PITT'S RESIGNATION IN 1801: A COMMENT

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Historians of the period have often been critical of William Pitt's decision to resign office in 1801 when George III refused to countenance his plans for cementing the new Anglo-Irish Union by measures of Catholic emancipation. Such a verdict was natural and even forgivable in the Irish nationalist historians of the 19th century, who from McNevin onward saw the Union as a long-planned piece of treachery, to achieve which Pitt and Castlereagh had stirred up the 1798 rebellion, and later double-crossed the Catholics into accepting Union as their one hope of relief from Protestant Ascendancy repression. But it has turned up as recently as 1951 in a work of some academic pretensions, *Irish Nationalism and British Democracy.* Strauss, who marred a promising theme by cocksure and ill-founded judgments, called the treatment of the Catholics "a piece of sharp practice," and categorically asserted that "Pitt abandoned office primarily as a pretext in order to wriggle out of his obligations to the Catholics." Weightier criticism may be found in Lecky, after seventy years still in many respects the soundest authority on 18th-century Ireland. He considered that "In 1800 the conscientious objections of the King seemed to form the only serious obstacle to Catholic emancipation," and censured Pitt for failing to press his plans for following the Union by the admission of Catholics into parliament, the endowment of their priesthood under conditions that gave a guarantee for their loyalty, and the commutation of tithes. Lecky, like a good Victorian, under-estimated the extent of the power which the political conventions of 1800 still left in the hands of the Crown. But even a modern historian like D. G. Barnes, whose most important book expatiated at length on George's continued importance in politics after 1783, could dismiss Pitt's action with the remark "that it was more a personal blow to his 'Grenville' pride than a fundamental constitutional principle which caused Pitt to offer his resignation."

None of these opinions can be sustained in the light of recent work on the relations between George III and his ministers. According to Pares, the king was in the habit of accepting, even against his own personal inclinations, policies agreed by Cabinet as necessary to the king's service:

The general well-being of the country, the improvement of social conditions or political machinery, were not immediately related to that service unless they touched public finance or commercial treaties. A Cabinet minister was bound to propose, and even, perhaps, to insist upon, anything which was, in his opinion, necessary for the king's service; he was not equally bound to insist upon anything which he thought right in itself. This distinction is clear, for example, from the younger Pitt's behaviour over Catholic Emancipation in 1801. He had to resign office when the king would not even let him propose a measure necessary for his service; ... Pitt had never considered the question in terms of right, only in terms of expediency for the king's service, a matter on which he had changed his mind, but now made it up, and could not have his advice rejected without resigning.

I propose in this article to examine some of the manoeuvres during the 1801 crisis, in order to suggest that Pitt's position was in fact so untenable that resignation was the only serious possibility for him.
The question of Catholic emancipation had entered practical politics during the winter of 1792-3, when the onset of war with France had turned Pitt's attention to the Irish situation. With the rise of the United Irishmen it was becoming doubtful whether the Protestant Ascendancy controlling the autonomous Irish parliament could secure the tranquility of the country or the loyalty of the Catholics. Where repression failed, conciliation or union with England were the alternatives. Informed that union would be unpalatable to all sections of Irish society, Pitt obliged the Irish government to sponsor several necessary reforms, among them the admission of Catholics to the vote. The Catholic gentry and middle class continued a peaceable agitation for admission to parliament and the higher offices of state, until in January 1795 Lord Fitzwilliam, a Portland Whig, was sent over as Lord Lieutenant to explore the prospects of further concessions. Almost at once he exceeded his instructions by dismissing several of the old Ascendancy junta, and encouraging Grattan's bill for Catholic emancipation. Fitzwilliam was recalled (though not, as is usually asserted, in disgrace) and both measures were allowed to lapse, to the profound disappointment of liberal elements in Ireland.

During this controversy two factors emerged which would seriously embarrass any future schemes for Catholic relief. On 7 February, 1795, George III, expressing strong distaste for the scheme, had observed "that the subject is beyond the decision of any Cabinet of Ministers." No mention, as yet, of his Coronation Oath; but this was soon to come. One week later Lord Clare, the bigoted but very able Lord Chancellor of Ireland, formulated the doctrine that the king could not repeal the Test Act or the Act of Supremacy without violating the Oath. This opinion was communicated privately to the king by a former Lord Lieutenant, Westmoreland. George took advice from the chief English law officers; was informed that the interpretation of the Coronation Oath depended on the person taking it; and from that time on, though he had previously refrained from blocking Catholic relief measures, would assent to no further concessions. Clare had done his work well. How well none of the British Cabinet were to realize until 1801.

