THE FOX–NORTH COALITION

'Britannia Roused, or the Coalition Monsters Destroyed', Rowlandson.
From M. D. George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*,
Vol. vi, 1784–92.

THE FOX–NORTH COALITION

Crisis of the Constitution, 1782–4

BY

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PREFACE

I should like first to express my gratitude to Lord Abergavenny, Lord Camden, Lord Kenyon, Lord Lansdowne, Lord Spencer and Mr Victor Montagu for permission to quote from family papers in their possession; to the Librarian of the University of Leeds for permission to consult the Brotherton Collection; and to the trustees of the late Sir Robert Dundas of Arniston, Bt.

I have much appreciated the kindness shown by my colleagues in the University of Bristol, particularly Patrick McGrath, James Sherborne and David Large, each of whom has shown great interest in the undertaking and listened with patience on many occasions. The staff of the University library have been invariably considerate, and I should especially like to thank Mr M. G. Edwards and Mr G. F. Richmond for the help they have given me over many years.

In the course of the volume I have in some places dissented from the views of my former colleagues in the History of Parliament Trust, the late Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke. It therefore gives me particular pleasure to have an opportunity of acknowledging the many acts of kindness I received from them both, and my respect for the contribution they have made to our understanding of the eighteenth century.

Lastly, I must place on record my appreciation of the courteous treatment I have had from the staff of the Cambridge University Press. I hope that they too have enjoyed the gentle irony that a book which shows William Pitt in a less flattering light than usual should issue from the Pitt Building.

BRISTOL
July 1969

J. A. C.

ABBREVIATIONS

Buckingham	The Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, *Memoirs of the Court and Cabinets of George the Third*, 1853
Debrett	J. Debrett, *The Parliamentary Register*, 2nd series
Fitzmaurice	Lord Fitzmaurice, *Life of William, Earl of Shelburne*, 1912
Fortescue	*The Correspondence of King George III*, ed. Sir John Fortescue, 6 vols. 1927–8
Grafton	*Autobiography and Political Correspondence of Augustus Henry, Third Duke of Grafton*, ed. W. R. Anson, 1898
Laprade	*Parliamentary Papers of John Robinson 1774–84*, ed. W. T. Laprade, 1922
Leeds	*The Political Memoranda of Francis, Fifth Duke of Leeds*, ed. O. Browning, 1884
Russell	*Memorials and Correspondence of Charles James Fox*, ed. Lord John Russell, 1853
Stanhope	Lord Stanhope, *Life of the Rt. Hon. William Pitt*, 1861
Wraxall	N. W. Wraxall, *The Historical and Posthumous Memoirs*, ed. H. B. Wheatley, 1884

INTRODUCTION

The attempt by Charles Fox and Lord North in 1783 to establish their administration in defiance of the king's wishes marks the political and constitutional climax of the reign of George III. A party in command of a majority in the House of Commons was pitted against a monarch employing every weapon in the still formidable armoury of prerogative. The conflict was a struggle not merely for power, but between rival views of the constitution. From the beginning of his reign, George III had dedicated himself to the extirpation of party. In March 1783, reflecting on the previous twenty-three years, he wrote: 'When he mounted the throne . . . he had the pleasing hope that being born in this kingdom, he might have proved the happy instrument of conciliating all parties, and thus collecting to the service of the state, the most respectable and most able persons this nation produced. Of this object he has never lost sight.'[1] This was no personal whim on George's part, but a logical endeavour to check that development which was bound, in due course, to deprive the monarch of many of his powers, and in particular of the right to choose his own ministers. Any ruler, conscious of his own interest, would pursue a similar policy: it was hardly necessary to devise a melodramatic explanation in terms of Bute's indoctrination of high prerogative principles in order to account for George behaving as most monarchs had done. William III had struggled to resist party rule, and his successor had declared that party domination would render her a slave and mean her 'personal ruin'. Though the exigencies of the dynastic dispute with the Stuarts led the first two Georges to embrace party, with Frederick, Prince of Wales, the situation reverted to normal, and his programme included the determination to 'abolish for the future all distinctions of party'.[2]

[1] Fortescue, vi, no. 4259.
[2] *H.M.C. 9th Report, appendix*, 471–2; *Correspondence of John, fourth duke of Bedford* (1842–6), i, 320.

Opposition to the growth of party was, in fact, a standard monarchical attitude, and Gustav III of Sweden, George III's contemporary, assured his subjects at the time of his *coup d'état* that he was not establishing absolutism but rescuing them from 'the despotism of party rule': the parallel did not pass unnoticed during the acrimonious debates in Britain in 1784.[1] One hundred years later, in the midst of the controversy over parliamentary reform, Queen Victoria was still echoing the same sentiments: 'I do wish there was some patriotism, instead of Party, Party, in all this painful question.'[2]

But despite the disapproval of successive monarchs, political parties and combinations continued to flourish, and in the course of time acquired defenders. The old duke of Newcastle, whatever his practice, still professed devotion to the ideal of non-party government, and claimed to 'detest the thought of an *Opposition*'.[3] But a new generation of politicians openly declared party allegiance to be desirable. 'How men can proceed without any connection at all is to me utterly incomprehensible', wrote Burke in 1770, and in 1783 Fox proclaimed party as an article of his political faith: 'I have always acknowledged myself to be a party man . . . a systematic opposition to a dangerous government is, in my opinion, a noble employment for the brightest faculties . . . Opposition is natural in such a political system as ours'.[4] This

[1] I. Andersson, *A history of Sweden* (1956), 279–80. Archibald Fraser referred to events in Sweden during the debate of 20 January 1784, and in caricature no. 6485, M. D. George, *Catalogue of political and personal satires*, vi, Pitt is shown exhorting the king to emulate Gustav III.

