THE POLITICAL GENESIS OF EDMUND BURKE'S
REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE

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The conventional view of the political, as distinct from the philosophical, significance of Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France is that the pamphlet was important, firstly, because it revived in England the perennial debate on the fundamental principles of political authority and, secondly, because it contained a classical exposition of the modern doctrines of conservatism. It is, however, only comparatively recently that it has become possible for historians accurately to trace the genesis and to assess the political motivation of the book, owing to the opening up in 1949 of the Wentworth-Woodhouse archives of the Fitzwilliam family deposited at the Central Reference Library in Sheffield and to the publication earlier this year of Burke's correspondence between 1789 and 1791, edited by Professors Alfred Cobban and Robert A. Smith. The interpretation which the study of this manuscript and printed material suggests is that the Reflections were intended by Burke to be a kind of unofficial party political manifesto, addressed almost equally to the leading magnates of the Whig connection, and to English public opinion at large. In my view the pamphlet can only be properly understood against the background of contemporary English, as well as October 1967.


4 "I wished that Book to be, in the first instance, of service to the publick, in the second, to the party, as a valuable part of that publick. I beleive the service of the party was only second in my thoughts; but perhaps it was the first. I am sure its Interests were important considerations with me in every step I have taken on this and on all occasions", Burke to Earl Fitzwilliam, 5 June 1791 (ibid. p. 272). See also R. R. Fennessy, Burke, Paine and The Rights of Man (The Hague, 1963), p. 183.

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of French, politics and in relation to the peculiar and tragic situation of Burke himself as an ageing and somewhat dispirited politician, who was in 1789 acutely conscious of the ambiguous nature of eighteenth-century Whig principles and of his own increasing isolation within the Whig party. That isolation stemmed ultimately from the death, in 1782, of his former patron and head of the Whig party—Lord Rockingham, but more immediately it derived from Burke’s own criticisms of the unprincipled tactics and manoeuvres of the Whig opposition during the Regency crisis of 1788 and the increasing lukewarmness of Fox and Sheridan in the impeachment of Warren Hastings.

In this sense the Reflections may be construed as a bid by Burke to recapture his former influence as a political mentor in the inner councils of the Whig party, at a time when its attitudes to the most crucial issues of English domestic politics were already divided and when a rising generation of younger Whig politicians was tending to stress the radical rather than the conservative element in the Whig creed.

In this respect the Reflections need to be studied in close association with Burke’s other contemporary writings and speeches. The Reflections contained, in fact, the second instalment of Burke’s thoughts on the implications of Whig principles at the end of the eighteenth century. The first instalment of these views had been delivered in Burke’s speeches on the Regency question in 1788 and the same general principles were elaborated and reaffirmed, after Burke’s public breach with Fox in 1791, by the publication of his Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs.

For the ambiguity of Whig principles in the eighteenth century, see A. S. Turberville, A History of Welbeck Abbey and its Owners, ii. 211.


For the tensions in the Whig party at this period see Turberville, op. cit. ii. 215.

Cf. Burke’s subsequent explanation of his conduct, addressed to William Weddell, M.P. for Malton, but intended for circulation to members of the Whig party, dated 31 January 1792. In this he states, “You cannot forget that I supported the prince’s title to the regency upon the principle of his hereditary
The party aspect of Burke's political thinking, which is hardly detectable in the Reflections and which has only become evident to historians through access to his private correspondence in the Fitzwilliam archives, was then publicly though, for the time at least, unavailingly emphasized. All these expressions of Burke's political thought were thus demonstrably related to such specific issues in contemporary English politics as the constitutional problems arising from the temporary "insanity" of George III in 1788, the controversial interpretation of the constitutional settlement of 1688 contained in Dr. Richard Price's celebrated sermon before the London Revolution Society on 4 November 1789, and the final separation of Burke and Fox over the Quebec Act in May 1791. In all these controversies there was involved a struggle between Burke and the Whig leaders over what may be called the political conscience of the Whig party. This divergence of views turned as much upon the attitudes of the Foxite Whigs to the contemporary relevance of the principles of the English revolution of 1688 as upon Burke's own fears of the threats to ordered society and the fabric of European civilization implicit in the new doctrines of the French revolution of 1789. What Burke was attempting to do during these years was to try and convince his political superiors that the Whig creed of the eighteenth century was fundamentally a conservative one and that the future of the Whig party depended on the preservation of its character as an essentially aristocratic connection, politically independent from either popular or court influences. Earlier in his career Burke had helped to assert that independence against what he considered as the corrupt influence of the Crown, now he was determined to protect it from the contagion of democratic principles.¹

The Reflections, however, had been begun as part of Burke's private correspondence and the initial impulse to their composition right to the crown; and I endeavoured to explode the false notions, drawn from what had been stated as the revolution maxims, by much the same arguments which I afterwards used in my printed reflections "..." (Correspondence (ed. Earl Fitzwilliam and Sir R. Bourke, London, 1844), iii. 399).

had come, not from England, but from France. The pamphlet was cast in an epistolary form and it was, in fact, one of the longest letters ever to be composed—the first edition of the book ran to 356 pages octavo.¹ In his preface to the work Burke informed his readers that the Reflections "had their origin in a correspondence between the Author and a very young gentleman at Paris, who did him the honour of desiring his opinion upon the important transactions which then, and have ever since, so much occupied the attention of all men". Burke added that he had composed an answer to this enquiry in the month of October 1789 (though, in this respect, his memory was at fault).² He noted that this reply had been kept back upon what he called "prudential considerations"—by which he meant that he had not wished to involve his correspondent in any difficulty by attempting to evade the strict postal censorship which had been temporarily imposed in the French capital after the October days. When his friend made a new and pressing application for Burke's views on the French revolution the author further explained that he had begun "a second and more full discussion on the subject". Burke's readers were also informed that he had thought of publishing his observations on the revolution in the spring of 1790, but that the importance of the theme had "required a rather more detailed consideration than at that time he had any leisure to bestow upon it".³ In the spring of that year Burke's main energies were, in fact, absorbed by the impeachment of Warren Hastings—a task which he regarded as his final political commitment before retirement from active political life.⁴ For this reason the publication of the Reflections was delayed till

