

## The Grafton ministry (1768–1770): the Middlesex Election and the Townshend Duties Crisis

‘The King seems to have changed his plan of government. The idea of an unconnected independent Administration is given up, and the Duke of Grafton is declared first Minister, with full confidence and ample powers.’<sup>1</sup> So did Grenvillite William Knox write the epitaph of the Chatham experiment of non-party government. Grafton had already sold the pass by admitting the Bedfords as a group. Chatham’s resignation finally removed the shadow hanging over the administration, the possibility that he might return and reverse policy decisions taken in his absence. Grafton, now with full power and responsibility, enjoyed the King’s wholehearted support throughout his brief ministry: on 13 October George III told the Duke that he was a man ‘in whom I can in the most entire manner rely, and whom I sincerely value as a friend’.<sup>2</sup> Grafton possessed more in the way of ability and character than tradition has accorded him, though the distractions of his private life, women and horse racing, may have contributed to his ministerial failure. But he did not have an easy task. Faced with a divided cabinet and an increasingly united and formidable opposition, he inherited also a difficult policy legacy: the fiasco over Corsica, confrontation with John Wilkes over the Middlesex Election, and the ongoing American crisis. All those issues would at once be raised in the new Parliament, for it was due to meet on 8 November.

Within the cabinet Grafton obtained scant support from the original Chathamite part of his administration. The respective heads of the army and navy, Lord Granby and Sir Edward Hawke, were little interested in politics. Camden and Conway were both indecisive men, the Lord Chancellor unreliable, the latter still sensitive about offending his former Rockinghamite allies. Fortunately for the Duke, his ministry derived strength from the newer recruits. Lord North was

emerging as the key figure, doing the financial business as well as leading the Commons. Lord Hillsborough proved an effective American Secretary. Lord Rochford, an experienced diplomat, possessed a safe pair of hands in foreign policy. None of these three had factious connections, and their loyalty was to the King's government. But in the policy clashes that arose over America and Wilkes they tended to side with the hardline Bedford faction, as ever greedy for power and patronage. The ailing Bedford now took a back seat, but Gower was proud and ambitious, Weymouth difficult to control, and Sandwich anxious for a cabinet post.

This discordant element in the ministry was now finally separated from their old Grenvillite allies. The summer of 1768 had witnessed a rapprochement between the Rockingham and Grenville factions. In July Edmund Burke told Alexander Wedderburn that Grenville was 'a most excellent Party man', one on whom reliance could be placed. Grenvillites optimistically detected a Rockinghamite willingness to follow Grenville's lead in the Commons, and thought that Rockingham himself had 'lowered his pretensions', presumably with respect to any future coalition ministry.<sup>3</sup> The threat of a formidable opposition coalition increased when Chatham sought and obtained a reconciliation with his brother-in-law Lord Temple, already allied with Grenville. The *Political Register*, a Grenvillite paper, announced this union on 25 November.<sup>4</sup> It was fortunate for Grafton that Chatham did not recover his health until the following summer.

Although the political omens were black, Grafton got off to a good start in Parliament, because opposition overplayed its hand over Corsica. Newcastle with this topic in mind, had put foreign policy at the top of the agenda for a meeting of the Rockinghamite leadership on 8 June.<sup>5</sup> The Duke was to play no further part in Parliament, for he died on 17 November, aged seventy-five, reputedly £300,000 the poorer for his public career. His political reputation has now been rescued from the tradition of corruption and incompetence, and contemporaries never doubted his personal integrity. 'I knew him to be very good-natured, and his hands to be extremely clean', wrote his old colleague and sometime opponent Lord Chesterfield.<sup>6</sup> That Newcastle had picked out Corsica as a subject to take up suggests that his advice would not have averted the subsequent opposition blunder. In the customarily wide-ranging debate on the Address on 8 November seconder Hans Stanley played down the significance of Corsica. Edmund Burke criticised the administration's lack of alertness, Grenville the feebleness of policy in contrast to his own gunboat

diplomacy. Sir Edward Hawke publicly belied his earlier private cabinet opinion by claiming there was little threat to British trade.<sup>7</sup>

Opposition then decided to make Corsica the basis of the first major challenge to government. On 17 November Grenvillite Henry Seymour moved for all relevant papers, in effect asking whether the ministry had any policy. Answer was there none. Commons Leader Lord North countered with the argument that Britain did not want to be seen as the bully of Europe. Grenville replied that such ministerial weakness was dangerous. ‘For fear of going to war, you will make a war unavoidable’. Bedfordite Rigby, though in office, scored an irrelevant party point by the claim that Britain’s weakness on America had encouraged Choiseul to annex Corsica. The political consensus was that Corsica was not worth a war, and the Parliamentary opposition had clearly made a big mistake by selecting the topic as the subject of the first vote in the new Parliament, for the ministry won by 230 to 84.<sup>8</sup> James Harris noted ‘a most motley minority of Rockinghams, Grenvillians, Country Gentlemen, Lord George Sackville’s Friends, and even of Lord Bute’s’.<sup>9</sup> Horace Walpole, apart from the wrong choice of topic, thought the opposition had magnified its mistake by the wording of the motion.

When the strength of a new Parliament is not known, methinks it were wise, by a plausible question to draw in as many of the lookers out, at least of the rational, and the well meaning, as possible. In lieu of that, they frame a question that required a very strong opposition stomach to digest ... and thus a fluctuating majority becomes a stable one – for every interested man will now be in a hurry to be the two hundred and thirty-first. It was a great day for the administration, a better for the Duke of Choiseul ... France will look on this vote as a decision not to quarrel for Corsica.<sup>10</sup>

