

# The Younger Pitt

Michael Duffy

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Profiles In Power



*The Younger Pitt*

## PROFILES IN POWER

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# THE YOUNGER PITT

Michael Duffy

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2000 by Pearson Education Limited

Published 2013 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

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ISBN 13: 978-0-582-05279-6 (pbk)

#### *British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book can be obtained from the British Library

#### *Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Duffy, Michael, 1944–

The younger Pitt / Michael Duffy.

p. cm. — (Profiles in power)

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 0-582-05278-5 (cased : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-582-05279-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Pitt, William, 1759–1806. 2. Great Britain—Politics and government—1760–1820. 3. Prime ministers—Great Britain—Biography. I. Title. II. Profiles in power (London, England)

DA522.P6 D84 2000

941.07'3'092—dc21

[B]

00-032708

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Add. MSS	British Library, Additional Manuscripts
BL	British Library
<i>C.C.GIII</i>	Duke of Buckingham and Chandos (ed.), <i>Memoirs of the Courts and Cabinets of George the Third</i> , 4 vols (1853–55)
<i>EHR</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>HJ</i>	<i>The Historical Journal</i>
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
Holland	This common contemporary abbreviation has been employed instead of the full title of the Dutch republic: the United Provinces of Holland, Zeeland etc.
<i>L.C.GIII</i>	A. Aspinall (ed.), <i>The Later Correspondence of George III</i> , 5 vols (Cambridge, 1962–70)
NRS	Navy Records Society
PH	<i>Parliamentary History</i>
<i>Parl. Hist.</i>	W. Cobbett (ed.), <i>The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803</i> , 36 vols (1806–20)
<i>Pitt/Rutland Corresp.</i>	Earl Stanhope (ed.), <i>Correspondence between the Rt. Hon. William Pitt and Charles, Duke of Rutland . . . 1781–1787</i> , with Introduction by the Duke of Rutland (1890)
PRO	Public Record Office, London
<i>Speeches</i>	W.S. Hathaway (ed.), <i>The Speeches of the Rt. Hon. William Pitt</i> , 4 vols (1806)

The place of publication for works cited is London unless otherwise stated.



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## CHRONOLOGY

- 1759 Pitt born 28 May
- 1773–9 At Cambridge. American Declaration of Independence and war 1776; death of father 1778; France (1778), Spain (1779) and Holland (1780) enter war against Britain
- 1780 Called to the Bar as a recognised trial lawyer; general election, defeated for Cambridge University seat
- 1781 MP for Appleby, takes seat 23 January, first speech 26 February
- 1782 Fall of Lord North's Ministry (March); introduces parliamentary reform motion (May); becomes Chancellor of the Exchequer in Shelburne's Ministry (6 July)
- 1783 Shelburne defeated on peace preliminaries and Pitt resigns (February); declines King's invitations to form a government; visits France; encourages King to defeat Fox's India Bill and appointed First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer (19 December)
- 1784 Struggle to win supremacy in the Commons (January–March); general election; MP for Cambridge University; passes own India Act and begins tax reforms
- 1785 Defeated on Westminster Scrutiny, parliamentary reform proposals, Irish Commercial Propositions; presses administrative economic reforms
- 1786 Richmond's fortifications bill defeated; start of the two years that made Pitt's reputation as a Minister; Sinking Fund scheme to eliminate National Debt; Commercial Treaty with France
- 1787 Consolidation of customs duties; supplants French influence over the Dutch; first opposes repeal of religious Test Acts
- 1788 'Triple Alliance' with Prussia and Holland; Regency Crisis (November 1788–February 1789)

