



Forty-One Years of Neglect: The Outcome the British did not Expect

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On May 4, 1607, the Virginia Company of London established what would become known as Jamestown. The British empire finally established a colony on the North American mainland after the failed attempt at the lost colony of Roanoke in 1585. For the next one hundred and sixty-eight years, one British idea dominated colonial politics and government in North America. This idea was to allow the colonies to fend for themselves. The crown figured that if they did not impose strict laws, especially laws dealing with taxes and trade on the North American colonies, that the British empire would not have to worry about colonial issues and could focus its attention on European politics and expanding the empire. Edmund Burke coined this idea when he called it “Salutary Neglect” in a speech he gave in The House of Commons on March 22, 1775, about conciliation with America.¹ From 1721-1762, this idea of Salutary Neglect was at its climax when three men dominated the political landscape of colonial affairs. These men were Sir Robert Walpole, Henry Pelham, and Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle. Their way of running political affairs in the colonies to impact their interest and stacking colonial positions with men who supported them caused the colonist to already see themselves as a free nation by the end of the Seven Years War.

On April 4, 1721, Sir Robert Walpole became the First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer.² This put Walpole at the center of power of British policies. Historians often refer to Walpole as being the first Prime Minister of Great Britain. In April of 1724, Thomas Pelham-Holles became the Secretary of State of the Southern Department of the

¹ Edmund Burke, *Select Works of Edmund Burke: Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents and The Two Speeches on America* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc, 2014), 235, eBook collection (EBSCOhost).

² Jeremy Black, *Walpole in Power* (United Kingdom: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 20.

English Government. His brother, Henry Pelham became Secretary of War that same year. These three men were now in the center of colonial politics for Great Britain.

One of the most significant issues that plagued Walpole during his time was the issue of paying colonial governors. Parliament would issue a wage as a yearly salary to the colonial governors. One of the greatest challenges came in Massachusetts Bay. Since 1722 Governor Shute argued his case in England in front of the Board of Trade for a revision of the charter and a salary increase. Newcastle, being in charge of the Southern Department put him in the mix of dealing with this issue. In 1724 Newcastle had forty-one places at his disposal in North America.³ Working alongside Walpole, Newcastle knew he had to do something. Shute was not receiving his annual salary from the Massachusetts Bay Colony Assembly. They refused to listen to the order of Parliament and the Board of Trade. The assembly did not want to pay Shute a fixed salary like they were supposed to. They believed that colonial positions should be given out to members of the assembly and not someone supported by the crown. Finally, in July of 1725, the Privy Council approved the new charter.⁴ This gave Shute full military control and power to regulate court in Massachusetts Bay. This did not mean however that the assembly in the colony would follow this order. On March 30, 1726, the board suggested that they pay the governors salary "till such time as the People of New England can be brought to a better Temper of Mind and induced to make Suitable fixed and perpetual Provision for His Majesty's Governors of that Province."⁵

³ James Henretta, *Salutary Neglect: Colonial Administration Under the Duke of Newcastle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 110.

⁴ Henretta, 62.

⁵ Cecil Headlam, ed., *Calendar of State Paper Colonial Series America and West Indies 1726-1727* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1936) 42.

For Walpole, this did not sit well with him considering he was the head of the board of Treasury. The Treasury and the Southern Board of Trade had different opinions. The Treasury Department for years had the opinion that the colonies should pay for colonial positions and that a surplus of their revenues should go back to England. The Board of Trade thought that no matter the cost of colonial administration, it should be paid because the benefits of American trade outweighed the financial issue. They believed that if officials paid from England could govern better, then that is what needed to happen to keep the colonies in order. On July 26, 1726, the Privy Council agreed with Walpole and that the home government would not pay for Shute's salary and that the Assembly of Massachusetts Bay would have to pay him. Shute was to be sent back to America with a letter from the king demanding that a fixed salary of £ 1,000 be paid to him. Before returning to America, Shute was replaced by William Burnet, who was the former governor of New York and New Jersey. Shortly after King George II appointed him, he died unexpectedly. Mr. Belcher received appointment to the governorship, and this surprised many. Belcher had a troublesome background. Walpole and Newcastle knew this would not go over well with the Assembly. Belcher's appointment was the single greatest cause of why reform over the colonies did not work in the late 1720s and early 1730s.⁶

In 1734, a proposal passed by the whole house to change the charter privileges of the American colonies to force the assemblies to send laws to England first and allow them to be decided by the house before they could go into law was turned down by Parliament. This showed the unwillingness of Parliament to want to deal with colonial administration and law.

