

# Report of the Annual Meeting

## Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

# Constitutional and Political Reflections on the Dismissal of Lord Grenville's Ministry

W. B. Hamilton

Volume 43, Number 1, 1964

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300445ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300445ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Hamilton, W. B. (1964). Constitutional and Political Reflections on the Dismissal of Lord Grenville's Ministry. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 43(1), 89–104. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300445ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1964

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**é**rudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

# CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE DISMISSAL OF LORD GRENVILLE'S MINISTRY<sup>1</sup>

W. B. HAMILTON  
*Duke University*

In March of 1807 the king dismissed a ministry with which he was in disagreement, just as he had in 1783, and thereafter until madness claimed him maintained in office a weak government by his own strength. The extent of the power of the crown in the last days of George III is familiar to those who have read Professor Barnes's *George III and William Pitt* and Professor Aspinall's work on *The Cabinet Council* and his introductions and commentaries on *English Historical Documents* for the period. It should have been clear to scholars all along, as it was to Thomas Erskine May in 1860, that the Victorian constitution had not been brought down off Mount Sinai by William Pitt, but historians love their myths as well as lesser breeds do.<sup>2</sup>

The sacking of the Talents can, however, still bear some comment and analysis. The bare outline of events is as follows: Searching for some way to find more troops to carry on the war and at the same time to conduct a massive attack on the whole of the Spanish empire;<sup>3</sup> search-

<sup>1</sup> This paper owes much to grants from the American Philosophical Society and the Council on Research of Duke University. I have to acknowledge the gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen to make use of material from the Royal Archives in Windsor Castle. To the Rt. Hon. Earl Spencer, the Rt. Hon. Earl Fitzwilliam and his Trustees of the Wentworth Woodhouse Settled Estates, and G. G. Fortescue, Esq., I give thanks for the use of their papers.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Grove Barnes, *George III and William Pitt*, Stanford, 1939; A. Aspinall, *The Cabinet Council, 1783-1835, The Raleigh Lectures on History, British Academy, 1952*, separate, from *Proceedings of the British Academy, XXXVIII*, 145-252; *English Historical Documents, 1783-1832* [Vol. XI of the series ed. David C. Douglas] ed. A. Aspinall and E. Anthony Smith, London, 1959; Thomas Erskine May, *The Constitutional History of England Since the Accession of George the Third, 1760-1860*, 2 vols., London, 1861-1863. Preface dated January 12th, 1861. Here used in Francis Holland's edition, 3 vols., London, 1912.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Memorandum, in Lord Grenville's hand, of sources and needs for troops, covered by a note endorsed in Thomas Grenville's hand "7 August-1806" saying: "I made out the inclosed this mornng to supply the want of W[indham]'s paper. I hope you will think it as satisfactory as I do. But it strongly leads to the necessity of Irish Catholic Recruiting—" Huntington Library, Stowe, Political 170.

This project was broached to Bedford, the lord lieutenant of Ireland, who replied that he and Elliot (the Irish secretary) saw objections to purely Catholic troops for foreign service as stirring up the Orange Protestants; both should be recruited. Bedford also reported that Catholics in the army finding themselves in England were sometimes compelled to attend Protestant services, a fact which impeded recruitment. Bedford, Phoenix Park, September 13, 1806, private, to

ing likewise for some sop to prevent the Catholics from pressing another petition for further relief, an event which would have brought the ministry to an end,<sup>4</sup> Grenville's Government conceived the idea of a minor concession. They proposed to extend to England the provisions of an Act of the Irish Parliament of 1793 opening commissions (up to rank of general) in Ireland to Roman Catholics. George III, confronted with the one question on which he was even more obstinate than on others, and one he was persuaded involved his coronation oath, balked, but he was led to acquiesce in this measure, provided he was not coerced into taking one more step.<sup>5</sup> Ministers interpreted their own intent and the King's concession to extend to "any military commission" whatever; they interpreted "military" to mean "army and navy"; they interpreted "commission" to cover appointments of general officers; and they interpreted the extension to include Dissenters as well as Catholics: "... Catholics to hold *in common with the rest of his Majesty's subjects any military commission or appointment whatever*..."<sup>6</sup>

George III was not going to agree to this measure and the old man rallied to fight his ministers once more. It was obtuse of Grenville and the Whigs to think they could get by with it, and when it dawned on them that they were faced with the royal displeasure, they first thought

Grenville. Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report on the Manuscripts of J. B. Fortescue, Esq., Preserved at Dropmore* (10 vols.; London, 1892-1927), IX, 328-329.

<sup>4</sup> Bedford wrote Holland on Dec. 18, 1806, he was afraid the Catholics were going to petition. What to do? If you duck or temporize, "you place yourselves on a level with Pitt on the question of the Slave Trade and parliamentary reform..." Holland House MSS, British Museum, CCCXLIII, not foliæd. Grey's reaction (to Holland, from Stratton St., Dec. 22, *ibid.*, CCXVII) was that the consequence of opening such a measure would be, not as the Duke supposed the carrying of the question, "but the certain dissolution of the Government." Holland (to Grey, endorsed, probably erroneously, "Feb'y 1807", *ibid.*, CCXVII) offered to go to Dublin to try to stop the petition. Grenville (to Elliot, Feb. 6, 1807, *Dropmore*, IX, 29-30) was also sure that to agitate "the great point," would break up the Government. In the same vein was Grey's correspondence with his kinsman, George Ponsonby, the Irish chancellor, Grey to Ponsonby, Dec. 31, 1806; January 10, February 18, 1807. Grey Papers, Prior's Kitchen, Durham, Papers of the 2nd Earl, Box 47, File 10.

<sup>5</sup> Spencer to Bedford, Feb. 9, 1807 (sent on Feb. 12) [drafted by Grenville. Grenville to Howick, Feb. 8, Grey Papers, 2nd Earl, 21/2/76]; George III, Windsor Castle, Feb. 10, 1807, to Spencer; Grenville, Downing St., Feb. 11, 1807, with cabinet minute, to George III; George III, Queen's Palace, Feb. 12, 1807, to Grenville — all in *Dropmore*, IX, 103-110.

