

**THE INFLUENCE OF
GRENVILLE ON PITT'S
FOREIGN POLICY,
1787-1798, PP. 1-77**

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THE INFLUENCE OF GRENVILLE ON PITT'S FOREIGN POLICY, 1787-1798.

INTRODUCTION.

In discussing the course of the English government during the wars of the French Revolution it has been the custom of historians to credit Pitt with responsibility for the initiation and adoption of each specific point of English policy. Pitt, it is said, was the head of the English government and the English government was Pitt. In minor matters he might defer to his colleagues, but in greater questions of policy his will was supreme and his decision final. In short histories of the period such extreme statements may be excused by the necessity for concise writing, but the tendency to overestimate the importance of Pitt is found also in more extended accounts. It amounts very nearly to an assertion of despotic control by the chief minister and of an entire subordination of the other members of the Cabinet.

In fact, however, Pitt's Cabinet was so organized as to preclude the absolutism of one man. It consisted not of the chief supporters of one fixed line of policy, as is the case today, but of a variety of elements, all of which it was necessary to harmonize by concession and compromise. At least two of the members of the Cabinet, Dundas and Grenville, asserted their authority in their own departments, and were in consequence rather the fellow-ministers of Pitt than his executive agents. Contemporary opinion, indeed, credited Grenville with a greater influence upon the general policy of government and a more complete control of his own department than were exercised by any other of Pitt's colleagues. Lord Muncaster* is authority for Grenville's independence in outlining foreign policy; Lord Sheffield considered Grenville's "head as a statesman . . . to be at least as good as that of any of His Majesty's ministers," † and Count Woronzow, the Russian ambassador, told Gouverneur Morris that Grenville

* Stanhope, III, 4. † Auckland, III, 371.

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was the strongest man in the English Cabinet.* As less direct evidence may be cited Malmesbury's résumé of the difficulties of temper experienced by Pitt and Grenville in their relations,† and Rose's testimony to the same effect.‡ Of a directly opposite character, but equally to the point, is the picture presented by Stanhope§ of the friendship and intimacy existing between these "two proud and sensitive natures when personal affection was not clouded by differences of political opinion."

In themselves, these and similar isolated assertions of Grenville's influence and of his intimacy with Pitt furnish insufficient proof of the important rôle sustained by Grenville in formulating English foreign policy during the French Revolution. That proof has been unexpectedly supplied by the recent publication in England of the Dropmore manuscripts, embodying a very complete series of "most private" and "most secret" letters between Grenville and English diplomats at foreign posts. It is the purpose of this article, by means of these manuscripts, in connection with the principal memoirs of the time, and with the aid of some few primary authorities, to trace the development and extent of Grenville's influence in foreign policy up to the Napoleonic period. No attempt is here made to outline all of the important events of English diplomacy of the period. Only those episodes are described in which Grenville was an important factor, and these are treated in their chronological order.

OCCASIONAL INFLUENCE OF GRENVILLE ON FOREIGN POLICY.

1787 TO APRIL, 1791.

William Wyndham Grenville entered upon his Parliamentary career in 1782, when but twenty-two years of age. His first official position was that of chief secretary to his elder brother, Earl Temple, then Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and with Temple he resigned office in June, 1783, on the accession to power of the short-lived Coalition Ministry. In the July following, George III began those negotiations which in December resulted in Pitt's acceptance of the difficult task of forming a ministry against the will of the majority of the House of Commons. In these negotiations Grenville had an intimate share, though less as an active

* Morris, II, 95.

† Malmesbury, III, 291ff.

‡ Rose, I, 4. Pitt is stated to have said, "I will teach that proud man [Grenville] that I can do without him."

§ Stanhope, II, 122.

agent than as an intermediary in the discussions between Pitt and Temple upon the policy of the prospective government and the make-up of the Cabinet.* Under Pitt's government as organized in December, 1783, Grenville filled the position of Paymaster General, while other minor offices were held in succeeding years. The correspondence for this period as given in the Dropmore manuscripts shows very clearly that while Grenville was aiding his kinsman Pitt in every way, he was as yet essentially a subordinate.

Grenville's first service seems to have been the smoothing of difficulties between Pitt and Temple, who had now become Marquis of Buckingham. His importance was, however, rapidly increasing, for the steadiness and caution of his judgment, the coolness of temper that marked his decisions, combined with a conciliatory manner, made him a valuable ally in the daily Parliamentary battle. By 1786, though not a member of the Cabinet, he actually wielded an influence on the conduct of public affairs greater than that of ostensibly more important members of the government.†

It was as an interlude in the routine of customary official duties that Grenville first undertook a diplomatic mission. In the spring of 1787 affairs in Holland had reached a stage where it finally became necessary for Pitt to determine whether or not England should unite with Prussia in repelling the aggressive interference of France. Harris, the English diplomat at The Hague, had been insistent upon more forcible measures by England and more open assistance to the Stadtholder, but Pitt was as yet undecided. In his perplexity he determined to send Grenville as a trusted friend and adviser to report upon the situation in Holland.‡

That Pitt felt the utmost confidence in Grenville's judgment is evinced by the letters passing between them at this juncture,§ while the recognition in other quarters of the extent of Grenville's influence is shown by the correspondence of Harris and others interested in upholding the Stadtholder.||

Pitt gave Grenville a free hand in managing the details of the enterprise. "If," he wrote in forwarding the draft of a memorial to Holland, "you find anything objectionable as it now stands, have no

* A series of letters between Pitt, Grenville, and Temple. Dropmore, I, 214-220.

† Burges, 68.

