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by

BETWEEN 1688 and 1760

THE IDEA OF NON-PARTY GOVERNMENT IN ENGLAND

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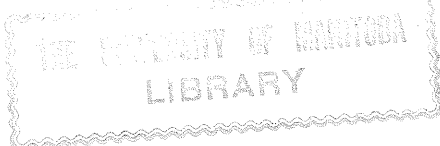
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## I

The eighteenth century in England is generally accepted as having been the period in which the English system of government through the medium of opposing political parties was first developed. Whig historians have been apt to attribute to this development a certain inevitability, to assume that each of its stages was consciously reached by politicians who had a clear and complete foreknowledge of its end, and to speak as though English constitutional development could have followed no other line of advance. Those of them who have considered the possibility of non-party government have tended to treat it as a negligible and somewhat freakish aberration from the well determined lines of English political development, and, in consequence, have been at little pains to do justice to the motives of those public men who from time to time have been critical of the whole theory and practice of party government. The purpose of this thesis is to attempt to examine the idea of non-party government as it appeared in the period which elapsed between the accession of William III and that of George III, and to relate it to contemporary constitutional theory and practice. It is hoped that at the end of such an examination it may be made to appear that while the future of English political development was not to be with it, the idea of non-party government in this period died hard, and commanded the allegiance of some of the foremost minds in England.

## II

The accepted views of constitutional development after 1688 are nowhere better stated than in Adams "Constitutional History of England". "The new epoch", he writes, "starts with the old issue (between a limited and an absolute monarchy) settled, and its chief endeavour constitutionally is to learn

how to apply that settlement more and more completely to all the details of government operation, and to devise effective machinery for carrying it out in practice. Its most striking characteristic is the institution making, and the chief institution made is beyond all question one of the most important of history, we may perhaps in the end be justified in saying the most important, for its history is not yet finished. The new institution was the English cabinet, not meaning by that the cabinet as it is today, a mere institution, but the cabinet system of government, as controlled by the modern doctrine and practice of ministerial responsibility<sup>1</sup>. With the settling of the executive power in the cabinet and of the sovereign authority in the House of Commons, another feature of modern democracies also became a more definitely effective and controlling force in public affairs, what we call party government; that is, the vital connection between organized political party and the new executive and the new sovereign power.

The determination of the policy which the nations would follow by a group of the chief political leaders of the time, who would act together as a unit, implied of necessity two things. For one thing it implied that they, all of them, held to certain common fundamental principles of government which made it easy for them to unit upon a special line of policy; and second, it implied that a majority of the House of Commons, and perhaps of the nation, could be for the same reason easily inclined in the same direction".<sup>2</sup>

That this passage gives an accurate picture of

- (NOTES: 1. Adam's "Constitutional History of England". p.362.  
2. Adam's "Constitutional History of England". p.388.

the final result of English constitutional development in the period from 1688 to 1832, no one need deny. At the same time, however, it may be pointed out that the inevitability or even the probability of this development was by no means clear to contemporaries under William III and Anne. So far from being an accepted fact, party government seemed highly undesirable to some of the most practical political minds of today.

It is not too much to maintain that the men, who had the largest share in directing the political fortunes of England during the reigns of William III and Anne, inclined to practise a non-party system whereby the moderate men of both sides would combine to carry on the Crown's policy. The Revolution of 1688 itself was the result of the combination of both parties, the moderate men working together for a settlement which would be acceptable to the majority, and so successful was their effort that this was obtained without bloodshed.

William III, when he became King, was not himself primarily interested in the internal party struggle in England. All his attention was focused on European affairs, and, in particular, on his long struggle with Louis XIV. His main purpose in securing the throne of England was to procure additional means of prosecuting that struggle, and, in consequence, William was virtually prepared to govern through any set of men who obtain for him the necessary supplies for the war with France. It was this fact that led him to choose moderate men for his government, and to throw the influence of the Crown against any measures which, by threatening to revive the worse animosities of party, would have distracted men's minds from foreign affairs.

