

# The Hanoverian Succession and the Downfall of the Tory Party:

## A tercentenary essay

**Lord Lexden OBE**

**T**he insult was swiftly and defiantly embraced, and then brandished with pride, as insults sometimes are. The term Tory, an Irish word meaning bandit or thief, was adopted gleefully by those MPs – strong supporters of the monarchy every one – against whom it was hurled repeatedly during heated parliamentary debates in 1679–80 on legislation to exclude the Roman Catholic Duke of York, younger brother of Charles II who was childless in the legitimate line, from the succession to the throne. It was widely believed that, as an especially ardent member of his church (to which he had converted), he would disturb the recently established Protestant order in church and state which, since the mid-century civil wars, had included a more important, though far from predominant, role for Parliament. The Tories attacked the legislation proposed in 1679–80 as an intolerable infringement of the hallowed, divinely sanctioned rights of the monarch and hurled an insult of their own, Whig, meaning sour milk, which in its turn was at once taken up and brandished with no less pride by the opponents of the Duke, the future James II, during what became

known as the Exclusion Crisis. Arbitrarily chosen words of disparagement became names that would resound through subsequent British history.

The Exclusion Crisis turned out to be just the prelude to long years of recurrent constitutional turmoil and unbroken political strife, during which the two parties that had emerged in 1679–80 became permanent features of British life; almost all MPs and active members of the House of Lords came swiftly to support one or other of them. Outside Parliament the processes of government became much more extensive and efficient: a strong central bureaucracy came into existence for the first time, staffed by able civil servants like Samuel Pepys. Abroad, war raged almost continuously, as Britain and her allies fought on many fronts to defeat Louis XIV's ambitions for European hegemony. Victory in that vital national struggle was achieved on terms that were very favourable to Britain (thanks to the patient diplomacy of patriotic Tories) through the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 which marked the country's arrival as a major international power. In party politics, the final grand climax began on 1 August the following

year when Queen Anne, the last Stuart monarch, died and George, the proudly Protestant Elector of Hanover, inherited the crown under legislation passed in 1701 with the support of both Tories and Whigs which set aside the superior hereditary claims of no fewer than fifty-seven Roman Catholic contenders in the main Stuart line.

After a final burst of intense party political warfare (in which the Tories were routed), the long period of political instability which had begun with the Exclusion Crisis came to an end. A firm settlement was crafted by the Whigs in 1714, whose strength was underlined by the total defeat of the Catholic Stuart claimants, the Old and Young Pretenders, who took up arms against it in 1715 and 1745. The eighteenth-century British constitution came to be widely admired throughout Europe for the way in which it successfully balanced the interests of monarchy and Parliament in association with the Anglican Church, an essential arm of the state. No one in this period believed that power should be transferred decisively from monarch to party politicians, still less that general elections should determine the shape of

governments. Britain in 1714 was not on the way to becoming a modern, secular democracy. Leadership of both parties remained firmly in the hands of the landed classes. The Tories regarded themselves as having a special understanding of the needs of the landed interest, infinitely superior to that of the Whigs who had close ties with trade and commerce.

The tercentenary of the Hanoverian succession deserves to be properly marked in terms that recognize its true historical significance, unembellished by subsequent, largely Whig, historians. It brought a swift end to deep and long-running political turmoil which many at the time, including the monarch, regarded as a national curse. It is through a consideration of the preceding period of turmoil that the true significance of what happened in 1714 can be most effectively appreciated.

★

During the years of strife that preceded the Hanoverian succession Tories and Whigs found no difficulty in maintaining the strong mutual antipathy that the Exclusion Crisis had generated. The principal issues that divided them were of the most fundamental constitutional character. Whigs were attracted by the newly fashionable view that a contractual relationship existed between monarch and people; a monarch who misgoverned or oppressed the people could be held to have broken the contract, for which he should forfeit the crown. To avoid such a state of affairs the Whigs stressed that the monarch must govern in partnership with Parliament. Tories did not dispute the importance of such a partnership, but placed no restrictions on the rights of the crown. They insisted on the sacramental character of hereditary monarchy. In an address to the University of Cambridge (not then the most loyal institution in the land) in 1681, the controversial Duke of York declared:

*We will still believe and maintain that our Kings derive not their title from the people but from God; that to him only are they accountable; that it belongs not to subjects, either to create or censure, but to honour and obey their sovereign.*



*Queen Anne disliked the Tories and Whigs equally, and preferred to have representatives of both parties in her cabinets (Michael Dahl, 1705, National Portrait Gallery).*

---

Tories agreed. They fully accepted the doctrine of the divine right of kings whose wishes should prevail.

