British Parliamentary Parties 1742-1832

FROM THE FALL OF WALPOLE
TO THE FIRST REFORM ACT

B.W. Hill

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To
Richard and Anne

Preface

This volume sees the completion of a project, begun fifteen years ago, of tracing party development from the 'Glorious' Revolution to the first Reform Act. A decade and a half would be a long time to hold unaltered opinions on a wide-ranging subject and I must confess to some changes, one in particular. When writing the previous book, covering the years from 1689 to 1742, I still accepted the view that the Tory and Whig parties virtually lapsed in the mid-eighteenth century and reappeared only towards the end of the century. I now believe that, despite the presence of Whig factions, a basically two-sided alignment existed throughout. Evidence is cited to show, contrary to some received opinion, that the main elements of the Whig party went into opposition from the end of 1762 and that at the same time the Tory party largely went into regular support of successive ministries acceptable to George III. For powerful if transient motives the description Tory was not acceptable to these ministries, and in Chapters 6 to 11 its use has accordingly been avoided as far as possible out of respect for their preference. But to deny the very existence of a stable party of government called Tory by its Whig opponents, containing a great majority of the Old Tories and having a clear place in the longer history of the Tory party would be not simply pedantic but seriously misleading.

As in the first volume, quotations have been modernized as to spelling, capitalization and punctuation whenever this has been possible without loss of the original meaning. Dates before Britain's adoption of the New Style calendar in 1752 are given in the Old Style, but years are assumed to begin on 1 January and not, as in pre-1752 usage, on 25 March (Lady Day).

It is a pleasure to record my sense of gratitude to the owners of all manuscripts used in this work. I am especially indebted to those owners who entertained me, sometimes at considerable inconvenience to themselves, in their homes. But for such kindnesses the profession of historian would be much harder. I have drawn attention in various parts of the text to historians on whose works I have drawn. If, in the process, I have done less than justice to any who have anticipated some of my judgements I apologize: acknowledgement on every agreed point, like amplification of every disputed

one, is a luxury not to be indulged in a volume covering ninety years of British political experience. I should not, however, let pass the opportunity of mentioning my admiration for, and indebtedness to, that magnificent instrument for succeeding generations the *History of Parliament*. The many contributors to this work have done an invaluable service to the study of history. I also wish to thank the Leverhulme trustees, who enabled me to take leave for research, and to acknowledge my obligation to conversations over the years with colleagues and with students of my Special Subject on Burke. Especial thanks are due to Madge Robinson who has shouldered the burden of the fair-copy typing. My dependence on my wife and family is acknowledged elsewhere.

University of East Anglia, Norwich
March 1984

Abbreviations

Add. MS(S)	Additional Manuscripts in the British Library
AHR	*American Historical Review*
BIHR	*Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*
BL	British Library
CHJ	*Cambridge Historical Journal* (see also *HJ*)
CJ	*Journals of the House of Commons*
Econ. HR	*Economic History Review*
EHR	*English Historical Review*
HJ	*Historical Journal* (continuation of the *CHJ*)
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
HLB	*Huntington Library Bulletin* (see also *HLQ*)
HLQ	*Huntington Library Quarterly* (continues the *HLB*)
JBS	*Journal of British Studies*
JMH	*Journal of Modern History*
LJ	*Journals of the House of Lords*
NS	New Style
PRO	Public Record Office
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*
WMQ	*William and Mary Quarterly*

Annotation

Two methods of annotation are used in this volume. Notes likely to be immediately useful to readers are placed at the end of each chapter and denoted in the text by superior *letters*. Notes for scholars wishing to refer to source materials are gathered in the Notes section at the end of the book and are signalled in the text by superior *numbers*.

So I have seen the Tory race
Long in the pouts for want of place.

(*The Simile*, 1759)

Naught's permanent among the human race
Except the Whigs *not* getting into place.

(Byron, *Don Juan*, 1824)

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Cover Illustration: Sir Charles Barry's New Palace of Westminster, built after the fire of 1834.

PART ONE

Introductory

CHAPTER ONE
History and Historians

Few historians have enjoyed so much influence or subsequently attracted so much criticism as Sir Lewis Namier, whose views long dominated our understanding of eighteenth-century parties. His *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* appeared in 1929 and for a quarter of a century received increasing acclaim, but both his findings and his methodology came progressively under review from 1957 with the publication of Sir Herbert Butterfield's *George III and the Historians*. The work of demolition was perhaps completed twenty years later when Professor Geoffrey Elton, one of the most eminent historians of British political institutions, wrote that he had thought of the *Structure* as one of two possible nominations for a 'most overrated book' by reason of 'deficiencies in historical method aggravating the dominance of pre-conceived ideas'.[a]

First, however, tribute must be paid to what Namier did contribute of permanent value to eighteenth-century studies. It will never again be permissible to think of a two-party 'system' on the Victorian pattern at any time before the first Reform Act. The great nineteenth-century historians who set the tone of the 'Whig interpretation', which both Butterfield and Namier denounced, erred in thinking that the constitutional verities of their day had been an unchanging feature of political history since the Revolution of 1688.[1] It is doubtful, indeed, whether a two-party system has ever existed in a pure form for very long periods. At other times third and even fourth parties have been visible, transitory in themselves but forming a regularly recurring feature of politics. Moreover, the fairly rapid alternation in office of two parties with which British political life has been familiar since 1832 finds little parallel in the earlier period except between 1689 and 1714. With the main Whig party in power from 1714 to 1762 and in opposition, except for four very short spells, from then until 1830, there was hardly a system of alternation in the modern sense.

