

'The friends of Mr Pitt's character and memory': The Afterlife of a Political Leader 1806-7

The death of William Pitt the Younger on 23 January 1806 signaled a shift in the British political landscape. Prior to his death, Pitt had governed Britain for twenty of the previous twenty-three years. While by the start of 1806 his wartime government was teetering on the brink of collapse after the dissolution of the Third Coalition following its defeat at the Battle of Austerlitz, with opposition MPs preparing to attack Pitt over his conduct of the war upon the resumption of parliament on 21 January 1806, Pitt was nonetheless considered by contemporaries, both supporters and enemies, as an essential pillar of the political establishment. His death shattered the status quo, triggering the collapse of his ministry and its replacement with the Grenville-Fox 'Ministry of All the Talents', a significant moment that ended the twenty year-long proscription of Charles James Fox and his Whig supporters from holding ministerial office.

This paper addresses a key aspect to the transition from Pitt's Ministry to the Ministry of All the Talents (1806-1807). It examines how Pitt's former supporters positioned themselves in the uncertain and unfamiliar environment outside of the ministry in the absence of a recognized leader? Compounded by the shock and distress elicited by Pitt's sudden passing, the question, 'What line should be taken by Mr. Pitt's friends', posed by the then out-going treasury secretary William Huskisson, was representative of both the primary concern driving Pitt's supporters in the aftermath of his death and how Pitt's supporters identified themselves. Key to this question was the issue of whether they should enter into systematic opposition against the newly formed government or whether their role was simply to act as guardians to the legacy and measures of Pitt and the Government he led. This study examines correspondence between key individuals in Pitt's former network together with parliamentary speeches and contemporary newspaper

reports. By tracking the activity of Pitt's key parliamentary supporters in the direct aftermath of Pitt's death, I explore how this grouping reacted to the shock of losing its eponymous leader and navigated a new and uncertain political environment, relying upon the memory of their political friend.

[Slide 2] The death of Pitt on January 21 1806, had a powerful emotional impact on those closest to Pitt, being described variously as a 'calamity which has befallen us' and 'the fatal blow which overwhelms us.'¹ In the immediate aftermath of Pitt's death his close friends exhibited deep distress, with many reports of an outpouring of tears and weeping upon being notified of Pitt's passing. Across private correspondence, journals, and diaries of the members of Pitt's network, including those who were not members of his Administration, the outpouring of emotions was universal. William Wilberforce, independent in politics but a life-long friend of Pitt exclaimed to his friend Lady Waldegrave 'poor Pitt, I almost believe died of a broken heart!' mourning that Pitt's death was linked to the burden and stress implicit to his role as a wartime leader.² Lord Grenville, Pitt's cousin and member of his pre-1801 Administration who as the then Opposition leader had been reluctantly preparing to attack Pitt's Government over the conduct of the war, described himself as being 'entirely overcome by the melancholy event', travelling to his country estate at Dropmore to 'recover [himself] a little' in order to 'prepare [his] mind for any discussions to which this great public and private misfortune may give rise.'³

[Slide 3] These accounts suggest that while viewing Pitt's death as a personal tragedy, sentiment arising from personal intimacy with Pitt quickly gave way to political considerations,

¹GD51/1/90/2, Lord Castlereagh to Lord Camden February 7 1806; BL Add MS 89143/1/1/104, Lord Melville to Canning, January 23 1806.

² Life of Wilberforce, Wilberforce to Lady Waldegrave February 1 1806, 250.

³ Manuscripts of J.B Fortescue Preserved at Dropmore, Volume VIII, 332-3.

as broader questions surrounding Pitt's political legacy and likely successor quickly coloured how and on what basis Pitt was remembered. Lord Castlereagh, who served in Pitt's second Ministry, writing to outgoing cabinet colleague Earl Camden described the pressing need for them to 'renew their existence as a party' which he saw as having been dissolved by Pitt's death. Acknowledging the varying 'shades of differences' in the opinions of Pitt's former followers, Castlereagh stated that he believed that:

The great majority would incline to some understanding to **protect and perpetuate the system and principles** upon which they have acted under Mr. Pitt.⁴

Grenville, who succeeded Pitt as Prime Minister, predicted that such principles would provide an impetus to the future conduct of Pitt's former colleagues, describing to his brother Thomas Grenville that while Pitt's death had 'relieved' him of the 'insuperable difficulty' of 'urge[ing] a censure upon his measure and character' it would on the other hand 'give to [Pitt's] colleagues the greatest possible advantage in sheltering themselves under his name, should there be the least appearance of pressing upon his memory', acknowledging his awareness of the significance of the memory of Pitt as a powerful political edifice for his now-leaderless followers to rally behind.⁵

[Slide 4] Thus, when 'Mr. Pitt's Friends' were promptly thrown back into the political fray, their return to political action was directly related to the 'pressing upon' the memory and legacy of their friend. The question of Pitt's personal debts, together with Pitt's deathbed request for a pension to be provided for his niece and nephews, dominated the discussion

⁴NRS, GD51/1/90, fols.2, Lord Castlereagh to Lord Camden February 7, 1806.