<sup>6</sup> Howick later admitted to being confused himself about the extent of the measure proposed. Nonetheless, the quoted wording is included in his dispatch of March 3 to Bedford (*Dropmore*, IX, 115), which was drafted on March 2 in accordance with instructions from Grenville (March 2, Grey Papers, 21/2/82), whose purpose was thus slyly to set the King straight; and sent to the King along with the vital clauses of a proposed bill (Howick, Downing St., March 2, to the King, Royal Archives, Geo. 12651. Clauses may be found in Lord Holland *Memoirs of the Whig Party* [2 vols., London, 1852-1854], II, 307-308); and received back from Windsor without comment. Next day Howick saw the King, heard him on the subject of the bill and misunderstood him not to veto it (note by Grenville, *Dropmore*, IX, 116), and gave notice of intent to bring it before the House.

of receding to the limitations of the Irish Act of 1793.<sup>7</sup> The Marquess of Buckingham had at the outset told them they were fools to stake so much on a measure that did not even appeal to the Irish; they were going to break up the government on "the Kings imbecile and mulish rejection of the nothing that you proposed to him."<sup>8</sup> And as Thomas Grenville explained to Spencer, "I don't want to be choked to death by a cobweb. If we are to die, we should have died on emancipation."<sup>9</sup> Finally, finding it impossible to cobble the bill, they withdrew it entirely. They saved face by asserting to the King that they had not changed their minds on the need for concessions to the Catholics, and would not be restrained in future from submitting for His Majesty's decision such measures relating to Ireland as circumstances might require. George's answer was that he could not "*ever* agree to any *concessions to the Catholics*" and he must have a positive assurance to relieve him from "all future apprehension" on that score. Ministers replied that "it would be deeply criminal in them . . . to bind themselves to withhold" such "councils" as might in future seem necessary.<sup>10</sup>

The Government had adopted the tactic of not resigning but awaiting dismissal, in order, presumably, to make a more dignified exit constitutionally speaking.<sup>11</sup> The King obliged; as soon as he could assemble a Government he asked for the seals on March 25. It would seem at first blush that the old politician was in for trouble. He had sacked a ministry that appeared to have tremendous power, and turned to a crew that had ignominiously fled the scene of battle only a year before. After the King had by one expedient or another shored up a weak government from 1801 to 1806, when Pitt died January 23, 1806, its remnants deserted, declaring unanimously that they could not carry on, Hawkesbury and Eldon among them. George III suffered the indignity of having to accept Grenville — he had never liked Grenvilles — and what was worse Fox. Divided among themselves, the Pittite opposition gave very little trouble to Government, and the quiet corps of independents stayed away rather than vote against the king's Government.

When in October, after the death of Fox, the King granted Grenville a dissolution premature by two years it seemed to opposition the death knell. The country would see in this a sign of especial grace toward the

<sup>7</sup> Grenville, Downing St., March 5, 1807, to T. Grenville, after conversing with Howick. Add. MS 41852 ff. 289-290. But Grenville explained to the King on March 13 the Irish Act extension would include the Dissenters, and extend to the navy. Thomas Grenville, March 14, to Spencer, Althorp MSS.

<sup>8</sup> From Stowe, Feb. 11, 1807, to Grenville. Mr. G. G. Fortescue's MSS at Boconnoc. Cleaned up a bit in *Dropmore*, IX, 34-36.

<sup>9</sup> March 13, 1807, Althorp MSS.

<sup>10</sup> Cabinet Minute, March 15, 1807; George III to Grenville, March 17; Cabinet Minute, March 18. *Dropmore*, IX, 116-120.

<sup>11</sup> I do not know the author of this tactic, but Buckingham urged it: to Thomas, March 17, March 18. Add. MS 41851, ff. 312, 314; and to Ld. G., n.d., Boconnoc Papers.

ministry. And of course the king's ministry always carried elections. Hawkesbury<sup>12</sup> and Eldon advised desperately against the King's action, and when the dissolution came the latter thought "it had destroyed him," and that it was a "...fatal and final blow..." to Eldon's faction.<sup>13</sup>

Charles Long, one of Pitt's election managers in the Treasury, bemoaned in early January that the Pittites had no head, no program, and seemed to be in no state to form a party. As for the outcome of the elections, "Bourne reckons that we have lost about 8 or 9 by the dissolution — I reckon 31, and the Government 46... but *the Dissolution itself* in the Complexion, it has given to things independant of numbers is the greatest blow..."<sup>14</sup> Canning held much the same views.<sup>15</sup>

When Grenville had breached the fortress itself by driving the abolition of the slave trade through the House of Lords, and opposition to that measure collapsed in the Commons, an observer was awed by the power of Government :

Nobody expected this great question to be carried with so high a hand. I cannot but rejoice at it; but unless one is to suppose that a *sudden* and complete revolution has taken place in the public mind without any new assigned or assignable cause upon this subject, and that not confined to one but extended to both Houses of Parliament, it is to one who holds my opinion both disgusting and alarming to observe that the present Administration can do so much more than Pitt could accomplish in the plenitude of his power. I call it alarming because there is no knowing to what length or to what subjects this reluctant acquiescence (for reluctant it has been) to the will of Government may be carried in future.<sup>16</sup>

Suffice it to say George had put his axe to an apparently stout tree; but he was a powerful axeman. As a matter of fact, he had used more force than was necessary; he was powerful but at this point not too shrewd. He knew the Government was divided on the Army and Navy Bill. They told him so; the minutes of Cabinet were not signed by Sidmouth, Ellenborough, or Erskine; and Sidmouth openly counselled rebellion to the King on March 4.<sup>17</sup> In the course of the crisis Holland

<sup>12</sup> Hawkesbury, Oct. 1806, to George III. Most conveniently in *Eng. Hist. Docs.*, XI, 117, where Aspinall says letter may not have been sent.

