The Chatham ministry II.  
Grafton as caretaker (1767–1768): political re-alignments

‘I suppose my Lord North is to succeed poor Charles Townshend. I hear they seem not to be sorry for his loss. They may stand in need of his abilities sooner than they imagine.’¹ The Duke of Newcastle’s comment, written only the day after Townshend’s death, was grudging testimony to the talents of the young Lord North, now thirty-five years old. Newcastle himself had in 1759 appointed North to the Treasury Board, where for six years he had acquired financial expertise. The contrast between the dazzling and unpredictable Townshend and the sound, reliable North could hardly have been greater. Yet Townshend himself was among those who had discerned the talents of the man now to be his successor.² George III at once instructed Grafton to offer the Exchequer to Lord North. The Duke later noted that this decision was ‘particularly satisfactory to me, as I knew him to be a man of strict honour: and he was besides the person whom Lord Chatham desired’, recalling the abortive attempt to replace Townshend by North in March.³ North’s debating and administrative skills were already so apparent that he had recently sometimes attended cabinet, even though he only held the post of Joint Paymaster General. He was to surpass expectations by creating the permanent administration George III had been seeking since 1760. North became the main prop of government: for nearly fifteen years he was Chancellor of the Exchequer and Commons Leader, replacing Conway at the beginning of 1768; and Prime Minister for over twelve years from January 1770.

In 1767, however, that development lay in the future. The political game continued as before, and the customary pre-sessional moves and hopes manifested themselves in opposition circles. In September the Rockinghamite leadership, intending to revive the combined opposition of the previous session, was belatedly prepared to concede the points
that had wrecked the July negotiations, dropping the insistence on including Conway in and excluding Grenville from any future Rockingham administration. But the Bedfordite party was not now interested in planning a ministry for the Marquess, while Grenville, aware that he would not fit into any such arrangement, rejected the idea of opposition for its own sake. When Bedford suggested a united opposition of the three factions, Grenville replied that ‘measures alone were what he regarded’. Bedford and Newcastle also suffered from the same vestigial hangover of contemporary convention, the idea that opposition to the King’s government needed to be justified; for on 19 November Newcastle made this comment. ‘I like the Duke of Bedford’s notions of opposition, upon proper points, to the present administration’.7

The Rockinghamites nevertheless sought to achieve a united opposition vote when Parliament met on 24 November, by an umbrella motion under which all opposition MPs could unite. This was an anodyne amendment by Dowdeswell to the Address, deploring the omission of any measures to promote trade. The tactic failed dismally. In the debate no support came from either Grenville or the Bedfordites, and the amendment was rejected without a vote. Worse was to follow. Grenville had sat simmering with rage, because on the previous day he had been told that at a recent Newmarket race meeting Rockingham had publicly vetoed any alliance with the Grenville family. He also knew of incipient colonial protests against the Townshend duties, and of long-term resistance in America to the trade laws and the Mutiny Act. As soon as Dowdeswell’s amendment was rejected Grenville rose to make a virulent attack on the repeal of the Stamp Act: here is a summary of his speech in Newcastle’s papers.

After declaring his sentiments about America, and of the necessity of enforcing (supposed to mean, by some new Act) the superiority of this country over the colonies; that there were persons of contrary sentiments (turning his eyes towards Mr Dowdeswell) whom he would never support in power, or cooperate with, and that he would hold the same distance from them, that he would from those, who opposed the principles of the Revolution.8

Bedfordites like Rigby apologised at the time for Grenville’s behaviour, and that evening Weymouth told Rockingham that Grenville and the Bedford group were quite distinct parties. Rockinghamite retaliation, led by Edmund Burke, produced two further Parliamentary rows with Grenville over America later that month, and all semblance of opposition unity was destroyed. Lord Chancellor Camden gleefully
commented that ‘it was impossible for Stamp Men and No Stamp Men ever to agree’. Misguided Rockinghamite attempts to take the Bedfordites to task for Grenville’s behaviour worsened the situation. The Bedford party, aware that the antipathy and rivalry of Grenville and Rockingham was a more divisive and permanent factor than the American question, perceived the futility of opposition in such circumstances. By the end of November they began a negotiation with Grafton to join the ministry. On 2 December Bedford, as a courtesy, informed his old ally Grenville, who made no objection, if the Bedford group maintained the same policy. He said he would never force himself into office, and the two men parted political company on friendly terms, although henceforth their factions were quite separate. Bedford did not wish to break all links with the Grenville party. He therefore soon told Lord Lyttelton that ‘the basis of the late treaty with the Duke of Grafton was a supposition that Lord Chatham was politically dead’, and that he personally wished to see Grenville ‘at the head of the Treasury’. Grenville for his part thought the new arrangement was ‘too disjointed to last’.

