

Edmund Burke: The Father of Conservatism

Burke was a statesman and political thinker who dominated debates in the British Parliament during the late 1700s. His principled stands on such controversies as the American and French revolutions inspired modern political conservatism.

Edmund Burke was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1729. His Protestant father was a lawyer for the Irish government that England largely controlled. His mother was a Roman Catholic. Although Burke himself was a Protestant, he battled discrimination against Irish Catholics throughout his life.

Burke attended a Quaker boarding school and then Trinity College in Dublin. He excelled in history and loved poetry, but in 1750 his father sent him to London to become a lawyer.

In London, Burke studied law briefly, but abandoned it in favor of pursuing a career as a writer. He also worked as a secretary for several politicians, writing pamphlets and speeches for them. In 1757, Burke married the daughter of a Catholic doctor who had treated him.

Through his political connections, Burke got a job as the private secretary of Charles Rockingham. A wealthy aristocrat, Rockingham led the Whig Party in the House of Commons in Parliament. The two men became lifelong friends and political allies.

In 1765, when the prime minister lost majority support in Parliament, King George III appointed Rockingham prime minister. Rockingham saw to it that Burke secured a seat in the House of Commons.

Burke and the Whig Party

Burke immediately plunged into the hot debate in Parliament over repeal of the Stamp Act. This was a tax on newspapers and legal documents in the American colonies. Its purpose was to help pay off the British debt from the French and Indian War in North America, which had ended in 1763.

The Americans resisted the Stamp Act by boycotting English goods. Since they lost business, English merchants and manufacturers demanded that Parliament repeal this tax. Rockingham Whigs sympathized with their economic troubles. Burke also favored repealing the tax, but for a different reason. As a matter of principle, he argued that Americans should not be taxed without their consent. He quickly impressed many with his excellent debating skills and speeches.

The Rockingham government repealed the Stamp Act. But Rockingham lost support in the House of Commons within a year, and King George appointed William Pitt the Elder as the new prime minister. In 1767, Pitt's treasury minister, Charles Townshend, pushed through Parliament another series of taxes on Americans that further angered them.

Soon, Burke became embroiled in a different political controversy. He and other Whigs charged the advisors of King George with funding the election of "placemen" to seats in the House of Commons. The king had appointed these individuals to government-paid jobs that had few or no real duties. Burke claimed that these "friends of the king" were conspiring to control the House of Commons and Pitt's government.

Although historians tend to doubt this "conspiracy" amounted to much, Burke wrote a pamphlet on what he believed was royal tampering with the traditional roles of king and Parliament. "When bad men combine," he wrote, "the good must associate, else they will fall, one by one."

Most people in England considered a political party to be, at best, a group that followed a powerful leader, or, at worst, a faction of political schemers. Burke, however, had a different view of political parties. He defined a party as "a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed." He described the politician as "the philosopher in action" who attempted to implement a principle by enacting party programs.

Both the Whigs and their main political rivals, the Tories, consisted mainly of wealthy property owners. The electorate also owned property, as ownership was a requirement for the right to vote. Burke tried to mold the Whigs into a party of principle to respect more rigorously the British Constitution.

Unlike the U.S. Constitution, the British Constitution is not written in one document. It consists of charters like the Magna Carta, laws, declarations by Parliament, court precedents, and customs. All these elements of the British Constitution, Burke believed, represented the inherited wisdom of past generations. In the dispute over the king's "placemen," Burke sought to restore what he believed was the traditional balance of power between the monarchy and Parliament.

In 1774, the voters of the seaport of Bristol elected Burke along with one other man as their representatives in the House of Commons. Upon their election, Burke's fellow representative promised he would always vote according to the will of the Bristol voters. Burke, however, took a principled position on how he would cast his votes. In a famous speech to the Bristol voters, Burke agreed that their wishes "ought to have great weight." But he said that he owed them even more his "judgment and conscience." To vote "blindly" according to the instructions of his Bristol constituents, he said, would violate the British Constitution. Burke insisted that Parliament was a deliberating "assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole—where not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good."

