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Marquess of Rockingham



13 July 1765 to 30 July 1766; 27 March to 1 July 1782
Whig

By Jesse Norman

Full name: Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquess of Rockingham

Born: 13 May 1730, Wentworth House, Rotherham

Died: 1 July 1782, Wimbledon, London. Buried at York Minster

Education: Westminster School

Married to Mary Bright; no children

Quotation: ‘The King can have no interests, no dignity, no views whatever, distinct from those of his people.’

CHARLES WATSON-WENTWORTH, 2ND Marquess of Rockingham, was the eighth British prime minister to have held that office since it took recognisably modern form in the hands of Robert Walpole. But otherwise he was everything Walpole was not:

aristocratic, retiring in disposition if sporadically headstrong, a poor public speaker, personally incorruptible, but of limited energy and executive capability.

These are not in general the qualities of a successful politician, then or now. Rockingham spent little time in office, and his administration has been treated with icy condescension by historians ever since. For many, he is little more than a figure of fun, notable only for his love of the turf, for giving the St Leger its name, and for commissioning from George Stubbs a magnificent life-size painting of his horse Whistlejacket, which hangs today in the National Gallery in London.

His home, Wentworth Woodhouse, was the largest private house in Britain, with some 365 rooms (no one is sure exactly how many) and a magnificent East Front of 606 feet, the longest façade of its kind in Europe. But it was gravely damaged by Emanuel Shinwell and the post-war Labour government, which pushed open-cast coal mining right up to the house, apparently for reasons of class warfare, and it still stands in need of comprehensive restoration.

In fact, however, there are three linked achievements for which Rockingham must always command admiration. He formed and led for almost twenty years what is recognisably the first proto-political party; he was the friend and patron of Edmund Burke, the greatest philosopher-politician of the past three hundred years; and he supported Burke in and out of office while Burke laid down the intellectual basis of modern representative government.

Rockingham was born on 13 May 1730 in what was then called Wentworth House, near Rotherham, Yorkshire, the third child and only surviving son of Thomas, 1st Marquess, and Anne, daughter of the 2nd Earl of Nottingham and 7th Earl of Winchilsea. The family was fabulously wealthy: at a time when a gentleman could live on £300 a year, the young Marquess had an annual income of over £20,000, which doubled over his lifetime. He went to Westminster School in 1738, before completing his education via a Grand Tour in 1746–50; when his father then died, he acceded to the marquessate and got married. En route he had been gazetted a colonel, presented himself at the age of fifteen to the Duke of Cumberland as a volunteer against Bonnie Prince Charlie and the revolting Jacobites, and picked up what may have been a serious

case of venereal disease. Possibly as a result, his marriage to Mary Bright – herself a considerable heiress – though loving and long-lasting, produced no children.

Rockingham spent the next decade learning to discharge the county responsibilities of a great aristocrat, improving his estates, gambling and horse-racing, and making periodic and occasionally successful forays into local politics. But he gradually became more active in Westminster. Family connections drew him close to the Duke of Newcastle, Walpole's Whig lieutenant and the great power-broker of the era, who followed his brother, Henry Pelham, as prime minister first in 1754 and then again, after a brief interruption, in 1756. In 1760 Rockingham was nominated for the Order of the Garter, and he assisted at the coronation of George III in 1761. But he had little taste for the new King's politics, for his willingness to intervene in politics, or for his favourite, the Earl of Bute, and resigned when Newcastle went out of office in May 1762.

The 1760s were a time of pressure-cooker politics in Britain, with six brief administrations – each unhappy in its own way – in a decade. The central question was how to deal with the financial and administrative aftermath of the Seven Years' War (1756–63), the first truly global conflict, in which Britain had defeated France across five continents and laid the foundations of an empire. With his wealth, modesty and personal charm, Rockingham had come to play a central role in organising the Whigs behind the scenes. When the other candidates all proved to be unpalatable to each other or to the King, he accepted the premiership in June 1765. He had never held ministerial office before, a characteristic he shares with Ramsay MacDonald, Tony Blair and David Cameron. It is an eclectic bunch.

In all, Rockingham was to hold office for only fifteen months, in two governments separated by sixteen years. The centrepiece of his first administration, which ended in July 1766, was the tumultuous repeal of the Stamp Act, a tax on legal documents and other goods levied to pay off war debt, and widely despised among the American colonies, which swiftly adopted the slogan of 'no taxation without representation'. In an effort to placate parliamentary hard-liners, the new government under Rockingham removed the duty

but passed a Declaratory Act, which insisted on Britain's right to tax in principle and only inflamed the colonists further.