[2] Quoted in C. S. Emden, *The people and the constitution*, 2nd edition (1956), 115.

[3] Newcastle to Hardwicke, 17 August 1761, Add. MS. 32927, ff. 69–70. Historians have taken these protestations too seriously: the duke got over his dislike of a formed opposition. K. G. Feiling, *The second tory party, 1714–1832* (1938), 4, wrote: 'Nor, again, could there properly be, it was commonly thought, such a thing as "a formed Opposition". Till the Nineteenth century most retiring ministers followed the model of passive loyalty set by Walpole.' I do not see how this comment could survive an examination of the conduct of subsequent ministers. Bute retired from politics completely, and Shelburne for several years, but Newcastle, Devonshire, George Grenville, Grafton, North, Rockingham, Portland and Pitt all went into formed oppositions.

[4] *Thoughts on the cause of the present discontents*; Debrett, xii, 307–9.

George III would never concede. Opposition was to him inseparable from disloyalty. In November 1782, he wrote to North: 'I have no wish but for the prosperity of my dominions, therefore must look on all who will not heartily assist me as bad men as well as ungrateful subjects'.[1]

The confrontation between these conflicting views produced in 1783–4 the most acute political convulsion since the Revolution of 1688. Contemporaries talked of the possibility of civil war: Fox was likened to Oliver Cromwell, George to James II. For six weeks in the spring of 1783, while the country was still at war, government was in abeyance, with the king threatening abdication. For three months in 1784 the first minister was defeated in every major division in the House of Commons, yet would not resign. Every aspect of the royal prerogative was probed and discussed.

The tensions of the period 1779–80, at the time of Dunning's motion, have been described by Professor Butterfield as 'quasi-revolutionary to a degree which the world has since forgotten'.[2] His argument did not command complete acceptance,[3] and one may suggest that the description could more aptly be applied to the years 1783–4—by which time the ferments in Ireland had grown greater rather than less, the extra-parliamentary associations were still vigorous, the loss of the thirteen colonies was an undoubted fact, public credit was at a low ebb, there was serious disaffection in the army and navy, and Parliament and executive government were paralysed by constitutional deadlock. One may perhaps go further and see in the struggle between king and Parliament an English counterpart of the rivalry between monarchs and nobility that was so marked a feature of the European scene at this time. Though the people were no more than auxiliaries

[1] Fortescue, vi, no. 3973. This was an appeal to North's own position, as the 'ungrateful' jibe was intended to indicate.
[2] *George III, Lord North, and the people, 1779–80* (1949), p. vi.
[3] See, e.g., reviews by Richard Pares, *English Historical Review*, lxv, 526–9, and W. T. Laprade, *American Historical Review*, lvi, 340–1.

in the contest between the king and what Dundas termed 'an insolent aristocratical band', the unexpected by-product of the clash was an important extension of the role of public opinion in political life, as first the Rockinghams appealed to it in 1782 to coerce the king, and in 1784 the king, with even greater success, retorted it upon the Rockinghams. 'When the Crown and Nobility contend,' wrote Horace Walpole, 'both endeavour to conciliate the favour . . . of the people; and though the ultimate end of the contentions of the great is to oppress the people, many advantages are conferred on the latter to purchase their support'.[1]

No modern study of the central theme of these events—the formation of the coalition—has been undertaken. Indeed, the only full-scale treatment of the subject is in Nathaniel Wraxall's *Historical and posthumous memoirs*, published 150 years ago: though Wraxall's work is by no means as contemptible as its reviewers suggested, it is culled largely from the printed parliamentary debates, and is sometimes credulous and melodramatic. I have myself quoted from the debates of the time to an extent that some readers may find irksome, partly to do justice to the niceties of the constitutional arguments, and partly to convey something of the quality of a House of Commons that contained in North, Pitt, Fox, Burke, Sheridan and Dundas, six of the most effective debaters in parliamentary history.

In conclusion, it may be worth admitting at the outset that this is essentially a 'Whig' interpretation of the subject. I hope that this declaration will not lay me open to the charge of wilfully distorting the evidence, or of believing, as Horace Walpole did, that George III cherished a design to subvert the constitution and establish absolutist government. It means two things. First, that I have written unashamedly with an eye on the future, since I do not believe it possible for an historian to study the past 'for its own sake'. Secondly, I use the phrase in the sense employed by W. R. Fryer in his extremely useful attempt at synthesis, 'King

[1] *Journal of the reign of King George III*, ed. Doran (1859), ii, 626.

George III, His Political Character and Conduct, 1760–1784; a new Whig interpretation', *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, vi, 68–101, with whose argument I am in general agreement—*viz.* that George III is much more open to criticism than has sometimes been allowed, and that on occasions he strained his prerogatives and infringed established constitutional usage. Indeed, I believe that his intervention against Fox's India Bill was indefensible according to both the constitutional theory and practice of his own day. Finally, I think one can hardly too often stress the desirability, in the study of constitutional problems, to anchor one's investigations to the practice of politicians and not rest content with a survey of theory, which is often to be found lagging decades behind. Usages continue to be deplored while everyone knows that they are necessary and inescapable. In no field is this tendency more apparent than in relation to political opposition. Even though it is generally understood that opposition is at the heart of democratic government, people are sometimes uneasy, as though it were still faintly reprehensible. The practice is less ambiguous. When Mr Heath declared, immediately after the Labour victory of 1966, that 'if the government does pursue policies which we regard as being in the national interest, then we shall support them', few can have supposed that he would not lead his party into a formed Opposition.[1]

[1] *The Times*, 2 April 1966.