- 1789 Outbreak of revolution in France
- 1790 Nootka Sound crisis with Spain; general election
- 1791 Negotiations with Opposition (February–March); defeated in Ochakov crisis with Russia; Church and King riots in Birmingham; Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man* stimulates formation of radical reforming societies
- 1792 Extends Sinking Fund; proclamation against seditious writings; forces resignation of Lord Chancellor Thurlow; failed negotiations with Portland Whig Opposition; accepts King’s offer of Wardenship of Cinque Ports; autumn crises over internal disturbances and radicalism and over external threat of French to the Austrian Netherlands and Holland; encourages loyalist association movement (November)
- 1793 Outbreak of war with France (1 February); opposes Grey’s parliamentary reform motion; negotiates First Coalition of European powers; initial successes followed by defeats at Dunkirk (September) and Toulon (December)
- 1794 Scares from threat of invasion and agitation for a convention by radical clubs; first call for home defence volunteers; suspension of Habeas Corpus (May); Glorious First of June naval victory but defeat in Netherlands; union with Portland Whigs (11 July); imperial successes (West Indies) checked
- 1795 Fall of Holland; ministerial reshuffle (December 1794–January 1795); crisis with Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Earl Fitzwilliam (February); Prussia and Spain make peace with France, and Dutch join French against Britain; corn scarcity and radical agitation; attack on King’s carriage (November); ‘Two Acts’ against treasonable practices and seditious meetings (November–December); announces willingness to make peace with lasting French government
- 1796 General election; abortive peace overtures to France (February, September–December); Spain joins war against Britain
- 1797 Pitt’s *annus horribilis*: abandons courtship of Eleanor Eden; run on banks and suspension of cash payments (February); Austria defeated and withdraws from war; mutinies in fleet (April–May); Cabinet divisions on peace overture (June); unsuccessful negotiations with France (July–September); death of Eliot (September); naval victory at Camperdown (October); unpopular assessed taxes proposals
- 1798 Renewed invasion threat; encourages volunteers and patriotic subscription; duel with Tierney (27 May); rebellion in

- Ireland suppressed (May–June); naval victory at the Nile (August); negotiations to renew Coalition against France; incomes tax enacted
- 1799 Renewal of continental war; banning of named subversive societies; repulse of expedition to Holland, and Russian defeat in Switzerland
- 1800 Union of Britain and Ireland enacted (to start 1 January 1801); corn scarcity and rioting; collapse of continental war; forces Egyptian expedition through Cabinet
- 1801 Determines to resist Armed Neutrality of Baltic Powers; resigns over royal opposition to Catholic Emancipation (14 March); but supports successor Addington in making peace with France
- 1802 Peace of Amiens with France (March); general election; Pitt severely ill in autumn, delays taking seat
- 1803 Attempts to persuade Pitt to enter Ministry; renewal of war with France (May); returns to Commons but defeated on Patten's motion (June); leads volunteer movement against invasion threat
- 1804 Joins attack on Addington's conduct of war, and becomes First Lord of the Treasury again when Addington resigns (10 May); Treasury reforms; union with Addingtonians (December)
- 1805 Negotiations to form a third European Coalition; defeated over Melville (May); withdrawal of Addingtonians from government (July); renewal of European war; naval victory at Trafalgar, but allies defeated at Ulm and Austerlitz
- 1806 Dies 23 January

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## INTRODUCTION

True Patriotism in the times of public peace and tranquillity . . . consists in a sober and steady obedience to the laws, and observance of the constitution; in mild and moderate endeavours to rectify whatever disorders and corruptions may have crept into either . . . ; in a firm support without respect to names and parties, or private connections of whatever administration may happen to be then established in points wherein they are right, in a firm though a calm opposition to them, in matters wherein they may be wrong; but above all, it consists in providing for the contingencies of war during the times of peace, in increasing the revenue without burthening trade, in discharging the public debts, and in promoting arts, science, agriculture, manufactures and population throughout the kingdom.

Indeed, it is only in times of public and national distress, . . . that real Patriotism becomes bustling and active, and makes a noise in the world.

*Anon., Essay on Patriotism and on the character and conduct of some late famous pretenders to that virtue, pp. 12–13 (London, 1768).*

It has become customary to trace Pitt's political career chronologically in two unequal parts: the years of peace and reform, followed by the years of war and repression. This I have tried to avoid, since I am inclined to agree with Pitt's much abused 'official biographer', George Pretyman Tomline, that 'Mr Pitt's administration forms a consistent whole, and all its various parts are founded on the same principle, and give a force and support to each other.'<sup>1</sup> Historians have debated the particular principle that moved Pitt, but it seems to me that his life and speeches echo the sentiments expressed in the extract above, which represent the Patriot ideal of the mid-eighteenth century. Ironically they were enunciated in a pamphlet attacking Pitt's father, whereas it was from his father that Pitt acquired his Patriot inspiration. When the Younger Pitt

spoke of his ambition for 'character', it was a character as a virtuous Patriot statesman that he had in mind.<sup>2</sup>

I have chosen to take primarily a thematic rather than a chronological approach, as the best way to show the fields of power in which Pitt operated and how he operated, as well as the continuities between the customarily divided parts of his career. It also helps to show the sheer range of his activity, operating across far more areas, for a far longer length of time, than any of his most powerful eighteenth-century predecessors, or for that matter, any of his successors. Not only was he Britain's youngest ever head of a government, but his hold on office was also phenomenal. For four-fifths of his 25-year political career he was in government (and for all except eight months of this was leader of the government). In 1801 an admiring Cabinet colleague, the Duke of Portland, declared that 'Pitt and Office cannot be separated'.<sup>3</sup> The career of William Pitt the Younger is undoubtedly a profile in power.