Fitzwilliam's recall was followed by two attempted French invasions and an almost constant state of unrest in Ireland, culminating in the combined United Irishmen's rising and peasant jacquerie of 1798. These events, as well as the growing dependence of the Irish government on subsidies from the British House of Commons, decided Pitt on uniting the governments of Great Britain and Ireland. Cornwallis, the Lord Lieutenant chosen to retrieve the situation in June 1798, was known to be a Catholic sympathizer. The king thoroughly approved his appointment, but took care to observe that:

... the new Lord Lieutenant ... must not lose the present moment of terror for frightening the supporters of the Castle into an Union with this country, and no farther indulgences must be granted to the Roman Catholics, as no country can be governed where there is more than one established religion.

During the preliminary discussions shaping the Act of Union between September and November, 1798, Cornwallis somewhat reluctantly agreed not to insist on emancipation as an article of union, and Clare energetically used a visit to London to convert Pitt and his ministers to this point of view. By November Pitt and Grenville had convinced themselves that the only safe footing for Union was the shelving of emancipation, and the provision of Government stipends for the Catholic clergy as compensation.

It was hardly surprising that the Catholics of Ireland stood neutral during the next two months while a formidable anti-unionist opposition took shape,
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drawing strength on the one hand from the regular Foxite opposition under the duke of Devonshire's cousins, William and George Ponsonby, and on the other from a wing of the Protestant “ultras” already antagonized by Cornwallis' policy of clemency, and fearful for Ireland's commercial interests under the new arrangements. When the Dublin parliament rejected the Union proposals by a narrow margin in January, 1799, both government and anti-unionists at once attempted to court the Catholic interest. Once again George III sounded a warning “that though a strong friend of the union of the two kingdoms, I should become an enemy to the measure if I thought a change in the situation of the Roman Catholics would attend the measure.” However, owing to the strong Orange element among their number, the anti-unionists were unable to frame terms for winning over the Catholics, and they remained a tempting source of support for the beleaguered Irish government.

During the parliamentary recess over the summer of 1799, Castlereagh, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, worked hard mustering support for the Union. Since bribery was less of a cure-all than most historians have been naive enough to suppose, he was anxious to secure as much public support from the respectable sections of the community as possible; and some of the most gratifying results came from the western and southern counties, such as Galway, Tipperary and Cork, where the Catholics were beginning to realize that their enfranchisement in 1793 offered them some power as a pressure-group. It was still a far cry to the mass organization of Daniel O'Connell's time, but the unionist need for support gave the Catholics for the first time some inkling of their political potential. In return, Castlereagh formed the view that emancipation should be attempted, if only because it might give the Catholic gentry and priests an interest in curbing the turbulence of the lower orders. He was a young politician, and had very little firsthand experience of George III. But in the autumn of 1799 he secured Pitt's authority to accept Catholic support as fully as possible, as “the opinion of the cabinet was favourable to the measure” although “some doubts were entertained as to the possibility of admitting Catholics into some of the higher offices, and that ministers anticipated considerable repugnance to the measure in many quarters, and particularly in the highest...” This went considerably further towards committing the Cabinet than they had been prepared to go in 1798. Indeed Lord Hobart, one of a small group of reactionary “experts” who had the king's ear on Irish affairs, warned Pitt that he should disabuse the Irish government and the Catholics of their “wrong construction of the opinions you have delivered in public.” Pitt, however, made no such disavowal, but settled for a waiting game. His delay was attributed first to the doubtful outcome of the struggle in the Irish House of Commons, and then, with Union carried in June 1800, to negotiations for an armistice with the French.

When the British Cabinet discussed the question anew in September 1800, opposition was voiced by the Lord Chancellor, Loughborough, who aspired to a position of royal confidence comparable to that of his predecessor Thurlow, and had already formulated (at the time of the Fitzwilliam episode) the doctrine that Catholics were disqualified from the exercise of any office in which they might figure as representative of the Crown or the legislative authority. However, they might exercise all rights of citizenship appropriate to a subject, including apparently the right to vote. Pitt thus faced difficulties not merely with the king's conscience, but with the two keepers of that conscience in Great Britain and Ireland. Seasoned and unscrupulous politicians both, neither Loughborough nor Clare accepted the doctrine (still barely formed) that the Lord
Chancellor owed loyalty to his Cabinet colleagues, and went in and out of office with them. Instead, Loughborough drew up a memorandum against Catholic concessions with which he sought to influence the more "Protestant" members of Cabinet, such as Portland.17