Burke and the American Revolution

The American colonists continued their cry of "no taxation without representation" in opposing the Townshend duties. The duties were taxes on glass, paper, tea and other imports from Britain.

In 1770, the unpopular taxes resulted in a violent clash, known as the Boston Massacre, between Bostonians and British troops. To calm things down, Parliament repealed the Townshend duties, except for the one on tea.

When the famous Boston Tea Party took place in 1773, the Tory government then in power decided to punish the Americans. Urged on by King George, Tory Prime Minister Lord North ordered the port of Boston closed until the colonists accepted the tea tax.

The following year, Burke, now also a lobbyist for New York's colonial legislature, made the first of two major speeches in Parliament in defense of the American colonists. Burke objected to Lord North's policy of imposing taxes on them without their consent.

Burke advised the British government to leave the Americans alone to tax themselves. He predicted that they would voluntarily contribute their share for the defense of the empire. Otherwise, he concluded, the policy of forced taxation would only lead to disobedience, and, "after wading up to your eyes in blood," would result in no revenue from the Americans at all.

In March 1775, Burke delivered a speech on the escalating crisis in America. As descendants of Englishmen, Burke declared, the Americans were right to object to forced taxes. Throughout English history, he reminded his colleagues in Parliament, taxation had always been at the center of the English fight for freedom. English liberty, he said, was founded on the principle that the people must "possess the power of granting their own money" to the government.

Burke declared that America was too distant from the mother country for members of Parliament elected in England to represent the colonists adequately. Let them tax themselves, he again urged, and they would willingly aid the king's government and remain forever loyal to England.

Burke and the other Whigs introduced resolutions to repeal the tea tax and end the policy of Parliament taxing the Americans without their agreement. But the Tories soundly defeated these proposals. A month after Burke's speech, American minutemen and British redcoats battled at Lexington and Concord. King George declared the colonies "in open rebellion," and the American Revolution began.

Following the Declaration of Independence in 1776, Burke still pleaded with the Americans not to separate from England where the "very liberty, which you justly prize" originated. As the American Revolution unfolded, Burke increasingly sided with the colonists.

Burke pressed Lord North to negotiate an end to the "mercenary and savage war." When North finally agreed to negotiate following the British defeat at the Battle of Saratoga, it was too late. The Americans would settle for nothing less than full independence.

King George rejected the idea of American independence and wanted to continue the war. He held out for victory even after the British disaster at Yorktown.

By 1782, Lord North had lost support in Parliament, and his Tory government resigned. Charles Rockingham was prepared to become prime minister again and form a new Whig government. But first he demanded that King George abandon his opposition to American independence. The king finally agreed. This series of political maneuvers, largely engineered by Burke, signaled the further decline of royal power in the English government.

The new Rockingham government negotiated peace and independence with the Americans. But Charles Rockingham died after only three months in office, and a coalition of parties replaced the Whig government.

Ireland, India, and the French Revolution

Following the American Revolution, Burke took unpopular positions on other controversial issues. The Protestant English government barred the Catholic majority in Ireland from voting, holding public office, establishing schools, and even working in certain jobs. Burke proposed legislation, easing this harsh discrimination. This reflected his lifelong support for toleration of all religions (but not atheism). Parliament ignored him.

In 1783, Burke launched a campaign against corruption, greed, and needless wars in British India, virtually ruled by the East India Company. He focused his attack on Governor General Warren Hastings, whom he called "the greatest delinquent that India ever saw." When Parliament impeached Hastings, Burke led the prosecution at his impeachment trial. It lasted, on and off, for seven years before Parliament finally acquitted him.

In July 1789, the French Revolution exploded in Paris. Some in Britain applauded the extraordinary events in France for expanding the "rights of man." But Burke did not. "As much injustice and tyranny has been practiced in a few months by a French democracy," Burke wrote to a friend, "as in all the arbitrary monarchies in Europe."