⁵ Manuscripts of J.B Fortescue Preserved at Dropmore, Vol VIII, 333-4.

amongst Pitt's friends. The matter of pensions was quickly resolved through a direct application to the King.⁶ More complex, was the issue of Pitt's debts. Whilst long-term intimate friends of Pitt such as George Rose were eager to attempt to pass a motion in parliament to cover Pitt's debts, many of Pitt's supporters were reluctant to use public money to cover a private debt. William Huskisson on informing Viscount Melville of the proceedings in Parliament stated his belief that the situation required 'some delicacy' as many of Pitt's supporters worried that airing his private affairs would be used by his enemies to undermine his character.⁷ Chiefly, he was concerned that 'Wilberforce and his set', would 'seize the opportunity of reading us a lesson out of their Book of Christly morality' to launch an 'enquiry of Mr P[itt]'s Character.'

This exemplifies the divided nature of Pitt's friends. While a friend of Pitt Wilberforce was not counted as one of 'Pitt's friends' in relation to the parliamentary grouping that formed around Pitt. Wilberforce's opposition stemmed from the belief that it was not appropriate for the public to pay a private debt, particularly due to 'the time and circumstances' of Britain being faced with the ongoing war with France and the accompanying financial strain on the state.⁸ This reluctance was personified by those members who preferred the alternative option of a private subscription amongst Pitt's friends to cover his debts, as was previously organised in 1801. However, once it was moved before the House of Commons the overriding sympathy and respect for Pitt shared by many members of parliament resulted in Parliament moving to accept the discharging his debts.

⁶ BL Add MS 89143/3/3/6, fols.15-20, Canning to Joan Canning January 26 1806.

⁷ NRS, GD51/1/90, fols.1, William Huskisson to Henry Dundas January 27 1806.

⁸ Wilberforce to Muncaster January 25 1806, in *Life of Wilberforce Vol III*, p.245.

The move from Pitt's friends to push for a public funeral for their former leader was coupled with the issue of the payment of Pitt's debt. This effort was organised by a key group of Pitt's friends who met frequently in the days following Pitt's death to craft an approach to secure Pitt's immediate legacy.⁹ Grenville, now the Prime Minister, primarily supported by Pitt's former political enemies, even played a role in aiding the passage of the pro-Pitt bills through parliament. This required Grenville to oppose his new political allies, as many of them believed that honouring Pitt through a public funeral would represent a positive 'judgement on the general effects of his political life,' which they vehemently and ardently opposed.¹⁰ Grenville largely ignored these concerns. Instead, he actively sought to support the efforts to commemorate Pitt, seeing it as his duty to 'render this last melancholy service to a friend whose memory will ever be most dear to me.'¹¹ Grenville thus viewed these motions as a final expression of his friendship to Pitt, a sentiment that was acknowledged by his brother Buckingham as being directly tied to his 'personal feelings' in contrast to any political consideration.¹² Thus due to the efforts of the friends Pitt had fostered throughout his life, his immediate legacy in the weeks after his death was assured, with the Foxite Whigs offering only a token resistance, aware that a strong opposition to the motion would have strained their relationship with Grenville, the head of their new administration.¹³ (say why!).

The Battle over Pitt's Legacy: The Friends of Mr. Pitt Post-Pitt

With varying strands of Pitt's friends combining to secure his legacy, the question remaining was what was their long-term political position to be? None of Pitt's ministers were invited to join Grenville's 'Ministry of All the Talents', as Grenville judged them as

⁹ BL, Add. MS. 89143/3/3/6, fols.15-20., Canning to Joan Canning January 14 1806.

¹⁰ Windham to Grenville, in *HMC Fortescue Volume VIII*, p.346.

¹¹ Grenville to Thomas Grenville January 24 1806, in *ibid*, pp.335-6.

¹² Buckingham to Grenville January 26 1806, in *ibid*, p.343.

