

On the Decline of British Royal Power in the Early George Era (1714-1761)

Robert Louis

Independent Researcher
1726598756@qq.com

Abstract: *After the Glorious Revolution, the British monarchy began to be restricted. The Bill of Rights marks a long-term struggle between monarchy and parliament. This article discusses the decline of British monarchy in the early George era. During this process, George I ushered in an era of gradual decline in monarchy, mainly due to the king's recognition of his own identity and the establishment of the Prime Minister system, leading to the decline of British monarchy. During the reign of George II, the personal factors of the king, the expansion of the Prime Minister's power, and the shift of the Prime Minister's "supporting body" from the king to the parliament also marked the continued decline of royal power. However, monarchy was only a custom and convention at this time, without legal recognition from the state. The main factor leading to the decline of British monarchy was the establishment of the Prime Minister system and the expansion of power.*

Keywords: The era of King George; Royal power; Cabinet; Parliament.

1. INTRODUCTION

The era of King George was a very long one. He mainly experienced three George kings, namely George I, George II, and George III. During the 46 years of the reign of George I and George II, the development of the British monarchy continued to decline, but during the reign of George III, the monarchy gradually rebounded. Therefore, the focus of this article is on describing the trends in the development of monarchy during the reigns of George I and George II. This article takes the monarchy of the late Stuart dynasty as the background, explores the evolution trend of the monarchy during the George era, and discusses the general trend of the decline of monarchy and the continuous strengthening of the power of the Prime Minister in the George I and George II eras. However, there are few research results in the domestic historical community on the overall trend of the decline of monarchy during the reigns of George I to George II. Although a few articles discussing George III's personal rule and the development of Victorian monarchy have mentioned George I and George II [1], there is a lack of in-depth research on the trends in the development of monarchy during their reign. The author believes that studying this topic not only helps to make up for the weak links in the study of British history in China, but also deepens the understanding of the connotation of the political system evolution in the process of Britain's transition to a parliamentary constitutional monarchy.

2. GRADUALLY RESTRICTED MONARCHY

2.1 Revolutionary mainline - the struggle between the king and parliament

After the victory of the Puritan Revolution led by Oliver Cromwell, the British political system experienced the dictatorship of the Protectorate and the authoritarian monarchy after the restoration of the Stuart dynasty. However, James acted in reverse, openly promoting the most disliked religious belief of the English people - Catholicism, and frequently dismissed those who did not believe in Catholicism, using more extreme methods to damage the national sentiment of the English people. This will inevitably lead to the occurrence of revolution.

In early 1689, there was a debate in parliament over the issue of succession to the throne. The "Orthodox" Tory Party, the "Co ruling" Whig Party, and the "Regent" facilitated three opinions among members of parliament. Eventually, under the threat of William III's "return to the Netherlands" and the compromise[2] of the three supporters, a situation emerged in England where William III and Mary II co ruled and William exercised executive power.

2.2 The culmination of the tradition of "legislative limitations" — the Bill of Rights

In October 1689, the Parliament passed the Declaration of Rights and enacted it into law, becoming the Bill of

Rights. In the Bill of Rights, five rights of the monarchy were restricted, namely "restricting the king's legislative, enforcement, and judicial powers", "restricting the king's taxation power", "restricting the king's right to suppress public opinion", "restricting the king's right to conscription", and "restricting the king's religious leadership power". It guarantees the "six rights" of parliament, namely "legislative power", "political freedom", "judicial power", "fiscal power", "normalization of assembly", and "military power".

The promulgation of the Bill of Rights marked the beginning of the British constitutional monarchy. From the content of the Bill of Rights, it appears that it imposes a series of restrictions on the monarchy, but the monarch has not become a virtual ruler who rules and does not rule.

On the one hand, accepting the Bill of Rights was not a prerequisite for William III and Mary II to accept the throne, but a "restrictive law" enacted by the parliament after their accession to the throne to restrict royal power. That is, the law was not enacted against William III and Mary II, but rather a democratic restriction against the previous Stuart dynasty's retrograde "divine monarchy" authoritarian rule.

On the other hand, the Bill of Rights only imposes restrictions on royal power and does not deprive it, and the power of the king remains significant. At best, the Bill of Rights only establishes a political mechanism for the sharing of power between the king and parliament, and does not specify which party is in a dominant position in the exercise of power between the king and parliament[3].

It can be seen that the Bill of Rights is a resolution to the 48 year English Revolution, which restricted the traditional rights of the king. The starting point of the English Revolution was the king's right to tax, so the most restrictive aspect of the king's power was the right to tax.

