The parameters of politics

Britain has never had a written constitution. The closest approximation was the Revolution Settlement of William III's reign, as embodied especially in the 1689 Bill of Rights and the 1701 Act of Settlement. But the provisions were essentially negative, stipulating what the monarch could not do. The sovereign could not override the law of the land, and, in practice, for financial and other reasons, could not govern without an annual meeting of Parliament. By 'the Revolution', as it was denoted in the eighteenth century, politicians in Britain prevented the evolution of an autocratic monarchy. Yet the sovereign retained the executive power, and William III certainly exercised it; but under his successors the functions of policy-making and patronage fell increasingly into the hands of ministers who were Parliamentary politicians. Twice, moreover, in 1742 and 1744, George II was compelled by the politicians who controlled Parliament to part with Premiers he wished to retain: and for long historians were accustomed to portray him as a king held 'in chains' by his ministers.

How far the balance of power in the British constitution had already tilted from the Crown to the House of Commons was the issue underlying the controversy over the behaviour of George III when he inherited the throne in 1760. For the active role played by that new young monarch seemed to many contemporaries accustomed to envisaging Parliament as the power centre of their political world to be a reversion to pre-1689 practice. Was he subverting the constitution, as portrayed by the traditional interpretation long held by Whig or liberal historians? That view stemmed from the circumstance that the Hanoverian Succession of 1714 effectively deprived the monarchy of a choice between the two parties of Whig and Tory. All ministries between 1714 and 1760 were Whig, albeit opposed

often by malcontent Whigs as well as a dwindling number of Tories. This seemingly permanent political alignment, with Sir Robert Walpole, Henry Pelham and his brother the Duke of Newcastle successive leaders of the dominant 'old Whig corps', gave rise to terminology appropriate to the 'court versus country' situation that had evolved. That most commonly used in mid-century Parliamentary debate was 'administration' and 'opposition', and by 1770 the even more frank designations of 'the majority' and 'the minority', previously deemed irregular, had become 'the constant language'.¹

This political dominance of 'the Whig oligarchy' led to the assumption, both contemporary and historical, that the reign of George II witnessed a significant loss of power by the Crown. Recent reassessments of the role of that monarch have largely undermined that interpretation, which forms the premiss for the consequent charge that George III was somehow seeking to turn back the constitutional clock.² George II certainly did make the famous complaint in 1744 that 'ministers are the Kings in this country'.³ But his remark was less a description of the British scene than an implicit comparison with his own autocratic role in Hanover and that of monarchs in continental Europe. George II was no William III, in that he did not initiate policies, but in the making of ministries the King played a positive role even during his old age in the 1750s;⁴ and the able but detested William Pitt was kept out of cabinet office until the crisis of the Seven Years War. His ministers had to pay heed to his wishes in every aspect of politics. Foreign policy was distorted by the King's insistence on the need to safeguard his beloved Electorate of Hanover. At election times George II took an active part in approving the choice of candidates and authorising royal expenditure. As for patronage, he exerted more control over posts in the army and at Court than did George III, and he kept a close eye on the bestowal of bishoprics, peerages, and honours generally. Incessant complaints by the Duke of Newcastle bear ample testimony to this royal influence, and in 1755 George II even told the Duke, then head of the ministry, that there was no first minister in Britain, and that his control over appointments was confined to the Treasury.⁵ In a reversal of historical tradition, George II, in the exercise of a whole range of royal powers, compared favourably with his grandson.

If there was scant loss of royal power under George II for his successor to recover after 1760, the old idea of Whig mythology that George III had ambitions of autocratic monarchy is complete nonsense. The myth that his mother Augusta, Dowager Princess of Wales,

urged her son, 'George, be a King', with the implication that she meant a monarch in the German tradition, has long been exploded. Historian Sir Lewis Namier joked that she was referring to his table manners. His mother's successful endeavour was to instil in her eldest son, though not his brothers, the virtues of religion and morality.⁶ George III's concept of himself as an honest and moral man contributed to his strength of character, but that was the sole political consequence of his maternal upbringing. His tutor Lord Bute taught the young Prince to revere the constitution as established by the Revolution Settlement. Political liberty in Britain, that phenomenon so widely admired in Europe, was the result of a system of checks and balances between the executive, headed by the monarch, and the legislature, embodied in the two Houses of Parliament, with the added safeguard of an independent judiciary.⁷ By 1760 the Prince had begun to think for himself, and perceived two royal threats to the balance of the constitution, the unfettered power of the Crown to create peers, and the existence of an army under royal control. That in an essay on the British constitution, written only a few months before his accession, George III privately showed this concern about the potential danger to liberty from the monarchy is an ironic contrast to much contemporary and historical portrayal of his behaviour as King.⁸

Bute's sound constitutional indoctrination of the future King was marred by prejudices he instilled about the contemporary political scene. The young Prince of Wales was led to condemn the Hanoverian propensities of his grandfather George II; to deplore the division into parties that prevented government by a coalition of the best men; and generally to regard the governing politicians in Britain and Ireland as corrupt and selfish. On 4 May 1760 he wrote to Bute, 'I look upon the majority of politicians as intent on their own private interests instead of that of the public'.⁹ The consequence of all this was not only that the new young King would, with the naive idea of cleansing the political system, assert the Crown's power of appointing ministers, a right so lapsed that many Parliamentarians were to regard it as improper; but that he formulated the logical conclusion that Bute himself must be his political saviour. That had not been the intention of Bute, a man more suited to scholarship than to politics. But, hoist with his own petard, he was willing to forsake a quiet private life to become Prime Minister, a task he performed conscientiously and creditably, but quit within a year.