² For this important letter see The Correspondence of Edmund Burke (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 39-50. It was actually written in the second half of November 1789.
³ This first draft of the Reflections, which Burke had submitted for comment to several of his friends, including Philip Francis, was announced in the World of 13 February 1790 as due for "speedy" publication. Burke's view of the increasing importance of the subject matter of his correspondence with de Pont derived from his dispute with Sheridan in the House of Commons over the Army Estimates on 9 February (Parl. Hist., xxviii. 323-74).
⁴ Ibid. p. 255. For Burke's doubts, in the winter of 1789-90, about the continuance of the Impeachment see P. J. Marshall, op. cit. p. 76.
1 November 1790, well in advance of the meeting of the new
Parliament elected during the summer.\(^1\) Though the material at
his disposal had, in consequence, become much more abundant,
Burke had found it difficult, he said, to change the form of the
Reflections, so that when the pamphlet eventually appeared in
print it was still, nominally, in the form of a letter to a French
 correspondent, whose identity, however, Burke did not disclose.
This secret was actually revealed in the English newspaper press
in February 1791, at a time when his correspondent published an
answer to the Reflections which was translated into English.\(^2\)
Subsequently, however, the identity of Burke's correspondent was
forgotten and it was only in 1951 that the late Mr. H. V. F.
Somerset of Oxford was able to establish the name of Burke's un-
known friend by unearthing in the Fitzwilliam archives at
Milton Hall four manuscript letters addressed to Burke by a
certain Monsieur de Pont, who in 1789 was a magistrate of the
Parlement of Paris, aged 23.\(^3\)

From this evidence it appears that the young de Pont had
first made Burke's acquaintance in the autumn of 1785 when he
and his father, who was then intendant of Metz, had enjoyed
Burke's hospitality at his home in Beaconsfield, after they had been
recommended to him by Madame de Genlis.\(^4\) Both the dePonts
had also been taken as guests to a Lord Mayor's banquet at the
London Guildhall in November 1785 by Burke's brother
Richard. During his short stay in England the young de Pont
had had lengthy discussions with Burke on political affairs and
had apparently acquired from the great reforming statesman an
admiration for English institutions and an enthusiasm for the
forms of English constitutional liberty. The second of the

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\(^1\) Burke was particularly insistent that the work should appear on 1 Nov-
ember, to prevent further press ridicule about its delayed publication and pos-
sibly so that it should be on sale before the anniversary meeting of the London
Revolution Society on 4 November (Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith),
vi. 142).

\(^2\) The Diary, 8 February 1791, and The Star, 9 February 1791. Answer of
M. Depont to the Reflections of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, 1791. Copies
of this work exist in the Bodleian Library at Oxford and the Rylands Library.

\(^3\) Printed in Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française (Oct.-Dec. 1951),
xxiii. 364-73. For biographical details of de Pont see Burke, Correspondence,
vi. 31.

\(^4\) Correspondence (ed. H. Furber), v. 226.
letters unearthed by Mr. Somerset, dated 4 November 1789, recalled these circumstances and made the original application for Burke’s views upon the state of French affairs alluded to in the preface of the Reflections.¹ In doing so de Pont suggested that he should resume his correspondence with Burke, offering in return to keep him informed about the progress of the revolution. He reminded Burke with youthful enthusiasm that “son Coeur a battu pour la première fois au nom de Liberté en vous en entendant parler” and continued: “Si vous Daignez l’assurer que les francais sont Dignes d’etre libres, qu’il Scauront Distinguer la liberté de la licence et un Gouvernement légitime d’un pouvoir Despotique; si vous daignez enfin l’assurer que la Révolution Commencée Réussira, fier de votre témoignage, il ne sera jamais abattu par le Découragement qui Suit Souvent L’Espérance”.”²

Such a letter, with its touching tribute to Burke’s stature as an elder statesman, its charming deference to Burke’s mature political wisdom, and its reference to Burke’s ability to intimidate the ministerialists, could hardly prove other than irresistible. De Pont was not to know that Burke had by this time conceived deep-rooted suspicions of those members of the French Liberal aristocracy who had, like his correspondent, given their support to the parti patriote, but Burke was nevertheless prepared to resume contact with an admirer who had clearly been disconcerted by the violence committed during the October days.

The third letter in this series from de Pont to Burke was dated 29 December and contained the renewed and pressing invitation for a statement of Burke’s views to which the author of the Reflections had also referred in his preface.³ In this de Pont’s early enthusiasm for the revolution was sustained but he was clearly anxious to hear from first hand of the impression created in England by the reforms and upheavals in France. He was particularly concerned to hear from the man whom he regarded rather naively as an observer “devoid of passions and prejudices”.

¹ The first letter, dated 15 January 1786, had expressed de Pont’s thanks for the hospitality he had received at Beaconsfield and intimated that he hoped to pay a further visit to Burke in two or three years (Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française, xxiii (1951), 364-5).
² Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 31-32.
He also alluded specifically to the recent proceedings of the Lon­
don Revolution Society of November 1789, which he regarded as reassuring evidence that the French reformers had found influential friends and sympathizers across the Channel. De Pont now admitted that the new French constitution had its defects but claimed, on the other hand, that it had, at least, made specific provision for the separation of powers and for the rights of the nation. He conceded that some people in France were dismayed by the popular excesses, but pointed out that these were only what might have been expected when the formidable corporations of the clergy and nobility were under simultaneous attack and when the attempt was being made to eradicate all the long­standing abuses of the old régime. De Pont made no pretence that the new constitution was necessarily more perfect than the English constitution—he knew his man at least to that extent—and only expressed his hope that France’s new­found liberty would have as secure a foundation as English liberties had. The French had seen fit to establish a single rather than a bicameral legislature and to grant the monarch a suspensive rather than an absolute veto—thus departing from the English model—but these decisions he explained as necessary precautions against aristocratic influence and despotic rule which had been dictated by local political conditions. Perhaps, however, these pre­cautions had been excessive.

This letter is especially valuable for the historian since the specific questions it posed seem to have suggested both the form and content of Burke’s argument in the first part of the Reflections, because it drew Burke’s attention to the crucial proceedings of the London Revolution Society, which had hitherto escaped his notice, and since the date of its probable receipt helps to fix the time when Burke began the composition of the Reflections as the second half of January 1790.1

1 Price’s sermon before the Revolution Society, delivered on 4 November 1789, had been published early in December and had provoked much newspaper comment, but Burke was not in London at the time and it was only in mid January, when he returned to the capital for the meeting of Parliament on the 21st, that he read Price’s sermon and the Revolutionary Society’s congratulatory message to the National Assembly. Burke to William Weddell, 31 January 1792 (Corres­pondence (1844), iii. 396). For Burke’s initial sketch of the pamphlet see J. T.
To understand Burke’s state of mind when he began his reply to de Pont, however, it is necessary to recall Burke’s own previous attitude to the revolution in France. One is so accustomed to Burke’s passionate outbursts on this theme that it is somewhat surprising to discover that his initial reaction to events in France had been, as de Pont had himself anticipated, one of caution and reserve. Throughout the spring and summer of 1789 Burke had suspended judgement, watching the situation across the Channel closely and gathering first-hand information from English friends visiting the French capital and from the French acquaintances of his son Richard. Among the latter were the Parisot family at Auxerre, with whom Richard had stayed as a lodger in 1773-4, who recounted their alarming experiences during the Grande Peur in Burgundy, and Jean-Baptiste Decrétot, a woollen manufacturer of Louviers, deputy of the Third Estate for the baillage of Rouen, who supplied the Burkes with eyewitness and published descriptions of the proceedings in the Estates General at Versailles and of the turmoil in Paris.¹

Burke’s cool and dispassionate appraisal of the trend of French politics in the summer of 1789 is clear from the letter which he addressed, early in August, to one of his oldest and closest Irish friends—James Caulfeild, 1st Earl of Charlemont.

