RALEIGH LECTURE ON HISTORY

SINCERITY AND INSINCERITY IN CHARLES JAMES FOX

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I

OVER twenty years ago, I met accidentally at Liverpool Street station Mr. H. V. F. Somerset of Worcester College, Oxford. I told him that I had just been talking to some historical society about Charles James Fox; and I described how—not for the first time—I had tried unsuccessfully to persuade my audience that, in the crucial year, 1792, Fox had not been greatly in earnest about parliamentary reform. In other words, it was not zeal on his part for that particular cause which, in my view, produced before the end of the year the famous split in the opposition Whigs. I remember pointing out that converging lines of evidence left no room for reasonable doubt about this matter; for they came like the spokes of a wheel, none of them quite reaching the centre, perhaps, but all of them showing where the centre indubitably lay. All this, however, seemed not sufficient for students of history, who wanted a single clinching documentary statement, supported by the kind of footnote that puts all controversy to rest. For a case like the one now under discussion, nothing indeed could satisfy some students except a written confession by Fox himself—an actual admission that he had been insincere. And I remember saying to Mr. Somerset in this connection: 'What chance is there of finding a politician who will actually confess that he has been insincere?'

In the following week—on a hint from Mr. Somerset—I consulted the Fitzwilliam Manuscripts, then at Lamport Hall in Northamptonshire. Amongst these I found the letter written by Fox to Earl Fitzwilliam on 16 March 1792—that is to say, almost at the last moment before the serious turmoils of that year began. It appears that the aristocratic leaders of the opposition Whigs had come to be nervous about his views, and on certain points an explanation had become necessary. In the part of his letter that dealt with parliamentary reform he gave the following account of himself:

> The truth is that I am more bound by former declarations and consistency, than by any strong opinion I entertain in its favour. I am far

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from being sanguine that any new scheme would produce better parliaments than the present mode of election has furnished, but perhaps the House of Commons in the present reign has been so dragged through the dirt and bespattered, in early times by the Whigs and in the later by the King and Pitt and the Tories, that one constructed on a new plan might be better from the mere circumstances of its novelty.

Addressing a man who had shown himself thoroughly conservative on this subject, Fox added: 'I much doubt whether the part which you have taken on the question be not upon the whole the most manly and judicious.'

The supposedly clinching piece of evidence is certainly often liable to carry dangers of its own: and, for example, politicians are not always to be relied upon, even when they are confessing their sins. It might be thought that, in March 1792, Fox had every reason for trying to minimize the gap between his views and those of the bulk of his colleagues, including not only Earl Fitzwilliam but also the Duke of Portland, the formal leader of the party. Perhaps this minimizing was carried too far when he suggested in the same letter that his divergence from Fitzwilliam on the question of the treatment of dissenters was a matter of theory, not likely to have any effect in practice. But he was prepared to be firm with his colleagues and he did make it clear in this letter that, party or no party, he was going to continue the agitation for the abolition of the slave trade. We can take it that, in what he said about parliamentary reform, he is not likely to have been merely hoaxing or humouring Fitzwilliam.[1] And this conclusion, in point of fact, coincides with the one that emerges from the rest of the evidence. For example, a little later, the Earl of Carlisle, a friend and colleague, wrote of Fox: 'I acquit him of any real love of reform of parliament.'[2] But perhaps those who study Fox from this point of view soon have to begin asking themselves what sincerity really is.

II

He presents us with quite a problem from the very start, and though his political enemies would often testify to his charm and ability, the people who were very close to him could be severely critical. His conversation might seem utterly frank and uninhibited, but, even without any hint from contemporary reporting or description, we find ourselves wondering sometimes

[1] Fox to Earl Fitzwilliam, 16 Mar. 1792, Milton MSS., Northants. Record Office.

[2] Earl of Carlisle to Fitzwilliam, 19 Oct. 1792, ibid.

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about the depth of his genuineness. When he was a young man he was reproached by his mother for neglecting his father—that father who had been perhaps too undiscriminating, too permissive, in his love for him. He replied to the charge in a letter that was loaded with an insistent kind of affection; and though in a way one cannot doubt the sincerity of this, one has to say that it was sincerity 'of a sort', sincerity 'at a certain level'—it proved to be a handy means of turning the tables on a complaining parent. He wrote to his mother: 'I am sure if you had known how miserable you have made me you would not have written [in the way you did].' He rubbed the point in:

> What have I done to forfeit your esteem? Is dissipation, is imprudence such a crime that I am to be made the most miserable man in the world? Pray, my dear mother, consider how miserable you have made me. Pity me.[1]

Clearly it was the mother who was going to have to do the apologizing; and one begins to ask whether the writer of such a letter as this would ever in his life be deeply sincere—would ever be induced either to look at himself properly or to realize in any graphic way the existence, the authenticity of other people. At a date not far from this, Mme du Deffand was quite frightened by the youthful Fox—recognizing his charm and his friendly ways, but shocked by a certain hardness in him—left with the feeling that it really was not possible to get through to the man.[2] George Selwyn talked extravagantly about his affection for Fox, and was ready to say that 'never was anybody more agreeable', but he was shocked by what he regarded as the man's callousness when he found Fox apparently incapable of bringing home to himself the responsibility he had had for the financial distresses of his younger friend, the Earl of Carlisle. He now described Fox as setting at nought the solemnest ties and living only for 'the gratification of the present moment'. Writing to Carlisle he said that Fox 'was perhaps your first and warmest friend', and he added: 'I believe he still loves you, that is, as he loves [his parents] Lord and Lady Holland [that is to say], *à sa* [*sic*] *façon*.'[3]

[1] [Brit. Mus.] Add. MS. 47570, ff. 6–7.

[2] *Lettres de la Marquise du Deffand à Horace Walpole* (London, 1912), ii. 201 (10–13 Jan. 1771). See also, especially, ibid. 38; iii. 276, 285–6.

[3] George Selwyn to Carlisle, 5 Feb. [1774], Hist. MSS. Comm., *The MSS. of the Earl of Carlisle*, pp. 263–5. Cf. ibid., p. 264: 'such a belief in the necessity of Charles's being the first man of this country . . . that they cannot conceive there should be the least impediment to it arising from his own conduct, or from that of others.'