Although George III then had to fall back on Parliamentary politicians, men not always to his liking, he maintained the practice of

allowing his ministers to govern. For, contrary to much historical interpretation, it was never his intention to impose measures as well as choose ministers. Often, as early on over America and India, he had no opinion on matters of policy. When he did, he often made his views known to individual ministers. But there was never any question of the King enforcing his opinions by the threat of removing recalcitrant ministers from office, except for one brief occasion in 1762 when Bute was encountering resistance over the peace terms. Horace Walpole understood from his friend Henry Conway, Secretary of State 1765–68, that ‘whether hating or liking the persons he employed, he seemed to resign himself entirely to their conduct for the time’.¹⁰ George III’s practice was recalled in 1775 by Lord Hillsborough, who had sat in cabinet from 1768 to 1772 as American Secretary. ‘The King ... always will leave his sentiments, and conform to his Ministers, though he will argue with them, and very sensibly; but if they adhere to their own opinion, he will say, “Well. Do you choose it should be so? Then let it be.”’¹¹ It was the cabinet, albeit often influenced by royal opinions, that made decisions on policy

‘There is in our constitution no such thing as a cabinet’, MP Charles Jenkinson reminded the House of Commons on 12 February 1770, and the usual designation in government papers was ‘meeting of the King’s servants’.¹² But MP James Harris put matters in a practical perspective when he made this comment after similar assertions in Parliament a week earlier. ‘Strange! As if all matters political were not to be discussed in the cabinet, and the ministers to come down to either House without knowing each other’s minds.’¹³ The cabinet may have been unofficial, but its existence was accepted in newspapers, correspondence and Parliamentary debate. Its informality was reflected in irregularity of meetings and variation of composition. It met as need arose, usually at least once a week save in the summer recess of Parliament, and almost always at the private houses of ministers, any one of whom might summon a meeting. The size of the cabinet varied considerably, but the first decade of George III’s reign saw the final evolution of a small, efficient cabinet, a development not approved by the sovereign, who perceived therein a curtailment of his own political role.

At the head of the cabinet was the Prime Minister, not yet a term much in vogue nor one favoured by Lord North, who held the post for twelve years from 1770. Press references were often to ‘the Premier’, those in Parliament simply to ‘the Minister’. George Grenville, who held the post from 1763 to 1765, later referred to having been ‘First Minister’.¹⁴ The post was usually but not invariably equated with

the office of First Lord of the Treasury, for it was desirable for the Premier to control the main fount of patronage. If he was an MP and not a peer, though only two Premiers, Grenville and North, were during this period, the Prime Minister would also be Chancellor of the Exchequer, for the good reason that finance constituted the main government business in the Commons. Otherwise the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not sit regularly in cabinet until Charles Townshend secured that status late in 1766.¹⁵ The other major executive officers were the two Secretaries of State, equal in rank. In theory each could handle any matter that arose, and in emergency might do so, but in practice they had a clear division of responsibility. The Southern Secretaryship was now deemed the more important, and Northern Secretaries sometimes moved to take a vacancy there, as in 1763 and 1768.¹⁶ The Southern Secretary handled diplomatic relations with France, Spain, Portugal, and the Mediterranean countries: but he was also responsible for the American and other colonies, Ireland, and acted as unofficial Home Secretary. The Northern Secretary was concerned with the German states, Holland, Scandinavia, and Russia, and seemingly also with Scotland. In 1768 a third Secretaryship of State was created, for America, though its claim to equality of status was sometimes disputed by holders of the senior Secretaryships. If these busy executive posts constituted the heart of the cabinet, membership also included the three traditional great offices of state: the Lord Chancellor, head of the legal profession, who presided over the House of Lords; the Lord President of the Privy Council, that increasingly formal institution numbering around a hundred, that constituted the official advisory body for the Crown; and the Lord Privy Seal, responsible for the official signing of state documents. In 1768 this last post, when held by a political nonentity, was excluded from the cabinet in order to reduce its size, but soon afterwards was restored to membership. The other customary cabinet post was First Lord of the Admiralty, a tacit acknowledgement of the importance of the navy. The army was represented in wartime, but not always in peace, by the Commander-in-Chief or the Master-General of the Ordnance, never by the civilian Secretary at War. The President of the Board of Trade and Plantations was not a member, but always attended on American business until the creation of the American Department. The Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland took a seat when over in Britain, but that claim was to fade with his permanent residence in Dublin from 1767.

In 1760 membership of the cabinet was not confined to leading office-holders. It then included two political allies of Prime Minister

Newcastle, in the Duke of Devonshire and the Earl of Hardwicke, Lord Chancellor from 1737 to 1756, now without office but Newcastle's prop and confidant. Lord Mansfield, Lord Chief Justice of King's Bench, continued to sit through three ministries until the autumn of 1763. Bute sought to emulate Newcastle's practice by bringing in some of his friends when he took the Treasury in May 1762. Lord Melcombe attended only briefly, dying in July, and Lord Waldegrave refused, but another Bute man, Lord Egmont, though only Postmaster-General, sat in cabinet even before he took the Admiralty in September 1763. Lord Gower, holding merely the Royal Household post of Master of the Wardrobe, attended cabinet during the second half of Bute's ministry, October 1762 to April 1763, to represent his brother-in-law the Duke of Bedford, Lord Privy Seal but absent negotiating peace in Paris. So too then did Henry Fox, only Paymaster of the Forces but now also Leader of the Commons.

This anachronistic situation must have been anathema to the tidy mind of George Grenville. Soon after he became Prime Minister in 1763 the cabinet was virtually reduced to a small group of office-holders, although he did accept Lord Marchmont as a replacement lawyer for Lord Mansfield. Thereafter the cabinet had no more than a dozen members, and sometimes as few as six. Grenville also effectively put an end to what George III called 'the common cabinet' to distinguish it from 'the ministerial cabinet'.¹⁷ This body, comprising numerous politicians, household officers, and such dignitaries as the Archbishop of Canterbury, and called by some historians 'the Nominal Cabinet', had been expanded beyond the limit of efficiency. Horace Walpole commented in 1761 that the rank of 'cabinet counsellor will soon become indistinct from Privy Counsellor by growing as numerous'.¹⁸ It met occasionally in the early years of George III's reign, as to ratify the peace terms finally signed in 1763, but thereafter its political role was formal, notably the approval of royal speeches prior to their presentation to Parliament.