In this fortuitous manner the Grafton ministry was strengthened rather than weakened by the Corsica question, and thereafter Lord Rochford ensured that foreign policy would not again be a focus for political attack. He was a career diplomat, and he stood aloof from the distraction of internal politics, conducting a positive foreign policy while his cabinet colleagues were concerned with Wilkes and America. His aim was to end the diplomatic isolation made starkly obvious by the Corsican crisis, and Russia was now the only possibility, an opportunity enhanced by Turkey’s declaration of war, in October 1768, on a Catherine II already concerned about guerrilla warfare in Poland and the revived power of the anti-Russian Hat party in Sweden. This

threefold Russian crisis she blamed on Choiseul's machinations, and so Russia looked to Britain for help. But Rochford maintained the British refusal to pay a peacetime subsidy, claiming that Parliament would never endorse it, and offered merely a twenty-year defensive treaty, excluding any colonial war to balance the absence of a 'Turkish clause'. This proposal was scorned in St Petersburg, and even the vital assistance given by Britain to the Russian fleet on its epic voyage in 1769–70 from the Baltic to the eastern Mediterranean, an exploit impossible without repairs and supplies in British ports, failed to produce a more favourable reaction. Yet the episode worsened Britain's relationship with the Bourbon Powers. Choiseul did reject a Spanish suggestion of October 1769 that the Russian fleet should be intercepted, fearing that a general war would result; but British determination to protect the Russian fleet both on its journey and while in the Mediterranean opened the prospect of confrontation even before the Falkland Islands Crisis.<sup>11</sup>

While the Grafton ministry must have anticipated adverse criticism over Corsica, it could invite commendation for the successful military coup in Boston. The cabinet was nevertheless aware of the deeper American problem, the challenge to Parliament's right of taxation. American Secretary Hillsborough understood all too well the legacy bequeathed by Charles Townshend. The American objection to taxation, based on non-representation in Parliament, logically implied an exemption from all legislation. Simple repeal of Townshend's taxes was therefore not an option the cabinet could consider or Parliament would accept. British political attitudes during the Stamp Act Crisis seemed to make that clear, although in both administration and opposition that course of action had its advocates. Yet Hillsborough was among those who soon perceived that the duties Townshend had levied on colonial imports of British manufactured goods might be deemed 'uncommercial', as adversely affecting their sale. Therein lay the path to a solution.<sup>12</sup>

The ministry was not able to give America the attention it deserved. John Wilkes could not afford to languish forgotten in prison, and on 3 November he announced his intention of petitioning Parliament for a redress of his grievances. It was in vain that Grafton sought conciliation rather than confrontation. On 10 and 13 November he sent a message and then a messenger to Wilkes, offering not to expel him from Parliament if he dropped his petition, and even release from prison if he would make a token submission to the King. Wilkes declined this invitation to embrace ignominious obscurity.<sup>13</sup>

But before the Middlesex Election case came to dominate the political landscape the Grafton cabinet contrived to devise an agreed colonial policy. Events in both America and Britain made that possible. The resignation of Chatham gave ministers a free hand to act, without fear of rebuke or overrule. The American problem appeared less intractable, for the colonies this time had so far failed to organise an effective trade boycott, and Boston had quietly succumbed to military occupation. The general mood of the Commons debate of 8 November on the Address, which mostly concerned America, was in favour of moderation, although Lord North, in a phrase later remembered against him, declared himself against repeal of the Townshend taxation ‘until he saw America prostrate at his feet’.<sup>14</sup>

During November Grafton formulated an American policy acceptable to both cabinet and Parliament. There would be a series of Parliamentary resolutions condemning the resistance in Massachusetts, followed by an Address asking George III to order Governor Bernard to submit names and evidence concerning any treason committed in the colony during 1768, so that under an old statute of Henry VIII such offenders could be tried in Britain. American Secretary Hillsborough favoured alteration or even forfeiture of the Massachusetts charter, but was outvoted in cabinet. Deeming the policy a meaningless gesture, words not action, he refused to move the Address in the Lords. Public opinion was broadly on his side, for when the policy became known the ministerial failure to exact retribution from Boston or change the Massachusetts charter aroused widespread astonishment. The cabinet decided to refuse repeal of the taxation until the colonies showed a proper submission, but by the end of 1768 the prospect of a repeal in the Parliamentary session of 1770 was being leaked. The Grafton ministry had devised a complete American policy, intended to solve the double problem of British indignation and colonial defiance: apparent initial firmness and subsequent concession, if colonial behaviour allowed Britain to save face.<sup>15</sup> As a compromise it was neither negative nor foolish, for the current situation in America raised hopes that the colonial problem might, with a little encouragement, simply fade away.

The ministerial policy was revealed in the House of Lords on 15 December. It nonplussed the Rockinghamite party, which had been expecting a harder line, and was denounced as ‘a paper war’ by Lord Temple. Grafton answered the accusation of softness by stating that there would be no repeal of American taxation that session.<sup>16</sup> The resolutions and Address were carried in the Lords without a division, but

the Commons was already too busy with Wilkes to consider America until 26 January 1769. Dowdeswell then denounced the proposed use of the Treason Act as unfair, Grenville the whole policy as a sham, echoing his brother when he described it as ‘waste paper’. North replied that order had been restored; that refusal to repeal the taxes was a policy decision; and that mention of the Treason Act was a warning to the colonists not to rely with impunity on their own law courts. Barré urged repeal of the Townshend duties, as ‘contrary to commercial principles’ and because America would not otherwise be quiet. At the end of the debate the Grenvillite party voted for the resolutions, carried by 213 to 80, and against the Address, carried by 155 to 89.<sup>17</sup> In a subsequent debate on 8 February the ministry did not deny the opposition contention that Townshend’s duties were unenforceable and harmful to British exports, simply answering that the American denial of Parliament’s right of taxation made repeal impossible.<sup>18</sup>

By then Wilkes had long virtually monopolised political attention. The presentation on 14 November of his petition alleging malpractice over the *North Briton* case sparked off a series of Commons proceedings as the House examined the complaints. The ministry was undecided what to do, and on 10 December postponed the hearing until 27 January 1769. On that same day, 10 December, Wilkes finally succeeded in goading the ministry into acting against him, by publishing in the *St. James’s Chronicle* two papers relating to the St George’s Fields ‘Massacre’ of 10 May. One was a letter of 17 April by Secretary of State Weymouth reminding local magistrates of the availability of soldiers. The other was a preface alleging this to be proof that the slaughter had been planned. It was this outrageous accusation that provoked Grafton into finally deciding on the expulsion of Wilkes from Parliament. On 15 December he moved a Lords resolution that the comment was ‘an insolent, scandalous and seditious libel’, the same wording used in 1764 about the *North Briton*. The Commons received this Lords resolution the same day, but postponed consideration of it also to 27 January.<sup>19</sup>