As to us here, [he wrote], our thoughts of every thing at home are suspended, by our astonishment at the wonderful spectacle which is exhibited in a Neighbouring and rival Country—what Spectators and what actors! England gazing with astonishment at a French struggle for liberty and not knowing whether to blame or to applaud! The thing indeed, though I thought I saw something like it in progress for several years,² has still something in it paradoxical and Mysterious. The spirit it is impossible not to admire; but the old Parisian ferocity has broken out in a shocking manner. It is true, that this may be no more than a sudden explosion: If so no indication can be taken from it. But if it should be character


¹ Further evidence as to the date when Burke embarked on the Reflections is contained in Richard Burke’s letter to Fitzwilliam dated 29 July 1790, where he noted that his father had spent six months in writing the pamphlet (A. iv 71(a), Milton Archives. Photostat copy, Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments, Sheffield, Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 10-11 and 16-20).

² Burke had predicted “some extraordinary convulsion” in France as early as 1769 (Observations on a Late Publication Intituled The Present State of the Nation, Works (Bohn), i. 230).
rather than accident, then that people are not fit for Liberty, and must have a Strong hand like that of their former masters to coerce them. Men must have a certain fund of natural moderation to qualify for Freedom, else it becomes noxious to themselves and a perfect Nuisance to everybody else. What will be the Event it is hard I think still to say. To form a solid constitution requires Wisdom as well as spirit, and whether the French have wise heads among them, or if they possess such whether they have authority equal to their wisdom, is to be seen; In the mean time the progress of this whole affair is one of the most curious matters of speculation that ever was exhibited.¹

The note of grudging admiration and reserve is here obvious, yet the traces of Burke's later doubts about the final outcome are also observable in the oblique reference to the fall of the Bastille.

This mood of critical appraisal lasted till the end of September 1789. William Windham, Whig M.P. for Norwich, who was one of Burke's devoted political disciples, paid a short visit to Paris between 12 August and 9 September and on his return sent Burke some books and printed material containing, as he said, "a pretty general view of the state of opinions prevailing at the commencement of this business in France".² Windham himself took the view that the French reformers were settling down, at long last, to the constructive tasks of constitution making and that the prospect of renewed "civil commotion" appeared unreal. Burke's reply, dated 27 September, once again showed that his attitude of cool scepticism towards political reformation in France had not been relaxed. While he was prepared to agree that the National Assembly had made some progress in settling the constitution this was only, he thought, because "the Interests of the Crown have no party, certainly no armed party, to support them"—an interesting observation at a time when royal troops were already being concentrated on Versailles. The financial problems were still unsolved and the authority of the national legislature, the fruit of the "subversion of all orders, distinctions, privileges, impositions, tythes and rents", seemed to Burke to hang by a thread—"as there is a Mob of their constituents ready to Hang them if they should deviate into moderation, or in the least de-

¹ Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 9-12.
² Ibid. p. 21. The printed material probably consisted of excerpts from the cahiers de doléances drawn up for the instruction of the representatives of the several Orders at the time of the elections to the Estates General, with which Burke was familiar.
part from the Spirit of those they represent". Burke also doubted "whether in the End France is susceptible of the Democracy that is the Spirit, and in a good measure too, the form, of the constitution they have in hand" and noted that it was "much more truly democratical than that of North America".¹

By the early part of November 1789 Burke's commitment against the revolution in France had crystallized. His subsequent rejection of the new French model of liberty stemmed partly from his emotional response to the violent excesses of the Paris mobs during the transference of the French court from Versailles to the capital in the October days, from his condemnation of the secularization of the estates of the Gallican church on 2 November, and from his disapproval of the decree of 7 November which excluded deputies from the ministry. The emphasis which Burke placed upon these events in the Reflections—the famous dramatic set pieces and purple passages relating to Marie Antoinette, the fierce attacks on the assembly's confiscatory methods of finance, and Burke's impatience with the French rejection of British political experience—all these make it clear that these were major articles in his indictment of the revolutionary process. Burke also appears to have accepted without question or reserve contemporary rumours and allegations that the events of the 5th and 6th October 1789 were the product of Orleanist intrigues and this interpretation helped to convince him that the revolution itself had started as a conspiracy.² Burke's anxieties were further deepened by the initial emigration of the French nobility and the secession of the moderate constitutionalists, led by Mounier, from the National Assembly.³ The nationalization of the clerical estates he condemned on several

¹ Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. p. 25.
² This view of the situation in France was, of course, inaccurate and prompted Burke's omission to consider the social origins of the revolution in the Reflections, for which he has always been criticized by historians, see, e.g. A. Cobban, Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution (Historical Association Pamphlet G 2, 1958). Burke's belief in this theory made him differentiate the French from the American revolution and so did not involve him in any inconsistency in his views of the origins of what he called "general rebellions" (B. T. Wilkins, The Problem of Burke's Political Philosophy (Oxford, 1967), pp. 74-75).
grounds—as an unjustifiable assault on the sacred institution of property held in trust and as an indirect attack on the nobles who filled the ranks of the upper clergy. He rightly foresaw that it would not provide a solution for France’s financial problems and that it would only multiply the sources of social and political division. Oversimplifying and perhaps misunderstanding the whole nature of the operation, he saw the nationalization of the church lands as the handiwork of atheists and shuddered at the shock administered to religious establishments everywhere. The defeat of Mirabeau’s motion in the assembly which would have allowed ministers to take part in its deliberations, though not to vote, only confirmed Burke’s initial suspicions of French political immaturity and factiousness.