The cabinet proper was by contrast the genuine centre of decision-making, where the Prime Minister, though he presided, did not always get his way: Grenville was overruled on the American land settlement of 1763, and Grafton defeated over the American tea duty in 1769. The usual practice was for each item of business to be introduced by an appropriate departmental minister, with ensuing discussions customarily being commenced by the newer members, so that they would not be overawed by their seniors. If consensus could not be achieved, decisions were taken by majority votes. Policy disagreements

seldom led to resignations. Those usually occurred only if a minister had been overruled in a matter concerning his own department, as when Southern Secretary Weymouth resigned in 1770 over the Falkland Islands Crisis, and American Secretary Hillsborough in 1772 over a proposed Ohio colony. Rather was acceptance of a majority decision the norm: of the three MPs who argued in cabinet on 13 January 1769 against the expulsion of John Wilkes from the House of Commons, two voted for expulsion and the other abstained when that business came before the House on 3 February. Cabinet decisions were recorded in minutes, which were, so Southern Secretary Shelburne wrote in 1767, 'according to the indispensable custom of those meetings, read over to the Lords present, to know whether it expressed their sentiments as they wished them to be laid before His Majesty'.¹⁹ They were respectfully tendered to the King in form only as 'advice', and also formed a security for those ministers executing the decisions taken.²⁰ George III, often having put in his word beforehand, would accept the decisions of his 'ministerial cabinet': but they often also needed endorsement by Parliament.

There was by now a set pattern to the annual Parliamentary session. The important business would usually be done between the Christmas and Easter recesses, for attendance was otherwise poor. The session began in both Houses of Lords and Commons with the voting of an Address in reply to the King's Speech, which had stated the ministry's opinions and intentions. The ensuing debates set the political tone of the new session, and a failure of opposition to force a vote over an amendment usually betokened a quiet time for the administration. Taxation was routine and seldom controversial, though administrations were discomfited over a cider tax in 1763 and a window tax in 1766, and actually defeated in 1767 over the rate of land tax to be imposed. Levied on estate rents, that was the sole direct tax on income, but by now more revenue accrued from customs and excise duties. All measures of home policy, financial and otherwise, were enacted by legislation. This was now standardised into some dozen stages in each House, of which the second reading, to debate the principle, and the committee, to discuss the details, were the most significant. All MPs and peers were free at any time to propose motions and initiate legislation. Government might seek approval of policy measures. Opposition motions often took the form of requests for papers on current political issues or general resolutions of principle critical of ministerial behaviour. By now administration had an array of obstructive devices to block direct votes on awkward

topics, often generically described as ‘the previous question’, which specifically was a counter that the motion be not put. Adjournments and amendments served the same purpose of avoiding embarrassment. Such were the weapons of Parliamentary warfare, deployed in the political arena of Westminster.²¹

Parliament, in the context of the political battle for power, meant the House of Commons. Contemporaries knew that contests between administration and opposition over policies and for office were decided there. The House of Lords as a political institution enjoyed prestige rather than power, and setbacks for ministers there were merely inconvenient and annoying. No ministry would be overthrown by defeat in the Lords, and its chief role was that of a political sounding-board. It did contain the bulk of the nation’s political leadership, a majority of the cabinet and the heads of most opposition factions. Its debates were often of high quality, and widely reported in the press during the 1770s. Yet all this was rather a sham. At best the Lords was a forum for propaganda, as opposition peer Lord Temple acknowledged when in 1770 he announced he would not attend merely to ‘talk to tapestry’ after the Lords, to counter the onset of Parliamentary reporting, decided to prohibit public attendance.²²

It was not merely that the Lords lacked a significant role in the body politic. There was in any case also the circumstance of a permanent majority for government there. That this ministerial hold on the Lords rested on a triple foundation of bishops, Scots, and courtiers was stated by radical journalist John Almon in 1770, when in the monthly *London Museum* he described ‘the Court Lords’ as ‘consisting of the Scotch Lords, the Bishops, the Placed-Lords, etc.’, and has long been received historical wisdom.²³ All the twenty-six bishops of England and Wales owed their appointment to a minister, and since their promotion and patronage prospects depended on support of the current administration most of them transferred their allegiance on any change of ministry. Newcastle, long responsible for ecclesiastical appointments under George II, was the first fallen minister of the new reign to suffer such desertions, with his famous joke that even the bishops forgot their Maker. The sixteen Scottish representative peers were chosen at the time of each general election, when the Scottish peerage, meeting in Edinburgh, tended to vote almost en bloc the government list sent from London. The third component of a government majority was a Court Party, comprising peers who held offices of honour or profit, often in the Royal Household itself, and about a dozen impecunious peers who had pensions. In 1774 Treasury

Secretary John Robinson listed sixty-five English and ten Scottish peers as holding office.²⁴ George III's youthful fear about the power of the Crown to create peers was irrelevant to the Parliamentary scene, but it was reflected in his reluctance to make new peers, until a logjam of promises was broken by ten creations on the same day, 20 May 1776. Ministerial control of the Lords was buttressed by a procedural device peculiar to that House, that of proxy voting, whereby peers expecting to be absent could entrust their votes to other peers. Since it was more respectable to support the King's government than to demonstrate hostility to it, ministers found it easier to collect proxies than their opponents. But proxies were not an essential weapon. When called for they served to increase a ministerial majority, but never in this period did they reverse a decision made by the peers actually present.

Since the membership of the House of Lords remained constant at around two hundred, the combined size of these groups of government supporters would appear to guarantee a safe majority for any ministry, and that was almost invariably the case. But in the 1760s two developments disrupted the customary pattern of political behaviour. The factionalisation of politics in that decade meant that about half the House of Lords owed allegiance to various political leaders and at some time voted against the King's government. This circumstance did not in itself threaten ministerial control of the Lords, for one or more of the factions were always with administration. But the Court Party was disrupted by the American question, as many peers deemed the policies of the Rockingham and Chatham ministries too conciliatory towards the colonies. Courtiers, Scottish peers and bishops all voted in some numbers over America against the Rockingham ministry, which in 1766 actually suffered two Lords defeats on relevant issues, by 63 to 60 and by 59 to 55, on 4 and 6 February respectively. They could rebel in safety because the King's favourite Lord Bute was at their head. Prime Minister Rockingham then put pressure on George III, and the key measure of repeal of the Stamp Act was carried by 73 votes to 61, the majority being raised by proxies to 105 to 71. That total of 176 was the largest at any Lords division during the century. This near-success of a challenge to ministerial policy was exceptional. The opposition attacks in the Lords during 1767 ran the Chatham ministry close, down to a majority of only three, 65 to 62, on 26 May; but they threatened only embarrassment over opposition motions, not defeat of government policy, and the conflict was different, comprising an alliance of factions against a court party whose

unity was much tighter than in 1766. Nor, despite George III's belief in 'an intention to storm my closet',²⁵ did the opposition hope to bring down the ministry by defeat in the Lords: and the sole consequence was to frighten the cabinet into abortive coalition negotiations during the recess.²⁶

Too much should not be read into these ministerial difficulties in the House of Lords during the mid-1760s. The Grafton and North ministries had no problems there as normality returned from 1768, and Chatham, on his return to opposition in 1770, found that his peerage had politically emasculated him, since the House of Lords lacked the significant body of independent opinion that as William Pitt he had made his power base in the Commons. In the four sessions from 1771 to 1774 the opposition did not even force a Lords vote on the Address, and the Rockinghamite party made the best of a bad job by exploiting the procedural device of printed *Protests* against Lords decisions, using them as a vehicle for press portrayals of opposition viewpoints. The House of Lords was again a mere sounding-board.