Grafton welcomed the Bedfordite approach, because it would give him the Parliamentary strength he had sought in the July negotiations, in so far as his intention then was genuine. But George III disliked the Bedford party, because of their involvement in the 1765 coercion of him towards the end of Grenville’s ministry, and seemingly also from personal antipathies. Grafton therefore had to promise the King that neither then nor later should they have more than two cabinet posts. That presented no problem, since only two were available. Lord Northington was anxious to retire as Lord President of the Council, and Conway seized the chance to do so as Northern Secretary. They were succeeded respectively by Lords Gower and Weymouth. Bedford wanted no post himself, but why Sandwich, already with ample cabinet experience, was passed over is unclear: he was less than satisfied with the post of Joint Postmaster General. Conway now also gave way to Lord North as Commons Leader, but remained in the cabinet, even though merely Lieutenant-General of Ordnance, a post he had taken when it was vacated in August by Lord Townshend’s appointment to Ireland. He held it without salary when Northern Secretary, presumably wanting a suitable post to which he could retreat. This ministerial reshuffle was prolonged by the creation of a new Secretaryship of State for America, to relieve the workload of the Southern Secretary. Shelburne agreed to this, but resisted Grafton’s pressure to become American Secretary. The Duke wished to avoid
placing a hardliner in that sensitive post, but perforce had to accept a man reputed to be so in Lord Hillsborough, twice President of the Board of Trade, from 1763 to 1765 and in 1766, and so rightly deemed a colonial expert.\footnote{16}

Administration must have expected a quiet time when Parliament reassembled in January 1768 after the Christmas recess. The defection of the Bedford group was a body-blown to the opposition, not only in terms of numbers and debating talent, but also because it removed the link between Grenville and Rockingham. The Duke’s former Treasury Secretary James West made this wry comment to Newcastle on 21 December. ‘Nothing can be done now but Lord Rockingham’s shaking hands with Mr Grenville and shewing their joint feeble efforts for another two or three years.’\footnote{17} The next general election, moreover, was due by March, and many MPs were absent attending to their re-elections. The ministry, too, apart from financial business, had only one piece of legislation to offer, but it did constitute a hostage to fortune, being a topic likely to revive the alignment of the previous session, another East India Company Dividend Bill.

This had been introduced early, and received a second reading on 16 December 1767 by 128 votes to 41. On 15 January 1768 a motion by William Dowdeswell to refer the Company accounts to a Committee was opposed by new Commons Leader Lord North, William Beckford, and Lord Barrington, who claimed the motive to be delay. Dowdeswell, reminded by North of the previous vote, did not force another.\footnote{18} The General Court of the Company this time itself limited its dividend to 10 per cent. That was the rate fixed by the Commons Committee on 22 January, but although the substance of the dispute was over Dowdeswell ‘injudiciously’ divided the House next day on a postponement motion, being heavily defeated by ‘120 to poor 25’. James West thought that such a debacle put an end to any opposition. ‘It looks as if it would be the last division of the session.’\footnote{19} The minority vote went up to 41 for the third reading on 27 January, and included Conway, but the Rockingham party was fighting a lone battle. The Grenville group was abstaining as well as the now ministerial Bedfordites, apparently because of an abortive Grenvillite flirtation with administration. For it was also on 27 January that Lords Temple and Lyttelton had a long discussion with Charles Jenkinson, whom James West, in a version of the King’s Friends myth, coupled with Sir Gilbert Elliot as ‘the sole governors deputed for national affairs’.\footnote{20}