Under the direct impact of these developments Burke’s previous impartiality collapsed. Writing on 12 November 1789 to his political patron Earl Fitzwilliam, Burke delivered judgement. “As to France,” he wrote, “if I were to give way to the speculations which arise in my Mind from the present State of things, and from the Causes which have given rise to it and which now begin to be unfolded, I should think it a country undone; and irretrievable for a very long Course of time.” He now referred to “the total political extinction of a great civilised Nation in the heart of this our Western System” and saw in it “many inconveniences, not only to Europe at large, but to this Country in particular.” He told Fitzwilliam that “a publick Bankruptcy seems the only remedy for the distempers of their Finance, and a civil war the only chance of producing order in their Government.” There did, however, remain a third possibility of salvation—the emergence of a despotic ruler. Burke concluded his letter: “One man may change all. But when and where and how is this man to appear?”

Even more important in deciding Burke to communicate to the public views which he was shortly to pass on in private to de Pont was the totally different impression which events in France had made on the English reformers and on the progressive Whigs. Though public interest during the spring of 1789 was

1 Reflections, Works (Rivington, 1826), v. 280-1.
2 Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 36-7.
still concerned with the issues raised during the Regency crisis, the imagination of most who were actively interested in politics had been caught and held by the fall of the Bastille.¹ Writing on 28 July to his Genevan friend Etienne Dumont—the first inventor of Benthamism—Samuel Romilly noted that "the revolution has produced a very sincere and very general joy here". "It is", he went on, "the subject of all conversations; and even all the newspapers, without one exception, though they are not all conducted by the most liberal or most philosophical of men, join in sounding forth the praises of the Parisians and in rejoicing at an event so important for mankind."² There were, indeed, many in Britain who, like Romilly, Fox or Priestley, could rejoice with the French at the overthrow of despotism and who were prepared, like de Pont, to regard the popular excesses as the inevitable by-product of a corrupt system which had now been destroyed or of the misguided attempts to arrest the course of political and constitutional reform. Some, like Priestley, Price and Paine, had saluted in the French revolution the second stage in the new era of liberty that had opened with the American revolution and were confidently expecting that the third stage would be the emancipation of all Europe. Parliamentary reformers like Major John Cartwright and parson Horne Tooke were hopeful that successful constitutional reform in France might remove English conservative fears of "innovation", and thus pave the way for a purification of the English system of representation.³ Others thought that the downfall of despotism in France would eliminate the causes of Anglo-French commercial and colonial rivalry, terminate the need for expensive military establishments and thus diminish the weight of the National Debt.⁴ The French revolution also

¹ For the generally favourable reception of the revolution in Britain see P. A. Brown, The French Revolution in English History (1965 reprint), chapter II; Veitch, op. cit. chapter V.
³ Veitch, op. cit. pp. 120-1.
rekindled the hopes of those humanitarians who, like Clarkson and Wilberforce, had dedicated themselves to the task of abolishing the slave trade and who were in close touch with the Société des Amis des Noirs in France. The concession of a limited toleration to the French Protestants in 1787 and the freedom of religious belief recognized in the Declaration of the Rights of Man had given comfort and encouragement to the English Protestant Nonconformists in their struggle for the abolition of the Test and Corporation Acts. Optimism and calculation had thus secured for the revolution in France a spontaneous and genuine welcome from all those in Britain who had the cause of reform at heart.

One of the earliest public expressions of solidarity with the French revolutionists had occurred at the annual meeting of the London Revolution Society on 4 November 1789. This society was one of the few survivors of a number of similar clubs formed at the beginning of the eighteenth century to commemorate the blessings of the "glorious" Whig revolution of 1688. These societies, had, for some time afterwards, continued to meet annually on the birthday of William III. As the Jacobite danger receded some had died out, but a few, like the society in London, had survived throughout the eighteenth century and had taken on a new lease of life in 1788 on the occasion of the centenary celebrations. From the printed account of its proceedings in 1788 we learn that the society, whose membership had originally been confined to the inhabitants of the city of London, then included "many persons of rank and consequence from different parts of the kingdom". Although Burke referred to it in the Reflections as a "club of dissenters", it is clear that it also included members of the Established Church. At its annual


2 An Abstract of the history and proceedings of the Revolution society in London (London 1789). See also G. Pariset, "La Société de la Révolution de Londres dans ses rapports avec Burke et l'Assemblée Constituante", La Révolution Francaise, xxix (1895), 297-325, which, however, contains a number of inaccuracies on details.
anniversary meetings it was the custom of the society to hold a religious service in the morning followed later in the day by a more festive gathering at one of the London taverns. On 4 November 1788 the members had observed these rites on a more impressive scale. The evening dinner had been presided over by Lord Stanhope—the eccentric radical peer and inventor—and had been attended by the Lord Mayor of London and several prominent M.P.s. On this centenary occasion the committee of the society had reformulated its political principles and resolutions had been passed with the aim of reviving or establishing similar Revolution societies in the provinces and of promoting a bill in Parliament to declare 16 December—the date when the Bill of Rights had been promulgated—as a day of national thanksgiving.

When Burke turned his attention to the proceedings of the Revolution Society of 4 November 1789 he found that, in the evening session, Dr. Richard Price, a leading Unitarian minister, had moved and his colleagues had unanimously approved a congratulatory message to the French National Assembly. This address was a typical specimen of the high-flown and grandiloquent sentiments of the English reformers and expressed their pious hopes of the spread of the spirit of "universal benevolence". It was the forerunner of many such messages which passed between the society and the Jacobin club at Paris and its provincial affiliates between 1790 and 1792, the innocuous nature of which was only questioned during the Anti-Jacobin reaction.

Even Burke himself in the *Reflections* found the message unexceptional. What really antagonized Burke, however, was the content and tendency of the famous sermon "On the love of our Country" preached by Dr. Price in which he had claimed that the true Whig principles of 1688 had established "the right to liberty of conscience in religious matters, the right to resist power

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1 Abstract of the History and Proceedings of the Revolution Society in London (1789), pp. 8-9. The bill, moved by Beaufoy in the Commons and by Stanhope in the Lords, was rejected in the upper chamber.

