

Lord William Wyndham Grenville

Change of Administration
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CHANGE OF ADMINISTRATION

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Lord Hawkesbury moved, that the house at its rising do adjourn to Wednesday sen night.

Lord Grenville immediately rose, and [232] called the attention of their lordships to the subject of which he had given notice yesterday. The principal points of his lordship's speech, which occupied upwards of three hours in the delivery, were to the following effect.—I do not mean to offer any objection to the motion which has just been made; but I rise for the purpose of stating, as your lordships all know it is competent for me on this question to do, the circumstances which have led to the present situation of public affairs. I mean to explain, as far as I am acquainted with them, the causes which have brought about the change which has taken place in his majesty's councils. It is now six years since the members of a former administration, of which I formed a part, thought it their duty, under similar circumstances, to ask permission of his majesty to withdraw from their situations. This determination they carried into execution without communicating through any channel to the public the grounds which had induced them to take that step. I participated fully in the motives of forbearance on which that conduct was founded. I am far from now regretting that the change did take place in that manner. But it must be in the recollection of all your lordships, that the motives of the persons who composed the administration to which I have alluded, were made the subject of much comment, and were greatly misrepresented in consequence of that forbearance to which they adhered. On the present occasion, then, when a change of administration has taken place, not by resignation, but in consequence of the exercise of the royal prerogative, it is natural that I, who know the misrepresentations which occurred in a former instance, should wish to avoid similar imputations, by making to your lordships, and thro' you to the country, a full explanation of all the circumstances which have given rise to the existing situation of public affairs. But I have still a much stronger claim to your lordships indulgence in making this statement. It has happened that a libellous publication has already appeared, containing a false and garbled representation of the circumstances to which I allude; and here let me ask the noble lords on the other side, whether they can point out any period of the history of this country in which it ever happened that such a publication was made? I speak of the

publication of the minutes of advice given to his majesty by his late ministers. That advice was given to his majesty in writing, and though it was proper that the paper should [233] be transferred to the persons who succeeded to the administration, in order that they might know the grounds upon which their predecessors were dismissed, it was a very extraordinary proceeding in those persons to authorize its publication. If they thought it a fit document for public discussion, either in or out of parliament, there were two ways in which they might have proceeded, in order to promote a constitutional investigation. They might have come down to parliament and stated, that improper advice had been given to the crown, and upon that statement moved an address to his majesty for the production of the paper; or they might have adopted another course. If they found upon their accession to the government, that evil counsels had been given, they might have advised his majesty to lay those counsels before parliament, in order that those from whom they proceeded might receive the punishment they merited. But will the noble lords on the opposite side vindicate the publication of a paper of this important nature in the manner it has taken place? I must again ask them whether they can refer to any instance, in the history of the country in which any similar publication had, from party views or any other motive, ever been made? Under these circumstances, however, I could not refrain from desiring to lay before your lordships the truth of the case on this important subject, which had, in consequence of the publication I have noticed, become the subject of conversation and misrepresentation in every coffee-house. For this purpose, I was induced to ask leave of his majesty to make the statement I am about to lay before your lordships; for without that permission, I should not, most anxiously as I desired to explain every circumstance connected with the important transactions that have taken place, have taken this opportunity of addressing your lordships. But my application to his majesty was received with all that kindness and tenderness to the feelings of others for which his royal mind is so eminently distinguished, and I shall ever entertain the strongest sense of gratitude for the benevolent condescension with which the permission I solicited was granted. Having now stated the grounds on which I think it will appear that an explanation on my part was indispensably called for, it scarcely can be necessary for me to assure your lordships, that whatever I may say in addressing you will be accompanied with every feeling of respect which is due to the sovereign of these [234] realms. I have, my lords, no complaint to make; I have only to state what is necessary for the vindication of my own character

