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Conclusion:
factions or parties?

The old concept of a two-party system of Whigs and Tories does not survive detailed knowledge of mid-eighteenth-century politics.[1] By 1760 less than one hundred MPs could be deemed Tories even by a generous definition, and in the ensuing decade they split asunder, being variously attached to the Court or to factions, or remaining independent of all connections. The ministry at George III's accession was a coalition of all the Whig groups, but soon fell apart. The next five ministries were all reshuffles of the Whig pack, and none entailed a complete change of cabinet membership. It was this fluid political situation that gave George III the leverage to exercise the significant power that lay with the Crown. In doing so he acted in accord with much contemporary opinion. Many thought with the King when he used 'faction' and 'party' as pejorative words. For men of both 'court' and 'country' outlook they possessed the connotation of self-interested combinations acting against the interests of the state. In 1770 Lord North clearly deemed it a political advantage to disparage party in theory and practice. In that sense his establishment as Prime Minister that year did mark the victory of George III in his battle with the 'factions'.

By 1763 the disintegration into faction was apparent. Pitt and his friends had left the administration in 1761, and Newcastle led out the 'old Whig corps' in 1762: it was to be merely one, albeit the largest and most permanent, of the four main Parliamentary factions. The ministerial negotiations of 1763 resulted in an alignment of the old Bedford and new Grenville groups in government, and those headed by Pitt and Newcastle in opposition. Two years later the Newcastle group took office under Rockingham, with the initial tacit support of Pitt, while the Grenville and Bedford factions went into opposition.

1766 saw an end to any lingering notion of a Whig party that included both Pitt and Rockingham when Pitt, now Lord Chatham, replaced Rockingham in office. That there were four distinct political factions was recognised in contemporary speculations and negotiations during 1766, for they envisaged the possibility of any of the Rockingham, Grenville and Bedford groups becoming ministerial partners with Chatham. In 1767 the Bedford-Grenville alliance ended when the Bedfords joined the Chatham group in office. This last combination was also the basis of the Grafton ministry at the end of the 1760s, facing opposition from the factions of Rockingham and Grenville. The North ministry, in so far as it related to this decade of faction, was based on the remnants of the Bedford and Grenville groups, which began to disintegrate after the deaths of their leaders: and was confronted by the other two, one headed by Rockingham, and the second often by Shelburne, as deputy for Chatham. This last faction survived under him after Chatham's death in 1778 until it dissolved in the political convolutions of 1782–84 that brought to power Chatham's son, William Pitt the Younger.

The Rockingham party has conventionally been seen as a quite different kind of political entity from the other more ephemeral groups that existed only in the lifetime of a leader. It is usually perceived as the link in personnel and principles between the ruling Whig party of George II's reign and the opposition Whig party of Charles James Fox. Nor is this idea simply the invention of later historians. Newcastle and Rockingham men were wont to assert that they were 'the Whig Party', to the annoyance of other politicians like Grenville and Bedford whose claims to a Whig pedigree were equally valid. In terms of personnel the Rockinghamite claim to be a link in Whig party history is weaker than is often supposed. The two haemorrhages of placemen in 1762 and careerists in 1766 meant that in the 1770s Lord North, in terms of his Parliamentary support, was more the heir of Newcastle than Rockingham himself. On policy the continuity or otherwise of attitude is difficult to establish, for the major problems of America, India, and Ireland were new issues of the 1760s. It might seem that the older Whig tradition of opposition to government power in Stuart times, rather than the actual role of ruling party in the earlier Georgian era, had been revived in the Rockinghamite attitude to those questions of empire: but in each instance the behaviour was explained by specific motives. American policy stemmed from the conviction that the colonies were worth more to Britain in terms of trade than taxation. Attitudes to Ireland were influenced by the many

personal and political links with the Undertakers. A belief in the sanctity of charters – and here there was a reminder of Whig attitudes in the later seventeenth century – was the spur to defence of the East India Company from ministerial interference.