Rockingham therefore did not expect Grenvillite support in the Lords on the Dividend Bill, or to muster more than 20 votes.\footnote{21} But by
the second reading, on 4 February, the Grenvillite faction was back in open opposition, and both Lyttelton and Temple spoke against the legislation, as did Rockinghamites Richmond, Dartmouth and Hardwick. When speaking for the ministry both Shelburne and Grafton, though believed to be at odds with each other, asserted the state’s right to the Indian territories, with Grafton even talking of ‘the share which Parliament might allot to the East India Company’. The opposition vote was boosted to 35, as against 73, by a silent phalanx of Bedford peers, led by the Duke, anxious to demonstrate their consistency on that issue.22 The new Act extended the dividend limitation to 1 February 1769, the date of expiry for the 1767 agreement of government and Company.23

The imminence of a general election was a political factor that cut both ways for a ministry. While it reduced the attendance of independent MPs, it was also an opportunity for opposition to raise popular issues that would remind MPs that they soon had to face their electors. Two such came before the Commons early in 1768. William Beckford introduced an Election Bill. Before the Christmas recess he had been saying it would be a Triennial Bill, ‘Lord Chatham’s favourite’, according to James West. But on 19 January 1768, when he gave public notice, he said privately it would be a Bribery Bill, to oblige MPs to swear that they had not secured votes by corrupt means.24 When leave was given for the Bill on 26 January, Beckford mentioned several instances of bribery, notably one at Oxford. In 1766 the two Oxford MPs were asked by the corporation to pay off the city debt of £5,670, and one of them, Sir Thomas Stapleton, now confirmed this to the House.25 At least 340 MPs, probably the fullest House of the session, attended on 1 February, when the Oxford MPs produced the incriminating letter, and the Mayor and Aldermen were ordered to attend on 5 February.26 The corporation members, ten of them, were then found guilty of corruption, and after a long debate over their punishment the House voted in what James West termed ‘a very motley’ division by 129 to 111 to send them to Newgate Prison. They remained there for five days before being released after a reprimand.27

This scandal was freshly in mind when on 3 February Beckford produced his Bribery Bill, increasing penalties for corruption and enacting oaths to be taken by candidates at elections and by MPs before taking their seats in the House.28 After the second reading on 5 February Dowdeswell and Burke spoke strongly against its committal, because the measure would strike at individual MPs while leaving government corruption unchecked. But a more constructive approach
to this problem was adopted by another Rockinghamite, Sir George Savile, who, so West told Newcastle, ‘spoke exceptionally well’ in arguing for clauses ‘to prevent the power of the Crown being employed in bribery against the subject’. The Bribery Bill was under consideration at a time when the impending general election highlighted malpractices. ‘Boroughs had been publicly advertised for sale in the newspapers’, so Horace Walpole later wrote. But Beckford’s Election Bill contained no check on government influence, and on 17 February Dowdeswell therefore announced he would propose a clause to disfranchise revenue officers when the Committee sat two days later. The customs and excise men, being on the government payroll, were deemed to play the key role in so-called ‘Treasury boroughs’, and to vote in favour of ministerial candidates throughout the country. This idea anticipated a Bill that Dowdeswell would propose in 1770, and foreshadowed the Economical Reform programme that began a decade later. In the Committee on 19 February Beckford’s proposals were criticised as too severe, as excluding neighbourly charity, and also for encouraging informers. He stormed out when accused of creating a new crime of perjury. Burke and Dowdeswell continued to oppose his ideas, but Grenville supported them, ‘to flatter the country gentlemen, who can ill afford to combat with great lords, nabobs … and West Indians’, so Horace Walpole thought. When the ministry moved to kill the measure by closing the Committee without a report, Dowdeswell opposed this, because of his intended clause, and voted with Grenville in a minority of 69 to 93.

The opposition, however, had meanwhile taken the opportunity to end the session on a high note. During the last few years there had developed in Cumberland an electoral feud between Sir James Lowther, a son-in-law of Lord Bute, and the Duke of Portland, a Rockinghamite peer. In 1767 Lowther contrived what he must have thought a devastating coup. Sir Fletcher Norton had told him that two parts of Portland’s Cumbrian estate, the Forest of Inglewood and the Socage of the Manor of Carlisle, did not form part of the Honour of Penrith granted to the Duke’s Bentinck family by William III in 1694. Lowther therefore applied on 9 July 1767 for a lease of them to himself, and, doubtless assisted by his court connections, he obtained a patent on 28 December, despite Portland’s objections. The area looked to be decisive in the county constituency, since it contained over three hundred freeholders, who would now be expected to change sides. Portland contrived to keep most of their votes, by offering indemnities and announcing legal proceedings, and Lowther
was to lose his election. Whatever the legal niceties, his action was perceived as deploying Crown power against private property, and aroused alarm and consternation both locally and nationally, not least as fuel for the Bute myth.32