Within the cabinet Camden, Conway, Granby and Hawke, the remnant of the old Chatham ministry, still resisted expulsion; but scruples about expelling Wilkes twice for the same offence could now be overcome by the new alleged seditious libel, and on 22 January 1769 the cabinet decided to proceed. There followed a succession of long and heated Commons debates. The first, on 23 January, was over an opposition motion to reverse the resolution of 24 November 1763 that Parliamentary privilege did not cover seditious libel; the ministry

may have been caught unawares, for the attendance was low, but Grenville and his followers voted with administration in a majority of 165 to 71.<sup>20</sup> After the allegations in the petition from Wilkes were all successively rejected as trivial, the House on 2 February voted the Lords resolution of 15 December, by 239 to 136. The stage was set for the expulsion of Wilkes.<sup>21</sup>

The expulsion motion, proposed on 3 February by Lord Barrington, was a composite one, listing libels from 1763 as well as that of 10 December. Opposition speakers denounced as unfair this tactic, evidently designed to maximise support. Wilkes had already been expelled once for that in the *North Briton*, while five years earlier the Commons had ignored the three ‘impious and obscene’ libels now cited from the *Essay on Woman*. Grenville, who had then been Prime Minister, made that point in a speech deemed his best ever oration. Grenville’s opposition to expulsion aroused widespread astonishment, and was not followed by some of his own adherents. More ominous for the ministry was that of Barré, for it reflected the hostility of Chatham, many of whose followers were still in office. Although Lord North defended the ministerial tactic, and pointed out that the libel on Lord Weymouth was a new crime since the election of Wilkes, unease among customary administration supporters was reflected in a lower attendance than in some previous debates, a majority of 219 to 137 for expulsion. Hawke and Granby voted for a measure they had opposed in cabinet but Conway was absent.<sup>22</sup>

In that debate of 3 February Grenville reminded MPs that already public opinion could foresee only two ways the ministry might extricate itself from the trap Wilkes had set, for the common and correct assumption was that he would seek and secure continuous re-election. Either the administration could refuse to issue a new writ, thereby depriving the Middlesex electorate of a representative: or the seat would have to be awarded to a minority candidate. The saga was prolonged by the inability of the ministry to find a candidate bold enough to challenge Wilkes on the public hustings. His first re-election, on 16 February, was unopposed, with reputedly 2,000 freeholders present. Next day the Commons voided this election, after resolving that since he had been expelled he was ‘incapable’ of election. This was opposed by Dowdeswell, Grenville and Barré, but carried by 235 votes to 89.<sup>23</sup> At the next election, on 16 March, a rival candidate briefly appeared, a saw-mill proprietor Charles Dingley, but no one was willing to propose him. In the Commons debate next day Grenville accepted that the resolution of 17 February made Wilkes inadmissible and the

opposition did not force a vote when his election was disallowed.<sup>24</sup> Whether or not the ministry was involved in the Dingley fiasco, it produced a candidate for the third monthly by-election, on 13 April. He was Colonel Henry Luttrell, a young war hero from the Portugal campaign of 1762 and already MP for Bossiney, a seat he vacated only on 11 April. Luttrell attended the election under the protection of a large posse of horsemen, and an orderly poll saw Wilkes defeat him by 1,143 votes to 296.

This return was invalidated the next day, and the ministry called for a Commons examination of the poll on 15 April, when a motion to award the seat to Luttrell produced a lively debate. The government case was that the House of Commons had the power to expel and incapacitate its members, and therefore, as Lord North put it, the freeholders polling for Wilkes had thrown away their votes. Radical MP William Beckford warned that a corrupt majority could expel whoever they wished, an alarmist and improbable scenario. Grenville made another fine speech in his role as guardian of the constitution, distinguishing between a Parliamentary resolution and the law of the land. The House alone had no right to impose a legal disqualification. The ministry won by 197 to 143. Its majority had fallen to 54 as against 82 for the original expulsion. Six supporters on that occasion had changed sides, and a further 27 were absent. The administration was so alarmed at this drop in support that it mustered a large attendance for the next chapter of the story, the hearing of a petition of Middlesex freeholders on 8 May, when the ministry won by 221 votes to 152.<sup>25</sup>

Next day the opposition held a morale-boosting dinner at the Thatched House Tavern, attended by 72 MPs, including Grenville, Rockinghamites Burke and Dowdeswell, Chathamite Barré and City radical Beckford. The Middlesex Election case had united the various opposition factions in a common cause. Altogether 215 MPs had voted with opposition on the issue, and, with Lord Temple correctly calculating their potential strength at a minimum of 200, they looked forward to toppling the Grafton ministry in 1770.<sup>26</sup>

During the early months of 1769 the Parliamentary scene was largely taken up with and public attention engrossed by the furore over Wilkes. But during this very same time the ministry had to pay heed to America and India. American Secretary Hillsborough was so concerned about the lack of any positive policy that on 13 February he submitted to the cabinet a comprehensive list of proposals, major and minor, mostly coercive in attitude. They included suggestions that

the Massachusetts Council, recently obstructive to the Governor, should henceforth be appointed by the Crown instead of being elected by the Assembly; and that the refusal of several colonies to comply with the 1765 Mutiny Act should be countered by the threat of quartering soldiers in private houses. But he also put forward the conciliatory suggestion that any colonies making provision for civil government costs should be exempted from the Townshend taxation. Hillsborough invited the comments of George III, who rejected the proposal about the Massachusetts Council because ‘altering charters is at all times an odious measure’, and declared that obedience should be the criterion for relieving colonies from the taxation.<sup>27</sup> All Hillsborough’s ideas were rejected by the cabinet, after objections from Camden, Conway, and Grafton.<sup>28</sup>

