4
Fragmentation and Coalition

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In November 1790 Edmund Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, perhaps the most famous piece of British political writing of the revolutionary era. Only Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* comes close to equalling it in terms of historical reputation, and even this began as a reply to Burke. The starting point for Burke, however, had been another, and less well-known, pamphlet by the Dissenting minister Richard Price, originally delivered in the form of a sermon at an event commemorating the Glorious Revolution. Price argued that since 1688 the King owed his crown to the choice of the people, who also possessed a natural right to cashier their governors for misconduct. Such ideas created considerable excitement in the light of the recent revolution in France. Burke replied with an eloquent and complex defence of the traditional order. Rejecting the argument from natural rights, he maintained that British liberties owed their existence to a constitution that had evolved historically to a perfection otherwise unattainable. To tamper with this system risked sacrificing real benefits in a foolhardy search for abstract rights that would only bring anarchy in its wake. On the same ground he predicted that the French experiment would inevitably fail because the world could not be made afresh by a few fine-sounding phrases. A viable constitution required more solid foundations, and Britain possessed these already in its hereditary monarchy and aristocracy together with a legal system that defended fundamental liberties and protected the rights of property. This was a philosophy that Portland held dear to his heart; but the circumstances under which Burke publicised it in the *Reflections* caused him anxiety and distress. Enthusiasm for the early ideals of the French revolution
was not restricted to radicals like Price and Paine, but was also to be found within the highest ranks of the Whig party. Burke's jeremiad on the French revolution came in tandem with a very public separation from Fox. This marked the first stage in the fragmentation of the Whig party that would eventually lead to Portland forming a reactionary coalition with his old enemy Pitt.

The disagreement between Burke and Fox had already been bubbling for some time when, in the Commons on 15 April 1791, Fox gave fulsome praise to the French revolution. Burke was unable to make an immediate reply for procedural reasons, and was forced to wait until a set-piece debate could be arranged. During this enforced lull Portland did not manage to reconcile his friends. Although he disapproved of what Fox 'very unnecessarily went out of his way to say on the French revolution', he did not believe that Burke was playing a double game with the ministry. It was nevertheless true that Pitt was rubbing his hands with glee at the prospect of the opposition pulling itself apart. Portland for the moment remained confident of 'the superiority of Fox's talents and the rectitude of his heart and head'.

On 6 May the debate took place: Burke was exceedingly grave, whereas Fox at first adopted a tone of ironic levity, either callously or in an attempt to diffuse the situation. The result was an increasingly hostile response by Burke. The debate ended with both of them in tears and their friendship in tatters. Portland was forced to come to terms with Burke's separation from the party. He found it rather disquieting that the Morning Chronicle thoroughly endorsed Fox's conduct, creating an impression that his was the authentic Whig interpretation. The Duke had already complained bitterly to William Adam about the Whig press, threatening that he would 'not subscribe another shilling' unless it was 'shut against the reception of all doctrines of the Price etc. school'. Burke was convinced that

Of all men that ever lived the Duke of Portland is the most averse to shaking the smallest particle of the Revolution settlement, or even tampering with it in the slightest degree. He loves...the liberty of the subject, and is convinced that it has no security, and can have none separated from the just prerogative of the crown, and the importance of the intermediate orders.

Burke had no doubt about Portland's fundamental beliefs; but he was constrained to admit that the Duke was 'slower and less public in declaring his creed'.