First claim to my gratitude for their patience and support in preparing this study must go to my family. I am also indebted to advice, encouragement and information supplied by many individuals, and particularly Jeremy Black, John Ehrman, Charles Fedorak, Piers Mackesy, Anthony Smith, Elizabeth Sparrow and David Wilkinson. Ideas have been honed under the critical scrutiny of many cohorts of special subject students at Exeter to whom I am eternally grateful. The helpful services and permission to publish of many libraries and archives must be acknowledged and notably the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the British Library; Buckinghamshire County Record Office; Cambridge University Library; the William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Kent Archives Office; Leeds Central Library (the Harewood Estate); the National Library of Scotland; the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; Nottingham University Mss Dept; the Public Record Office, London; the John Rylands Library, Manchester; the Scottish Record Office; Sheffield Central Library; and the Suffolk Record Office.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Lord Rosebery (ed.), 'Tomline's Estimate of Pitt', *The Monthly Review*, vol. 12: August (1903), p. 21.
- 2 Earl of Malmesbury (ed.), *Diaries and Correspondence of James Harris, Earl of Malmesbury* (1845), vol. 4, p. 78.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

## *Chapter 1*

# ‘SUPERIOR EVEN TO CHARLES FOX’: THE SHORT PATH TO POWER

### GREAT CHATHAM’S SON

In any reckoning of British politics and government the rapidity of William Pitt the Younger’s rise to power is unique and will probably remain so. On 28 May 1780 he came of age on his twenty-first birthday. Within seven months he was elected a Member of Parliament; within two years and two months he was Chancellor of the Exchequer and a member of the Cabinet; within three years and seven months he was First Lord of the Treasury and leader of the government.

The least astonishing part of this extraordinary progression was his election to the House of Commons at such an early age. The unreformed eighteenth-century electoral system gave youth its chance. One in six of all members of the Commons which Pitt entered were under the age of thirty, though few were as young as he. Entrance was available if the youth could find a patron with a predominant influence over a parliamentary seat, either through family or political connection or by having a famous father with whose reflected glory a patron would wish to be associated. The Younger Pitt fell into the latter category. He was the second son of the great Earl of Chatham (William Pitt the Elder) who had been the most dazzling and turbulent political comet of the mid-eighteenth century. His inspirational leadership had helped guide the nation to victory in its most successful war – the Seven Years War (1756–63). William Pitt the Younger was born in the so-called Year of Victories of 1759 when his father’s fame stood at its zenith.

As influential on him as this success, however, was the fact that the Younger Pitt grew up amidst the decline of his father’s reputation. The Elder Pitt stood as a Patriot statesman, acting disinterestedly for



the national good, independent of party rancour or faction, and hostile to all forms of mismanagement resulting from the corruption and jobbery of eighteenth-century politics. He was the enemy of aristocratic domination of the House of Commons and of titles, pensions and sinecures offered by governments to win their majorities. But by 1768 he was being assailed in publications such as the anonymous *Essay on Patriotism*, which introduces this book, denouncing him as a 'patriotic imposter'. He was alleged to have put pride before service to his country by resigning in 1761, when his Cabinet colleagues would not approve his plans for war with Spain, and refusing support for their subsequent conduct of the war. His reputation as the incorrupt 'Great Commoner' was severely shaken when, after his resignation, he accepted a £3,000 per annum pension and a peerage for his wife and, still more, when he became Earl of Chatham on briefly returning as Prime Minister in 1766–8. His Premiership, an experiment in the Patriot ideal of a non-party Ministry based on support for 'measures not men', collapsed amidst Cabinet recriminations and power struggles when illness removed him as its unifying force. Chatham's subsequent espousal of parliamentary reform regained him some popular and independent support (though it also separated him from other major politicians), but he lost touch with the national mood on foreign and imperial policy which had formerly been his greatest strength. He urged war on an unreceptive country over the Spanish occupation of the Falkland Islands in 1770, and he unavailingly pressed peace and reconciliation with America on an impatient country between 1774 and his death in 1778.

