

Political Instability and Whig Inefficiency in Britain in the Post-Pitt Era

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Abstract: The years from 1806 to 1812 were remarkably unstable in British politics. The beginning of this period saw one of the few occasions during the reigns of George III and his two sons (1760-1837) when the Whigs tried to provide stable government, but the Ministry of All the Talents managed to remain in power only for little more than a year. The special character of the political system, the deaths of two great leaders, the difficulties of fighting the war against France, personal rivalries, divisive political issues and George III's illness all combined to make this era utterly unstable. This article seeks to explain the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the Whig-dominated administration and discusses the factors that contributed to the failure of the Tory governments up to 1812.

Keywords: political instability, Whigs, Catholic emancipation, Napoleonic Wars, parliamentary politics, party development

The political instability of the early nineteenth century started with the death of the great rivals, William Pitt the Younger and Charles James Fox. These two great men had dominated politics since 1783. They had faced each other in the House of Commons for more than twenty years, and always from the same side of the chamber. Pitt was Prime Minister after December 1783 for most of the remaining twenty-two years of his life, while Fox held high office only during the last seven months before his death. Pitt died in January 1806, and Fox in September of the same year, after a few months as Foreign Secretary in William Grenville's government, the Ministry of All the Talents. This short-lived ministry was the only Whig-dominated government between 1783 and 1830. It is surprising that the Whigs should have been so ineffective during that long period. Between 1807 and 1812 the Tory ministries were particularly weak. On at least four occasions the Whigs had an excellent chance of coming to power, but each time they failed. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to account for the two main aspects of the period from 1806 and 1812: instability and the weaknesses of the Whigs.

The key to understanding these questions is the peculiar nature of the political system of the time. The Whig historians of the nineteenth century were unable to provide acceptable explanations for the occasional instabilities and the failures of their intellectual forefathers because they completely misunderstood the politics of the previous century. They assumed the existence of strong political parties upon which a cabinet system of government could rest. They believed that the political system of their own time had come into existence well before the middle of the eighteenth century. The Whig historian, Thomas Erskine May, for example, described the political system of the early eighteenth century in the following way.

Instead of dangerous conflicts between the crown and Parliament, there succeeded struggles between rival parties for parliamentary majorities; and the successful party wielded all the power of the state. Upon ministers, therefore, devolved the entire burthen of public affairs: they relieved the crown of its cares and perils, but, at the same time, they appropriated nearly all its authority. The king reigned, but his ministers governed. (May 1868, 3)

All this, of course, still lay in the future, even in 1806. We have to emphasise that the political system at this time was still of an “eighteenth-century character”. That is, there were no really disciplined and well-organised parties in Parliament. There was no clear, two-party confrontation. The House of Commons consisted of a number of political groups, factions, and many unattached members.¹⁷ This is not to argue that parties were non-existent or had no significance at all during the Long Eighteenth Century (1688-1832). As Frank O’Gorman has also emphasized, “certain periods – for example, the reign of Anne, the 1780s, the period after 1815 – exhibited powerful party characteristics while others – the 1750s, the late 1790s and the late 1820s – manifestly do not” (O’Gorman 1981, 450-451). During the period under discussion a gradual realignment of political groups occurred, which eventually led to the emergence of a new and much more stable party system after 1812.

Until 1806, the great leaders, Fox and Pitt, were able to separate politicians into two main groups, and thus simplified and solidified politics. After their deaths, however, a process of disintegration started. A medley of political groups and fac-

17 For more information on the nature of politics at this time see O’Gorman 1987. For a concise survey of the six sessions of the 1807-1812 Parliament see *The History of Parliament Online*.

tions, with a large number of members not permanently attached to any of them, took the place of 'Foxites' and 'Pittites' (Roberts 1965, 330; O'Gorman 1981, 468). Under these circumstances, the king's power and personal responsibility increased. Since the basis of parliamentary government – a stable party system – did not exist, the ruler had to intervene in politics and exercise his political influence. It was the king who had to choose his ministers from among parliamentary leaders, who – after being appointed – tried to create a reliable parliamentary majority for themselves. Political stability depended partly on the willingness of the parliamentary leaders to co-operate and partly on royal decision and support. The politics of the period from 1806 to 1812 should be studied in view of all this.

