

PRINCE ALBERT AND BRITISH POLITICS

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In 1952, the year of Her Majesty The Queen's accession, a brilliant and famous lecture was delivered by Sir Lewis Namier, the doyen of eighteenth century political historians. It was entitled 'Monarchy and the Party System'. In it Namier set out the basic elements of constitutional monarchy in Britain. This is how he defined them:

A Sovereign placed above parties and policies; a Prime Minister and Government taking rise from Parliament, and received rather than designated by the Sovereign, yet as 'H.M confidential servants' deriving from the Royal Prerogative that essential executive character that an elected legislature could not impart to them... Under royal government the sovereign was the undisputed, immediate head of the executive; under parliamentary government it is the prime minister; but no clear-cut formula is possible for the intervening period of 'mixed government', during which the direction of government gradually passed from the sovereign to the prime minister by a process that can be logically defined but eludes precise dating. The prime minister replaced the sovereign as actual head of the executive when the choice of the prime minister no longer lay with the sovereign; the sovereign lost the choice when strongly organised, disciplined parliamentary parties came into

existence... Thus constitutional monarchy as now understood hinges to a high degree on the working of the modern party system. In 1761 not one parliamentary election was determined by party, and in 1951 not one constituency returned a non-party member.

Namier not merely declines to indicate the exact point when Britain became a constitutional monarchy in the full modern meaning of the term, a state in which the monarch had yielded control of the executive to the prime minister and lost the unfettered right to decide who should occupy the post of prime minister; the great historian goes on to make clear that the exact turning-point cannot be established, for the transfer of power and responsibility, in his words, 'eludes precise dating'. What the political historian has to do, therefore, is to trace the process by which the transfer took place over time, noting the events by which it advanced. There has never been any doubt that Prince Albert played an important part in this great historical process which gave Britain the type of political stability – provided by a fully fledged party system – which it continues to enjoy in 2013. Prince Albert's contribution was much discussed in his lifetime. His biographers have paid well-deserved tribute to it. I would like today to offer some reflections on it.

When Prince Albert married Queen Victoria in 1840, Britain's progress towards constitutional monarchy was well-advanced. Indeed the term 'constitutional monarchy' had long been in use. It was applied readily, but loosely to the state of affairs that had existed since the late seventeenth century under which the monarch and his or her ministers required the support of the majority of MPs in the House of Commons in order to be able to govern. But throughout the eighteenth century monarchs and their chosen ministers had for the most part

little difficulty in procuring majorities for their policies, both by foul means (bribery and corruption) and by fair ones (chiefly a sense of deep patriotic loyalty to the Crown).

In this period Britain's two famous political parties, the Whigs and the Tories, who had come into existence in the late seventeenth century, were not significant forces on the political scene. Monarchs were not seriously constrained by them. In the early nineteenth century, however, the terms on which this early, more powerful form of constitutional monarchy had operated – terms weighted in favour of the monarch and ministers appointed by the monarch – changed dramatically.

By 1840, when Prince Albert became the stunningly handsome royal consort, the House of Commons had entered a new era. It was now divided along party political lines. Almost all MPs were to be found on one side or the other. The Whigs under Lord Melbourne had a majority – though a small and shrinking one – over the Tories, led by Sir Robert Peel, who were referring to themselves increasingly as Conservatives, though no formal rebaptism took place and the old name continued to be used in everyday speech alongside the new, as it still does. Gone were the days when a substantial number of MPs, some 200 strong, known as the 'King's Friends' and shunning party ties, had provided a nucleus of support for whomsoever the monarch in his or her wisdom (or the lack of it) appointed as first minister. Many of the monarch's permanent supporters had been furnished by constituencies with very small electorates – the notorious rotten boroughs – which had been seriously diminished in

number by the Great Reform Bill of 1832, a famous Whig measure passed against the wishes Queen Victoria's predecessor, her uncle King William IV.

In these new circumstances the power of the monarch was seriously weakened. That was made clear in dramatic fashion in 1834-5. William IV sacked Melbourne and replaced him with Peel. Following the example of his predecessors, the King dissolved Parliament in the confident expectation that the ensuing general election would produce a majority for Peel. It did not, and the King was forced to take Melbourne back. The Crown's influence was now insufficient to sustain the prime minister of its choice. Melbourne was, in Namier's phrase, 'received rather than designated by the sovereign'. Never again in Britain would a ministry come into office simply because the monarch wished it to do so.