—At the period of the change of administration, to which I have already referred, your lordships know that a great and illustrious statesman, (Mr. Pitt), to whom I never can allude but with sentiments of the most unfeigned respect, was at the head of his majesty's government. My lords, in the year 1801, it was the opinion of that illustrious statesman in which opinion I completely concurred, that large further concessions should be made to the catholics of Ireland. It was then thought expedient that a measure for that purpose should be proposed to parliament. That proposed measure not meeting with his majesty's approbation, the consequence was the resignation of the then ministers. The result was different in the present case, for reasons which I shall presently state. I at that period thought it my duty to resign, and cheerfully sacrifice all those personal considerations which may be supposed to attach to the situation of one of his majesty's ministers. My lords, I will sacrifice those considerations over and over again, upon the same principle. It is undoubtedly true, that no pledge was given to the catholics of Ireland that further concessions to them should be one of the results of the union; their consent was undoubtedly not purchased by any seal promise. It is well known, however, from the speeches in parliament, upon the great question of the union, and we know that what is said in parliament, somehow or other becomes known to the public, that the understanding upon the subject certainly was, that further concessions to the catholics of Ireland, might, and ought to be a measure consequent upon the union. That such a measure was not only politic and expedient, but absolutely necessary, was the opinion, as I have already stated, of that great and illustrious statesman, Mr. Pitt; it was also the opinion of his great and illustrious rival, Mr. Fox. These eminent statesmen concurred in opinion in three great measures of policy, the establishment of the sinking fund, the abolition of the African slave trade, and the necessity of further concessions to the catholics of Ireland. The first of these measures was adopted on its first proposition; the second, the abolition of the African slave trade, met with much, in my opinion, mistaken opposition, but has at length been carried. The third, that of a system of conciliation and kindness to the catholics of Ireland, remains [235] yet to be carried into execution; but it rests upon grounds of such unavoidable necessity, that I think it is impossible for any man, after weighing on the one hand the objections which have been urged against it, and on the other the advantages which must inevitably flow from it, to resist the coming to this conclusion, that it is a measure which, for the welfare of the country, ought to be speedily adopted. It

was in this view that on a former occasion I sacrificed my situation in the government; and that sacrifice I was ready to make again, being convinced that four millions of our fellow subjects in Ireland are to be governed by conciliation and kindness, and not by persecution. In consequence of circumstances which occurred in the situation of public affairs, which it is not necessary here to restate, overtures were repeatedly made to me to take a part in his majesty's councils. My answer to all such overtures was, that my sovereign might always command my services in any frame of government which might be formed, but at the same time I always explicitly declared, that I never would forego my right to state my sentiments on this question in parliament, whenever any occasion should occur which might call for such a statement. A time arrived when the Roman catholics of Ireland thought fit to represent to parliament the state of their grievances. They did me the honour to apply to me to present their Petition. [See vol. 4, p. 97.] I felt that application, my lords, to be an honour, because it was a proof of the opinion those persons entertained of my conduct and sincerity. I complied with their wishes. But here, my lords, it is proper that I should correct a misapprehension which has very generally prevailed on this subject. It is not true, as has been frequently asserted, that the consent of the Roman catholics of Ireland to the union was purchased in consequence of any promise made to them of a measure of complete conciliation; but it is certain, from the debates that took place on the Union, that it was understood that the catholic question should be fully considered, and on this ground I considered myself bound to bring their claims before your lordships. The result of the application which was made to parliament is well known. The majority against the measure, large as it was, could not be considered as precluding its revival at a future period, or as imposing any pledge on parliament not to accede to the catholic claims to the full extent in which they were then made, In a [236] few months after I had the honour to make the application,,the result of which I have mentioned, the country had the misfortune to lose the great statesman who was at the head of the existing administration. His majesty was then pleased to think that, under the circumstances in which the country was placed, I might be of use to him and to the public, and directed me to assist in forming a new government. I did form one, which, from the materials of which it was composed, and the principles on which its members agreed to act together, appeared to me best calculated for promoting the interests of the country. The sentiments of most of the persons who became members of this administration, upon the catholic

