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*British Politics and the American Revolution*

While there certainly exist factors external to the British body politic which led to the eventual loss of the American colonies, it is foolish to claim that British politics did not play a critically important part in the outcome of the American Revolution. According to Ian Christie, “[t]o a significant degree, the story of the loss of the American colonies is a story of the misjudgments and the inadequacy of British politicians,” (Christie 111), and on the careful consideration of the politicians in power and the policies enacted during the twenty year period stretching from 1763 to 1783, this would appear to be so. George Grenville, Charles Townshend, and Lord North were all leading politicians whose actions (and the acts that they each sponsored) directly contributed to the outbreak of rebellion. Whether or not the eventual outcome could have been prevented by any of these men through a more delicate or considered course of action during their tenure is unclear (except perhaps in the case of Charles Townshend), as is the question of whether the war could have been won at all once it had begun; however, it is certainly the case that the ‘misjudgments and inadequacy’ of the men involved in the British government was of vital import to the onset of the American Revolution.  
 George Grenville was in power for two years, beginning in April of 1763, during which time the problem of providing for the defense of the colonies against Indian attack was an issue of grave importance. In May of 1763, the ‘conspiracy of Pontiac’ broke out on the Great Lakes, moving swiftly eastward to threaten the colonies. In order to deal with the issues that this raised, the British government issued the Proclamation of 1763, to check westward expansion by the colonists in an effort to limit conflict between the Indians and colonists. Following the establishment of the Proclamation line, it fell to the British to provide for its enforcement and defense, as the governments of the colonies were prone to shirk the tax burden that the new defenses (and the costs from the latest war in their defense) represented. It seemed unfair that British citizens living in England should have to pay duties such as the cider tax in order to support war waged for the benefit of people thousands of miles away while the people that were being protected paid very little towards the war effort.

In order to mitigate this disparity, Grenville chose to increase enforcement of the Acts of Trade, which culminated in the passage of the Sugar Act of 1764 which, “coupled with the steps already taken to enforce customs regulations, caused considerable inconvenience and hardship in the mainland colonies,” (Christie 48). Despite this, Grenville decided to move forward with the passage of the Quartering and Currency Acts in 1764 and the Stamp Act in 1765 (which was vehemently rejected by the commercial community along with the Sugar Act). In Grenville’s defense, these actions were to him nothing more than a concerted and logical effort to shift some of the burden of colonial defense from the home islands to the colonies, and it is apparent that he (along with the majority of Parliament) believed them to be constitutionally supported. Grenville was guilty of oversight in that he chose not to seek the support of the colonies for the Stamp Act prior to its being composed, but instead waited to ask for their approval after it had already been drafted, a move which prevented colonial input regarding the provisions of the Act and as such “would have required exceptional trust on the part of the colonists,” (Christie 52) to accept. If the colonial governments had been consulted regarding the Stamp Act, it is to be assumed that the eventual crisis which sprung largely from a lack of representation and colonial participation in the British government, would have failed to arise in such force as it did.

Grenville’s administration fell from power due to bad relations with George III, and the Rockingham administration took over in Grenville’s stead. Almost immediately after taking power, the Rockingham administration repealed the Stamp Act, a step intended to ease tensions and compensate for Grenville’s oversight. Unfortunately for the British Empire and the interests of a peaceful resolution to the problem of the American colonies, however, the Rockingham Whigs fell from power shortly after repealing the Stamp Act in 1766, and were replaced by the Chatham administration, of which Charles Townshend was a key member as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Townshend proposed and passed the Revenue Act of 1767, which established a host of new customs duties on all manner of popular imports into the colonies, including tea, in an attempt to offset the drain which colonial administration and defense placed upon the coffers of the British government by using the money collected to fund the Civil Lists in the colonies. In spite of the high degree of disagreement which existed and was voiced through the formation of organized resistance to the enforcement of the new duties, “Townshend believed that he was learning the lessons of the Stamp Act crisis…that imperial officials needed…a source of revenue independent of the colonial assemblies, otherwise government could be [stopped] whenever the…assemblies desired,” (O’Gorman 191). Soon after these duties were put into place, the not-so-long-dead cry of “no taxation without representation” went up again in light of the near-impossibility of anyone avoiding the payment of at least some of the duties and the use of the revenue to fund the civil lists, making the Revenue Act appear to the colonists to function as a *de facto* tax, and violence broke out in Boston and Virginia.   
 Christie argues that far from helping solve the problem or even being a well-considered, though ultimately mistaken policy move considering the situation (as Grenville’s actions probably were), “Townshend’s revenue measures were an incoherent and inconsequent makeshift, arising largely out of his pathological craving for adulation,” (Christie 113). Clearly, such legislation was not going to make the circumstances any better, but it seems too much to say that Townshend instituted the Revenue Act with utter disregard for anything but his own self-aggrandizement (and, if Christie is to believed, something bordering on actual malicious intent). The legislation appears logical from the standpoint of a British politician interested in limiting the ability of the colonies to contest Parliamentary authority, and it is reasonable to see such legislation being put forward by politicians with fewer character flaws than Christie ascribes to Townshend. As such, the fact that its institution proved to be ill-advised is a reflection on Townshend’s judgment, and the judgment of Parliament as a whole at the time, rather than entirely upon his character.