2 For the relations between the English reformers and the French political clubs see Veitch, op. cit. chapter VI. For the two-way messages see The Correspondence of the Revolution Society in London with the National Assembly and with various societies of the friends of liberty in France and England (London, 1792).
when abused and the right to choose our own governors, to cashier them for misconduct, and to frame a government for ourselves".\(^1\) In the course of his sermon Price had also expressed views on the eighteenth-century constitution, on the nature of English monarchy and on the imperfections of the Whig revolutionary settlement which challenged Burke's most cherished political principles. Burke's veneration for the balanced English constitution of the eighteenth century and his conviction of its superiority over any other form of contemporary government need no emphasis. In the Regency debates Burke had also committed himself to the view that the most fundamental fact about the English monarchy was that it rested, not on the principle of popular election, but on an hereditary basis. He had even gone so far in 1788 as to criticize his Whig colleagues for their apparent willingness to qualify this doctrine in order to minimize their differences with the ministry in their quest for place and power.\(^2\) For Burke there could also be no question about the perfection of the Whig revolutionary settlement—with him any attempt to criticize its inadequacy savoured of disloyalty to Whig principles and an intention to promote parliamentary reform.

Price's sermon, however, had thrown doubt on the validity of all these convictions. He had argued that true patriotism was not an exclusive sentiment and that it ought not to involve any persuasion of the superior excellence of British laws and institutions.\(^3\) He had contended that the House of Hanover owed the English crown and its retention to popular election.\(^4\) He had drawn attention once more to the limitations of the revolutionary settlement in the sphere of religious toleration and noted that nothing had been done to correct the inequalities and injustices of the system of parliamentary representation.\(^5\) In this way Price had sought to justify renewed attempts to redress the civil and religious disabilities of the English Protestant dissenters and to

\(^1\) *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (London, 1789), p. 34.
\(^2\) Derry, op. cit. p. 170.
\(^3\) *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (London, 1789), p. 3.
\(^4\) Price referred to George III "as almost the only lawful King in the world, because the only one who owes his crown to the choice of his people" (ibid. p. 25).
\(^5\) Ibid. pp. 35-41.
press forward with the campaign for parliamentary reform. His sermon had welcomed the French revolution because it would help to resuscitate English reform movements by its example. It had suggested that the French themselves had been, to some extent, guided by the English principles of 1688 and had implied that English reformers might in turn draw fresh inspiration and support from the French principles of 1789.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Burke, on reading this sermon, should have immediately decided not only to discredit, in his private correspondence with de Pont, the activities of the London Revolution Society as totally unrepresentative of English views on the revolution in France, but also publicly to repudiate Price's interpretation of the principles of 1688 from the point of view of Whig orthodoxy. Hence his argument in the Reflections that the French revolution represented, not a welcome imitation of the principles of 1688, but their negation.

In the spring of 1790, after he had begun drafting his second and fuller reply to de Pont, Burke became aware that Price's forecast of the effect of the French revolution on the English reforming movement had proved remarkably accurate. During the parliamentary debates in February 1790 on the Army Estimates he found that both Fox and Sheridan—leaders of the Whig opposition—were prepared publicly to express their approval of French principles and, in consequence, he promptly broke with Sheridan, but not with Fox. In March Fox, angling no doubt for the political support of the Dissenting interest in the approaching general election, had consented to move in Parliament for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts which Burke had now determined to oppose. Almost simultaneously Henry Flood introduced proposals for Parliamentary reform and obtained the qualified support of Fox. Though

2 For these debates see Parl. Hist., xxviii. 337-74. Although Burke said that, to resist the contagion from France, "he would abandon his best friends, and join with his worst enemies", the real provocation in these discussions had come from Sheridan, after Fox had succeeded in allaying Burke's feelings.
both of these measures were defeated, Burke was deeply per­
turbed at these increasing signs of Whig commitment to causes
which he himself had come to regard as verging on radicalism.
Once discussion of the French revolution had thus been intro­
duced into English domestic politics Burke’s private corres­
pondence with de Pont assumed a wider and deeper significance.
He now felt the need, not only to disillusion his French correspon­
dent and to refute Price, but also to attempt to dissuade the Whig
party itself from following the lead being given by Fox and
Sheridan. He therefore decided to expand the views he had
already expressed during the debates on the Regency question
and on the Army Estimates but to defer their publication till
parliament reassembled after the general election.

In July, while he was engaged on this task, Burke noted with
mounting indignation that Sheridan had induced the Whig club
itself to celebrate the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille and had
again underlined his approval of French principles.1 From this
point on, Burke became convinced that the driving forces in the
Whig leadership were sponsoring a new and dangerous departure
in English politics. What this new radical trend inside the
Whig party was thought to involve is clear from a long and
revealing letter dated 29 July 1790 from Burke’s son Richard to
Earl Fitzwilliam—Rockingham’s nephew and heir and Burke’s
main political patron.2 Though this was apparently written
without Burke’s knowledge or authorization, there can be no
doubt that it vividly portrayed his political anxieties whilst he
was writing the Reflections. The purpose of the letter was to
warn Fitzwilliam against the new kind of parliamentary opposi­
tion which was being strongly advocated by Sheridan and weakly
acquiesced in by Fox. Hitherto, Richard noted, the Whigs had
adhered consistently to the practice of Lord Rockingham when
in opposition, not only by resisting the bad measures of ministers

1 This was the famous mass meeting of the Friends of Liberty held at the
Crown and Anchor tavern in the Strand on 14 July 1790, presided over by Lord
Stanhope, at which further good-will messages and congratulations were sent to
the French assembly and toasts drunk to “the Majesty of the People” and
“Equal representation of the English People in Parliament”.
2 Extracts of this letter are printed in Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith),
vi. 125-30.
but, above all “by adhering to and maintaining both the form and substance of our present constitution.” 1 The new line in opposition tactics canvassed by Sheridan, however, was to seek popular support for political reform by public criticism of the vices, or supposed vices, of the constitution. According to Richard Burke, many of the Whigs had already adopted this policy—“some knowingly, some giddily, some seeing it distinctly, others more obscurely ”. The whole Whig party seemed to him about to follow suit.