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On the political side there was something peculiar in the inconsistencies and apparent inconsistencies of this man who, after recklessly supporting the system of George III, had become equally extravagant in his hostility, and ended by claiming for the Prince of Wales the prerogatives he refused to permit to the King. Allowance must perhaps be made for the fact that he entered politics at an unusually early age, and that, no matter what side he might take in a controversy, he would wildly over-express himself. Also, he cared nothing about appearances and attached too little importance to the effect that his conduct and opinions would have upon the world in general. Perhaps it was just bad luck that he who came to join forces with the Whig magnates and then insisted to the last on the aristocratic character of his party, should have wanted in his youth 'to put a stop to an aristocratical party that has been gaining ground for some years, and which should it succeed, would be far worse than absolute despotism'.[1] Perhaps it was only curious that he who came to build so much on extra-parliamentary movements had been the one who, in 1770, had insisted that the opinion of the country was a thing to be discovered or measured only in the House of Commons.[2] A surviving draft of a speech intended for the House of Commons—and described by Fox as his first intervention in the problem of the American colonies—complains that, after the Boston Tea Party, the ministry of North might be pursuing only disgraceful, trimming measures—concerned merely to secure indemnification for the East India Company. Fox's initial reaction to this crisis was to say:

> Surely, Sir, when you consider the nature of the offence it would be more becoming the dignity of . . . a Great Country like this to declare a firm resolution to bring the offenders to punishment as well as to indemnify those who had suffered.[3]

He had a way of formulating more extravagantly than anybody else the case against those principles which, later, he himself was

[1] Add. MS. 51468, f. 4.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, xvi. 1264–5.

[3] Add. MS. 51468, ff. 13–15 [? Mar. 1774]. Fox at this stage plans to say that if the Stamp Act had been 'properly enforced it would have retarded if not prevented the factious proceedings of the Americans'. He adds: 'I hope to God my fears may prove groundless.' He changed his attitude later; but it is possibly in some connection with the above that Horace Walpole, *Last Journals* (London 1910), i. 316, writes (14 Mar. 1774): 'Charles Fox, without heat, left himself at liberty to take what part he should please.' Cf. ibid. 320. In Add. MS. 51468 there are also one or two drafts of a speech on the Royal Marriage Bill.

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to find most indispensable; so that, for example, it was he who, in the early years of his opposition to Lord North, challenged Lord Rockingham's insistence on the rule that the Whigs should accept office only as a body of men who would stand or fall together.[1] One of the ways in which posterity has failed to do justice to Fox has been to neglect the profounder aspects of his attachment to peace after 1792—neglect the amount of thought he gave to the matter as well as the depth of his sentiment in regard to it. But it was as though some evil spirit had attended him, prompting him to betray himself in advance. Only three years before the French Revolution broke out he was opposing Pitt's Commercial Treaty with France, and he took the opportunity to denounce the people who were fanatics for peace:

> Surely [he said] the example of Holland ought to teach the world that it is not in the long run good policy to be always sacrificing political importance to gain and peace. No country has for the last half century [had] more years of peace [than Holland] and none has so much declined in its importance.[2]

A further complication arises from the fact that it is difficult—perhaps it is impossible—to find any considerable body of structured thinking in Fox or to build his ideas into a coherent edifice. The works he leaves behind him are largely speeches delivered in the House of Commons, and one cannot recover the shape of a man's intellectual system by merely drawing lines from one debating point to another. His letters to party colleagues contain his responses to successive tactical situations; and here any given sentence of his might need to be ironed out because it would be angled to a particular man or an immediate purpose. In any case, it seems hardly possible to escape the conclusion that Fox—much more than other politicians—was governed by feeling rather than by intellect; and, this being the case, it was only too easy for him to have the conviction of being sincere. His feelings would betray him, however; and, perhaps more than any other famous politician, he would shock the House of Commons with things that he did not really mean, though he earnestly thought that he meant them. According to Whig report, some of his followers, after parliamentary debates in the 1790s, would bring him to tears by the way they

[1] Fox to Marquis of Rockingham, 24 Jan. 1779, Russell, *Memorials and Correspondence of Charles James Fox*, i. 206–10; cf. ibid. 213–23.

[2] To Duke of Portland, n.d., Add. MS. 47561, ff. 87–8. Cf. *Parl. Hist.* xxvi. 443–4, 15 Feb. 1787.

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scolded him for the extravagant things he had said—things that for the moment he had felt strongly but did not really mean. He himself, writing to a member of his party, Robert Adair, made reference to 'your letter and especially that part of it which relates to the apprehensions that are entertained of my manner of expressing myself'.[1] To another correspondent he pointed out that, if on Tuesday he had been unable to speak properly about the Irish problem even among friends, 'how totally unable [he would] be in the House of Commons to speak without that sort of passion which would be disgraceful to [him] and certainly harmful to the cause'.[2] In a passionate mood, however, he was equally ready to betray to the House certain opinions and sentiments which he felt to be really genuine but had never intended to avow in public. In one letter he regrets that a debate is going to take two days instead of one, because this will double his chance of saying indiscreet things—a danger he regards as very great. He goes on to illustrate the kind of thing he has in mind:

> For the truth is I am gone somewhat further in hate to the English Government than perhaps you and the rest of my friends are, and certainly further than can with prudence be avowed. The triumph of the French Government over the English does in fact afford me a degree of pleasure which it is difficult to disguise.[3]

Fox adds to our difficulties when he touches on the ethical aspect of his political conduct, for here (perhaps more than anywhere else) he relies on his feelings, and he resorts to a general formula: 'I know I am right', or 'I know I have done what I thought right and that is my consolation'. He is perhaps too regularly pleased with himself because he has done what was right, and even if we make allowance for the fact that in some of his letters he might be 'talking down' to Mrs. Armistead, there is a naïvety or a crudeness in his handling of these questions. Perhaps he insisted the more strongly upon the rectitude of his conduct because he had doubts and needed to reassure himself. When, in December 1792, it seemed to become clear that the breach with his old colleagues was unavoidable, and his enemies were making him unpopular everywhere, he wrote: 'But it does not signify as long as one is satisfied that one is doing

[1] [20 Nov. 1802] Add. MS. 47565, f. 209. *Parl. Hist.* xxxii. 456: '[Fox] said he was not a correct measurer of words.'

[2] To D. O'Brien [8 June 1798], Add. MS. 47566, f. 14.

[3] T. Grey, 22 Oct. [1801], *Memorials*, iii. 349.

