Biographical Dictionary of British Prime Ministers

edited by

Robert Eccleshall and Graham Walker

ROUTLEDGE

BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF BRITISH PRIME MINISTERS

The *Biographical Dictionary of British Prime Ministers* is a wide-ranging, comprehensive guide to the political lives of Britain's prime ministers, from Sir Robert Walpole to Tony Blair. Written by some of the leading scholars in British history and politics, this authoritative dictionary provides essential information about each premiership, including facts and analytical debate on seminal issues and events in British history. Each entry has been written to a consistent style and contains:

- brief biographical information outlining career history and significant dates and events
- a brief summary of the significance and peculiarities of each prime minister followed by a more descriptive and interpretative account of his or her political life and impact on British politics
- references and further reading

The *Biographical Dictionary of British Prime Ministers* addresses many of the key themes which have influenced parliamentary politics in Great Britain in the past three hundred years, such as the historical and cultural context of each premiership; party management and reform; intra-party intellectual and ideological debate and, where relevant, the evolution of the office of the prime minister in connection to the role of monarchy and the impact of mass politics.

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PREFACE

This volume, as its title suggests, consists of portraits of each occupant of the highest office in British politics since the first half of the eighteenth century. It is scholarly in approach: the assessments of the individual prime ministers are informed by a knowledge of academic findings in the field, particularly works of history but also of the social sciences and literature. Political memoirs and diaries have also been expertly mined for what they might contribute to the critical objective. Prime ministers are placed firmly, and we hope illuminatingly, in the context of their time; scholarly debates around cognate themes such as the development of party, the role of the monarch, the impact of mass democracy, and the ideological foundations of policies and programmes are alluded to where appropriate. Contributors have been chosen with a view to the new insights they might bring to their subjects, and to their command of the broader political, social and economic context. As editors we believe the volume represents a fair reflection of scholarly progress in the realm of British political history and, indeed, contemporary history. It may also be viewed as a contribution to the study of questions of leadership in British politics and society, rightly identified by a prominent British historian as a somewhat neglected theme (Clarke 1991:1–7).

While scholarly standards have been a guiding principle, we have tried, no less rigorously, to ensure clarity and readability. We want this volume to give pleasure as well as to provoke thought; to entertain as well as to enlighten. Again, our contributors have been chosen for their abilities in this regard. We hope that readers will find complex issues to have been clarified without being oversimplified or distorted. We hope that they will appreciate and be stimulated by the range of writing styles and critical approaches which mark these appraisals.

The book is not primarily an example of the kind of scholarly contribution usually categorized as 'political science', although as editors we happen to be located in a Politics department and there are contributors here who would class themselves as political scientists. The nature of the volume precludes systematic investigation of issues pertaining to the office of prime minister and the changing role of the premier in relation to other elements of executive government and to the wider political culture of the country. Nevertheless,

much may be gleaned from these pages by the student of politics on the prime ministerial careers which form part of the empirical basis of the scholarly debates about the exercise of political power in modern Britain.

Similarly, insights into the evolution of the office can be fashioned from these pages. Controversy, of course, still surrounds the question of who actually was the first prime minister, and will survive this collection. However, Stephen Taylor's discussion of this question in his appraisal of Sir Robert Walpole not only supplies powerful arguments for following convention in the choice of Walpole as the starting-point for the book (see Van Thal 1974), but also provides a guide to the means of defining the role of the office in the unreformed system of the time.

Coming up to date, the volume may also be said to be a vital point of reference for those engaged in, or concerned to comprehend, the debate over prime ministerial power which has been joined since the 1960s. The most significant contributions to this debate, involving political and academic figures such as Richard Crossman, John MacKintosh and G.W.Jones, have been well summarized by several scholars (Barber 1991:122–37; Madgwick 1991:234–57; Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995:11–37, 322–5), but new variations on the theme (for example Foley 1993) suggest that deliberations in this field are taking on a greater degree of sophistication. In addition, the premiership of Margaret Thatcher has in many ways provided an ideal focus for competing perspectives, a testing ground for the theories of growth in prime ministerial power and the employment of the 'presidential' analogy on the one hand, and those arguments which stress the enduring importance of constraints on premiers on the other. The extended analysis of Thatcher's career in this book is in a way an acknowledgement of her centrality to both the ideological and governmental developments which have profoundly affected British politics and society.

Yet political science models, while often illuminating, cannot explain those aspects of prime ministerial behaviour which derive from individual personality traits and the quality of temperaments under pressure. As political circumstances and fortunes fluctuate so the strengths and weaknesses of prime ministerial personalities and their particular approaches to the office will be revealed. This volume illustrates the great variety of governing styles—from the strong conviction-based, perhaps authoritarian, leadership of Thatcher and Gladstone, through the blend of a dominant personality and fidelity to the principle of cabinet government represented by Churchill, to the more low-key chairmanship of Baldwin and Attlee. Moreover, the collection offers much in the way of character studies: there is, for instance, critical commentary on the personal features that have lowered the reputation of such premiers as Rosebery, Eden and Heath.

At the time of writing, the United Kingdom appears to be at the threshold of an era of wide-ranging constitutional reform. It is possible that the context provided by the 'unwritten constitution' and the importance of precedents and conventions to political practices—the context in which the records of the

prime ministers in this volume have to be judged—will be profoundly altered. The United Kingdom looks set to be reshaped in the form of devolution for Scotland and Wales, and possibly by an evolving structure of British-Irish relations. On the other hand, speculation about the possible establishment of a prime minister's department reflects the extent to which the system of government has become increasingly centralized. It is for these reasons that we commissioned a last-minute entry on Blair, inevitably different in scope from the other contributions, whose government—committed to a wide-ranging modernizing agenda but also determined to eliminate obstacles, inside the Labour party and beyond, to its project—was elected only a few months before the manuscript went to press.

It remains to be seen whether, perhaps in a short space of time, studies of prime ministers will have to be conducted within very different scholarly frames of reference. However, there is little doubt that the endeavour will remain a fascinating one. It is hoped that readers—scholarly or lay—will find much to fascinate them here.

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Robert Walpole, First Earl of Orford

Born 26 August 1676, first surviving son of Robert Walpole and Mary Burwell. Educated at Eton, King's College, Cambridge, and Lincoln's Inn. Married (1) 1700 Catherine Shorter; (2) date not known, but before 3 March 1738 Maria Skerrett. MP for Castle Rising 1701–2, King's Lynn 1702–17 January 1712 (expelled from the Commons), 11 February–6 March 1712 (election declared void) and 1713–42. One of the Council of the Lord High Admiral 1705–8; Secretary at War 1708–10; Treasurer of the Navy 1710–11; Paymaster of the Forces 1714–15 and 1720–1; First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer 1715–17 and 1721–42. Created Knight of the Bath 1725, Knight of the Garter 1726, Earl of Orford 1742. Died 18 March 1745.

Robert Walpole is one of the most remarkable figures of modern British politics. He is commonly regarded not only as the first prime minister, but also as the longest serving holder of that office, his twenty-one years far exceeding the tenure of any of his successors. He was the dominant figure of the early Hanoverian period. Contemporaries referred to him as the 'Great Man' and, unlike any other prime minister, he has given his name to the period: it is the Robinocracy.

Looking at Walpole from the perspective of the early modern period, he appears as part of a long line of dominating ministers, in the tradition of Wolsey, Burghley and Buckingham. Like many of his predecessors Walpole made a personal fortune while in office and founded a noble dynasty. No subsequent prime minister was to do the same; none left behind them a country house on the scale of Houghton. In this sense Walpole marks the end of a line rather than the beginning of one. But Walpole has also long been seen as the first British prime minister. In what way, if any, was he different from his predecessors?

Walpole was certainly not the first person to be referred to by contemporaries as prime minister. Even if we ignore references to 'chief minister' or 'premier-minister', contemporary usage gives us two earlier candidates for the title of the first prime minister—the Earl of Godolphin and Robert Harley. Harley in particular was frequently described as 'prime minister' by both supporters and

opponents. Nor should too much significance be attached to the fact that Walpole occupied the post of First Lord of the Treasury, which only subsequently came to be associated with the prime ministership. Indeed, George I had got rid of the post of Lord Treasurer, placing the treasury in commission and thereby creating the position of First Lord, partly because he did not want to give any one minister the pre-eminence associated with the lord treasurership.

Can we then still regard Walpole as the first prime minister? The answer to this question is not clear-cut. Contemporaries were familiar with the concept of a prime minister before Walpole rose to power, and in many respects his role was anticipated by some of his predecessors. Nevertheless, he does mark a new departure. To understand in what way, we need to look more closely at the characteristics of a prime minister in the first half of the eighteenth century.

One of the best definitions of a prime minister is provided by Clayton Roberts: 'He monopolized the counsels of the King, he closely superintended the administration, he ruthlessly controlled patronage, and he led the predominant party in parliament' (Roberts 1966:402). This definition might be criticized, not least because it assumes a high degree of party identity. But for the first half of the eighteenth century—the period when the concept of a prime minister became generally recognized and accepted—there did exist a fairly well-defined party structure (Hill 1976; Colley 1982; but cf. Speck 1981). Moreover, by emphasizing the role of prime ministers in managing parliament for the King, Roberts highlights what distinguishes them from all first ministers (except perhaps Danby) in the pre-Revolutionary period.