⁶ Henretta, 90.

Parliament would not act to strengthen the crown by enforcing a colonial policy. Assemblies in America were no longer scared of Parliament back home. With Assemblies having the power to make and execute their own laws, they now felt as if they could stand side-by-side the members of Parliament as equals.

By the late 1730s, a split between Walpole and the Pelham's was beginning to form. For many years both Thomas and Henry looked up towards Walpole, and in a sense, Walpole taught them how to be politicians. In 1737, an example of this split showed. Part of Newcastle's job was to appoint officials for colonial administrative positions, but Walpole worried about his self-interest instead of what might be best for the Crown. Walpole met with General James Oglethorpe. Oglethorpe stated that he was unsure of how to protect the colonies. He feared that the Spanish might attack Georgia by coming up from Florida. Walpole did not want to lose Georgia to Spain, so he offered the vacant governor position in South Carolina to Oglethorpe. This would provide Oglethorpe the money and location needed to defend the territory of Georgia if Spain attacked. Since Oglethorpe was already the governor of Georgia, South Carolina gave him more land to fall back on in case of a Spanish assault in Georgia. The Spanish government warned Walpole that the appointment could cause aggression between the two European powers.⁷ Oglethorpe refused because he did not want to give up his position in parliament. He would only go as a military commander of South Carolina and Governor of Georgia. The king himself gave him this power, and he was named Commander-in-Chief of both colonies. This undermined Newcastle and made him look weak towards the board of trustees in

⁷ Henretta, 178.

Georgia. Many were unsure of why the appointment skipped over Newcastle. This was a classic case of Walpole era politics of stacking the deck in his favor.

The Pelham's knew that they could not survive politically without the help of Walpole and Walpole knew the same about the Pelhams. Still, the Pelham's knew that they needed to have complete control over the government to be able to support their political agendas. Walpole fought to fend off the Pelhams. By October 1739 war broke out with Spain. All of the colonies were to raise a militia for the crown. They all did besides one, Massachusetts Bay, who was led by Belcher. The Pelham's saw this as an opportunity to go at Walpole yet again. Newcastle knew that if Belcher was removed that this would be yet another crack in the armor of Walpole and would strengthen the Pelhams in Parliament. William Shirley asked Newcastle for the appointment in 1739, but Newcastle was not sure if Shirley was the right pick. Finally, by December 1740, Newcastle was convinced. He began to work with the ministry and gained support for the change after many had seen what type of leader Belcher was. On April 30, 1740, Newcastle decided to promote Shirley to Governor of Massachusetts Bay.

The Pelham's had yet another colonial patronage in their hands. The landmark of British politics began to shift towards them. The Pelham's used America to their advantage. They used colonial patronage as a substitute for financial resources to build their family name. They sold the American colonial administration posts. There was nothing Walpole could do. The Pelham's had power in parliament and the general election of 1741 all but strengthened those ties. Walpole's collapse was imminent, and in February 1742, Walpole was out of power.⁸ The Earl of

⁸ Brian Hill, *Sir Robert Walpole: Sole and Prime Minister* (London, England: Penguin Group, 1989), 212.

Wilmington took his post, but he died shortly after taking office. This put Henry Pelham in the driver's seat. He became First Lord of the Treasury. The Pelham's now controlled two of the highest offices in British politics. No one would stand in their way of pursuing their interest in the American Colonies.