‡ Malmesbury, II, 302-307, and Keith, II, 208-218. Grenville's mission was also undertaken for the effect it was likely to have in consolidating the party of the Stadtholder in Holland. At the time it was considered that the strongest proof of the intention of the British government to act with vigor was "the mission of Mr. Grenville, who was supposed to possess, and was known to deserve, the entire confidence of Mr. Pitt." *History of the Late Revolution in the Dutch Republic*, 193.

§ Dropmore, III, 408ff.

|| Letters between Grenville, Harris, and Bentinck. *Ibid.*, 415, 416, 417, 422, 423.

scruple to get Sir James Harris to change it in any manner you think safe, preserving the two general ideas I have just mentioned." * Grenville found conditions in Holland favorable to intervention and supported with energy the efforts of Harris. He was thus an active participant and agent in formulating those principles that resulted in the Triple Alliance of 1788, and heartily approved the spirited attitude assumed by the English government in its relations with France. † Grenville's services at this crisis were not, however, concluded with the completion of his work in Holland. He returned to London in the middle of August, and the scene of diplomatic action was transferred to Paris, where Eden and Goltz represented England and Prussia. Goltz reported to his government that Eden was not supporting him with energy in the demand made for a cessation of French interference in Holland, and this gave rise to a momentary impression at Berlin that England was not acting in good faith. Though Eden was anti-Prussian in his sympathies, the report was seemingly unjust to him, but it determined Pitt to send him a letter of reproof ‡ and to hurry Grenville to Paris to take charge of the negotiations. Grenville went to Paris "to speak plain, because he [Eden] has not" § spoken plainly, and wrote to Buckingham, who disapproved of his acceptance of the undertaking, that "one of the difficulties on this subject was Eden's want of a competent knowledge of the points in dispute. . . . Another, and perhaps not the least of the two, was the strong bent of his mind to admit the assertions of the French government, however unfounded, and to soften our communications in order to keep back a rupture" || Grenville set out for Paris on September 21, but before he arrived the rapid march of Prussian troops under the Duke of Brunswick had restored the Prince of Orange to his authority and nearly all of Pitt's demands were already satisfied. In these circumstances Pitt thought that England should ask a guaranty of non-interference from France, rather than enter upon stipulations

* Pitt to Grenville, August 7, 1787. *Dropmore*, III, 414-415.

† *Court and Cabinets*, I, 319-339.

‡ Smith MSS., p. 357 [Papers of Joseph Smith, private secretary to Pitt after 1787]. Eden was reported at Berlin to have stated in Paris that England was not interested in supporting Prussia's claims to satisfaction in Holland, but merely desired Prussian mediation. Pitt wrote to Eden, Sept. 8, 1787: "The report of it [this speech] may have produced the most serious and, in my opinion, irreparable consequences, if communications since made from hence have not fortunately arrived in time to counteract it." It is noteworthy, as illustrating the caution with which memoirs and letters compiled by interested partisans or relatives must be taken, that the portion of this letter containing Pitt's reproof is wholly omitted in the *Auckland Correspondence* without any indication of the elision.

§ Buckingham to Grenville, Sept. 20, 1787. *Dropmore*, I, 283.

|| Grenville to Buckingham, Sept. 19, 1787. *Court and Cabinets*, I, 326-327.

for a settlement in Holland.* Grenville opposed this, and wrote at length to Pitt, stating his reasons for preferring to any guaranty a silent acquiescence by France in the events in Holland.† Harris, the foremost manipulator for England in the intrigues at The Hague, strongly urged a guaranty,‡ while Eden, still friendly to France, thought the time was ripe for establishing an alliance between England, France, and Spain.§ Before Grenville's letter could reach England, Pitt had come to a similar opinion in favor of silent acquiescence.||

Grenville, having satisfied himself that France would accept such a settlement, asked and obtained leave to return to London, leaving the formal conclusion in the hands of Eden. Negotiations were closed October 27 by the signing at Paris of a declaration and counter-declaration,¶ in which the French government stated that it had not had and did not have any idea of interfering in Holland, and agreed with England to a disarmament. It was the exact result desired by Grenville. He had not brought Pitt to this conclusion, for both had separately reached the same opinion, but probably the incident still further increased the confidence felt by Pitt in Grenville's judgment. The letters between the two at this period are remarkable for their tone of sincere friendship and confidential intimacy. They are rather familiar letters of conference than diplomatic instructions, and are in marked contrast to the letters passing between Pitt and other diplomatic agents. Two days after Grenville left London on his journey to Paris, Pitt had written in regard to foreign complications: "Let me know what you think of all this. Even in these two days I feel no small difference in not being able to have your opinion on things as they arise."** Harris, Eden, and others interested in these negotiations noted Grenville's aptitude for diplomacy, and were not slow to express their appreciation of his influence and their admiration for his intelligence.

As yet, however, Grenville was not a member of the Cabinet, nor is it to be understood that he was always consulted on questions of foreign policy. His activities were principally directed toward the details of Parliamentary management, and in January, 1789, his services in this field were rewarded by election to the speakership of the Commons. During the regency crisis of 1788-1789 Grenville vigorously supported

* Pitt to Grenville, Sept. 23, 1787. *Dropmore*, III, 428.

† Grenville to Pitt, Sept. 27, 1787. *Ibid.*, 431.

‡ Harris to Grenville, Oct. 5, 1787. *Ibid.*, 437.

§ Eden to Grenville, Oct. 10 and Dec. 6, 1787. *Ibid.*, 438, 440. Also Eden to Pitt, Oct. 10, 1787. *Auckland*, I, 219.

¶ Pitt to Grenville, Sept. 28, 1787. *Dropmore*, III, 434.

** For text see *Parliamentary History*, XXVI, 1264.

** Pitt to Grenville, Sept. 23, 1787. *Dropmore*, III, 429.