Judging by these criteria, how strong a case can be made for Godolphin and Harley? For Godolphin it fails, because he shared his court influence with the Duke of Marlborough and was never a party leader. But for Harley it is persuasive, and many historians would accept Roberts's claim that Harley was the first prime minister. Nonetheless, there is a significant difference between Harley and Walpole. Even after the Tory landslide in the 1710 elections, Harley did not regard himself as the party's leader. By instinct he was a non-party manager, attempting to create a broad coalition to support the Queen's business in parliament. Walpole, by contrast, was a committed party man. He was not only the King's minister, but also the leader of the Whig party. The emergence of a prime minister in the modern sense thus owed much to the Hanoverian succession. George I had distrusted the Tories ever since their betrayal of Hanover at the Utrecht peace negotiations. He was further alienated from them by their abuse of his German advisers and the flight of two of their leaders, Bolingbroke and Ormonde, to the Jacobite court in exile. Consequently, George I, in stark contrast to both William and Anne who had preferred non-party governments, was prepared to entrust himself to the Whigs. Had the leaders of Whig government of 1717–21, Stanhope and Sunderland, lived longer, either of them, rather than Walpole, would almost certainly be appearing as the first entry in this volume.

Walpole himself repudiated the description 'prime minister', but it is important not to attribute too much significance to this. He used the phrase in the French sense of a minister who usurps the powers of the Crown itself. Nor was 'prime minister' simply a term of abuse used by opponents. By the 1730s it was being used with unparalleled frequency by supporters as well as opponents and even appeared in the title of a pro-ministerial pamphlet as early as 1731.

But when did Walpole become prime minister? Since there was no such office, whether formally or informally, this is a difficult question to answer and one which has been the subject of much debate. Traditionally his premiership is dated from his appointment as First Lord of the Treasury in 1721. Eveline Cruickshanks has suggested 1720, the year in which he rejoined the ministry, on the grounds that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, John Aislabie, was merely a figurehead (Cruickshanks 1984:23). In fact, a date of 1723, or even later, is much more plausible.

To explain both how and when Walpole became prime minister it is necessary to go back to 1714, when he and Lord Townshend, his brother-in-law and close political ally, were two of the beneficiaries of the accession of George I. At this time they were only part of a much broader Whig ministry. Townshend, the senior of the two and a leading aristocratic Whig in the Lords, was made secretary of state, while Walpole, who had emerged as one of the leading Whig debaters in the Commons during Anne's last years, received the lucrative but junior post of Paymaster-General. In 1715 Walpole became First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer, but this did not mark their dominance of the ministry. The older Whig leaders of Anne's reign, the former Junto, were being removed by death and illness, but Townshend and Walpole had rivals in their own generation, notably in Stanhope and Sunderland. In the resulting factional struggle Stanhope and Sunderland emerged triumphant. Townshend was first relegated to the lord lieutenancy of Ireland and then, in 1717, dismissed. Walpole resigned and followed his brother-in-law into opposition together with a small group of allies. The schism in the Whig party was followed by a split at court, as the Prince of Wales quarrelled with his father. For the next three years Walpole and Townshend, the Prince of Wales and the Tories co-operated in opposition, putting the ministry under constant pressure and subjecting it to some striking, if occasional, defeats. The aim of Walpole and Townshend was clearly to force themselves back into government.

In 1720 they achieved this aim. However, while the reasons for both sides coming to terms are obscure, it is clear that Townshend and Walpole returned as junior partners. Townshend was made Lord President, Walpole found himself once again as Paymaster, and some of their followers, such as William Pulteney, were left out in the cold. The ministry was still dominated by Stanhope and Sunderland: Walpole was so far from being prime minister that he was only a junior minister outside the cabinet. Only a combination of luck and judgement enabled Townshend and Walpole to achieve dominance of the ministry over the next months and years.

Their first stroke of luck came with the bursting of the South Sea Bubble. The ensuing financial and political chaos enabled Walpole to demonstrate his abilities by guiding through parliament the legislation necessary to restore government credit. More importantly, perhaps, it removed many of their rivals. The Stanhope-Sunderland ministry was deeply implicated in the crash. Stanhope died of apoplexy after defending himself in the Lords; Craggs, Stanhope's colleague as Secretary of State, died of smallpox after his son committed suicide; Aislabie, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was found guilty of corruption and expelled from the Commons; Sunderland survived, but only just, and was forced to resign as First Lord of the Treasury. Townshend succeeded Stanhope as Secretary of State and in April 1721 Walpole was appointed First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Sunderland, however, remained a powerful rival. He now occupied only a minor court post, the groom of the stole, but it gave him access to the King, whose favour he retained, and he was soon intriguing to undermine Walpole and Townshend. But fortune again intervened when Sunderland died on 19 April 1722.

J.H.Plumb dates Walpole's premiership from this point (Plumb 1956:378). There is much to commend this view, but in many respects Walpole was still not yet prime minister. The ministry contained many of Sunderland's former allies, not least Lord Carteret, Townshend's colleague as Secretary of State. Walpole and Townshend did not yet enjoy the confidence of the King. Moreover, there was considerable suspicion of them among the Whig party in parliament. Their factional opposition to a Whig government in 1717–20 had damaged their party credentials and, among the more independently minded Whigs, Walpole was further tainted by his role in screening the corrupt during the South Sea inquiries.

The discovery in 1722 of a Jacobite conspiracy, better known as the Atterbury plot, was thus of crucial importance to the consolidation of Townshend and Walpole's power (Bennett 1975). It is now clear that Walpole manufactured evidence to secure the banishment of Bishop Atterbury in May 1723, but it is contemporary perceptions which are important. Townshend and especially Walpole were able to portray themselves as loyal ministers and zealous Whigs who had uncovered a dangerous conspiracy against the Hanoverian succession. The plot also discredited their rivals, since Sunderland and Carteret, in an attempt to gain a parliamentary advantage over their Whig rivals, had both been involved in negotiations with the Jacobites in 1721. As Arthur Onslow later noted, this episode was

> the most fortunate and the greatest circumstance of Mr Walpole's life. It fixed him with the King, and united for a time the whole body of Whigs to him, and gave him the universal credit of an able and vigilant minister.
>
> (Historical Manuscripts Commission: 513)

Arguably, therefore, Walpole's premiership should be dated from no earlier than 1723. The ministry was more secure in the support of both the King and

the Whig party, while Walpole's own prominence within the ministry was increased because he was the only cabinet minister sitting in the Commons. He therefore took the lead in defending government policies across the full range of its activities, including foreign affairs. Moreover, while Walpole, unlike many historians, did not underestimate the significance of the Lords and was at times personally involved in its management (Jones 1987), the Commons was of greater importance for most regular government business. Well over one-third of government-sponsored legislation between 1715 and 1754 concerned supply (Sedgwick 1970:i, 5), and this was both Walpole's own department and Commons' business—the convention had long been established that the Lords could not amend money bills.

Nevertheless, we must be cautious about according too much prominence to Walpole—even after 1723. First, there was continued rivalry within the ministry. Carteret remained as Secretary of State until 1724, and thereafter was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and he had allies in figures like General Cadogan and the Earl of Macclesfield. Moreover, George I was reluctant to allow the ministry to be dominated by Walpole and Townshend. Second, it must not be forgotten that Townshend was Secretary of State. In some ways he was still Walpole's senior; he dominated foreign policy; and he exercised the predominant influence over other areas of government policy, such as religion. In addition, Townshend had won over the King's mistress, the Duchess of Kendal, and enjoyed a better relationship with his sovereign than Walpole. Consequently, if Walpole is to be called 'prime minister' from 1723, it is a description which must be heavily qualified. To many contemporaries it was a Townshend-Walpole ministry, and it is perhaps more accurate to describe it as duumvirate. Had Walpole been dismissed at the accession of George II in 1727, we would probably find it difficult to see any significant differences between him and Stanhope and Sunderland.

Walpole's dismissal is precisely what everyone, including Walpole himself, expected on the death of George I. It is ironic, therefore, that this event secured Walpole's dominance. George II's detestation of his father's ministers was well known, and for a few days it looked as if the new King would dismiss him. But once George II had decided to keep the ministers, Walpole's position within the ministry was greatly strengthened. It is true that he had to live with some uncongenial bedfellows, not least the rival who had failed to replace him, Spencer Compton, who was compensated with a peerage. But now it was Walpole, rather than Townshend, who enjoyed the greater influence at court, largely through the influence of Queen Caroline whom he had courted assiduously while Princess of Wales. The full strength of his position became apparent over the next three years, as he challenged Townshend over foreign policy and won. Walpole was increasingly worried about Townshend's bellicose attitude towards the Austro-Spanish alliance. Acting with the Duke of Newcastle, he negotiated the Treaty of Seville (1729), which detached Spain from Austria. This marginalization of Townshend in his own sphere of foreign affairs led

directly to his resignation. There is, therefore, a strong case for arguing that it is only between 1727 and 1730 that Walpole emerged, by himself, as someone enjoying the predominance within parliament and the ministry which is associated with the 'office' of prime minister.

That position was, of course, very different from that of a modern prime minister. Not only was there no office of prime minister, but also Walpole did not occupy a post which made him *officio* head of the ministry. As First Lord of the Treasury he was a departmental head, as were most of his ministerial colleagues. Indeed, it was not Walpole's government. He did not appoint the cabinet. Instead, the King appointed all the leading ministers and they reported directly to him. If Walpole wanted to dismiss a minister, he had to convince the King and that was never an easy task. Throughout his time in office Walpole had to endure the presence of rivals and critics in the cabinet, and most important policy decisions were made at meetings of a small inner cabinet. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find that there was no concept of collective cabinet responsibility. This was made very clear in January 1742, when the ministry was defeated in parliament but Walpole alone resigned.

The discussion hitherto has concentrated on the vexed questions of whether Walpole was the first prime minister, and, if so, when he achieved that position, and it has tried to illuminate something of the nature of the 'office' of prime minister in the early eighteenth century. But little has been said about Walpole's remarkable achievement of remaining for over twenty years one of the dominant figures, if not the dominant figure, in the Whig government. How, then, was Walpole able to remain in power for so long?