question, were well known from their public declarations, and particularly in consequence of the discussion which had recently taken place on the subject. When, therefore, we were called to the councils of our sovereign, no man could suppose that we were called in any other manner than that in which ministers ought constitutionally to discharge their duty; namely, to give on all proper occasions to his majesty, conformably to the oath we had taken, full, fair, and upright counsel, and not to withhold that advice from interest, affection or any other motive. I do not make this assertion, my lords, from my own recollection only. Within these few days my sovereign has declared it to be conformable to his recollection also, and authorized me to confirm this statement, not from myself only, but from him. After what had recently happened, it will not be supposed that it could be the desire of the late administration to press the catholic question, or to revive any measure known to be painful to the feelings of a great personage, to whom every respect is due, unless the pressure of unavoidable necessity compelled us to bring it forward. We flattered ourselves, therefore, that from the character of the persons to whom the government of Ireland was entrusted, many causes of dissatisfaction in the people of that country would be diminished. The manner in which the noble person at the head of that government (the duke of Bedford) executed the laws, and the just but conciliating spirit of his administration, gave us reason to hope that the unanimity so much desired in the sister kingdom might at last be accomplished. We had but one wish, the welfare and security of the whole empire; and, by knitting together the hearts of all his majesty's subjects, we cherished the hope that this [237] great object might be attained. We were induced to pursue this conduct, as well because we knew the agitation of the subject might prove painful in a high quarter, as because the recent decision of parliament had rendered it very unlikely that it could be carried, while it was probable that it would revive animosities. One of the first objects of the late administration, therefore, was to prevent, if possible, the revival of the Catholic question. In the first session of parliament our endeavours were successful; but the state of Ireland during the last year was not so satisfactory; disturbances had broken out in several districts, disturbances of that nature which this measure was particularly calculated to prevent. These commotions were, however, composed by the ordinary exercise of the civil administration of the country. Such was the love of justice and lenity which distinguished the noble duke at the head of the government of Ireland, that he carefully avoided resorting to any extraordinary measures in repressing these disturbances, and his system

of conciliation had proved successful. At the time these events occurred in Ireland, the attention of his majesty's government in this country was anxiously directed to the means of raising a great military force, which the total destruction of the power of Prussia had rendered more than ever necessary for the security of the British Empire. No measure could be so well calculated to promote that end as one which would induce the superabundant population of Ireland to enter into the army and navy, and for such a proceeding the great earl of Chatham had set an important example, when, in order to remove the disaffection of the Highlands of Scotland, then nearly in the same situation as Ireland now was, he held out inducements for the population of those districts to enlist in the army. With regard to the state of Ireland, until the wealthy yeomanry could be interested, by having opportunities of providing for the younger branches of their families, similar to these afforded to the same description of persons in this country, it was in vain to expect that they would exert their influence in recruiting for the army. Besides, those persons who have the charge of religious instruction in that country, will never, with any zeal, encourage men to enter into a service where the exercise of their worship is not protected by law. It was to remove these difficulties that the measure which had been lately withdrawn in the house of commons was introduced to the consideration of [238] parliament. With regard to the general question, I hesitate not to declare it to be my opinion, that the Roman Catholics, by pushing forward their petition at the present moment, have acted highly injurious to their own interests, and to the interests of the empire at large. It was therefore my anxious wish, as well as that of those who acted with me, to devise some means by which the discussion of the general question in parliament might have been prevented, and nothing appeared to us better calculated for that purpose than the bill, which was intended to give to all the subjects of his majesty the right of holding every description of military employment. About fourteen years ago, the parliament of Ireland opened to the Roman Catholics the army, with the exclusion only of the rank of commander in chief, master-general of the ordnance, and general of the staff. With these exceptions, his majesty was enabled to give commissions in the army to all his Catholic subjects in Ireland; and there was no doubt, from the construction of the act, that it opened to them the navy also, in so far as the authority of the Irish parliament could extend to that service. As this act, however, could not extend to the Catholics in Great Britain, it operated as an obstruction to the removal of the military force from the one country to the other. So absurd, so

