I

THE FORMATION OF THE COALITION AND ITS EARLY PARLIAMENTARY SUCCESSES

1

THE FORMATION OF THE ABERDEEN COALITION, DECEMBER 1852

Preliminaries

For the half-dozen years following the repeal of the Corn Laws and the break-up of Sir Robert Peel's ministry in June 1846 British party politics were in a state of flux.[1] Lord John Russell's Liberal administration survived until February 1852,[2] largely owing to Peelite support, but the very words 'Liberal' and 'Peelite' are question-begging.The term Liberal party had only recently come into use[3] to describe all those who had given general support to the 'Reform' Administrations of Grey and Melbourne. The word Whig was still used to describe the point of view and social background of the aristocratic leaders of the party, while at the other extreme the word Radical covered a variety of ultra-Liberals, the Philosophical Radicals such as Hume and Roebuck, the Manchester Radicals such as Cobden and Bright, and more vaguely some social Radicals such as Fielden, all of varying independence and perhaps numbering about a third of the party in the House of Commons at the most.[4] Increasingly rank and file members of the party simply called themselves Liberal to judge from Dod's *Parliamentary Companion* in the 'forties and 'fifties.[5] Russell could consider himself as a Whig, but call himself the leader of the Liberal party. Finally there was the Irish Brigade, as they became known in the early 'fifties, Catholic or Catholic-supported Irish Liberals who broke with Russell over his

[1] See C. H. Stuart, 'The formation of the coalition cabinet of 1852', *T.R.H.S.*, 5th series, IV (1954), 45–68, my 'Peel and the Peelites, 1846–50', *E.H.R.* LXXIII (1958), 431–52, and Donald Southgate, *The passing of the Whigs 1832–86*, chs. V–IX.

[2] Dr F. Dreyer's doctoral thesis, 'The Russell administration, 1846–52', is an illuminating study of the Whig-Liberal party during these years.

[3] See E. Halévy, *A history of the English people in the nineteenth century*, III, *The triumph of reform 1830–41*, 180, n. 1, who says that the term became official in 1847.

[4] See S. Maccoby, *English radicalism, 1832–52*, Appendix A, 449–51, which lists the names of one hundred Liberals or Radicals who voted against Russell on Locke King's Reform motion.

[5] See my 'Party politics in the age of Palmerston', in P. Appleman, W. A. Madden and M. Wolff (eds.), *1859: Entering an age of crisis* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1959), p. 167.

Ecclesiastical Titles Bill of 1851 and who vaguely adhered to a tenants' rights programme for Ireland.[1]

Peelite is an even more elusive category to define. It was estimated that there were 117 free-trade or Liberal Conservatives elected in the general election of 1847,[2] but probably only forty-odd of these could properly be considered as Peelites, i.e. free trade Conservatives personally loyal to Peel and after his death to his memory and ready, if necessary, to remain indefinitely independent of the main body of the Conservatives, now known as Protectionists. The number of this group was indeterminate, but its hard core were those men who had held office under Peel. By and large they were men of liberal views, but distrust of the Radicals, distaste for Whig cliquishness, suspicion of Liberal ecclesiastical policy and the politician's natural disinclination to cross old party lines made it difficult for them to contemplate fusion with the Liberal party. Over the years, it is true, some had merged with the Liberals, but after the death of Peel, who refused to sanction any overt organisation of his followers after 1846, Gladstone and Sidney Herbert had kept together a band of about forty who sat as a group below the gangway on the opposition side of the House.[3]

Peelite support for the Russell ministry was less certain after Peel's death in June 1850. Russell's foolish and illiberal Ecclesiastical Titles Bill of 1851 was strongly opposed by the Peelite leaders in both Houses, as well as by some Radical and most Irish members of the Commons. Differences over this measure were a major factor in preventing the formation of a Liberal Peelite coalition after Russell's defeat on Locke King's motion for parliamentary reform in February 1851. The Peelites welcomed Palmerston's dismissal from the Russell ministry in December of that year, but they failed to come to Russell's support when Palmerston joined with the Protectionist opposition to defeat the government's Militia Bill.[4]

Lord Derby, who succeeded Russell as Prime Minister, managed to keep his minority Protectionist government in office until the end of the abortive 1852 session, thanks to divisions among the Liberals and a