But when the young Victoria became Queen at the age of eighteen in 1837, she did not trouble herself about the profound constitutional implications of what had occurred. As is well known, she became total besotted with Melbourne. Whereas her uncle William IV had wanted to get rid of him, she was absolutely determined to keep him regardless of the situation in the House of Commons, so emphatically demonstrated in 1834-5, which made it imperative for the prime minister of the day to be at the head of the party which could get the government's business through the House. As the strength of the Whig Party ebbed, Melbourne wanted to retire in favour of his old adversary Peel in 1839, but Victoria refused to contemplate the idea. Peel, she said, was 'a cold, unfeeling, disagreeable man'. She fomented a dispute

with him, which gained immortality as the Bedchamber Crisis, by flatly refusing to remove those ladies in her household who were related to ministers in the Whig Government. Melbourne remained in office and the Queen was made to look hopelessly out of touch.

In the new political world dominated by two parliamentary parties, her conduct damaged the monarchy. In its own interests the Crown needed to be prepared to work with either of them. In Coburg, Baron Stockmar, the Duchy's remarkable physician – cum - political philosopher, was aghast. 'How could they let the Queen make such mistakes, to the injury of the monarchy?', he asked. The point would not have been lost on his protégé, Prince Albert. The Prince's first, indeed his greatest, achievement in British politics was to put a stop to such mistakes, at least for his lifetime, by ending the Queen's reckless partisan support for the Whigs and lifting the monarchy above the party political fray which had now taken such a firm hold on British life.

The first principal beneficiary of that outstanding achievement, Robert Peel, had at the outset wondered whether the royal marriage would bring hope of change. 'Albert has been selected, I hear', he wrote to the great Tory social reformer Lord Ashley (later Shaftesbury), 'as a young gentleman who will not busy himself in politics or affairs of state, [but] who will rather pursue hunting, shooting, dancing and other amiable distractions. I am informed however by the Duchess of Cambridge [a member of another German royal family], who knows him well, that he is the reverse of this, and entertains very strong and ambitious views'. The Duchess was of course correct. But at the start the

Prince was given no scope to advance 'ambitious views' of any kind. 'I know it is wrong', Victoria said, 'but when I am with the Prince I prefer talking on other subjects' rather than about politics (a perfectly understandable view since he knew a great deal about so many other subjects). So her mistakes of 1839 were not immediately corrected. She sided openly with the Whigs in the general election that took place in 1841, the year after their marriage.

The deep embarrassment she suffered when Peel emerged from the contest with a majority of 100 gave the Prince the opportunity he needed to set the monarchy on a new course. There would never be another election in Britain in which royal funds flowed into the coffers of a political party; Victoria's financial assistance to the Whigs in 1841 would never be repeated.

The Prince ensured that the Queen worked exclusively with her new Tory government, and put an end to the correspondence that she had planned to continue with Melbourne. By 1843, Stockmar, a man not easily impressed, was effusive in his praise for the Prince's political skills. 'He is rapidly showing what is in him. He is full of practical talent, which enables him at a glance to seize the essential points of a question, like the vulture that pounces on its prey and hurries off with it to his nest'. With his sharp, quick mind this serious young man in his early twenties was already having a powerful effect on the politics of his new country. Writing to his sister in 1851, Disraeli described the Prince as 'the best-educated man I ever met', possessing 'great abilities and wonderful knowledge'.

The Prince immediately formed the highest regard for Peel; and so did the Queen who now cast aside completely her old Whig prejudices – a clear indication surely of the political dominance which Albert achieved as they worked ferociously hard at desks placed next to each other in the royal palaces, though hers stood empty for a while after each of the nine pregnancies with punctuated the first seventeen years of their twenty-one year marriage, enabling him to consolidate his position further. Royal approval was readily forthcoming for the bold, constructive reforms in economic policy and in the country's institutions that Peel undertook during his five-year premiership.

Royal support was particularly strong for Peel's self-sacrificial decision in 1846 to put country before party by repealing the Corn Laws and introducing a new era of cheap food in defiance of the wishes of most Conservative MPs. The Prince recorded his admiration for Peel's breadth of vision when the Prime Minister told him in December 1845 of his great national plan for 'removing all protection and abolishing all monopolies but not in favour of one class, as a triumph over another, but to the benefit of the nation' as a whole. The Prince made his first appearance in the gallery of the House of Commons on 27 January 1846 when Peel unveiled his proposals and plunged Britain into political crisis. Albert was immediately attacked by Peel's leading Conservative opponent, Lord George Bentinck, for giving 'the personal sanction of Her Majesty to a measure which, be it for good or evil, a great majority of the landed aristocracy of England, of Scotland, and of Ireland imagine fraught with deep injury if not ruin to them'.