The ministry would not endorse coercion of America, but its failure to offer any concession other than the vague prospect of taxation repeal next year, if the colonies should prove quiet and obedient, did not satisfy the lobby of colonial agents, merchants, and other friends of America. An attempt to expedite a decision was therefore made on 19 April, when Thomas Pownall proposed in the Commons a Committee on America. A former governor of Massachusetts, he avowedly sought a consensus solution, and disclaimed any attack on the ministry. What he had in mind was a repeal of the Townshend duties on economic grounds. Not even the Rockinghamite party supported him, and Edmund Burke expressed concern lest a confrontation might develop over America in Britain. ‘I never thought America should be beat backwards and forwards as the tennis ball of faction.’ Some cynical observers thought the opposition wished the tax to remain, as an embarrassment for ministers. Lord North opposed the motion because of the American trade boycott, and criticised Conway for favouring a declaration of intent. An inconclusive debate, in which no one defended the taxation, and few sought its repeal, ended in the rejection of the motion without a vote.<sup>29</sup>

But the discussion had served a useful purpose, in showing the ministry that there would be strong Parliamentary support for concession. It prepared the way for the cabinet decision of 1 May, when the prospect of other problems impelled ministers to seek a solution to that of America. The Middlesex Election threatened to be an ongoing issue. An international crisis was foreshadowed by Spanish designs on the Falkland Islands. While every political problem might be worsened by the impending recovery at last of Chatham from the ill health of the last few years.

Complete repeal of the Townshend duties was the solution proposed on 1 May by Prime Minister Grafton, and for obvious reasons. It was now known that by January 1769 the duties had raised a mere £11,000, in over a year. Another new factor was the decision of Philadelphia on 10 March to join the hitherto ineffective colonial boycott: expedient action might avert the economic consequence. But the Premier, though supported by Chathamites Camden and Granby and former Rockinghamite Conway, found himself outvoted by five to four over retention of the tea duty. That was favoured by North, Hillsborough, Rochford, and the two Bedfordites, Gower and Weymouth. Grafton later attributed this defeat to the absence of Sir Edward Hawke through an illness that was prolonged for much of May.<sup>30</sup> By such accidents is history made. Since tea was simply a commodity imported from Asia and re-exported to America, that duty was not liable to the same objection as the others, all on British manufactures. Nor was its retention merely symbolic, for it had yielded some three-quarters of that tax revenue to date, and North was to use the money to carry out the Townshend aim of paying colonial salaries. In retrospect this decision to keep the tea tax can be seen as a turning point in the story of the American Revolution, but at the time Grafton may have thought the simultaneous cabinet decision of a public promise that no future taxes would be levied on America to be of more significance. These decisions were made known to the colonies by a circular letter of 13 May, obviously intended to undermine the trade boycott and divide colonial opinion.<sup>31</sup>

India, by comparison with 1767, took up little Parliamentary time or political attention. The ministry was resolved to restrict consideration to financial negotiation with the Company, and to disregard such wider issues as the problem of Indian government and the question of territorial right. By the end of 1768 the ministry and Directorate had negotiated an agreement whereby the government would receive the same payment of £400,000 for another five years, while the Company would be allowed to raise its dividend eventually to 12.5 per cent, by not more than 1 per cent a year. But objections raised in the Court of Proprietors, that while the state revenue was fixed the Company income was uncertain, exposed to the risks of Indian wars and commercial hazards, led to the agreement being rejected there on 13 January 1769 by 248 votes to 207. However the Directorate, by a compromise wording that reflected this concern, persuaded the Court of Proprietors to accept the agreement on 9 February by 290 votes to 250, after a warning that the alternative would

be a Parliamentary inquiry.<sup>32</sup> The only important Commons debate on India in 1769 took place on 27 February, over the Company petition containing the already agreed proposals. Lord North urged MPs to discuss only the financial terms and not ‘the general state of the East India Company’. But Lord Clive sought to do just that in his maiden speech, asserting the need to reform the Company. His suggestions anticipated much of Lord North’s legislation of 1773, notably that Directors should be elected for four or five years, and that there should be a Governor-General and Council in India. Sullivan echoed Clive’s concern for reform, but the financial plan was accepted without a vote, and the subsequent Bill passed with little discussion.<sup>33</sup>

Although the ministry suffered no Parliamentary embarrassment in 1769 over the major issues of America and India, it faced such a prospect on two other matters, the Nullum Tempus Bill and the Civil List Debt. The opposition wasted no time in playing its trump card in order to win over the support of new MPs, a motion for a Nullum Tempus Bill being made on 15 November 1768. Proposer Sir George Savile explained to the ‘many young members’ that a similar act of 1623 had merely safeguarded estates derived from the Crown that had been held for sixty years before that date. He intended ‘a moving limitation, to make a sixty years possession, in all future times, a bar against the claims of the Crown’. Lord North rose not to oppose but to reserve his opinion, and support for the principle of the measure was voiced by Secretary at War Lord Barrington, true to his promise in the previous session, and by George Grenville, who linked the Bill with the King’s voluntary surrender in 1760 of his hereditary revenue in exchange for a fixed annual income.<sup>34</sup> Such was the evident popularity of the measure that the ministry offered no initial resistance, and early in February 1769 Charles Yorke thought ‘there will be no opposition. The Court think it a sweetener to the pill of the Civil List Debt.’<sup>35</sup> No subsequent debate on the Nullum Tempus Bill took place until the House went into Committee on the measure on 24 February. Procedural expert Jeremiah Dyson then complained that there had been no discussion of the principle on the second reading, as was customary, and that then took place. William Beckford opposed the whole measure, on the radical ground that all Crown property belonged to the people, but he found no support for this view. The debate centred on an amendment by Attorney-General De Grey to make the Bill merely retrospective, like that of 1623. Solicitor-General Dunning backed his colleague with the argument that otherwise the Bill would encourage future fraudulent acquisition of

Crown property. Wedderburn replied that ministers ought to welcome the measure as a reason to refuse future applications for Crown land. It did not reduce any royal prerogative, and would quieten public concern. Moreover, the House of Commons needed to win public goodwill after the Middlesex Election case. This point was echoed by Grenville, who declared that he had expected unanimous approval, because the main objection in the previous session had been that the Bill then had been brought in to deal with a particular case, Lowther's action against the Duke of Portland. Now that objection did not exist, for the eighth clause stipulated that the legislation would not apply to actions commenced before 1 January 1769. Amid scenes of disorder the amendment was rejected by 205 votes to 124, the extent of the ministerial defeat being increased by the deliberate abstention of the Bedford group for a reason that even Horace Walpole could not surmise. 'We ... beat the administration hollow', wrote the jubilant George Byng, a Portland adherent, 'ministerial power has not, in this instance, as yet prevailed.'<sup>36</sup> The Bill passed the Commons on 6 March and went through the Lords without resistance.<sup>37</sup> Two years later, in February 1771, the opposition attempted to delete the eighth clause. In a brief Parliamentary contest, this measure survived two votes by majorities of twenty-nine and fifteen, but failed in a third division by ten votes.<sup>38</sup>