The relationship between the Younger Pitt and his father was a strong one. His cousin, William Grenville, later remarked that Pitt 'always spoke of Lord Chatham with affection, and no wonder; for there never was a father more partial to a son'.<sup>1</sup> This relationship made it virtually inevitable that the Younger Pitt would go into politics at the earliest possible opportunity. Not only had Chatham trained his son for public speaking from childhood, but there was a pressing filial obligation to restore the Patriot, Great Commoner, reputation of his dead father. He should carry forward in the House of Commons the torch of Patriot principles which his father had espoused – though with the lessons before him (which he did not forget) of his father's mistakes. Yet it was a bold venture, since he launched his political career from precarious financial foundations. Chatham died heavily in debt and Pitt was left dependent on a grant of £600 a year from his elder brother, and what he could borrow against his expectation when his father's estate was eventually cleared of creditors. For an independent income of his own he had to turn to one of the professions open to gentlemen. In 1779–80 he

served his terms at Lincoln's Inn and in the summers of 1780 and 1781 he practised as a lawyer on the Western Circuit. This was however an uncertain financial existence, and, since Members of Parliament were not paid and his Patriot ideals precluded a pension or sinecure, he really needed an active, paid government office to sustain an effective political career.

In these early years of his career he was extraordinarily lucky in the way events unfolded in the most favourable way for him, though much still depended on his own capacity to exploit his good fortune. As the War of American Independence (1775–83) worsened, with France and Spain joining in against Britain, Chatham's opposition to the breach with America was seen in a more favourable light. The floundering conduct of the war by Lord North's government highlighted Chatham's vigorous and successful conduct of the previous war, while the Ministry's mismanagement was blamed on that corruption and excessive Crown influence which Chatham had so often attacked in the past. The materials were thus at hand for a vindication of his father's name, and the opportunity for access to the appropriate forum came within months of his coming of age, when Parliament was dissolved and a general election called in September 1780.

In standing forward to vindicate his father's name and principles, however, Pitt was also handicapped by those very principles. Idealistically he sought to be even purer than his father. He could not turn to any existing party or connection to help bring him forward but, like his father, advertised himself as an 'independent Whig'.<sup>2</sup> This meant being independent of party, but committed to maintaining the mixed and balanced constitution which contemporaries believed had been established by the Whigs in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and which he believed to be in jeopardy from encroachments on the independence of Parliament by the King, George III, and his government. The Younger Pitt carried his independence so far as to reject early offers of nomination to pocket boroughs, even though the proffering patrons were his relatives Earl Temple and Thomas Pitt, and even though his father had entered Parliament in this way. Instead he sought election by an open and independent constituency and turned to Cambridge University which he had entered, after a private domestic education, in 1773 at the age of fourteen. At Cambridge he took his MA without examination (as he was entitled to do as the son of a peer) in 1776, in which year his mother described him as 'perfectly well at Cambridge, and follows the exercise of his mind, and that of his Horse, with an equal Ardor, which I confess I think for Him the perfect Thing'.<sup>3</sup> During three years of further study and hard riding there, his high spirits, playful wit and quick repartee

among those of his acquaintance enabled him to build up a strong circle of friends and potential supporters. A seat for his University he described as 'of all others the most desirable, as being free from expense, perfectly independent, and I think in every respect extremely honourable'.<sup>4</sup> He began working up an interest on his behalf before he left Cambridge in 1779, but the general election, called unexpectedly early by the government, came before his canvassing had built up much momentum, and he came bottom of the poll.

Necessity therefore compelled him to accept the good offices of a Cambridge friend, the Duke of Rutland, whose contacts with the great northern borough-monger, Sir James Lowther, got Pitt returned for Appleby in Westmorland on terms which Pitt felt satisfied his need for independence. 'Judging from my father's principles,' Pitt told his mother of Lowther, 'he concludes that mine would be agreeable to his own.' Lowther imposed no specific terms but expected Pitt to vacate the seat should their lines of conduct become opposite.<sup>5</sup>

The snap early election caught all opponents of government unprepared, and a temporary upturn in the war and Treasury influence enabled Lord North's Ministry to secure a majority. Consequently the new member for Appleby, like his father, took his place on the side of the Opposition. He made his maiden speech barely a month after taking his seat, on 26 February 1781, in support of an Opposition bill to reallocate money from the King's Civil List to the public service. His chance came unexpectedly, but he was ready for it thanks to his father's coaching and his own attendance to hear his father's later speeches and subsequent debates (his close friendship with William Wilberforce stemmed from the frequency with which they found themselves listening in the strangers' gallery before each was elected to the Commons). Pitt spoke impromptu, with composure and assurance, to points made by former speakers in the debate. Even Lord North generously declared it the best first speech of a young man that he had ever heard. His father's reputation gave him a ready hearing and inevitably there were comparisons with his father. Edmund Burke reportedly asserted that he was 'not a chip of the old block: he is the old block himself'. It may be that his father's fame helped sway judgements in his favour. George Selwyn, who came to the House especially to hear his third speech on 12 June, judged that 'if the matter and expression had come without that prejudice, or wrote down, all which could have been said was, that he was a sensible and promising young man'.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless his father's renown could only advance his career so far. He needed his own abilities to take full advantage of this flying start, and after his first speech in the autumn session, even Selwyn admitted