Unfortunately, Namier's view did not stop short at pointing out that the eighteenth-century party system was in an embryo state

but went on to deny the existence of parties at all 'in the modern sense'.[2] It is on this contention that the bulk of the criticism has centred. The reluctance displayed by Namierite historiography to admit the importance of the eighteenth-century parties came about in reaction to the earlier writers; overstatement provoked overstatement, and the structure of post-Revolution and Hanoverian politics went from being assumed to be a Victorian-type constitutionalism to being regarded as a continuance of the seventeenth-century court/country pattern.

The success of Namier's assault was aided, as Butterfield pointed out, by earlier twentieth-century scholarship which had questioned many aspects of the Victorian viewpoint. Much of the Namierite exposition of politics in the 1760s in terms of the breakdown of Tory and Whig parties was anticipated by the work of C. W. Alvord, a pioneer whose work prepared the ground for Namier's much more explicitly revisionist approach. The work of Alvord and other earlier writers was part of a much wider reaction against Victorian historiography, comprehending almost every field of medieval and modern British history, which began with the increasing professionalization of history writing and teaching at the end of the nineteenth century. Thanks to the work of Professor Blaas, we can now see the context of Namier's work.[3] To understand why the 'Whig' ship-of-the-line gave way to the Namieran privateer it is necessary to remember the previous weakening of timbers which rendered the older vessel vulnerable. Like the political Liberalism with which it was so closely associated, Whig historiography was declining in the post-1918 era from long-term causes. Nevertheless, Sir Lewis Namier added to the received picture his own characteristic contributions to a new interpretation of the eighteenth century. Freudian psychoanalysis (another product of Europe-wide reaction against the late-nineteenth-century world) was his right arm in his analyses of human motives – analyses which did not bring to light much good in the character of those politicians he examined. A brilliant writing style put his ideas over in an English rarely equalled; his books were, and are, a pleasure to read.

The question has to be asked, however, how far was the 'Whig interpretation', like Victorianism itself, treated with less than justice between the first and sixth decades of the present century. Much of what it had to say about King George III's reign has received subsequent confirmation.[4] Attempts by Professor Walcott to 'Namierize' politics between 1689 and 1714 have been swept away by a deluge of reassertions of the importance of the rival Tory and Whig parties in that period.[5] Other works have reasserted the importance of the Tory opposition from 1714 to 1760, and of the

Whig opposition after 1762, while Professor Cannon's *The Fox–North Coalition* has pointed out that his study of the years 1782–4 'could not have been written except in party terms'.[6] The steady return of most historians to a modified Whig interpretation, that of its last decades rather than its heyday, has been accompanied by a gradual erosion of Namierism's credibility on points of scholarship and detail. Historians have pointed out the bias involved in a pessimistic view of human motivation, in excessive attention to patronage at the expense of issues,[b] in failure to take into account foreign affairs, and in the lack of a longer-term perspective. Butterfield showed that many of Namier's presuppositions concerning George III were in fact a revival of contemporary arguments in that monarch's favour. Sir Lewis's methodology has been criticized above all for its preoccupation with the minutiae of a structural model of political life unsatisfactory because of what one historian has called 'its basic irrelevance to efforts to relate and explain the course (in contrast to the structure) of politics'.[7]

Some of the weaknesses in Namier's basic contention on the unimportance of parties were inherent in his own writing. He conceded Whig and Tory *names and creeds* 'which covered enduring types moulded by deeply ingrained differences in temperament and outlook' and, even more importantly, admitted that 'in a good many constituencies the names of Whig and Tory still corresponded to real divisions'.[8] How names could survive in Parliament, and 'real divisions' continue in those constituencies, without meaning or significance was never fully explained. Despite Namier's remark that 'the political life of the period could be fully described without ever using a party denomination' Professor Brewer points out that 'of course Namier never actually tried to do this. All his writings employ party labels, however modified, and doubtless the remark was something of a *jeu d'esprit* directed against a prevailing whig historiography.'[9] Unfortunately, the *jeu d'esprit* was taken literally and some of those influenced by Namier did indeed come close to writing books covering the whole eighteenth century while managing to ignore the role of Whigs and Tories. Others, however, drew back or even retracted. Romney Sedgwick, whom J. Steven Watson was not alone in regarding as 'that good Namierite', found in the preface to his last work the *History of Parliament, The House of Commons 1715–1754* 'a real difference between the two parties' and discussed both Tory and Whig parties in great detail. John Brooke in his 'Introductory Survey' to the 1754–90 section of the *History* set a terminal date for 'the era of personal parties' preferred by Namierite writers about 1770, leaving room thereafter for the 'Rise of Party' which Namier himself had originally intended to write.[10]