[1] See J. H. Whyte, *The Independent Irish Party, 1850–9*.
[2] *The Times*, 3 September 1847.
[3] British Museum Add. MS. 44778, fols. 76–83, Gladstone memorandum no. 95, dated 29 November 1876, partly quoted in John Morley, *Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, I, 428.
[4] See W. D. Jones, *Lord Derby and Victorian Conservatism*, p. 159; H. F. C. Bell, *Lord Palmerston*, II, 58.

conscious decision of the Peelites to withhold judgment until the Derbyites had shown where they stood with respect to free trade, the income tax and other issues of the day. As soon as the essential business of the session was completed parliament was dissolved, but the results of the general election held in July were indecisive. *The Times*[1] gave the ministry 284 safe seats, and the Liberal opposition, including the Radicals and the Irish Brigade, 309 seats, while it listed separately the names of fifty-eight 'Liberal Conservatives', but not all of these could be called Peelite. Bonham, Peel's former party manager, counted fifty 'Peelites',[2] but Sir John Young, the former Conservative chief whip, only found thirty-four and his names were not all the same as Bonham's.[3]

Russell in opposition was less stand-offish than in office. Indeed he was no longer in full control of his own party and it was clear that many of his former colleagues and followers were reluctant to serve again under his leadership. This was an irritating situation for a man of Lord John's thin-skinned sensitivity, but he soon realised that a Liberal-Peelite coalition was the only solution to the parliamentary situation and the prospect of a closer relationship with the Peelite leaders was more congenial now that the loyalty of some of his former colleagues was in doubt. When the election results showed him that he would have no majority of his own in the new House he entered into a long and friendly correspondence with Lord Aberdeen, the titular head of the Peelite group, to explore the possibilities of joint action in the coming session.[4] Although a Tory of forty years standing, Aberdeen, always a member of the upper House, had never been deeply involved in party politics. His main interests were in the field of foreign affairs, but he was a staunch supporter of Peel's free trade policy, and now showed himself to be remarkably open-minded, indeed liberal in his general political views. He and his close friend and colleague, Sir James Graham, a former Whig, were ready enough to work with Russell, but the

[1] 28 July 1852; three seats were unaccounted for.
[2] Add. MS. 44110, fols. 228–31, to Gladstone, 29 July 1852.
[3] Add. MS. 44273, fols. 209–10, to Gladstone, 4 August 1852. Young gave the government a possible maximum of 315, but of these he only considered 272 as safe. He and Bonham carried on a fascinating three-way correspondence with Gladstone as to the number of Peelites elected that indicates how uncertain membership in the group was.
[4] The correspondence is in the Aberdeen Papers, Add. MS. 43066, fols. 87–120, 21 July–18 September 1852, and the Russell Papers, PRO 30/22/10/C, /D and /E, 23 July–16 September, and much of it is reproduced in Spencer Walpole, *The life of Lord John Russell*, pp. 155–8.

younger Peelites such as Gladstone, Sidney Herbert and the duke of Newcastle had more reservations.[1]

All the Peelites were ready to join the Liberals in the House of Commons in forcing Disraeli to accept a free trade resolution when the new parliament met in November, although with Palmerston they were prepared to work out a modified wording to avoid the downfall of the government. They were anxious to see what sort of budget proposals Disraeli would produce before finally making up their minds where they stood. Disraeli's budget resolutions introduced in December, however, were decisive, for they simply did not come up to Peelite fiscal standards and they proposed to introduce the principle of differentiation in the income tax in a way that Gladstone found quite unacceptable. Disraeli's treatment of personalities in the debate was the last straw and late on the final night Gladstone wound up with an impassioned attack that was conclusive. Forty-two Conservatives, of whom thirty-nine may be classified as Peelites, joined the Liberals to defeat the Resolutions in the early morning hours of 17 December.[2]

At long last the hour of decision for the Peelites had come. For more than six years they had sat on the fence, hostile to any party or any government led by Peel's traducers, but suspicious of Whigs and Radicals as lifelong political rivals and opponents. By and large the Peelite reforming tradition was a better match for the main body of the Liberals than for the main body of the Conservatives, but human reluctance to change old associations remained strong to the end. Even while the debate was still in progress so staunch a Peelite as Sir John Young wrote to Gladstone warning him that 'politically' he was 'on

[1] The interesting correspondence between the ex-Peelite ministers and Aberdeen, who relayed it to Russell, is to be found in *Aberdeen Correspondence* (hereafter *Ab. Cor.*) *1850–60* (privately printed by Lord Stanmore and deposited in the British Museum), pp. 301–70.