that 'Mr Pitt's speech today had made a great noise'. After his next speech the veteran Horace Walpole recorded that 'young William Pitt took to pieces Lord North's pretended declaration, which he had minuted down, and exposed them with the most amazing logical abilities, exceeding all the abilities he had already shown, and making men doubt whether he would not prove superior even to Charles Fox'. On New Year's Day 1782 another of his audience wrote of him that 'He is wonderful in all respects, but in nothing so much as in the regular and rapid improvement he makes: I have heard him speak three times only, and each speech was much better than the former.'<sup>7</sup>

Despite the verbal battery from a glittering display of Opposition talent, in which Pitt joined his voice to those of Charles Fox, Burke, Sheridan and others, Lord North had held his own in the spring session of 1781, sturdily seconded by the Scottish Lord Advocate, Henry Dundas. Pitt's advance would have been halted without another twist of circumstances in his favour. The surrender of a British army at Yorktown catastrophically wrecked the war in America and destroyed confidence in the Ministry. In March 1782, with his majority collapsing, Lord North resigned.

The disintegration of North's long-established government reduced the political world to a series of fragmented groupings. In these circumstances it was not just Pitt's speaking powers that gave him weight. His ready wit and conviviality, particularly with acquaintances of his own age in Parliament, made him a leading figure in a young members' club called Goostree's. It largely consisted of old Cambridge friends: amongst whom were John Jeffreys Pratt and Lord Euston, the sons respectively of Earl Camden and the Duke of Grafton, former prominent supporters of his father. Edward Eliot and Henry Bankes he also knew from Cambridge. Wilberforce had also been at Cambridge but did not make Pitt's acquaintance till they met in London, as did Richard Pepper Arden who shared a staircase with him at Lincoln's Inn. The banker Robert Smith became connected with him after he entered Parliament. Two other Cambridge acquaintances, William Lowther and the Duke of Rutland (who controlled six Commons seats), might also be included in this close circle. Many of these were older than Pitt – Arden fifteen years, Smith seven, Rutland five, Bankes three, Euston and Eliot a year – and it says much for his attractive personality that he was able to win their affection and eventual support.

As yet Pitt had an influence with them rather than their guaranteed firm votes, but it was noticed: Selwyn wrote in March 1782 that 'Young Pitt will not be subordinate; he is not so in his own society. He is at the head of a dozen young people, and it is a corps separate from that of

Charley's [Fox]; so there is another premier at the starting post, who, as yet, has never been shaved.' Ten days earlier a scheme by Dundas to prop up North's flagging Ministry included bringing in Pitt as Treasurer of the Navy 'with a seat at the Treasury, Admiralty and Trade, to some of his young friends'. Already Pitt was seen as attracting his own support.<sup>8</sup>

Inexperience however led him into overplaying his hand. In expectation of offers when a new government was constructed, he determined never to accept a subordinate situation and he told the Commons so on 8 March. Horace Walpole considered it a great indiscretion:

so arrogant a declaration from a boy who had gained no experience from, nor ever enjoyed even the lowest post in any office, and who for half a dozen orations, extraordinary indeed, but no evidence of capacity for business, presumed himself fit for command, proved that he was a boy, and a very ambitious one and a very vain one. The moment he sat down he was aware of his folly, and said he could bite his tongue out for what he had uttered.<sup>9</sup>

It left him without bargaining power and dependent on the goodwill of the senior politician with whom he most associated – the Earl of Shelburne, who had inherited leadership of a residue of Chatham's former followers. Shelburne applied to the Earl of Rockingham to whom, as leader of the largest Opposition grouping, the formation of the new government had been entrusted. Rockingham was prepared to offer the minor post of Vice-Treasurer of Ireland, worth £5,000 a year, but Pitt rejected it out of concern for consistency after his public declaration and for fear of having his image of Patriotic virtue tainted by a quasi-sinecure office of profit (again seeking to be purer than his father whose first office it had been). Shelburne had too many other prior claims that he needed to satisfy to be able to press for a Cabinet post for Pitt, and so the new government was formed without him.