It has already been noted that Walpole himself expected to be dismissed on the accession of George II. This fact highlights the importance of the King and the court in eighteenth-century politics. Britain may not have been a 'court society' on the French model, as some historians have argued (Clark 1988:121), but Walpole was the King's minister in much more than a nominal sense. His skills as a courtier were vital to his success. It must be remembered that George II, like his father, was astute enough to keep rivals and critics of Walpole within the ministry and at court. Even the prime minister could not be allowed too easy a dominance of government. Nevertheless, in the 1730s Walpole enjoyed unrivalled access to the King and Queen, with whom, according to Lord Hervey, he developed a relationship of remarkable intimacy and trust.

But the confidence of the King, by itself, was not enough. If it had been, Compton would have replaced Walpole in 1727. George II's detestation of his father's ministers was intense—he referred to Walpole as 'a great rogue' and Townshend as 'a choleric blockhead' (Hervey 1931:29). He had never forgiven them for the terms of his reconciliation in 1720. The problem, and the objection to Compton in 1727, was that the King also wanted someone who could get his business through parliament. Walpole had an unrivalled ability to manage parliament, and this is what tipped the balance in his favour in 1727. If the point needed emphasis, he provided it by securing for George II an increased civil list

of £800,000. Conversely, at the time of his resignation in 1742 Walpole still retained the confidence of the King, but was no longer able to maintain his majority in the Commons. To explain Walpole's tenure of power, we need therefore to turn to his relationship with parliament.

The opposition to Walpole explained his parliamentary dominance very simply —by corruption. They feared that so many Members of Parliament (MPs) and peers were becoming dependent on the ministry that parliament was in danger of becoming little more than a rubber stamp for government policy. This analysis, propagated most effectively in *The Craftsman,* has exercised a great influence over historians, and often patronage appears to be the key to Walpole's maintenance of his parliamentary majority. We must not, of course, overlook the importance of patronage or the role of the First Lord of the Treasury in distributing it. As the Earl of Hardwicke later remarked, MPs 'were naturally to look thither; that there must be some principal person to receive applications, and to hear the wants and the wishes and the requests of mankind, with the reasons of them' (Sedgwick 1970:i, 41). Those in receipt of government offices and pensions did form a significant part of the membership of both houses of parliament. In the Lords there were about eighty office-holders in 1721, rising to about 100 by 1742, out of a total membership of just under 200. In the Commons they accounted for between 120 and 150 of the 558 MPs. Discipline was not as rigorous as in the modern Commons, but in general office-holders were expected to support the ministry. This was as true whether they were peers or commoners. During the excise crisis of 1733 Walpole came far closer to defeat in the Lords than the Commons, and the Dukes of Montrose and Bolton, the Earls of Stair and Marchmont, and Lord Cobham were all dismissed for voting against the government.

But office-holders, by themselves, were never numerous enough to give Walpole a majority. In addition, there were important limits to the power of patronage. Some offices were granted for life, giving the ministry little control over their holders. Indeed, one of the most independent Whigs in the House, Sir Joseph Jekyll, was an office-holder as Master of the Rolls. Other recipients of government favours had a distressing tendency to view them as a reward for past services rather than as a down payment for future support. Moreover, and perhaps most seriously, the ties of patronage were weakest precisely when the ministry most needed support. In times of crisis those dependent on government favours were faced with a dilemma: should they stay loyal to the minister and risk going down with the ship if he resigned, or should they try quietly to distance themselves from him in case they had to come to terms with a new regime? The weakness of patronage was highlighted in the most serious crisis experienced by the Walpole ministry, the excise crisis of 1733. Walpole's majorities in the Commons declined until they reached the point at which he was forced to abandon the Tobacco Excise Bill, a major piece of financial legislation. Opposition strength, however, remained more or less constant throughout the crisis. Walpole's problem lay in the attitude of previously reliable ministerial supporters, who, seeing the weakness of the

ministry and fearing that Walpole was on the point of being replaced, abstained or stayed away from parliament in ever greater numbers (Langford 1975).

To explain Walpole's success in parliament, therefore, we need to look beyond patronage and examine his appeal to the more independent members of the Commons. Walpole was undoubtedly a very effective manager of patronage, but it is perhaps in his ability to appeal to the less committed that he stands out above his colleagues and rivals. First, Walpole was a party leader as well as the King's minister. He had played a leading role in the impeachment of Henry Sacheverell, the high-flying Tory clergyman who had 'preached against the Revolution', and his later imprisonment in the Tower on charges of corruption had given him the aura of a Whig martyr. His reputation was damaged by his behaviour while in opposition between 1717 and 1720 and during the South Sea crisis, but it was partly recovered by his vigorous prosecution of the Atterbury plot. Some Whigs remained suspicious of Walpole, an attitude which contributed to the 'patriot' opposition from 1725. Nonetheless, for all his failings, he was and remained a Whig, able to appeal to Whig identity. This appeal could be particularly effective when divisions among the Whigs threatened the government's majority in parliament. In the immediate aftermath of the excise crisis, when the opposition tried to press home their attack on Walpole, he rallied Whig support by appealing to party solidarity, raising the spectre of Jacobitism and portraying the ministry as the only real defence for the Hanoverian succession and Revolution principles.

Second, Walpole possessed unrivalled abilities as a parliament man. As it is difficult in retrospect to recapture the effect of an individual's presence and the power of his oratory in the Commons, the best testimony comes from contemporaries. Lord Chesterfield's account is particularly interesting because it comes from the pen of one of the leaders of the opposition to Walpole's administration. He was, according to Chesterfield,

> both the ablest parliament man, and the ablest manager of parliament, that I believe ever lived. An artful rather than an eloquent speaker, he saw as by intuition, the disposition of the House, and pressed or receded accordingly. So clear in stating the most intricate matters, especially in the finances, that while he was speaking the most ignorant thought that they understood what they really did not.
>
> (Franklin 1993:114)

It is in this context that the significance of Walpole's decision to abandon precedent and remain in the Commons becomes clear. Not only did this decision reveal his awareness of the importance of the lower House for government business, but also, by making a symbolic public statement of this kind, Walpole further enhanced his position in the Commons. As one contemporary noted: 'Mr W. chooses to give nobility to others, rather than to accept it himself' (British Library (BL) Additional Manuscripts (Add MSS) 70400, John Wainwright to Timothy Thomas, 17 November 1723).

Third, Walpole inspired confidence by his competence as a finance minister. The calm common sense which he brought to the restoration of government finances in the aftermath of the South Sea crisis was impressive, even if his screening of the corrupt was censured. The maintenance of public credit thereafter depended on the government keeping the confidence of the great financial institutions, and in his definitive study of public finance in this period P.G.M. Dickson has concluded:

> There is no doubt that the hard, tough men who ran the City and its institutions recognized in his handling of this and subsequent financial issues a competence equal to their own, and not found at the Treasury for any length of time since the fall of Godolphin.
>
> (Dickson 1967:198)

Moreover, Walpole combined this unrivalled grasp of financial details with the ability, noted by Chesterfield, to explain them clearly.

Finally, Walpole tried to pursue policies which would attract broad support both in parliament and in the country. Having served his parliamentary apprenticeship during the violent party strife of Anne's reign, he was well aware of the danger of controversy. But his policies were not only dictated by a concern to stay in power; cooling the embers of party strife was also seen as the best way of preserving the Hanoverian succession, which many feared might be susceptible to the challenge from the exiled Stuarts. In foreign policy war posed a particular danger, as the attempted Franco-Jacobite invasion of 1708 had proved, giving the Jacobites the opportunity to find continental allies who would mount an expedition against Britain. This threat helps to explain Walpole's support for the Anglo-French alliance of 1716, and his reluctance in the early 1730s to admit that it had disintegrated. More generally, Walpole aimed to pursue a pacific foreign policy, keeping Britain out of continental entanglements. It was, as has already been pointed out, Walpole's concern about Townshend's bellicosity which lay at the heart of the dispute which ended in Townshend's resignation. In the 1730s, too, Walpole worked hard to keep Britain out of the War of the Polish Succession.

A pacific foreign policy had further attractions, as it helped to keep taxation low, especially the land tax. The heavy burden of the land tax had been one of the more contentious issues in Anne's reign, doing much to alienate the landed gentry who saw their money going into the pockets of financiers. Walpole's fiscal policy was, therefore, intended to appease the landed interest. In only three years —1727, 1740 and 1741—was the land tax levied at its 'wartime' rate of four shillings in the pound. For most of the rest of the period the rate was two shillings, and in 1731–2 it was reduced to one shilling. To achieve this, expenditure had to be controlled, which meant war had to be avoided. But Walpole's financial policy was not merely passive. In some respects he was a reformer, shifting some of the tax burden from direct to indirect taxes. This was done partly by reducing the

interest payments on the national debt and partly by a series of technical measures to increase the yield from indirect taxes, such as the replacement in 1724 of customs duties by excises on tea, chocolate and coffee.

A similar strategy was pursued elsewhere, most notably perhaps in the government's religious policy. Religion had been the most divisive issue in the reign of Anne, with high church Tories campaigning for 'a return to the past when church and state had conjoined in a single authoritarian regime' (Bennett 1975:22). The Whig party, by contrast, was identified with low churchmen and dissenters, and many Anglican clergy believed that the church could never be safe in its hands. The Stanhope-Sunderland ministry did nothing to allay such fears, pursuing a radical religious policy and attempting to repeal the Test Act. Townshend and Walpole, by contrast, did their best to defuse these religious disputes by working to prevent Whig attacks on the church. At the same time they entrusted the management of church affairs to Bishop Gibson, a committed Whig but also a high churchman, someone who could reassure the lower clergy that the church was indeed safe in Whig hands (Sykes 1926:83–182). It is a measure of the success of this policy that religion all but disappeared as a central issue of parliamentary politics in the years after 1720.