In the *Nullum Tempus* episode Parliamentary sympathy lay with private property as against Crown rights. But the Civil List Debt produced a vastly different reaction, and the opposition attempt to embarrass the ministry proved to be a bad miscalculation of Westminster opinion. It was led by Dowdeswell and Grenville, who, as former Chancellors of the Exchequer, must have been aware of the true reasons for the royal deficit.<sup>39</sup> They had advance knowledge of the royal message submitted to the Commons by Lord North on 28 February 1769, which acknowledged a debt of £513,511, and asked for payment to be made; for on the previous day they consulted together on draft motions.<sup>40</sup> Opposition MPs sensed an opportunity to score points, even though dispassionate opinion, as voiced by Horace Walpole, reflecting on all the royal expenses, believed that sum 'could not be thought exorbitant'.<sup>41</sup> William Beckford promptly suggested that money had been used, by way of pensions, to influence voting in that House, and commented that changes of administration were always expensive in compensatory payments to displaced office-holders. He moved for an account of all payments from 1760 to 1769, and welcomed North's motion to add those from 1752 to 1760. Dowdeswell, supported by Grenville, said

the accounts should distinguish the responsibility of each Chancellor of the Exchequer. North replied that all of them must share the blame, and urged that, in fairness to creditors, the debt should be paid before any inquiry. The motion for accounts was agreed, but the ministry rejected, by 164 votes to 89, another by Dowdeswell to state the Civil List balance at the time of Newcastle's resignation in May 1762, when, as he knew, it was still in credit.<sup>42</sup>

On the next day, 1 March, Dowdeswell moved an instruction to the impending Committee of Supply that it should not vote money before accounts were examined. Initial reactions in the ensuing debate were not what he had anticipated. Suggestions that the Civil List grant might be inadequate were made by opposition MP Charles Cornwall and by Secretary at War Lord Barrington, while Lord Granby and Charles Jenkinson both said that the 1760 settlement was the cause of the deficit. But Beckford, armed with instructions from his London constituents, demanded an inquiry first, even adopting the radical stance that 'the Crown is trustee for the people'. So did Lord George Sackville, claiming that the recent vote on the Nullum Tempus Bill showed that House to be 'the friend of liberty and the constitution, and the true friend of the people'. Edmund Burke declared that it would be 'a downright mockery of Parliamentary proceedings' if the Committee of Supply paid the debt without accounts. But this time the ministry had whipped up a large attendance, and Dowdeswell's motion was defeated by 248 votes to 135. In the ensuing Committee of Supply North gave an accurate account of Civil List expenditure, and said that George III had made the 1760 agreement 'before he had had time to form a judgement what his expenses would be'. His motion to discharge the debt was agreed without debate.<sup>43</sup>

Next day Dowdeswell moved to recommit the resolution, arguing that MPs 'ought to derive our information, not from ... the minister, but from the accounts themselves', and even claimed that 'there has been blame somewhere'. Grenville spoke at length, objecting to two of the arguments being deployed as reasons for immediate payment, the plight of royal creditors and 'disrespect to the Crown'. As ever Grenville appealed to the country gentlemen, urging a return to 'the good old Parliamentary law: let us examine before we give'. He also pointed out that many of the expenses during the 1760s had been non-recurrent, and that £800,000 should now be sufficient. North complimented Grenville on his financial skill, but could not promise there would never be a future deficit. The House agreed without a vote that the debt be promptly paid.<sup>44</sup> There were two debates in the

Lords. Rockingham spoke in both, and together with Grenvillite peers Temple, Lyttelton and Suffolk, put forward the same demand for prior accounts. The ministry won the only vote by 60 to 26.<sup>45</sup>

During the Parliamentary session of 1768–69 circumstances had provided the opposition factions with topics over which they could unite to attack the ministry. This cooperation gave rise to rumours of a formal agreement, as Lord Buckinghamshire reported to Grenville on 20 March. ‘The news of yesterday was, that an alliance, offensive and defensive, had been concluded between you and Lord Rockingham, through the mediation of the Earl of Chatham: this, men in office give a degree of credit to.’<sup>46</sup> Such reports prematurely anticipated the return of Chatham to the political arena, and were otherwise unfounded. For, in contrast to 1767, opposition politicians in 1769, doubtless aware of the insuperable difficulties over both America and possession of the Treasury, made no attempt to plan future ministries. And despite the ostentatious display of unity at the Thatched House dinner of 9 May, they embarked separately on the nationwide campaign of protest about the Middlesex Election that engrossed most political attention during the remainder of 1769.

This petitioning movement was not spontaneous, for the lead was invariably undertaken by Parliamentary politicians and London radicals. It made an uncertain start, for, as Burke and Wedderburn later lamented, ‘there was not time after the meeting at the Thatched House to concert the proper proceedings in the several counties’.<sup>47</sup> Many MPs and peers, too, entertained constitutional scruples about petitioning the King over the behaviour of Parliament. Prime Minister Grafton expressed this opinion strongly, taking the line that the petitions were ‘innovations of a dangerous tendency, injurious to Parliament, and dangerous to the constitution’, and had to be dissuaded by Lord Chancellor Camden from instigating prosecutions.<sup>48</sup>