After the enactment of the Bill of Rights, William III continued to hold the positions of Head of State, Head of Government, and Commander in Chief of the British Army, and had the right to appoint confidants as court officials. This is something that the parliament cannot tolerate, so they are preparing to gradually limit the king's power.

2.3 Succession of Thrones in Parliament

In 1702, William III passed away. According to the Law of Succession, the throne passed to Queen Anne Stuart, the cousin of William III. During the reign of Queen Anne, the parliament further restricted the monarchy. Firstly, the parliament placed the cabinet under its own control, limiting the appointment criteria of the king and ministers to the group of members of the lower house, effectively avoiding the situation where the king appointed trusted nobles as trusted ministers. This led to the principle that "parliamentary government must remain consistent", and Queen Anne gradually realized that government ministers must be aligned with the majority party in parliament. Although Queen Anne disliked the Whig Party, she still followed advice and organized a Whig government in 1708, setting a precedent for the cabinet to align with the majority party in parliament.

Another sign of further restriction of royal power is the natural loss of veto power. Since Queen Anne vetoed the militia bill passed by the Scottish Parliament in 1707, this right has never been exercised again, which means the king's veto power has been lost. The loss of the king's veto power is an inevitable trend, as the parliament at this time has completely controlled the cabinet. Queen Anne and her subsequent governments either submit to the parliament or lead the people to step down[5].

With the introduction of the Law on Succession to the Throne, the parliament promulgated the Restriction Act. Firstly, one is not allowed to leave the British Isles without permission; Secondly, no external war shall be carried out to defend private territories; Thirdly, judges with "upright conduct" shall not be dismissed. The Restriction Act further restricted royal power.

The Bill of Rights is not only a culmination of legislation to restrict royal power, but also ensures that the throne does not fall into the hands of James Edward, a Catholic, after William III, and maintains the status of Anglican Christianity in England since 1534. The Law on the Succession of the Throne clearly stipulates that the throne can only be inherited by Protestant kings, reflecting a "balance" relationship between the royal power and the parliament in the late Stuart dynasty. The royal power gradually became limited but remained strong, while the parliament gradually rose but remained constrained by the royal power.

3. IN THE EARLY DAYS OF KING GEORGE'S REIGN

3.1 The Beginning of the Decline of Royal Power

3.1.1 The King of Hanover in England

On August 1, 1714, Queen Anne passed away, and the throne was inherited by George Lewis, the son of the Elector of Hanover and Princess Sophia of Pfalz in Germany, but the monarchy began to decline.

The stability towards internal and external troubles demonstrated the monarchy of George I. Although the monarchy of the early Hanover dynasty was weakened, it was still able to share power with the parliament. Firstly, George I held two separate positions, serving as both the Elector of Hanover and the King of Great Britain. Therefore, while inheriting the throne of Queen Anne, he also inherited her power. Secondly, before the age of 56 (1717), George I attended cabinet meetings every year. Unlike his later "lazy politics", in the first three years, George I could only communicate with cabinet officials in French or through translation. Although not fluent in language, before 1717, the monarchy of George I could still have had an impact on parliament.

3.1.2 Establishment of Prime Minister System

The most important reason for the decline of royal power during the reign of George I was that he spent much more time in the Duchy of Hanover than in England. Firstly, from 1714 to 1727, George I returned to the Duchy of Hanover six times, which forced the cabinet meetings to end prematurely every year. [6] Secondly, George I, who was already over fifty years old when he succeeded to the throne, was already disinterested in British affairs and was too lazy to listen to the arguments of both houses in the parliamentary hall. As a result, from 1717 onwards, except for the Cabinet meetings in 1721 when Walpole was appointed as the Chief Finance Minister, George I hardly attended any meetings.

George I appointed Robert Walpole as the "Chief Chancellor of the Exchequer" to attend cabinet meetings on his behalf as his spokesperson in the cabinet. As the spokesperson for the king, Walpole relied on the support of George I to manipulate the House of Commons, control the cabinet, and monopolize administrative power. Starting from Walpole, the cabinet began to break free from the control of the king and had its own leader. In March 1721, Walpole became Prime Minister. After Walpole became Prime Minister, the national economic policy still continued the measures taken to rectify the "South China Sea foam incident". These measures have gradually stabilized the country's financial situation.

During Robert Walpole's 21 years in office, he remained firmly in control of the cabinet. On the one hand, it is due to the promotion of seats and official positions in the lower house of Walpole that a group of legislators with good relationships with themselves have entered the cabinet. On the other hand, because Walpole convinced the parliament to approve George I's acquisition of more royal income and publicly stated complete dependence on the royal family [6], it also indicates that the royal support during George I's reign was a necessary factor for Walpole's cabinet to be able to govern for a long time.