Sheridan was depicted, in this letter, as a man of deep and calculating ambition who had “come forward to put himself at the head of the spirit of innovation in this country”. His suggestion that the Whig club itself should unite forces with the London Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information seemed designed to involve the Whig party in some kind of popular front. Fox, unfortunately, could not be counted on to dissociate himself from these manoeuvres—since he had considerable personal sympathy with the radical Dissenters, and because “the permanent and ancient interests in this country have for the most part treated him with ingratitude and his hopes in the present establishment are only reversionary and even then precarious”. The danger implicit in this situation, according to the Burkes, was that the character and direction of Whig policy would be determined, not by Sheridan or Fox, and much less by the Duke of Portland or Earl Fitzwilliam, but rather by the popular forces conjured up by Doctors Price and Priestley, by Lord Stanhope and Horne Tooke, which it might prove impossible to control or resist. Thus would be unleashed a Frankenstein’s monster—a desperate and turbulent democracy inspired by the levelling tendencies of the French revolution. Unless Sheridan and Fox were publicly repudiated by the Whig magnates before it was too late, French principles would gain ground both in the country and inside the party and even Price’s enthusiastic vision of an era of radical reform might well issue in the kind of “irrational, unprincipled, proscribing, confiscating, plundering, ferocious, bloody, and tyrannical democracy” of which Burke

had spoken during the debates on the Army Estimates.\footnote{Speeches, iii. 458.} The Whig connection would cease to be under aristocratic control: it would cease to be independent of popular pressure and, under Sheridan's direction, it would become "a new party for new purposes". One of these purposes, Richard Burke suggested, might well be the destruction of the House of Lords.\footnote{A.W. 71(a) Milton Archives. Photostat copy. Wentworth Woodhouse muniments, Sheffield, fol. 4. This section of the letter is omitted in Correspondence, vi. (ed. Cobban and Smith).} Although Fitzwilliam expressed his agreement in general terms with this analysis and wrote a letter of remonstrance to Fox (which was quietly disregarded), he did not consider it expedient to take a resolute stand against the new tendencies.\footnote{Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 130.} This must have proved a further inducement to Burke to nail his colours to the mast in the Reflections.

If these undercurrents of dissension within the Whig party are kept in mind and if we are conscious of the increasing tensions between Burke and Fox we shall, I think, be in a better position to appreciate the partly avowed, but partly concealed, motivation and contemporary English relevance of Burke's views as expressed in the Reflections. Much of the evidence suggests that the work was written at fever heat with specific political ends in view.\footnote{These were summarized by Burke in his letter to Weddell, 31 January 1792, after his general ostracism by the Whigs (Correspondence (1844), iii. 383-409). Burke's absorption in his task may possibly account for the absence of references in his correspondence to the general election of 1790. The Reflections were apparently completed towards the end of August (Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 137).} Burke set out, firstly, to condemn the revolution in France root and branch with the idea of checking English popular sympathies for it and in order to demonstrate how antagonistic its principles were to Whig traditions. Secondly, and of this he made no secret, the Reflections were written to repudiate and discredit the political behaviour and aims of the Protestant Dissenters led by Price and Priestley. Thirdly, it seems probable that Burke also intended to check the reviving movement among the Whigs for parliamentary reform. Lastly, he was
determined, if possible, and before it was too late, to prevent the Whig party from losing its character as an aristocratic connection influenced, if not manipulated, by the Whig magnates. In other words, Burke was less concerned about the consequences of the revolution in France than with its probable impact on England. On 25 October 1790—only a few days before the publication of the Reflections—Burke himself confirmed this by writing to Calonne: "In reality, my Object was not France, in the first instance, but this Country."

In condemning the principles and procedures of the French revolution of 1789 Burke did not intend, as his opponents asserted, to indict the whole French nation. Such an approach he had already repudiated when the rights of the American colonists had been under discussion. As has been seen earlier Burke's view of the revolution was that it had been engineered by a small clique of Liberal aristocrats, traitors to their order and their country, who had subverted the army and suborned the mobs. The whole thing had, in his opinion, been a conspiracy, plotted by designing and ambitious men like the Duke of Orleans (boon companion of the Prince of Wales), Mirabeau, the Lameth brothers and La Fayette associated together in secret cabals such as the Comité des Trente. Ironically, it may well be that Burke had been converted to this erroneous view as much by Paine's reports on the political factions in Paris on the eve of the revolution, as by the general suspicions of Orleanist intrigues in October 1789.

Nor is it strictly correct to argue, as Paine did in his Rights of Man, that Burke had idealized the institutions of the Ancien Régime and glossed over its defects. Burke's claim in the Reflections that he was "no stranger to the faults and defects of the subverted government of France" was not in itself absurd. Though maintaining a respectful attitude to the high judicial

1 Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. p. 141.
2 Ibid. p. 172. For the Comité des Trente see G. Lefebvre, Quatre-Vingt-Neuf (Paris, 1939), p. 60.
magistracy and some members of the upper clergy, Burke specifically condemned the Anglomania, atheism, immorality and social exclusiveness of the French aristocracy.\footnote{Works (Rivington, 1826), v. 253-4.} Nor was he above inquiring in considerable detail from French correspondents, such as the Vicomte de Cice, into the reality of peasant complaints against the nobles as feudal superiors and landlords.\footnote{Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 207.} Such defects, however, did not, in his opinion, justify the destruction of the French nobility or the uprooting of what he fondly called "the Corinthian capital of polished society". More questionable was his general thesis that before 1789 the French did possess an institutional fabric which could have been reformed without violence and that the fundamental laws of the kingdom had been a bulwark against monarchical despotism. This view may have been derived ultimately from Montesquieu or possibly from the disgraced Controller-General Calonne.\footnote{For Burke's debt to Montesquieu see C. P. Courtney, Montesquieu and Burke (Oxford, 1963), chapter VIII. Calonne's De l'Etat de la France présent et à venir was published in London in October 1790.} One is inclined to agree with Professor Cobban who has pointed out that "the pre-1789 constitution, on which Burke laid such store amounted to no more than the claims of the narrow and selfish caste of lawyers entrenched in the parlements, and the political ambitions of a decadent noblesse".\footnote{Historians and the causes of the French Revolution (Historical Association Pamphlet G.2, London, 1958), p. 5.} Burke's suggested method of reform had in fact been tried out in 1787-8 and had failed, mainly owing to the opposition of the lay, clerical and judicial aristocracy which had appealed to the fundamental laws as the sheet-anchor of their own privileges.\footnote{J. Egret, La Pré-Révolution Française, 1787-1788 (Paris, 1962), p. 201.} Not a word was said about this in the Reflections.