Eight years later the Prince was the subject of a vicious and prolonged press campaign because of his support for negotiations with Russia conducted in the hope of averting what was to become the Crimean War. Does his conduct in 1846 and 1854 not conflict with the new principle which he himself had introduced: namely, that the monarch should remain politically neutral in an England where, in Namier's words, 'the prime minister replaced the sovereign as the actual head of the executive'? In fact the Prince never believed that because the relationship between prime minister and monarch had altered, the monarchy should sit mutely and passively on the political sidelines. That was not his definition of a constitutional monarchy. It should be impartial in its relations with political parties, but never politically inactive. He once declared that:

nowhere does the Constitution demand an indifference on the part of the sovereign to the march of political events... Why are princes alone to be denied the credit of having political opinions based upon an anxiety for the national interests and honour of their country and the welfare of mankind? Are they not more independently placed than any other politician in the State? Are their interests not most intimately bound up with those of their country? Is the sovereign not the natural guardian of the honour of his country, is he not necessarily a politician?

As this passage makes clear, a powerless monarch was very far from the Prince's mind. He insisted that the Crown must remain above party and his conduct was wholly consistent with that principle. But some of those who observed the Prince's immensely hard work as an entirely non-party man reached the wrong conclusions about his ultimate intentions, failing to see the

true scope of his ambitions. The famous diarist Charles Greville, Clerk to the Privy Council, was among them. When Albert was made Prince Consort in 1857, Greville wrote gushingly:

The manner in which the Queen, in her own name, but under the influence of the Prince, exercised her functions was exceedingly good, and well became her position, and was exceedingly useful. She held each minister to the discharge of his duty and his responsibility to her, and constantly desired to be furnished with accurate and detailed information about all important matters, keeping a record of all the reports that were made to her, and constantly recurring to them... and again weeks or months afterwards referring to these returns and desiring to have everything relating to them explained and accounted for and so throughout every department. This is what none of her predecessors ever did, and is in fact the act of Albert, who is to all intents and purposes King, only acting entirely in her name. All his views and notions are those of a constitutional sovereign, and he fulfils the duties of one, and at the same time makes the Crown an entity and discharges the functions which properly belong to the Sovereign.

It is the last sentence of this quotation which misrepresents the Prince's true position and attitude. He did not regard himself as putting forward the 'views and notions' of a constitutional monarch confined to a narrow role in the nation's affairs. He sought a continuing, large, political role for the monarchy. The Prince's political ambitions were studied with particular care by the historian Sir Robert Rhodes James, who was also MP for Cambridge whose university was brought out of its long academic slumber and transformed into

an institution of world-class status as a result of the far-reaching reforms initiated by Prince as its Chancellor. In his biography of the Prince Consort, published exactly thirty years ago in 1983, Rhodes James concluded that 'Albert's dominant purpose was not to reduce, but significantly to *increase* the real power and influence of monarch within the new conditions of British politics and society'. Professor Vernon Bogdanor, our leading authority on the monarchy and the constitution, concurs. 'Albert took the view', he writes, 'that the sovereign should remain detached from parties so as to be in a stronger position to influence policy, an influence which would be exerted all the more effectively because he or she was not partisan'. As the Prince himself put it, 'I hold that the Sovereign has an immense moral responsibility upon his shoulders with regard to his Government and the duty to watch and control it' – note the final phrase 'to watch and control it'.

The Prince believed that the monarchy's independent political role should be exercised above all in relation to foreign affairs. The Whig grandee Lord Clarendon, who referred cheekily to the Queen and Prince as Eliza and Joseph in his private correspondence, wrote that they 'labour under the curious mistake that the Foreign Office is their peculiar department and they have a right to control, if not direct, the foreign policy of England' (note interestingly that Clarendon like the Prince uses the word 'control'). The Prince's strong commitment to monarchical pre-eminence in foreign affairs led him into prolonged and bitter conflict with Lord Palmerston, the dominant figure in British foreign policy throughout the Prince's life in Britain.

Between 1846 and 1855 the two men were at daggers drawn. The following comments by the Prince give the flavour the quarrel and sum up the crucial differences between them: 'Lord Palmerston is an able politician with large views and an energetic mind, an indefatigable man of business, a good speaker; but a man of expediency, of easy temper, no very high standard of honour and not a grain of moral feeling'. They approached foreign policy from diametrically opposed standpoints, as the Prince recognised. 'We are often inclined', he wrote in 1847, 'to plunge states which have no wish for them into constitutional reforms – this I regard as quite wrong (*vide* Spain, Portugal, Greece) although it is Lord Palmerston's hobby horse. I, on the other hand, regard England's true position to be that of a protecting power for those states whose independent development may be hindered from without'.

These two formidable men clashed again and again until towards the end of the Crimean War in 1855 when they at last began to respect each other's great abilities and reached a *modus vivendi*. But the Prince was unable to establish his view of the monarch's right to control foreign affairs as a settled feature of Britain's constitutional arrangements. What his great efforts did achieve was an enduring recognition until at least the First World War of the monarch's right to close involvement in foreign affairs ---something which his son Edward VII was to uphold so successfully as the author of the *Entente Cordiale*.