After Pitt's death, his friends felt unable to govern without him, so George III was obliged to admit Fox to high office. However, it was William Grenville, not Fox, who was commissioned to form a government.¹⁸ Thus came into being the administration to which – ironically in view of its poor performance – contemporaries attached the label 'Ministry of All the Talents'.¹⁹ The new government had two important aims: it wanted to end the war against Napoleon, and it desired to lift some of the restrictions which lay upon the Roman Catholics. In neither objective was it successful.²⁰

The Ministry of All Talents (February 1806-March 1807) was an awkward combination of four different groups: the Foxites, the followers of Grenville, politicians attached to the Prince of Wales, and the Addigtonians, that is, the supporters of Viscount Sidmouth. The ministry's unity depended upon its members' willingness to sink issues on which they had formerly been at odds. This meant, for example, that the Foxite leadership was bound to disappoint the expectations of its backbenchers who had been fed on irresponsible opposition rhetoric. Grenville and Sidmouth represented conservative influences which were likely to clash with the more reformist ideas of Fox's friends. On the Catholic question,

18 This development was a bitter disappointment to the former followers of Pitt who had all looked to Grenville – the first cousin of William Pitt the Younger – as the new leader of the Pittites. Viscount Lowther, for example, wrote of Grenville that "I can no longer consider him as the Man he was, and I am afraid, with all the Fairness of Character which hitherto distinguished him, he has become the Instrument by which others have raised themselves to Power." Quoted in McQuiston 1971, 505-506.

19 It was in January 1804 that the Foxites (a group of about 130) and the Grenvilles (a group of 16) became allies. Besides providing the basis for the Ministry of All the Talents, this alliance considerably determined the activities of the Whigs for more than a decade. See Willis 1972.

20 The only – although very important – achievement of the Ministry of All the Talents was the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. It must be mentioned, however, that the government was divided on this issue and, therefore, the ending of the slave trade was not a government measure. See Harvey 1972, 629-630.

Sidmouth was a die-hard, and on the subject of negotiations with France, he was even more inflexible than Grenville. Moreover, both these questions were likely to lead to conflict with the king (Christie 1985, 270-271).

The Ministry of All the Talents was not any more successful in diplomacy and war than the Pitt Government had been. An attempt by Fox to initiate peace negotiations with Napoleon failed.²¹ The various military and naval actions “lacked any general strategic purpose and failed to secure any permanently successful results” (Briggs 1979, 150). Naval operations in the Mediterranean were active but the Baltic was neglected. Napoleon managed to play off Prussia against Britain in February 1806 by persuading the former to annex Hanover. It was only after the battle of Jena and the annihilation of the Prussian army by the French that the British made peace with Prussia.²² After these unfortunate developments, Britain should have supported Russia but owing to a series of diplomatic blunders alliance with the last potential anti-French power was also lost. Russian requests for naval cooperation in the Mediterranean, a loan of six million pounds, and British coastal raids on Holland and France were, on the whole, ignored by the Ministry of All the Talents, and after March 1807, the new Foreign Secretary, George Canning, was unable to regain the confidence of Alexander I.²³ All in all, the war policy of the “Talents” was a failure. Nevertheless, it was not this, but the other main issue, Catholic emancipation, that brought the government down.

In 1805 the Catholic demand for political emancipation was becoming stronger in Ireland. James Ryan, a young rich Catholic merchant, was trying to bring the management of Catholic affairs into his own hands. Largely as a result of this effort, a petition for Catholic Emancipation was about to be presented to Parliament. This development created serious embarrassment for Fox when the Ministry of All the Talents took office early in 1806. Fox was aware of the risks involved in dealing with this question and suggested that the petition should not be presented. In exchange, he promised to support the Catholics in every possible way. Ryan accepted the deal by which he immediately laid himself open to attacks from his political rivals. A meeting in March 1806 reversed Ryan’s decision, put an end to his domination, and formed a more broadly based Catholic Association to co-ordinate and intensify the agitation (Roberts 1965, 10-11; 1935, 61).

21 For details see Butterfield 1962.

22 On George III’s efforts to represent the interests of his German dominions see Riotte 2007, 78-85.

23 The Russian Tsar signed the Treaty of Tilsit with Napoleon on 7 July 1807. For details see Roach 1983 and Harvey 1972, 633-634.

