

State Papers Regencies, George I, George II and the Government Of Britain, 1716-1755

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Government in the early eighteenth century was a very different business from today. The size of the central administration was considerably smaller and the tasks that government was supposed to perform more limited. Parliament, while an ancient institution, had only recently ceased to be a body that a monarch could occasionally consult and become a permanent fixture within constitutional practice.

Many contemporaries spoke of the value of Britain, as it had become following the Act of Union in 1707, having a mixed or a balanced constitution. Aristotle had identified three different forms of government (by the one, the few and the many) each of which could exist in a good and bad variant. Later commentators argued that by combining the good elements of each of these forms, a balance could be achieved. In practical terms, it was thought that the monarchy (the one), the House of Lords (the few) and the House of Commons (the many) in combination were superior to both Britain's continental counterparts and to previous constitutional arrangements within Britain. For much of the eighteenth century, therefore, British political debate tended to be couched in terms of whether one part of the constitutional trinity was becoming too powerful and undoing the carefully cultivated balance between these three elements.

One of the persistent questions that both George I and George II faced was how far their powers had altered as a result of the manner in which they had acquired the British thrones. The Glorious Revolution (1688-89) had resulted in the deposition of James II and his replacement by his son-in-law, William III, and daughter, Mary II. The process by which the thrones were offered to William and Mary by the Convention Parliament led some to believe that Parliament now

had the upper hand when it came to determining the future of the succession within Britain and that the monarchy was now limited by parliamentary authority.

A further problem that emerged in the course of the 1690s was how to deal with an absentee monarch. William's accession led to Britain becoming involved in a series of wars against Louis XIV and William himself was often away from Britain on campaign. Additionally, William was ruler of the United Provinces and maintained a continuing interest in and concern for the country from which he had come. His journeys home were increasingly unpopular and this was used as leverage when it came to sorting out the question of the succession.

By the late 1690s, it was clear that neither William nor his sister-in-law and heir, Anne, were likely to have any surviving children so alternative arrangements needed to be made to fill the British thrones. Given the objections to James's Catholicism, which contemporaries associated with tyranny and arbitrary government, it was clear that ensuring that future monarchs were Protestant was of vital importance. This led to Parliament passing the Act of Settlement (1701) which excluded more than fifty of William's closer blood relations on the grounds of their religion, and placed the succession in the hands of Sophia, dowager Electress of Hanover, and 'the heirs of her body being Protestant'⁽¹⁾. Sophia was a granddaughter of James I and VI and her mother, Elizabeth, was the wife of Frederick V, Elector Palatine, who had briefly been King of Bohemia at the start of the Thirty Years War. She had married Ernst August, Prince-Bishop of Osnabrück, who, through a series of astute negotiations, had risen to become Elector of Hanover (one of the most important German princes who elected

the Holy Roman Emperor) in 1692. Members of the Lords and Commons were glad that the Hanoverians seemed to offer security of succession over several generations but were also anxious to ensure that their concerns about foreign rule were addressed as well. Consequently, the Act of Settlement included a number of safeguards designed to protect British interests. The monarch was no longer allowed to create non-naturalised Britons as peers (William had made Hans Willem van Bentinck and Arnold Joost van Keppel, two of his Dutch favourites, into the Earl of Portland and Earl of Albemarle respectively during the 1690s) and any absence from Britain would require parliamentary permission.

Sophia did not live long enough to become Queen herself - she died a few weeks before Anne's demise in August 1714. Her eldest son, Elector Georg Ludwig, was proclaimed as George I and made a leisurely journey to London, arriving at Greenwich in late September 1714. Before leaving Hanover, George had set out guidelines for how his electorate was to be governed in his absence^[2]. Although the Hanoverian privy councillors were able to exercise some powers, all important decisions, particularly anything to do with the crucial area of foreign policy, had to be referred to the king in London.

George I was, therefore, both aware of the difficulties that governing two states might entail and alive to the practicalities of management. His accession to the British thrones had come relatively late in life (he was born in 1660) so it is not entirely surprising that he was keen to return to his Hanoverian homelands on various occasions after 1714. Although these visits were supposed to require parliamentary permission, it was quickly decided that this was an unnecessary

infringement of royal prerogatives so these aspects of the Act of Settlement were quietly ignored. George I was to make five trips back to Hanover after 1714 and it was during a sixth trip, in June 1727, that he was taken ill, dying at his castle in Osnabrück. His son was to make twelve visits between 1727 and 1760. These journeys usually took place during the summer. The parliamentary session in London sometimes had to be brought to a premature conclusion to allow the king to depart and parliament remained prorogued until the king's return (royal presence was necessary both to open the session with the king's speech and to sign bills into law at its end). On average George I and II were absent from Britain for roughly one summer in three.

Considerable insight into how government functioned in their absence can be found in the documents in SP 43 (Regencies). The geographic separation of officials between London and Hanover meant that decisions that would typically have been taken orally, thus leaving no necessary trace within the historical record, were now subject to discussion through written exchanges and thus become accessible to the historian. These collections of letters that travelled regularly across the North Sea show how particular policies were formulated and give insights into the mechanics of diplomatic negotiation, such as those that led to the signing of the Treaty of Hanover in 1725^[3]. Yet they can also provide other sorts of information. One of the ways in which monarchs in this period still retained considerable influence was through the power of patronage: that is, deciding who should be appointed to particular posts in the military, the church or the civil administration. Monarchical decisions were rarely reached in a vacuum and so personal intervention on

behalf of those seeking advancement was common. Therefore, knowing to whom the king was speaking and about what could be an important means of assessing whether specific requests might be granted and what the general lie of the political landscape was. In the early years of George I's reign, there were fears that some of his Hanoverian advisors, particularly Andreas Gottlieb von Bernstorff, were too influential and there was, in consequence, considerable relief when he left London and returned to Hanover in April 1721. However, when George I returned to Hanover in 1723, British officials were quick to point out how much time George seemed to be spending with Bernstorff and how he still seemed to value his advice^[4].