The initiative for the first petitions came from members of the newly formed Bill of Rights Society and fellow radicals. That Society, founded in February to support Wilkes, included men like John Horne who took a wide view of radical objectives.<sup>49</sup> The petitions from Middlesex in May and London in June therefore comprised general attacks on the ministry. Radicals active in petitioning outside the metropolitan area included Henry Cruger in Bristol, William Beckford in Wiltshire, John Sawbridge in Kent, and John Glynn in Devonshire and Cornwall. Rockinghamite politicians were the other main driving force behind the petitioning movement. They strove to be more moderate in tone, confining the grievance to the Middlesex Election decision, as Dowdeswell

did in his native Worcestershire. Yorkshire was so slow to act that the ministry spread rumours that Rockingham was against a petition:<sup>50</sup> but the county petition eventually weighed in with 11,000 signatures. Later petitions, led by Westminster, boldly asked the King for a dissolution of Parliament. Among those that followed this line were Buckinghamshire, at the instigation of Lord Temple, Cavendish-dominated Derbyshire, and Somerset. Geographically the movement did not extend to Scotland or Wales, and was strongest in the north-East of England, and in the South-West, where the cider tax controversy had created a recent tradition of petitioning. Altogether some 15 counties petitioned. Nascent moves in at least another five were discouraged or deterred by ministerial supporters, Grafton himself intervening in Norfolk and Essex, and Bedford in Bedfordshire. About a dozen boroughs also petitioned, but the total number of petitions, which is unknown, was clearly no more than about thirty, with a total of 60,000 signatures.<sup>51</sup> The Parliamentary opposition intended these petitions to provide a basis for a renewed attack on the Grafton ministry when the new session began in January 1770. But that veteran politician Lord Chesterfield opined in August that the campaign might prove counter-productive. ‘Another thing will be of use to the administration, which is, that factious and seditious spirit that has appeared of late, in petitions, associations, etc., which shocks all sober thinking people.’<sup>52</sup>

A more potent threat to the ministry was the return of Chatham to an active political career. By April Chatham’s recovery of health was virtually complete, and on 29 April Lord Granby visited him, only to discover his hostility to ministerial policy and his personal animosity towards Grafton, whom he refused to meet.<sup>53</sup> This antipathy preceded the Duke’s marriage to Bedford’s niece on 24 June, which Chatham wrongly deemed a political alliance. Grafton was wary of being captured by the Bedfords, and aware of the King’s personal dislike of that faction, and of their seemingly insatiable desire for office. From the moment of their accession to the ministry in December 1767 the Bedfords sought to replace Lord Townshend by Sandwich as Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, an office that would not breach their royal quota of two cabinet posts. George III backed Townshend, but the issue did not die even when in January 1769 Townshend appointed Lord Bute’s son-in-law Sir George Macartney as his Chief Secretary. For on 6 June the King rejected a tentative suggestion of Grafton that Lord Sandwich be appointed Irish viceroy, because ‘Lord Chancellor, Lord Granby and others in less superior stations who are already jealous of the weight the Bedfords have in administration would be much hurt’.<sup>54</sup>

A visit to Chatham by Camden early in July confirmed his hostility to the Prime Minister, who in turn naturally resented the attitude of the man who had left him to carry the burden of high office. Matters came to a head on 7 July, when Chatham, adhering to his own strict constitutional ideas, had a private audience with the King. He there criticised ministerial policy, for not ignoring Wilkes into political oblivion, and for according too great importance to the East India Company, whose General Courts were behaving like 'little Parliaments'.<sup>55</sup> Afterwards Chatham lingered outside the royal closet, being cool to Grafton and the Bedfords, civil to Conway, and cordial to Granby.<sup>56</sup> Thereafter there was no contact between Grafton and Chatham, whose return to the political scene posed a clear threat to the unity and consequent survival of the ministry. That became even more obvious when Chatham sought to construct an opposition alliance.

Early in August Temple and Chatham visited Grenville, who afterwards informed his ally James Harris that 'there was perfect harmony between him and the two Earls ... there was no looking back, particularly as to America'; and all condemned the expulsion of Wilkes as unconstitutional.<sup>57</sup> 'The re-union of the triumvirate', would, so Lord Chesterfield commented to General Irwin on 6 August, 'alarm the administration, but still I think they will hold it out another year, by certain ways and means, which the payment of the civil debts will enable them to put into practice, and you will know, that the votes in both the chaste Houses of Parliament, are counted, not weighed'.<sup>58</sup> Chesterfield's cynical forecast was to prove wrong, even though Chatham failed in his attempt to assume leadership of the Parliamentary opposition. Oblivious of the lessons of 1766, he displayed delusions of grandeur, approaching individual Rockinghamites like Portland, Burke and Albemarle, until negative responses brought the realisation that he would have to deal with the party as a whole.<sup>59</sup> The Rockinghamites saw the opposition as distinct factions, and Rockingham's own preference now was for Grenville as an unthreatening ally. 'The use of him in the House of Commons would be of service ... and *the personal ill footing he is and has long been on in the closet* all coincide to make him the more safe for us'. Chatham, by contrast, constituted a rival and a threat to party unity. 'A negotiation for an arrangement, thrown into Lord Chatham's Hands', would, the Marquess commented to Burke on 15 October, '*if executed*, produce another edition of a court patched up administration', as in 1766.<sup>60</sup>

For there was a clash of ideology as well as personality between Chatham and Rockingham. Although Chatham was now prepared to

play the game of opposition, his political attitude was at variance with the Rockinghamite concept of party, which was reaffirmed at a leadership conclave at Wentworth early in November. There, in the absence of its author, approval was given to Edmund Burke's draft of his pamphlet *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, much of which was concerned to justify party politics.<sup>61</sup> The Rockinghamite view was that party was an essential weapon to fight the power of the Crown, and the Marquess wrote in that vein to Charles Yorke on 4 November. 'The Ministers may declaim against *faction*, but the general cry of the nation will bestow that epithet upon them, and with a steady perseverance I think we may yet see a thorough overturn to that ruinous and dangerous system on which most administrations have been formed for the last eight years.'<sup>62</sup>

In a conversation with Lord Temple on 23 November Burke took the same line, as he reported to Rockingham. 'I told him that I believed, no union could be formed of any effect or credit, which was not compacted upon this great principle, "that the King's men must be utterly destroyed as a Corps" – to which he assented very heartily.'<sup>63</sup> Lord Temple may have been an anti-establishment figure, but Chatham was not, and his personal and political record in 1766 made the Rockinghamites suspicious of a repeat performance, if any offer was made by the Crown. Rockingham in any case had no intention of playing second fiddle to either Grenville or Chatham in a ministerial coalition. At the end of 1769 the opposition was poised to strike, united in their resolve to topple the Grafton ministry, but had no plan as to its replacement.