[2] *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, CXXIII, 1693 (hereafter *Hansard* with a volume number). The thirty-nine Peelites who subsequently supported the Aberdeen coalition were afterwards joined by one other, the third Sir Robert Peel, who missed the division, and by four others who were defeated in the general election of 1852, but who later returned through by-elections, namely, E. Cardwell, T. Green, Roundell Palmer and R. J. Phillimore. The three Conservatives who opposed the Disraeli budget, but who did not give consistent support to the coalition, were James Johnstone, Colonel Jonathan Peel (brother of the Prime Minister) and G. Tomline. Thus the hard core of Peelites who supported the coalition proved to be forty-four (see Appendix A), although another thirty-six independent Conservatives, including James Johnstone, gave it not infrequent support (see Appendix B), but none of this was clear when the coalition was formed. Only twenty-four of the forty-four were survivors of the band of Peel's supporters in 1846.

the brink of a grave danger'. The inclination of such men was to win over as many as possible of the supporters of Lord Derby to a reconstituted Peelite Conservative party, not to achieve a union of the present small band of Peelites with the Liberals. Young made this point clear in a letter to Gladstone explaining the nature of the danger facing him. If Aberdeen were to head a coalition government with Russell leading the Commons and Graham in a prominent position, then in Young's view the whole Conservative party would follow Derby and Disraeli into opposition, 'nearly divide the House & render the succeeding Ministry weak and powerless—dependent on the Radicals and the Irish Brass Band for their existence from day to day'. He was also convinced that a dissolution for such a ministry would be disastrous since he believed the Conservatives were stronger in the country and would beat them. In conclusion he hinted at the dangerous influence that Sir James Graham might exercise, for all his great talents, because of his 'love of intrigue' and his extreme unpopularity with the Conservative party.[1]

Of this letter Gladstone noted: 'Yes—I agree quite in this view. As to political questions those affecting religion should be open.'[2] Yet subconsciously he may have felt that events were taking the course of a Greek drama in which he had to play his fore-ordained role. At any rate his apparent agreement did not stop him taking the risks against which Young warned him.[3]

Gladstone's friend and former secretary, Sir Stafford Northcote, wrote in a vein similar to Young's. He suggested that with free trade settled the Peelites were the natural leaders of the Conservative party, although the self-constituted chiefs of that party remained anxious to keep them out, and he asked:

> Is it not then the policy of the Peelites to assert themselves as a purely Conservative Administration, claiming the support of the whole Conservative body, and that alone? And resting this claim to supersede Lord Derby on the simple ground of their superior capacity for administering the financial and other affairs of the country?
>
> It would not be inconsistent with this position [he went on] that they should

[1] Add. MS. 44237, fols. 222–4, 13 December 1852.
[2] *Ibid.* fol. 226, 18 December 1852. The note is unsigned, but presumably Gladstone's.
[3] The action of some rowdy young Tory bloods who threatened to throw him out of the Carlton Club a few nights before the defeat of the government may have helped Gladstone to make up his mind that he no longer belonged in that atmosphere. See L. Strachey and R. Fulford, *The Greville Memoirs* (London, 1938), VI, 383; Morley, *Gladstone*, I, 440–1.

accept the services of a few of the Conservative Whigs, but it *is* inconsistent that they should join Ld. J. Russell the acknowledged leader of the Liberals, unless he abjures his old party, which is not the case.

In short he recommended the formation of a Liberal Conservative ministry which he believed could expect the support of most Conservatives and could rally the electorate at a general election.[1]

On the government's resignation Gladstone himself prepared a 'most Private memorandum' regarding the possibility of forming a 'mixed Government' to defend the income tax, which went a good deal further than either of his correspondents had suggested. In the existing situation, he reasoned, neither the Conservative nor the Liberal party was capable of forming a single government. The Liberals might like to form one with reinforcements from the Peelites, but the latter were not prepared to take office as members of the Liberal party 'and if they were they would be encountered by an Opposition numerically too strong for them in the present Parliament and one which they could not weaken by a Dissolution'. The only alternative, he concluded, was the formation of what he called a 'mixed Government'.