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right, and I am quite so—I am completely.'[1] It might not have occurred to some of us to doubt him if he had not added those last words, 'I am completely', as though it were necessary to reassure himself. When discussing his resistance to Pitt's idea of a war against Russia in 1791, Fox produces a curious juxtaposition which in fact also occurs on other occasions. He writes: 'It is a great comfort to know that one is doing right in the first place, and, besides, whatever hurts [Pitt] in public opinion must do us some good.'[2] Most illuminating of all, perhaps, is Fox's letter to Mrs. Armistead at the time of the controversy over his famous India Bill in 1783:

> Indeed, my dearest Liz [writes Fox], it is no hypocrisy in me to say that the consciousness of having always acted upon principle in public matters and my determination always to do so is the great comfort of my life. I know I never did act more upon principle than at this moment when they are abusing me so. If I had considered nothing but keeping my power, it was the safest way to leave things as they are or to propose some trifling alteration, and I am not at all ignorant of the political dangers which I run by this bold measure; but whether I succeed or no I shall always be glad that I attempted [it] because I know that I have done no more than what I was bound to do in risquing my power and that of my friends when the happiness of so many millions was at stake. I write very gravely because the amazing abuse which is heaping upon me makes me feel so. I have the weakness of disliking abuse but that weakness shall never prevent my doing what I think right.[3]

III

There was one man who, still, to the very end of the story, put forward views of Charles James Fox which reflected very much what Mme du Deffand had been saying when Fox was young. He was Sir Philip Francis, a member, but not a very favoured member, of Fox's political group; and he said severe things that we might have counted as merely malicious if they had not been offset by his significant and far-reaching statements on the other side—the whole leaving us with the impression that he had brought to the subject a carefully discriminating mind. His final conclusion, which goes against appearances, and which he realizes to be implausible, is that the 'essential

[1] To Mrs. Armistead [*c.* Dec. 1792], Add. MS. 47570, ff. 195–6; cf. f. 193 and f. 197.

[2] Ibid., f. 184.

[3] Ibid., f. 153.

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defect' of Fox, and the 'real cause of all his failures', was simply the fact that 'he had no heart'. But he makes a distinction—he allows that the man had what he calls 'tenderness', this itself being, however, nothing more than 'a vibration of the nerve'. It was a tenderness that existed as something like a luxury of feeling in Fox; but, says the writer, it went no further than that.[1]

Francis calls our attention to that famous scene in the House of Commons on 6 May 1791, when Burke declared that his friendship with Fox was at an end. He writes:

> Fox made that outcry in the House of Commons about the separation from Edmund Burke, and shed so many tears, they who knew him knew that it was a farce and that he cared not one farthing for Burke. It was ill-acted too [he adds] and would not have succeeded as a [dramatic] representation.[1]

Francis goes too far in all this, for if his account had been correct the Whig party would hardly have been so firmly on the side of Fox at this particular juncture. Certainly we need not make too much of the attitude of the Whigs which was affected by an anterior political prejudice—they were hostile to Burke in any case, because he was threatening the unity of the party. The episode throws light on the problem of Fox's sincerity.

In reality Fox had been provocative in the first place; for, in a debate on Pitt's armament against Russia, he had declared that the French constitution—or perhaps he had said the French Revolution—was the most glorious achievement of human integrity since the creation of man. Burke, who is described as being visibly agitated, was prevented from replying then and there, because the lateness of the hour had made members of the House impatient.[2] But he insisted on having his counterblast as early as possible, and an obvious opportunity seemed to present itself not long afterwards in the Commons debate on a Bill to provide a government for Canada—a debate in which one might discuss whether French (or English, or even American) constitutional ideas could be regarded as suitable for inclusion in the project or required rather to be rejected. Burke informed both Pitt and Fox of what he intended to do, and although Fox did not like the idea, the two managed to discuss the matter

[1] J. Parkes and H. Merivale, *Memoirs of Sir Philip Francis, K.C.B.*, vol. ii (London, 1967), Appendix II, pp. 443–63, 'Charles James Fox', p. 459.

[2] *Parl. Hist.* xxix. 248–9.

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without coming to an actual quarrel.[1] During the preliminary talk, Burke can hardly have been envisaging the dramatic destruction of a friendship.

The trouble seems to have developed in a peculiar way: Burke, when he made his speech, was beset by constant interruptions and points of order. His initial protests against these things were touched with humour, in a way that was not unusual with him; and he complained of the 'enthusiasm for order', and scoffed at the 'rage for order'—then he called it a 'tumult for order', and, gradually losing his temper, spoke of 'most captious ideas of order', even 'fatigues and skirmishes of order which', he said, 'were wonderfully managed by [Fox's] light troops'. There can be little doubt that some of Fox's younger and less responsible friends were engaged in the not unfamiliar game of

[1] Ibid. 381–2. Cf. ibid. 248–9. Also pp. 361–2, under the date 21 Apr. (with footnote quoting *Annual Register*, 1791). I do not feel that L. G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party, 1782–94* (Oxford, 1971), has produced adequate evidence to make Pitt responsible for either Fox's 'outburst' on 15 Apr. or Burke's on 6 May, all of which would mean overriding the account given in *Parl. Hist.* xxix. 249, and Burke's own narrative in the debate (given in Fox's presence but not contradicted), ibid. 381–2, also the explanation by Richard Burke (see below). Indeed, if Pitt provoked Fox's speech on 15 Apr. by charging his rival with 'republicanism', it is difficult to see what he hoped to gain by it. He can hardly have allowed himself to be troubled by the fear that George III had been transferring his favour to Fox. But it is still more difficult to see how Fox could imagine that he would meet the charge of republicanism, or mend his own cause, or damage Pitt, by his outburst in favour of the Revolution. Pitt's speech on 6 May (ibid. 398–400) is more typical of his attitude and more consonant with Burke's complaints about his behaviour a few months later. He said 'he could not but think, that every asperity and censure on [the French Revolution] had . . . better be avoided'. And this chimes in with his conduct on 11 May when he intervened very quickly, declaring that Fox's further speech that day had 'completely removed' all doubts about him, as though he were anxious to use Fox's more moderate conduct as a basis for reconciliation. Fox's friends may have taken some trouble to persuade him to behave more reassuringly on this second occasion, and Horace Walpole in the letter mentions the report that the Prince of Wales joined in their persuasions. Fox and some of his friends may well have believed that Pitt deliberately provoked the episodes of 15 Apr. and 6 May; but it is quite the kind of story Fox's friends loved to put around—these were in fact the little tricks they liked to play themselves—the kind of thing which gave offence even to Fox nearly a year later. Mr. Mitchell is more on the spot—but is he absent-minded?—when he repeats Richard Burke's version of the episode of 6 May and tells how 'the elder Burke, as the self-appointed interpreter of Whiggery set out to counteract the impression which must be produced by Fox's last panegyric [15 Apr.] on the French Revolution' (R. Burke to T. L. O'Beirne, 6 May 1791, *Correspondence of E. Burke*, vi. 253–5).

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baiting Burke and it seems likely that the latter was right in his view that this had been planned in advance. Burke even thought that Fox himself was involved in the plot, for he pointed out that, besides replying in a militant speech—a speech intended to humiliate him—Fox during the debate was 'supported by a corps of well-disciplined troops, expert in their manœuvres and obedient to the word of their commander'. It is easy to see, therefore, why the quarrel became for Burke a bitterly personal one; and it was only when it was too late—when Burke had declared the severance of friendship—that Fox became quite alerted to the seriousness of the occasion. Only now did it occur to him to deny that he had directed the manœuvres against Burke. 'Upon his honour', he said, 'no one of the hon. gentlemen who had risen that day and called his right-honourable friend to order had been desired by him to do so.' But in a sense Fox admitted that something conspiratorial was afoot, for he said that 'wherever he thought he was likely to have his application complied with he had earnestly entreated his friends not to interrupt the right hon. gentleman'.[1] Here he was undoubtedly telling the truth, and, this being the case, it was perhaps unfortunate that his own first intervention in the debate had itself been a case of baiting Burke, teasing the exasperated lion.[2] Burke drew attention to its irony. It took an earthquake to remind Fox of that extraordinary devotion to Burke to which he gave expression before the end of the debate.