The continued Catholic pressure during 1806-07 led the Ministry into a politically fatal confrontation with George III. Fearing the strengthening of a Catholic agitation, the cabinet concluded at the beginning of 1807 that concessions must be made. The government decided to extend the right of Catholics to serve in the army, which was established in Ireland in 1793, to the rest of the United Kingdom. This recommendation, however, came nowhere near to resolving the problems of Catholics. According to Ian Christie, to the Irish Catholics, this measure “was wholly marginal and in no way likely to reduce popular agitation in Ireland, as the government hoped” (1985, 279). Such crucial issues as the right of Catholics to enter Parliament and their ability to become members of borough corporations were not even considered.

George III agreed to extend the rights of Catholics to serve in the army to the entire United Kingdom, but in the meantime, the ministers pushed their demands further on two points. The plan that they adopted would allow Catholics to be appointed generals on the staff. This was something which had been excluded in the Irish Act of 1793. The ministers’ formula would also end discrimination against Protestant nonconformists. This scheme was brought forward in the Commons as a separate Bill, that is, without consulting the king the ministers had gone far beyond what he was willing to accept. Sidmouth, who opposed Catholic relief, drew the king’s attention to all this. George III informed the cabinet of his refusal to support its policy, and, in the face of royal resistance, Grenville and his colleagues decided to abandon the Bill. The king, angered by the sly attempts of his Ministers to introduce Catholic officers into the army, asked Grenville for a written promise that such attempts would not be repeated. The Prime Minister refused this, the government resigned, and in March 1807 it was replaced by a new administration led by the elderly Duke of Portland (Roberts 1935, 61-77; Christie 1985, 279).²⁴

24 This was the second premiership of William Cavendish-Bentinck, 3rd Duke of Portland, who was the titular head of a short-lived coalition government in 1783. According to Frank O’Gorman, the period after the elections of 1784 was of great significance from the viewpoint of party development since “almost all groups and individuals opposed to the court came together under Portland and Fox’s leadership.” The Whig Party “acquired much of the apparatus of a modern, bureaucratic party.” It was due to these developments, “upon this secure foundation that in the second decade of the nineteenth century there could emerge finally and permanently the two party duality of Whig and Tory” (O’Gorman 1981, 464-465).

This is how the Ministry of All Talents, the only predominantly Whig ministry between 1783 and 1831, fell.²⁵ Who should be blamed for this? Did the king force his ministers out by trickery or can we accuse the ministers of having used dishonest methods? In Ian Christie's view, the king's demand for the written pledge "is clearly to be explained by the fact that the ministers had deliberately misled him over the extent of the concessions they were bringing before Parliament" (1985, 280). They were trying to smuggle the new Bill past him. George III decided to turn his ministers out not simply because he disagreed with their policy, but because he felt he could no longer trust them.

The fall of the government was not popular with the general public. Although the king appeared to be the champions of constitutional progress, the king was more representative of public opinion. George III stood by his coronation oath and the Protestant constitution (Christie 1985, 279-280; Roberts 1965, 13-34).

The new Prime Minister, the Duke of Portland, was old, ill, and ineffective. He was unable to inspire or lead. During his two and a half years in office, he made no speeches at all in the House of Commons. His major service was to lend the prestige of his name to the cabinet, about half of which consisted of nonentities. In the House of Lords, the defence of the administration fell upon Lord Eldon, the Lord Chancellor, and Hawkesbury (later Earl of Liverpool), who became Home Secretary. The front bench in the House of Commons included George Canning, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, the Minister of War, and Spencer Perceval, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons.²⁶ The main issue uniting the administration was the vigorous prosecution of the war. Over other issues, however, there were serious differences between ministers. On Catholic emancipation, a deep divide separated the pro-Catholic Canning and Castlereagh from Perceval and Eldon who were as much against giving concessions to the Irish Catholics as George III himself. Personal rivalries also weakened the administration. The ambitious Canning held Castlereagh responsible for some bad decisions and military fiascos. In March 1809 he announced that unless Castlereagh was removed from the War

25 For a full assessment of the ministry's governmental record see Harvey 1972. Harvey's study is based on a pamphlet entitled *A Short Account of a Late Short Administration*, which is the Whigs' own list and discussion of what they thought were their achievements.

26 The Portland Government had a clear majority in the House of Commons for the 1807 election "returned 388 government supporters, 224 opposition members, 29 independents, 17 doubtfuls, and 12 designated neutrals " (Hay 2005, 12).

Office he would resign.²⁷ The sick and old Portland did not refuse Canning's request but kept delaying its fulfilment, so in September the impatient Canning resigned (Briggs 1979, 154-155).