The Rockingham party resorted to legislation to remedy the injustice inflicted on one of their number, and Sir George Savile on 17 February moved a Nullum Tempus Bill, intending to set a time limit of sixty years for Crown claims to property in other hands. It was a cause the ministry found difficult to fight, and the opposition was in fine fettle. Savile, Charles Yorke, Dowdeswell, and Burke all shone for the Rockinghamites, while the Marquess conceded that ‘Mr G. Grenville spoke well and much better than I have often heard him’. James West told Newcastle ‘the administration behaved very poorly’. At first North and Jenkinson objected to the encroachment on the royal prerogative, not a popular line to take with MPs. North then argued that it was too late in the session for such legislation, and Secretary at War Lord Barnington even said he would support the measure in a new session. North avoided a direct vote by moving for next business, carried by the slender majority of twenty, 134 to 114, with, so Horace Walpole later wrote, ‘many courtiers voting in the minority’. But Rockingham told Newcastle that ‘only two men in office … voted with us’ and that ‘Conway kept away’. The episode put the opposition in good heart, with a triumph in prospect early in the new Parliament.33

Parliament was dissolved on 11 March 1768, but since it had lasted the full seven years the general election campaigns had long since commenced. Newcastle had told Rockingham in December 1766 that it was ‘high time’ to be planning for it.34 The unusually large number of eighty-three constituencies went to the poll, thirty more than in 1761, but that was due to a multitude of local circumstances, not to any great political excitement. A rare mention of political issues occurred in the City of London, where opponents of Barlow Trescothick made much of his role as ‘a friend to the colonies’, for hostile American responses to the Townshend Duties were now becoming known.35 If policy matters seldom impinged on the electoral scene, neither was there any clash of administration and opposition. There was less government interference than had been usual under the Duke of Newcastle, for Chatham disapproved of ministerial electioneering in principle, and Grafton was too idle and uninterested, even permitting Newcastle, though in opposition, to nominate candidates for the Treasury boroughs of Rye and Seaford, as he had done for so long. Local electoral alliances bore no necessary relation to national politics, as when Grenvillite Lord
Buckinghamshire supported two Rockinghamites in Norfolk against a sitting Grenvillite member. Although faction leaders sought to match candidates and seats, whether their followers fared well or badly depended on circumstances over which they had little influence. At this election the Grenvillite party of 41 MPs was reduced by ten, with nineteen losses and nine new supporters. The Rockinghamite party, which had dropped to 54 MPs, ended the election with 57.

As usual the new House of Commons would contain over a quarter of new members, this time 167, and the political attitude of most was unknown, a ground for optimism for opposition and concern to administration. When the new Parliament met briefly in May Lord North 'plumed administration on there being between 3 and 400 of the last Parliament in the present', a customary occurrence but a debating-point reminder of that House’s support of each successive ministry. James West, reporting this to Newcastle, commented that ‘it is more difficult now perhaps than in any part of the Duke of Newcastle’s life to form a judgement of this Parliament, when matters of real business and altercation may come on’. A few days later this more considered, and shrewdly accurate, opinion was penned by Sir Matthew Fetherstonhaugh.

If I can give any guess at Parliamentary Connections, I do not think the majority (by far) of the new members stand well disposed towards the present people in power. I hear a great many free censures thrown out, which make me think (if our friends play their cards right) they may make us happy in a better system. But if I might advise, they should hazard no division, but upon a strong and material subject, for as in war so in Parliament, a good blow staggers the adversary, but slight skirmishes only serve to strengthen the enemy (who sets out superior), and waste your own forces, who generally desert, upon unsuccessful combats.