On his behalf it could be said that he had his own fears; and when Burke informed him of his intention of intervening in the debate on the Quebec Government Bill, he gave himself away—he asked if the minister, Pitt, had prompted the move; nor would he be quite reassured when Burke merely answered that he had in fact mentioned his intention to Pitt. It should have been clear to everybody that Burke's fanaticism on the subject of the French Revolution was a sufficient motor in itself; and in fact the younger Pitt tended rather to regret that this fanaticism was so excessive. However, Fox does seem to have suspected this collusion between Pitt and Burke, and he certainly felt that Burke was trying to ruin his reputation in the country—to ruin him perhaps even at court—by charging him with being a 'republican';[3] and this came out bitterly in

[1] *Parl. Hist.* xxix. 369–76, 384, 385. Fox's explanation, ibid. 391.

[2] Ibid. 368–9.

[3] Ibid. 389–91. Here Fox says that 'he could not help feeling that his right hon. friend's conduct appeared as if it sprang from an intention to injure him'.

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the course of the debate. On the other hand, Burke, when addressing the House, declared his regret that Fox had had so little time for him in recent years. Fox was probably right in replying that this was the kind of thing that happened unintentionally at certain stages of one's life,[1] and, if he was wrong about this, Burke had been partly to blame for his own growing isolation—he had been so obsessed with both the French Revolution and Warren Hastings. One might still feel that if of late Fox had been wonderfully devoted to Burke, this must have been analogous to the way he loved his parents—'*à son façon*', for he had not made the matter very clear.

All the same, Philip Francis does less than justice to the shock that Fox received when he learned that Burke was announcing the severance of friendship. Francis says: 'Even then, though I did not suspect his sincerity, I was little moved by his tears',[2] and indeed the tears, while being credible enough, may have come from a pool that lay near the surface. Fox behaved as though, down to this moment, he had merely imagined himself to be playing a political game; but now, having suffered a jolt, he realized that this had become a personal matter, a human affair, the kind of thing that tended to touch him closely. When, before the end of the debate, he implored Burke to remember how often he himself (Fox), in his speeches to the House, said things that he did not mean, he was using an argument that could only have come from a very real kind of sincerity.[3] If there were any doubt about this matter, it ought to be settled by his intervention five days later in a further debate on the Quebec Government Bill, when he produced an impressive justification of hierarchical society and property. It was sufficient to satisfy Pitt; and, it was clearly intended to reassure Burke on the issue which the latter regarded as most critical.[4] It is interesting to see that Fox carried out his determination to present this hymn to aristocracy—this peace-offering to Burke—after Burke himself had been irredeemably angered by what

[1] Ibid. 388 n.

[2] Parkes and Merivale, ii. 459. Cf. Horace Walpole to Mary Berry, 12 May 1791, Toynbee, *Letters of Horace Walpole*, xiv. 430: 'In short it was the most affecting scene possible, and undoubtedly *an unique* one, for both the commanders were in earnest and *sincere*.' Walpole saw Fox as responsible for the provocation, and confirms that opposition leaders (concerned for the unity of the party) tried to induce Burke not to reply. He describes how, when Burke was speaking, 'prodigious clamour and interruptions arose from Fox's friends'.

[3] *Parl. Hist.* xxix. 394.

[4] Ibid. 409–14

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must have been another sally on the part of Fox's light troops. The Foxite press had announced that, the Whig party having rejected Burke, he would shortly be leaving parliament. And it complained that Burke was accusing Fox of 'republicanism' in order to ruin his chance with the King. Now, more than ever, Burke came to realize his loneliness.

IV

At what may be regarded as the crucial turning-point, towards the end of 1792, Fox did not move forward as the fervent crusader—perhaps he was rather the prisoner of events, the victim of a predicament which he had too carelessly or too wilfully produced for himself. It might be argued that the very force of things left him no choice but to be earnest in future; yet we might wonder sometimes whether tactical considerations did not decide his ideals, or at least the degree of his attachment to them. Perhaps it was a small thing which, granted his peculiar temperament and position, determined the shape of his future career.

From August 1792 the French Revolution was brought to a more intensive stage, producing calamities like the September massacres, while the Duke of Brunswick was forced to retreat, as the French armies took the offensive—all this giving a stimulus to political clubs in England, and increasing their incendiary character. The more aristocratic leaders of the opposition Whigs were more quickly and perhaps more seriously affected by all these events than the ministers themselves.

On 6 November the news of the French victory at Jemappes made it clear that Belgium would be quickly conquered, that Holland was in danger, and that there had arisen across the Channel the situation which for centuries had always been regarded as dangerous for England. A week later Burke and Windham, after frantic discussions, had an interview with Pitt and his foreign secretary, Lord Grenville; and they gave these ministers the assurance that if only the government would adopt a firmer—indeed an offensive—policy against France, while also repressing the incendiary publications at home, a considerable section of their party would support such action and abandon any attempt to overthrow the ministry. Burke felt that the inertness of the government in the face of danger was due to the consciousness of lacking the support of 'the strong permanent aristocratic interests of the country'. This explains

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his 'very bold step... which he knew could not be justified by the common rules of Prudence'. Windham thought that the measure altered the policies of states and affected the future of Europe. Amongst the opposition Whigs, however, Lord Fitzwilliam, though he was anxious for a firm policy at home and abroad, resented Windham's 'proffer of his party to Pitt' without the 'sanction or participation' of its leader, the Duke of Portland. The Duke himself, on the other hand, had 'never never' agreed with this view. He doubted whether he would have protested if Burke and Windham had informed him of their proposed action in advance.