Arguing from this thesis, however, Burke had contended that there had been no need for the French to seek their constitutional models in England and he did not suggest that they necessarily should have done so.\footnote{He did not, for example, condemn the French rejection of a bi-cameral legislature.} What Burke detested about the revolution
in France was its atheistical tendencies, the metaphysical gospel of the "rights of man" and its Rousseauite principle of popular sovereignty. These doctrines, he thought, had led to the attacks on the religious establishment, the contempt for prescriptive rights and the assaults on property. It was in this light that he sought to portray a revolution which he feared might spread, not only to England, but to the rest of Europe. Burke was prepared to admit that he may have been mistaken as to some aspects of the situation in France, but he did make repeated attempts to obtain first-hand information from those who were in a position to know. ¹ Nor were his opinions borrowed exclusively, or even mainly, from prejudiced émigré sources.² His intention, he insisted, had also been to avoid misrepresentation.³

On the other hand most readers of the Reflections will feel disposed to agree with the contemporary criticism of Mackintosh's Vindiciae Gallicae that Burke's attack on the English Protestant Dissenters could hardly have been more prejudiced and Burke himself confessed to conscious misrepresentation of their political conduct.⁴ Burke, however, had his own reasons for fearing and detesting the Dissenters' growing influence in English politics. In the 1770s and 1780s he had had many valued personal friends among the Dissenters and he had, at that period, been in general sympathy with the movement for the removal of their civil and religious disabilities.⁵ More recently he had become estranged from them, mainly for party political reasons. He had never quite forgiven them for having sided with Pitt in the general election of 1784, which had led to the Whigs' greatest political

¹ Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 16-20.
² Writing to Adrien Duport (in late March 1790) Burke maintains that, whatever his errors in his speech on the Army Estimates may have been, "they have not been infused into my mind, as you suppose, by any representation of the Refugees from France in London" (ibid. p. 105).
³ Burke to W. Windham, 27 October 1790 (ibid. p. 143).
⁴ Vindiciae Gallicae, 4th edn. (London, 1792), p. 297. Burke to Philip Francis, 20 February 1790, "I mean to do my best to expose them to the hatred, ridicule, and contempt of the whole world"—referring to Dr. Price and the Dissenters patronized by Lansdowne Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 92.
⁵ For Burke's change of attitude to the Dissenters see U. Henriques, op. cit. pp. 104-12. For Burke's own defence see Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs (Works, 1826, vi. 117).
débâcle. His displeasure had been increased during the Regency crisis of 1788 because the Dissenters had, as he put it, "seized the opportunity of divisions among the great to bring forward their democratic notions". He also strongly resented their disloyalty to the Whig connection, in so far as it stemmed from a time-serving and hypocritical repudiation of the leadership of Fox. Having repeatedly condemned Fox for his private immorality, the Dissenters had, nevertheless, once more sought his political support in the renewed campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. By 1790, moreover, Burke had other and, to him, more compelling reasons for wishing to discredit the English Protestant Dissenters and these help to explain the powerful undercurrent of emotional antagonism which is so clearly evident in the Reflections. What, above all, Burke feared and resented was Priestley's uncompromising attacks on the English established church. Priestley later professed his inability to understand Burke's devotion to the eighteenth-century alliance of church and state when faced by the post-revolutionary situation in America. "There he must see", he wrote in his answer to the Reflections, "the civil government goes on very well without it. It neither stands in need of religion, nor does religion stand in need of it." But nothing could shake Burke's convictions on this score. He had stated his position on religious establishments in his earliest political pamphlet—The Vindication of Natural Society—and he never subsequently shifted his ground. For him religious establishment was the Ark of the Covenant.

Lastly, Burke also believed—and this is where his suspicious emotionalism got the better of his judgement—that the so-called "philosophical Dissenters" led by Price and Priestley were engaged in an insidious plot, countenanced by their political

1 Burke to William Weddell, 31 January 1792 (Correspondence (1844), iii. 394.
2 Ibid. p. 397.
3 Speech in opposition to Fox's motion for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, 2 March 1790 (Parl. Hist., xxviii. 430 ff.).
5 For Burke's defence of religious establishments see Reflections, Works (Rivington, 1826), v. 176-91.
It was for this reason that he referred to the radical Dissenters in the *Reflections* as the "smugglers of adulterated metaphysics". It was these principles, which he mistakenly thought had been borrowed from France, that Burke both detested and feared. Because he regarded the philosophical Dissenters as vehicles, for the ventilation of these doctrines in England, he had no compunction in launching against them his virulent campaign of calculated misrepresentation and slander. Too much was at stake for Burke to have been impartial in this respect.

Burke's ridicule in the *Reflections* of the London Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information, his weighty commendation of the balanced English constitution and his elaboration of the theory of prescription, his apologia for the conservative principles of the Whig revolution of 1688 seem to me to have had an unavowed political motivation—the desire of a Rockinghamite Whig to disprove the necessity for the reform of English parliamentary institutions. Nowhere was this openly stated and perhaps it was intentionally concealed. The subject was perhaps not strictly relevant to the issues raised by de Pont and, in any case, in the immediate future, after the defeat of Flood's proposals, the outlook for the advocates of parliamentary reform appeared unpromising. Burke did, however, manage to convey the impression that the movement for constitutional reform in England was in danger of duplicating the features which had conditioned the revolution in France. Its progress seemed to him to be connected with aristocratic sponsorship, the spread of "clubism" and a willingness to deploy the

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1 Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 91. There was no need for the Dissenters to do this for they had their own native theories of Natural rights before 1789 (A. Lincoln, *Some Political and Social Ideas of English Dissent*, 1763-1800 (Cambridge, 1938), p. 2).
3 Passages in the *Reflections* do, however, defend the unreformed system of representation, e.g. ibid. p. 96.
resources of the eighteenth-century mob.¹ The English Parliamentary reformers could, he thought, be discredited by making out that the new inspiration which they appeared to have received in 1789 was derived, not from the radicalism which had somehow always been inherent in the Whig creed, but from the suspect and dangerous source of French metaphysics and occult political intrigue. There is plenty of innuendo in the Reflections and some of it appears to me to have been directed at the Parliamentary reformers. Where Burke wrote or spoke of "innovation" at this period this is what he often had in mind.²

Finally, I return to the suggestion which I made at the outset of this lecture—that the Reflections may, and perhaps should, be regarded as a political manifesto meant for the instruction of the aristocratic leaders of the Whig party. The pamphlet was a salutary warning to the Whig magnates against the dangers of imitating the political example set by the French Liberal aristocracy. Fox had regarded the French revolution as primarily a successful and laudable assault on monarchical despotism.³ Burke, arguing that the Bourbon monarchy had been, before 1789, "a despotism rather in appearance than in reality", offered an alternative interpretation that the revolution's guiding light had been, not liberty, but equality and that its essential objective had been the taming and destruction of the French aristocracy.⁴ He had always viewed the Whig connection as an "independent embodied aristocracy" and what he feared in 1790 was that its independence would be at an end if the Whigs surrendered the initiative to the Protestant Dissenters and the radicals. Just as the French nobility had been betrayed by the Liberal aristocrats so, Burke thought, might the Whig aristocrats

¹ For this the whole of Richard Burke's letter to Fitzwilliam, 29 July 1790, should be read. See above p. 352.
² For this see J. T. Boulton, The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke (London, 1963), passim.
³ J. L. Le B. Hammond, Charles James Fox, A political study (London, 1903), p. 244.
⁴ Burke to Fitzwilliam, 21 November 1791, "Its great Object is not... the destruction of all absolute Monarchies, but totally to root out that thing called an Aristocrate or Nobleman and Gentleman" (Correspondence (ed. Cobban and Smith), vi. 451).
suffer a similar fate if they were led astray by political misfits like Lord Stanhope or intriguing manipulators like the Marquess of Lansdowne, or if they allowed Sheridan and Fox to create a new radical tradition in Whig politics. In a very real sense, therefore, the Reflections were concerned to plead the cause of conservative Grand Whiggery as the main preservative of the principles of 1688 against those of 1789.

