CHAPTER I

THE ROCKINGHAM ADMINISTRATION

On 27 February 1782 a motion in the House of Commons against the further prosecution of the war in America was carried by 234 votes to 215.[1] Lord North's ministry was doomed, and the Rockinghams, after a sixteen years sojourn in the political wilderness, could see the promised land. But the birth pangs of the new administration were arduous and protracted. The king did all he could to avoid a step which would certainly entail recognition of the independence of the American colonies. His first attempt was to try to shore up the existing ministry by bringing in Lord Gower and Lord Weymouth, remnants of the old Bedford party, with the help of the duke of Grafton, 'the most temperate of all the opposition'.[2] On 7 March they declared themselves unable to give any assistance, and North warned the king that it would prove 'very difficult to form a mixed system'.[3] The king next authorised Thurlow, the Lord Chancellor, to negotiate the formation of a ministry on a broad basis, not excluding the Rockinghams. These approaches also proved abortive as the king clearly hoped they would. Rockingham was not prepared to join forces with the existing ministry, and demanded specific assurances that the king would not obstruct the grant of independence to America, nor the introduction of

[1] Technically, the division was on a government motion for the adjournment.

[2] Fortescue, v, no. 3543. All three had at one time been colleagues of North in his administration. Grafton was Lord Privy Seal from 1771 to 1775; Gower was Lord President of the Council from 1767 to 1779; Weymouth was Secretary of State for the Southern Department from 1775 to 1779.

[3] Fortescue, v, no. 3545. I cannot agree with the suggestion by J. Norris, *Shelburne and reform*, 147, that there was a negotiation with Shelburne at this stage. The critical document is Fortescue, v, no. 3542, which appears to have been misdated by the editor. It is the reply to no. 3632, and was presumably written on 6 April.

economical reform. This the king treated as a personal affront, broke off the negotiations, and began talking of abdication.[1]

The next round of negotiations was triggered off by a further blow to the ministry. On Monday 18 March Lord North, who had survived a direct vote of no confidence the previous Friday by a mere 9 votes, learned that a sizeable group of country gentlemen was no longer prepared to support him. In a letter which was a model of tact and cogency, he advised the king to abandon his search for a 'broad-bottom' administration and come to terms with Shelburne and Rockingham. The king's reply was rude and peremptory:

> After having yesterday in the most solemn manner assured you that my sentiments of honour will not permit me to send for any of the Leaders of the Opposition and personally treat with them, I could not but be hurt at your letter of last night. Every man must be the sole judge of his feelings, therefore whatever you or any man can say on that subject has no avail with me.[2]

But the prospect of being left with no ministry at all while the war still raged, and two more urgent representations from North, induced the king to change his mind and instruct Thurlow to reopen discussions. On Wednesday 20th, North announced his resignation rather than face another vote of no confidence. The following day the king saw Lord Shelburne and offered him the lead on the assumption that the Rockinghams would be prepared to follow. Shelburne was obliged to refuse. His own parliamentary following, though distinguished, was small, and there was no chance of the Rockinghams enlisting under his banner. After another unsuccessful approach to Lord Gower, the king reconciled himself to offering Rockingham the ministry, though Shelburne was to be built up as a counterpoise to the Rockinghams, and was to have complete charge of the negotiations. To his confidant

[1] Fortescue, v, nos. 3555, 3561, 3564 & 3563. The last of these letters seems to be misdated. Thurlow's 'little excursion' began on 17 March (see *H.M.C. Carlisle MSS.*, 597), so presumably the letter was written on 18 or 19 March. Rockingham's terms are given in no. 3564; Leeds, 62; and Albemarle, *Memoirs of the marquis of Rockingham and his contemporaries* (1852), ii, 451-3.

[2] Fortescue, v, nos. 3566 & 3567.