The effect of the episode on Fox was bound to be colossal, and a long-awaited decision was now precipitated. When Burke had reached London early in November he had still been 'not without hopes that Fox would come out right'. Windham had said that the man's sentiments 'remained in a great measure unknown'; and people like Portland and Fitzwilliam were still hoping that he was about to declare his agreement with them. Fox's more radical friends were also waiting impatiently for his decision, and one of these, Tierney, wrote on 14 November that he would be 'lost' unless he quickly declared himself in favour of parliamentary reform. The business of sitting on the fence made him moody. He would stay out of town, would evade old friends, would fob off questioners with the remark that he had not been keeping in touch with things.[1]

But then the mood changes and in the latter half of November his angers become mountainous. Even by the 14th Tierney has learned that he is disposed to be 'stout' on the subject of parliamentary reform. His ugly moods are repeatedly connected with the fact that he was so 'extremely chagrined and exasperated' by the conduct of Burke and Windham. On 24 November the Duke of Portland found his mind 'so much more warped ... I fear I observed symptoms of no very strong indisposition to submit to a new and possibly a republican form of government'.[2] Early in December Lord Fitzwilliam, to whom Fox had been particularly attached since his schooldays, wrote: 'I have seen Charles (Fox) ... I by no means like him.'[3] Because on

[1] For this and the preceding paragraph see H. Butterfield, 'Charles James Fox and the Whig Opposition in 1792', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, lix (1949), 319–23.

[2] The Duke of Portland to Earl Fitzwilliam, 30 Nov. 1792, Wentworth Woodhouse MSS.

[3] H. Butterfield, op. cit. 324.

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1 December ministers described some local disturbances as an 'insurrection', he fell into a rage, saying: 'I shall grow savage and not think a French *Lanterne* too bad for them.' On 12 December his old party-friends agreed not to amend the Address in parliament; but he declared 'with an oath . . . that there was no address at this moment Pitt could frame that he would not propose an amendment to, and divide the House upon'. His anger showed itself in his revised notions of party policy. Besides calling for the repeal of the Test Act, a parliamentary reform (at least of the Scottish boroughs), and the emancipation of the Irish Catholics, he proposed an extremist attack on the government, one which would 'load Pitt as the author of the present state of the country'. War seemed imminent, and his oldest friends in the party had sought earlier in the year to create a 'national government'. While they thought the situation desperate, he now said that if the attack on Pitt was only made 'violent' enough, it would bring administration to a 'stop', and the minister would have to go.[1]

For him this was the moment of decision, assuming that his recent conduct had left him with the opportunity for deciding anything. He appears to have said earlier in the year to the Duke of York that a coalition ministry ought to be established; for, otherwise, if war were to break out, he himself, being in opposition, would have to declare against it. The remark is one that he might very well have made, for he liked this kind of frankness and loved to give it a dash of naughtiness. The course he took at this time could hardly have been chosen for any advantage it would give him, unless, having been committed in that direction previously, he now judged it profitable to give his views a more sensational turn. Either he was tremendously earnest about the French Revolution, or he acted as a desperate man who knew that in any case there would be no possibility of a junction with Pitt. Alternatively, it was simply Burke's 'proffer of his party' to Pitt which precipitated a host of angry resolutions on his part. Perhaps all these factors were at work together, giving Fox's mind a more radical turn, creating indeed the Fox that the nineteenth century knew, really shaping his historical role. In truth, his letters in 1792 to his nephew, the young Lord Holland, then travelling abroad, show that his

[1] For Fox's ideas on policy and actions at this time see E. Burke to Fitzwilliam, 29 Nov. 1792, *Corresp. of E. Burke*, vii. 316; Fox to Adair, 29 Nov. 1792, Add. MS. 47565, ff. 163–7; J. Anstruther to W. Windham, 30 Nov. 1792, Add. MS. 37873, ff. 181–2.

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commitment to the Revolution was felt to be genuine enough. This attitude to events in France seemed to determine the whole set of his personality.

When there was an interval in his angers—and particularly when, in December, he could still hope at times to be able to save the party—he would speak in a touching manner about friends now estranged, though he was more wilful than they in the pursuit of policies calculated to injure good feeling. Furthermore, since it was so clear that he could expect no satisfaction in respect of his short-term purposes, he turned his mind to long-term objectives; and here he was more impressive—doing something creative with the predicament in which he had been placed. He held that if England ever needed a strong government in time of war the future would be grateful that something of an opposition had still survived, keeping the cause of liberty in existence. He determined that he would keep his small group of followers together, hoping they would stand as a permanent nucleus, and that, when the war was over, his original colleagues, his oldest friends, would return to their former political views. He felt that the future would be grateful to him in any case—grateful for the things that even a small minority might be able to do in wartime. Above all he regarded it as important to keep together a party that stood for Whig principles—to have this existing, however small it might be—so that the continuities could be restored when the turmoils were over.

It would generally be recognized that the key to this entire situation—as indeed to Fox's career—lies in his passionate hatred for the King and his extravagant fear of the monarchy. In 1783, when the Fox–North coalition ministry had been broken, Fox had written: 'We are beat . . . by such treachery on the part of the King . . . as one could not expect even from him.'[1] The ministry of the younger Pitt had appeared therefore as only the product of a royal coup, and even in 1792–3 neither its services to the country nor the support it received from Parliament had softened the judgement of both Portland and Fox on its unconstitutionality. There was something anachronistic in the attitude of the Whigs by this time, as well as in Fox's view that the French Revolution was essentially directed against the principle of monarchy. In reality, he

[1] To Mrs. Armistead [? *c.* 15–17 Dec. 1783], Add. MS. 47570, f. 156; *Memorials*, ii. 221.

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construed the Revolution in terms of English constitutional history. In 1792 he could regard the Jacobins as the equivalent of the Whigs.

Indeed, Fox believed that in England the Crown was winning the contest. 'In a very few years', he said, 'this government will be completely absolute.' In December 1792 he wrote: 'the King is . . . master of the country',[1] and he claimed that this had been the purpose of Pitt—'any man who denies this is either a fool or a hypocrite'. A ministry might be as bad as Addington's, he argued later, but still, if supported by the Crown, it would prevail against Pitt, the Grenvilles, and the Foxites combined. 'The Crown [if] in earnest would beat all.'[2] And when the Addington ministry broke the treaty of Amiens and renewed the war, this was because an insane King was driving his ministers to that policy.

And therefore the primary political objective—the real reason for having any politics at all—is to create a barrier against the Crown, and party is a matter of supreme importance because it represents the way in which the barrier can be constructed. For him 'a good stout blow at the Crown' is the thing that matters—'it is good to force the King to change'; and more than once when he talks like this he is willing to add: 'come what may afterwards'.[3]

Here, as no doubt everybody would agree, the student of Fox can feel that he has reached bedrock.

V

We might ask ourselves whether the story could not have been different—whether much did not depend on the angle which, at one moment and another, Fox gave to his personality. If in 1792 he could write with such fervour about the Revolution to Lord Holland, in 1794 he was 'ready to confess' that he had changed some of his ideas, and that

[1] To Mrs. Armistead [? 15 Dec. 1792], Add. MS. 47570, ff. 195–6.