3.1.3 The Beginning of the Decline of Royal Power

During the reign of George I, the monarchy was in a period of transformation. Due to the significant efforts of the Whig Party in the issue of George I's succession and the consolidation of the early Hanover regime, George I and his successor George II (George Augustus) regarded it as a "natural ally". During the reign of George I, constitutional monarchy underwent further development, which went beyond the limitations of the Bill of Rights on monarchy during the reign of William III and affirmed the dominant position of the Whig Party.

Robert Walpole, in the later years of George I, relied on the king's trust in him and took advantage of various opportunities to exclude dissidents, establishing his own advantageous position. George I ultimately experienced the loss of royal power due to the Chief Chancellor's independent behavior in his later years. In 1727, at the age of 67, George I passed away, and the British monarchy under George I's rule began to decline.

So, during the reign of George I, the decline in monarchy became increasingly apparent and spread all the way to the reign of George II, accompanied by the re-election of Walpole, exerting influence on the newly succeeded George II[7].

3.2 The continued decline of royal power

3.2.1 Prime Minister's highlight moment

George II was the eldest son of George I, born in Hanover in 1683. He ascended to the throne in his prime. George II, like his father, was still obsessed with the affairs of the Hanover territories after inheriting the English throne and was not interested in British affairs. Moreover, the two George kings often left England for Hanover, ranging from ten and a half days to six months. [8] Therefore, during his thirty-four years in power, George II returned to Hanover twelve times and lived in Hanover for more time than on the mainland of England.

George II was more involved in governing than George I. During the reigns of George I and George II, there were actions such as appointing military officials, supervising civilian officials, overseeing job assignments, controlling courts, deciding foreign policy, and appointing and dismissing ministers[3]. However, George I's appointment of ministers was usually made after consultation with the Chief Chancellor of the Exchequer, Walpole. In the early days of George II, the appointment of ministers was usually determined by the king and then discussed by the cabinet, indicating that although the monarchy showed a declining trend in the early days of George I and George II, it did not decline to the extreme.

The lack of interest in British affairs during the mid-term of George II's reign has led to an unstoppable trend of continued decline in the monarchy. Due to his ethnic identity and language barriers, George II only attended cabinet meetings when he appointed Henry Pelham as the "Chief Chancellor of the Exchequer" in 1745. Due to laziness, he only attended the meeting in 1756 when he appointed the Duke of Newcastle, Thomas Pelham Holles, as the "Chief Chancellor of the Exchequer", 11 years after the last meeting. Finally, due to personal factors related to physical illness, he participated in a cabinet meeting in 1758 appointing William Pitt the Elder as the Chief Chancellor of the Exchequer. Therefore, starting from George II, the influence of the monarch gradually weakened, and the formulation of national policies was almost entirely carried out by the cabinet. The independence of the cabinet continued to increase[5], and the prime minister system eventually ushered in a "shining moment".

3.2.2 The continued decline of royal power

During the reign of George II, Walpole's control over the cabinet significantly increased, reaching the pinnacle of his power. As the Chief Chancellor of the Exchequer, Walpole was able to use the seats in the House of Commons as bargaining chips to bribe [3] and collude with members of parliament without interference from George II, demonstrating the phenomenon of corruption and party formation in parliamentary elections.

During the reign of George II, the limitation of royal power did not only come from the parliament, but also from the cabinet, which was more evident in the "small cabinet" established at the beginning of George II's accession. The "dual cabinet system" created during the Walpole period shifted state power from the old "large cabinet" to the newly created "small cabinet", weakening the power of royal control over the cabinet to the extreme. The cabinet has basically freed itself from the control of monarchy, and the centralization of power has greatly improved the efficiency of government work, allowing the Chief Financial Secretary to control the cabinet and become the core of the cabinet.

During Walpole's tenure as Prime Minister, especially in the early days of George I and George II, the Chief Chancellor of the Exchequer, who served as the head of the cabinet, began to have a say in the selection of ministers and sometimes even played a decisive role. When appointing ministers, monarchs often consult with the Prime Minister and gain their approval. All reservations made by cabinet ministers should be based on the opinion of Walpole, and the monarch expresses support for Walpole's opinion. The decline of monarchy can be seen from this. The decline of monarchy was mainly manifested in the downfall of Walpole. Due to disagreements between the parliament and the cabinet over war proposals, Walpole, who held a position of "peaceful balance of power diplomacy", stepped down.