What gave the general election significance was the return of John Wilkes for Middlesex. Wilkes, though still an outlaw, returned to Britain early in 1768 from his French exile, aiming to obtain a Parliamentary seat by popular election. He had little to lose in a well-calculated gamble to retrieve his political and financial fortunes. The ministry studiously ignored his presence, not to avoid another gift of martyrdom, but simply because the cabinet was split, the Chathamite part favouring leniency as against the hardline attitude of their colleagues. Wilkes was left free to stand for Parliament, and, after coming last of seven candidates in London, declared his candidature for the metropolitan county of Middlesex. A whirlwind campaign, assisted on election day by mob
intimidation of opposing voters, put Wilkes at the top of a low poll, swept to victory by a tide of popular enthusiasm channelled by a superb organisation, as the artisans and shopkeepers of London outvoted the rural gentry.40

The cabinet, stunned by this event, in April decided, under pressure from George III, to expel Wilkes. But a pretext was not easy to find, especially after Lord Chief Justice Mansfield revoked the outlawry on 8 June, on a technicality. For although Wilkes was imprisoned for two years after surrendering to justice in April, that was punishment for the libels for which he had already been expelled in 1764. The London area meanwhile was the scene of repeated disorders, celebrations over his election being followed by protests over his incarceration, culminating in a riot of 10 May outside his prison that was quelled by soldiers with seven fatalities, the so-called ‘Massacre of St George’s Fields’. These political disturbances had a background of social distress produced by a combination of a bitter winter and economic recession, and the propertied class closed ranks in face of this threat. Opposition MPs joined with ministerial supporters to criticise not the deployment of troops but the government failure to maintain order. Lord North replied by blaming the local magistrates.41

No Parliamentary action could be taken about Wilkes until November, and the attention of the ministry was directed to more urgent and important matters, the French seizure of Corsica, renewed defiance in the American colonies, and a developing crisis in Ireland. In 1767 Secretaries of State Shelburne and Conway had so neglected Europe because of their concern with imperial matters and internal politics that Britain could not be said to have had a foreign policy at all. Nor did Conway’s replacement by Weymouth in January 1768 lead to any improvement. Horace Walpole wrote scathingly of the administration then that ‘they endeavoured to doze over all thoughts of the continent’.42 There was no anticipation in London of France’s acquisition of Corsica from Genoa in May 1768, even though French soldiers had since 1764 been assisting Genoa in the suppression of a Corsican nationalist movement under Pasquale Paoli. Only in April did the British ambassador to Paris, Lord Rochford, pick up rumours of French intentions, and, misled by Choiseul, his assessment was that France would not risk a war with Britain. This British failure in timing was crucial. The prior dispatch of a British naval squadron to Corsica would have thrown that decision on Choiseul: and France’s naval weakness, and a hostile French public opinion, might well have
deterred him from the venture. But after May the decision whether to embark on a war to reverse the French coup lay with Britain. This international crisis coincided with disorders in London. The British government was pre-occupied, and also divided. Chathamites Shelburne, Camden, and Hawke were alarmed by the new French threat to British naval and commercial interests in the western Mediterranean, but the cabinet majority did not think Corsica worth a war. The official British response was impotent disapproval, conveyed by Shelburne. That he had been overruled in his own department widened the breach with his colleagues. When later in the summer Paoli appealed for help to Britain, where the Corsican cause was popular, he received help not only from private individuals but also secretly from the British government. George III approved this, but firmly told Grafton on 16 September that a war to prevent French military occupation of the island would be both expensive and futile. This aid merely delayed completion of the French conquest until 1769, when Paoli took refuge in Britain. The Corsican episode seemed to confirm the belief of contemporaries at home and abroad that Britain had lost interest in Europe, and statesmen like Panin and Frederick II wrote her off as a continental power. They were so far correct in this assessment in that for the next two years, until the Falkland Islands Crisis, British political attention was focused on America and Wilkes.

Throughout the winter of 1767–68 disturbing news had been arriving from America of opposition to the Townshend duties, first of trade boycotts in most of New England, and then of the publication in colonial newspapers from December 1767 of the serial ‘Letters of a Pennsylvania Farmer’, written by lawyer John Dickinson of Philadelphia. These explicitly denied the right of Parliament to lay any taxes at all on the colonies, whether internal like the stamp taxes or external like Townshend’s port duties. This claim in the Farmer’s Letters was endorsed by public meetings from Massachusetts to Georgia, and officially by the Massachusetts Circular Letter approved by that colony’s assembly on 11 February as an example to be adopted elsewhere. This still conceded that Parliament was the legislature for ‘the whole empire’, but any tax infringed the rights of ‘American subjects’ because they were not represented there.