Lord Hervey reported the jibe that Walpole's government was based on Tory principles and pursued Tory policies (Hervey 1931:3–4). It is easy to see the basis of this accusation. For much of the period Whig government appeared to have abandoned the Grand Alliance, which had been the cornerstone of British foreign policy for the quarter-century after the Revolution of 1688, in favour of an alliance with the old enemy, France. In religion, the dissenters were denied further concessions, albeit on the ground that the time was not proper. Walpole, however, continued to see himself as a committed Whig, and with good reason. His overriding concern remained the preservation of the Hanoverian succession and the protestant monarchy, as established at the Revolution. He had, it is true, abandoned the partisanship of Anne's reign when, following his expulsion from the Commons, he was celebrated as the Whigs' 'jewel in the Tower' (History of Parliament Trust forthcoming). He had become more pragmatic, perhaps even more moderate. His political apprenticeship in Anne's reign had been a formative experience. He had surely learnt much about the arts of parliamentary management from Robert Harley, though Walpole imposed an even more rigorous discipline on office-holders. More importantly, the party strife of those years taught Walpole that peace, low taxation and the damping the fires of religious conflict were essential both for ministerial stability and for the security of the Hanoverian succession, which remained precarious for some years after 1714.

In essence, the key to Walpole's success lay in his ability to satisfy the demands of both King and parliament. Walpole himself was conscious of this; he was 'minister with the King in the House of Commons' and 'minister for the House of Commons in the Closet' (Sedgwick 1970:ii, 41). These two roles were inextricably linked. It has already been shown that one of the attractions of

Walpole for George I and George II was his ability to manage parliament. Conversely, the fact that he was the King's minister and retained the confidence of the King was crucial to his support in parliament. One of the most important reasons for the weakness of Walpole's parliamentary position in 1733 was rumours that he had lost the confidence of the court and that George II was considering his dismissal.

It is important not to underestimate Walpole's abilities. One might argue that the period favoured his style of politics: nevertheless, his is an unparalleled achievement. It is equally important, however, not to exaggerate those abilities. Walpole did make mistakes. His meddling in Irish affairs repeatedly caused trouble, never more so than in the controversy over Wood's patent in 1723–5 (Hayton 1984). His domestic politics also occasionally backfired, notably in 1733 and 1736. The Tobacco Excise Bill of 1733, intended in part to appeal to the landed gentry by facilitating a reduction in the land tax, provoked an impressive alliance of opposition Whigs and Tories in parliament, tobacco merchants, and small shopkeepers and traders through the country (Langford 1975: ch. 4). The result was a massive public campaign against the Bill and the collapse of Walpole's majority in the Commons. Three years later Walpole's espousal of the Quakers' Tithe Bill, which he saw as a minor measure of relief for one group of protestant dissenters, provoked not merely the expected hostility of the Tories, but also the united opposition of the clergy, led by Gibson and the bench of bishops. On this occasion the Bill was defeated in the Lords (Taylor 1985).

The crises of 1733 and 1736 were relatively short-lived. Once the contentious legislation had been abandoned, the boil had been lanced and the ministry was able to consolidate its position once more. It was not so easy to deal with opposition attacks on foreign policy and the conduct of the war between 1738 and 1742. First, in 1738 and 1739, concerted attacks were made by the opposition both within parliament and outside on the ministry's conciliatory policy towards Spain and its reluctance to go to war in defence of British trade with the Spanish colonies in South America. Then, after war had been declared on Spain, attention shifted to the ineffectiveness of the government's military strategy, especially the failure of the expedition against Cartagena. Towards the end of 1741 it focused on Britain's failure to support Maria Theresa, the Queen of Hungary, following the outbreak of the War of the Austrian Succession. Walpole was singled out in many opposition attacks. He was particularly vulnerable because he had opposed going to war and then virtually washed his hands of it, saying to Newcastle: 'This war is yours, you have had the conduct of it, I wish you joy of it' (Yorke 1913: i, 251). Walpole was gradually losing his predominance within the ministry. Newcastle, Hardwicke and Pelham, hitherto reliable supporters, were far more committed to the war than the prime minister.

Arguably, however, the war only provided the context for Walpole's fall. In the 1741 elections the ministry more-or-less held its own in the larger, more open constituencies, which were most susceptible to the vagaries of public opinion. It was in Cornwall and Scotland that the opposition made its major

gains. In Cornwall the influence of Frederick, Prince of Wales, as Duke of Cornwall, was thrown against the ministry, a consequence of the breach between the Prince and his father in 1737. In Scotland the defection of the Duke of Argyle meant that the Earl of Ilay, Walpole's Scottish manager and Argyle's brother, was unable to secure the election of the solid bloc of Scottish MPs whose allegiance the ministry had hitherto enjoyed. It is difficult to estimate the support enjoyed by the parties when parliament reassembled in December 1741, but Newcastle's calculation that the ministry had a majority of fourteen is probably as accurate as any. But fourteen was not enough. As in 1733, Walpole soon found that supporters were staying away from the House, and through December and January the ministry suffered a series of defeats. Walpole could no longer manage the Commons for the King. His resignation became inevitable, allowing the reconstruction of the ministry around his 'Old Corps' Whig followers with the admixture of some of the 'patriot' opposition.

Walpole resigned on 6 February 1742 and was created Earl of Orford. His retirement, however, was not complete. He believed his political legacy was worth preserving, and wrote to the Duke of Devonshire that 'the Whig party must be kept together' (Coxe 1797:iii, 592). For the next four years he worked behind the scenes to ensure the predominance of the Old Corps and his chosen successor, Henry Pelham. It is far from clear how much influence Walpole did exercise. But, by the time of his death in March 1745, Pelham had become First Lord of the Treasury and the Old Corps' dominance of the government was rapidly being consolidated. A few months later the event Walpole had always feared, a Jacobite rebellion, broke out in Scotland. For a few months, as Bonnie Prince Charlie's army marched south to Derby, the position of the regime appeared precarious. But, long before the Jacobites' final defeat at Culloden, the press and public had rallied to it, revealing an impressive level of support in England at least (Harris 1993: ch. 6). Walpole's legacy was secure.

How, then, should Walpole be assessed? As a man we know surprisingly little about him. The image he cultivated of a bluff country gentleman was, to some extent, a façade. He certainly came from a Norfolk gentry family, but it was a well-established one which had sent a representative to parliament as long ago as the reign of Edward VI. Walpole himself had aristocratic pretensions and tastes. He assembled one of the finest picture collections in England, the core of which was later sold to Catherine the Great. Moreover, he fully understood the relationship between image and power. Houghton House, on which work was begun in 1721, was constructed in the newly fashionable Palladian style, and was intended to eclipse the leading aristocratic houses of East Anglia and beyond.

As a politician Walpole was neither an idealist nor a great reformer. He left no legislative monuments in the manner of the great nineteenth-century prime ministers. He was rather a practical man of business and a manager. There is no doubt that circumstances, and a large share of luck, helped to raise him to the position of prime minister and then to keep him there. But it is important not to diminish his significance too much. He excelled as a politician, and

contemporaries, whether they liked him or hated him, had no doubts about his stature. Not only did he dominate the political system, but also the image of the 'Great Man' pervaded the culture of the period. To Swift he was 'the Poet's Foe'; he was Palinurus in Pope's *Dunciad,* Macheath in Gay's *Beggar's Opera,* and Quidam in Fielding's *Historical Register* (Downie 1984). Walpole may not have been Britain's first prime minister, but no prime minister since has imposed his, or even her, imprint on his period of office to such an extent.

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Stephen Taylor

Spencer Compton, First Earl of Wilmington

Born c. 1674, sixth but second surviving son of James Compton, third Earl of Northampton, and Mary, daughter of Baptist Noel, third Viscount Campden. Educated at St Paul's, Middle Temple and Trinity College, Oxford. Unmarried. MP for Eye 1698–1710, East Grinstead 1713–15, Sussex 1715–28. Chairman of the Committees of Privileges and Elections 1705–10; Paymaster of Queen's Pensions 1707–13; Treasurer to Prince George of Denmark 1707–8; Speaker of House of Commons 1715–27; Treasurer to Prince of Wales 1715–27; Paymaster-General 1722–30; Lord Privy Seal 1730; Lord President of the Council 1730–42; First Lord of the Treasury February 1742 until his death 2 July 1743.

Wilmington, Walpole's successor as prime minister, has been regarded as George II's favourite nonentity. Though there is some truth in this, he was a more complex and significant figure than has been realized.

Coming from a Royalist Tory family, Compton was a Whig when he was returned for Eye in Suffolk on the interest of Lord Cornwallis. A 'Lord Treasurer Whig' under Queen Anne, he was one of Godolphin's managers in parliament. For five years he was chairman of the Elections Committee, one of the two key committees in the House with Ways and Means, and one used by the government

to increase their majority by unseating political opponents. He was rewarded with the lucrative office of Paymaster of the Queen's Pensions, despite showing some independence in voting and his criticisms of Godolphin's allies, the Whig Junto. As a manager of the trial of Dr Sacheverell, the High Tory cleric, he showed uncharacteristic passion, trembling and foaming at the mouth as he denounced Sacheverell as a criminal. In the Tory backlash of the 1710 election, the managers were liable to incur insults and personal injury from enraged Tory mobs and Compton prudently stood down. Returned for East Grinstead in 1713 on the interest of the Duke of Dorset, his political links with the Sackvilles remained lifelong.