incongruous a state of law, never existed in any nation in the world. Instead of asking why it is not put an end to, the question ought rather to be, how it is possible that it could have existed so long? In such a state of things, was it to be wondered that we should endeavour to apply a remedy, and when we were to propose to the catholics in every part of the empire to enter into the army or the navy, we resolved not to make that proposition upon a narrow principle, but to call them to a liberal system of service, and to open to them every rank. Here, however, another point arose, which it was necessary to meet fairly. In the year 1778 the Irish parliament thought proper to open to the Protestant dissenters in Ireland, not only the navy and the army, but all employments whatever. Therefore in 1795, when it fell to the lot of my noble friend, who was then at the head of the Irish government, to propose the admission Of the catholics into the army and the navy, he had no occasion to enter into any consideration as to the situation of the dissenters. In England, however, the case is different; here dissenters are excluded from all public [239] employments unless they take a sacramental test, which is contrary to the principles of their religious faith. If we had adopted the Irish act of 1793 in this country, the catholics would have been admitted to offices from which the Protestants were excluded. Let me ask your lordships, whether such a measure would not have awakened the attention of the protestant dissenters? And what answer could you have given to them, if they asked you to explain the reason of the distinction made between them and the catholics? Regarding the question, then, under all those points of view, I was induced to form the decided opinion that the measure to be submitted to parliament in the form of an act, should, after reciting the danger to which the empire was exposed, also recite the remedy by which all hearts and hands might be united in warding off every attempt of the inveterate foe of this country. I am aware that much may be expected to be said on the manner in which the measure was brought forward. In the first place it may be observed, that it is the duty of all members of parliament to propose those measures which they may conceive to be conducive to the welfare of the country. In the like manner it is the duty of the members of government to submit to his majesty such measures as they may think calculated to promote the interests of the public. If his majesty should not approve of any measure they may suggest, they have then to chuse whether they will abandon that measure, or tender their resignation to their sovereign. I need not tell you, my lords, that in the recent instance which has occurred of this

difference of opinion, the former course was that which was adopted. In the other case, in 1801, when a similar measure was proposed to the king, and disapproved by him, the administration of that day thought proper to resign. In the present case, however, the same result was brought about in a different manner. The measure was withdrawn, and it was intended to suffer it to drop entirely; but his majesty had, in the mean time, thought fit to appoint a new administration. I shall, my lords, endeavour to state as briefly as possible the circumstances which gave rise to this event. A misapprehension of the nature and extent of the measure proposed appears to have taken place, and the statement of that misapprehension comes from a quarter to which I give the most implicit credit. In the explanation I am about to make, I only wish to shew that I, and those with [240] whom I acted, had reason to suppose that the nature of the measure was fully understood, which, from my heart and soul, I am convinced it was not. I only mean to justify our characters by stating the reasons which induced us to suppose that no misapprehension existed. In doing this, my lords, it will be necessary for me to recapitulate the different stages of the proceedings which took place. The draft of the Bill was laid before the king for his approbation. That draft contained a recital of the Irish Act with the restriction. It then proposed that the services of catholics should be received without any restriction, and no condition required but the taking of the oath of allegiance. When this draft was submitted to his Majesty, I thought I had done every thing on the subject which my duty required of me. Afterwards, however, I learned that difficulties were stated, and that there was a repugnance in his majesty's mind to the measure. A written answer to this effect was received by his majesty's servants, and to which a representation was returned. I am sure, my lords, there is no man into whose hands that representation may have fallen, but must regard it as a most dutiful and respectful address, such as was fit to be presented to the best of sovereigns by his servants. On that representation his majesty was pleased to give orders that the bill might be submitted to parliament. A dispatch was immediately sent to Ireland, in order that his majesty's consent having been obtained, it might be communicated to the catholics. At the conference which took place in consequence of this proceeding between the government of Ireland and certain persons, who possess great influence with the catholic body, a question was asked, whether the rank of general of the staff, and other employments, from which the catholics were excluded by the act of 1793, were to be laid open to them? The answer given on the part of his majesty's government