The contrasting independence of the House of Commons stemmed from the electoral system. The electorate was beyond the control of government, and not merely because of its size, for which 300,000 voters can be no more than an informed guess, in the absence of both electoral rolls and frequent polls.²⁷ Political power lay with the landed class, whose estates, prestige and other modes of influence created 'natural' political interests, on which government could make little impact. Most constituencies were controlled by the squires, the myth of an aristocratic oligarchy of a few great patrons having been destroyed long ago, in 1929, by Sir Lewis Namier, who calculated that in the English boroughs 55 peers influenced the election of only 111 MPs.²⁸ Subsequent research, and the inclusion of county seats, has raised that total to around 150 MPs, and the greatest patron, the Duke of Newcastle, is now credited with ten rather than seven seats.²⁹

There were 314 constituencies returning 558 MPs, forty-five of them for small Scottish electorates mostly under the control of 'friends of government', whoever was minister. By contrast, the forty English counties were the most obvious bastions of independence. Here wide interpretations of the forty-shilling freehold franchise produced an average electorate of 4,000, too great a number for Scottish peer Lord Denbigh, who informed the House of Lords in 1773 that 'he was for raising the qualification of all the electors of England':³⁰ his was a lone voice when most commentators on the electoral system advocated its expansion and reform. If tiny Rutland had only 800

voters, giant Yorkshire had 20,000, being by far the largest constituency in the country. Over three-quarters of the eighty county MPs were squires, the remainder being sprigs of the aristocracy. Often one seat out of the two for a shire might by convention or calculation be conceded to a local aristocrat, as to the Duke of Devonshire in Derbyshire. The county representation was usually decided at public meetings, for the gentry could only lead and not dictate to the freeholders. Since contests were fearsomely expensive, few counties actually went to the poll.

The squirearchy also sat for the twenty-four Welsh seats, county and borough alike, and for most of the 405 seats of the 203 English boroughs, whose great varieties of franchises bestowed by separate charters are conventionally classified into five categories: twelve pot-walloper or householder boroughs; ninety-two freeman or burgess boroughs; thirty-seven 'scot and lot' or ratepayer boroughs; twenty-seven corporation boroughs; and thirty-five burgage and freeholder boroughs, where the franchise simply appertained to a piece of property. A wide franchise did not necessarily mean a large electorate, but there was some correlation. Twenty-eight freeman boroughs had over 1,000 voters, whereas the largest corporation borough, Bath, had only sixty. Small electorates were usually easy to control, and fifteen corporation boroughs were now the pocket boroughs of local squires or peers. So were nineteen of the burgage and freeholder boroughs, since the purchase of a majority of relevant properties in a borough was simple, though often expensive. Such pocket boroughs should be distinguished from the 'rotten' or venal boroughs. Numerous voters perceived elections as opportunities for material gain. Bribery implies freedom of choice, and the thrust of some modern research is to demonstrate that candidates had far less command of constituencies than was formerly assumed.³¹ Too much should not be made of this independence of the electorate. That the average length of an MP's service in Parliament was over twenty years underlines the point that the basic problem confronting a ministry there was the power of the gentry, not the behaviour of the mass electorate, though any constituency pressures from counties and large boroughs were likely to be against the government of the day.

After each general election a ministry was therefore confronted with a House of Commons over the membership of which it had had very limited influence. At the general election of 1761 the ministry directly controlled only thirty seats, the so-called Treasury and Admiralty boroughs where those two departments had many voters on

their payroll.³² A ministry otherwise spent on average only £50,000 at a general election to assist a few favoured candidates, when the purchase of one seat in 1761 cost £2,000, and considerably more by 1768.³³

A typical House of Commons would thus comprise 500 self-returning MPs, as against 50 elected under government influence. The problem of ministerial control can be perceived in the circumstance that some 300 MPs would be independent, with about 100 belonging to the hard core of political factions, and some 150 to a Court Party of office-holders. This tripartite analysis of MPs and peers into placemen, politicians and independents is that portrayed by Sir Lewis Namier in his seminal work *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, wherein he destroyed the prevailing notion of a two-party framework of Whigs and Tories. The political alignment he substituted comprised an administration side of politicians, placemen, and independents, challenged by an opposition of other politicians and independents.

It is time to put some flesh on these bare bones of analysis. The smallest of the three political segments of Parliament comprised the party factions. These were the men ambitious for the power and emoluments of office, and often with opinions on policy-making, from whom all ministries were constructed. They competed for, and filled the high offices of state, such lesser posts as membership of the Boards of Treasury, Admiralty, and Trade, and other executive offices of government, together with numerous household and court posts, and a few sinecures, some of which were clearly reserved for men whose role was to give debating support to government. The factions were temporary phenomena, meteors in the political firmament, often ending on the death of their leader, or perhaps then merging into the general body of supporters or opponents of government. Contemporaries disagreed, as do historians, as to the precise composition of these groupings, and with good reason, for many attachments were fluctuating and uncertain. Historian John Brooke in 1956 essayed an examination of factional politics at its height in 1767, identifying four main groups: but even his careful calculations have been subjected to subsequent corrections.³⁴

Lord Chatham, then head of the ministry, had never as William Pitt sought to be a party leader, and his following of a score of MPs and a handful of peers was hardly worthy of that name. Without the efforts of his chief lieutenant Lord Shelburne the group might well have broken up after 1770, when Chatham absented himself from Parliament

for some years, and it was often denoted 'the Shelburne party' even before his death in 1778. Shelburne returned to Parliament lawyer John Dunning and firebrand Colonel Isaac Barré to give the party a vocal presence in the Commons, while he and Lord Camden spoke in the Lords on behalf of their frequently absent leader.

