Chapter Forty-Six

THE RULE OF THE ÉLITE

THE great change in 1714 was the advent of a king who was politically committed to one party, the Whigs. The new dynasty were Electors of Hanover, rulers of a small state in Northern Germany. Although coming almost by accident into possession of the crown of what was fast becoming the wealthiest country in Europe and a major power, the Hanoverians continued to view affairs of state largely through the eyes not of a king of Great Britain but those of an Elector of Hanover. Hanover always had their heart, something which did not alter until the first king's great-grandson ascended the throne in 1760, but he was the first Hanoverian monarch to be brought up in England.

George I was honest, dull and diffident. Fifty-four when he became king, he was devoid of either personal charm or regal bearing and lived only for his ugly German mistresses, who were made English duchesses, and for Hanover. And, like all his family, he hated his eldest son, which created a new pattern of politics focusing on rival courts, that of the king and that of the Prince of Wales. His son, George II, who succeeded him in 1727, was no improvement on his father, although he at least had a command of English. George II was stiff and formal, a man obsessed by regularity and detail but also given to sudden bouts of ill-temper and uncontrolled passion. On the field of battle he could be courageous. Both kings, however, were sharply aware of their prerogatives, and exercised them to the full. The old picture of George II as a ruler manipulated by his wife, Caroline of Ansbach, in the interests of Sir Robert Walpole does not hold water in view of a reign of thirty-three years, over only ten of which did she exercise any influence. George II remained his own man and was a shrewd judge of abilities.

Sir Robert Walpole was the greatest political figure and fixer of the era. He took over as First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer in April 1721 when he was forty-four and was only finally forced from office over twenty years later in February 1742. No other person in this position has ever held power for so long. But Walpole was a man made for an age which had grown tired of the perpetual clash of ideologies. He was a corpulent, almost gross Norfolk squire, with coarse features

Sir Robert Walpole satirised by his opponents as the English Colossus, such was his dominance of the political scene. A quote from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* emphasised the point: 'Why man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus and we petty men walk under his legs and peep about to find ourselves dishonourable graves.'

and a florid complexion. His milieu was the hunting field, which he loved, and not the drawing-room, for he lacked social polish, and he revelled in the earthy and bawdy. His outlook on the world was practical, utilitarian, and dispassionate. His boyhood friend had been the leading Whig magnate in Norfolk, Viscount Townshend, who married his sister. Walpole himself married the granddaughter of a Lord Mayor of London which brought him City connections. In miniature, this set of family relationships indicated what politics was to become for much of the eighteenth century, the art of managing and sustaining a vast network of people through family and friends committed to supporting the government of the day. It was to be the age of the rule of the élite. Walpole knew the weakness of human beings and how to flatter, cajole and dominate them, which demanded of him huge reserves of patience, nerve, courage, self-control, humour and ruthlessness. Politics for him was the art of

the possible. After decades of revolution, war and civil unrest, he gave the aristocratic and gentry classes what they most wanted: peace and prosperity.

The most striking feature of the country during this period is the seeming stability of the government after almost a century of turbulence, punctuated by revolutions, which first abolished the monarchy and then brought it back, accepted as monarch an armed conqueror who happened to be married to a Stuart, and then finally abandoned that dynasty altogether in favour of the ruler of a minor German state who chanced to be the only surviving Protestant descendant of James I. All of this suggested that the monarchy would be weakened even further, but that did not follow. Both George I and George II remained at the centre of the political stage as founts of honour and justice, as chief executives of the realm and makers of peace and war. They stood at the apex of a social and political hierarchy which was within their creation as they controlled all the major appointments including the civil service and church, army and navy. They also retained the right to appoint and dismiss ministers, but with one new condition, whoever the king chose as his principal minister had to be able to carry a majority in the Commons. In general the king's choice always did, as the Commons was filled with recipients of royal patronage.

