

CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON AND THE EARL OF
REDESDALE. 1837 - 1851

Among the family papers deposited in the Gloucestershire Record Office by Lord Redesdale is part of a correspondence between the 1st Earl of Redesdale and the Duke of Wellington, lasting from January 1837 to July 1851. There are 40 letters from Wellington, and 7 drafts or copies of letters from Redesdale. At this time Wellington was a leading member of the Tory party, and Redesdale was acting, without any official title, as the party's first Whip in the House of Lords. These letters are therefore interesting for what they reveal of the early stages in the development of party organisation, in the modern sense, within Parliament; they also show the different attitudes of two politicians to various political questions of the time. Obviously, the correspondence is of limited value - most of Redesdale's contribution to it is absent, and much of the business involved in party management must have been done by word of mouth, letters being necessary only when one of the men was out of London. Nevertheless, some impression can be gained of the methods of party organisation, and of Wellington's attitude to them.

Wellington's first letter in the series expressed his gratitude for "the Service that you consent to render to us", (presumably referring to Redesdale's new duties as "Whip") and a number of years later he again mentioned this with appreciation: "I..... have exercised an influence in that House, due to your kind Assistance, which has not been exercised in Modern Times by any Individual". Yet Wellington was in some ways an unlikely figure to preside over these early exercises in party discipline. As the greatest soldier of his time, and the victor of Waterloo, he held a unique position in British politics, and although he had for a time been leader of the Tories, his letters show his belief that "I ought never..... to consider myself a Party Man". One early letter in fact flatly stated: "There is nobody who dislikes so much as I do, and who probably knows so little of Party Management," and he went on, in a somewhat illogical tirade, to attribute the passing of the Parliamentary Reform Act and all the Tory reverses of the 1830's to the growth of this practice. However, he seems to have become more willing, as time went on, to accept the need for organisation.

The main period of activity in party management seems to have been the opening of a session, when policy had to be planned, and attendance encouraged. (The importance of this may be unduly emphasised by the fact that more letters were exchanged at this point, since the preparation for a session necessarily took place during the vacation, when both men would be in the country). It was usual for Wellington to prepare a circular letter urging attendance, to be sent to the Tory peers before the session. He would begin on this some six weeks before the opening, composing and signing a draft, and arranging for copies to be made. Redesdale's part was to supply the list of recipients. The earlier letters refer to all this in some detail, but as time went on, less comment was needed, and in 1845, for

example, Wellington merely said he would write the "usual circular letter".

In general, Wellington's letters make little reference to the need for a good attendance of Tory peers. Even in January 1846, when the critical repeal of the Corn Laws was to be introduced, although he mentioned the desirability of a full attendance at the beginning of the session, he added that he did not want anyone to be "put to real personal inconvenience by coming to the day exactly". One reason for this lack of a sense of urgency was probably the existence of proxy voting in the House of Lords at this time. In December 1839, for instance, Wellington, commenting that he was anxious to stay at home at the beginning of the session, believed that "we may trust to London and its neighbourhood and Proxies to do all that we shall probably require". There are references to blank proxies sent by Wellington to Redesdale, in bulk, or singly for particular individuals; on one occasion Redesdale was asked to supply one.

A regular practice at the opening of a session was the holding of dinners at Wellington's London house. This was an occasion for the discussion of party policy, and in August 1841 Wellington, who did not as yet know the exact date for the opening, was determined not to hold the dinner more than one day before this, for fear that their discussions on "the course we should take in the two Houses..... must get out". Two dinners were usually held, because of the numbers involved, and the leading Party members (including Redesdale) would attend both. Not all the Tory peers were invited. 50 or so came to each dinner, as against some 200 who received the circular letters. At first Redesdale provided a list of those to be invited, with a supplementary list for filling up any places left vacant through refusals, but in later years, as the procedure became more familiar, Wellington seems to have decided on the guests unaided. In December 1845, for instance, he mentioned that he would "invite the usual Party to dinner".