With his political progress apparently stalled again, Pitt quickly found the means to keep himself before the public eye. The expense and mismanagement of the American War had stimulated demand for parliamentary reform to make Parliament better representative of propertied national opinion. From London radicals it spread to the county gentry, and in 1779 the Reverend Christopher Wyvill formed the Yorkshire Association as an extra-parliamentary pressure group to campaign for reform, with other counties setting up Associations in imitation. Pitt's father had been a convert to the cause of parliamentary reform, and in October 1780 Pitt was elected to the committee of the Kent Association of which his enthusiastic brother-in-law, Lord Mahon, had become chairman.

The movement hit a setback with North's election victory, but their hopes revived at his fall. In April 1782 reformers, including Wyvill and Pitt, met at the London house of the Duke of Richmond and agreed that Pitt should move in the Commons for a Select Committee to consider the state of the representation. He introduced this motion – his first – on 7 May, in a speech of one and a half hours urging calm revision of principles and a moderate reform of defects. Though it was rejected by 161–141, he successfully established himself as the leading Commons spokesman for parliamentary reform, with direct contact with reformers outside the House. A further meeting twelve days later agreed to launch a national petitioning campaign to enable Pitt to renew the question in the next session.

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### SHELBURNE'S CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

In fact Pitt's career advanced rapidly before this, as once more fortune turned his way. The new government split into feuding parts in a power struggle between Shelburne and Fox. Pitt's absence from office enabled him to escape being tarnished by it, and he was free to stand forward when Rockingham suddenly died in July and Fox and his friends resigned after the King turned to Shelburne to head the ministry. With vacant Cabinet places to fill and a need for someone who might stand up to Fox in the Commons, Pitt's claim for high office made in March now unexpectedly paid off. Having been on the point of setting off to earn his living on the Western Circuit, he could scarcely refuse Shelburne's offer of the post of Chancellor the Exchequer with a seat in the Cabinet. Of his friends, Arden became Solicitor-General, while Eliot and Pratt were given seats on the Treasury and Admiralty Boards.

Remarkable as his advancement was, Pitt's position was a weak one in a weak Ministry. He was not yet able to demand a specific post and what was offered to him was at the mercy of the need to satisfy others. The King and Shelburne originally intended him as Home Secretary of State, but Thomas Townshend, a useful speaker with more experience, eventually received that office and the leadership of the government in the Commons. Townshend and at least two others turned down the Exchequer, so that Pitt got it by default. It was not to be an office of power, for Shelburne as First Lord of the Treasury intended to keep financial matters firmly in his own hands. Both Pitt and Shelburne had much still to prove. Even a future friend and follower of Pitt, the Earl of

Mornington, wrote in horror on hearing the first rumours of the new Ministry: 'W. Pitt Secretary of State! and Lord Shelburne Premier! surely the first cannot be qualified for such an office, and the last is, in my opinion, little to be depended upon.'<sup>10</sup>

Pitt's first government appointment was directly into a Cabinet office, but his first share in power lasted barely nine months, and only two long parliamentary recesses stopped it being shorter. Shelburne was far from popular. Clever and well informed by talented private advisers, he was nevertheless inherently secretive and had a reputation for duplicity. Moreover although he had won the King's goodwill, this was presently of diluted value, since George III's prestige was at a low ebb at this moment of defeat in the American War which he had so zealously espoused. It was reckoned that in the Commons, Shelburne's supporters and the King's Friends could muster 140 votes, Fox 90 and the fallen Lord North (who had 'made' the sitting House in 1780) 120, the remainder being without firm commitment. Much therefore depended on the wider support Shelburne could attract for his policies. Here however he faced the need to settle what would inevitably be adverse peace terms with America and its European partners and which would draw odium on the government that agreed them. Shelburne in fact extricated the nation from the war with some skill, but the concessions he had to make ultimately fragmented his Cabinet and enabled his opponents to rally a majority against him in the Commons.