[2] To Lord Holland, 23 Mar. 1803, *Memorials*, iii. 217–18; and to Lauderdale, 19 Feb. 1801, ibid. 325–6. Cf. To Fitzpatrick, 9 Sept. 1781, Add. MS. 47580, ff. 68–9, *Memorials*, i. 267: 'But is it not a little hard upon us, who expected to play some part upon the stage of the world . . . ? Indeed, indeed it is intolerable to think that it should be in the power of one Blockhead to do so much mischief.'

[3] e.g. to C. Grey, 19 Apr. 1804, Add. MS. 47565, ff. 124–6.

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he could hardly frame to himself the condition of a people in which he would not rather covet to continue, than to advise them to fly to arms, and strive to seek redress through the unknown miseries of a revolution . . . the French Revolution had exhibited the scene in its most shocking aspect.[1]

In 1800 he declared that the successive rulers of revolutionary France had been 'as bad, as execrable, in various instances, as any of the most despotic and unprincipled governments the world ever saw'.[2] At least he seemed not to be the meditative kind of person who broods in order to bring his mind into a unity—to make his Monday self square with his Friday self. Sometimes he gives the appearance of merely making debating points to himself. Perhaps his thinking was done only for talking purposes. He would throw the whole of himself into the momentary mood.

But it is easy to exaggerate the degree to which Fox, from 1792 at least, was a politician struggling for ministerial office—driven to insincerities by the pressure of personal ambition. The royal veto on his appointment, the virtual impossibility of a combination with Pitt, and indeed the general disposition of forces, made the chance of office from that time exceedingly remote. Already, at the beginning of 1792, he had judged the government so strong that opposition, he said, could not plausibly be regarded as engaged in a struggle for power. From the close of 1792, it is easy for us to exaggerate the degree to which he lusted either for office or for the game of politics. We may find it moving when we see this man—of all people—settling into such a Darby-and-Joan existence with Mrs. Armistead; but misgivings soon arise, and one can hardly help being a little saddened, a little puzzled, at the spectacle of this weakening and withering of desire. As time went on, he would be worried

[1] *Parl. Hist.* xxxi. 560–1. Cf. ibid. xxxii. 415–16 (25 Nov. 1795) where Fox says: 'Would any man assert, that although he [Fox] had often said that the first French revolution was a glorious event, he had asserted that the systems which had been built upon that revolution were good? So far from it, the most moderate of them appeared to him to be unstable at least . . . he had stated it as his opinion . . . that an old edifice well altered and repaired, was more likely to be useful than one built on an entirely new construction, of the structure of which they had no experience. . . . "If ever" said Mr. Fox "those persons who wish to destroy the constitution of this country, as was done in the French revolution, by rapine and plunder, by carnage and desolation, should become a triumphant party here, though I may not be the first, I am well convinced I shall not be the last object of the popular fury."'

[2] Ibid. xxxiv. 1361.

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when he learned that his friends spoke sceptically and deprecatingly about his resolution not to take office. He feared that the world would think him insincere; he claimed that he was actually unfit for the labour and responsibility.[1] He liked to be able to say that he was really working to promote the career of Grey. Certainly he accepted office in 1806, but the death of Pitt had created an urgent situation, and the alliance with the Grenvilles had been very much his policy—not congenial to many of his followers; furthermore, he conceived himself as having a mission—as being the man who might procure peace with France. Office itself was not the objective during these years, and it was more to the point that he had a great desire to do harm to George III. He would say that anything which injured or disgraced Pitt would be good for the country. It is curious that a man so distinguished in his friendships should have been so governed in politics by his hatreds.

He disappointed many who had put their hopes in him, however, and particularly the nonconformists and the lower orders of society. Some of these seem to have felt that the very basis of their faith in him was destroyed when he made the coalition with North in 1783. In reality he did not pretend to be one of those people who, like Sir Francis Burdett, were dedicated to a legislative proposal such as parliamentary reform—his great objective was to check the King and bring a new ministry into existence. Even when he came into office, he might be unable to achieve reforms, however urgently he might desire them. He would be able to govern only with the help of allied groups and even party colleagues to whom such changes would probably be unacceptable.

He was prepared to claim that religious liberty for the nonconformists, besides being a congenial policy for an enemy of George III, was part of the essential programme of Whiggism. He would not have been the man to rescue his country or the Continent from a rising aggressor like France; but it was useful to have the opposition led by a man who became so earnest a lover of peace, and so clear in his rejection of an ideological war against revolution as such. All the same his negotiations in 1806 were unfortunate. He seemed surprised to learn that Napoleon and Talleyrand would cheat even *him*.

On parliamentary reform he made one of his most extravagant statements on 14 December 1797—one which he prefaced by

[1] To Lauderdale, 2 June 1797, Add. MS. 47588, f. 7.

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the words 'I publicly declare', and which he afterwards recognized to have run as follows:

That a radical reform both of the representation of the people in parliament, and of the abuses that have crept into the practice of the constitution of this country, together with a complete and fundamental change of system of administration, must take place, and that until it did, I, for one, would take no share in any administration or be responsible in any office in his Majesty's councils.[1]

In reality he was to suffer some unpopularity because of the reservations which he had about parliamentary reform and his doubt about the wisdom of hasty action. But he had become more definitely a reformer now, partly of course because the measure was calculated to weaken the King. In 1796 he wrote to Lord Holland that:

perhaps therefore instead of saying *now* that the power of the House of Commons ought to be first restored and its constitution considered afterwards, it would be better to invert the order and say Parliament should first be reformed.[2]

In 1800, when Earl Fitzwilliam was coming closer to opposition again, Fox said that 'anything in favour of Reform it is impossible to propose to him', and he added the warning that no attempt should be made as yet to change his ideas. Commenting on this to Grey, he wrote, however:

That it [reform] must be part of a change of system there can be no doubt and Fitzwilliam must know as well as anybody else that you and I are so pledged to it that it must be an inevitable result of power being in our hands.

Knowing this, Fitzwilliam would 'gradually make up his mind to it; but that he should acquiesce in it immediately [and particularly support Christopher Wyvill] is beyond all hope'. Here is an illustration of Fox's view that a party tends to carry its refractory members along with it, operating therefore to elevate their political outlook.[3] Fox firmly held, however, that parliamentary reform was only practicable if there was a powerful movement for it in the country as a whole—a strong resolve to put pressure on the legislative body. Sometimes he would incite such a movement, though possibly declining to take any part in it himself, but sometimes he would discourage

[1] This was what Fox gave later (4 Jan. 1798, *Parl. Hist.* xxxiii. 1229) as his impression of what he had said. The *Parl. Hist.* account is ibid. 1126. Cf. ibid. 1130 and 1195.

[2] To Grey, Wed. 1796, *Memorials*, iii. 135.

[3] To Grey, Fri. 1800, ibid. 305; and Sun. 1800, ibid. 308.