But they had a second doctrine of no less importance to them than the first. The Church of England was also a divine instrument working in the spiritual sphere alongside the monarch in the temporal. Paradise was available to the people through the rites of the Anglican Church, at least in England and Wales (the Tory writ did not really extend to Scotland and Ireland). Tories held that the monarch must support the Church in its national mission of redemption, while the Church must buttress the divinely bestowed authority of the king and endorse the ministers whom he chose to assist him. Those outside the Church could not be full citizens and Tories gave vigorous support to the laws which excluded them from participation in public affairs. Protestants who refused to conform to the Anglican Church were regarded by Tories with particular aversion, perhaps more so even than Catholics, and they were subject periodically to active persecution. Whigs, however, took a much more lenient view. While supporting the position and privileges of the Church of England, they argued that the interests of the Church were probably best served by a degree of tolerance towards dissenters rather than an insistence on uniformity. Whig and Tory positions were irreconcilable. Over the years the two sides did nothing to try and diminish the gulf between them that deep differences over the constitution had created.

Toryism rested on two simple watchwords: Church and King. But what if Church and King should part as a result of the monarchy passing into the hands of a Catholic hostile to the privileges and special position of the Church, forcing Tories to choose between them? They found themselves in exactly that dire position in 1688 when James II, the former Catholic Duke of York, over whom the party struggle had begun, fulfilled the predictions of the Whigs and began to give power to Catholics. In the constitutional crisis which ensued, the Tories chose the Church at the price of resisting the King. The Whigs exploited their anguish and discomfort, laying claim to the entire credit for replacing James II with his Protestant daughter, Mary, and her husband William of Orange

In no subsequent period of British political history was the party political battle fought with greater bitterness than during these years.



*'One of the most remarkable Tories of all time': Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, shown in his parliamentary robes (Charles d'Agar, 1678).*

– even though Tory support was vital for the transfer of the crown, accomplished bloodlessly at Westminster (though not in Scotland or Ireland). What might have been a moment of national reconciliation was represented instead as a great triumph for the Whigs and they began to think of themselves arrogantly as the natural party of government to which the monarch should invariably turn. The Tories were determined to turn the tables. From this moment on they dedicated themselves to establishing a decisive political ascendancy which would leave their opponents in a permanent minority.

In no subsequent period of British political history was the party political battle fought with greater bitterness than during these years.

Frequent elections, required under the Triennial Act of 1694, ensured that the country as a whole was divided as sharply and passionately as Parliament itself. Both parties had highly developed organizations which attracted abundant support in the constituencies amongst voters and the unenfranchised alike (the latter enjoyed the excitement and money that elections brought), and both maintained close links with journalists

and pamphleteers committed to their cause in a country where literacy rates were high by European levels (perhaps nearly two-thirds of men and one-third of women). It is estimated that at this time Britain had an electorate of some 250,000, or 4.7 per cent of the population, a slightly higher proportion than after the Reform Act of 1832. The country went to the polls no fewer than ten times between 1690 and 1714, far more frequently than any modern generation of democrats would contemplate in such a short period. The pendulum swung between the two parties, producing either small or significant majorities for one or the other until 1710. Then the Tories achieved two landslides in a row. In 1710 they won 346 seats, leaving the Whigs with 193; three years later, following a sudden upsurge of fanatical popular support for the Church, the margin was even greater: 370 Tory MPs were returned and only 177 Whigs. The party of Church and King had at last secured the ascendancy for which it had worked since 1688. Moreover, the monarch was a staunch Anglican. The Tories looked forward to serving her in government indefinitely.

For her part, however, the monarch acquiesced reluctantly. In 1710 Queen Anne, then aged 45 and frequently in poor health, had reigned and ruled for eight years. Like all her predecessors, she had a marked aversion to ministries composed of members of a single party on the very sensible grounds that they would seek to impose their policies on her. She always preferred to have representatives of both parties in the cabinets over whose meetings she invariably presided throughout her reign. It was through coalitions, or mixed administrations as they were called at the time, that the monarch's authority as the head of the government could be most effectively preserved. Anne disliked both parties equally, describing them as her bugbears (a word that had a stronger meaning then than now).