<sup>13</sup> Eldon to Sir William Scott, Monday (just after Cumberland had sent him an express to tell him of the dissolution), in Horace Twiss, *The Public and Private Life of Lord Chancellor Eldon...* (3 vols.; London, 1844), II, 11-12. Evidence for his having tendered advice: "His language had led me to hope for better things..."

<sup>14</sup> Long, Burlington St., Jan. 12, 1807, to Huskisson. Add. MS 38737, ff. 183-184.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Ryder, Jan. 3, 1807, to Harrowby, quoted in Denis Gray, *Spencer Perceval, The Evangelical Prime Minister, 1762-1812* (Manchester, 1963), p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> Ryder, Feb. 27, 1807, to Harrowby, excerpt in *Eng. Hist. Docs.*, XI, 803.

<sup>17</sup> That is, he explained to George exactly what he was being asked to approve, and rather egregiously told his sovereign he, Sidmouth, wouldn't approve it even if the King did. Entry of March 8, *The Diary and Correspondence of Charles Abbot, Lord Colchester...*, ed. Charles, Lord Colchester (3 vols.; London 1861), II, 96-97.

and Grey felt uncertain about carrying on, but on balance were only a little less eager to cling to office than the Grenvilles. In both groups, however, there were grandees who consulted their honor and felt they could not concede to retreat. It was manifestly impossible for Bedford and Elliot to remain in Ireland after they had promised the Irish the little concessions.<sup>18</sup> Spencer, who was ill at Althorp, was outraged at the retreat and said he would resign.<sup>19</sup> And so they would have gone out even if the King had not required the pledge. If he had lain low and stood on the veto, he would have made impossible the very interesting constitutional debate which followed. For it was clear even to Grey at this time that the king could withhold his permission to bring in a *Government* measure, i.e., to veto in advance.<sup>20</sup> The demand for the pledge, therefore, was a political blunder. On its side, ministry made no political sense in proposing the bill. It was not one that appealed to the Irish, who sneered that the English were only trying to recruit troops, not to make concessions to them. Furthermore, the whole lot of politicians knew the King's fixed scruples on the Catholic question (and privately gave him credit for their sincerity),<sup>21</sup> had all seen Pitt humbled by them, and they could have slipped into their measure only through careless absentmindedness.

An obvious political effect of the proposal of course was to give the dispirited, disunited opposition an issue to rally 'round: King and Church. As early as February 28 Hawkesbury, Perceval, *et al.*, were communing with one another and spreading the alarm,<sup>22</sup> and by March 8 even old

<sup>18</sup> Bedford, Dublin Castle, March 17, 1807, to Grenville. *Dropmore*, IX, 99-100; Bedford, Dublin Castle, March 18, to Holland, B. M. Holland House MSS CCCXLIII, a very sharp letter indeed, accusing the ministers in London of acting with the weakness that was the disgrace of Pitt's administration.

<sup>19</sup> To Thomas G. March 14, and Lord Grenville, March 15, both drafts; Thomas, 6 P.M., March 16, and Ld. G., Downing St., March 17, to Spencer, Althorp MSS. Grey, Holland, and Windham were for resigning earlier rather than yielding the bill, according to Grey, but the latter could not take responsibility for breaking up the Government at that point. Grey, March 17, 1807, to Fitzwilliam, the absentee member of the cabinet without portfolio. Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments at Sheffield, F64a.

<sup>20</sup> Grey in his speech in the Commons on March 26, 1807 (*Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, IX, 268) said there was no doubt that "where a measure . . . is to be brought forward with the authority of the government, the measure itself, as well as the case to which it applies, ought undoubtedly to be first submitted to his majesty." Windham wrote to Thomas Grenville ( $\frac{1}{2}$  pt. 5, 9 Dec. [1806], Add. MS 41854, f. 341): "I have stopt in sending you an official order conformable to the minute of Cabinet, doubting whether such an order would be proper before the answer was returned from the King. . ." The Grenville ministry in a year sent more information and cabinet minutes to the king than in all the past five years put together (Aspinall, *Cabinet Council, 1783-1835*, p. 195), a fact which probably testified to insecurity and suspicion on both sides. George III was triumphant at having got all the minutes and correspondence on the Catholic question in writing, and when the sacking came the documents were speedily disseminated in all directions. On the veto see *Eng. Hist. Docs.*, XI, 158-177.

<sup>21</sup> Not only Grenville, but even Buckingham (to Thomas Grenville, from Stowe, March 15, 1807, Add. MS 41851, ff. 308-311) and Holland (copy, to Bedford, most private, March 13 [1807], B. M. Holland House MSS CCCXLIII), who however called it bigotry rather than Buckingham's "bona fide scruples."

<sup>22</sup> *Diary and Correspondence of Charles Abbot*, II, 92.

Portland roused himself from his narcotic stupor and began to summon the troops to Burlington House.<sup>23</sup> From here matters so progressed that when the lords Eldon and Hawkesbury were sent for to come to Windsor and commissioned by the King to command Portland to form an administration with the advice of Chatham and Lowther, he was able to do so in six days.

With a total disregard for history or for their own experience since 1783, the discharged servants of the crown thought they could maintain control of the House of Commons. They mounted an offensive calculated 1) to get support for deploring their removal (they were on poor ground here, because no responsible one of them denied the right of the King to choose his ministers); 2) to assert that the requiring of a pledge of councillors not to counsel was unconstitutional.<sup>24</sup> Note that ministers were far from asserting that the King had to take their advice, only that he had to receive it and they had the duty to tender it; 3) to assert that accepting such a pledge was unconstitutional and that ministers by accepting office under the circumstances had accepted the pledge; and 4) that the late ministers had been undone by secret intrigue and 5) by advice, for which someone was responsible, because the King can do no wrong and is not answerable for his acts, which are done on advice.

Government 1) mostly skipped over the pledge, and 2) denied they were bound by it, i.e., that they were responsible for the policy which resulted in their taking office; 3) denied intrigue; 4) denied advice, a denial which by inference placed the responsibility on the King; 5) went on directly to invoke the King's name by alleging he was arraigned at the bar of both houses; 6) first threatened dissolution, to scare the £4000-seat holders; 7) then carried out the threat, appealing to the country to support the King, and tried to make the election a straight referendum on king and Church.