Charles Jenkinson the king wrote on Sunday 24th: 'I have seen Lord Shelburne; his language is fair: he dreads the R(ockingham) party, and will I believe offer to take a secondary part if he can gain them. He knows I will not treat *personally* with Lord R(ockingham)'.[1]

Time was now running out. If a new administration were not formed by Monday 25th, the opposition threatened to bring forward a resolution expressing 'the anger of the House'. Not until the very last moment did the advice of Shelburne and Thurlow prevail; Dunning was empowered to inform the House of Commons that an administration was under construction.[2] The rest of the day Shelburne spent with Rockingham working out the arrangements, and reported to the king that he hoped he had been able 'to keep things within the bounds prescribed by Your Majesty'. The *rapprochement* between Shelburne and the king was developing fast, and George replied with some degree of cordiality: 'Lord Shelburne's Note I look upon as an instance of *personal* attention, and feel it as such; I trust from it he has stood firm, and will have remembered that the powers intrusted to him in the Ministerial line, according to his own sentiments, gives him strength with more vigour to resist all others'.[3] The first of the new ministers kissed hands on Wednesday 27 March.[4]

[1] *The letters of King George III*, ed. B. Dobrée, 151–2.

[2] Debrett, vi, 509. There is no evidence to support the assertion in Albemarle, ii, 464 that Rockingham had an audience with the king before kissing hands. Horace Walpole wrote to W. Mason, 1 April 1782, that Rockingham's friends had persuaded him to swallow the rebuff, and this is confirmed by the account given in Russell, i, 291.

[3] Fortescue, v, nos. 3581 & 3582.

[4] The cabinet numbered eleven. Thurlow stayed on as Lord Chancellor and watchdog of the royal interest. Shelburne, who took the seals of the Home Department, had his close ally Dunning (raised to the peerage as Lord Ashburton) with him as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and might expect support from the ex-Chathamites, Grafton and Camden, serving as Lord Privy Seal and Lord President of the Council. Rockingham's staunch supporters Fox and Lord John Cavendish were Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Chancellor of the Exchequer, and he could normally expect support from Keppel at the Admiralty and Richmond at the Ordnance. General Conway, the Commander-in-Chief, stood somewhat aloof from the main groups, and his politics

In the king's handling of these negotiations may be seen the seeds from which the Fox-North coalition was ultimately to spring. His objective from the beginning was to drive a wedge into the opposition, and he was not unduly squeamish in his methods. In January 1780, when similar discussions had been in progress, a reminder from the opposition that they would expect all his confidence drew from him an indignant declaration: 'I think I know sufficiently the extent of my duty in this respect, and have never been wanting in the discharge of it'.[1] Yet this deference to constitutional propriety hardly squares with his refusal to see Rockingham, or his pretence that he knew nothing of the specific measures Rockingham was insisting upon. Rockingham complained repeatedly during the negotiations of royal evasiveness: 'I must confess that I do not think it an advisable measure, first to attempt to form a ministry by arrangement of office—afterwards to decide upon what principles or measures they are to act'.[2] Even after this clear indication that Rockingham was not to be side-tracked, Thurlow warned the king through North:

> He had never owned to Lord Rockingham his having mentioned his Lordship's four propositions to Your Majesty, but had always treated them as inferior, and subsequent considerations to be settled after the formation of a ministry, and not as conditions of acceptance. He advises, therefore, that Your Majesty should not appear acquainted with that part of Lord Rockingham's conversation . . .[3]

Since there was no alternative to Rockingham, these prevarications were merely futile, and after North's resignation Rockingham had to be given the assurances he demanded.

It was equally unfortunate that Rockingham was not made aware of the extent of the king's commitments to Lord Shelburne. Although the king had talked of Shelburne taking a 'secondary

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were unpredictable. The situation was, of course, fluid, and it is not possible to say precisely where each man stood. A rather different classification of the cabinet is given by A. S. Foord, *His Majesty's Opposition, 1714–1830* (1964), 373.

[1] Fortescue, v, no. 2916.

[2] Albemarle, ii, 459.