Historians have not treated Anne kindly, dwelling on her intellectual shortcomings, her lack of charm, and her emotional dependence on strong-minded ladies at court. It is impossible, however, not to feel admiration for a woman who conceived at least seventeen children and lost all of them; the longest surviving, the Duke of Gloucester, died in 1700 at the

age of eleven. She desperately wanted to leave the crown to a Protestant Stuart. Deprived of that sense of fulfilment, she nevertheless continued to work immensely hard up until her death, seeing her ministers daily, reading their interminable documents, chairing cabinet meetings, and listening to debates in the Lords which she visited incognito.

In 1710 she bowed to the inevitable. The Parliamentary arithmetic meant that an almost exclusively Tory government could not be avoided, at least for the time being. She had, however, a major consolation. The leader of the Tories, Robert Harley, who became Earl of Oxford in 1711, was a clever, experienced, moderate politician, instinctively attracted to consensus in domestic policy, having begun his career as a Whig before becoming a successful

## Toryism rested on two simple watchwords: Church and King.

Commons Speaker, trusted by both parties. Anne made him her first minister (the term prime minister was deplorable) in 1711, appointing him Lord Treasurer. He could be relied upon to restrain the spirit of triumphalism now strongly apparent among rank and file Tories at Westminster and in the constituencies. Many wanted to harry the Whigs mercilessly and launch a new crusade against Protestant dissent to please the extremists now dominant in the Church of England. Oxford did not intend his government to be disfigured by rash conduct or sectarian bigotry.

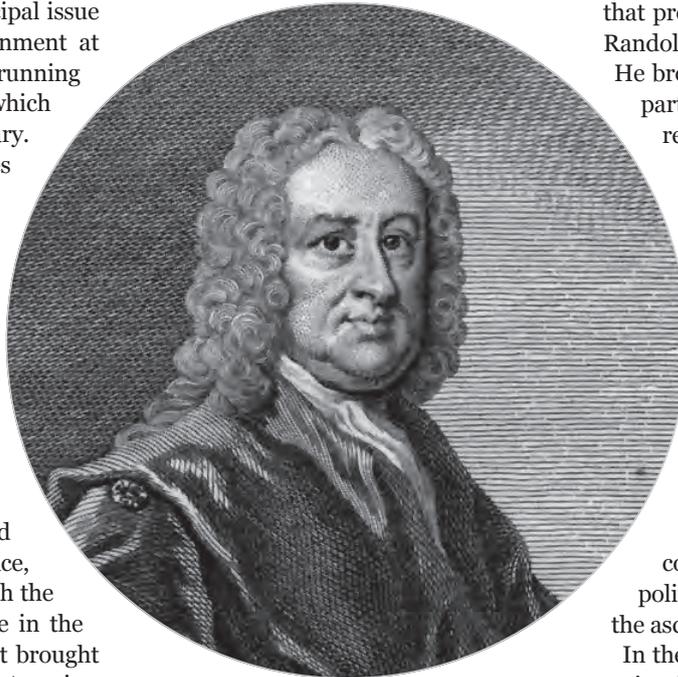


*Bolingbroke and his great rival the Earl of Oxford. The portrait in front is of Francis Atterbury, Queen Anne's chief ecclesiastical adviser (after the painting by Sir Godfrey Kneller, 1723).*

He concentrated on the principal issue which confronted every government at this time: the expensive, long-running war against Louis XIV, of which the nation had grown weary. The energies of the Tories were directed chiefly towards securing a treaty with France regardless of the wishes or interests of the continental allies – which included Hanover – that Britain had lavishly subsidised since 1689, while concentrating its own forces on successful maritime expeditions across the globe. The Whigs denounced what they described as a dishonourable separate peace, ratified at Utrecht in 1713, which the Tories rightly proclaimed to be in the British national interest since it brought large territorial gains in North America, along with valuable islands in the West Indies and strategically important ones in the Mediterranean, most notably Gibraltar. Above all, it established Britain as a major world power. The Whigs sought to block the Treaty in the Lords where they had a majority. The royal prerogative was used to create twelve Tory peers, the first (and, so far, only) occasion that the upper house has been brought to heel in this way.