In 1746, in the face of a rebellion launched by the James III party, known as the "Old Tyrant", and the internal and external difficulties of the Anglo French War abroad, Henry Pelham requested that George II appoint William Pitt the Elder as the Cabinet Secretary. George II sternly refused, which led to the collective resignation of Henry Pelham's cabinet. Two days later, George II requested Pelham to reorganize the cabinet, but Pelham still insisted on Old William Pitt joining the cabinet with many harsh conditions, and George II could only approve it[9].

The political crisis of 1746 fully illustrates that during the reign of George II, the monarchy experienced the weakening of the "small cabinet" during the Walpole era, and no longer posed a significant threat or interference to the Prime Minister and the selection of Cabinet Ministers. This indicates that during the reign of George II, the monarchy continued to decline.

3.2.3 Transformation of the Cabinet's "Supporting Body"

When Henry Pelham and the Duke of Newcastle formed their respective cabinets, the world was at a time of war between Britain and France, particularly the Anglo French colonial conflict and the Seven Years of War. In the early stages of these wars, Britain suffered repeated setbacks. To quell the stirring public opinion in the country, George II ordered the Duke of Newcastle to reorganize his cabinet. In the same year, the Duke of Newcastle resigned and William Pitt the Elder was appointed to form a cabinet.

However, William Pitt's flexible and effective actions during the Seven Years' War posed a threat to the monarchy that George II only held. In 1757, George II, who had always been dissatisfied with William Pitt the Elder, dismissed Pitt from his position as Minister of State during a cabinet reshuffle. Although George II dismissed Pitt from his position, he was unable to form a new cabinet that rejected him. Therefore, George II reappointed the Duke of Newcastle as the new cabinet. The Duke of Newcastle's primary condition was also to have Pete continue to serve as the Chief Secretary of State. So a four-year "Old Pitt government" was established, with the Duke of Newcastle serving as the "Chief Chancellor of the Exchequer" in this cabinet, but the actual Prime Minister was William Pitt the Elder[3].

This situation also indicates that the British monarchy has continued to decline during the reign of George II, and also indicates that the Prime Minister's "support subject" has begun to shift from king support to parliamentary support.

In the early days of King George's era, the monarchy showed a gradual decline trend, and this trend was jointly recognized by the monarchy and parliament. This indicates that the decline of monarchy has become a trend. Even if George III attempts to revive monarchy in the future, he will be completely defeated by the overall trend of the decline of monarchy.

4. EVALUATION AND SUMMARY

Overall, the decline of the British monarchy did not begin in 1689, but gradually began through legislative means from the end of the Stuart dynasty, and it was not until the reign of George I that the monarchy began to decline. The most important factors contributing to the decline of the British monarchy were the establishment of the Prime Minister system under George I and the expansion of power under the Prime Minister system under George II. King George I and King George II provided the soil for the expansion of power in the prime minister system, and the decline of royal power became inevitable. George I and George II are truly one of the great monarchs of the Hanover dynasty and even in the history of England. During their 48 years in power, Britain achieved relatively stable development, creating favorable conditions for the subsequent industrial revolution and parliamentary reform.

REFERENCES

- [1] Liu Jinyuan On the Reasons for the End of George III's Personal Dictatorship *Journal of Suzhou University of Science and Technology: Social Sciences Edition*. 2013; (6); 65-73.
- [2] Clayton Roberts, David Roberts, Douglas R. Bison Translated by Pan Xingming et al *British History (Volume 1): Prehistoric -1714 [M]*. Beijing: Commercial Press; 2013.
- [3] Qian Chengdan, Liu Jinyuan, Li Yizhong *General History of Britain (Volume 4): The Transformation Era of the 18th Century [M]*. Jiangsu: Jiangsu People's Publishing House; 2016.
- [4] Qi Shirong, Liu Cheng, Liu Jinyuan, Wu Qinghong *UK: From Dominating the World to Returning to Europe [M]*. Shaanxi: Sanqin Publishing House; 2005.
- [5] Clayton Roberts, David Roberts, Douglas Bison Translated by Pan Xingming et al *British History (Volume 2): 1688 present [M]*. Beijing: Commercial Press; 2013.
- [6] Qian Chengdan and Xu Jieming, *General History of Britain [M]*. Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences; 2019.

- [7] Andrew C. Thompson George I, II, and the Government of Britain [J]. 18th Century Online Government Documents: 1714-1782.2013; (2): 2.
- [8] Roland Kleinhenz The British Parliament and mixed responsibility 1740-60 [J] Routledge Taylor and Francis Group 2010; (4): 5.