That new dimension began under George I. Walpole had worked hard to gain the king's respect and indeed so closely associated had they become that when George died in 1727 everyone thought Walpole would be dismissed. But this did not happen. Walpole realised that the key to the new king was the queen and to gratify himself with both he secured for them large sums of money for their Civil List allowances, far in excess of any of their predecessors.

George II inherited Walpole but they became increasingly out of tune over foreign policy. By 1741 the king had even made overtures to members of the opposition via the Pelhams, that major configuration of Whig interest which focused around Henry Pelham and his brother the Duke of Newcastle. It was indeed the war which, in 1742, finally brought Walpole down, for he was a bad war minister and lost his hold on a majority in the House. The king now had to choose between two Whig clusters, that which centred on Lord Carteret and William Pulteney and that which looked to the Duke of Argyll and the Prince of Wales. George II opted for Carteret, soon created Earl of Granville, but the Pelhams brought him down on his handling of the war. Already, however, Henry Pelham had been given the office of First Lord of the Treasury and the Exchequer followed a year later in 1744. To begin with George was uneasy with the Pelhams who in the aftermath of the 'Forty-Five' Jacobite rebellion insisted that William Pitt, whom the king loathed, should be made Secretary of State for war. The king called on Granville and Pulteney, now Earl of Bath, to form a

ministry precipitating a mass resignation of the Pelhamites. Granville and Bath were forced to resign and the Pelhams returned. Pitt was given office but only lesser posts. The king had retained the whip-hand. George II quickly discovered that the mechanics of government worked smoothly with the Pelhams, giving him what he wanted. Henceforward it was established that no administration could survive without a minister who enjoyed the confidence of both king and Commons.

So one part of what became a political system was in place, but there were other constraints within which the king had to work. These included the acceptance of regular parliamentary sessions, and the financial control of the Commons. The king met his ministers in what was called the Royal Closet but there was also a meeting of ministers called the Cabinet Council which he did not attend. This was the ancestor of our present Cabinet but it had a long way to develop. But much that we would recognise as part of the pattern of today's politics was beginning to fall into place, of which the most important was the ability of any first minister to control the Commons.

There were, however, ways and means of securing a majority. Sir Robert Walpole and Henry Pelham both knew how to make such a system work, and they were helped by the Act which extended the period of each Parliament to seven years. This meant that those in power were there long enough fully to entrench themselves. And this was achieved through a ruthless, at times bordering on corrupt, use of what was known as the patronage system or influence.

Government was stable because enough members of Parliament were, for various reasons, part of the network which brought them benefits if they voted along with the ministry of the day. Of the four hundred or so members returned by the boroughs, for example, over half were in control of either the government or private patronage. In addition, up to 30% of the House could be office-holders of the crown. Such facts indicate that the strings were already in position, and only waited for a man with the ability to begin to pull them. That is not to say they were not pulled in the previous century, but it was Walpole who realised the full potential. He recognised that the seat of political power for any chief minister was henceforth in the Commons. He therefore refused to go to the Lords and remained in the Commons, creating thereby a new office, the ancestor of our present Prime Minister, the minister for the king in the House of Commons. Walpole was the first man to play that role, succeeded in the 1740s by Henry Pelham.

In the House of Commons the leading office-holding politicians sat on one side while those out of office sat on the facing benches. Both groups were from the major political families, and it was between them that any debate raged. The role of those in

A scene from William Hogarth's series of satirical paintings, *The Election*, inspired by the notoriously corrupt Oxfordshire election of 1754. This was a contest between the Tory gentry of the county and its great Whig magnate, the Duke of Marlborough. In a highly complex scene Hogarth exposes the political corruption of the age: to the left the landlady of the Royal Oak tavern counts what she has received in bribes, in the middle a smooth Tory agent attempts to lure two ladies with gifts from a pedlar, while a sharp countryman accepts invitations from both sides.

government was to secure enough votes to obtain a majority. They began by being certain of the votes of at least a hundred and eighty members by 1742 because they were men directly in the pay of government, holding offices at court or in the administration or sinecures. The problem centred on persuading enough of the remaining three hundred or so members to vote in their favour as well. And among these lurked the 'Old Corps' Whigs, those who had held Walpole in power, who were genuinely opposed to expensive foreign wars, high taxation, the growth of centralised administration, and who were also highly suspicious of the influence of the court. But the government had ways of winning these members over from actually controlling the elections to inducements such as office.