So Pitt delayed showing his hand, to the growing anxiety of Cornwallis and Castlereagh, who by December 1800 were urging the ministry to act before they were forestalled by the whigs. Dublin Castle estimated that 64 out of the 100 Irish members of the united House of Commons would support relief measures, and, as for Clare, Cornwallis commented: "Our Chancellor will bully and talk big, but he is too unpopular here to venture to quarrel with Administration." At first their pressure seemed effective. By mid-January Whitehall expected the king at least to consent to some concessions. Perhaps Pitt's self-confidence led him to discount Loughborough's influence. But on 28 January it became plain how strongly the king's prejudices were moved.

It had become necessary to find a parliamentary seat for the Irish Chancellor of the Exchequer, Isaac Corry, a known pro-Catholic. One of the surviving Irish close boroughs was Armagh, whose nominal patron, the archbishop of Armagh, always returned a government nominee. It was proposed that the archbishop should create a vacancy for Corry by securing the resignation of the sitting member, Duigenan, a rabid Protestant pamphleteer. As it happened, the archbishop was a newcomer to Ireland and very much a king's man. George had preferred him to the see a few months earlier against Cornwallis' wish, over the heads of all the Irish bishops; he was, moreover, a son of the celebrated earl of Bute. Loughborough made it his business to communicate the Armagh proposal to the king, whose immediate reaction was...

...to apprize the Lord Primate of the ill effect it would produce should he assist any person to a seat in parliament who is supposed to be favorable to the Roman Catholic question, and that at the expense of one supposed a strong friend to the present Church Establishment.19 Profusely apologizing for venturing to raise the matter, Loughborough at once advised George "that no formal communication should be made by Your Majesty to the Primate of Ireland on this subject." The emphasis was Loughborough's; the implication was plain.

Such direct interference by the King in the return of a member for a House of Commons borough would have been noteworthy enough in the early years of his reign. Now, after seventeen years of Pitt, the notion revealed the strength of his feelings. Thoroughly excited, the king made the disagreement public on the same day by hectoring Dundas at a levee over the "Jacobinical" scheme that Castlereagh had brought over from Ireland.21 The next day (29 January) George wrote to the Speaker, Addington, urging him to remonstrate with Pitt against so dangerous an idea; and the archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Eldon joined in condemning the scheme.22 Events moved quickly. On 31 January Pitt sent the king a closely reasoned memorandum justifying Catholic concessions, minimizing the danger of consequent upheavals, and offering his resignation if after mature consideration the king failed to agree. In conclusion he appealed to George to refrain from dabbling in politics and to discountenance "in the whole of this interval all attempts to make use of your name or to influence the opinions of any individual or descriptions of men on any part of this subject."23

Pitt had missed any slight opportunity there may have been of restraining his sovereign. George was now full of his coronation oath, although he hoped that Pitt's sense of duty would deter him from retiring at all "to the end of
my life." But Pitt submitted his resignation on 2 February, and two days later Addington was commissioned to form a ministry. During the next five weeks, while Addington battled with cabinet-making, Pitt had time to reconsider his decision. But he must have been aware that "the inferior cabinet on Irish affairs" — Auckland, Westmoreland and Hobart, whose conservative influence was considerable with the king — were hard at work whipping together the nucleus of an anti-Catholic group of "king's friends", combining the royal influence with the Protestant wing of the anti-unionists. Few of the Irish Orange party had much cause to love Pitt and Cornwallis, and they responded to these overtures with alacrity.

The greatest of the anti-unionist anti-Catholic magnates was Lord Downshire, who had been dismissed a year earlier from the privy council for stimulating anti-unionist agitation amongst the Irish militia. Convincingly assured by Hobart and Westmoreland of royal favour, Downshire now hurried his members to Westminster to "attend the Catholic Emancipation bill and assist our good King in throwing it out." In the House of Lords the earl of Darnley, an Irish magnate with an ambiguous record on Union, was preparing to table a motion on the state of the nation, which was expected to provide an opportunity for rallying the "King's friends." In Dublin Lord Clare was in tantrums, believing that emancipation had been decided on before the passage of the Union and sedulously concealed from him throughout. Dr. Duigenan refused to resign his seat at Armagh, and busied himself trying to secure from the Dublin corporation an address of thanks to the king for his support of the Protestant cause. What, meanwhile, had become of the 64 Irish members whom Dublin Castle expected to support Catholic relief? Many of the more moderate Irish peers favoured the measure, notably Lords Shannon and Kilwarden who had been foremost in counselling caution to Fitzwilliam over the same issue six years earlier. But as the extent of Pitt's difficulties became obvious, the rats began to emerge. Even the Foxite whigs were affected; William Burton, a veteran member of the Ponsonby cousinhood who had trodden the liberal line on most occasions, was heard the declare he would not vote for Popery. Despite the enlightened views of the whig leaders, there was an unassessed number of back-benchers who might have agreed with him. And if the Irish members were not solid in support of Catholic Emancipation, what could be expected from the English?