The Whig opposition was unable to benefit from the disarray of the government. On the war, it remained defeatist. One Whig declared: "The next French battle will be fought in Ireland, or perhaps in Kent" (qtd. in Williams and Ramsden 1990, 162). The two main groups of the opposition, the Foxite Whigs and the followers of Grenville, were united only on the Catholic issue. The year 1807 had shown, however, that this was exactly the issue which made them unpopular with the king and the electorate. Parliamentary reform was more divisive than unifying. A group of radical Whigs led by Whitbread were in favour, but Grenville was strongly opposed and Earl Grey, the leader of the Foxite Whigs, was hesitant. Economic reform was fashionable again, but the failure of the Whigs to take action when they were in office in 1806 and 1807 made it difficult for them to mount a convincing campaign.

In September the Portland Ministry was nearing dissolution. The Prime Minister was mortally ill, and the great quarrel between Castlereagh and Canning now broke out openly. Castlereagh challenged Canning to a duel which ended with Canning being wounded in the thigh. Portland decided to resign, and Castlereagh followed his example.

The rump of the administration seemed unable to survive. In this situation, Perceval obtained the king's permission to approach Grey and Grenville with proposals for a broad-based coalition to carry on the war. Perceval hoped that the tension over Catholic emancipation might be brushed under the carpet. Grenville was ready to negotiate, Grey, however, rejected the idea of combined administration from the outset. His refusal might be put down to his party's traditional hatred of coalition and the desire to have complete control of administration. The Catholic question, even though it never got to the stage of discussion, may also have poisoned the political atmosphere. It also seems likely that in 1809 – as Ian Christie has put it – Grey "shrank from assuming responsibility for a war which he had no idea how to win" (Christie 1985, 289). He was afraid to take office because the difficulties of the situation were more than he could face.

27 Animosity between Castlereagh and Canning can be traced back to the interlude between the first and second Pitt Governments (March 1801- May 1804), when Henry Addington was Prime Minister. While Castlereagh was ready to enter Addington's cabinet, Canning refused to support it and criticised its measures in opposition. See McQuiston 1971, 503.

George III now relied on the remaining ministers to continue in office, and he appointed Spencer Perceval Prime Minister. The only important change in the new ministry was that Canning was replaced by Wellesley at the Foreign Office. The War Department was given to Hawkesbury.

The next crisis came in the autumn of 1810. The king fell ill, which made the situation very uncertain for Perceval's government. Everything depended upon his recovery. At the end of the year, it became clear that there would have to be a Regency, and with that, the Whig hopes were raised. The Prince of Wales had old ties of personal friendship and political connection with Grey and his followers. As Regent, he might well be expected to turn out the Perceval administration and bring in his friends. The Tories were quite certain that they were to be dismissed. The Whigs were already celebrating their triumph, busily constructing cabinets. Nevertheless, at the end of January 1811, the Prince decided not to make an immediate change of administration. The main reason for this was the news that his father seemed to be on the road to recovery. The Prince feared that by placing in office a ministry the king disliked, he might jeopardise his return to health. This was a risk the Prince decided should not be taken, and with that, the Whig hopes of coming to power were also blighted.

Their next chance to get in was a year later, in February 1812. The possibility of George III's recovery now appeared remote, so the Regent was free to act, unrestrained by the fear of offending his father. The ministry was also in disarray, for Wellesley would not work with Perceval, while the rest of the cabinet did not wish to accept Wellesley in the premiership, at which he was now aiming. Thus, the opportunities of the Whigs seemed to be improving again. Nevertheless, by early 1812, the inclinations of the Prince were less clear-cut than they had been a year earlier. Twelve months of royal responsibility had resulted in a change in his views. On the question of Catholic emancipation, he was beginning to take the same line as his father had done. He still had a sentimental feeling for the Foxite Whigs, but he had none for Grenville, whose extreme pessimism regarding the outcome of the Peninsular War he did not like. At the same time, he had grown accustomed to dealing with Perceval and understood the importance of his ability to command the House of Commons. The Prince wanted a strong administration that was firmly committed to the war and was willing to postpone the Catholic question. It was clear that the Whigs did not fit well into such a scheme. The Prince invited Grey and Grenville to join a coalition government, but this was rejected by the two politicians and Perceval was con-

firmed in power. Wellesley, who had wished to become Prime Minister himself, resigned, but this did not wreck the government. Instead, by bringing in two influential politicians, Perceval strengthened it. Catholic emancipation was treated as an 'open question', which enabled both the anti-Catholic Sidmouth and the pro-Catholic Castlereagh to return to office.