¹³ James J Sack, *The Grenvillites 1801-29: Party Politics and Factionalism in the Age of Pitt and Liverpool*, University of Illinois Press, 1979, 85.

incompetent and unsuitable to government. Only two, Lord Bathurst and Charles Long, were offered minor positions, which both turned down.¹⁴ Despite their proscription, most of Pitt's friends were reluctant to outwardly oppose Grenville, with Castlereagh, the outgoing Minister for War, fantasising about a scenario in which the Grenvillites would 'break with their present associates' and realign themselves to 'the whole of Mr. Pitt's connection.'¹⁵ This continued belief in Grenville, , was due to a belief that he was naturally as much of a 'Friend of Mr. Pitt' as they were. As Wilberforce once wrote, describing his own political separation with Pitt and his friends, one was able to 'more easily forgive ill will to their friends than good will to their enemies.'¹⁶ This acknowledgement of Grenville as a wayward friend, was coupled with a combination of conflict between the leading figures of the remaining rump of Pitt's friends over who should take the leadership, together with a reluctance to engage (in the words of Huskisson) in 'an imitation of the conduct of the Old Opposition, such it would ill become us to adopt either on the ground of policy or character.'¹⁷ Instead, he, and the friends he canvassed advocated for 'Mr Pitt's Friends' to act as a 'Corps de Reserve' that Grenville could fall back upon for support as long as Grenville did not destroy 'all of Mr Pitt's systems and principles.'¹⁸ This attachment to Grenville was not universally shared amongst all the 'Friends of Pitt'. Robert Dundas, Lord Melville's nephew, believed that 'decided hostility' was the 'only honourable course' due to Grenville's 'detestable' conduct in abandoning Pitt. Dundas, perhaps uniquely amongst Pitt's friends, preferred the possibility of aligning with Fox, unrealistically contingent on Fox abandoning his traditional Whig allies such as Charles Grey and instead attaching himself to the Prince of Wales and Lord Moira..¹⁹

¹⁴ Sack, *The Grenvillites*, p.100.

¹⁵ NRS, GD51/1/90, fols.2, Castlereagh to Camden, February 7 1806.

¹⁶ Wilberforce, *Life of Wilberforce Volume II*, p.100 Quoting Francis Bacon.

¹⁷ NRS, GD51/1/90, fols.3, Huskisson to Melville, February 9 1806.

¹⁸ NRS, GD51/1/90, fols.4, Huskisson to Melville, February 10 1806.

¹⁹ NRS, GD51/1/90, fols.5, Robert Dundas to Henry Dundas February 17 1806.

[Slide 5] Despite these disagreements, what made the idea of a united ‘Friends of Mr, Pitt’ party with a shared political goal possible was the fragmentation of Pitt’s original governing coalition that had occurred during to Pitt’s time in opposition. On returning to office in 1804, Pitt lacked much of the support he had had in 1801. Yet, the support he retained, was relatively politically homogenous. At the heart of this homogeneity was a shared attachment to Pitt that moderated the personal enmity that existed between sections of his supporters. Upholding Pitt’s legacy was not, however a complete programme, and many wondered what next steps were appropriate to take. Thus, while in the popular press, a united opposition was often depicted, such as in the Gilray Print ‘Political mathematicians, shaking the Broad Bottom’d hemispheres’ that features Canning, Hawkesbury, Castlereagh, Perceval and George Rose attempting to pull down the Ministry in the shadow of the ‘Pilot who Weathered the Storm’ [Pitt], in reality it was not a unified, cohesive group. As William Huskisson informed Melville, recounting the outcome of meetings held by Pitt’s Friends in early February 1806, although they remained united in matters ‘that may bear upon his fame, or effect his character’, it remained unclear as to ‘what line should be taken by Mr. Pitt’s friends.’²⁰ The conditions necessary to unite them in opposition against Grenville’s ministry were soon fulfilled after Windham, who had served as Pitt’s Secretary at War between 1794 to 1801, attempted to pass military reforms that directly undermined the volunteer system that had been at the heart of Pitt’s plan for home defence, providing an opportunity to engage in ‘vigorous’, not ‘systematic’ opposition.²¹

It was during the debate on the repeal of the Additional Forces Act, that ‘Mr. Pitt’s Friends’ in April 1806 first rallied together to oppose the measures of the new Ministry. Canning justified

²⁰ NRS, GD51/1/90, fols.3, Huskisson to Dundas February 9 1806.

²¹ Jupp, *Grenville*, p.373.

their opposition by describing Windham's intention as 'the demolition of Mr Pitt's favourite measure' and saw it as providing their grouping with an opportunity to take 'a stand in the House of Commons, as we are bound to make – both in respect to Pitt's memory, & in duty to the Public.'²² In calling upon his personal friends such as Edward Bootle-Wilbraham, he rallied support from sympathetic MPs such as Robert Holt Leigh, MP who he identified as 'eager enough in his resistance to the overthrow of a favourite measure of Mr Pitt's.'²³ Yet this opposition was not universal, as Wilberforce, despite now sitting on the opposition benches alongside Canning, Perceval and Castlereagh supported Windham in voting for the repeal of the Act.²⁴ In his speech supporting the repeal, he referred to both Windham and Canning as 'honourable friend', exemplifying the difficulty in building a united political opposition constructed from the remnants of those who had held personal and political ties with Pitt.