Was there intrigue and advice? Yes. We do not have to be too cynical to accept the truth of the allegations about the influence of the Duke of Cumberland inside the castle,<sup>25</sup> or the truth of Bishop Tomline's reminder to George Rose that the King was "watching for an opportunity

<sup>23</sup> Portland, Burlington House, Sunday, March 8, to Hawkesbury. Add. MS 38191, f. 246.

<sup>24</sup> The oath of a privy councillor enjoined him "You shall in all things to be moved, treated, and debated in Council, faithfully and truly declare Your Mind and Opinion, according to your Heart and Conscience..." Thomas Grenville's oath, taken Dec. 5, 1798, in Huntington Library, Stowe, Miscellaneous.

<sup>25</sup> Gray, *Perceval*, p. 93, states as a rumor that Cumberland read Perceval's speech against Howick's bill to the King. Romilly, *Life*, II, 191, reported that on the day of Grenville's elucidation in the Lords, March 26, "The Duke of Cumberland placed himself at the head of this [the] bench [appropriated to the ministers], probably to proclaim to the world, that he is the person who has brought about the change of administration." Plunkett in the debates of April 9 named the Duke as a secret adviser.

to get rid" of Grenville's Government before the Catholic question came up and that certain feelers had been put out.<sup>26</sup> It is only fair to state, however, that Holland, an enemy of the court, thought the King's intentions and actions were perfectly honest — at least he thought so when he wished to cling to office.<sup>27</sup>

Sidmouth when on March 4 he openly advised George III against the measure, named others who would oppose.<sup>28</sup> Lord Eldon probably did the same on March 8, when he went down to Windsor on the business of the Princess.<sup>29</sup> Is it a coincidence that Portland, Perceval, and Co. swung into action immediately after Eldon's visit?<sup>30</sup> On March 11

<sup>26</sup> Bishop of Lincoln, Riley Grove, Nov. 14, to Rose, Add. MS 42773, ff. 85v-86.

<sup>27</sup> His letter to Bedford, London, most private, March 13 (copy in B. M. Holland House MSS. CCCXLIII) is worth quoting extensively:

Since I wrote, which by the bye is a scandalous long time, we have been embarrassed in a most perplexing way about the bill relating to Catholic commissions in the army, and were at least reduced to the alternative of yielding some of the points or breaking with the Court and some of our colleagues — Had we been quite in the right our case would have been clear and we must have resigned on the bill being rejected by any branch of the legislature, for if it had come to the throne the negative would certainly have been put — Had we had the least reason to suspect that the K. did it to thwart us, that he affected to misapprehend in order to perplex us, or that he was glad of such an opportunity of quarreling with us, we must have come to the same conclusion. But the truth is, he did honestly misunderstand us, and indeed some of our friends, Grey among the number, were not aware that our original dispatch to you meant to extend the grant beyond the Irish act — The K. therefore found steps taken both in Ireland and in Parliament (for the bill was already there) without his having consented to the measure as at last explained to him — and I must own that with all my disposition to suspect what comes from that quarter, I am convinced there has been neither trick, intrigue nor design in this occasion. Sheer bigotry, not to use a still more disagreeable phrase — So much do I believe this that I am persuaded the prospect of change added to the melancholy and restlessness which the fears of this question had produced in his frame.

<sup>28</sup> See n. 17, *supra*.

<sup>29</sup> Canning (March 11, to Mrs. Canning, excerpt in *Eng. Hist. Docs.* XI, 118-119) reported that "Lord Eldon said the King had talked to him upon other subjects, but that, having given his honour to Lord Grenville that he went upon no other subject than the Princess, he did not think it right to say what passed upon others. I did not combat this delicacy, but I shall try to ascertain whether he is the Duke of Portland's informer" that the King will oppose the bill "with all his influence." Note that Canning lied to the House on March 26 when he specifically denied Eldon had transgressed his promise to Grenville (*Cobbett's Parl. Debs.*, IX, 343) [unless he had had a categorical denial in meantime]. The Grenvilles were said to have retained the belief that Eldon had intrigued with the King. Hardwicke, Wimpole, September 26, 1809, to C. P. Yorke, Add. MS 45034, ff. 61-61. Dave Sedley wrote to T. Grenville on April 15, 1815, inclosing the printed page of *A Letter to Lord Eldon on the Change of Ministers in March 1807; Showing the Secret Means by which it was Effected*. By Ulysses. London, J. Bigg, and asking advice. Grenville replied, April 22, no comment. Add. MS 41858, ff. 200, 201.

<sup>30</sup> Canning letter immediately above reporting remarks of Portland and Perceval. Portland, London, Sunday, March 8, to Hakesbury (Add. MS 38191, f. 246): "...knowing as I now do the extreme importance of its being rejected, I can not but entreat you to come to Town tomorrow as early as possible in order to consult You on the best means of defeating..." the Catholic measure.



Sidmouth, from inside the cabinet, opened negotiations with the anti-Catholic zealot Perceval, who talked with Sidmouth's friends and consulted Hawkesbury, Castlereagh, Eldon, and Portland at Burlington House and was as a result about to rebuff Sidmouth when the latter shied off.<sup>31</sup> By March 12 the Household had had their orders to fight their master's Government's bill.<sup>32</sup> As he received that news, Portland was in the final stages of the composition of a letter to the King, a long and shrewd document. It has been observed that Portland advised the King to veto (after passage) if he were driven to it, but what is likewise remarkable is that Portland, remembering George III's fear at times in the past of not having anyone to turn to — after all he had been driven in 1783 to take Portland — twice assured the King that if he sacked or drove out Grenville, he would have no difficulty in finding men who could carry on his government.<sup>33</sup> Shortly after the King could have received this extraordinary communication, Miss Goldsworthy came from the Queen's House to Malmesbury, authorized to say the King wanted it known he was standing firm.<sup>34</sup> Burlington House began planning a ministry and arguing about whether or not to dissolve parliament.<sup>35</sup> The King must have felt able to send his ultimatum of March 17 and to summon Eldon and Hawkesbury late on March 18 after it was somehow conveyed to him that