These arrangements were temporarily thrown into disarray three months later when Perceval was assassinated by a madman in the lobby of the House of Commons. Liverpool, who took Perceval's place, was defeated in the House of Commons. New negotiations had to start, but it was impossible to create a different combination. Once again, by setting reasonable but unacceptable conditions the Regent ensured that Grey and Grenville would exclude themselves from any new arrangement. Liverpool was able to return to office with his old colleagues, and the general view that there was no alternative tended to increase parliamentary support for the government (Roberts 1965, 347-387; Christie 1985, 289-294).

With the blasting of Whig hopes the period of confusion in parliamentary politics also started to come to an end. By 1812 the various groups on the anti-Whig side were fusing together into a new Tory Party. As O'Gorman has explained, "the Church and King patriotism of the war, resistance to Catholic claims, the horror at radicalism reigning in many propertied quarters, the rejection of Foxite Whiggism and the organization of a political following together constitute the re-emergence of a Tory party in Britain between 1806 and 1815" (O'Gorman 1981, 459). Liverpool's stable administration was to last until 1827. The collapse of the Napoleonic system and the victory over France prevented this ministry from the parliamentary tribulations of its predecessors and enabled it to become strongly entrenched in power.

The Whigs were robbed of all hopes of power. Their failure to obtain office, however, was not only the result of personal considerations, the enmity of George III and the Regent. It was the result of the negative impression they made upon the people, the Members of Parliament, the king and the Regent, by their unpopular policies and internal divisions.²⁸ They were entirely out

28 In his book on Whiggery during the reigns of George III and his two sons, Leslie Mitchell explains that "Whigs seemed to hold no common ground. Every issue engendered new disagreement. Every Whig seemed to be a party in his own right and, what was worse, to glory in the fact." At the same time, "Inertia, habit, the comforting warmth of tradition and custom all worked against Whig claims. They were acutely aware of not being in the majority in most years" (Mitchell 2007, 1; 8).

of tune with popular opinion. Their obstinate fidelity to Catholic Emancipation, the only issue which united them, made them very unpopular and was one of the main reasons for their failure to obtain office. Even more unfortunate was their attitude to the fortunes of the war. A considerable section of the party insisted, despite the clearest evidence, that an honourable peace could be achieved.²⁹ In opposition the Whigs criticised the measures of the government and the conduct of the generals, but “their criticisms were purely destructive: their objections frequently cancelled out each other; and they could not agree in championing any intelligent strategical plan” (Roberts 1965, 3). After the poor military record of the Ministry of All the Talents, their criticisms became even less effective. The Whigs even failed to make effective use of the new interest in parliamentary reform, over which they were anything but united.

The political events of the period from 1806 to 1812 make plain the still essentially “eighteenth-century character” of the political system. The right of the monarch to choose his ministers was still clearly recognised. Politics in Parliament was not yet dominated by a simple two-party confrontation. Instead, the legislative assembly consisted of several relatively small groups, some of which were not sure allies either of government or opposition (Christie 1985, 282-283; 295). In such circumstances, there should have been ample opportunity for the Whigs to extend the Grey-Grenville alliance to include some of these groups. Their internal divisions, the inflexibility of their leaders and their unpopular policies, however, made it impossible for them to compete successfully with their opponents.

It is certainly true, nevertheless, that the long period that the Whigs spent in opposition from 1783 onwards was to their advantage in the sense that it enabled them to become an organised party earlier than the Tories (Orme 2014, 589). The ‘Cult of Fox’, which began a number of years before the death of this most charismatic Whig leader, “helped coalesce different Whig factions into a more unified party” (Orme 2014, 590). The Whig ascendancy started after 1830 with changes in public attitudes, the decline in monarchical power and the development of parliamentary government based on strong and disciplined parties. It commenced when the royal assent became a formality and was no longer an obstacle in the way of political and social reforms. In 1832 the

29 The majority of the party did accept that the continuation of the war was inevitable, but they had doubts about the effectiveness of a British military intervention on the Continent.

reform-friendly Whigs were able to carry out the parliamentary reform aims that the Foxite Whigs had developed during the 1790s (Ellis 1979, D1254) and the “political modernization of England” could at last begin.³⁰

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30 On the effects of the Great Reform Act of 1832 see Phillips and Wetherell 1995.

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