Compton, who had been a friend of Walpole in the Queen's reign, had a full share in the Whig monopoly of office which followed the Hanoverian succession. His becoming Treasurer to the Prince of Wales (the future George II) enabled him to gain the prince's ear and to form a close relationship with him. He was appointed Speaker in the 1715 and 1722 parliaments, at a salary of £1,000 a year, an office still part of the ministerial team. An experienced politician, though not a first-rate one, he was learned in parliamentary procedure and was a stickler for precedent, particularly the rulings of previous speakers. His successor, Arthur Onslow, described him as 'very able in the chair, but had not the powers of speech out of it' (Historical Manuscripts Commission: 516). During the Whig split of 1717–20, he went into opposition as head of the Prince's household, co-operating closely with Walpole. After the reconciliation between the King and the Prince, which was achieved by giving places to the Prince's followers, he obtained the immensely profitable office of Paymaster-General of the Forces, out of which he was reported to have made £100,000.

On George I's death in 1727, George II's first intention was to replace Walpole by Compton, directing all public business to him. The reasons why Compton did not become prime minister then are explained by contemporaries hostile to him. According to John Scrope, Walpole's Secretary to the Treasury, Compton was 'frighted with the greatness of the undertaking and more particularly as to what related to money matters' (Coxe 1797:i, 287). George ordered both men to prepare the King's speech for dissolving parliament, but chose Walpole's. On the matter of settling the Queen's revenue, Compton undertook to secure £60,000 a year for her, whereas Walpole offered £100,000, which sealed the alliance between Queen Caroline and Walpole. It was not thought advisable to continue Compton as Speaker and he went to the Lords as Baron Wilmington, being made an earl in 1730. He then gave up his post as Paymaster to the Army for that of Lord Privy Seal. Though he had been responsible for cutting the profits of that office from £5,000 to £4,000 a year, he had the salary restored to its original level for himself. At the end of 1730 he became President of the Council, an important ministerial post.

The first Lord Egmont left a good description of Wilmington:

> His stature is something more than the middle sort and he is not corpulent though full fleshed. He is proud though affable to those who visit him, and is rare of his speech, but then positive. He maintains no debates in the House of Peers, but never swerved from voting as the Ministry would have him being very servile to his Majesty's inclinations. He has no great genius, but cannot want experience.... He is extremely covetous and formal in business, was never married, but has children unlawfully begotten, which he stifles the knowledge of as much as in him lies. He has no ambition, and has told me the true interest of England was to have no chief minister, but that every great office should be immediately dependent on the King and answer for itself.
>
> (*Egmont Diary* 1923:iii, 250)

Wilmington disliked Walpole's practice of employing political tools rather than men of substance, and did what he could to prevent the dismissal of those who had opposed Walpole's excise scheme in 1733. Nor should he be underestimated for in 1740 Lord Egmont noted there were three parties at court: Walpole's and his friends; the Duke of Newcastle's and Lord Chancellor Hardwicke's; and Wilmington's with the Duke of Dorset and his friends.

In February 1742, after the fall of Walpole, Wilmington joined the Duke of Argyll against Newcastle, Hardwicke, William Pulteney and Lord Carteret in pressing for a broadly based coalition, to include some Tories and to implement the 'Country' measures which had been demanded by opposition Whigs and Tories alike. Pulteney, the obvious choice as Walpole's successor, had disqualified himself by repeatedly declaring that he did not seek office. Wilmington was asked to become First Lord of the Treasury on the understanding that he would have his burden lightened by working with Samuel Sandys, Pulteney's second-in-command, as Chancellor of the Exchequer. At a meeting on 8 February 1742 Wilmington was asked 'upon what foundation he apprehended he was capable of supporting the place of the head of the treasury, what party of Commoners he could influence?' (Ryder 1742:9 February 1741/2). He asked for two or three days to think it over then accepted. When Lord Carteret, a brilliant speaker in the Lords and very able though something of a maverick, was appointed Secretary of State and the effective head of the government without consulting him, Wilmington threatened to resign, going to the King to tell him so. With tears in his eyes George II reproached him 'what, my Lord, will you desert me too?', to which Wilmington replied, 'he found his Majesty so resolved to narrow his bottom [i.e. against a multi-party administration] and withstand the voice of his people, that he saw his very Crown in danger' (*Egmont Diary* 1923:iii, 254). But he agreed to stay and to try and reconcile the parties within the government. He died suddenly, while the King was in Hanover, leaving his large fortune to his nephew the fifth Earl of Northampton and nothing to the Sackvilles, who had courted the legacy. The much quoted poem by Sir Charles Hanbury Williams

See you old dull important lord
Who at the long'd for money board
Sits first, but does not lead

should be his sole epitaph. His views on the role of the prime minister were no longer politically realistic, but if he lacked the wit of Hanbury Williams, Lord Hervey or Horace Walpole, his chief critics, he had, unlike them, political scruples.

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Eveline Cruickshanks

Henry Pelham

Born c. January 1695, second son of Thomas Pelham MP (created Baron Pelham of Laughton 1706) by his second wife Lady Grace Holles, daughter of Gilbert, third Earl of Clare. Educated at Westminster, Hart Hall, Oxford, and Padua University. Married 1726 Lady Katherine Manners, daughter of John, second Duke of Rutland. MP for Seaford 1717–22, Sussex 1722–54. Treasurer of the Chamber 1720–2; Lord of the Treasury 1721–4; Secretary at War 1724–30; Paymaster-General of the Forces 1730–43; First Lord of the Treasury 1743–54; Chancellor of the Exchequer 1743–54. Died 6 March 1754.

Henry Pelham is generally considered one of the most successful of eighteenth-century premiers, and his administration one of the most stable. Such generalization seems crude in view of Pelham's prolonged struggle to achieve a prime ministerial position commensurate with that enjoyed by Walpole, and his subsequent difficulties in keeping his ministry together. The stability of Pelham's administration was more apparent than real; even the early 1750s, so often seen as the plenitude of his ministry, were aggravated by political intrigue and crisis. A flair for conciliation was the key to Pelham's political durability, though to contemporaries his subtlety and constant manoeuvring often seemed perfidious or cowardly. Detractors, such as Horace Walpole, wondered whether 'he ought

to have conferred greater benefits on his country', but throughout his premiership Pelham operated skilfully within complex limitations of circumstance (Hodgart 1963:46). If his resulting achievements seem modest, it was because he was a successful pragmatist.

Pelham showed no initial promise for high office. His abilities emerged gradually through years of experience and practice, though the early opportunity he was given to enter the world of high politics and government was of undoubted advantage. Born into one of Sussex's wealthiest gentry families, his political initiation was entirely due to his elder brother Thomas, whose recently inherited fortune and zealous championship of the new Hanoverian establishment soon after coming of age earned his promotion in 1715 to the dukedom of Newcastle. At a by-election in February 1717 Newcastle brought Henry into parliament for Seaford, a Sussex coastal town where the family exercised considerable electoral sway. Henry Pelham's earliest experiences in politics were dominated by the 'schism' within the Whig party occasioned by the resignations in 1717 of Lord Townshend and Robert Walpole from the Sunderland-Stanhope ministry. He naturally followed his elder brother's lead in supporting the government, but during the process of reconciliation in 1720 a friendship emerged between himself and Walpole, and through Townshend's influence Pelham was given the royal household post of Treasurer of the Chamber. Walpole's rapport with Pelham enabled him to capitalize on Newcastle's connection with Sunderland and helped to facilitate his readmission to the ministry in June 1720. When Walpole replaced Sunderland at the head of the Treasury in April the following year amid the political backlash from the South Sea Bubble, he swiftly acknowledged Pelham's services by appointing him to the Treasury board. Pelham was still only 25, yet under Walpole's eye at the Treasury he soon showed a capacity for administrative and financial business, while in the Commons he figured as one of Walpole's devoted acolytes.

At the general election of 1722 Pelham was chosen unanimously as a knight of the shire for Sussex. It was quite exceptional for an ambitious politician to put himself at the mercy of a large county electorate rather than remain in the safer haven of a small manageable borough. But Sussex was his elder brother's chief electoral stronghold, and the Duke naturally wished Pelham to have the most prestigious seat he could offer. In 1724 Walpole appointed Pelham Secretary at War with responsibility for the day-to-day administration of the army, while his advancement in 1730 to the paymastership of the forces placed him in overall control of the army's finances. Unlike several previous paymasters, however, he never availed himself of the opportunity to use public funds for his own purposes; indeed, throughout his career he remained free of any taint of financial impropriety. Access to ducal wealth placed him above the need for corrupt gain. An income of £5,000 a year settled on him by his father had been handsomely supplemented in 1726 on his marriage to a daughter of the Duke of Rutland with a dowry fortune of £30,000.

During the 1730s Pelham emerged as a popular front-bench man to whom the arts of government were second nature. The usually caustic Lord Hervey saw him at this time as 'a gentlemanlike sort of man, of very good character, of moderate parts, in the secret of every transaction, which, added to long practice, made him at last, though not a bright speaker, often a useful one; and by the means of a general affability he had fewer enemies than commonly fall to the share of one in so high a rank' (Hervey 1931:120).

He served Walpole devotedly. The two men shared a common viewpoint on all political issues of the day, and Pelham regarded Sir Robert as 'my oracle' (Wilkes 1964:230). Although relations between Newcastle and Walpole soured towards the end of the decade, Pelham did not allow this state of affairs to affect his own connection with his mentor. Pelham's exact role during the final days of Walpole's administration in January 1742 is not clear. He appears to have stayed loyal until the very end, although members of Walpole's family always maintained that the King had received 'private intimations' from the Pelhams that Walpole had 'lost' the Commons and could no longer continue in office. George II's coolness towards the Pelhams in the years that followed certainly indicates that he considered them personally responsible for Walpole's downfall.