It was at home during the 1850s, a particularly unsettled period in political life, that Britain benefited most conspicuously from the Prince's marked taste for political activity. 'Albert grows fonder and fonder of politics and business',

Victoria wrote to their joint uncle Leopold, King of Belgians, in February 1852, 'and is so wonderfully fit for both – such perspicacity and such courage – and I grow daily to dislike them more and more'. The two-party system that had so restricted the monarch's role in the 1830s crumbled. The Conservative Party split formally as a result of the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. The Whig Party split informally as its radical element and Irish MPs developed a habit of voting against the policies of the Party's leaders. As one of Robert Peel's colleagues put it, 'Princes are strong when Ministers are weak'. Albert was in his element at the centre of discussions through which a series of mainly fragile, short-lived governments were put together. He was particularly pleased – and rightly so – with the part he played in the formation in 1852 of a coalition government under Lord Aberdeen, a serious-minded Tory after the Prince's heart, who brought stability to this unruly decade until the incompetent conduct of the Crimean War led to the coalition's destruction. In the course of a discussion of British politics in 1858, the great Austrian Chancellor Metternich said that 'the Crown's hand has not been played so well for a long time as it has been of late years'.

But this achievement of the Prince's could not outlast the party political turmoil of the 1850s that had created the conditions for it, and by the end of his life the two-party system was re-emerging to end the scope for active constitutional monarchy. Some take the view that, if he had lived, the Prince's political ambitions might have brought him into serious conflict with elected politicians at Westminster. In her recent superb biography *Bertie: A Life of Edward VII*, Jane Ridley writes that the Prince's 'quest for power was arguably destined to set the monarch on a collision course with Parliament'. I doubt it.

Though he had firm ideals and strong ambitions, Albert was a shrewd realist. He would have recognised that in the 1860s the monarch once again faced clear boundary lines created by the revival of the two-party system, beyond which it would have been unwise to proceed. Above all, he would not have wished to embarrass the monarchy which he had done so much to strengthen.

The Prince's death in December 1861 stirred profound sorrow. *The Times* expressed it movingly: 'The nation has just sustained the greatest loss that could possibly have fallen upon it. Prince Albert... the very centre of our system, the pillar of our state, is suddenly snatched from us'. How should his political legacy be regarded? In 1840 there was a serious prospect that the monarchy could become mired in party politics. He swiftly removed that danger. As his private secretary Charles Phipps wrote in May 1858, 'the Queen had throughout the numerous changes of government maintained an unassailable position of constitutional impartiality'. She owed that to him.

It was the only sensible response to the emergence of 'strongly organised, disciplined parliamentary parties' which Namier identified as the chief agents of change that would eventually make Britain a country in which the monarch reigned but lacked all political power. Such a Britain was anathema to the Prince. By placing the monarchy above party he wanted, in Professor Bogdanor's words, to elevate 'the constitutional position of the sovereign since, in Albert's view, only the sovereign could comprehend the true interests of his or her people and acquire a dispassionate view of the public good'. That could never have become a formal part of Britain's constitutional

arrangements since it was incompatible with the dominance of 'strongly organised, disciplined parliamentary parties'.

But his conviction that the monarch should retain an independent political role strongly influenced Queen Victoria when she emerged from seclusion in the 1870s to favour Disraeli and oppose Gladstone; and, after Queen Victoria's death in 1901, it helped make their son Edward VII an effective participant in the nation's political life alongside his ministers, as Jane Ridley's new life of him shows. How misguided his parents were to regard him as a nincompoop. Walter Bagehot said famously in 1867 that the British monarch possessed only three rights – to be consulted, to encourage and to warn. It was not until the death of Edward VII in 1910 that Bagehot's dictum began to accord with reality.

There is one final aspect to the Prince's legacy in British politics. He won the respect of politicians regardless of party who did business with him by his immense diligence and firm grasp of all the principal issues of the day. The last Hanoverian monarchs, George IV and William IV, had shown only fitful interest in their duties. Prince Albert read everything that came to him in the government's interminable red boxes. His widow quailed at the prospect she faced after his death. 'I must work and work, and can't rest', she wrote to their eldest daughter, the Crown Princess of Prussia, 'and the amount of work which comes upon me is more than I can bear!' But bear it she did, and all her successors bar one (Edward VIII who was soon gone) have devoted long hours to the business of state. That is the tradition that Prince Albert established. By

maintaining it, Britain's constitutional monarch today possesses deep knowledge and well-informed views to which all wise prime ministers listen.

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