As the situation deteriorated, it was increasingly apparent that a larger proportion of colonists were opposed to the Townshend Act than had been opposed to the Stamp Act. Through organized resistance of the terms of the Townshend Act by many within the colonial commercial sector, “British imperial authority and the system of commercial regulation-which…rested on…consent and mutual convenience-collapsed,” (Christie 73) and it became clear that London was running out of options with which to reconcile the colonies to British rule. In light of this, the Revenue Act was modified in 1770 so as to only include the duty on tea, restoring trade to near-pre-Townshend levels and bringing to an end the non-consumption/non-importation agreements which many colonial merchants had made in order to protest the Revenue Act. However, the situation remained tenuous, with smuggling and customs avoidance operations continuing more or less unchecked.  
 The issue of the British government’s right to tax and interfere with local policy in the colonies without direct representation in Parliament was once again tested in December 1773 with the Boston Tea Party’s destruction of £10,000 of British tea. Though the colonists assumed that the British government would make a conciliatory effort as it had in the case of the Sugar Act, Stamp Act, and Revenue Act, the new government of Lord North had no such intentions. Lord North’s government believed that the colonies needed to be brought into line by forceful legislation at the very least, and by actual force if necessary. In pursuit of this end, the North administration brought a series of “Intolerable” acts to bear upon the issue, including the Boston Port Act, which closed the port of Boston, the Massachusetts Bay Regulation Act, which abolished the elected government of the Massachusetts Bay colony and turned it over to the Crown, and the Quebec Act, which the colonists took as a stark denial of their rights to expand westward and a further attempt on the part of the British government to assert total control over the colonies. When General Thomas Gage arrived in Boston in 1774, the situation was such that he “regarded it as impossible, with the troops at his command, to enforce order or obedience to the Coercive Acts,” (Christie 90). With the armament of the colonial militias and the rapid growth of the list of grievances held by the colonies, the entire matter was balanced on the edge of a knife as 1774 drew to a close.

Despite the efforts of Lord North to appease the colonies with his Conciliatory Proposition, Chatham’s Conciliation Bill, and Burke’s plan to assent to the demands of the first Continental Congress, neither of which were passed in early 1775, it was clear that the revolutionary cry had grown far beyond mere “taxation without representation;” the colonists increasingly desired a measure of autonomy that Parliament was unwilling to grant. Following the clash at Lexington-Concord in 1775, Congress “sent the Olive Branch Petition to King George III. This affirmed the colonists’ wish to remain within the British Empire but only on the terms [of the Philadelphia Congress],” (O’Gorman 194). But this was not something that Parliament was willing to grant at the time. By the time that Lord North proposed the repeal of the Coercive Acts in February 1778, Congress had long since issued the Declaration of Independence, and it was too late for political reconciliation with England on grounds of anything short of the recognition of that independence. From this point on, the British government had no hope of victory save for on the battlefield, and “[o]nce Britain was faced with…global war, the likelihood of defeating the American rebels was sharply reduced,” (O’Gorman 198) which, along with the fact that Britain was at a significant disadvantage fighting a war 3000 miles away from London, proved ultimately insurmountable.

Both Christie and O’Gorman seem to agree, and are equally correct in their assessment that politics played a significant role in the loss of the American colonies. However, Christie’s repeated insistence that individual British politicians deserve the brunt of the blame is suspect. O’Gorman sees things in a broader scope, realizing that the political situation in the colonies was a difficult and complex one to handle through legislation and noting that few men could have stemmed the tide of revolution once it had begun. For instance, had Grenville waited to present a finished draft of the Stamp Act for the colonial assemblies to agree to or merely sought the colonies’ input during the drafting process, the cry of “no taxation without representation” would probably not have found as fertile ground to take hold in, as the representatives of the American colonies would have been allowed to represent the interests of their constituents to their government in helping draft the Act, but Grenville’s decision not to wait was a result of the political situation and the belief held commonly within the British government that Parliamentary rule needed to be asserted over the colonists in short order. Had Grenville’s administration held off on passing the Stamp Act, it would not have had to have been repealed by the Rockingham administration, and the Declaratory Act which, “assigned a greater authority to Parliament than Grenville had originally asserted with the Stamp Act,” (Christie 66) would not have had to have been put into place by Parliament. This being the case, the intense political confusion which it created over the enumerated powers of Parliament with respect to taxing and legislating for the colonies that resulted would not have come about. The Revenue Act would have not rekindled the animosity felt during the time of the Stamp Act, and Lord North would not have inherited a situation where political victory was so unlikely, despite his best efforts to quell it once and for all with the Coercive Acts. All things considered, it would appear that the American Revolution came about more through the repeated failings of the British government to rise to the occasion than through the existence of incompetent politicians in places of great power during the period.