It was within no politician's power in 1742 to resuscitate the semblance of political 'stability' which had characterized Walpole's long administration. The endless round of negotiation and manoeuvring over the next four years in seach of a workable ministry has been aptly described by one historian as a 'stately minuet of Whig cliques in and out of office' (Hill 1985:56). In the aftermath of Walpole's resignation from office in February 1742, Pelham's conciliatory gifts played an important part in the reconstruction of the ministry. The Court and Treasury party, which had formed the backbone of Walpole's parliamentary support (thenceforth known as the 'Old Corps') remained in office, but in their determination to keep the ministry on a strictly Whig footing Old Corps leaders would brook no deal with Whig opponents disposed towards the Tories. In consequence, only William Pulteney and his followers (who had turned on their former Tory allies with opportunistic spite) entered the new ministry. Pelham assumed undisputed leadership of the Commons when in July 1742 Pulteney, his closest rival for this position, went to the Lords with the earldom of Bath. The ministry was still without a clear leader, however. Wilmington, who had succeeded Walpole as First Lord of the Treasury, was little more than an ailing figurehead. Although parliament and the cabinet were dominated by the Old Corps, it was Lord Carteret, Pulteney's chief associate and now secretary of state for the north, who monopolized the King's confidence. On Wilmington's death in July 1743, Pelham became First Lord of the Treasury, almost certainly through Walpole's continuing influence with the King behind the scenes. Although the office was coveted by Lord Bath, there was no question that Pelham was a better choice as Old Corps leader in the more volatile Commons. Moreover, the appointment set him firmly on the path towards achieving the prime ministerial role which Walpole had forged for himself. By December

Pelham had entrenched his position at the Treasury by securing the removal of Bath's nominees from the board, taking advantage of the Pulteneyites' weakening credibility. And, following Walpole's example, he took the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer in tandem with that of First Lord.

Though Pelham was now in complete control of the Treasury, and the acknowledged leader of the Old Corps in the Commons, no single politician as yet dominated the ministry. Quarrels broke out in the cabinet over practically every issue between the Old Corps and the former opposition grandees now in office and known as the 'New Whigs'. The chief cause of friction was Lord Carteret's pursuit of a costly war policy designed to protect the King's Hanoverian dominions from invasion. Elaborate continental alliances were underwritten by subsidies and the Hanoverian army taken into British pay. Worst of all, Carteret conducted his diplomacy in close liaison with the King but in isolation from the government, regarding Pelham as little more than 'a chief clerk' (Wilkes 1964: 49). In parliament the Old Corps spokesmen encountered increasing difficulty in justifying such policies to country gentlemen inflamed by the anti-Hanoverian rhetoric of William Pitt and his Grenvillite associates (sometimes referred to as the 'Cobhamites' after their aristocratic leader Lord Cobham). By the summer of 1744, Pelham and his supporters within the ministry were confident that Carteret's policies were so unpopular that he could be driven from office, and in November, under carefully orchestrated pressure, the King was given little alternative but to dismiss the secretary. In the consequent reshuffle Pelham's plan was to widen the base of his support to form a 'broad-bottom administration', the intention being to accommodate as many shades of parliamentary opinion as practicable. Pelham had in fact begun negotiating with opposition chiefs several months before Carteret (now Earl Granville) was ousted. While keeping control of the principal cabinet offices, he disposed many of the lesser posts from which many Pulteneyites had been removed among leading opponents, who thenceforth become known as the 'New Allies'. The new ministry included such former opposition grandees as Lord Chesterfield and the Duke of Bedford, and several of the most effective debaters on the opposition benches in the Commons, though the King refused to accept Pitt on account of his insulting attacks on Hanover. Pelham also appointed a number of Tories, but their commitment to the ministry was conditional upon too many of their old parliamentary demands. It was to prove the least satisfactory aspect of the 'broad-bottom' experiment.

From the start, however, the new ministerial 'system' was undermined by George II's continuing confidence in Granville. Relations between the King and his ministers began to deteriorate until Pelham resolved to bring the issue to a head. He was unable to risk a ministerial crisis, however, until the Jacobite invasion of September 1745 had been safely contained. By January 1746, he had won over his most angry opponents, those of Lord Cobham's connection excluded from office in 1744, by agreeing to isolate Granville and to reduce Britain's expensive continental commitments in favour of a naval war. This time

Pelham could not afford to omit the King's *bête noire*, William Pitt, whose denunciations of war policy had made the ministry's position in the Commons decidedly uncomfortable. Having obtained promises of solidarity from his ministerial colleagues, Pelham saw the King on 6 February to insist on Pitt's appointment as Secretary at War. George refused, and on the 10th Pelham resigned, followed over the next day or two by most of his colleagues, leaving the King to entrust Granville and Lord Bath with the formation of a new ministry. It was soon clear, however, that they had only minimal support in the Commons, while the City was set against advancing money to a ministry led by Granville, The King had little choice but to reappoint Pelham.

The events of February 1746 enabled Pelham to finish his self-appointed task of forming an administration on 'broad-bottom' principles. It remained his abiding concern to avoid the type of 'long opposition' which for many years had confronted and eventually toppled Walpole (Sedgwick 1970:ii, 330). Wherever possible he sought to absorb opposition talent into the ministry, which was why Pitt's inclusion by 1746 had become so imperative. But Pelham was not to achieve the broadly based administration which he had envisaged, perhaps naively, in 1744. Though Pelham had personally desired it, the inclusion of Tories in the ministry had been far from popular among his Whig colleagues. To make matters worse, the recent rebellion had revived suspicions about the association of Toryism with Jacobitism, and if anything helped to stress the abiding Whig-Tory polarity in politics. Instead, Pelham's ministry-building, drawing on widely diverse Whig groups and factions, saw English Whiggery become ever more firmly entrenched as the governing ethos. With the exception of a few courtiers, Granville's remaining friends in office were all dismissed and their places taken by former Cobhamite opponents. The King this time gave in to Pelham's wish to include Pitt, and in May he was appointed Paymaster-General.

The collective desertion of the monarch instigated by the Old Corps in 1746 was an exceptional display of what ministerial unity might achieve. That such unity was achieved at this particular juncture, however, testified to Pelham's stature within the administration, even though Granville's 'secret influence' with George II had impeded Pelham's emergence after 1744 as 'prime minister'. Contemporaries were well aware that important constitutional implications lurked behind the Pelhamite initiative of 1746. It had been demonstrated to the King that if his appointed ministers were to govern in the nation's interest they needed his goodwill, and that he could not expect to operate through politicians who lacked support in parliament. Although foreign policy was the exclusive sphere of royal prerogative, parliament, and in particular the Commons, was responsible for voting the necessary funds. Pelham and his colleagues had not aimed to circumscribe the King's power. As one historian has commented, 'as in 1742, so in 1746; the Commons might directly or indirectly impose a veto on particular ministers, but they did not dictate whom the King should employ. If George chose to limit his options, that was his privilege' (Owen 1973:124). It cannot be denied that in forcing themselves upon the King in this

way, the Old Corps and their New Allies had acted from self-interested motives. Above all, it showed how determined Pelham had become to establish the same pattern of authority in his relations with the King as Walpole had, and which he regarded as the foundation for proper governance.

There was no guarantee in 1746 that the alliance between the Old Corps and the New Allies would survive. In fact, it proved the beginning of a new period of political stability and Whig consensus which lasted until Pelham's death in 1754. But the process of keeping the political situation in check required his constant attention and was often fraught with difficulty. George II's acceptance of Pelham was at first sullen, but in time he grew to appreciate Pelham's strengths, and in the key area of financial management recognized that his capabilities surpassed those of Walpole. 'With regard to money matters', the King told Newcastle in 1752, 'your brother does that, understands that, much better' (Sedgwick 1970:ii, 331). Pelham's chief political feat, undoubtedly, was in holding together a divergent and seemingly mismatched body of politicians. As such, he went a long way towards reuniting the Whigs as the natural governing party, although in practice this involved many policy disputes and much intra-cabinet quarrelling. But if he had learnt anything from Walpole's bitter experience, it was that political differences should not be prosecuted in a manner that endangered the King's service. In all his ministerial dealings he showed tolerance and conciliation, though not infrequently his actions were derided as timorous. By nature he was a man of restraint, though the pressures of power subjected him to bouts of irascibility which in the end undermined his health.