Disunity Amongst Friends?: [Slide 6]

There was clear tension amongst those who identified themselves as 'Mr Pitt's Friends', once they had moved beyond the defence of his legacy through securing a public funeral and the relief of his debts. This tension was frequently ridiculed by *The Morning Chronicle*, a pro-Foxite newspaper, which on July 24 1806 noted that 'a jealousy [had] arisen between Messrs. Perceval, Canning and Lord Castlereagh, as to which of them shall take the lead'.²⁵ This tension within the group was not just a construct of the opposing press, but was at the front of mind within the opposition in 1806, as the question of how to 'consolidate the party of Mr. Pitt's Friends' became more pressing.²⁶ Lord Boringdon, a life-long friend and support of George Canning, stated his belief that Canning should look to the ministerial benches to forge a

²² BL Add MS 46841, Canning to Wilbraham Bootle, April 8 1806, f27-8.

²³ Ibid, April 11 1806, f29-30.

²⁴ York Herald, Saturday March 8 1806, Issue 821

²⁵ The Morning Chronicle, Thursday July 24 1806, Issue 11602.

²⁶ Add MS 89143/3/3/7, George Canning to Joan Canning, June 11 1806, ff 205-8.

‘permanent connection’, and that individuals such as ‘Lord Castlereagh, Lord Hawkesbury, and Lord Eldon’, were less fit for government than ‘Grenville, Fox & Howick’. Furthermore, Boringdon believed that such an arrangement ‘would be most conducive to [Canning’s] satisfactions, public & private, & ultimately to the accomplishment of the most sanguine expectations which can be formed.’²⁷ Canning, in communicating with fellow ‘Mr Pitt’s Friends’ acknowledged such internal divisions, confirming in a letter to George Rose the perception that there were two groupings, representing ‘two different descriptions of Mr. Pitt’s friends: Canning and those he had ‘previously ascertained [his] own concurrence of feelings and opinions’ and ‘Perceval and Lord Castlereagh’.²⁸

Life after Pitt: Memory and Reformulation of Political Attachments [Slide 7]

The immediate reaction to the passing of Pitt and the appropriation of his memory reinforces the inherent ambiguities that lay at the heart of being a ‘friend of Mr Pitt’. Being a ‘Friend of Mr. Pitt’ without Pitt fundamentally altered the make-up of his former political network. Brought together largely due to a shared personal connection with Pitt, one of the core drivers that kept many together was this former association. Coupled with a natural inclination to abhor ‘systematic opposition’ and support the incumbent government, ‘Mr Pitt’s Friends’ at times resembled a loose confederation of occasional aligning interests rather than a cohesive group. The weak links that marked the relationship between Pitt’s respective friends were not capable of sustaining the comprehensive political network he had overseen once he was no longer present. Instead, each respective member of the network reverted to reliance on their own personal networks that they had maintained concurrently with their friendship with Pitt. Yet Pitt, his memory, and individual’s attachment to it remained a unifying factor, but not

²⁷ BL Add MS 89143/1/1/114, Boringdon to Canning September 2 1806.

²⁸ The Diaries and Correspondence of the Right Hon. George Rose 1860, vol II, 311.

always the over-riding one. Thus, when Grenville made overtures to Canning between July-September 1806 to join his Ministry, Canning consulted with Hawkesbury, Perceval, and Castlereagh, and together formulated the response that they would only consider an overture made to them as a group and not individually.²⁹ In a similar vein, Lord Melville, writing to Canning in March 1807, in the aftermath of the resignation Ministry of All the Talents, stated his belief that

‘If those who profess themselves to be the friends of Mr Pitts character and memory... unite on that basis, and bind themselves to adhere to and follow no separate course, I should consider that plan as the most dignified, and cooperate in it to the utmost of my abilities and influence.’³⁰

Yet what this ‘course’ entailed remained ill-defined and contested as the conflict between questions of personal intimacy and affection and political considerations and attachments that marked Pitt’s ‘system’ of government during his lifetime continued after his death as his former friends and supporters sought to establish a government sturdy enough to weather the storm caused by the continuing Napoleonic Wars.

²⁹ Wendy Hinde, *George Canning*, 147

³⁰ Add MS 89143/1/1/104 Melville to Canning 7 March 1807.