This new constitutional challenge, making clear what had only been implicit in the Stamp Act Crisis, did not become the subject of Parliamentary attention until the end of the year. The ministry meanwhile took stern and effective action to control the situation in
America. Responsibility for this lay with American Secretary Hillsborough, who as soon as he knew on 15 April of the Massachusetts Circular Letter obtained cabinet approval, Shelburne being the sole dissenter, to circularise all governors with an order to prevent any response from their assemblies, and to instruct Governor Bernard of Massachusetts to force withdrawal of the circular. This hardline policy was followed on 8 June by an order to General Gage to send soldiers to Boston to maintain order there. Simultaneously the Admiralty was instructed to send five ships. This action was a response to a plea of 12 February from the American Customs Board, based in that port. This firm action was retrospectively fully justified, by a Boston riot of 10 June when custom officials sought to impound for smuggling a ship owned by John Hancock, a prominent patriot. It was in this atmosphere of excitement that the Massachusetts Assembly on 30 June rejected the ministerial demand for repudiation of its circular, by 92 votes to 17, and was then dissolved by Governor Bernard. Eight colonial assemblies had responded to that circular before Hillsborough’s letter reached their governors, and the other four did so by the end of the year. The protest was universal, but the trade boycott to give it teeth was as yet ineffective, since Philadelphia led a widespread refusal to cooperate with Boston, and Gage warned Hillsborough not to be fooled by colonial propaganda in that respect.48

Further escalation of the crisis came with news on 19 July of the Boston riot of 10 June. Several cabinet meetings culminated in two policy decisions on 27 July. One was to send Lord Botetourt to Virginia as resident governor, in place of the absentee Sir Jeffrey Amherst. That colony had been to the fore in opposing taxes both in 1765 and 1768, and was perceived to need a firm hand; but Amherst regarded his salary as a pensionary reward for his wartime command in America. The second decision was to dispatch more soldiers to Boston, by now obviously under mob rule in the absence of any military protection for officials there. The ministry was calling the colonial bluff in Boston, where during the summer Sam Adams and other patriots professed defiance, claiming that the government could not even suppress riots in London. In Britain many feared that civil war might ensue, but the colonists attempted no resistance when the soldiers arrived in Boston on 28 September. News of this bloodless coup reached Britain on 4 November, before Parliament met. Grafton, by then officially head of the ministry, would be able to propose colonial conciliation from a position of strength.49
The third ongoing major problem, Ireland, would not attract attention at Westminster, being as yet a matter only for King and cabinet. Lord Townshend’s 1767 appointment as Lord-Lieutenant was intended to implement the decision of the Grenville cabinet in 1765, that henceforth Ireland would be directly ruled by a viceroy living in Dublin Castle. That idea was dropped by the Rockingham ministry, but revived by George III and Chatham in 1766. Lord Bristol had let them down, but Lord Townshend, a former army general, was made of sterner stuff. The purpose of his appointment was recalled in 1771 by Lord North, by then Prime Minister, when he promised Townshend full support ‘to establish and confirm the measure adopted in 1767, having a Lord Lieutenant constantly resident in Ireland’. And Grafton stated in 1804 that Townshend was appointed ‘under the same stipulation for permanent residence as Lord Chatham had intended’. Townshend was a courtier, who so strongly shared George III’s views on the role of the monarchy that on Bute’s resignation in 1763 he had commented to him on ‘the insolence of an aristocracy … forging fetters’ for the King, an analogy applicable to the Undertakers and Dublin Castle.

Prior to his departure for Ireland Townshend obtained from cabinet meetings of 7 and 8 October permission for two popular measures, septennial Irish Parliaments and security of tenure for Irish judges. The Judges Tenure Bill was rejected by the Irish Commons after an unacceptable clause was inserted by the British Privy Council against Townshend’s advice, one that would allow the British Parliament a voice in the removal of Irish judges: Camden and Conway supported Townshend in a ministerial split on this point. The Septennial Bill was sent over to Britain with the next election specified for 1774. It returned to Ireland as an Octennial Bill, but with the election to be in 1768. Shelburne told Townshend that eight-year intervals would better suit the Irish circumstance of biennial sessions, and that simultaneous general elections in Britain and Ireland would be avoided. The Octennial Act made the passage of unpopular government measures more difficult, as MPs became more aware of their electors: but the real losers were the shocked Undertakers, who had assumed the Septennial Bill would be rejected as usual. Opposition peer Lord Charlemont recorded John Ponsonby’s reaction to the news. ‘His countenance fell. He turned pale, and it was visible to every one that some fatal news had been received … Never did I see in one group so many doleful faces, nor to me so laughable a sight.’