The running of the country increasingly came to depend on the ability to manipulate a few hundred largely interconnected people, the élite. Real power was concentrated in only a few hands, those of the king and a handful of landed aristocratic families who in the main were either Whigs or converts. Between them this group could pull every lever in the book. And although those out of power lived out a fiction of being some kind of country opposition, a mixture of Whig 'outs' and Tories, bent on rescuing the king from the malign influence of evil ministers, if any were offered office with all its attendant perks they grabbed at it. From time to time this shifting opposition found a figurehead in successive Princes of Wales.

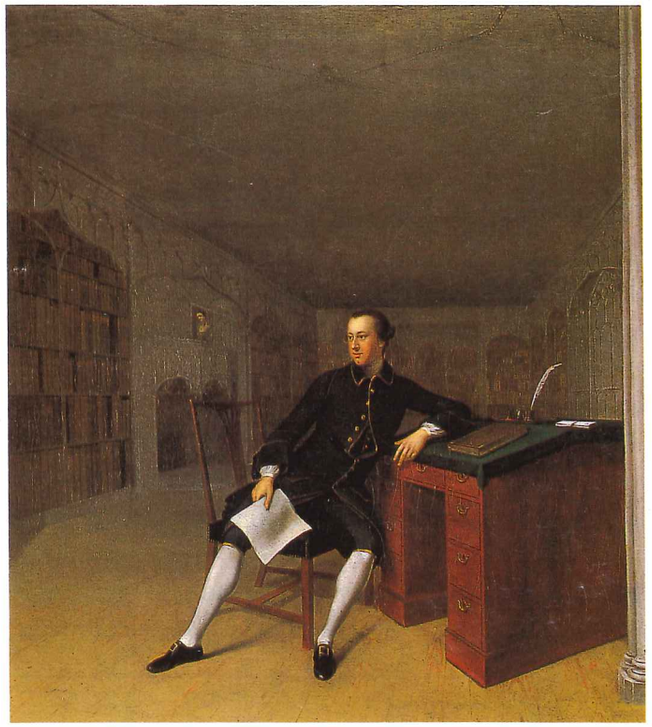
The ability of the 'Old Corps' of Whigs to hold on to power for so long was also helped by the fact that, on account of the long period of relative peace, the political scene was devoid of passion. The function of government in the hands of this interconnected circle was confined to maintaining law and order, conducting foreign policy and exerting minimum economic control. The pattern at the centre radiated downwards. In the counties the great magnates were appointed lord lieutenant by the king, as his representative in that region. The Lord Chancellor appointed the local justices of the peace who not only tried criminal cases but who also went on to cope with roads, bridges, gaols and other local amentities. The justices controlled the appointment at parish level of every officer except that of churchwarden. Only the towns might escape such pressure. There their government was usually formed by a mayor, aldermen and common councilmen being elected by the freemen of the borough.

Everything worked smoothly except when something was attempted which even the usually pro-government floating voters in the Commons really objected to. In the case of Walpole, this happened only twice. Once in 1733 when he attempted to increase taxation on commodities in an Excise Bill, but he was wise enough to withdraw it. The second time it precipitated his downfall, his failure as a war minister during the War of the Austrian Succession, but he had by then already begun to lose his touch. Walpole believed in peace, which was made with France, thus avoiding huge expense and the dislocation it brought to trade. For him the rule of the House of Hanover was not to be founded on mystique, as it had been with the Stuarts, but on sound government finance and commercial prosperity. The City financiers trusted Walpole and he built on that. To reduce the National Debt he set up a Sinking Fund to pay it off. By the 1730s confidence was such that government bonds were regarded as foolproof. He believed in low taxation, preferring to tax indirectly rather than directly on land. As a consequence he bequeathed a formidable legacy of achievement.