> The formation of a mixed Government [he wrote] can only be warrantable or auspicious when its members have the most thorough confidence in the honour, integrity, and fidelity of each other; when they are agreed in principle upon all the great questions of public policy immediately emergent; and lastly when a great and palpable emergency of State calls for such a formation.

Gladstone considered that such an exigency existed at that moment, not only in the foreign situation, but more particularly in the field of finance. He analysed the history of the income tax at length and considered the dangerous innovations now proposed to differentiate between sources of income. Here he found the basis of a coalition between the temperate portions of the Conservative and Liberal parties to oppose such innovations. Thus he believed that the three conditions to justify a mixed government existed. 'By a mixed government', he wrote, 'I mean something different from a fusion of parties. A mixed government may honourably be formed, but a fusion of parties could not, with a reserve upon political questions more remotely impending, such as Parliamentary Reform; a reserve to this extent that upon all the particulars and details of such a measure. . . every man will retain an entire freedom.' The question of a differentiated income tax,

[1] Add. MS. 44778, fols. 72–5, December 1852.

he insisted, must be the subject of great deliberation, perhaps by a cabinet committee which might work out a reasonable plan. If not the cabinet must then take a united stand on another course.[1]

Gladstone's distinction between a mixed government (i.e. a coalition) and a fusion of parties is of particular interest, because, although he here appears as the protagonist of the former concept, in the long run the fusion was achieved under his leadership. Gladstone presumably made his views clear to Aberdeen, for the latter appears to have kept in close touch with him as well as with Herbert and Graham about the steps which he was now taking towards the formation of a government.[2]

Certainly Graham was in close communication with Aberdeen throughout the whole process of cabinet making, and indeed his Diary of events, although highly partial, is the most detailed source of information in print.[3] As the senior Peelite in the House of Commons and as a born politician he was anxious to ensure that his less worldly-wise friend and colleague in the House of Lords made no unnecessary mistakes. He strongly advised Aberdeen 'to send for each individual *without exception*' to whom a place was to be offered. 'You must make it felt *at once*', he wrote, 'that you are the head of the Government, and that the power of the Crown flows from you *alone*.'[4]

On the eve of the Derby government's fall the duke of Bedford, who had been in correspondence with Baron Stockmar, intervened to act as a secret and unofficial link between the Court and the opposition camp. He invited several Whig and Peelite leaders—Russell, Lansdowne, Clarendon, Aberdeen and Newcastle—to be his guests at Woburn from 15 to 17 December.[5] There they were joined on the 17th by Colonel Phipps, Prince Albert's private secretary. Both Bedford and Phipps sent much the same advice to Windsor, namely that in the event of Derby's resignation the queen should send for both Lansdowne and

[1] Add. MS. 44778, fols. 66–71, memo. 93, 18 December 1852.

[2] See Add. MS. 44778, fols. 60–5 and Add. MS. 44740, fols. 171–83 for a variety of lists of names in Gladstone's hand of Peelites and Liberals evidently being considered for office, and a letter from Gladstone to Aberdeen, dated 'Christmas, 1852', making suggestions for non-cabinet appointments.

[3] Graham Papers, Diary 17–30 December 1852, entitled 'Changes of Government' (printed in C. S. Parker, *Life and Letters of Sir James Graham*, II, 190–203, with some omissions).

[4] Add. MS. 43190, fols. 377–8, 23 December 1852.

[5] R.A. C42, fol. 48, Bedford to Stockmar, 15 December 1852; cf. L. Strachey and R. Fulford, *The Greville Memoirs*, VI, 377–82; Spencer Walpole, *Lord John Russell*, II, 161. Lansdowne, detained by gout, arrived on the 17th after Russell's departure.