In 1767 the other three factions were all in opposition. Chatham's brother-in-law George Grenville had while Prime Minister from 1763 to 1765 acquired a personal following: this numbered about forty in 1767, but was reduced to thirty at the general election of 1768.³⁵ The Bedfordites were often equated with the Grenvillites, and sometimes listed with them, because they had together formed the ministry of 1763–65. That was a mistake, to become apparent when the groups parted company at the end of 1767. The tightly organised Bedford faction dated from the 1740s, headed by a group of peers, Bedford, Gower, Sandwich and Weymouth. Their real weight was in the House of Lords, where this formidable debating team headed a band of fifteen peers, but their electoral influence also provided a useful twenty votes in the Commons, where Richard Rigby was a robust speaker. The Bedford faction was notorious for its naked desire for the financial and other benefits of office. Dismissed in July 1765, they contrived to return to government before the end of 1767, for being in opposition was anathema to the Bedford group, an attitude signified in the response of Rigby when congratulated in 1765 on having won a debate though not the vote. 'No! Damme! A minority never was in the right from the beginning of the world to this day; a minority is always absurd.'³⁶

In contrast with the transitory nature of those factions dependent on the career of their leader was the party headed in 1767 by the Marquess of Rockingham. Claiming to be 'the Whig party', with a political lineage from 'the old Whig corps' headed successively in office by Sir Robert Walpole, Henry Pelham and the Duke of Newcastle – and according to journalist John Almon known as 'the Pelhams' as late as 1766³⁷ – this group has traditionally been seen by historians as the link with the future Whig party subsequently headed on Rockingham's death in 1782 by Charles James Fox and his nineteenth-century successors.³⁸ A recent alternative interpretation portrays the Rockinghamites as 'a country party', heir to the opponents of that Whig monopoly of power in the earlier eighteenth century.³⁹ This apparent conflict of opinion is rather a difference in emphasis: for both views are served by the Rockinghamite claim to be defending 'liberty' against the power of the Crown.

The size and continuity of the party would seem to represent a strong case for the traditional interpretation, but analysis of the constantly changing party personnel weakens that line of argument. For a significant proportion of the 'old Whig corps' men and families of George II's reign were supporters of Lord North's ministry in the 1770s, and not in opposition with Lord Rockingham. Most of them were lost in 1762 and 1766. In November 1762 Newcastle, no longer at the Treasury, drastically reduced the estimated size of his Commons support from 238 to 142. Even that was optimistic, for a modern assessment puts this at 69 MPs in December. The party had recovered somewhat by the time of the formation of the Rockingham ministry, to number 105 MPs in 1765, and 111 at its dismissal in 1766. But there occurred then the loss of those who preferred office to the prospect of permanent opposition. Over 40 MPs deserted Rockingham when Chatham replaced him as Prime Minister, including his Commons Leader Henry Conway. Newcastle's papers at the time contain a list of 26 MPs optimistically headed 'friends of ours who remain with the present administration'.⁴⁰ But even the old Duke soon realised that they were lost for ever: in January 1767 he listed only 79 MPs and 44 peers as 'particular friends'.⁴¹ At the general election of 1768 the Rockingham party had 54 MPs and 34 peers. Deaths and desertions further weakened the party, which reached its nadir at 43 MPs after the 1774 general election.⁴²

The Rockinghamite party was in structure a larger and looser version of the Bedfordite group, with a nucleus of aristocratic families. The personal following of the Marquess numbered a dozen, half from his native Yorkshire. The Duke of Portland and Lord Albemarle each returned four MPs, the Duke of Richmond two. By 1768 Newcastle was down to six seats, and on his death later that year his nephew heir proved to be an adherent of government. The death in 1764 of the fourth Duke of Devonshire left the Cavendish family without an active aristocratic head, but Lord John Cavendish was prominent in the Commons. The death that same year of Newcastle's old friend the Earl of Hardwicke loosened the ties of the Yorke family with the party, even though Charles Yorke acted as Rockingham's Attorney-General and his brother the second earl was offered cabinet office: the Yorke family deserted in 1770. By then the two leading Rockinghamites in the Commons were men without aristocratic connections. Irish orator Edmund Burke, Rockingham's private secretary as Prime Minister, was the star performer, but William Dowdeswell carried more weight. Once deemed a Tory by Newcastle, this independent

MP for Worcestershire had been recruited as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1765, and from 1766 to 1774 led the party in the Commons. Burke and Dowdeswell made a formidable pair, and the Rockinghamites altogether had a good array of speakers there. But lack of debating talent in the Lords was an obvious party weakness: only Richmond spoke effectively, for Rockingham was inarticulate and the other grandees like Portland virtually silent.

The Court Party outnumbered the political factions in the Commons. A snapshot of it is provided by a list compiled by or for Treasury Secretary John Robinson of MPs holding office in the summer of 1774. It yields a total of 135 for the Court Party, after 25 politicians in office have been excluded. They comprised 24 MPs in administrative posts; 46 holders of court offices; 39 soldiers and 2 naval men; 14 lawyers on the government payroll, useful in debate; 7 merchants holding government contracts; and 3 absent ambassadors.⁴³ Robinson did not include the few MPs who held simple pensions. These were often retainers until they were found a post, for to the actual Court Party there must be added the MPs and peers anxious to join it. Many of these posts, especially those at Court, involved little or no work. The duties of the eight-man Board of Green Cloth did not justify their £1,000 salaries, nor did the 12 Lords and 12 Grooms of the Royal Bedchamber have more than formal tasks to earn their respective salaries of £1,000 and £500 each. The Royal Household contained many such posts, for no office was abolished when its usefulness had passed. But the Court Party was not mere lobby-fodder, and several officials were hardworking. George Rice was one. Scion of an old Whig family but also son-in-law of Lord Talbot, a Bute man who became Steward of the Household on George's accession, Rice sat at the Board of Trade from 1761 to 1770, through all the ministerial vicissitudes of that decade: under Lord North he doubled his salary by moving in 1770 to the court office of Treasurer of the Chamber, but remained a government spokesman on colonial matters. The administrator-politician par excellence was Lord Barrington, who perceived it his duty to serve the King's government, whoever was Prime Minister. He was an office-holder continuously from 1746 to 1778, under a long succession of ministries, conduct often attributed to venality by contemporaries. He served nineteen years as an able Secretary at War, and his debating role in Parliament was not then confined to military matters. The Court Party altogether was a hybrid of sinecurists, administrators, and debaters.⁴⁴