Oxford pleased the Queen, delighted the Tories, and dished the Whigs. There was just one problem which boded ill for the future of the Tories. The heir to the throne in Hanover was distinctly displeased with the Treaty on whose key provisions he had not been consulted. The Whigs hastened to fuel his resentment. No invitation was ever extended to him to visit the country over which he was destined to rule. Some months later, when the Queen's health was clearly failing, the authorities in Hanover suggested that the Elector's son, the future George II who had been created Duke of Cambridge, might make a short, fact-finding trip

**Bolingbroke was the d'Artagnan of the Tories. He was eloquent, flamboyant and utterly ruthless.**



*The Whigs denounced Bolingbroke as a malign force in national life - but the Tory faithful loved him.*

to the Parliament in which he had been appointed to sit. The proposal was quickly quashed by the Tories in London. The pattern of subsequent Hanoverian politics, dominated by the Whigs, was beginning to take shape.

The Tory triumph at Utrecht was accomplished despite deep division in the Tory ministry. Oxford was in constant conflict with one of the most remarkable Tories of all time, Henry St. John, who was created Viscount Bolingbroke in 1712 (he was furious at being denied an earldom). Seventeen years Oxford's junior, Bolingbroke was the second most important member of the government, holding one of the two Secretaryships of State; he was determined to secure the most senior position by ousting Oxford as Lord Treasurer. The two principal Tories brought to their feud all the bitterness of men who had once been very close friends before falling out irretrievably.

Bolingbroke was the d'Artagnan of the Tories. He was eloquent, flamboyant and utterly ruthless. He behaved recklessly: an eye-witness spread it around that 'he saw him and another of his companions run naked through the Park, in a fit of intoxication'. He was the first in that long line of brilliant Tory adventurers

that proceeds through Disraeli and Lord Randolph Churchill to Boris Johnson. He brought to Toryism the passion and partisanship that Oxford consciously repudiated. In 1714 he introduced legislation to suppress schools run by dissenters and ban the practice of occasional conformity by which dissenters could qualify for public office by making an annual appearance at an Anglican communion service. The Tory faithful on the backbenches and in the constituencies loved him. The Whigs denounced him as a malign force in national life; Oxford privately agreed. There could be no stability in British politics while Bolingbroke was in the ascendant.

In the winter of 1713–14 the Queen fell seriously ill. The succession now became the only issue in politics. Bolingbroke intrigued incessantly to replace Oxford while the Queen still lived in the hope of dominating events when the succession took place. Bolingbroke told his friends that if he succeeded the Queen 'would not leave a Whig in employ'. Rumour and speculation ran out of control. Though the Tories had backed the legislation passed in 1701 which provided for the Hanoverian succession, around a hundred Tory MPs in 1714 favoured the Catholic Stuart claimant, the Old Pretender – James III to his followers – who was then living in France. If Bolingbroke overthrew Oxford, would he then prepare the way for a Tory repudiation of the Hanoverian succession and the installation of the Pretender if the latter would convert to Protestantism – or even if he would not, as became clear in 1713? Bolingbroke had some contact with the Pretender, but it seems clear that he never drew up definite plans for a Jacobite succession. Nevertheless, strong rumours of a Jacobite plot, masterminded by Bolingbroke, were widely believed. The Whigs spread them gleefully. In Hanover the Elector put Bolingbroke at the top of his black list. The Tories themselves were hopelessly split with the majority standing firm for the Hanoverian succession.

On 27 July 1714 the Queen sacked Oxford as Lord Treasurer. Bolingbroke worked round the clock to gain the vacant post – and failed. The Queen appointed a

caretaker on 30 July. She died two days later and the accession of George I was proclaimed. All Bolingbroke's work and hopes for the future lay in ruins. He was not yet forty. He wrote:

*The Earl of Oxford was removed on Tuesday, the Queen died on Sunday. What a world is this, and how does fortune banter us.*

With Oxford disgraced, the Tories lacked any able figure to lead them in the new Hanoverian era.