The dinners were apparently begun in January 1840, and the early ones were a source of some annoyance to Wellington, who protested in 1840, "I am very troublesome. But I cannot help it....A Man cannot make his Room hold 60 or 70 at dinner, when it can hold only 50", although he acknowledged that those who were left out resented their exclusion. The note of irritation recurred in 1841. He refused to invite peers who were abroad, for fear they should accept out of willingness to have an excuse to return home; and dismissed the idea of a side-table, as "none of these great Lords" would like to sit at one. "A Man must cut his Coat according to his Cloth" was his terse comment on the problem of numbers, and he concluded "I must do as I usually do; the best I can". After these initial difficulties, however, the pre-session dinners seem to have become part of the accepted pattern of party management.

When the Tories came into power, after a number of years in opposition, in 1841, a new preoccupation was added to the customary pre-session arrangements. Peers had to be chosen to propose and second the Address to the Queen moved in the Lords in reply to the Speech from the Throne. Redesdale was usually consulted over this and asked to suggest names; in September 1844, for instance, he was asked to "consider who the Peers are to whom I

might apply". Wellington might also suggest names himself, and in January 1844 he discussed at length the nice problem of which of two peers should act as mover, one being senior by virtue of his Irish earldom but junior by the barony which entitled him to a place in the Lords. Again, as time went on, less consultation seems to have been found necessary.

Once a session was under way, fewer letters were exchanged, but some idea of Redesdale's duties at these periods can be gained. The first problem that arose in a session was the possibility of an Opposition amendment to the Address to the Queen. In December 1839, when the Tories were the Opposition, Wellington hoped that the Address would be innocuous enough not to need an amendment, adding "But I cannot answer for them". Conversely, in January 1846, when the Tories were in power, he hoped to "prevail upon our friend in the House of Commons" not to move an amendment.

There are several references to impending Parliamentary business. In October 1837 Wellington briefly discussed the beginning of the session: a discussion on the Civil List was probable, and although there were unlikely to be "questions" early in the session, "we must be in readiness". Few Bills are mentioned. In January 1838, the Tory peers were anxious for a private meeting to discuss a Bill which was about to receive its second reading in the Lords, and Wellington readily agreed to this - "I can understand the Lords wanting to have a meeting" - without, apparently, having intended to call one on his own initiative. In July 1840, Wellington was unwell, and agreed to Redesdale's suggestion that, because of this, the third reading of the Irish Corporation Bill should be postponed. In August 1843, it was Redesdale he consulted about whether an unspecified Bill had had its first reading, and whether he ought to attend the second reading. Tory peers who wished to introduce Bills or needed information for use in debates would on occasion apply to Wellington. In February 1842 Redesdale was asked to make arrangements concerning a motion which Lord Mounteagle wished to introduce, and to let Wellington know what was arranged. On another occasion, in 1843, he was asked to find out precisely what information Lord Clanricarde needed to enable him to answer questions in the Lords, so that Wellington could supply him with it. Redesdale might sometimes have to inform the Tory peers of forthcoming events - in February 1845, an address was to be presented to the Queen at Buckingham Palace, and he was requested to notify the peers of the time of presentation, "which I beg you to do without loss of time." This letter, incidentally, also refers to Redesdale's counterpart: "the Lord who communicates with the Lords in Opposition".

From time to time in the correspondence specific political issues of the day are discussed, usually on Redesdale's initiative. In September 1840, the problem had arisen of where the Queen's new husband, Prince Albert, should sit at meetings of the Privy Council. An announcement in the Gazette had made public the Queen's intention that he should sit on her right, taking precedence over her royal uncles, to which he had, strictly speaking, no legal right. Redesdale was disturbed by this action; he felt that she was behaving in an arbitrary manner, declaring that if her uncles pressed their rights and "Her Majesty turns them out because she does not choose to obey

the law of the land, I fear the consequences." Wellington's attitude was calmer : the Queen was within her rights in choosing where the Prince should sit, and she must be obeyed, although he felt that the public announcement was a mistake, and was inclined to attribute some blame to the Whig Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne.

