

# Bribery, Corruption, Dead Cats And Kisses From A Duchess!

ELECTIONS are becoming a live issue, though, as this article makes clear, they are not likely to be the lively issue that they once were. It is the first of a series of articles which we shall publish in the next few weeks on the subject of putting people into Parliament, in Great Britain and in New Zealand.

ELECTIONS, so we are told, are not what they were—and never have been. In politics as in everything else, habits change. Those who remember the 'nineties of last century, will insist that 50 years ago there was more public interest in politics than to-day, while the generation of 50 years before that told their children that in their young days elections were really lively affairs, with plenty of bad eggs and broken heads.

But to judge by some of the records of the elections of 150 or 200 years ago, an election of to-day is tame. In a world without radio, movies, and football matches, elections provided life and colour for the working man. Dukes and duchesses came down from their fine houses and hobnobbed and even osculated. ("He kissed my wife, he shall have my vote!"). Opposition members provided simple entertainment by arranging hold-ups and staging fights. The Earl of Hertford in 1768 was obliged to get out of his coach and was held with his legs in the air while the figures "45" were chalked on his soles.

The history of elections in England is peculiar, because the growth of Parliamentary institutions in England is peculiar. But that doesn't mean that either voting or going to Westminster to Parliament was always a privilege. Far from it. Towns had to pay the expenses of members, and they didn't like doing it. The members themselves were in the unenviable position for a long time of having to vote money for the Royal Exchequer and having to admit to their fellow citizens that they had voted it. Only gradually and over a long period did membership of the House of Commons and the right to send members to the House of Commons emerge as a privilege.

From this first period of reluctance came the next stage when the wealthy and the influential saw all sorts of possibilities for power in gaining control of the Commons by bribery. The Marquis of Wharton, Addison's patron, is calculated to have spent £80,000 of his own funds on his policy of forwarding "the designs of an oligarch by the attraction of a demagogue." He managed to return from 20 to 30 members "at an expenditure of thousands, backed by a happy persuasive knack of carrying all before him." But it was not only cash that carried the day. His biographer tells the story of his methods in the election of 1705, when the Tory Opposition put up two candidates, and were prepared to spend money freely. Lord Wharton won the day not with cash alone, but with his intimate knowledge of the private affairs of various members of the electorate.

Nor were methods always so reputable as even that. Stories true or false were bandied around about members and their patrons, and neither party scrupled to invent calumnies. Any "act of folly" of the past might be brought up at an election. This story is told of a young candidate:

"Mamma," he asked his parent in deep confidence, on nomination day, "tell me truly, is there anything against my birth?"—this being an ingenious precaution against the eventualities which the youth not imprudently employed to prepare himself for the worst, and that he might not be taken by surprise at the hustings."

Unpleasant as this metaphorical mudslinging could be, other things were thrown about which might be just as unpleasant. The commotion caused by elections in the days of Queen Anne is pictured by Dean Swift:

"On the way, we met the electors for parliament-men, and the rabble came

Right: The "Devonshire," or most approved manner of securing votes, 1784. A cartoon by T. Rowlandson.



about our coach crying, 'A Colt! A Stanhope!' We were afraid of a dead cat, or our glasses broken, and so were always of their side."

The Duchess of Marlborough used more subtle methods to discredit the patron of her nominee's patron, Lord Grimston. He had in his earlier days written a play *Love in a Hollow Tree*, of which he had become ashamed, and which he attempted to suppress. The Duchess of Marlborough, however, had a copy, and when he was against her at an election, she had a new edition of it printed, and prefixed to it as a frontispiece "an elephant dancing on a rope to show that his Lordship's writing comedy was as awkward as an elephant dancing on a rope."

## What It Cost

A burlesque "Bill of Costs" of an election was printed in *The Flying Post* (January 27, 1715) "for a late Tory Election of the West," in which part of the country the Tory interest was strongest. Although fictitious, it gives some line on elections and what they were like. In this "Bill," bribery is not put down as one of the prominent features of an election at this period. Violence was apparently more effective than corruption.

For bespeaking and collecting a mob	£ 20
For many suits of knots for their heads (party colours)	30
For scores of huzza men	40
For roarsers of the word "Church"	40
For a set of "No Roundhead" roarsers	40
For several gallons of Tory punch on church tombstones	30
For a majority of clubs and brandy bottles	20
For bellringers, fiddlers and porters	10
For a set of coffeehouse praters	40
For extraordinary expenses for cloth and lac'd hat on showdays to dazzle the mob	50
For Dissenters' damners	40
For demolishing two houses	200
For committing two riots	200
For secret encouragement to rioters	40
For a dozen perjury men	100
For packing and carriage paid to Gloucester	50
For breaking windows	20
For a gang of alderman abusers	40
For a set of notorious liars	50
For pot ale	100
For law, and charges in the King's Bench	300
	£1460

It may be of some interest to compare this with the list of expenses which Sheridan noted as his actual borough expenses for the first Parliament in which he represented Stafford, in 1784.

248 Burgesses paid	£5/5					
each	£1302	0	0			
	£	s	d	£	s	d
Yearly Expenses Since						
House rent and taxes	23	6	6			
Servant at 6/- a week board, wages	15	12	0			
Do. yearly wages	8	8	0			
Coals, etc.	10	0	0	57	6	6
Ale tickets	40	0	0			
Half the Members' Plate	25	0	0			
Swearing young Burgesses	10	0	0			
Subscription to the Infirmary	5	5	0			
Do. Clergy-men's widows	2	2	0			
Ringers	4	4	0	86	11	0
One year				143	17	6
Multipled by six years				863	5	0

Total expenses of six years' Parliament, exclusive of expenses incurred during the time of the election and Sheridan's own annual expenses £2165 5 5

## The Duchess to the Rescue!

Canvassing reached unsurpassed heights of excitement during the Westminster election of 1784. This election was an event of great political importance, in fact it was the only serious check that the Court encountered in the attempt to secure a subservient House of Commons. London was in a state of excitement for weeks. "The poll was opened on April 1, and continued without intermission until May 17. During this time, Covent Garden and the Strand were the scenes of daily combats between the rival mobs: the papers were filled with squibs of the most personal nature . . . and hundreds of pictorial satires appeared on every incident." One of the stories told is of the new methods used by the Duchess of Devonshire. It is an eye-witness account:

"The party were driven to new resources, and the Duchess of Devonshire restored the fates of the Whig Champion. The progress of the canvass thenceforward is amusing. The entire of the voters for Westminster having been exhausted, the only hope was in exciting the suburbs. The Duchess instantly ordered out her equipage, and with her sister, the Countess of Duncannon, drove, polling list in hand, to the houses of voters. Entreaties, ridicule, civilities, influences of all kinds were lavished on these rough legislators, and the novelty of being solicited by two women of rank and fashion took the popular taste universally. An immediate result was that they immediately came to the poll."

An attempt to use the same tactics was made by the wives of the opposition,

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The hustings at Brentford, Middlesex Election, 1768