The last round of the bitter party conflict that had begun in 1679–80 now followed. The initiative passed decisively to the Whigs. They had never wavered in their support for the Hanoverian succession while the Tories agonised and quarrelled among themselves. It has been widely held that George I, who arrived in London on 18 September, was only too willing to see his Whig champions monopolize the posts in a new ministry. In fact this successful and experienced ruler, highly respected throughout continental Europe, wanted a ministry composed of both Tories and Whigs. But suitable Tories refused to serve and the Whigs, after years of Tory taunting and oppression, were in no mood to promote the idea of power-sharing. Oxford was sent to the Tower and Bolingbroke fled to France where he became the Pretender's Secretary of State for a time (giving his many enemies ample apparent proof that he had wanted to thwart the Hanoverian succession). The final downfall of the two warring leaders followed the dismissal of twenty-five Tories from the Privy Council, the removal of others from judicial posts, and the reconstruction in the Whig interest of the Commissions of Peace up and down the land which dealt with all local affairs including elections. By law, a general election had to be held within six months of a monarch's accession. Polling took place in early 1715 and produced a Whig landslide which subsequent elections extended much further. Political stability had been achieved at the expense of the Tories.

★

It is impossible to see how the Tory Party could have managed the transition

from Stuart to Hanoverian monarchy successfully. The prospect of a new royal dynasty in 1714 recreated in a more acute form the terrible crisis of conscience that the Party of Church and King had faced in 1688–9 when the Anglican Queen Mary II and her husband, the warrior-statesman William III, replaced the Catholic James II, the divinely ordained monarch. They were forced to choose between their Church and their King. 'The dread of Popery was the great counterpoise to the love of legitimacy', in the words of Lecky, the great nineteenth-century Liberal historian. In repudiating the King for the sake of the Church, they could then at least comfort themselves that the crown had remained within the immediate family of James II. The line of succession had been adjusted in 1688–9, not wrenched completely out of its natural course. George I was but distantly related to Queen Anne. This time it was impossible for the party as a whole to put Church before King. The majority backed the Hanoverian succession, but 'the King over the water' reigned in many Tory hearts. For years fond hopes were retained of a Catholic Stuart restoration in which the Church of England could somehow be accommodated. It was wholly unrealistic.

When Queen Anne died, the Party was already divided. The remarkable Tory ascendancy, achieved in 1710 and extended in 1713, had not produced a sense of common purpose. Moderates and extremists were constantly at each other's throats. The Party's overall fortunes were effectively in the hands of two extremely talented leaders, Oxford and Bolingbroke. By 1714, though serving in the same ministry, they could hardly stand the sight of each other. It was only days before the Queen's death that the conflict was finally resolved in Bolingbroke's favour, far too late to enable him to bind the party's wounds, a task for which he was in any case ill-suited. The crisis over the Hanoverian succession completed the party's misfortunes, condemning it to lose general elections for decades to come. Indeed there was not to be another administration that called itself Tory until the end of the Napoleonic wars.

'There never was a juncture, within the memory of any who are now living, when the rage of parties ran higher than at this time', wrote a confidant of Bolingbroke. The Tories' difficulty was of course the

Whigs' opportunity. They seized it with relish. They gave no quarter. George I, like his Stuart predecessors, wanted a mixed administration of both parties. He was thwarted. The Whigs were inevitably the new monarch's principal ministers. They used their position of strength ruthlessly to create a political ascendancy of their own – which rapidly came to be known as the Whig oligarchy – that lasted in one form or another until the accession of George III in 1760. They purged the Tories from positions of power and influence throughout the country, a process researched in detail by Professor Linda Colley. She writes: 'The year 1714 witnessed not only the Hanoverian succession, but also one of the most remarkable *coups d'état* ever staged'.

The Tories lost. The Whigs won. It could not have been otherwise.

■ **Lord Lexden** is official historian of the Conservative Party, and Chairman of the Conservative History Group. Full information about his work and historical writing can be found on his website, [www.alistairlexden.org.uk](http://www.alistairlexden.org.uk)

## Bibliography

- Sheila Biddle, *Bolingbroke and Harley* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975)  
J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832* (Cambridge University Press, 1985)  
Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party 1714–60* (Cambridge University Press, 1982)  
H.T. Dickinson, *Bolingbroke* (London: Constable, 1970)  
Ragnhild Hatton, *George I: Elector and King* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978)  
Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (London: Macmillan, 1967)  
Peter Jupp, *The Governing of Britain 1688–1848: The Executive, Parliament and the People* (London: Routledge, 2006)  
James Lees-Milne, *The Last Stuarts* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983)  
W.E.H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. I (London: Longmans, 1897 edn.)  
Richard Pares, *Limited Monarchy in Great Britain in the Eighteenth Century* (London: The Historical Association, 1957)  
J.H. Plumb, *The First Four Georges* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1956)  
J.H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England 1675–1725* (London: Macmillan, 1967)