The closer one gets to the heart of Namier's remarkable achievement in revising the views of his predecessors, the more it becomes apparent that it arose less from the method of 'structural analysis', which in his hands became a self-imposed limitation on his breadth of vision, than from the readiness of his generation to receive his message and the scintillating form which he gave to that message. But literary mastery itself has dangers for the historian. One of Sir Lewis's most famous statements was the elegant antithesis: 'In 1761 not one parliamentary election was determined by party, and in 1951 not one constituency returned a non-party member.'[11] But he had himself listed, over twenty years before this was written, no fewer than 113 Tories returned in the 1761 election.[12] To reconcile these statements we must believe that all those Tories elected were returned without reference to their party convictions, a manifestly absurd proposition. The alternative is to relegate this remark to the realm of literary devices. If Macaulay had made it, and he too was fond of 'antithetical judgments', it would be given little credence today, and Namier must be treated with the same scepticism as is meted out to the pioneer of 'Whig' history. Nevertheless, Namier's claims in regard to parties are still being echoed by some historians. Professor I. R. Christie, in a textbook published in 1982, sees little sign of two parties between 1760 and 1815 and remarks that 'Oppositions have been discussed as "Whigs" ' in the modern monographs on the Whig party by O'Gorman, L. G. Mitchell, D. E. Ginter and Michael Roberts, works which between them cover all but fifteen years of that period.[c]

Namier's work was a profound but narrow and highly biased body of research. In attempting to exorcise Tory and Whig parties he took little account, in his later work at least, of the great efflorescence of Tories and Whigs in the generation before 1714, and thus he grossly underestimated the lasting influences of the party tradition then set up. Likewise he gave little explanation other than the existence of Whig and Tory 'mentalities', for the appearance of sophisticated parties in the nineteenth century, though these could hardly have emerged without earlier development.

Influenced perhaps by the publications of W. R. Laprade[13] which appeared to show a high degree of patronage control in elections and political affairs generally, Namier set the scene in the first paragraph of his preface to *The Structure of Politics* for his subsequent contentions: 'A re-statement of the arguments or an analysis of what is called "public opinion" would not get us much further; for political problems do not, as a rule, deeply affect the lives and consciousness of ordinary men, and little real thought is given them

by these men . . .'. From this basic misconception of the role and importance of public opinion came much of Namier's interpretation of what was going on in political life in the eighteenth century. Professor Browning, whose biography of the Duke of Newcastle deals with Namier's own chronological heartland, has put the opposite point of view, believing that this minister's

> freedom of action was in fact circumscribed by three concentric rings of authority. The innermost ring was the Parliament, especially the House of Commons. To flout its will systematically was to invite a breakdown in orderly government. The second ring was the electorate. Voters' displeasure with a tyrannical ministry or a meek Parliament could find expression at intervals frequent enough to encourage ministerial caution. The outermost ring, generally the most lethargic but also, if aroused, the most invincible, was public opinion.[14]

The influence of Browning's first 'ring', Parliament itself, is the most obvious. No minister could stand without parliamentary support, as Walpole discovered in 1742, Carteret in 1744 and again in 1746, Newcastle in 1756, North in 1782, Addington in 1804 and Wellington in 1830. Ministers who drew back from the brink of defeat by giving way in the Commons included Walpole, over the Excise Bill crisis in 1733, and Pelham over the Jew Act in 1753. Not only Newcastle but any minister who wished to retain his place had to make constant calculations as to his strength in the Commons. In the Lords the situation was different, for in that smaller body patronage and the personal influence of the monarch usually made for safe government majorities. 'We have nothing to do', remarked the veteran fixer George Bubb Dodington in 1741, 'but to confine our considerations to the House of Commons.'[d] A minister who lost control of the Commons could not remain in office.

It has often been argued, however, that the Commons, too, was controllable, in practice, by patronage. As much of the narrative section of the present book is devoted to dealing with this question, directly or indirectly, it may perhaps be enough to say for the moment that the Lower House was never in the hands of a 'court and Treasury' party alone and that this element itself sometimes exhibited an independence which was, to prudent ministers, an alarm bell. Whether the placemen could be relied upon to vote at full strength, and whether the ministry could then obtain the party backing necessary for a government majority, depended upon the state of politics. Walpole and the Pelhams relied for their political longevity on the support of the large independent sector of the Whig