<sup>31</sup> Copy, Perceval Committee Room, House of Commons, March 11, to Sidmouth; Sidmouth, 12 Gloucester Place, March 13, to Arden; Arden (Perceval's brother), Bruton St. [March 13] to Perceval; draft Perceval, Bruton St., ½ p. one o'clock, March 14, to Perceval, all in Add. MS 49185, unbound when inspected; *Malmesbury*, IV, 368; Gray, *Perceval*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>32</sup> Portland's sister, the Dowager Marchioness of Bath, came to tell him that her sons Lord George (Comptroller of the Household) and Lord John Thynne (Vice Chamberlain of the Household) had had the word. Lady Bath was herself Mistress of the Robes to the Queen. She found Portland agonizing over a letter to the King, and urged him to send it, "saying she would let them know" she had found him writing it. *Malmesbury*, IV, 365; Portland, Thursday, March 12, half-past eleven P.M., to Malmesbury, *ibid.*, IV, 362-363.

<sup>33</sup> Portland, Burlington House, Thursday, March 12, 1807, 10. P.M. to George III. Royal Archives, Geo. 12706. Portions printed by Roberts, and by Aspinall in *Eng. Hist. Docs.*, XI, 119-120. This letter must have gone to the King, who was at the Queen's House, early on the morning of the 13th, "...and I know from Taylor that he delivered it to the King..." (Portland, Friday, March 13, 4:15 o'clock, to Malmesbury, *Malmesbury*, IV, 364-365). One loses a bit of faith in either the integrity or the memory of Col. Taylor, the discreet secretary to the King, when one finds him quoted in the *Edinburgh Review*, Oct., 1838, as saying that on the change in 1807 George took counsel only with himself. There was no advice or communication from his previous ministers. "Nay, on that occasion he placed in my hands unopened, a letter addressed to him, before that event [the removal] was positively fixed, by one of the leaders of the opposite party, and I have it to this day, with a minute to this effect." (*Eng. Hist. Docs.*, XI, 119 n. 1.) If so, that was still another letter, for the King wrote at Windsor on March 22, 1807, to Portland (copy, Royal Archives, Geo. 12746): "Although the King was prevented by Circumstances from replying to the Letter which the Duke of Portland addressed to him in London..." he cannot delay thanking the Duke for his zeal, etc.

<sup>34</sup> *Malmesbury*, IV, 362; and *Malmesbury*, Spring Gardens, 11:45 A.M., to Portland, *ibid.*, IV, 365-366.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 366-369.

the old government of 1805 were reasonably settled with each other, had agreed upon Portland as nominal head, and were eager for office.

Grenville was at first reluctant to fight,<sup>36</sup> and remembered Fox's "running on too fast" in 1784;<sup>37</sup> but Grey, confident of the control of the House of Commons, was for making what capital they could of protests.<sup>38</sup> The strategy was to try carefully not to attack the King or to deny the King's right to change his ministers,<sup>39</sup> but to go first for the constitutional issue of the pledge and advice, regret the sacking, and if that went down, to express want of confidence in the new ministers.<sup>40</sup> It is difficult to see how politicians with twenty-five years' experience and any memories at all thought they could carry this program. The parliament usually voted with the King's new ministers; the King's friends and the country gentlemen would leave their dogs and their bottles for such an occasion as this; even if the closet were forced, ministers could not have lasted a month; and the cry of the prerogative and no popery had already been raised by the courtiers. Useless as it was, however, the effort brought on what Romilly correctly called an "extraordinary" debate, which began with unusually detailed explanations of events on March 26 and ran on through motions in both houses, an election, and the opening of a new parliament in the summer.

The old government maintained that it was unconstitutional for responsible ministers to take a pledge not to proffer any advice necessary for the welfare of the country, because the King cannot exercise any of his prerogatives without advice, for which someone other than the King is answerable. To hold otherwise would expose the King to responsibility, and destroy the sensible uses and protections of the maxim that the King can do no wrong.<sup>41</sup> This view the parliament was invited

<sup>36</sup> Grenville, March 20, to Howick, Grey Papers, 2nd Earl 21/2/86; same March 23, *ibid.*, 21/2/87.

<sup>37</sup> Grenville, Downing St., March 26, to Buckingham. *Courts and Cabinets of George III*, ed. Buckingham and Chandos (4 vols.; London, 1853-1855), IV, 148.

<sup>38</sup> Howick, Stratton St., Friday evening [March 20?], to Grenville, Add. MS 41852, f. 298; Howick, Downing St., March 22, to Auckland, *Auckland*, IV, 302-303; copy Howick to Grenville, March 24, Grey Papers, 2nd Earl 21/2/88.

<sup>39</sup> Grenville to Howick, April 2, *ibid.*, 21/2/90; Howick to Grenville, March 24, *ibid.*, 21/2/88; Auckland (Palace Yard, March 23, to Howick, *Auckland*, IV, 303-304) cautioned that "it is extremely material to satisfy the country that we are not seeking to hold the throne in thraldom."

<sup>40</sup> *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly . . .*, ed. by his sons (3 vols.; London, 1840), II, 194.