It was only after Parliament reassembled in December 1782 to discuss the peace that Pitt began to develop an effective power-role for himself. The vast preponderance of Treasury patronage lay with Shelburne, and Pitt was dependent on whatever the First Lord was prepared to lay off to him. When, for example, a rearrangement in the office created five vacancies, Shelburne kept two for his own disposal and granted one each to his two Treasury Secretaries, Orde and Rose, and the other to Pitt. The young Chancellor of the Exchequer attended the Treasury Board conscientiously, but Shelburne seems to have worked directly with expert revenue officials, his own private advisers and the Treasury Secretaries. Pitt was involved in his schemes for the administrative reform of the Treasury, being given responsibility for putting two bills through the Commons, one to reform the customs and the other to regulate the public offices. There are however at least two indicators that Pitt was not in Shelburne's inner circle on Treasury business. One is the little surviving correspondence between the two, particularly when Shelburne was at his country seat at Bowood in the autumn of 1782; the other is the testimony of one of the Treasury Secretaries, George Rose, that although he met Pitt at the Board and sometimes at dinner at

Shelburne's, he did not become closely acquainted with the Chancellor of the Exchequer until after they left office.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, although Pitt was present at all recorded meetings of the Cabinet, the role of that body was limited. Shelburne kept a direct control over the peace negotiations by private meetings with foreign emissaries, by sending personal representatives and corresponding privately with British envoys, as well as by using the two Secretaries of State. In reports of the Cabinet debates Pitt is anonymous. Others such as the Duke of Richmond and Lord Keppel emerge as the ones forcefully expressing their views and complaining at the lack of proper Cabinet consultation. In the short life of the Shelburne Ministry power unquestionably lay in the hands of the Prime Minister, and whatever Pitt learned from the style, there is little to suggest that he established any cordial relationship with him. When, two years later, Shelburne sent an emissary to discuss Pitt's offer of an elevation in the peerage, the former Premier remarked that 'I know the coldness of the climate you go into, and that it requires all your animation to produce a momentary thaw.'<sup>12</sup>

Only when Shelburne's hold on power became threatened in the House of Commons did Pitt's role become more prominent and influential. Pitt's greatest asset to any government was still his speaking ability and he rapidly came to speak with more authority than the other Cabinet Ministers in the Commons, General Conway and Thomas Townshend. He was however by no means free from blunders. In the initial debates on the peace negotiations on 6 December he wrongly asserted, and continued to assert when challenged, that the peace with America was unconditional on the results of further peace negotiations with France, contradicting what Shelburne himself said in the Lords. The King blamed it on inexperience: 'It is no wonder that so young a man should have made a slip!'<sup>13</sup> Another error became renowned. In the first debate on the final peace treaties on 17 February 1783, Pitt responded to Sheridan's criticisms by sarcastically declaring that his sallies were better reserved for the stage – only to bring on himself the withering reply from the playwright that were he to do so, he might be tempted to try an improvement on one of Ben Jonson's best characters, the Angry Boy in *The Alchemist*!<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless Pitt's debating skills became the most reliable and indispensable support to Shelburne in the Commons. Pitt was consequently a major influence when the Premier looked to strengthen his shaky Ministry. When Richmond resigned his Cabinet seat and Lord Carlisle the Lord Stewardship over the peace terms, Shelburne gave both to Pitt's friend Rutland – even though this precipitated the resignation of another Cabinet member, the Duke of Grafton, over lack of consultation.



The crucial decision was whether to seek a safe majority by accommodation with North or with Fox. Pitt was adamantly against sitting in any Cabinet with Lord North, so that even though Shelburne made soundings for North's support (apparently without Pitt's knowledge), these inevitably stalled on the Premier's inability to offer high office to North himself. Pitt was authorised to explore his own preference of an approach to Fox for reconciliation among the former Opposition, but Fox refused to come in on any terms while Shelburne remained, and Pitt would not abandon the Premier, so that this overture too collapsed. Fox and North then approached each other and, against expectations, these former determined opponents reached terms for a coalition which enabled them to defeat the Ministry's peace proposals in successive debates in the Commons on 17 and 21 February, inducing Shelburne three days later to announce his intention of resigning.

For Pitt, the speech he made in the last of these two debates was the most important of his life, and the real making of his immediate pretensions to head the government. He knew that the Ministry was doomed, and he had to extricate himself from the wreck. He had to show himself as a power in his own right, independent of the doomed Shelburne, but he had to do so without appearing to be disloyally deserting the Premier in this final trial. In a two and three-quarter hours' speech he adroitly solved all his problems by giving the House a discourse on Patriotism. One Opposition supporter described it as 'upon the highest stilts that ever his father was mounted'.<sup>15</sup>

He maintained that the peace terms were the best that could be obtained after North's mismanagement of the war. He accused the Opposition of attacking them not out of any consideration of the national interest, but simply as a vehicle to eject Shelburne. Their self-seeking was shown by the unnatural coalition of two groups, those of Fox and North, whose principles had been wholly opposite: 'if this ill-omened marriage is not already solemnized, I know a just and lawful impediment, and, in the name of public safety, I here forbid the banns'. Shelburne, their intended victim, he praised for 'acting an honest and honourable part' in difficult circumstances.