Rockingham had hoped for a swift return to office, but in the event it took sixteen years. When he finally made it back in 1782, his focus was on ending the American War of Independence, and on relief of the poor. But viewed with hindsight, what matters is what happened – and what did not happen – in between.

Eighteenth-century political opinion tended to view parliamentary groupings outside government disparagingly under the heading of 'faction': unhelpful and adventitious alliances held together by patronage and self-interest, short in duration, and targeted on some specific political campaign or goal. But by the late 1760s, it was becoming clear that the Whig politicians around Rockingham – an estimated sixty MPs and thirty peers – did not conform to this description.

At their centre was the young Edmund Burke. Burke was a direct contemporary of Rockingham, but, as a university-educated Irishman of 'the middling sort', of radically different social and economic origin. By the age of thirty-five he had become the editor of an influential periodical and digest, the *Annual Register* and the third elected member of Dr Johnson's Club, and was increasingly recognised as a writer and speaker of genius. Dr Johnson himself was open in his admiration, once remarking that he did not begrudge Burke's being the first man in the House of Commons, for he would be the first man everywhere.

An astonishing sequence of events over a few months in 1765 saw Burke appointed as Rockingham's private secretary, Rockingham made prime minister, and Burke himself elected to Parliament. Although the administration quickly foundered, it did not – contrary to expectation and precedent – disintegrate after its loss of office. Instead, it retained its coherence and took shape as a distinct grouping in Parliament dedicated to the restraint of royal power, the protection of personal liberty and the constitutional settlement of 1688. In this, it was sustained by Burke's daring defence of the political party as a body of men 'united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some political principle in which they are all agreed', and later by the famous description of the duty of a Member of Parliament in his *Speech to the Electors of Bristol*

(1774): ‘Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.’

Much of this was due to the personal charm and capacity to inspire loyalty of Rockingham himself, combined with lashings of patronage and financial support. Rockingham set the pattern, combining personal probity with a consistent adherence to a core of policy and insisting on his group’s independence of both Crown and populace. At the start, Burke was a mere salaried secretary. But over time he assumed a crucial role, becoming at once the leading pamphleteer and an important business manager of the Rockingham Whigs in Parliament, moving them away from factional politics and helping to shape them organisationally and intellectually into the prototype of the modern political party.

As a result, when the political wheel at last turned again in March 1782 following the disastrous battle of Yorktown, the Rockinghams were ready to take office once more. They had not fragmented, as factions had fragmented before them. On the contrary, for sixteen years they had maintained a distinct political grouping, a core of shared policies, and a coherent political identity. They had, in other words, created the first outlines of the modern political party. Power had passed entirely peacefully to this party, large numbers of office-holders had been forced to leave, and the new government had arrived with well-understood legislative intent. It marked, perhaps for the first time, a genuine move of party from government into opposition and then back into government.

The Rockinghamites had returned to office, moreover, despite the resistance of the King, and in pursuit of a conception of cabinet responsibility that has since become the foundation stone of British government. In so doing, they had pushed Britain one more step towards a constitutional democracy, and away from a purely personal monarchy. It remains a remarkable and woefully under-recognised achievement; and Rockingham and Edmund Burke were – practically, intellectually and morally – at its centre.

The new government sued quickly for peace with the American colonists. Burke was appointed Paymaster General, the most senior post outside the Cabinet, and devoted himself to economic reform and the reduction of Crown patronage. But tragedy was to strike,

with Rockingham's sudden death just fourteen weeks later from influenza.

Burke was distraught, and composed a valedictory inscription for the tomb of his patron, political leader and friend. Tying together person, party and politics, in part it ran:

He far exceeded all other statesmen in the art of drawing together, without the seduction of self-interest, the concurrence and co-operation of various dispositions and abilities of men, whom he assimilated to his character, and associated in his labours: for it was his aim through his life to convert party connexion, and personal friendship, (which others had rendered subservient only to temporary views, and the purposes of ambition) into a lasting depository for his principles; that their energy should not depend upon his life, nor fluctuate with the intrigues of a court, or with capricious fashions among the people; but that by securing a succession in support of his maxims, the British constitution might be preserved, according to its true genius, on ancient foundations, and institutions of tried utility.

Framed as the vindication of an underestimated life, Burke's valediction to Rockingham is a fitting tribute to both men. But it also sets forth a reforming ideal of party politics that was compelling in its time, and remains inspiring to this day.

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