Pelham was an effective parliamentary manager. His main focus of attention was the Commons which he regarded as 'a great unwieldy body which requires great art and some cordials to keep it together', and which, like Walpole, he chose to supervise personally rather than take a peerage and operate from the Lords through a deputy (Sedgwick 1970:ii, 331). He was an effective parliamentary performer, and his plain-speaking 'good sense' appealed to the country squires on the backbenches. Critics felt that his candour gave rise to too much 'doubling plausibility', but even Horace Walpole admitted that, once established in place, 'his eloquence cleared up, and [he] shone with much greater force' (Hodgart 1963:46). He certainly did much to achieve his objective of curbing opposition in the Commons. His chief lieutenant there was Henry Fox, an Old Corps man, while other ministerial spokesmen included several he had disengaged from opposition such as George Grenville, George Lyttleton, William Pitt and Henry Legge. With almost all the leading officers of state in the Lords, Pelham's administration epitomized eighteenth-century aristocratic government. In practical terms it also ensured that his governmental colleagues were for the most part shielded from opposition attack, while he himself took overall responsibility for policy in the Commons where the real focus of criticism was concentrated. In 1747, Pelham enhanced his mastery over the Commons when he caught would-be opponents off-guard by calling a general election a year before the present parliament was due to expire. Government supporters

regarded it as 'a master-stroke of politics' (Wilkes 1964:69). The result was a decisive victory which strengthened his hand within the cabinet. To one acquaintance he wrote, 'Our majority is…much greater, which I can impute to nothing…but a zeal for his [the King's] person and Government—a thorough detestation of Jacobitism, and confidence in his administration' (Wilkes 1964:74). Pelham was never faced, as Walpole had been, with the problem of a numerically threatening opposition. With the end of the war in 1748 much of the ground for attack disappeared, although the real thunderousness of opposition onslaughts led by Pitt in the mid-1740s had eased after he and his Cobhamite brethren were brought in to the administration. But the noisy criticism which often came from the depleted ranks of opponents was still enough to be disconcerting. There was the ever-present possibility that the government's reserves of 'independent' Whig support might succumb to opposition argument. A serious threat was posed by the formation during 1747–8 of the 'Leicester House' party, a combination of discontented Whigs and Tories centred upon the Prince of Wales's court. Its attraction to ambitious MPs lay in the prospects of political advancement when the Prince became King. The potential for such an opposition to grow was disturbing. In 1750 Pelham despaired that the Prince 'has as much to give in present as we have, and more in reversion. This makes my task a hard one, and if it were not for that I should sleep quiet'. What was probably less apparent to Pelham, however, was the extent to which the development of the 'reversionary interest' was hidebound by basic Whig-Tory disagreements over points of policy. Upon the Prince's sudden death in March 1751, however, his party rapidly disintegrated, thereby removing all semblance of organized opposition. As the next session got under way in November, Pelham's Secretary at War, Henry Fox, could write: 'There never was such a session as this is likely to be…. A bird might build her nest in the Speaker's chair, or in his peruke. There won't be a debate that can disturb her' (Connors 1993:122).

After the 1747 election there was never any question that Pelham was 'premier', though he did not affect the grand manner of a 'sole minister' or display the arrogance of power which had made Walpole so unpopular. The main business of government was shared, with a remarkable degree of informality and closeness, between a triumvirate of Pelham, his brother Newcastle and Lord Chancellor Hardwicke. Alone they constituted the 'effective cabinet', and George II was apt to regard the larger, more formal body of ministers as being merely 'for show' (Sedgwick 1970:ii, 331). The predominance of this arrangement derived from Pelham's brotherly tie with Newcastle and the Duke's long-standing friendship with Lord Hardwicke. Its most enduring ingredient was the personality of the Duke of Newcastle. The Duke's constant jealousy and self-obsession, often bordering on paranoia, all too often embittered his working relationships with ministerial colleagues, and not least with his brother. Because of his superior rank Newcastle always thought of himself as sharing power with Pelham. As Pelham consolidated his position at the helm of government, so the Duke grew more

anxious that his brother was seeking to monopolize ministerial influence in the closet at his expense. 'The truth is,' Newcastle testily complained to Hardwick in September 1751, '…everything passes through my brother's hands, and I am with regard to the King as much a stranger as if I was not in the ministry' (Sedgwick 1970:ii, 331). Personal friction regularly complicated the flow of ministerial business. But no one understood the underlying strength of this brotherly relationship better than Hardwicke, and it was invariably through his soothing influence on Newcastle that differences were settled.

Pelham was troubled almost constantly by disputes and wrangling among his ministerial colleagues. By far the most serious situation was the long-running battle which developed between Newcastle and his fellow Secretary of State, the Duke of Bedford. Appointed in 1748, Bedford soon proved himself a sturdy opponent of Newcastle's costly foreign policy and was used by Pelham as a counterweight to his brother. By March 1750, however, Newcastle's growing insistence on Bedford's dismissal placed Pelham in an awkward dilemma. Reluctant to make an enemy of Bedford and his substantial following in the Commons, it became plain that Newcastle could not be assuaged for much longer and that his impatience was leading towards a full-scale ministerial rupture. The recently formed alliance between Bedford and the Duke of Cumberland, the King's militaristically minded second son, was an additional complication since Pelham had been at pains to conciliate Cumberland as a useful royal ally and because of his army connection in the Commons led by Henry Fox. But by early 1751 Bedford's open opposition to ministerial policy determined Pelham to force his removal. The death of Prince Frederick in March, and the ensuing Regency Act, enabled Pelham to minimize Cumberland's political influence by restraining his powers in the event of a regency. The after-effects of Bedford's enforced resignation in June were thereby neatly contained. Newcastle secured the appointment of the amenable Lord Holdernesse as his co-secretary of state, while the King, who had been irritated by the treatment of his favourite son in the Regency Bill, was pleased to accept the Pelhams' recommendation that Lord Granville be reinstated to the ministry as Lord President of the Council. In the Commons the loss of Bedford's faction was more than compensated by the return of ex-Leicester House supporters to the Pelhamite fold. Moreover, Bedford's association with Cumberland prevented him from forming an opposition alliance with the Tories, who regarded the Duke as a power-hungry menace. There is no doubt, however, that the ministerial struggles of 1750–1 put Pelham under considerable strain since in April 1751 he endeavoured to obtain George II's permission to retire with a lucrative sinecure. But the King, who had learned to live amicably with Pelham, would not hear of it.

Given his long apprenticeship under Walpole, it was hardly surprising that Pelham's own policies and measures bore the imprint of Walpolian pragmatism, the mainspring of which was the overriding desire to uphold domestic order and stability. Pelham was a Treasury man to the core, and it was natural that fiscal considerations dominated his priorities. Once he had achieved ascendancy over

the administration, Pelham's principal concern was to end Britain's involvement in the Austrian war of succession. Like Walpole, he was painfully sensitive about the corrosive effects on backbench opinion of the expense of maintaining arms. 'We Englishmen are very stout upon our own Dunghill,' he once observed, 'but when this nation is engaged in a war…the country must pay for it, and then who is to bear the blame' (Sayer MSS 1738). In preference to increased taxation, the war had been financed largely through heavy borrowing and in consequence the national debt had soared by more than £20 million. One item of expenditure, the payment of treaty subsidies to continental allies, was a particular source of parliamentary annoyance. Pelham retained the confidence of the money market and established an invaluable working relationship with the London MP Sir John Barnard, the most influential of City financiers and usually a vehement critic of the government. The cost of loans, nevertheless, rose sharply. There were, of course, major differences among the ministers as to how the war could be brought to a satisfactory close. For a while Newcastle was able to circumvent Pelham's wish for immediate peace in what proved to be a dismal final attempt during 1747–8 to vanquish the French in Flanders and at sea. But it was largely due to Pelham's constant goading and intervention in Newcastle's ponderous diplomacy that a further campaigning season was avoided. Britain's gains from the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in October 1748 were but modest, and there was much opposition barracking on this score in parliament, but it enabled Pelham to turn to the much-needed task of financial retrenchment. In the post-war years, Newcastle continued to direct a foreign policy over which Pelham was forced to exercise a restraining hand. The keystone of the Duke's strategy was the maintenance of the 'old system' of alliances with the Austrians and the Dutch in opposition to France. But Newcastle's interventionist style and readiness to secure new alliances through the payment of subsidies was a major source of anguish to Pelham, by now deeply committed to the restoration of financial equilibrium at home. Though there was a soundness in Newcastle's ambitious plan to purchase princely support for the election of the Archduke Joseph as 'King of the Romans', thereby preventing any future outbreak of war over the imperial succession and securing Anglo-Austrian relations, Pelham's support for it was at best half-hearted. Newcastle was continually irritated by Pelham's campaign to reduce expenditure, always insisting that the upkeep of alliances must come first. Pelham went along with Newcastle's scheme not least because of the King's concern for the defence of Hanover. He proved correct in believing that the plan might result in Britain's being drawn into a game, and by 1752 it had to be abandoned as the electoral princes increased their monetary demands and broke promises. There can be little doubt that Pelham's resistance to the provision of subsidies on the scale required helped relegate 'old system' diplomacy and promote the establishment of ties with Europe's newest and most vigorous power, Prussia.

Historians correctly identify Pelham's financial reforms as his major achievement. Although he carried on much of Walpole's work in the management of government debt, his approach to these problems was far more comprehensive.

Indeed, Pelham's work in these pastures has been recognized as marking the zenith of the 'financial revolution'. In August 1748, with peace in sight, he told Newcastle that having had 'very little comfort in the great scene of business I have long been engaged in', his one 'selfish ambition' was to reduce the national debt which in 1748 stood at £76 million (Connors 1993:70). Over the next two years he succeeded in scaling down government expenditure from £12 million to £7 million. This was greatly facilitated by cutting the army back from 50,000 to its peacetime level of 18,850 men, and the navy from 51,550 to 8,000. His wholesale reduction in the size and cost of the government's fiscal bureaucracy was probably the most extensive undertaken by an eighteenth-century prime minister (Brewer 1989:87, 261, n. 77). Backbenchers received encouraging signs of the direction of his peacetime policy in 1749 when he lowered the burden of direct taxation on the landed classes by reducing the land tax from four shillings in the pound to three, reducing it again to two shillings in 1752, though it still proved necessary to make compensatory increases in indirect taxes. Pelham left the haphazard structure of revenue collection as he found it. Although an administrative shake-up might well have enabled him to introduce further economies, the furore in 1733 over Walpole's excise scheme had made it compellingly obvious that any major reform entailing an increase of government officialdom ran high political risks both within parliament and in the public domain at large.