in Ireland was, that from the words of the dispatch they understood that the catholics were to be allowed to hold every rank in the army and the navy. The lord lieutenant's dispatch, containing the account of this conference, was, as all such dispatches are, communicated to his majesty, and by him returned without any comment. In answer to it, another dispatch was sent to Ireland, for the purpose of giving full information of the nature of the measure to the catholics, which was also laid before his majesty. This dispatch contained copies of the clauses of the bill, and a remark was subjoined, that these clauses laid open the army and navy to the Roman catholics, and enabled the lord lieutenant to answer the question, which had been put on that point in the affirmative. After all that I have stated has taken place, what must be the feelings of men who read in libellous publications assertions openly made of their having deceived his majesty. For God's sake, my lords, let us stand clear of this foul calumny. Let us not be unjustly accused, I will not say of deceiving our amiable and benevolent sovereign, but of obtaining from any man by fraudulent means, his consent to a measure which he disapproved. I have stated what was the understanding of my colleagues on this subject, and, in particular, of a noble viscount, who had a principal share in all the transactions; and a man of a more refined and punctilious sense of honour than lord Howick does not exist. It fell to the lot of that noble lord to receive those official directions which he understood authorised him to submit the measure to the consideration of parliament. Here, indeed, a difference of opinion arose between the person to whom the question was addressed and the person who asked it, as to the impression which the answer ought to have produced. This much however, I can say, that the person who asked the question came away with the impression that the permission solicited was granted. I was waiting almost at the door of the chamber in which the conference took place, and I witnessed the effect of the recent impression on the mind of lord Howick. He stated to me, that he had obtained permission to introduce the bill, On my entering into the chamber immediately after, I forbore to allude to what was considered a delicate subject, and not a word was said to me respecting the conference which had just taken place with lord Howick. This conversation occurred on Wednesday the 4th of March: on the Thursday or Friday following, with that perspicuity which is peculiar to him, lord Howick explained to the house of commons the nature of the measure proposed to be adopted. The speech of that noble lord soon became the subject of public conversation, for we know, my lords, that the speeches of members of

parliament on important occasions do, by some means or other, get abroad; but, notwithstanding the publicity of that speech, it was not until the Wednesday following that I was informed of any objection having arisen to the measure. On that day we were for the first time informed, that the impression which we supposed to [242] have been so well founded, had been formed erroneously. This naturally gave rise to an anxious desire for explanation on our part; and here permit me to observe, that while they who know nothing of what passed, presume to say that we have been guilty of fraud and concealment, his majesty, who knows all that did take place, has the goodness to declare, that the difference which has arisen was only a difference on principle, and that all that had passed, on every occasion, was strictly honourable. This, my lords, is a declaration of great importance to me, were it only to prove the Sentiments which prevail in the royal breast; but how much more important is it to me when it serves at the same time to repel the foul calumny with which I have been assailed. In this situation of affairs we adopted a resolution, which, of all these transactions, I confess it would be for me the most difficult to justify, and which nothing but the mistaken impression which we had fallen into could excuse. We determined to withdraw the bill. On the Friday I intimated to his majesty the sacrifice we had resolved to make. At first we intended to reduce the bill to the same provisions as the Irish bill of 1793; but, upon examination, we found that impracticable, as it would then have appeared in a shape to which unanswerable objections would have been made. We then informed his majesty, that we were determined to make a still more complete sacrifice, and to drop the bill altogether. Perhaps it may be thought that we went too far, but after the mistake which had occurred, it was our wish to accommodate, as much as possible, our actions to his majesty's feelings. But when we did allow the bill to fall to the ground, though we did not mean to propose any other measures than those which his majesty approved, we thought it necessary to reserve to ourselves the right of stating our opinion of the great benefits which we were persuaded might be derived from pursuing a different line of policy—of openly avowing these sentiments in the event of the catholic petition being presented—and of submitting to his majesty from time to time, *for his decision*, such measures as we might think it advisable to propose. I have placed an emphasis on these words, "for his decision," because you will perceive, my lords, that they are left out in the publication to which I have alluded, evidently for the purpose of making it appear that we meant to force upon his majesty measures

