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THE POSITION OF A MINISTRY NOT SUPPORTED
BY THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

WILLIAM PITT

House of Commons, 1 March 1784(24 *Parl. Hist.*, 709 ff.)

[THE newly appointed Prime Minister, who had more than once been defeated in the House of Commons on motions tantamount to lack of confidence, defended his Ministry against a motion, by Charles James Fox, for an Address to the King to remove his Ministers. Pitt's attitude appears in some respects to be retrograde; but the circumstances of his appointment were peculiar; and his seeming disregard for the constitutional position of the House of Commons is explained by his belief that the House did not represent the views of the People.]

No man is more zealous or more unreserved in admitting and asserting the right of the House to advise the Sovereign in the exercise of all his prerogatives than I am: this has always been a sentiment which I have avowed: but that a declaration on the part of the House of their disapprobation of His Majesty's Ministers should, *ipso facto*, in any given instance, bind and compel the Sovereign to dismiss those Ministers, or oblige them to resign, is a point which I never have admitted, and will never allow. Such a sentiment of disapprobation surely places Ministers in awkward and unpleasant situations; but that it should force them to retire, I maintain, is an unconstitutional doctrine, hostile to the prerogative of the Crown, and to that balance of power on which the excellency of our government depends. This is a point, therefore, which I am always ready to maintain, and from supporting which I hope I shall never be precluded by any false theories, or vague declamation, respecting the dignity

of the House. . . . But, though I am thus the opponent of all capricious decision on the appointment of Ministers, I am as unfriendly to their continuance in office when disapproved of by the House of Commons on proper grounds, as by either branch of the Legislature. On this account I call on the House to specify charges against administration, to prove those charges, and not capriciously to condemn an Administration which has never as yet been found guilty, and has in fact, by an unaccountable obstinacy and untowardness of circumstances, been deprived of an opportunity of displaying its prudence and its zeal in the service of the public. When these accusations are proved, when these charges are substantiated, it will then be proper for Ministers to resign; and, if in such a case I shall afterwards continue in office, I will suffer myself to be stigmatized as the champion of prerogative, and the unconstitutional supporter of the usurpations of the Crown. But till this period arrives, I shall reckon it my duty to adhere to the principles of the Constitution, as delivered to us by our ancestors; to defend them against innovation and encroachment, and to maintain them with firmness.

Attempts have been made to fix imputations of criminality on the present Administration. Their sins have been stated; and one of the most glaring of them is, that the late Ministry were dismissed against the sense of the House. But what is the meaning of this charge? To what conclusion does the argument, when followed up, lead? Does it not fairly admit of this comment, that it is improper for His Majesty to dismiss his Ministers, provided they are approved of by the House of Commons; and that so long as they act agreeably to its sentiment, so long, and no longer are they to enjoy the patronage of the Crown, and retain the offices of administration? Is this a decent treatment of the prerogative? Is this constitutional doctrine? Is it not degrading the dignity of the Sovereign? Is it not a transference of the prerogatives of the Crown to the House of Commons, and a placing the royal sceptre under the mace that lies upon the table?

The Constitution of this country is its glory; but in what a nice adjustment does its excellence consist! Equally free from the distractions of democracy, and the tyranny of monarchy, its happiness is to be found in its mixture of parts. It was this mixed government which the prudence of our ancestors devised, and which it will be our wisdom inviolably to support. They experienced all the vicissitudes and distractions of a republic. They felt all the vassalage and despotism of a simple monarchy. They abandoned both, and by blending each together, extracted a system which has been the envy and admiration of the world. It is this scheme of government which constitutes the pride of Englishmen, and which they can never relinquish but with their lives. This system, however, it is the intention of the present Address to defeat and destroy. It is the intention of this Address to arrogate a power which does not belong to the House of Commons—to place a negative on the exercise of the prerogative and to destroy the balance of power in the Government as it was settled at the Revolution.