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such activity 'till there is a more general right feeling in the country'—he thought in 1799 that 'nothing could be done by great meetings of the people'. Even if there was a strong spirit in Middlesex he tended to feel that the rest of the country would not in fact follow a lead from that region.[1] He would correspond with Christopher Wyvill and Cartwright (in January 1806, for example), but the problem gave him anxiety, embarrassing his relations with his constituents in Westminster amongst other things.[2] There are likely to be differences of opinion on the question whether the French Revolution hastened or postponed the achievement of parliamentary reform in England; but Fox must have had some influence on people of his own class in the next generation—or the legend of him had this effect. And it is not clear that he could have achieved much more in reality, whatever policy he had adopted.

Perhaps more to the point was the fact that, by his own repeated confessions (as well as in the view of Burke himself) he was thoroughly aristocratic in his prejudices. It is only through the aristocracy, in his opinion, that the lower orders come to enjoy any consideration in the country at all;[3] and he rejoices repeatedly that even his tiny remnant of a party includes the Russells and the Cavendishes,[4] the kind of families that provide leadership for the popular cause. The party itself is too weak to achieve anything, and therefore

> the contest must be between the Court and the Democrats. These last, without our assistance, will be either too weak to resist the Court . . . or . . . being wholly unmixed with any aristocratic leaven, and full of resentment against us for not joining them, will probably go to great excesses and bring about the only state of things which can make a man doubt whether the despotism of monarchy is the worst of all evils.[5]

It was not his idea that he himself should simply be guided by the voice of the people. In 1796 he wrote: 'Unless the people are prepared to be completely hostile to Pitt, I have no desire for popularity with such a people.'[6]

We may achieve a deeper insight into the man if we glance

[1] I. R. Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform*, p. 177; to Lauderdale, 12 Jan. 1798, Add. MS. 47588; Fox to D. O'Brien (received Jan. 1806), Add. MS. 47566, f. 262.

[2] To Grey, Sun. 1800, Add. MS. 47565, ff. 16–17; *Memorials*, iii. 306–7.

[3] To Lord Holland, 5 Jan. 1799, ibid. 149.

[4] To Grey, 12 Mar. 1803, ibid. 399.

[5] To Lord Holland, Wed. 1796, ibid. 135.

[6] To Lord Holland, 16 Sept. 1796, ibid. 134.

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at a reform which in his view called for immediate action—a thing about which he was clamorous and his lack of success was to be a national misfortune. It had reference to the admission of Roman Catholics to seats in the Irish Houses of Parliament. His relatives and friends in Ireland, the connection established under the Rockingham ministry in 1782, and the fiasco of Lord Fitzwilliam's career as Viceroy in 1795 help to explain the consistency, the sincerity, and the importunity of Fox on this matter. In December 1797 when it was thought that the French were meditating invasion, he wrote: 'It is to be hoped they will find some means of delivering Ireland.'[1] Once Pitt had abandoned office because of the veto placed by George III on his plan of legislative action, Fox became much more insistent than ever on this issue. 'The more I think of it, the more I think it madness not to move the Catholic question', he would say.[2] Many of his friends in the party—and even the relevant voices from Ireland, G. Ponsonby and Grattan for example—advised him that the time was inappropriate: but this only made him angry—he would repeat that he was 'vexed . . . vexed'.[3] He wished to raise the issue but found that an insufficient number of people concurred in his opinion. He tried still to recruit supporters somewhere; and since in reality he had made up his mind, he had a mood of rebelliousness against his own colleagues. At the end of 1803 (when the issue became most intense), he wrote:

> I think I shall not bear it much longer, but how I shall get out of it the Lord knows. I sometimes think that I shall call a meeting and tell them fairly that a great many of the best opinions are against it, but that I must and will bring on the business of Ireland as an individual.[4]

And the pressure is so warm that the reader of these papers soon begins to wonder if there are not perhaps some meaner (or at least some more tactical) motives for his insistence. And this turns out to be the case—a point made clear in letter after letter.

[1] To Fitzpatrick, 1 Dec. 1797, Add. MS. 47581, f. 7.

[2] To Fitzpatrick [1801], ibid., f. 97. Cf. to Lauderdale, Fri., n.d., Add. MS. 47564, f. 183: 'For a party to let go such an opportunity of embarrassing and exposing all its enemies is such infatuation as I never before heard of.'

[3] To Fitzpatrick, n.d., Add. MS. 47581, ff. 147–8; *Memorials*, iv. 15. Cf. To Adair, 28 Dec. [1803], Add. MS. 47565, f. 234; To Grey, 17 Dec. 1803, *Memorials*, iii. 442.

[4] To Grey, 17 Dec. 1803, Add. MS. 47565, f. 105; *Memorials*, iii. 444–5.

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Pitt, who has gone out of office on this issue, is determined not to vote for the Catholics now, when he needs George III again.

> If Pitt opposes [the plan] as they say he will, it will tend more than anything else to disgrace him and show the abject state of both the late Ministers and Parliament in the strongest light.[1]

Furthermore, though Pitt opposes the plan he cannot entirely deny what he had previously believed—his speech must in fact give some substantial support on the main question—he will be placed in 'the most ridiculous . . . light'.[2] In any case those who resigned with him on this issue in 1801—the Grenvilles, Windham, and other friends of his—will hold to their principles and support Catholic emancipation. And nothing could more effectively bring torment to George III.[3] Besides, says Fox, 'I own to a little desire to rescue ourselves from the infamy of acquiescing in the baseness of conceding the most important of all national points to the private opinion of the King'.[4]

Fox's attitude was different when, in February 1806, he brought his party into office along with the Grenvilles and their friends. He had already agreed that if he took part in a ministry clearly favourable to Catholic emancipation, he would be prepared to make some temporary allowance for the prejudice of the King, especially if he were unwell.[5] When the ministry was established he put the case to the Irish: if they insisted, he would do what they wanted; but, supposing he raised the issue of emancipation, not only was he likely to be defeated but Ireland would lose the benefit of a ministry unusually favourable to its cause.

Fox was not in a position to say that he would decline to accept governmental office unless a specific legislative reform could be carried through Parliament. The fact that the defeat of George III and Pitt was the prime object affected the rest of his priorities, for he could only prevail or establish a government through junctions with other political groups. Particularly

[1] To Lauderdale, 19 Feb. 1801, Add. MS. 47564, ff. 81–3.

[2] To Lauderdale, n.d., ibid., f. 184. To Grey, 27 Nov. 1803, *Memorials*, iii. 435. To Grey, 30 June 1805, Add. MS. 47565, f. 174.

[3] To Grey, 17 Dec. 1803, *Memorials*, iii. 442. 'I must give it [the raising of the Catholic issue] up but with more regret I must confess than I ever felt upon any political subject in my life. It is the only question that can be started to make what can be called a *cause* against the Court.'

[4] To Grey, 19 Oct. 1803, ibid. 429.