Such considerations open up the wider question of how far a party veneer of policy identification can be superimposed on the factions. Some correlations can be established, but the arguments must not be unduly pressed. That policies were based on prejudices and pragmatism was characteristic of an age when ideology did not predetermine attitudes. Policy-making was usually a response to circumstances, but once political opinions had been adopted, the much-vaunted contemporary virtue of 'consistency' obliged politicians to repeat a similar stance if the same topic recurred later. That happened over America. Any politicians in office during the earlier 1760s would probably have taxed and otherwise sought to control the American colonies. The Grenville and Bedford groups happened to be then in government. It might well have been their opponents, who did not at the time challenge colonial taxation and other measures.[2] They did so subsequently, on news of American resistance, Rockingham on grounds of expediency and Pitt out of principle. But it is too facile to suggest simply that circumstances made policies. If the alignments had been reversed, Grenville and Bedford would not have championed the American cause. Grenville was a man obsessed with financial probity and legal authority, principles that determined his political behaviour. Even the Bedford group was something more than a band of politicians cynically united to increase their bargaining power – often their depiction by both contemporaries and historians. The Bedfordites were characterised by hardline attitudes, whether to American colonists, Wilkite radicals or Spitalsfield silk weavers: the consequent unpopularity incurred by the Duke seemed to provoke riots wherever he went![3] Chatham, by contrast, was governed on both America and India by his imperial vision. That led him into difficulty over America, since his desire for popularity in the colonies clashed with his view of America as a subordinate part of the British Empire. On India he held strongly the opinion that the state should claim and benefit from the territories acquired by the East India Company.

Foreign policy also distinguished the factions. The Bedford group was Francophile and pacifist for the most part, though in 1770 Weymouth proved to be the most bellicose cabinet member. Grenville was Francophobe, suspicious of Bourbon intentions, but content to rely on the navy rather than foreign alliances. The Newcastle-Rockingham party

passively clung to the traditional Whig idea of an Austrian alliance; but in practice supported Chatham's positive pursuit of the chimera of a Prussian alliance. These policy differences over what to do in Europe came to nothing, for no ally could be obtained. But they reinforce the overall impression that in one sense an embryonic party system did exist, if changes of ministry might lead to alterations of policy.

That argument cannot be pushed further. The British political scene between the accession of George III and the outbreak of the American War was a time when the two sides in Parliament were 'administration' and 'opposition'. That terminology was the usual language of debate.[4] Within that simple political context there existed distinct factions, but the political scene was in detail far more complex than that depicted in the broad strokes of this study. Some individual politicians, conspicuously Charles Townshend, occasionally changed their allegiance. A few such as Lord North professed none. Even the major factions were loosely constructed, with leaders like Grenville all too well aware that they must nurse their connections, and issue requests not summonses for Parliamentary attendance. Formal 'whipping' was a facility available only to the ministry of the day, for it was respectable for the King's government to ask for support.[5] Independent Sir Roger Newdigate hastened to London from Warwickshire in 1770 to answer a summons from Lord North. But the line between the Court Party and such supportive independents was a fine distinction. Many MPs who deemed themselves independent asked government for favours, as when Sir John Glynne requested and obtained an army commission for his son in 1763.[6]

The concept of independence implied a choice of supporting or opposing government to be made on each and every occasion, and almost every Parliamentarian liked to think he had that option. Any examination of the mid-Georgian political system must take its start from the notion that Parliament comprised 558 MPs and some 200 peers, without the easy classification of a party system. Analysis of these men into categories of placemen, political groups, and independents was both tentative and arbitrary. Compilation of lists was the stuff of politics for George III's ministers and their opponents.

Notes

1 For a recent attempt to maintain its validity, see Hill, *British Parliamentary Parties*, pp. 90–128.

2 Thomas, *British Politics and the Stamp Act Crisis*, pp. 112–14.

3 See, for example, *Bedford Papers*, II, 278–9; *Bedford Journal*, pp. 620–1.
4 Thomas, *House of Commons*, p. 210.
5 Thomas, *House of Commons*, pp. 110–19.
6 Thomas, *PH*, 17 (1998), 344.