[3] Fortescue, v, no. 3566.

part', it is clear that he intended him to be joint first minister.[1] It is most improbable that Rockingham would have accepted this situation had it been explicitly stated at the outset. If the king's intention was to sow dissension, it could hardly have been done more adroitly, and Charles Fox was not alone in drawing the conclusion that the new administration 'was to consist of two parts—one belonging to the king, the other to the public'.[2]

To the king it no doubt seemed indecent that a subject should attempt to strike bargains with his sovereign: all good men should be willing to serve without question. But this desire to subordinate the discussion of great political questions to his personal honour was also sound tactics, and gave the king a last card to play when all else failed. Rockingham's trump against this was to bring the force of public opinion to bear, in precisely formulated demands, a proceeding sufficiently novel in the world of eighteenth-century politics to justify Macaulay and others finding it significant.[3]

The prospects for the new administration were far from auspicious. On almost every major issue the cabinet was at variance.

[1] It is instructive to compare the two drafts prepared by the king in answer to Rockingham's subsequent complaints. In the first, submitted to Thurlow for consideration, the king's promises to Shelburne before the negotiations commenced are very clearly stated: 'he was assured that he should not only be fully consulted on the Plan of the new administration, and that the changes proposed should be communicated to the King by him, but that after the Administration should be formed, all Ecclesiastical and Civil Preferments should be jointly recommended by the Marquis of Rockingham and him.' This seems to have been thought too candid, and in the version communicated to Rockingham on 7 April, no mention was made of these specific assurances. Instead, the king took refuge in the disarming observation that he would 'receive the advice of both separately with great attention, but certainly with the more if it meets with the concurrence of the other'. Fortescue, v, nos. 3632 & 3639. [2] Russell, i, 292.

[3] Its comparative novelty can be gauged from the slightly bemused fashion in which Lord Stormont wrote to the king: 'their purpose is to draw advantage from insisting upon points which they have contrived to make popular for the moment.' Fortescue, v, no. 3587. Mr John Brooke, who distrusts the attempt to find 'uniqueness' in the Rockinghams and regards opposition policies merely as a cloak to cover political nakedness, nevertheless admits that 'on one occasion (in 1782) under the stress of a national disaster, the programme was actually put into effect when the Opposition achieved power'. See his stimulating essay entitled 'Party in the Eighteenth Century', in *Silver Renaissance*, ed. A. Natan (1961).

Whereas the Rockinghams had demanded independence for America, Shelburne was on record against it. In 1778 he had committed himself somewhat imprudently to the proposition that the moment independence was granted 'the sun of Great Britain is set', an opinion he reiterated as late as December 1781, declaring it would 'ever be a stumbling block' between himself and Rockingham.[1] To parliamentary reform, Shelburne, Fox and Richmond were sympathetic, Rockingham and Cavendish lukewarm, Thurlow stoutly opposed. On economical reform, while only the Chancellor dissented, the ministry suffered from the lack of candour at its inception, Rockingham presuming that the reform of the royal household would be by legislation, while the king assumed that he would be left to undertake it himself.[2] There were, in addition, other pressing problems, particularly in overseas affairs. The country had to be extricated from a war in which the Americans had been joined by the French, Spanish and Dutch. In Ireland the formidable force of the Volunteer Army demanded that Britain should renounce her claim to legislate for that kingdom. The Mahratta War in India was still unfinished, and the reports of the Secret and Select Committees on Indian affairs would soon compel the government to define its attitude towards Warren Hastings and towards the future of the East India Company itself. Horace Walpole doubted whether the ministry would survive to receive a quarter's salary.[3]

There was not even a honeymoon period for the new ministers: bickering broke out at once. Within less than a week of kissing hands and before the final arrangement of places was complete, the question of patronage was causing irritation. On 5 April the king wrote to Thurlow:

I stated to you shortly on Thursday that the Marquis of Rockingham had been with me that morning, wanting to get all Patronage into his hands, to the

[1] Fitzmaurice, ii, 14; Leeds, 48.
[2] Fortescue, v, no. 3648.
[3] Walpole to Mason, 1 April 1782.