Since the Court Party and the politicians in government would never, despite some alarmist predictions about the power of the Crown,

constitute a majority of any reasonably full House of Commons, the key to political power lay with the 300 or so independent MPs. In practice some independents would always vote for the King's minister. That Lord North in the 1770s enjoyed the invariable support of such 'old Tories' as Sir Roger Newdigate helps to explain the Tory label once fixed on that minister. A good number of independents were loosely attached to one or other of the factions. Many others followed the old Parliamentary tradition of opposition to the Crown. That attitude remained an important factor in the overall political situation, and since it usually prevailed among those MPs who seldom attended, the fuller the House was of MPs the greater the danger to ministers. Fortunately for government the presence of as many as 400 of the 558 MPs was rare. In the first decade of George III's reign the highest attendance at a vote was 455, on both 17 February 1764 and 12 February 1770. A mere 389 voted on 9 December 1762 over the Peace of Paris, and only 447 on 21 February 1766 over the repeal of the American Stamp Act. Apathy was one reason for the customary majority for government.

But there still remained the need for ministers, by argument in debate, to win the support of a proportion of the independents. It could never be taken for granted, and any failure to present the government case in debate would incur criticism. Hence the desirability for the Prime Minister to be in the House of Commons, since MPs did not relish being governed by proxy. Ministries headed by peers were short-lived and often in difficulty. That very predicament was the reason reputedly given by the Duke of Grafton to George III, for his resignation in 1770. 'As he found the great strength of the increasing minority was in the Lower House, he thought it most natural as well as advisable, to nominate a Premier there, in the scene of action; as he found by daily experience, that that was the fittest place for a Prime Minister, and that there was no doing any thing without it, as in the cases of Walpole, Pelham and Pitt.'⁴⁵

Crown, Lords and Commons formed the three 'estates of the realm'. The third quarter of the eighteenth century saw the full flowering of what later became known as 'the fourth estate', as the press was greatly expanded and increasingly politicised, notably by the commencement of newspaper Parliamentary reporting from 1768. In 1760 London had four daily newspapers and five thrice-weekly ones. Boasting the largest daily sale then at over 2,000 was the *Public Advertiser*, owned by Henry Woodfall. It was to be the vehicle for the publication of the controversial anonymous letters of 'Junius' between 1769 and 1772, which put the circulation up to 5,000, but the paper

never ventured into the field of Parliamentary reporting. Henry Woodfall left that to his brother William, in the daily *Morning Chronicle*, founded in 1769. His great circulation rival was the *Gazetteer*, with a sale of about 5,000 in the early 1770s.⁴⁶ The two other daily papers, the *Public Ledger* and the *Daily Advertiser*, were of no political account. The thrice-weekly papers were usually published on the post-days, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, for delivery to provincial towns as well as the metropolitan market. Most overtly political was the *London Evening Post*, anti-government since its foundation in 1734. The others were the *General Evening Post* and the *Whitehall Evening Post*, and two papers both started in 1757, the *London Chronicle* and *Lloyds Evening Post*. The *St. James's Chronicle* began in 1761, and the heightened political interest of the Middlesex Election case of 1768–69 led to a further press expansion, two more thrice-weeklies appearing in 1769, the *Middlesex Journal* and the *London Packet*. By 1770 five daily and eight thrice-weekly newspapers were being published in London.⁴⁷ The circulation of individual papers was only a few thousand at best, but stamp tax returns show the average total daily sale of newspapers throughout Britain was nearly 25,000, a total that includes about forty provincial and about a dozen other weekly papers. Since it was the practice of taverns and coffee-houses to take in newspapers for the benefit of their customers, the average readership per copy may have been as high as twenty, or up to a half a million a day nationwide.⁴⁸ Even the illiterate would have spicy items read out aloud to them over a drink of ale, tea or coffee. Contemporary cartoons mocked such ‘coffee-house politicians’, shopkeepers, artisans and others who worked for their living debating the issues of the day as if they were gentlemen, a phenomenon that astonished visiting foreigners.

The preponderance of political information and comment, much relating to Europe and America, is a feature of the eighteenth-century press. There was a great deal of ‘blood and sex’ crime coverage, but the bulk of the news and gossip was clearly directed to an audience interested in politics for its own sake. Much political comment was in the form of pseudonymous articles, sometimes written in-house but usually submitted by outside contributors. Such was their sales value that, like news items in general, they were widely reprinted in papers of varying political hues. Some newspapers indeed, adopted a neutral political stance altogether. They included the two Woodfall papers of the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Public Advertiser*, the *General Evening Post*, and the *London Packet*. *Lloyds Evening Post* was generally

pro-government, and the *London Chronicle*, hitherto neutral, became so during the North ministry. The *St James's Chronicle* favoured the opposition, but the real criticism of government, regardless of minister, came from three radical papers. The *London Evening Post* soon came out in support of John Wilkes. Its printer John Miller had personal links with both Wilkes and John Almon, the pioneer of Parliamentary newspaper reporting, who in the early 1760s worked on the *Gazetteer*, also an anti-establishment paper under successive editors Charles Say and Roger Thompson. A third in the same vein was the *Middlesex Journal or Chronicle of Liberty*, to give the flavour of its full title, founded in 1769 by radical MP William Beckford. It was no coincidence that these three newspapers led the 1771 fight to establish Parliamentary reporting.