The Rockingham and Grenville factions had failed to bring down the ministry in the previous session, but Chatham was a new factor in the political equation. His role would be twofold: to launch a Parliamentary onslaught, and to subvert the ministry by detaching his adherents. He had already announced the points of attack in November. 'Corsica for foreign affairs; America for home policy; the Right of Election as a constitutional principle.'<sup>64</sup> As the meeting of Parliament drew near, Chatham exerted pressure on his former followers within the ministry. Granby was the first major recruit: he was won over by Chatham at an interview on 26 November, despite his dislike of Temple and Grenville.<sup>65</sup> Camden, with his open criticism of the policy on Wilkes, had seemed the most likely catch, although after Grafton dined him and George III closeted him in mid-December opposition thought his allegiance still in doubt.<sup>66</sup> But his sovereign and ministerial colleagues anticipated his desertion. Grafton found himself under pressure to replace Camden by Charles Yorke, who

with characteristic family prudence had not committed himself to an opinion on the Middlesex Election, and now seemed likely to achieve his long-held ambition of becoming Lord Chancellor, like his father. While Grafton was enjoying his Christmas holiday at his Euston home, Gower and Weymouth arrived with a message to that effect from George III. But although the King told Grafton that he was 'now emancipated from the chains of Lord Chatham and the burden of the Chancellor',<sup>67</sup> the Duke, with residual Chathamite loyalty, refused to dismiss Camden, who was still Lord Chancellor when Parliament met on 9 January 1770.<sup>68</sup>

The power struggle that would then erupt at Westminster was expected also to resolve the situation in Ireland, where the autumn meeting of the Dublin Parliament had revealed an open confrontation between the Grafton ministry and the Undertakers: for it was generally assumed that the overthrow of the ministry would mean a return to power of John Ponsonby's friends in the Rockingham party. The cabinet, so divided over Wilkes and America between Chathamites and Bedfordites, was at one over Ireland. It had been for reasons of patronage not policy that the Bedfords sought to displace Townshend. They favoured British control over Ireland just as much as over America, and in July 1769 the Bedfordite Southern Secretary Weymouth promised Townshend patronage support against the Undertakers.<sup>69</sup> Townshend was confident of success, making an analogy between the fragility of Undertaker power and that of the Whig aristocracy in Britain. 'Do you think Mr Ponsonby's friends will gang to their destruction', he observed to Macartney on 28 June. 'It is ridiculous to suppose it, as if this their *minority* were of hardier stuff than the late Duke of Newcastle's followers', recalling the desertions of that fallen Prime Minister in 1762.<sup>70</sup>

John Ponsonby and Lord Shannon refused to promise support for the augmentation of the army when the Irish Parliament met in October, but many of their followers voted in the majority for it, thereby confirming Townshend's prognosis.<sup>71</sup> Irish MP Charles O'Hara had earlier commented to Edmund Burke that 'some people suppose that a vigorous opposition was wished for, as it will authorise a good deal of turning out'. O'Hara realised that Townshend, with Bedfordite encouragement, was seeking a confrontation with the Undertakers. 'His modes of business come entirely from the Gang; their friends are his ... No retreat held out to Ponsonby and his friends.'<sup>72</sup>

Ponsonby and Lord Shannon continued to act in opposition, and a final showdown was precipitated when on 21 November their

factions defeated an Irish Money Bill by 94 votes to 71, because it had originated in the Privy Council not the Commons: that reason opened up a disputed interpretation of Poyning's Law, a challenge that could not be ignored by the British government. George III reacted with anger, recalling how in 1761 the Undertakers had supported the Lord Lieutenant in a similar confrontation. In a letter of 29 November to Prime Minister Grafton the King suggested that a cabinet be at once called to instruct Townshend to prorogue the Irish Parliament. That would follow the only precedent, one of 1692.<sup>73</sup> The cabinet unanimously agreed on a punitive prorogation: later, indeed, Lord Chancellor Camden, to Chathamite embarrassment, was widely deemed to have been the instigator.<sup>74</sup> Next day Southern Secretary Weymouth, who may possibly have put the idea in the King's head when forwarding Townshend's report to him, duly sent the Lord-Lieutenant the appropriate instruction.<sup>75</sup>

There is reason to believe that Townshend himself was unhappy about such a draconian response: in the consequent British House of Commons debate of 3 May 1770 his friend Lord George Sackville stated that 'Lord Townshend sent home for instructions ... Report says, he wished the prorogation had not been insisted on'.<sup>76</sup> The Viceroy postponed it until 26 December, so as to allow the passage of finance measures in another form. In this interval the Undertakers justified the as yet secret ministerial decision by continued Parliamentary recalcitrance, behaviour explained perhaps by the expectation of a change of ministry in Britain. Townshend meanwhile prepared his attack on the Undertakers, sending detailed proposals to Weymouth in 'a most secret' letter of 23 December. Speaker John Ponsonby should be removed from his patronage power base of the Revenue Board, and Lord Shannon dismissed as Master-General of the Ordnance. Other holders of offices and pensions who had engaged in Parliamentary opposition should suffer the same fate, a long list being named. Furthermore, to signify royal disapproval of their behaviour, Shannon, Ponsonby, and five other opponents should be removed from the Irish Privy Council.<sup>77</sup> Since 1768 Townshend had also been advocating an administrative reform, the division of the Irish Revenue Board into separate Boards of Customs and Excise. This was first conceived primarily as a scheme to transfer Ponsonby's patronage to the Lord-Lieutenant, but greater efficiency was also an important motive. Although not mentioned in the letter of 23 December, this plan had already been placed on the ministerial agenda.<sup>78</sup> Whether Townshend would triumph or suffer ignominious dismissal by friends of the

Undertakers was dependent on the outcome of the imminent battle for power in Britain.