The ulterior motive behind the ministry’s willingness to accept some such popular demand was the desire to obtain a reciprocal...
acceptance of an increase in the size of the Irish army from 12,000 to 15,000 men. There were two distinct motives behind this policy. The introduction in 1764 of a rotation of army regiments throughout the British Empire made necessary their equalisation in size, and those in Ireland were smaller than elsewhere. There was also an intention that Ireland should contribute more to imperial defence. There were two distinct motives behind this policy. The introduction in 1764 of a rotation of army regiments throughout the British Empire made necessary their equalisation in size, and those in Ireland were smaller than elsewhere. There was also an intention that Ireland should contribute more to imperial defence. To allay Protestant fears about the Catholic majority, the ministry gave an assurance that despite the rotation system there would never be less than 12,000 soldiers in Ireland. But on 19 April 1768, despite the support of many independent MPs, this measure was defeated, by 105 votes to 101, because of the hostility of the Undertakers, displeased by the Octennial Act and by failures to meet their patronage demands. There was also the suspicion that the increase, paid for by Ireland, was intended to enable Britain to deploy more soldiers to control America. This episode convinced Townshend of the need to free Dublin Castle from reliance on the Undertakers, a situation Southern Secretary Shelburne had hitherto been prepared to countenance. The Lord-Lieutenant wrote to warn him on 31 May that 'this is now the crisis of Irish government. If a system is at this time wisely formed and steadily pursued, his Majesty’s affairs may hereafter be carried on with ease, with dignity and safety’. Further temporising as in the 1750s would only 'bring the King’s authority in Ireland, low as it is, into still greater contempt’. The cabinet was now convinced in principle of the need to humble the Undertakers, but preferred to await events at the meeting of the newly elected Irish Parliament in October 1769 before deciding on a course of action. By then Grafton had been official head of the ministry for a year.

Grafton’s formal elevation to the status normally appertaining to his post as First Lord of the Treasury, and one which he had indeed been enjoying unofficially during Chatham’s illness, was a consequence of his decision to remove Shelburne from a cabinet wherein he was increasingly isolated from his colleagues. Shelburne’s offence was personal behaviour, not disagreement on policy: contrary to much contemporary and historical opinion, he did not oppose the dispatch of soldiers to Boston. When Grafton raised the subject with George III, the King closeted Lord Chancellor Camden and ‘very frankly said that Lord Shelburne manifestly still attempted to thwart every measure that originated from you’, so he told Grafton. The problem was that Shelburne enjoyed the protection of Chatham, the shadow of whose possible return to health and political dominance still hung over the ministry. That was why George III had sounded out Camden, who agreed that
Shelburne had lost the ‘good opinion’ of all the ‘active members of the cabinet’. The replacement envisaged was Lord Rochford, a professional diplomat rather than politician, currently ambassador to Paris. Camden approved this choice, because ‘he could neither be called of the Bedford connection nor adverse to the Earl of Chatham’.

Rochford, who arrived in London on 6 September, was summoned by the King. ‘His Majesty ordered him to take the Seals. That he is of no party.’ So Rochford told Albemarle, who told Newcastle.

Camden, however, now warned Grafton that if Chatham, still Lord Privy Seal, resigned because of Shelburne’s dismissal he himself would do the same. This highlighted the delicate problem of removing Shelburne without losing the entire Chathamite part of the administration, as might happen if Chatham himself expressed disapproval. The panic-stricken Grafton, himself, as he said, in ‘a similitude of situation’, wavered as to whether to take the risk, and in a letter of 2 October threw the decision on the King. George III had no doubt as to what should be done. Shelburne’s conduct, especially towards Grafton, had caused ‘most of the members of my administration separately’ to insist on his removal from office. The King suggested therefore that Grafton should see Lady Chatham beforehand and explain why Shelburne was being dismissed. Grafton did so on 9 October, and explained how Shelburne had ‘on every occasion’ sought ‘to thwart and not to assist His Majesty’s government’. But Lady Chatham warned that her husband would not easily accept Shelburne’s removal, and the approach produced the very result Grafton and the King had tried to avoid.