If we look at the parliamentary politics of the

reign it at once becomes apparent that they cannot be described merely in terms of the conventional opposition between Whig and Tory. In effect, William's governments were composed of officials, and therefore moderate, Whigs, and of the 'de facto' Tories who had accepted the Revolution and its consequences. The opposition consisted of the extreme Whigs, who considered the Revolution a party victory to be followed by a proscription of their Tory rivals; the non-juring Tories, who had assisted in expelling James, but who shrank from a formal acceptance of the consequences of their act in the shape of an oath of allegiance to William; the Jacobites, who still upheld James' right to the throne; and, lastly, the neo-Tories, the heirs of the old country party of Charles II's reign, a constitutional opposition which objected to standing armies, continental wars, Dutch placemen, and the influence of the Crown in Parliament. Standing outside all these parliamentary groups were the great individual figures of the political managers, such as Marlborough, Shrewsbury, Godolphin, Somerset, and Argyll; and in the formation of all his ministries, William was guided much more by the need of constructing a working team from among these aristocratic cliques, than with any formal recognition of the various parties in Parliament.

Throughout Queen Anne's reign, the same practice of non-party government was continued, both in the six year Marlborough-Godolphin regime from 1702 to 1708, and in the Oxford regime from 1710 to 1714. Only the brief Whig rule of 1708 to 1710 represents an interlude of government controlled by party. In the first part of this period, from 1702 to 1708, the government was in the hands of four

moderate Tories, the Queen herself, with Marlborough for her captain, Godolphin for her treasurer, and Harley for her discreet manager of the Commons. This group took over and perpetuated William III's policy of concentrating on the war with France, and, for the same reasons as the former monarch, wished to avoid the extreme passions and strife of party warfare at home. The Government had at first been High-Tory in complexion, but the ministers had gradually drawn to themselves a middle party who were willing to concentrate on a vigorous war policy. This support was drawn partly from the commercial and trading interests in the country, who were usually Whigs in politics, and it tended to alienate the High Tories who were opposed to the war, and who were inclined to revive party animosities by pushing their extreme Anglican pretensions. This split between the High and Moderate Tories occurred during the winter of 1704-5, and, at this time, the Queen took occasion to state her opinions on party government. She had quarrelled with the High Tories, but did not think that this made it necessary for her to make friends with the Whigs, whom she always disliked. To Godolphin, she wrote, imploring him, "to keep me from the merciless men of both parties". Harley also refused to acknowledge the necessity of party government, and maintained that government could be carried on with those men who were under the Queen's influence, supported by the moderate men of each side. "I take it for granted," he writes to Godolphin, "no party in the house can carry it for themselves without the Queen's servants join them. The foundation is, persons and parties are to come to the Queen and not the Queen to them. The Queen hath chosen rightly which party she will take in. If the gentlemen of England are made sensible that

the Queen is the head and not a party, everything will be easy, and the Queen will be courted and not a party".<sup>4</sup>

Thus the Queen and Harley refused to be drawn over to the Whig side, but Godolphin and Marlborough, whose task and main purpose it was to carry on the war, found it increasingly difficult to resist the Whig demands. The country, and especially the landed class which was heavily taxed, was becoming discontented with the long war. More and more

Marlborough and Godolphin were forced to turn to the commercial classes, who were strongly Whig for their support, and these men were not willing to uphold indefinitely an administration in which their leaders were not included. Godolphin, as head of the ministry, was the first to realize this and to advise that the administration be broadened to include some of the Whigs. That it was merely pressure of circumstances and not any theoretic predilection for party government which led Godolphin to adopt this course appears from his letter to Harley of 1706, "Is it not more reasonable," he wrote, "and more easy to preserve those who have served and helped us (i.e. the Whigs) than to seek those who..... have done all in their power to ruin us".<sup>5</sup>

Marlborough, being in less immediate touch with the state of parties in parliament, was even more reluctant to admit the need of having recourse to the Whigs, and though, by the end of 1708, he and Godolphin had been compelled to reconstruct their government upon entirely Whig lines, neither of them really relished the process. For the past six years, England had really been governed by a junta consisting of the Queen, Marlborough, Godolphin, and Harley, all of whom, it