exclusion of Lord Shelburne; not satisfied with the lengths he had gone, he came after you left me, and begun the subject again. I said I would see how I could accommodate them both; when Lord Shelburne was with me he expressed an uneasiness lest I should yield to the importunities of Lord Rockingham, which would reduce him to a Secretary of State, acting under the former, instead of a colleague . . .[1]

On this occasion, Shelburne and the king concocted a soothing formula.[2] But when Lord Ashburnham, a fortnight later, resigned as Groom of the Stole, and the king offered the place through Shelburne to Lord Weymouth, Rockingham complained bitterly of 'want of confidence, and that everything must go through him'. Wrangling over appointments provided an obbligato to the ministry's activities during the remaining two months: 'besides the ill-will that this competition excites', wrote Hare, 'the time of the cabinet is as much taken up in settling the Vice-treasuryship as the kingdom of Ireland'.[3]

In the meantime Shelburne consolidated his standing with the king by a mixture of attentiveness to the royal interest and flattery. When Shelburne warned him that the cabinet was to discuss the Establishment bill, designed to effect economies in the royal household, the king urged him to 'concert' with the Chancellor in advance and 'do for the best'.[4] The result was a difficult cabinet meeting, described by Fox in a letter to Fitzpatrick, whose sister was married to Shelburne: 'There were more symptoms of what we had always apprehended than had ever hitherto appeared . . . Nothing was concluded, but in Lord Chancellor there was so marked an opposition, and in your brother-in-law so much inclination to help the Chancellor that we got into something very like a warm debate'.[5] When the matter was debated by the

[1] Fortescue, v, no. 3632. See also nos. 3627 & 3628.
[2] See p. 5, n. 1.
[3] Fortescue, v, no. 3699; Russell, i, 328. There was particular acrimony over the Governorship of Portsmouth. Shelburne had obtained a promise from the king on behalf of Lord Pembroke, but omitted to mention it to Rockingham, 'not intentionally, but owing to the difficulties which . . . attended all communications between Lord Rockingham and me'. Fortescue, vi, no. 3782.
[4] Fortescue, v, no. 3646.
[5] Russell, i, 314.

House of Lords, Shelburne stepped forth as the king's champion: 'I insisted that the proposed reduction of ministerial influence', he told the king, 'must make the struggle within and without doors, who should contribute most to Your Majesty's Dignity Comfort and Splendour'. This was a novel interpretation of economical reform, but it won royal approval: 'nothing could be more proper than Lord Shelburne's language on Monday in the House of Lords', replied the king.[1] By 18 April, Lord Temple suspected that Shelburne meant to play Rockingham false, and that there was 'some secret plan of removing Mr. Fox and of course Lord Rockingham and his friends'.[2]

Shelburne worked assiduously to build up his political connections from the moment of taking office. Of these the most valuable was with William Pitt, only twenty-two years of age, but already marked as a man of the future. He had rejected offers of junior appointments in March 1782 and maintained a certain distance from the two ministerial groups, but by May was identified in Fox's mind as 'the man that the old system, revived in the person of Lord Shelburne, will attempt to bring forward for its support'.[3] Of more immediate consequence, however, were Shelburne's overtures to Henry Dundas, who had retained his post as Lord Advocate: his electoral influence in Scotland and his growing command of Indian affairs, demonstrated in a powerful two and a half hour speech on 9 April, made him a man worth acquiring.[4] The intermediary was Thurlow who, early in April, explained to Dundas that Shelburne, 'if a breach of administration should ever happen so as to leave him in possession of government', would undoubtedly look to him to lead the House of Commons. Dundas, perfectly aware of his own political importance, was not over-anxious to cement an alliance with Shelburne,

[1] Fortescue, v, nos. 3665 & 3666. [2] Leeds, 66–7.
[3] Russell, i, 325. Shelburne wrote to the king, 20 May, that Pitt was 'certainly hostile' to the Rockinghams. Fortescue, vi, no. 3765.
[4] See Burke to Rockingham, 27 April 1782; William Adam to W. Robertson, 10 April 1782, Robertson–Macdonald MSS. 3943, National Library of Scotland.