From a resolute defence of the peace terms and of Shelburne's virtues, he moved to a personal statement of his own principles and separate political associations. The Chatham name was recalled and vindicated by contrast to present misfortunes:

I feel, Sir, at this instant, how much I had been animated in my childhood by a recital of England's victories:— I was taught, Sir, by one, whose memory I shall ever revere, that at the close of a war, far different indeed

from this, she had dictated the terms of peace to submissive nations. This in which I place something more than a common interest, was the memorable aera of England's glory.

Having linked himself to a matchless mentor far above Shelburne or any of his rivals, he pressed the point again near the close of his speech:

My earliest impressions were in favour of the noblest and most disinterested modes of serving the public: these impressions are still dear, and will I hope, remain for ever dear to my heart: I will cherish them as a legacy infinitely more valuable than the greatest inheritance. On those principles alone I came into parliament, and into place.

This Chathamite legacy and principles were those of the Patriot: 'I have ever been most anxious to do my utmost for the interest of my country; it has been my sole concern to act an honest and upright part'; nothing could be imputed to his official conduct 'which bears the most distant connection with an interested, a corrupt, or a dishonest intention'. He declared his future candidacy for power by admitting his ambition and his unashamed pursuit of high situation and great influence, but he coupled this with the Patriot qualification 'whenever they can be acquired with honour, and retained with dignity'. When he left office he would not resort to an indiscriminate opposition to his successors to try to get back into power, but, so long as they governed with a view to the real and substantial welfare of the community at large, he promised them his 'uniform and best support on every occasion, where I can honestly and conscientiously assist them'.

Appealing for recognition of his integrity and consistency of political conduct, he came to his climax:

you may take from me, Sir, the privileges and emoluments of place, but you cannot, and you shall not, take from me those habitual and warm regards for the prosperity of Great-Britain, which constitute the honour, the happiness, the pride of my life; and which, I trust, death alone can extinguish. And with this consolation, the loss of power, Sir, and the loss of fortune, though I affect not to despise them, I hope I soon shall be able to forget.

This was rounded off by a Latin quotation from Horace: 'I praise her [Fortune] while she abides. If she flutter her swift wings for flight, I renounce her gifts . . . and woo honest dowerless poverty.'<sup>16</sup>

It was blatant self-propaganda, openly addressed 'to the independent part of the house, and to the public at large',<sup>17</sup> and it might be dismissed

as Patriot cant which the Commons had heard from so many politicians seeking self-justification in the eighteenth century. It was spoken however with a conviction which came not just from youthful idealism, but from realisation that a character for integrity and consistency was the only sure protection to a political career for a man without fortune like himself, seeking to make his way as an independent Whig. To his audience what he said about wooing 'honest dowerless poverty' appeared patently true. He earned enough from his time at the Exchequer to afford a two-month holiday in France in the autumn of 1783, but he had sought no provision against leaving office, and expected to return to the bar again to earn his living. The speech could not save Shelburne's Ministry, but it saved the advancement of Pitt's career. One of those listening on the opposite benches, Thomas Pelham, noted that 'even his enemies or rather opponents unanimously acknowledged it to be the finest speech that ever was made in Parliament'.<sup>18</sup>

The first results of this personal triumph were soon apparent. Two days later, Shelburne broached the idea of Pitt as his successor to his astute political manager of Scotland, Henry Dundas, who responded enthusiastically next day that Pitt's qualities were obvious and, moreover:

in place of being an objection his youth appears to me a very material ingredient in the scale of advantages which recommend him. There is scarce another political character of consideration in the country to whom many people from habits, from connexions, from former professions, from rivalships and from antipathies will not have objections. But he is perfectly new ground against whom no opposition can arise except what may be expected of that lately allied faction.<sup>19</sup>

Shelburne put the proposal to the King, who approached Pitt at once.

It was the first of three offers of the leadership to Pitt which he declined before finally accepting the fourth in December. His refusals show a great degree of political maturity and judgement in being able to control his ambition. He had set his criteria for taking high office in his 21 February speech – that it would be acquired with honour and retained with dignity. He told the King that only the moral certainty of a majority in the Commons would induce him to accept. His father's old colleague, Earl Camden, warned that he would be too dependent on the Court. He himself told Dundas that he would be at the mercy of North and his friends not continuing to oppose and 'in point of honour to my own feelings, I cannot form an administration trusting to the hope that it will be supported, or even will not be opposed, by Lord North . . . The first moment I saw the subject in this point of view, from