(NOTE: 4. Bath MSS. Vol. I. p. 74-75.)  
5. Portland MSS. Vol. IV. p. 291.)



party labels must be employed, could best be described as moderate Tories. That party had now split upon the personal rivalry of Godolphin and Harley, and the results were to be disastrous to that idea of government through the moderate men of both sides which was equally dear to all of them. Marlborough and Godolphin, deprived by Harley of the queen's confidence, were compelled to throw themselves into the arms of the Whigs to an extent which neither of them had either foreseen or desired, while Harley and the queen, faced with the partisanship of the Whigs, were reluctantly driven into the arms of the extreme Tories. That Harley already had some apprehension of what was to come appears from his letter to Godolphin, 1708, "I dread the thought," he wrote, "of running from the extremes of one faction to another, which is the natural consequence of party tyranny and renders the government like a door which turns both ways upon the hinges to let in each party as it grows triumphant."

That Harley and the queen never intended to be captured by the Tories can be seen from their action when their hour arrived in 1710. The gradual steps by which in that year they displaced the Whig ministers were not merely a matter of adroit tactics, but also the genuine expression of the queen's and Harley's moderation. There is convincing evidence that when Harley ousted Marlborough and Godolphin in 1710, it was not his intention to play the Tory party game. Thus his confidant, Defoe, tells us that, "his design was to have framed a middle party of neutrals," and in 1710, we find him writing to Harley that he is "acquainting some people (i.e. the Whigs) (NOTES: 6. Bath Mss. Vol. I. p. 180-181). 7. Defoe. "Minutes of Mengers". p. 70.)

At the crisis which followed Anne's death, the Tory power was shattered, and the party ceased to exist as an organized and effective opposition. The reason for this is to be found in the history of the party during the four years preceding Anne's death. They had been returned to power in 1710, for the purpose of ending the war with France, and paradoxically enough, the accomplishment of that aim brought about their own ruin. Down to 1710, the Hanoverian heir to the throne had maintained a strict impartiality between the two great English parties. When, in 1714, however, it became clear that the Tory ministry were bent on making peace, the elector, as a strong supporter of the

### III

Moderate Whigs. never entirely severed his connection with Halifax and the coalition ministry, and throughout his period in office he the greatest reluctance that Harley abandoned his plan for a was compelled to give to them. Even so, it was only with the places which Harley had intended for moderate Whigs, he the spokesmen of the party demand for a full Tory game, and Tory followers on the other. St. John and Harcourt became vindictiveness on the one side, and the intransigency of his his power to stem. He found himself trapped between Whig opened the flood gates to a Tory torrent which it was beyond an overwhelming majority, and Harley found that he had November, 1710. From these elections the Tories returned and Shrewsbury was the results of the general election of what disconcerted the moderate plans of the Queen, Harley,

Emperor, and therefore a strong advocate of the continuation of the war, was drawn into the cabals of the Whig war-mongers in London. It is from the time of the peace negotiations onward that George may be regarded as having been captured by the Whigs. Finding the Hanoverian heir to the Throne in the pockets of their political rivals, the Tories were naturally led to flirt with the idea of excluding him from the succession by means of a Stuart restoration. Thus the peace question and the succession question moved in a vicious circle, and it was easy for the Whigs to represent at Hanover that their Tory rivals were unsound upon both questions alike.

So in 1714, on the accession of George I, the Whig party came into power and until 1760 enjoyed a monopoly of office. But, as there was no real opposition, it was not a period in which the further development of the two party system could be accomplished. The reasons for this state of affairs are not far to seek; between 1714 and 1760 the Tories were paralyzed by the accidental conflict between the two aspects of the Tory creed, the cause of legitimism and the cause of Protestantism. To such an extent is this so that during that period the party is better known from its literature than from its political activities. Who kept its electoral machine going, and how far, and on what issues, we do not know. For half a century after 1714, the two motive forces of the Seventeenth Century Toryism (i.e. the dislike of the dissenters and of their Whig patrons, and an attachment to the Anglican tradition of the earlier Stuarts) were rendered inoperative, first by the fear, which all genuine Tories felt, of the return of a Catholic King, and secondly, by their innate respect for law and order even when administered by