[5] To Grey, 19 Apr. [1804], Add. MS. 47565, ff. 124–6, and to Lord Grenville, 20 Apr. 1804, ibid., f. 128; these printed in *Memorials*, iv. 45–8.

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after 1800 these became the important things for him; and the coalition with Lord North in 1783 was not an aberration on his part, for in later years it was this aspect of his policy for which he struggled most. Sir Philip Francis made a severe comment on this policy of coalitions. 'Such sudden transitions from enmity to friendship', he said, 'from contempt and abhorrence to esteem and union, if it were possible to believe them sincere, are not to be effected without some sacrifices of conscience as well as opinion!' And then, he added, '[Fox] wondered that confidence in him and his professions had disappeared'.[1] Fox's explicit and repeated reply to this kind of criticism was that you cannot expect to achieve anything in politics if you are not prepared to combine with politicians you happen to dislike. He may have carried this view rather far. When even Thurlow broke with Pitt, Fox began looking to him. Thurlow's language is right, he says. Something therefore, may happen. He adds, however, that one must wait and see.[2]

He would say that 'he loved coalitions'. He was 'a friend to coalitions'. He 'thought it was good for his party to come into office if only for a month'. When he said sometimes, 'you know that I have no objection to any set [of men]', he clearly claimed this as a merit—a mark of greater urbanity in him. Some of his followers objected to his whole general view, rather as Sir Philip Francis did, and some of them drew the line at certain people whom he would have welcomed as allies. In 1805 he declared with some impatience:

> The Anti-Coalition doctrine I must always dislike. Without Coalitions *nothing* can be done against the Crown; with them, God knows how little.[3]

The objections of his friends would apply to all junctions, he said,[4] 'and would if attended to make all resistance to the Crown more impossible even than it is'.

> No strong confederacy since the Restoration [he wrote], perhaps not before, ever did exist without the accession of obnoxious persons:

[1] Parkes and Merivale, op. cit. ii. 445.

[2] To Fitzpatrick, n.d. [? early 1794], Add. MS. 47580, ff. 149–52.

[3] To D. O'Brien, 7 Aug. 1805, Add. MS. 47566; partly printed in *Memorials*, iv. 102.

[4] To Fitzpatrick, 5 June 1803, Add. MS. 47581, ff. 132–3: 'Are they [Fox's friends] absurd enough to think that we ought to avoid rather than seek the support and agreement in opinion of other parts of the opposition? in other words that we must never gain any accession of strength? . . . I have no doubt in my mind but a considerable desertion even from our small squad will take place before the next session is over . . .'

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Shaftesbury, Buckingham etc. in Charles II's time; Danby and many others at the time of the Revolution; after the Revolution many more, even Sunderland himself.

The coalition with North in 1783 was always quoted against him, he said, but that was because 'we were ultimately unsuccessful'.[1] Even that, however, had produced a formidable combination for the tormenting of Pitt during the subsequent decade. Even the Northites, in his view, co-operated so heartily that an imposing Whig party was in fact produced.

Here was the key to his real outlook. He regarded these political alliances as having a dynamic character. They represented the way in which a new Whig party, comparable to that of the 1780s, could be erected. When in January 1804 he made an initial agreement with the Grenvilles—nothing more than an understanding that the two groups would consult one another about parliamentary action for the overthrow of the Addington ministry—he wrote: 'Then the Grenvilles may, like all other oppositions, come at length to popular measures.'[2] Essentially, what he wanted was 'to act in a manner that may lead to the forming of a party against the Court',[3] and it was his view that any person who systematically opposed the King—even a Grenville, even a Thurlow—would be drawn into liberal policies, ultimately becoming a Whig in spite of himself. And similarly a Fitzwilliam, though he did not like it, would be carried by the party, brought to accept a policy of parliamentary reform. Fox showed discernment in his rapid realization of the fact that the resignation of Pitt early in 1801 would produce displacements likely to be favourable ultimately to his party; and at a surprisingly early date he was thinking of a combination with Grenville. It did not seem to matter that for so long a period Grenville had been an enemy, particularly in respect of the problems of peace and war—the point was that in Fox's view he would be a good party man. If the policy did in fact succeed, the accession of the Grenvilles would 'restore' the Whigs to something like the condition that they were in before the Duke of Portland 'deserted'. In his view this was the way to create a considerable political party—itself a momentous matter, since only by means of party could one check the King. And Fox was prepared to follow this method, even though it was so unpopular with many of his friends.

[1] To Lauderdale, 9 Apr. 1804, Add. MS. 47564, f. 218; *Memorials*, iv. 40.
[2] To Grey, 29 Nov. 1802, ibid. iii. 376.
[3] To Grey, 19 Oct. 1803, Add. MS. 47565, f. 100; *Memorials*, iii. 429.

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Repeatedly he had been saying that 'all opposition seems to be out of the question, perhaps for ever' or talking about 'the real danger of the total extinction of liberty and possibly of civilisation too'. The House of Commons, he says, 'has in great measure ceased and will shortly entirely cease to be a place of much importance'. He will add that he himself and his party would be able to do nothing, even if they came to power. He had even insisted in 1803 that Napoleon was the man who needed peace—that he wanted peace—that Britain alone was responsible for the warfare in Europe. In 1801 he had said: 'Bonaparte's triumph is now complete indeed; and since there is to be no political liberty in the world I really believe he is the fittest person to be the master.'[1] Since his judgements are extreme, his notions of policy could become desperate, and repeatedly he would say that only a change of king or a calamity like the loss of Ireland, or the resort to violent methods which he himself would never use, could remedy the situation. He said on 30 November 1795 that it was 'a reproach to the spirit of our ancestors, that the reign of [Charles II] was suffered to be protracted to the period of his natural life'.[2] Only a week before that, he had provoked great trouble for himself by saying (also in the Commons), that if certain legislation were passed against the will of the people, then to their request for advice, he should tell them that the question of their obedience 'was no longer a question of moral obligation but of prudence'.[3] There was, however, a real, and perhaps a more reliable, kind of earnestness in his determination to secure that religious and political liberty should again be the marks of Whiggism and that a party based on these should continue in existence in spite of the war. His services on behalf of parliamentary reform after 1792 were not without significance for his party and for people of his class; and, though the lower orders were right to have their doubts about him, it is not clear that anybody else could have quickened the pace of reform at that time. One important thing can be said on his behalf, and on behalf of a certain sincerity that was in him. It is difficult to imagine that a career devoted to the support of government and order would have suited and sustained the libertarian character or conformed with the prevailing impression—the prevailing picture—of his personality.

[1] To T. Maitland, 1801, ibid. 344–5.
[2] *Parl. Hist.* xxxii. 496.
[3] Ibid. 383; cf. 384–6, 449–50, 454–8.

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