It is easy to see why Fitzwilliam virtually ignored Richard Burke’s attempt to make his flesh creep and why even “the old Stamina of the Whigs” refused to be stampeded by the Reflections into his father’s “alarmist” interpretation of the revolution in France. The credibility of Burke’s apprehensions, however, lay mainly in his estimate of the dangers implicit in the principles of the “new” Whigs and in the long-range consequences of the spread of “innovation”. Burke’s more reasoned arguments on this score were deployed in his Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, published in August 1791. This was really Part II of the Reflections, written in the new context created by his breach with Fox and the publication of Part I of Paine’s Rights of Man.1 The argument, although geared to the political situation in which Burke had been virtually “ostracized” from the Whig party, was presented in general terms and has an interest extending beyond its contemporary relevance.2 It was an argument by analogy from what had happened in France, but it claimed to be based on Burke’s own long experience of the mechanics of British political life. The danger as he saw it arose from the calm indifference of the party leaders to the new Paineite doctrines which Burke assimilated with the “new” Whiggism, from the indecision of the middle or “equestrian” order of M.P.s, and from the excessive reliance of the general public on the conservative influence exerted by the “men of great hereditary estates”.3 No security, based on the different social and political situation of England, would, he considered, preserve the country from the contagion of

1 For Burke’s private feelings about the breach see his letter to Fitzwilliam, 5 June 1791 (ibid. pp. 271-6).
2 “It was an exhibition absolutely new, to see a man who had sat twenty-six years in Parliament, not to have one friend in the House” (ibid. p. 275).
3 Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, Works (Rivington, 1826), vi. 236-8.
French principles if the Dissenters and Paine were permitted to destroy the respect for the existing constitution in Church and State. If that constitution came to be regarded, in Burke's paraphrase of Paine, as "an usurpation in its origin, unwise in its contrivance, mischievous in its effects, contrary to the rights of man and, in all its parts, a perfect nuisance", who could or should defend it? No reliance could be placed on the fact that the Dissenters were in a minority; their ministers were talented and active politicians and their influence was on the increase. By contrast, the men of great hereditary estates seemed to Burke to be supine and inert in their indifference to the spread of levelling opinions and even prepared for some sort of "appeasement". Ministerial blundering might precipitate civil commotions and in such a crisis the men of property would no longer be able to rely on the habitual deference of their social inferiors, and their great possessions, far from being a bulwark against subversive change, would only invite appropriation. In times of confusion ambition might induce some of the great magnates to gamble for high stakes by committing themselves to a new hazardous course in politics and the desire to preserve their wealth and importance might tempt others to secure a place in the new order by taking a lead "with the party they think most likely to prevail".

In such a situation the noxious principles of 1789, "now only sown", would, he forecast, "shoot out and vegetate in full luxuriance". The people, disgusted with the futile wrangling of ministerialists and opposition, would come to think in terms, not of a "change of actors", but of "an alteration in the machinery". Then will be felt, [he concluded], the full effect of encouraging doctrines which tend to make the citizens despise their constitution. Then will be felt the plenitude of the mischief of teaching the people to believe, that all ancient institutions

1 Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, Works (Rivington, 1826), vi. 240.
3 This abandonment of political deference to "men of more respectable characters and great abilities" on the part of the provincial Constitutional societies was one of the marked features of the artisan political movement in 1792 (G. William's forthcoming Artisans and Sans-Culottes (London, 1968), chapter IV).
4 Appeal, Works (Rivington, 1826), vi. 254.
5 Ibid. p. 252.
are the results of ignorance; and that all prescriptive government is in its nature usurpation. Then will be felt, in all its energy, the danger of encouraging a spirit of litigation in persons of that immature and imperfect state of knowledge which serves to render them susceptible of doubts, but incapable of their solution. Then will be felt, in all its aggravation, the pernicious consequence of destroying all docility in the minds of those who are not formed for finding their own way in the labyrinths of political theory, and are made to reject the clue, and to disdain the guide. Then will be felt, and too late will be acknowledged, the ruin which follows the disjoining of religion from the state; the separation of morality from policy; and the giving conscience no concern and no coactive or coercive force in the most material of all the social ties, the principle of our obligations to government. ¹

In this way Burke forecast the nature of the next phase of British radicalism—the incursion of the working class into political life. That did not occur till 1792, but by November of that year, though Burke had not fully convinced even the Portland Whigs, he and Paine between them had prepared the English governing classes almost en bloc to associate in self defence for the preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers. ²

Burke's appeal to the only public he really recognized or cared about had, by then and to that extent, succeeded. Surprisingly the response to his appeal to the conservative Whigs as a political grouping was delayed even longer. In the winter of 1792-3 only isolated and interested Whigs, such as Loughborough, Malmesbury, Elliot and Windham, rallied to Burke's strident campaign of "alarmism", perhaps because it served to countenance their gradual desertion of opposition in order to accept lucrative government appointments under Pitt. ³ In the end, rather than Burke, it was Fox himself who caused the reluctant Portland, head of the conservative Whigs, in January 1794, to reject Fox's leadership. ⁴ And rather than Burke's own special pleading, it was the compelling force of circumstances—the need to stem the tide of British military disaster on the continent and to

¹ Appeal, Works (Rivington, 1826), vi. 252.
² For the Loyalist movement see E. C. Black, The Association, British Extra-parliamentary Political Organization, 1769-1793 (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), chapter VII.
³ Cone, op. cit. ii. 406.
⁴ Fox's final separation from Portland was caused by his uncompromising criticism of Pitt's war policy, his inability to restrain the more radical members of the Whig "Association of the Friends of the People" and by his public support of Grey's motion for Parliamentary reform in May 1793.
pave the way for reform in Ireland—which led to the Whig schism and to the formation of the coalition government with Pitt in July 1794.¹ Thus was completed the conversion of the “old” Whigs to a renovated rather than novel “conservatism” of which Burke had been for so long the prophet and chief advocate.