Aberdeen 'to consult them'.[1] Neither attached much importance to the Manchester party, but they both expressed concern regarding the attitude of Palmerston, with whom Bedford had had some conversations at an earlier date. Bedford reported that Palmerston would not serve under Russell as Prime Minister again, but that both of them would be willing to serve under Lansdowne. The latter, however, had expressed strong objections to the idea of resuming public office. Regarding the results of the Woburn colloquium Bedford wrote to Stockmar: 'I think our little meeting of politicians here, including my brother for one day, has been of infinite use, by putting the parties in good humour with each other & by smoothing jealousies and asperities, for a common object—but it is impolitic to conceal from oneself that there must still be great difficulties in the formation of a new Government.' He said that Aberdeen was 'very friendly both personally & politically' with his brother and that Newcastle, also, was 'friendly, & quite prepared to do his best to facilitate the formation of a good government by a [juncture?] of Whigs and Peelites'. Bedford sounded out his brother's own views, without telling him that he was doing so at the queen's request. 'He will do everything that loyalty, & patriotism can require, without a particle of self', Bedford reported to Stockmar. 'In confidence, I add', he continued, 'that he does not wish to be sent for—but will readily confer with, & probably do whatever Lords Lansdowne & Aberdeen think best—but Ld Palmerston must still remain a difficulty.' In a postscript Bedford added: 'You are aware that great objections exist to my brother as head of a Govt, especially among Irish members, & the followers of Sir Robert Peel.'[2]

Colonel Phipps gave his master an account very similar to the duke's. He reported a conversation with Clarendon, whom he described as gloomy, to the effect that a combination with the Peelites was desirable, but that there would be difficulties; 'almost all the Peelites and many of the Whigs', he wrote, 'would refuse to serve under Lord John, whilst the liberals would possibly object to Lord Aberdeen alone'. Clarendon told him that the only thing for the queen to do was to send for Lansdowne and Aberdeen 'to *consult* them', but he was concerned about Palmerston, whom he feared might yet form an alliance with Disraeli. Phipps found Newcastle strong for a coalition, saying that 'there was no sacrifice of feelings or opinion that he was not prepared to make'.

[1] R.A. C42, fol. 49, Bedford to Stockmar, 16 December 1852; R.A. C28, fol. 12, Phipps to Prince Albert, 18 December.
[2] R.A. C28, fol. 7, 17 December 1852.

But he said it 'must be a real coalition, & not an attempt to join the Peelites to the Whigs and Liberals'. He thought the Peelites would rally to a Lansdowne–Aberdeen ministry, with Russell leading the Commons, but not to a ministry headed by either Russell or Lansdowne alone.[1]

On the same day, the 18th, Bedford wrote yet another letter to Stockmar saying that after much thought he believed that an Aberdeen administration with Russell leading the Commons would have the best chance of success, even though such an arrangement might not be quite satisfactory to the Whig party. 'No one knows that I am writing to you or that I have arrived at the opinion I have given you', he added.[2] Nevertheless, the secret soon got out; the Russells were very indignant with the duke for acting behind his brother's back, as they saw it, and Lady John in a letter to her father, Lord Minto, indulged in all sorts of foolish might-have-beens. She gave a highly coloured account of the affair, dwelling upon her brother-in-law's duplicity in not revealing the contents of the queen's letters to Lord John, who, she said, was convinced that the queen only wrote to the duke 'as a channel to himself wch wd make her communication to him less public'.

> Now was there ever more extraordinary or weaker conduct than this [she continued] & is it not sad and strange that a man so afraid of & unfit for responsibility shd from the love of mystery have taken upon himself such an immense share of it—for to what he has done is I believe to be attributed the present state of things—At all events J. might have been sent for.[3]

On 17 December, immediately after his government's defeat in the House of Commons, Lord Derby proceeded to Osborne, where the queen was staying. He managed to cross over to the Isle of Wight on the same day and presented his resignation to the queen that evening. He advised the queen to send for Lord Lansdowne, 'who', he said, 'knew better than anybody the state of parties'. Rather oddly he explained his failure to recommend Lord Aberdeen by saying he feared that, in view of his own declared resolve to retire from public life, many of his followers 'would think it necessary to join Lord Aberdeen', if that nobleman were called to form a government on his recommendation. Prince Albert quite properly commented that constitutionally

[1] *Ibid.* fol. 12, 18 December 1852. [2] *Ibid.* fol. 19, 18 December 1852.
[3] Minto Papers, Acc 2794, Box 136 (National Library of Scotland), dated 'Xmas day, 1852'; from a transcription kindly supplied to me by Dr F. Dreyer.