By 1748 as much as 44 per cent of government expenditure was absorbed in the payment of interest on the greatly increased national debt. It was here, in the specialist realms of Treasury finance, that Pelham made his greatest mark. At the end of 1749, taking advantage of the buoyancy of government stock, he obtained parliamentary approval for his innovative 'conversion scheme' to reduce the interest rate on the debt from 4 per cent to 3.5 per cent by 1750, and down to 3 per cent by 1757. Such an across-the-board cut in the interest rate was an unparalleled stroke of fiscal engineering. In the early stages of its implementation the scheme was a considerable gamble and highly unpopular with the monied companies, especially the Bank of England, but Pelham quickly won their backing with the assistance of such enlightened City figures as Sir John Barnard and the Jewish financier Sampson Gideon. As a result most of the holders of 4 per cent stock were persuaded to accept stock at the lower rate, enabling Pelham to cut the cost of servicing the national debt by 12 per cent in 1750. He subsequently consolidated most of the old government stocks, thus further simplifying the machinery of public borrowing.

The wisdom of Pelham's financial strategy has not gone uncriticized, however. His pursuit of a rigorous policy of retrenchment at a time of international instability has been questioned on the grounds that it left Britain militarily ill-prepared for war in 1756 (Holmes and Szechi 1993:271). Although this may well highlight a deficiency of foresight on Pelham's part in the realm of foreign affairs, he was forced to act within immediate political constraints. To have tried to extract high military expenditure from parliament while the nation enjoyed a much-needed peace would have seriously undermined backbench goodwill.

His policies, rather like Walpole's, stemmed from his responsibility for the Treasury and an ingrained sense of caution where the Commons was concerned.

Pelham's administration is sometimes regarded as consciously adopting a reformist stance, but there is little to suggest this was so. Although a few distinctive pieces of ministerial legislation reached the statute book, namely the acts to reform the calendar (1751), limit the production and sale of spirits (1751) and prevent clandestine marriages (1753), their reforming scope was limited. In the usual fashion of eighteenth-century legislation, these measures addressed specific kinds of problem in an unenterprising way. Pelham had good cause to regret Hardwicke's Marriage Bill on account of the unremitting opposition it provoked from Henry Fox, his right-hand man in the Commons, who himself had eloped with a duke's daughter. An Act of 1753 permitting Jews to become naturalized by private Act of Parliament was intended by Pelham as a gesture of gratitude to the Jewish financial community for their assistance in his debt reconstruction scheme, but popular hostility forced its repeal later the same year. While some matters of wider social importance, such as the punishment of crime and the welfare of the poor, did receive much parliamentary attention under Pelham, the initiative came from backbench MPs rather than the administration. The most draconian of Pelhamite laws sought to implement a harsh policy of 'Scotch Reformation' following the Pretender's defeat at Culloden. Passed between 1746 and 1748, these measures were a sweeping attempt to break the traditional structures of highland society, but perhaps more than anything else they represent the severity with which the Whig establishment could respond to threats to order and stability.

Pelham died in office at the age of 59 after a short illness. In the ensuing ministerial struggle for advantage, the extent to which he had contained the tensions of disagreement was made bitterly obvious. Setting aside his weaknesses and foibles, friends and enemies alike could agree without reservation that he had discharged his public duties with exemplary care and honesty. 'He lived without abusing his power', wrote Horace Walpole, 'and died poor' (Hodgart 1963:46).

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Andrew Hanham

Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle

Born 21 July 1693, eldest son of Thomas, first Lord Pelham, and his second wife, Lady Grace, sister of John Holles, Duke of Newcastle. Educated at Westminster and Clare College, Cambridge. Added name of Holles in July 1711 on succeeding (as adopted heir) to the bulk of the estates of his uncle John. Succeeded father as Lord Pelham, 23 February 1712. Created Duke of Newcastle upon Tyne, 11 August 1715. Married 1717 Lady Henrietta, eldest daughter of Francis, second Earl of Godolphin. Privy Councillor 1717; Knight of the Garter 1718. Lord Chamberlain of the Household 1717–24; Secretary of State for the Southern Department 1724–48; Secretary of State for the Northern Department 1748–54; First Lord of the Treasury 1754–6 and 1757–62; Lord Privy Seal 1765–6. Died 17 November 1768.

Newcastle was the most prominent of the Old Corps Whigs, those Whigs who stayed in office throughout the reigns of George I and George II and who found the accession in 1760 of George III with his non-party views so difficult to deal with. The Old Corps came to see themselves as the natural party of government. On 5 November 1760 the fourth Duke of Devonshire, a member of the inner cabinet, told George's favourite, the Earl of Bute, that

> the Duke of Newcastle had united with him the principal nobility, the moneyed men and the interest which had brought about the [Glorious] Revolution, had set this [Hanoverian] family on the throne and supported them in it, and were not only the most considerable party but the true solid strength that might be depended on for the support of government. That therefore his Grace was undoubtedly the most necessary person for the King to cultivate.
>
> (Brown and Schweizer 1982)

George III was not to follow this advice and his destabilization of the Old Corps led directly to Newcastle's fall. That provided one clue to the minister's

earlier longevity. Although both George I and George II had on occasion disliked the hegemony of the Old Corps they were dependent on them. Neither monarch was prepared to turn to the Tory opposition, which they suspected of Jacobitism, and, among the Whigs, only the Old Corps seemed able to deliver the secure control of parliament that was necessary if the government's business was to be financed.

Newcastle played a major role in ensuring that control. Unlike Sir Robert Walpole, and Henry Pelham, his younger brother, Newcastle did not sit in the Commons and he was dependent on having the co-operation of a reliable parliamentary manager there: the failure of Henry Fox to fulfil this role in 1756 led to Newcastle's fall that year. However, as a minister willing to give much time and attention, and much of his own money to patronage, Newcastle played a crucial role in maintaining Old Corps cohesion, and thus strength, in the difficult years after the fall of Walpole in 1742.

During the reign of George I Newcastle was very much a junior minister, but he prominently displayed his loyalty. When Townshend and Walpole went over to opposition in 1717, Newcastle stayed with the ministry and attached himself to Charles, third Earl of Sunderland, a leading minister who was a relative by marriage.

Newcastle did not gain a position of business until 1724 when he succeeded Carteret as a secretary of state. He was, however, very much the junior secretary until the fall of his co-secretary, Charles, third Viscount Townshend in 1730. Thereafter, Newcastle became much more important in the formulation and execution of foreign policy, especially from 1744 when Carteret, who had regained office in 1742, was forced out by the Old Corps.

From 1744 until 1754 it is arguably more appropriate to write of a duumvirate than of a prime minister. Henry Pelham was the manager of the Commons and, as First Lord of the Treasury, a crucial minister, but Newcastle, as effective Foreign Minister, most influential politician in the Lords and wielder of much government and church patronage, was definitely not subordinate to his brother. Their correspondence survives and it is clear that each was frustrated by the difficulty of managing the other: Pelham thought Newcastle's diplomatic commitments too expensive and sought to limit them.

Similarly, and more famously, the Newcastle-Pitt ministry of 1757–61 was really a duumvirate. It is clear that Pitt did not wield the degree of power that is sometimes attributed to him. It has been shown that Newcastle was concerned about more than patronage and that George II still exercised considerable power, and thus that Pitt's role in the formulation of policy was not unchallenged. The crucial importance of the financing of the war ensured that Newcastle's post as First Lord of the Treasury was a key one.

Nevertheless, the Seven Years War (1756–63) accentuated a central feature of the political system, namely that successful parliamentary management required competent leadership and acceptable policies, as well as patronage, and that, especially in periods of real and apparent crisis, such policies tended to

take note of opinion 'out of doors', however manipulated, and however it was measured, and whatever the state of ministerial control of parliament. Given this situation, it was not surprising that Pitt played a central role during the Newcastle-Pitt ministry, one that does not need to be explained solely in terms of his ability or of Newcastle's indecisiveness and desire to share responsibility.

Even less was Newcastle prime minister when he was Lord Privy Seal in Rockingham's administration. The Marquess of Rockingham had been a protégé of Newcastle, but by 1765 the Duke was increasingly an elderly figure from the political past taking on a subordinate role. If Newcastle is to be seen as prime minister then the most appropriate criterion is not that of the specific office which he held. He was First Lord of the Treasury in both 1754–6 and 1757–62, but it was only in the former period that he can really be seen as prime minister. Even then he was dependent on having a colleague who could manage the Commons. Therein lay much of the instability of the period 1754–6, for it proved impossible to arrange for effective management. Henry Fox refused to accept the task in 1754 when he discovered that Newcastle intended to retain full control of all government patronage and to manage the forthcoming general election: that would have left him without the power to give substance to his management. Thus Newcastle turned to Sir Thomas Robinson, a pliable ex-diplomat with no independent political base. Robinson was not strong enough to deal with the political problems that faced the government in 1754–5 as Britain moved closer to war with France and found her allies unwilling to offer support. As a result, in November 1755, Newcastle agreed to make Fox secretary of state and Leader of the Commons.

The Newcastle ministry had done very well in the general election of 1754; yet it was to collapse in 1756. It apparently fell as a result of the popular agitation over the humiliating loss of Minorca to the French, a defeat that also led to the execution of Admiral Byng for cowardice. Such an interpretation would appear to vindicate an analysis of eighteenth-century politics that places stress on extra-parliamentary agitation.

The situation in 1756 was in fact more complex. Though Fox's inability to stand up to Pitt, of whom he was frightened in debate, was a very important factor, the likely parliamentary storm over Minorca also brought to a head the question of relations between Newcastle and Fox and thus created a crisis of parliamentary management irrespective of the activities of the opposition. Thus, the crisis of 1756 that brought down Newcastle echoed those of 1742, 1744 and 1746 in which he had played a major role: the government was divided. Under these circumstances, it was important for politicians to consider how best to create a new stable ministerial alignment, and Newcastle was unable to do this in 1756.

Fox attributed his resignation on 13 October 1756 to Newcastle's refusal to provide him with the necessary support in the Commons and to the Duke's willingness to consider replacing him with Pitt. Fox complained that he had