### Notes

- 1 *Grenville Papers*, IV, 395.
- 2 *Corr. of George III*, II, 56. Diarist James Harris noted this explanation on 30 Nov. 'That Lord Bute recommended him.' Malmesbury MSS. Photocopies B909.
- 3 BL Add. MSS. 42086, fos 60–3, printed in *Grenville Papers*, IV, 308–12.
- 4 *Chatham Papers*, IV, 349 n.
- 5 Escott, Thesis, p. 194.
- 6 *Chesterfield Letters*, VI, 2,873.
- 7 BL Egerton MSS. 215, fos 92–134.
- 8 *Cavendish Debates*, I, 52–61.
- 9 BL Add. MSS. 35608, fo. 290.
- 10 Walpole, *Letters*, VII, 239.
- 11 Scott, *British Foreign Policy*, pp. 131–5. Tracy, *Navies*, pp. 73–5.
- 12 Thomas, *Townshend Duties Crisis*, pp. 95–6.
- 13 Thomas, *John Wilkes*, pp. 90–1.
- 14 *Trumbull Papers*, p. 303. For the debate see Simmons and Thomas, *Proceedings and Debates*, III, 3–13. It is described in Thomas, *Townshend Duties Crisis*, pp. 104–7.
- 15 Thomas, *Townshend Duties Crisis*, pp. 107–11.
- 16 Simmons and Thomas, *Proceedings and Debates*, III, 47–50.
- 17 Simmons and Thomas, *Proceedings and Debates*, III, 64–83.
- 18 Simmons and Thomas, *Proceedings and Debates*, III, 87–112.
- 19 Thomas, *John Wilkes*, pp. 91–3.
- 20 BL Add. MSS. 35608, fo. 324.
- 21 Thomas, *John Wilkes*, pp. 93–5.
- 22 Thomas, *John Wilkes*, pp. 96–8.
- 23 BL Add. MSS. 35608, fo. 338. *Commons Journals*, XXXII, 228.
- 24 BL Add. MSS. 35608, fo. 348.
- 25 Thomas, *John Wilkes*, pp. 97–103.
- 26 *Chatham Papers*, III, 359–61.
- 27 *Corr. of George III*, II, 82–5.
- 28 Thomas, *Townshend Duties Crisis*, pp. 126–31.
- 29 Simmons and Thomas, *Proceedings and Debates*, III, 147–60. Thomas, *Townshend Duties Crisis*, pp. 133–5.
- 30 Mackay, *Admiral Hawke*, p. 318. *Grafton Autobiography*, pp. 228–9.
- 31 Thomas, *Townshend Duties Crisis*, pp. 137–41.

- 32 Bowen, Thesis, pp. 430–47. Sutherland, *East India Company*, pp. 184–7.
- 33 For the debate of 27 Feb. 1769 see BL Egerton MSS. 218, fos 94–182.
- 34 *Cavendish Debates*, I, 50–2.
- 35 BL Add. MSS. 35362, fo. 237.
- 36 HMC Kenyon, p. 501. For the debate see *Cavendish Debates*, I, 240–51. Walpole, *Memoirs*, III, 225–6.
- 37 *Commons Journals*, XXXII, 58, 72, 98, 245, 271, 289, 327. For the Act see *Statutes at Large*, VII, 27–9.
- 38 BL Add. MSS. 35609, fos 321–2. *Cavendish Debates*, II, 265–72, 313–21, 324–36. Walpole, *Memoirs*, IV, 181–2.
- 39 For them see Reitan, *HJ*, 9 (1966), 324–5, and Brooke, *King George III*, pp. 202–3, 206–8.
- 40 *Grenville Papers*, IV, 411–12.
- 41 Walpole, *Memoirs*, III, 227.
- 42 *Cavendish Debates*, I, 262–78.
- 43 *Cavendish Debates*, I, 278–90.
- 44 *Cavendish Debates*, I, 290–307.
- 45 Walpole, *Memoirs*, III, 228–30. After 1769 the Civil List costs averaged nearly £890,000, and North in 1777 had to ask payment of over £600,000 arrears. The grant was then raised to £900,000. Reitan, *HJ*, 9 (1966), 325–6. By then the revenue sacrificed in 1760 amounted to £1 million. Brooke, *King George III*, p. 204.
- 46 *Grenville Papers*, IV, 412–13.
- 47 *Grenville Papers*, IV, 444.
- 48 *Grafton Autobiography*, pp. 238–41.
- 49 Davies, Thesis, is a full account of the Society.
- 50 *Burke Corr.*, II, 51–2.
- 51 Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*, pp. 105–34. This account is corrected and supplemented, less sympathetically, by Hamer, Thesis, pp. 100–25.
- 52 *Chesterfield Letters*, VI, 2,887.
- 53 *Chatham Papers*, III, 335–7.
- 54 Grafton MSS. no. 535.
- 55 *Grafton Autobiography*, pp. 236–7.
- 56 Walpole, *Memoirs*, III, 249.
- 57 Malmesbury MSS. Photocopies B973.
- 58 *Chesterfield Letters*, VI, 2,887.
- 59 Hamer, Thesis, pp. 129–32.
- 60 *Burke Corr.*, II, 93.
- 61 For the background and text see *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, II, 241–323.
- 62 BL Add. MSS. 35430, fo. 156.

- 63 *Burke Corr.*, II, 113.
- 64 *Burke Corr.*, II, 112.
- 65 *Chatham Papers*, III, 364 n.
- 66 *Grenville Papers*, IV, 477–8.
- 67 Grafton MSS. no. 540.
- 68 *Grafton Autobiography*, pp. 245–6.
- 69 *CHOP*, II, 484–5.
- 70 *Macartney Papers*, p. 33.
- 71 *CHOP*, II, 519, 523.
- 72 Hoffman, *Edmund Burke*, pp. 456–7. ‘The Gang’ were ‘the Bloomsbury Gang’, a contemporary name for the Bedford group.
- 73 Grafton MSS. no. 539. For a draft see *Corr. of George III*, II, 60–1.
- 74 *Macartney Papers*, p. 100.
- 75 *CHOP*, II, 527.
- 76 *Cavendish Debates*, I, 558.
- 77 *Macartney Papers*, pp. 49–53. Summary in *CHOP*, II, 544–8.
- 78 *Macartney Papers*, pp. xix–xxi.