contrary to his feelings and his conscience.—I come now, [243] my lords, to state a circumstance which placed his majesty's government in a situation in which it was impossible it could stand, as it would have been divested of all constitutional responsibility. The answer to the representation made to his majesty, expressed regret that such a difference of opinion should have arisen, and required a written declaration that we should propose no farther concessions to the catholics. After all that had passed, a more painful situation could not have arisen. I beg of you, my lords, to consider what are the duties of the king's ministers, and what is the nature of the functions they have to discharge. It is their duty to advise the king, and to give, without favour or affection, that counsel which they think best for the country. What, then, would be the situation of any set of men who should hind themselves by oath to discharge this important office, and at the same time bind themselves by a written promise not to discharge it? If they meant to adhere to the written promise rather than to their oath, they would resolve to advise their sovereign always according to his wishes, but never according to his interests. In no very remote period it may be necessary, for the security of a principal part of the empire, to repeat the advice which has been recently given to his majesty, for the enemy has already pretty plainly shewn against what part of the united kingdom his first attempt will be directed. But I wish to look at this subject in a still larger and more important point of view than even the safety of Ireland, if that be possible. Will the British constitution exist if ministers give a pledge of the nature of that which has been described? And before this question be answered, let it be recollected, that as such a pledge was required of the ministers who have retired, upon every fair construction it must have been given by those Who have come into office. If calamities should befall the other part of the united kingdom, and those ministers should be asked why certain advice respecting its situation was not given, they must answer, that they have given a pledge not to take that subject into their consideration; that Ireland was a corner which had been cut out of the map of the empire they received into their keeping. If this doctrine, my lords, prevails, the cornerstone of our constitution, namely, the maxim that the king can do no wrong, and that his ministers only are responsible, is completely gone. If an opinion should prevail in parliament that ministers ought to have given [244] certain advice, and they should state that they had entered into a pledge not to give it, consider, my lords, where the responsibility then must fall. We should then return to principles which must sap the foundation of the

monarchy, to those, I had almost said, diabolical principles, by which the king of this country was once brought to answer to his parliament, and considered responsible for all the transactions of the government. Those who best know me, my lords, can declare, that when I came into the service of my sovereign, it was not a matter of enjoyment, but of duty, and I am now relieved from it, at a time when the difficulties of executing that duty are still of great magnitude. Let not those who have succeeded us imagine that they have succeeded to an easy task. We did not succeed to "a bed of roses," neither have we left "a bed of roses." My noble friend (lord Auckland), has stated to your lordships the growing prosperity of the commerce of the country, which was received with a sort of taunt from a noble lord on the other side. The commerce and the finances of the country we have left somewhat better than we found them. Our foreign relations we have left in a better state than we found them. Let me, however, call the serious and anxious attention of noble lords on the other side to the state of Ireland. If persecution for the sake of differences in religions opinions are again to be revived in this country, can there be a question that it will produce the most dreadful dissensions? and if, my lords, the system acted upon in Ireland by the noble duke who represents his majesty in that country, or the noble lord in the blue ribbon (the earl of Hardwicke) his predecessor, is to be reversed, and a system of persecution, coercion and restraint to be substituted, no human being can foresee the incalculable mischiefs that will result from such a system. When we know that our enemy has fixed upon one point of the British dominions where he thinks invasion practicable, and that that point is Ireland, surely it requires more than ordinary care, more than ordinary measures, to remove the causes of all those unhappy dissensions which have given rise to this hope of the enemy, and which have given rise in that country to those insurrections which have produced such dreadful effects. If they do not consider the state of Ireland with these views, the greatest danger may result to the interests of the empire.