Henry Pelham was to attempt to emulate this in the years of peace after 1748. He was a man of very different temperament, lacking Walpole's abrasive arrogance and passion. He was far more disinterested and liberal in outlook and was, above all, a master of monetary affairs, re-structuring public finance and restoring confidence. Peace, stability and conciliation were the keynotes of his administration and when he died on 6 March 1754 the country was to enter a very different era. The ethos of the long decades of Whig dominance was summed up by one of the great commentators on the period, Horace Walpole, when he wrote of life in the House of Commons, of which he was a member: 'A bird might build her nest in the Speaker's chair, or in his peruke; there won't be a debate that can disturb them.'

All of this so far might be described as the view from the centre. The ruling élite and their system also had its downside, for it embodied an economic, social and military dominance of the two islands which was solidly English. Its sway over Scotland depended on an alliance with the Scottish Presbyterians and over Ireland on one with the Irish Anglicans. In both of these countries large percentages of the population were denied any political rights at all. The English hold was often quite fragile and ultimately depended on an ability to mobilise military force to keep the populations in subjection.

For the first fifty years of Hanoverian rule the disaffected had a living embodiment



Sir Roger Newdigate in his newly built library at Arbury Hall. Painted in 1756–58 the portrait evokes the elegant ambience of the educated landed classes. Sir Roger had been on the Grand Tour to Italy and collected antiquities. His library reflects his taste for learning and the plans in his hands celebrate his rebuilding of Arbury in the revived Gothic style, one appropriate to a man who was Tory and looked back to the Middle Ages.

for their aspirations in the man alluded to as 'The king over the water', the exiled 'James III', the 'Old Pretender', son of James II. And those who looked in that direction, either directly or covertly, multiplied rather than diminished, for the longer the Whigs were in power the greater the accumulation of those who, for one reason or another, were alienated from the new régime. If 'James III' had ever returned Protestant history may well have taken a very different course. In Ireland, the Stuarts could rely on the majority of the population who had been cruelly treated, and in Scotland on those who had seen the country's independence wiped out by the Act of Union. In England, as the Whig hegemony went relentlessly on, they could hope for Tory involvement in Jacobite plots for their restoration. But the Tories never opted out of the political system and their interest in the Jacobite cause was ambiguous and opaque. Support for the Stuarts was still strong in old Royalist parts of England, the north, the west and Wales. It extended into the middle classes in towns such as London, Bristol and Manchester. In the main, too, they could look for support from France in their various invasion attempts. Between 1689 and 1759 there were no less than fifteen Jacobite plots, some of quite major proportions. In 1715 the English end of the plot was nipped in the bud, but there was a serious rising in Scotland and in the north of England. Thirty years later came the two most significant of these challenges, the first in 1744 when the country was threatened by a fleet and a large French army which never sailed, and the second when 'James III's' son, Charles Edward Stuart, the 'Young Pretender', landed in Scotland on 25 July 1745, rapidly collecting an army which captured Perth and Edinburgh. Early in November it marched south on a promise from the prince that there would be a rising in England and aid from France. Neither happened, but it is noteworthy that the north remained neutral. The Scots were forced to retreat and were eventually savagely massacred at Culloden. The prince fled into exile and penury. As part of the peace treaty of 1748 the French withdrew their support from the Stuarts which effectively ended their hopes, although plots lingered on into the fifties. In Scotland a cruel retribution was exacted on the Highlands and the Lowlands took on the character of being an outpost of English civilisation.

What this reveals is the overwhelming dominance of the south of England over both islands. With the final defeat of the Jacobites and the advent in 1760 of a ruler who was to be billed as a truly British king, increasing efforts began to be made to bring in the disaffected and forge a new collective identity. On paper George I and George II ruled as kings of Great Britain but the reality was that they presided over a series of arranged marriages. As the century progressed these were to be replaced by the invention of the idea of a single country, Britain, and a single people, the Britons.