for peace, Feb. 15, 1796.—Lord Colchester's Diary, i. 12, 33: 42 on Mr. Fox's motion on the state of the nation with regard to the war, May 10, 1796.—Ibid., 57.
5. Lord Holland's Mem., i. 32.—They were soon joined by the Duke of Bedford.—Ibid., 78.
6. Mr. Tierney entered Parliament in 1796.
7. 'In 1795 the Prince was offended by Mr. Pitt's arrangement for the payment of his debts out of his increased income, upon his marriage, and his support of the

government was weakened.'—Lord Holland's Mem., i. 81. March 28, 1797. 'The Prince of Wales sat under the gallery during the whole debate (on the Bank Committee), and his friends voted in the opposition.'—Lord Colchester's Diary, i. 88. April 3, 1797. The Prince of Wales, not being permitted to undertake a mission to Ireland, which he had proposed, 'wrote to Lord Fitzwilliam, and also to Mr. Fox, offering to put himself at the head of their party at home, and to oppose openly all measures of the present administration. They all dissuaded him from that line of conduct: but on Saturday, 25th March, Mr. Fox, Erskine, the Duke of Norfolk, etc., dined at Carlton House.'—Ibid., i. 94.

8. Supra, Vol. I. 355.
9. He was removed from the office of Dean of the Faculty of Advocates 12th January, 1796, for presiding at a public meeting, to petition against the war with France.
10. Lord Cockburn's Memorials of his Time, 86.
11. See Chap. IX.
12. Lord Holland's Mem., i. 84, 101; Lord Sidmouth's Life, i. 203; Memorials of Fox, iii. 136, 137 249. 'During the whole of this Session (1799) the powerful leaders of opposition continued to secede. Mr. Fox did not come once. Grey came and spoke once against the Union, and Sheridan opposed it in several stages. Tierney never acted with them, but maintained his own line of opposition, especially on questions of finance.'—Lord Colchester's Diary, i. 192. '1800. In February, Fox came upon the question of treating for peace with Bonaparte, and upon no other occasion during the session. Grey came upon the union only. Tierney attended throughout, and moved his annual finance propositions. Upon the opening of the session in November, all the opposition came and attended regularly, except Fox.'—Ibid., i. 216; Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt, iii. 41, 76-77; Life and Opinions of Earl Grey, 49.
13. 'Old Lord Liverpool justly observed that Mr. Addington was laughed out of power and place in 1803 by the *beau monde*, or, as that grave old politician pronounced it, the *biu mond*.'—Lord Holland's Mem., ii. 211.
14. Pellew's Life of Lord Sidmouth, ii. 254, et seq., 298, 301. Sir William Scott, speaking of the state of parties in 1803, said: 'There could be no adjustment between the parties, from the numbers of their respective adherents; there was not pasture enough for all.' Lord Malmesbury's Corr., iv. 77, 101, etc.; Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt, iv.21, 88, 116, 117, 139; Lord Colchester's Diary, ii.403.
15. Supra, Vol. I. 100.
16. Lord Malmesbury, speaking of this seccssion, Says:—'The French proverb is here verified, "Un bon ami vaut mieux que trois mauvais parents."'—Corr., iv. 309.
17. He was created Viscount Sidmouth in January, 1806.