<sup>41</sup> *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, IX: Brand, c. 785; Forbes, c. 302; Romilly, cc. 327, 328; Whitbread, c. 335; Howick, c. 339 — All April 9. Grenville, c. 244; Moira, c. 254; Holland, c. 257; Carnarvon, c. 258, ministers "would deserve to lose their heads, Erskine, c. 259 — all March 26. W. H. Lyttelton, c. 433; Hibbert, cc. 437-438; Roscoe, c. 451; Tierney, c. 462; Howick, c. 471; Windham, c. 474 — all April 15. Stafford, c. 351; Lauderdale, c. 404; Holland, 413 — April 13. Grosvenor, c. 595, June 26. Britannicus, *The Present State of the Constitution* (London, 1807) pp. 161-163; and, quite lucidly, Ld. Holland's librarian, John Allen, in the *Letters of Scaevola*, seriatim in the *Morning Chronicle*, and then collected into a pamphlet (1807).

to support by implication in resolutions which were composed principally by Ld. Hardwicke and Ld. Grenville<sup>42</sup> and brought into the House of Commons by Thomas Brand, a county member (Herts) and therefore "independent," and into the Other Place by the Marquess of Stafford. Brand's motion (on countermove for orders of the day) lost by 258 to 226 in a rather full house, a result which surprised everyone and which demonstrated to the King "... how confidently His M. may under Difficulties rely upon the Attachment of the Country."<sup>43</sup> Stafford's motion, by similar indirection, was defeated 171 to 81.<sup>44</sup>

Was the pledge unconstitutional? If you adopt the view that ultimately prevailed and that the Whigs insisted had prevailed as long as the case of Danby in the reign of Charles II, that there must be someone answerable for every act of the King from which they cannot hide by pleading royal commands, yes. The old standard authorities subsequent to the early days of Victoria are unanimous in declaring it unconstitutional.<sup>45</sup> If, however, one faces the fact that while to serve the king effectively ministers ought to have the confidence of parliament, they were in the latter days of George III responsible to the king with the acquiescence of parliament, then it would seem the constitution had not arrived at the position taken by the Grenvilles and the Foxites.

Note too how far we are from the seventeenth century or from textbooks interpreting English history as a struggle between the king and parliament. In the heat of controversy in 1807 we hear little about parliament. There was not an attempt to proclaim that the rights and powers of parliament were being assaulted. The division was at a lower level: between a king and ministers, anointed by parliament though they were. Politicians found they could make capital out of defense of the King, and to some extent defense of the Church — out of defense of the Establishment, but not a parliament. In fact the "people", or more accurately the reformers, were more likely to deprecate parliament as

<sup>42</sup> Grenville, Dropmore, April 2, to Hardwicke, Add. MSS 35424, ff. 74-76; Grenville, Dropmore, April 3, to Auckland, *Auckland*, IV, 306-307 (MS in Add. MSS 34447, ff. 277-278); Howick, Stratton St., April 4, to Grenville, *Dropmore*, IX, 131-132: copy, Hardwicke, St. Jame's Square, Saturday, April 4, to Grenville, Add. MSS 35424, ff. 78-80, and H.'s draft of resolutions, f. 82; Grenville, Downing St., April 8, to Hardwicke, *ibid.*, f. 85.

<sup>43</sup> Perceval, Lincoln's Inn Fields, 6:45 A.M. Friday, April 10, to George III; and the King to Perceval, April 10, Royal Archives, Geo. 12834-12836.

<sup>44</sup> *Cobbett's Parl. Debs.*, IX, 422. April 13-14.

<sup>45</sup> E.g., May, *Constitutional History*, I, 79: "But no constitutional writer would now be found to defend the pledge itself, or to maintain that the Ministers who accepted office in consequence of the refusal of that pledge, had not taken upon themselves the same responsibility as if they had advised it." Says *Taswell-Langmead's English Constitutional History* (11th ed., ed. F. T. Plucknett [London, 1960], p. 647): "flagrantly unconstitutional." Alpheus Todd took the same view (*Parliamentary Government in England* [new ed., ed. Spencer Walpole, 2 vols., London, 1892] I, 282).

it then stood and to view the king as a counterbalance to the corrupt and oligarchic domination of the borough mongers.<sup>46</sup>

The Pittite ministry of 1807 did not hesitate at all to use the King's name and uphold his power and prerogatives. Of course they denied intrigue and secret advice. In fact, with the single exception of Perceval, they denied any advice at all. Canning entered such a denial and so did Lord Eldon, who also disclaimed responsibility.<sup>47</sup> Perceval denied the King had had any advisers — "He did not mean as to the dismissal of the ministers, but as to the pledge" — still he was willing to be responsible for it, but was unfettered by any pledge.<sup>48</sup> They mostly just ducked the issue of the pledge and threw themselves on the support of the good old King and his power and prerogatives, not scrupling, as did their opponents, to invoke his name in debate. "This was the first instance since the time of Charles," cried Canning, "that a sovereign had been brought to the bar of parliament," and it was "painful" to that selfish schemer to see it done.<sup>49</sup> Hawkesbury and General Craufurd resented the arraignment of the sovereign at the bars of their respective houses.<sup>50</sup> The despised "Doctor," Sidmouth, now parted from his allies, said flatly that the events had been purely the King's actions, "proceeding from his own heart." Stafford's resolution, then, pointed to the throne itself, and the question at issue was "... the difference between reducing the monarch to a cypher and supporting him in the full exercise of his constitutional authority."<sup>51</sup> Sir Thomas Turton thought "The real question before the house was, whether the sovereign was or was not to be supported in the fair exercise of his prerogative, against an aristocracy which had the presumption to endeavour to dictate to him."<sup>52</sup> We are reminded of Leicester House.

Finally, in the debate of April 9 Canning made the dreadful threat that ministers would appeal to the country in standing by their

<sup>46</sup> Suggestion of this in Michael Roberts, *The Whig Party, 1807-1812* (London, 1939), pp. 231-232.