Burke saw the revolutionary ideas let loose in France as a threat to the British system of government. In 1790, he published his most famous written work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

In his *Reflections*, Burke compared France to a noble castle in need of repair. Instead of repairing the castle, he said, a "swinish multitude" had torn it apart to build an entirely new one while despising everything about the old. He condemned the newly elected French National Assembly for abolishing ancient laws, confiscating the property of nobles and the Catholic Church, and driving aristocrats into exile.

Burke assaulted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen that the National Assembly had enacted. He refused to accept the declaration's theories about vague rights of liberty and equality for all. "By having a right to everything," he wrote, "they want everything."

Burke and the British Constitution

Burke also wrote in his *Reflections* about the superiority of the British Constitution. In this part of his book, Burke summarized the essence of his political conservatism.

He explained that throughout a nation's history, trial and error resulted in some laws and government arrangements surviving while others died out. Those that survived represented the wisdom of past generations and made up a nation's sacred constitution. A nation, he wrote, is a partnership among "those who are living, those who are dead, and those who will be born."

Burke acknowledged that changes and reforms might be necessary, but not the complete destruction of the inheritance from a nation's forefathers. He cited the English Glorious Revolution of 1688. It preserved England's ancient laws and liberties by making the will of Parliament superior to that of the monarchy.

Burke celebrated the British Constitution, which contained the inherited "rights of Englishmen," not some theoretical notion about the "rights of man." He therefore criticized many Enlightenment writers such as Rousseau who believed in "natural rights"

and creating the perfect society.

In Burke's view, rule by king and Parliament in England, each limited in its role, was superior to rule by the people in France. He also described the English aristocracy, the landowning nobles, as "the great Oaks that shade a Country and perpetuate your benefits from Generation to Generation."

Burke was not enthusiastic about democracy. He defended the English monarchy based on inherited succession. He consistently opposed expanding the right to vote beyond property owners, who made up only a minority of the English population. Moreover, Burke warned, "democracy has many striking points of resemblance to tyranny," including the "cruel oppression" of the minority.

Burke summarized the British Constitution by saying, "We have an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage [House of Lords], and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises [voting rights], and liberties from a long line of ancestors." Underlying all this, he concluded, was the will of God and an established Anglican Church supported by public taxes.

Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* received a mixed reaction. King George loved it. Others, like the American patriot, Thomas Paine, condemned it. Burke himself warned of the "French disease" of revolution, spreading throughout Europe and even to Britain.

Retirement, Death, and Legacy

Burke split with the leadership of the Whig Party when he spoke in favor of war against revolutionary France. Britain declared war in 1793 when it joined other European monarchies already fighting the French army. But no longer supported by the Whig Party, Burke decided to retire from Parliament the following year.

He continued writing about the French threat. He also wrote in favor of the free market setting wages and opposed government support for the poor. This was the job of private charity not government, he said. He argued that burdensome taxes would lead only to the poverty of all. Taxes, he declared, should mainly be limited to funding the nation's established religion, courts, and military.

Edmund Burke died of cancer at his estate in 1797. Despite his superb debating skills, Burke was on the losing side of most major issues during his long career in Parliament. This was mostly because his Whig Party was usually in the minority. But Burke's consistent principles inspired modern political conservatism, especially in Britain and North America.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Edmund Burke believed that he should use his independent judgment and vote for the national interest even if this went against the views of those who elected him. Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?
2. Burke defended the revolution in America but condemned the one in France. Was he consistent or inconsistent in applying his conservative principles? Why?
3. How did Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine differ in their vision of government?

A C T I V I T Y

Would Burke Favor These?

- A. Students should first independently investigate and answer this question:
Based on his conservative principles, would Edmund Burke be likely to favor or oppose the following developments in the United States? Use evidence from the article to back up your answer on each development.
1. The increase in the number of people allowed to vote, which has taken place over the past 150 years (minorities, women, young people over 17).
 2. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which reads in part: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble"
 3. The Social Security system.
 4. The war in Iraq.
- B. Form small groups for students to compare and discuss whether they think Burke would favor or oppose each development. The group members should then discuss whether they agree or disagree with Burke's view.
- C. Finally, each group should report the results of its conclusions to the rest of the class.