If such newspapers presaged the future of the press, a heritage from past political practice was the weekly essay paper, still a significant part of the British scene. The most important in 1760 was the *Monitor*, which flourished as a Tory and then Pittite paper from 1755 to 1765.⁴⁹ It was respectable as well as influential, and some too outrageous pieces were sent on to the *North Briton*, founded by John Wilkes in 1762 to counter such ministerial papers as the *Briton* during the Bute ministry of 1762–63: attaining a circulation of nearly 2,000 as against 250 for its rival, the *North Briton* was a spectacular journalistic success.⁵⁰ The political excitement of 1768–69 led to a new flood of weeklies, including a revived *North Briton*, not now edited by Wilkes, and merged in May 1771 with *Bingley's Journal*, which was founded in June 1770 and appeared under variant titles over several years. Two scurrilous weeklies had a briefer existence. The *Parliamentary Spy* lasted only from November 1769 to May 1770, and the *Whisperer* from February 1770 to January 1772: the press hit a new low in these two papers, compared with which, so Horace Walpole wrote in March 1770, the *North Briton* of John Wilkes had been 'milk and honey'.⁵¹

Little part in the political game was now played by monthly magazines. A new one was indeed launched at this time with a political purpose: but the *Political Register*, founded in 1767 to support Grenville, virtually foundered in 1769. The long-established *Gentleman's Magazine* and *London Magazine* vainly sought to compete in Parliamentary reporting from 1770, but their accounts were brief and belated. Also unsuccessful, presumably for the same reasons, were two others established to specialise in the same field, the *London Museum*, begun in 1770, and the *Parliamentary Register*, started in

1774, each associated with John Almon: both seem to have expired in their second year.⁵²

Heavyweight public political debate was conducted not in the periodical press but in pamphlets, an old political weapon. Often they were instigated, subsidised and even written by Parliamentary politicians, and a new phenomenon in George III's reign was the appearance in this form of Parliamentary speeches, genuine or otherwise, in order to put a point of view. A standard print-run for a pamphlet was 500, but the sale of popular pamphlets would rise to many more. That of Israel Mauduit's *Considerations on the Present German War* in 1760, probably the most influential pamphlet of the period, was 5,750 copies, significantly more than the 3,250 of Edmund Burke's more famous 1770 treatise on party, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontent*.⁵³ The influence of pamphlets was far greater than their circulation, limited by production problems and price, would suggest; for summaries promptly and widely appeared in the periodical press, including the *Gentleman's Magazine*, whose monthly sale of 10,000 copies was mostly to the rural squirearchy.

In contrast to this serious political literature was the flood of ephemeral publications designed to appeal to a wider public. These ranged from one-sheet handbills, produced in their thousands, often with an election or a riot in mind, to ballads, presumably sung in taverns and at street corners. By 1760 cartoons were probably more important than ballads as an influence on and reflection of popular opinion. They were published separately, not as part of a printed periodical, for they were expensive to produce. A print cost 6d, or 1s if coloured, as compared with 2½d for a newspaper. A run would be about 500, until the soft copper plates wore out. Despite their price cartoons had a widespread impact, for, like newspapers, they were available for perusal in taverns and other places of public resort. Specialist print-shops were a feature of the London scene, some with portfolios for hire, while the poor could have a free look at window displays. With their appeal also to the illiterate, cartoons could reach a wide public.

This metropolitan picture was replicated on a lesser scale throughout Britain. Towns small and large had coffee-houses and taverns that took in London and provincial papers. The forty or so newspapers published weekly in old towns like York and Chester and new industrial centres such as Birmingham and Leeds had distributional networks covering large areas. The *Newcastle Journal* was sold from coast to coast across northern England, while Wales, without any

papers of its own, was comprehensively served by those in the border towns of Chester, Hereford and Gloucester. The press was now a pervasive influence throughout Britain.⁵⁴

By the 1760s the press was an important part of the political world. It brought 'the people' into politics, but that term did not include the lower orders of society. This practical definition was made by a *Gazetteer* correspondent in 1763. 'By the people I understand not the mob, but those who are to make any judgement of public affairs. Among those I reckon the Nobility and Gentry, the Professions ... and the trading part of the Kingdom.'⁵⁵ But that same year the Wilkite movement seemingly broke the rules of the political game. Prime Minister George Grenville perceived that 'the clamour of the people' then was not for a change of ministry, another reshuffle of Parliamentary politicians, but against the political establishment as a whole.⁵⁶ The Wilkite mobs of 1768 shouted 'Damn the King! Damn the Government!' The ruling élite at Westminster closed ranks, with opposition politicians criticising the ministry not for deploying soldiers against the crowd but for failing nevertheless to maintain order.⁵⁷ The Wilkite phenomenon added a new dimension to politics, but one that should not be misunderstood. The occasional and violent street mobs alarmed contemporaries, but the power base that Wilkes created in London came from men of some substance, the freemen of the City and the freeholders of Middlesex, the lower middle class of the day, not the proletariat.⁵⁸

Wilkism was an exception, for otherwise popular politics made no significant impact on the government of Britain. There was much public interest in political matters, as reflected in the development of the press. The century was punctuated by manifestations of great popular excitement; but, apart from the Wilkite movement, they were short-lived phenomena, with little permanent significance. Popular politics was the politics of impotence, unless a cause was taken up at Westminster.⁵⁹

A Parliamentary system of government was susceptible not only to public opinion but also to private lobbying; it has indeed often been surmised that the word 'lobby' in this sense derives from the lobby outside the old House of Commons. By the eighteenth century such activity was part of the British political scene. Chartered trading companies, like the Africa Company and the Levant Company, had long brought their influence to bear on government policy. The East India Company was the greatest of them all, but in the reign of George III became the subject of political intervention, and its role was essentially defensive. Other parts of the empire brought pressure

to bear in Whitehall and Westminster as need arose. Oldest and best organised was the West India Interest. By 1760 there existed a Society of West India Merchants. Numerous sugar plantation owners were resident in Britain, some of them MPs. Most of the islands appointed their own paid agents. There were occasions when the interests of planters and merchants did not coincide, as in 1766, but in 1775 they worked together under the American threat to their economy.⁶⁰ The North American colonies also had paid agents to safeguard their interests, and by the 1760s there was a Committee of North American Merchants. These London-based organisations in times of trouble sought and obtained support from ports and industrial towns throughout Britain, as by thirty circular letters from the American Merchants Committee in December 1765 concerning the Stamp Act Crisis. Bristol's Society of Merchant Venturers and the manufacturers of the English Midlands and North were also wont to act on their own initiative. This lobbying must however be put into perspective, for the attitude of government was the decisive factor. The petitioning campaign of 1766 over America succeeded because the aim accorded with ministerial thinking: that of 1775 failed because it ran counter to administration policy. For in Parliament the predominance of the landed interest meant that commerce, industry, and colonial interests commanded few votes and carried little weight. Emphasis on them is a distorting mirror of political reality, and equally so is undue attention to popular opinion. The political system was not yet markedly susceptible to outside pressure. The key centres of power were the Crown, the cabinet, and the House of Commons. The political story of the first decade of George III's reign is the uncertain balance between them.