<sup>47</sup> *Cobbett's Parl. Debs.*, IX, 342 (March 26, 1807); c. 606 (June 26, 1807).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, cc. 316, 317, 320. Contrast Perceval as prime minister March 18 [1812?], to Sir William Manners, who wanted a peerage: "... by the Constitution of the country, H. R. H. cannot, either as Regent or King, exercise any of the prerogatives of the Crown but under the advice of some responsible minister..." *The Letters of King George IV, 1812-1830*, ed. A. Aspinall (3 vols.; Cambridge, 1938), I, 245 n. 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Cobbett's Parl. Debs.*, IX, 342, 345 (April 9).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, 421 (April 13); cc. 286 ff. (April 9).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, 399 (April 13). And so with the lords Boringdon (c. 386), Aberdeen (cc. 353-354), Selkirk (c. 377), and Mulgrave (c. 411).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, 308 (April 9). The old clerk Ld. Liverpool wrote of Grenville's ministry: He "formed his Administration of the great Aristocracy of the country which had been in opposition to his Majesty from the commencement of his reign, and of all their dependants..." Mr. Fox was one of the latter. To [Mrs. William Watts, Spring, 1807] draft in Add. MS 38242, ff. 53-54.

sovereign.<sup>53</sup> The mere possibility of dissolution, which did not have to await this shocking use of force to have been reckoned on by members who had just bought seats and by anyone mindful of the expense of elections — it had long been obvious that new ministers would wish to resort to it — no doubt influenced votes on Brand's motion.<sup>54</sup> When it came, Ld. Holland, who had just helped advise dissolution in 1806 of a parliament with two more years of time to run, affected outrage: He repeated the words of Dunning's resolution on the power of the crown, and proclaimed that Charles I's invasion of the House of Commons "was not a more outrageous violation of the constitution."<sup>55</sup> A modern commentator thinks "Dissolution was, in the period of 1784-1832, revealed as a powerful aggressive weapon in the hands of the King . . .," providing a means of "... changing ministers without regard to the wishes of the House."<sup>56</sup>

More interesting than the constitutional implications of a mere premature dissolution is the fact that ministers chose to try to make the elections a referendum in support of King George III. When the blow fell on April 27, the Chancellor, for the lords commissioners, read the speech:

We are further commanded to state to you, that his Majesty is anxious to recur to the sense of his people, while the events which have recently taken place are yet fresh in their recollection — His majesty feels, that in resorting to this measure, under the present circumstances, he at once demonstrates, in the most unequivocal manner, his own conscientious persuasion of the rectitude of those motions upon which he has acted, and affords to his people the best opportunity of testifying their determination to support him in every exercise of the prerogative of his crown, which is conformable to the sacred obligations under which they are held, and conducive to the welfare of his kingdom, and to the security of the constitution.<sup>57</sup>

Administration papers took up the referendum theme: The old ministers, said the *Sun*, arraigned the conduct of their sovereign. "They wanted to make the cabinet a body independent of the King; they appealed to the people against their Sovereign, they have now no right to complain, when their Sovereign appeals to the people against them."<sup>58</sup> Howick thought this was "the first time that his majesty

<sup>53</sup> *Cobbett's Parl. Debs.*, IX, 346-347.

<sup>54</sup> Hardwicke, *House of Lords*, April 8, 1807, to C.P. Yorke. Add. MS 45034, f. 21. W.H. Fremantle, who had managed the elections in the autumn of 1806 (to Buckingham, April 3, 1807, *Courts and Cabinets of George III*, IV, 155) saw its effectiveness, partly because he had advanced no public money and so had no pledges.

<sup>55</sup> *Cobbett's Parl. Debs.*, IX, 588 (June 26).

<sup>56</sup> Betty Kemp, *King and Commons, 1660-1832* (London, 1957), p. 134.

<sup>57</sup> *Cobbett's Parl. Debs.*, IX, 552.

<sup>58</sup> April 28, 29; *Morning Post*, April 28, similar vein. Cited in Gray, *Perceval*, p. 105.

had ever been advised to make a personal appeal to the people . . . ,”<sup>59</sup> a point unanswered by Perceval from the Treasury Bench, and the young man put up in the new parliament to move the Address in Reply asserted the results of the referendum : “The country, sir, has beyond all question, shewn its determination to support his majesty, in the exercises of the rightful prerogatives of the crown . . . .”<sup>60</sup>

The elections of 1807 have not yet been analysed in detail in a published monograph. One may safely say the cries of “No Popery,” “King and Church” were raised in spots and might have been effective in some. Probably when we get to the bottom of it, however, there will be found the same old problems, the same old contests, mostly personal, in most constituencies. It was a livelier election than many — ninety-two contests, 182 new faces, and the Radicals taking Westminster. The Whigs were dispirited, and did not show up very well in the opening votes.<sup>61</sup>

The Government nonetheless was so weak and divided that it frequently felt its situation was precarious. George resolutely supported it, however, and it was still there when the darkness closed in on the poor man forever. This fact is the more remarkable a tribute to the power of George III because it defied the laws of political gravity. The King was almost sixty-nine years old when he sacked the Talents. He was scarcely recovered from two attacks of insanity that had afflicted him from 1801 to 1804, and he had gone blind in 1805. Under such circumstances, the reversion could have been expected to fall in at any moment, and power should long since have flowed from him to the next king. His loathsome son was in active politics, so that the standard had been erected to which politicians could repair. Not only the power of his father but his own actions, however, lost the Prince the reversionary power of gathering round him his own government. In the crisis of 1807 his domestic situation, the sense he probably had of Grenville’s contempt for him, the influence of the current mistress, his cowardice and his dependence caused him to hasten to make his humble duty to the King and rat on the Catholics.

When another crisis arrived in 1809, courage might fail some of the ministers, but there was much to rally support for old George. “His Popularity,” wrote Lord Bulkely, “is very great for the Mass of People look up to his good moral character and to his Age and to a comparison with his sons . . . .”<sup>62</sup> His very madness, while a grievous

<sup>59</sup> *Cobbett’s Parl. Debs.*, IX, 622 (June 26, 1807).

<sup>60</sup> Lord Newark, *ibid.*, IX, 609 (June 26). Hawkesbury and Buckinghamshire, among others, saw the election as a referendum. *Ibid.*, IX, 607, 601.

<sup>61</sup> Gray, *Perceval*, p. 106; divisions in *Cobbett’s Parl. Debs.*, IX, 577 ff. 622 ff. Both Rivington’s (pp. 198-199) and Otridge’s (pp. 235-236) *Annual Registers* thought the electors mostly indifferent.