Had Pitt persisted with Catholic relief measures in February 1801, he would have been opposed not only by the king, but by a parliamentary opposition drawn from quarters where he normally expected support, and organized by some of the most skilled and unscrupulous old hands among the "king's friends." He would have had the king interfering in fields of parliamentary management and policy-making in which (even though George had never formally relinquished the right of intervention) the cabinet had enjoyed virtually a free hand throughout Pitt's term of office. He could not count on a reliable bloc of support for Catholic relief; with no more than sixty members of the House of Commons attached to him personally, Pitt could not have formed a majority even if Fox had made a supreme effort of magnanimity and offered him a coalition with the whigs. Party solidarity had not yet reached the stage where a Government leader, deserted by a wing of his own followers, could force a piece of legislation with Opposition support, as Peel carried the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846.

By resigning, Pitt hastened a return to normal allegiances and ensured that the "king's friends" would have no pretext for intrigue against the
regular cabinet. Why then did he agree not to raise the issue of Catholic relief during George’s lifetime? The war was, of course, one consideration; George’s precarious sanity another. And since George was old enough to be Pitt’s father, the agreement might tie a minister’s hands only for a few years. But right up to 1829 royal acquiescence was necessary to get Catholic relief measures through parliament; and, to judge by their repeated attempts over the intervening years, the Irish Catholics showed an astonishing willingness to abide by parliamentary methods. Pitt had gained a breathing-space, which, unfortunately for Anglo-Irish relations, was not made use of, until eventually the Irish turned once more to the threat of violence and secured results. It is unrealistic to imagine that, in prevailing conditions, Pitt could have done more for Catholic relief. At least he introduced the convention that ministers might sometimes resign on a point of principle.

NOTES-
3. Ibid., p. 64.
4. Ibid., p. 107.
10. On 14 February, 1798, Clare enunciated this doctrine in a letter to his friend John Beresford (Beresford Correspondence, London, 1854, vol. ii, pp. 78-8), and six days later Beresford was cautiously sounding Auckland about the influence of the Coronation oath on the Catholic question (Beresford to Auckland, 20 February, 1798; B.M. Add. MSS 34303). But it was not until late in March the cabinet discovered that Clare had in some way alarmed the king’s conscience, and even then the extent of the mischief was unknown. (Portland to Pelham, 21 March, 1799; B.M. Add. MSS 38191).
11. George III to Pitt, 12 June, 1798, 7:38 a.m. (P.R.O. 30/8/104).
12. Memorandum date 21 January, 1799, 8:32 a.m. (Windsor Castle MSS; reproduced by permission of Her Majesty’s Keeper, Sir Owen Morshead).
13. Castlereagh to Pitt, 1 January, 1801 (P.R.O. 30/8/326). The emphasis is Castlereagh’s.
14. All former Lords Lieutenant or Chief Secretaries of Ireland, the group included Lords Auckland, Hobart, Buckingham and Westmoreland, Lord Camden was sometimes consulted.
15. Hobart to Pitt, 2 November, 1799 (P.R.O. 30/8/225).
16. D. G. Barnes, op. cit., p. 369 cites a memorandum date 12 December, 1806 in the Clements transcripts of the Royal Archives at Windsor, in the possession of the Ann Arbor library, Michigan. I have not seen the original.
19. Loughborough to George III, 28 January, 1801, 8 p.m. (Windsor Castle MSS).
23. George III to Pitt, 1 February, 1801 (Windsor Castle MSS).
24. Downshire to Hobart, 15 February, 1801; see also Westmoreland to Downshire, no date, and Hobart to Downshire, 6 February, 1801. (Downshire MSS, unclassified: Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast).
25. Cooke to Castlereagh, 19 February, 1801 (Castlereagh MSS; by permission of the late Dowager Marchioness of Londonderry, Mount Stewart, 60, Down, Northern Ireland).