The interplay between foreign and domestic concerns also comes through clearly. Ireland had its own parliament in the eighteenth century, although all the legislation it passed was ultimately subject to the approval of the English Privy Council. As the Irish parliament tended to meet in the summer months, when the king was abroad, legislation had to be forwarded to Hanover to receive the royal imprimatur. In September 1719, George I emphatically rejected a bill that would have introduced draconian penalties, including castration, for Catholic priests found operating within Ireland^[5]. His reason was that he was engaged in a delicate negotiation to secure greater protection for persecuted Protestants within the Holy Roman Empire so attacking Catholics within his territories was unhelpful to his bargaining position.

Besides details of high-level policy manoeuvrings, it is also possible to gain insights into what the officials who had to travel between London and Hanover thought about their surroundings. The king would typically depart with one of his British ministers and an office-

staff to service the diplomatic correspondence while he was away, along with members of the court and his household. The direction of British foreign policy at this time was shared between the king and his Secretaries of State for the Southern and Northern Departments. The Secretaries of State shared responsibility for domestic affairs (and details of their dealings with patronage and legal requests can be found in SP 35 and 36) and then divided up Europe geographically when it came to partitioning responsibility for foreign affairs. While the Secretary of State might have some military (Stanhope) or diplomatic (Townshend, Harrington, Carteret, Chesterfield, Craggs, Methuen, Holderness) experience, his office of clerks and undersecretaries were professionals. Experienced and astute, their letters to each other illuminate the inner workings of diplomacy and what they really thought about those they met. In June 1723, George Tilson shared his recent experiences with his colleague in London, Charles Delafaye. Tilson had found the journey through Westphalia to Hanover rather trying and compared the countryside unfavourably to Holland. He had been impressed by his meeting with George I's brother, the Duke of York, whose position as Bishop of Osnabrück meant that he resided in Germany, rather than Britain. Of Hanover itself, Tilson observed that he did not find much improvement 'since I saw it about 16 years ago, but the town is now cleaner and not so contemptible, for these parts, as some wags would make it'^[6].

Important as insights about patronage, policy and political machinations are, the Regency material also illustrates structural changes in the nature of government. This process is most apparent during the 1740s but it has its roots in earlier periods of royal absence. While the king was away, he appointed Lords

Justices to manage affairs in his absence. The Regency council consisted of the major officers of state, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Chancellor and Lord Privy Seal, along with politicians, such as the Secretary of State who was not with the king, and important military or court figures. The minutes of their meetings, which frequently contain little more than lists of attendees, survive^[7].

The correspondence in SP 43, however, indicates how increasingly the ministers left behind in London began to develop an independent voice. This was helped by two factors. First, the visits that George II made to Hanover in the 1740s took place against a backdrop of a complicated and rapidly changing international situation. Europe had been plunged into war, following the death of the Emperor Charles VI and the attempts made by various states, including Bavaria and Prussia, to divide his inheritance and overthrow his daughter, Maria Theresa. In 1741, while in Hanover, George II negotiated a neutrality arrangement with France to prevent a French invasion. In 1743 George led his army on campaign, culminating in the battle of Dettingen, the last occasion on which a reigning British monarch personally led his troops. During his 1745 visit, George was summoned back from Hanover to deal with a Jacobite rising in Scotland. Ministers in London were concerned that they were being kept in the dark and decisions were being reached without proper consultation and treaties signed behind their backs. Their position was strengthened by the fact that in this period, the senior Secretary of State tended to be the one who stayed in London, rather than travelling with the king to Hanover. A group of ministers, the major movers and shakers, emerged in London who were known as the 'Select Lords'. These were the people

whose advice and approval was particularly sought by the Secretary who was with the king and they served as a useful sounding board for the formulation of policy. The 'Select Lords' were a sub-group within the larger Regency Council and they tended to meet together on the days when they knew mail would arrive from Hanover to enable them to work out a joint response in advance of the more formal meetings of the Council^[8].

The link with Hanover was, therefore, important in the development of a system of government that was less reliant on the presence and guiding personality of an individual monarch. At the same time, the material in SP 43 also shows the vital role that a monarch still played in the conduct of diplomacy and the distribution of patronage. Eighteenth-century commentators were rightly keen to praise the balance that existed within British constitutional arrangements but the maintenance of that balance was a more complicated and involved process than it might appear at first glance.

NOTES

^[1] <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/Will3/12-13/2/introduction> [April, 2013]

^[2] These can be found in Richard Drögereit (ed.), *Quellen zur Geschichte Kurhannovers im Zeitalter der Personalunion mit England 1714-1804* (Hildesheim, 1949), pp. 5-15.

^[3] SP 43/6 and 7, 1725

^[4] SP43/4 f. 65-69, letter, 1723

^[5] SP 43/2 f. 165, 1719

^[6] SP 43/4 f. 45, 1723

^[7] SP 44/299, an example from 1740

^[8] There is a fuller discussion of this topic in Andrew C. Thompson, 'The development of the executive and foreign policy, 1714-1760' in William Mulligan and Brendan Simms (eds.), *The Primacy of foreign policy in British history, 1660-2000* (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 65-78.

FURTHER READING

Jeremy Black, *The Hanoverians* (London, 2004)

Ragnhild Hatton, *George I* (London, 1978)

Peter Jupp, *The governing of Britain, 1688-1848* (Abingdon, 2006)

Andrew C. Thompson, *George II* (London, 2011)

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