BRITISH POLITICS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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BRITISH POLITICS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

KEITH PERRY

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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
1 Origins and Purposes	1
<i>The Structure of Colonial Government</i>	1
<i>Whig Politics and ‘Salutary Neglect’</i>	10
<i>Parties in Flux 1754–63</i>	22
<i>The Nine Years’ War 1754–63</i>	26
2 1760–70: Principle and Pragmatism	30
3 Lord North and the Loss of the American Colonies, 1770–83	70
<i>‘The die is cast’</i>	70
<i>The Conduct of the War, 1776–82</i>	84
4 The Failure of Opposition, 1770–82	96
5 Rockingham, Shelburne and Peace-Making	109
Epilogue	118
America, the Old Regime and the Radical Challenge	118
<i>Notes</i>	128

Contents

<i>Further Reading</i>	135
<i>Appendix I: Dramatis Personae, 1754–84</i>	139
<i>Appendix II: A Brief Chronology of Events, 1754–84</i>	156
<i>Appendix III: The Chief Administrations, 1754–84: A Summary</i>	164
<i>Appendix IV: Chief Office Holders, 1754–84</i>	165
<i>Index</i>	169

To Hugh and Judith

INTRODUCTION

How could a country, proud of its reputation as the home of 'free-born Englishmen' and reared on the idea of the necessity of Empire for continued security and national greatness, lose so significant a portion of her colonies so quickly? And how could the American colonists who had helped defend the Empire and were so proud of their Britishness so quickly be driven to leave it?

The temptation is to juxtapose the liberty-loving Americans defending freedom and parliamentary democracy with the foolishness, ignorance and corruption of British politicians and the tyranny and madness of George III. Such temptation has not always been resisted in the past, and its residue is still to be found in text books. But we have long since ceased to see George III as fool, tyrant and madman, and politicians are coming to be understood as men of their time, grappling with severe problems and doing so with as much honesty, self-seeking and hard work as any other politicians in any other age, according to the ideas and presuppositions of their time and order within the limits of practical politics. They were handicapped by a failure of language and understanding. When words like sovereignty and representation mean different things to men for whom law is the language and defence of political beliefs it can lead to bitter conflicts of principle.

We have come to appreciate from the work of Pole, Maier and Gipson that America was no democracy either in 1763 or in 1776.¹ Few colonies had a truly democratic franchise before the advent of President Jackson. Property qualifications were necessary for participation in the election of legislators and religious disabilities applied in most colonies. All colonies were run by oligarchies, 'gentrified' as in Virginia; or mercantile as in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, while settlers on the frontiers of many colonies were grossly under-represented, though taxed. For much of our period only the eastern seaboard towns of America, dominated by such cities as New York, Boston and Charleston, were seriously involved in active opposition to British policy, while during the War of Independence many frontiersmen took up arms for King George against their eastern persecutors. 100 000 Loyalists left America after the defeat of Britain and many more Americans were unhappy at the turn of events. The population of Boston in 1763 was less than 20 000; that of the colonies less than two million. Thus the war in the colonies was a civil war too. Pauline Maier has shown the way in which a small group of radicals, aided by popular élitist reactions to British policy, were able to turn loyal colonists into, often nervous, supporters of independence.²

The story of American actions and reactions has been told very well elsewhere. This book is concerned only with the way British politics affected, and was influenced by, what happened in America. There are no heroes or anti-heroes in this story. No one individual can be blamed for the loss of the colonies. The degree of unanimity among the British ruling élite is the most obvious fact to emerge from a story of these events, and although some historians might wish that 'popular politics' would show considerable support for the colonists' cause, the evidence for any such sympathy is as patchy as is the evidence for any widespread dissatisfaction with the social and political order itself.

Benjamin Franklin was not the only contemporary to note that hostility to American pretensions was a failing not only of the administration of the time but of the British people.³

Politicians of any age may be foolish, venal, and even wicked but those of the eighteenth century were no worse, and in many cases, were a great deal better than those of other centuries, and it would be naive to argue that a whole political class, or a whole nation, could be characterised by a desire to tyrannise, or by foolishness. The politicians of any century are products of their time, share assumptions and act within the bounds of their own perceptions of things. Those of George III's reign held views about Empire and its crucial importance to Britain's survival as a power inevitable in men of their generation and breeding. With the possible exception of Pitt they were convinced of the virtues of a system based on the sovereignty of Parliament, a Parliament balancing the elements of monarchy, aristocracy and 'democracy' in such a way as to preserve liberty with order. True, none had first-hand knowledge of the colonies, but then the same could have been said of those later ministers who presided over the acquisition and relinquishment of the second British Empire. If all ministers were required to be intimately informed of their areas of responsibility few would ever be chosen; then as now they relied on the opinions and expertise of advisers who were generally of high quality. The ministers were conservative men of aristocratic origin whose fears of prerogative and belief in the virtues of parliamentary sovereignty made them act as they did towards American pretensions. They were not hostile to individual liberties, as reluctance to resort to arms amply proves. So it is to the way that politicians perceived the colonial system that we must look for the origins of British policies and reactions to the deeds of Americans.

Nor should we look to George III as originator of any tyranny in the colonies. George was neither mad nor bad and few monarchs can have had a deeper attachment to the constitution which it was his pride and duty to defend. Indeed the King's failing was rather to be too rigid in its defence. He was never responsible for making policy for America and rarely attempted to influence the responsible politicians to change their designs. Only three times in this

period did the King seek to influence a House of Commons vote and on one of these occasions it was at the request of the ministry itself.

But George shared the prejudices and preconceptions of his ministers in full measure. The Declaratory Act summed up his views on the relationship of the colonies to Parliament fully and in the prolonged crisis George saw himself as defender of the rights of Parliament though not in any vindictive way, as his advice on the Mutiny Bill of 1766 and his preference for modification, rather than repeal, of the Stamp Act demonstrate. The King refused the opportunity to increase his influence and power implicit in the idea that he was King of Massachusetts equally as he was King of Great Britain. Puzzled, offended and finally insulted by what he saw as colonial disloyalty and rebellion, only at the last did the King insist on a military solution.