against whom, he confessed, he had 'imbibed prejudices'. The result was a subtle sparring match between Thurlow and Dundas, two master-craftsmen in political manoeuvre. Thurlow suggested that the Keepership of the Signet for life, on which Dundas had set his heart, was his for the asking: Dundas replied that he would be glad to have it, but not at the price of being under a 'substantial obligation' to Shelburne. It would be difficult to arrange otherwise, thought Thurlow, for Shelburne would rely so much on Dundas that he would certainly wish him to feel the obligation as 'flowing directly from himself'. After these cautious explorations, the matter was taken further in a meeting between Shelburne and Dundas on 7 April. 'There was on his part', Dundas wrote to his brother, 'a great deal of civility and courtship rather a little overdone upon so slight an acquaintance.' The king had a rooted dislike of life appointments, which he regarded as an open invitation to disloyalty, but by June Shelburne was urging him to 'send for the Advocate and agree upon the best terms we can'.[1] The understanding with Dundas helped to strengthen the connection with Pitt, whom Dundas later described as the *sine qua non* of any non-Rockingham ministry, and opened the channel to Richard Rigby, whose small group would make a useful addition to Shelburne's parliamentary following.[2]

Grafton and Camden were also the objects of Shelburne's attention. Early in May Grafton described several dinner parties at which Shelburne revealed 'nothing like cordiality' towards Rockingham's ministry:

> I noticed . . . that every engine was set to work, to bring from Lord Camden a declaration that he would go on with Lord Shelburne in case of such a separation. No artifice could prevail on Lord Camden to acquiesce, though Lord Shelburne

[1] Fortescue, vi, no. 3798; Henry to Robert Dundas, 18 April 1782, Dundas of Arniston MSS., R.H. 4 15/5, Scottish Record Office.

[2] Dundas to Thomas Orde, 6 July 1782, Melville MSS., Scottish Record Office. In an analysis of the House of Commons made in March 1783 by John Robinson (Melville MSS.), Rigby is shown as the leader of a small squadron of seven members. He was, in addition, a useful speaker.

pressed him in a manner which appeared to me to be by much too warm. On my part, I gave his lordship no expectation that he could depend on my assistance on such a juncture.[1]

Such time and energy as ministers could spare from these pursuits were devoted to affairs of state. The programme of economical reform went through both Houses of Parliament without great difficulty.[2] The Northites were for some time in disarray, attendances were thin, and the debates desultory. The main opposition came from within the ministry itself, Thurlow speaking with particular vehemence against the bill to debar contractors from the House of Commons and against Burke's Civil List reform. A bill to reform the corrupt borough of Cricklade afforded another opportunity for the administration to parade its disunity. Richmond, goaded beyond endurance by legalistic obstruction, accused Thurlow of 'opposing indiscriminately every measure of regulation or improvement' which was laid before the House: his cabinet colleague, in injured tones, retorted that he was 'but a plain man, who studied nothing but to convey his sentiments clearly and intelligibly'. In the House of Commons, a motion by William Pitt for a committee to consider parliamentary reform proved a further embarrassment, Fox and Dundas clashing in the course of the debate. In addition, the proposal gave Lord North's following a chance to climb back into the political arena on an issue that united them most, and with their help the motion was defeated by 161 to 141 votes. It had been 'a strange day', wrote Burgoyne to Fitzpatrick, 'friend against friend among us; on the other side the late Ministry voted in phalanx'. The Northites' morale was further boosted by the news of Rodney's great victory over de Grasse in the West Indies. Unfortunately for the ministry orders had just been

[1] Grafton, 320.

[2] This legislation is discussed in detail by J. Norris, *Shelburne and reform* (1963), 155–64; B. Kemp, 'Crewe's Act, 1782', *English Historical Review*, vol. lxviii; I. R. Christie, 'Economical Reform and the "Influence of the Crown", 1780', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, xii.