George III himself wrote to urge Chatham to stay so that, when recovered, ‘I may have your assistance in resisting the torrents of factions’. He was rewarded for his effort when Chatham gave only ill health as the reason for his resignation. That removed the danger of a general Chathamite exodus from the ministry, especially when Chatham urged Camden not to resign. Grafton spoke to Granby, an enemy of the Bedfords, and Camden persuaded the highly regarded lawyer John Dunning to stay on as Solicitor-General, even though he had
owed that post in January as much to Shelburne as to Camden, and sat for a Shelburne borough. The only resignations were of Shelburne and his Commons mouthpiece Barré. In the reshuffle Rochford became Northern Secretary, Weymouth having expressed a wish to transfer to the Southern Department. Chatham’s own post of Lord Privy Seal was now demoted from cabinet status, after Northington declined it. Despite applications from Sandwich and from North, on behalf of Halifax, it was somewhat inexplicably given to Lord Bristol, who in 1766 had been Chatham’s unwise choice as Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland. The French embassy was given to Lord Harcourt, a courtier high in favour with the King.

Grafton had for eighteen months headed the ministry on behalf of Chatham. He was to do so in his own right for only fifteen months, and a troubled time he had of it. Leading an administration that was an uneasy coalition of Chathamites and Bedfordites, colleagues divided by personal animosities as well as political attitudes, he was to be confronted, and his ministry eventually destroyed, by the second John Wilkes case, that of the Middlesex Election.

Notes
1 BL Add. MSS. 32985, fos 14–15.
2 Thomas, Lord North, p. 20.
4 BL Add. MSS. 32986, fos 58–60.
5 Malmesbury MSS. Photocopies B875–6.
6 BL Add. MSS. 32987, fos 49–50.
8 For reports of the debate see Simmons and Thomas, Proceedings and Debates, II, 518–19.
9 BL Add. MSS. 32987, fo. 149.
10 Thomas, Townshend Duties Crisis, pp. 41–5. Brooke, Chatham Administration, pp. 315–24.
11 Malmesbury MSS. Photocopies B878–82.
12 BL Add. MSS. 42086, fos 5–8, printed in Grenville Papers, IV, 249–53.
13 Malmesbury MSS. Photocopies B882.
14 Grafton MSS. no. 545, quoted Brooke, Chatham Administration, p. 330 n.
17 BL Add. MSS. 32987, fos 270–1.
18 BL Add. MSS. 32988, fo. 21. Commons Journals, XXXI, 482, 505.
21 BL Add. MSS. 32988, fos 81–2.
24 BL Add. MSS. 32988, fo. 48.
28 BL Add. MSS. 32988, fo. 152. Commons Journals, XXXI, 573.
32 The whole episode is covered by Bonsall, Sir James Lowther and Cumberland and Westmorland Elections 1754–1775, pp. 83–103.
33 BL Add. MSS. 32988, fos 357–8, 369–70. Walpole, Memoirs, III, 114–16.
34 BL Add. MSS. 32978, fo. 235–41.
35 BL Add. MSS. 32988, fo. 49.
36 Lawson, George Grenville, pp. 258–69.
38 BL Add. MSS. 32990, fo. 57.
39 BL Add. MSS. 32990, fo. 107.
40 Thomas, John Wilkes, pp. 68–76.
41 Thomas, John Wilkes, pp. 76–86.
42 Walpole, Memoirs, III, 146.
43 Legg, British Diplomatic Instructions, pp. 101–5.
44 Corr. of George III, II, 44.
46 Scott, British Foreign Policy, pp. 112–24.
47 Thomas, Townshend Duties Crisis, pp. 76–8.
48 Thomas, Townshend Duties Crisis, pp. 81–6.
49 Thomas, Townshend Duties Crisis, pp. 86–93.
51 Grafton Autobiography, p. 157. For a similar opposition assumption see Hoffman, Edmund Burke, p. 407. For a challenge to this interpretation.
55 *CHOP*, II, 195, 202, 205.
56 *HMC Charlemont*, I, 26.
61 *CHOP*, II, 345.
64 BL Add. MSS. 32991, fo. 331.
68 *Chatham Papers*, III, 338.
71 Grafton MSS. no. 799.