Notes

- 1 *Cavendish Debates*, I, 444. William Dowdeswell is the MP quoted.
- 2 J.B. Owen, 'George II Reconsidered', in Whiteman, *et al.* (eds), *Statesmen, Scholars and Merchants*, pp. 113–34. Newman, *The World Turned Inside Out*.
- 3 Yorke, *Hardwicke*, I, 382.
- 4 Clark, *Dynamics of Change*.
- 5 Yorke, *Hardwicke*, II, 224–5.
- 6 Bullion, 'George, Be a King! ...', in Taylor, *et al.* (eds), *Hanoverian Britain and Empire*, pp. 177–97.
- 7 Brooke, *King George III*, pp. 55–8.

- 8 Thomas, *BIHR*, 60 (1987), pp. 361–3.
- 9 *Bute Letters*, pp. 45–6.
- 10 Walpole, *Memoirs*, III, 66.
- 11 *Hutchinson Diary*, I, 378.
- 12 *Cavendish Debates*, I, 447.
- 13 *Malmesbury Letters*, I, 191–2.
- 14 Malmesbury MSS. Photocopies B913.
- 15 *Grafton Autobiography*, pp. 92, 103.
- 16 *Chesterfield Letters*, VI, 2,543. Grafton MSS. no. 799.
- 17 Bute MSS (Cardiff), no. 301.
- 18 *Corr. of George III*, II, 73. Walpole, *Memoirs*, III, 219.
- 19 *CHOP*, II, 212.
- 20 Much writing on the eighteenth-century cabinet is confused and contradictory, and outdated by new sources of information. The most useful accounts are Williams, *History*, 22 (1937–38), 240–52; Pares, *George III and the Politicians*, pp. 142–81; Namier, *Crossroads of Power*, pp. 93–123; and Christie, *Myth and Reality*, pp. 55–108.
- 21 For more information on the practice and procedure of Parliament see Thomas, *House of Commons*, and, for the Lords, A.J. Rees, Thesis.
- 22 Malmesbury MSS. Photocopies B33.
- 23 *London Museum*, June 1770, p. 391. Pares, *George III and the Politicians*, pp. 39–43. Recent caveats to this analysis are critically discussed by Cannon, *Aristocratic Century*, pp. 94–104.
- 24 *Parliamentary Papers of John Robinson*, pp. 12–14. I have omitted from the list holders of such posts as county lieutenancies, who included opposition leader Rockingham: cf. Cannon, *Aristocratic Century*, p. 97.
- 25 *Corr. of George III*, I, 480.
- 26 Thomas, *British Politics and the Stamp Act Crisis*, pp. 199–205, 241–6, 315–17, 330–5. McCahill, ‘The House of Lords in the 1760s’, in Jones, ed., *Pillar of the Constitution*, pp. 165–98.
- 27 O’Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties*, p. 179 raises the traditional estimate of 280,000 to 340,000.
- 28 Namier, *Structure of Politics*, pp. 144–6.
- 29 Cannon, *Aristocratic Century*, pp. 104–10.
- 30 *Chatham Papers*, IV, 280.
- 31 This is an argument in O’Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties*.
- 32 Namier, *Structure of Politics*, pp. 139–42.
- 33 *Chesterfield Letters*, VI, 2,621, 2,832.
- 34 Brooke, *Chatham Administration*, pp. 248–94.
- 35 Lawson, *George Grenville*, pp. 221–3, 263, 269.
- 36 Hoffman, *Edmund Burke*, p. 325.

- 37 *Chatham Anecdotes*, II, 35.
- 38 This interpretation is reaffirmed in O’Gorman, *Rise of Party*.
- 39 Elofson, *Rockingham Connection*.
- 40 BL Add. MSS. 33001, fo. 368.
- 41 BL Add. MSS. 33001, fos 344–9.
- 42 O’Gorman, *Rise of Party*, pp. 44, 219–20, 319–20, 563.
- 43 *Parliamentary Papers of John Robinson*, pp. 14–17. This is my own analysis of the information. MPs holding two posts, as court and military offices, have been counted only once. I have excluded ten MPs listed: six holders of county lieutenancies, two of them opposition MPs; three other opposition MPs; and the Speaker.
- 44 For a full study of Barrington’s career see Jones, Thesis.
- 45 *London Evening Post*, 27 Jan. 1770.
- 46 Haig, *The Gazetteer*, p. 79.
- 47 Thomas, *EHR*, 74 (1959), 623–5.
- 48 Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*, pp. 141–3. The calculation is mine. A contemporary readership estimate of only ten per paper is cited by Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion*, p. 23.
- 49 Peters, *EHR*, 86 (1971), 206–27.
- 50 Thomas, *John Wilkes*, pp. 19–26.
- 51 Walpole, *Letters*, VII, 369. Even radical journalist John Almon commented in 1770 that the *Whisperer* was ‘detestable in the highest degree’. *London Museum*, May 1770, p. 267.
- 52 Thomas, *EHR*, 74 (1959), 626–32. Simmons and Thomas, *Proceedings and Debates*, V, vii–viii.
- 53 Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*, p. 146.
- 54 For general surveys of the press at this time see Thomas, Thesis, pp. 8–31; Rea, *The English Press in Politics*; and Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*, pp. 139–60.
- 55 *Gazetteer*, 11 Feb. 1763, quoted in Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics*, p. 236.
- 56 *Grenville Papers*, II, 239.
- 57 Thomas, *John Wilkes*, pp. 83–4.
- 58 This was established by Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*.
- 59 The period from 1760 to 1775 is virtually by-passed by Rogers, *Crowd, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain*; and, apart from Wilkism, by Wilson, *The Sense of the People*.
- 60 Thomas, *British Politics and the Stamp Act Crisis*, pp. 256–7, 261; Thomas, *Tea Party to Independence*, p. 182. For the West India Interest see Penson, *EHR*, 36, (1921), 373–92.