<sup>62</sup> To Auckland, Oct. 3, 1809, Add. MS 34457, f. 557.

weakness, was a source of strength: It made him an object of sympathy, but in addition it aroused the protective instinct of those who feared to see him crossed lest the strain lead to another attack. He was a hardworking, methodical, conscientious ruler, a father accursed with unworthy sons, a Head of the Church who defended it stubbornly. George was an old, mad, blind, respected king, *pace* Shelley.

Government was able, then, to speak of standing by him.<sup>63</sup> Perceval's brother wrote him that if the attempt failed, or the

... Conditions are unreasonable and not reconcilable to the King's Judgment, and his Majesty, well informed upon a View of the whole Case, requires you to stand by him in the best measure you can, you must do so to the utmost and at all risks and be but firm and you will do it with Success, for bad as the Times are and lowered as the King's Authority and Influence is, I still think that the constitutional Prerogatives, his Majesty's Character and steady Resolution will (as they have often proved before) be sufficient to uphold an Administration of his own Choice...<sup>64</sup>

Other observers also thought government could survive a great deal, with the King's support, if it did not lose courage. With Huskisson, who had gone out, and foresaw collapse, the military secretary to the Duke of York begged to disagree:

... From a pretty accurate observance of public affairs for some years back, and I have seen all the secret hinges of them, It has appeared to me that if The King chose to give his confidence fully and decidedly to a Chimney Sweeper, and that [if] the fellow had parts and good nerves, he might govern this Country in spite of any opposition that could be offered.<sup>65</sup>

A Scot more literally observed that "people here say the Ministers Cannot stand which I don't believe as I am sure any administration in the existence of which the king Concurr's sincerely will as things are now constituted remain firm."<sup>66</sup>

Lord Carlisle, a wit, declared he was "... prepared to see this Govt. struggle long for life, while a certain great Personage holds

<sup>63</sup> Liverpool, Sept. 25, 1809, to Thomas Wallace (copy), Add. MS 38243, ff. 147 ff.

<sup>64</sup> Arden to Perceval, Sept. 10, 1809. Add. MS 49188, unbound.

<sup>65</sup> Col. Sir James Willoughby Gordon, from the Horse Guards, to Huskisson, Sept. 25, 1809. Add. MS 38737, f. 340. Gordon's hyperbole is given some sharpness by indications he was a shrewd student of history. In the decayed state of the Commons, he said, "... it will probably end at last in some sharp, bustling, able man of business, like Mr. Harley, or Mr. Walpole, seizing upon the Government, and carrying it on in defiance of all: I wish it may be so for the public good." Buckingham expressed the same idea as the one above, substituting the king's footman for the chimney sweep, whilst Thomas Grenville assured Spencer a member of the fifth form at Eton would do, if supported by the king.

<sup>66</sup> [James, Lord] Forbes, Castle Forbes, Oct. 27 [1810?], to Sir Charles Hastings. Huntington Library, Hastings 120.

hartshorn under its nose, and declares it not to be dead, as long as it shows the smallest pulse and motion."<sup>67</sup> Indeed, George III showed more courage, or more desperation, than his ministers. He had consented reluctantly to the approach to the opposition, predicted its outcome, and pathetically begged his servants not to run off from him.<sup>68</sup> He exhorted them "...not to be wanting to themselves, and says that if they will stand by Him, He will stand by them to the very last."<sup>69</sup> Perceval saw "no option but to surrender the King, or stand as we can..."<sup>70</sup> "...Nothing is left for us," wrote Richmond, "but to fight the King's Battle."<sup>71</sup> To Liverpool, "the line of duty" was plain:

We accepted the Govt. two years ago to protect the King against an unwarranted attempt to surprise His Conscience on a Subject on which He was known to have the Strongest Scruples. Having done so, I feel that we are bound not to desert Him. We may be defeated in the Struggle when Parliament meets, but even in that Event, we shall at least have the satisfaction of keeping a Respectable Party together, which may be able to afford some Protection to the King, and I trust some Security to the Country.<sup>72</sup>

Now while a lot of this language is cant, some of it isn't, and the cant men live by says something of itself. Perceval, in his agonizing difficulties, had a stronger reason than sentiment or loyalty for sticking by the King. Explaining to a sullen Melville frankly why he could not put him (with his taint) in office, he wrote that by the separation of Castlereagh and Canning, the party had lost its cohesion as Pitt's Friends.

...the magic of that name is in a great degree dissolved; and the principle, on which we must rely to keep us together, and to give us the assistance of floating strength, is the public sentiment of loyalty and attachment to the King. Amongst *the independent part of the House, the Country Gentlemen, the representatives of popular Boroughs, we must find our saving strength, or our destruction.*<sup>73</sup>

In any event, the politics of the decade illustrate the power and activity of the King in politics, and the power of his name when invoked, explicitly or implicitly, by the politicians. It is now a truism that no government, before about 1835, "could survive without the

<sup>67</sup> Carlisle to Auckland, Sept. 26, 1809. Add. MS 34457, f. 544.

<sup>68</sup> See Eldon's letters in Sept., particularly those to Lady Eldon, Twiss, *Eldon*, II, 88-102.

<sup>69</sup> C. Arbuthnot, from Treasury Chambers, Sept. 30, 1809, to Huskisson. Add. MS 38737, f. 354. C. Long to same, same date, *ibid.*, f. 357, wrote to the same effect. Gray, *Perceval*, p. 261.

<sup>70</sup> To Ld. Arden, Sept. 30, 1809. Add. MS 49188.

<sup>71</sup> To Liverpool, Oct. 5, 1809. Add. MS 38243, f. 171.

<sup>72</sup> To Wellington, Oct. 20, 1809. *Ibid.*, f. 223.

<sup>73</sup> Perceval, Downing St., October 5, 1809, to Melville. Scottish Record Office, G.D. 51/1/112/3. Gray, *Perceval*, p. 258.



goodwill of the Sovereign";<sup>74</sup> and it might be added that one that did have the active support of the King was still invulnerable except in quite unusual circumstances.

<sup>74</sup> A. Aspinall, "The Cabinet Council, 1783-1835," in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1952 (London, n.d.), p. 228. There is a discussion here of the power of the crown, pp. 225-245.