A more important political question appears in August 1843, by which time the Tories were the governing party. Redesdale wrote to express his fear that the Cabinet might decide to adopt a system under which Roman Catholic clergy in Ireland would be paid by the state. He felt that such a policy would conflict with the oath, sworn at this time by M.P.'s on admission to Parliament, to allow no "foreign prelate" to have jurisdiction in the country; and that, even if an Act were to release members from this oath, he could not support such a proposal. Consequently, he warned Wellington that, were the measure introduced, he would have to give up his party duties, although this would be "very painful for me". To conceal his breach with the Government, he suggested that the excuse could be made that his new duties as a master of foxhounds made it necessary for him to spend more time in the country! Wellington's reply was, again, calmer in tone. He agreed with Redesdale's views, commenting that he himself had been "at one time bit by their (the reformers') Mania", but had changed his mind, because of the existing laws. However, he thought the Cabinet was unlikely to take such drastic action. In January 1845 Redesdale reminded him of the problem, but his reply was, again, that it was not likely to be raised - and in fact it was not.

The greatest political crisis of the 1840's was Peel's repeal, in the face of an Irish potato famine, of the laws restricting the import of foreign corn, an act which involved a complete reversal of declared Tory policy. There is a group of letters in the correspondence which discuss this question, in December 1845, soon after it arose, and while it was not yet certain whether the Tory government would itself introduce repeal, or resign and leave the problem to a Whig government. Redesdale set out his views in a long letter. He was flatly opposed to repeal, declaring, "I will not be a party to my own ruin and that of those with whom I live"; among other dangers he feared the competition from Russian and Hungarian corn, as railway development linked these areas with the ports of Northern Europe. He believed that the Government should maintain its previous policy, adding that "the people like a firm Government. They like consistency". He saw no danger of famine in England, and thought that the Irish situation could be eased by a larger amount of outdoor relief under the Poor Law, aided by an extra government grant. "We can beat the (Anti-Corn Law) league, the Times, and the Whigs if the Government will lead us to the charge."

Wellington's attitude was more flexible. He declared himself anxious to preserve the Corn Laws, but he was ready to agree to repeal if it should prove politically necessary, although he felt that the seriousness of the Irish famine had been exaggerated. He referred to his efforts to avoid a split in the Cabinet: "I have done everything in my Power to keep together the ... administration. Moved thereto by my sense of Duty to the Queen and

by strong feeling for the safety of the Publick Interest on various Points". His stress throughout was on the need to find the best policy for the preservation of good order and Peace", and when, after Peel's resignation, the Whig leader failed to form a government, Wellington was prepared to give Peel his full support over repeal, since the only alternative seemed to be a government led by the Whig back-bencher and founder of the Anti-Corn Law League, Cobden. "God send us a good deliverance!" he wrote.

The repeal of the Corn Laws led to a serious split in the Tory party, and Peel's resignation. With the party again in opposition, and Wellington himself ageing, the correspondence with Redesdale seems to have ceased, but there was one further interchange of letters in 1851, when Redesdale was a candidate for the post of Chairman of Committees in the Lords. He wished Wellington to propose him for this as "a public mark of your favour and regard" reminding him that in 1841 Wellington had offered him a further elevation in the peerage as an acknowledgement of his services, and Peel had refused it. Wellington, however, would not agree to the request, as he felt that Redesdale's candidature would embarrass the Government and might lead to their resignation, and he persisted in his refusal even when Redesdale assured him that the Government would not object-a typical instance of his readiness to ignore party advantage. In the event, Redesdale was unanimously elected.

The correspondence between Wellington and Redesdale thus gives some insight into the development of the modern party system in the earlier nineteenth century. It shows that a more carefully organised type of party was emerging, with the use of such methods as the pre-session dinners; while on the other hand there was little stress on party discipline over such matters as attendance.

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References

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Letters from the Duke of Wellington, with some draft or copy letters from Redesdale, 1837 - 51.