The power that the Pelham's now had was unmatched, and many of their close allies knew that. Request for colonial positions began to come into Newcastle from every angle. In 1742 the secretaries post in New Jersey was open. Lady Augustus Fitzroy suggested that an old friend of hers by the name of Joseph Warrell, who was at the time the Attorney General of New Jersey. Warrell already had a commission for the king, but he wanted a royal patent.⁹ This increased hold on Newcastle's position because colonial positions were now coming directly from him instead of having to go through Parliament first. In January 1742, William Wood, who was the secretary to the Commissions of Customs, wanted a list of all naval post held in America. Newcastle became aware that the position of Naval Commander was open on the York River. In 1744 the officer in charge of the James River died. This post was converted to a patent place and given to a supporter of the Pelhams by the name of Edward Fredcroft.¹⁰ This still left the York River position open. Newcastle told Gaberiel Johnson that Benjamin Wheatley would be taking the post. Johnson did not agree with this, but he did not want to argue with Newcastle. He told Johnson too but Wheatley in the first spot that came open and "for the future immediately acquaint me when any of the offices within your government shall become

⁹ Henretta, 223.

¹⁰ Henretta, 255.

void.”¹¹ This shows the complete control that Newcastle had. He was undoubtedly stacking colonial positions in his favor and only worrying about him and his brother’s self-interest.

Besides promoting friends and allies to colonial positions, the Pelham’s know that another key for them was to have a strong Ministry. The departure of Walpole and his supporters left opening in Parliament for other Whigs. The Whigs were the party that the Pelham’s belonged to and they knew that a strong parliament would help them stay in power. The Pelham’s began promoting the Whigs that ostracized under the time of Walpole. This meant people such as the Duke of Bedford as First Lord of the Admiralty and Earl of Chesterfield as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. They also started handing out minor positions to members of their Whig faction George Lyttleton gained a position on the Treasury bench, and Sir John Phillips was named Commissioner of Trade.

The colonies had done a lot for the Pelham’s, but yet the same could not be said about them towards the colonies. They did not care about the colonies as long as they were helping them. This is shown in the campaign into Canada in 1745. Great Britain was involved in a territorial battle with France at this time. In the summer of 1745, under the command of William Shirley, British militia marched into Canada and took a French stronghold at Cape Breton. Many people back home in England were excited about this. Public opinion was to focus on North America and try to take Canada from the French. It would take more than a force of militia the beat French regulars and the Pelham’s were unwilling to send the troops needed. Once again, the Pelham’s relied on political pressure instead of doing what was right

¹¹ Henretta, 256.

for the colonies and the crown. Pressure from their supports made them call off the expedition in Canada. If the Pelham's had sent English troops to attack Canada, the Seven Years War might have never happened, and following that, the Revolutionary War may have never happened. What Newcastle was soon to realize was that one decision he would make would alter the power of his family forever.

In February of 1748, the Pelham's were at the height of their power. Believing that nothing could bring them down, Newcastle gave up his role of Southern Secretary to The Duke of Bedford and Newcastle took over the Northern Secretary role. The Southern Secretary was the more profitable position, but the Northern was were the greatest business lied for Great Britain. Newcastle thought while holding this office him and his brother would be able to push their agenda even further, but this also meant that Newcastle, for the first time in a quarter of a century, was no longer in control of colonial politics and policy. Bedford was just as hungry as Newcastle had once been. He did not care if the Pelham's were in control, he wanted it for himself, and the death of Lord Monson, who was the president of the Board of Trade presented Bedford with his first opportunity to show just how hungry he was. Bedford chose to bring in Lord Halifax to replace Monson. Bedford and Halifax then Realized something. The tension between the two Pelham brothers had been brewing for years, mainly coming from the side of the Duke of Newcastle. Newcastle was jealous of what his brother accomplished. Bedford saw this as a chance to push his reform agenda of the advisory committee, while also pushing Newcastle out.

One year after Newcastle gave up control of the Southern Secretary office, Bedford was able to do something that Newcastle tried to do for over a decade. Plans were now made for

General Edward Cornwallis to become the first civilian governor and to settle Nova Scotia.¹²

Bedford was a strong supporter of the Canada expedition in 1746, so it was no surprise that the one thing he wanted to make sure he got done was to settle Nova Scotia. What was the most surprising aspect behind this was that Henry Pelham allowed him to do this when he would not allow his brother the same opportunity? Henry, like Walpole, still did not want to send British reinforcements to America, but he did not mind settling the area. Newcastle knew things were beginning to come undone. The steady policy that the Pelham's showed of not caring in the least of ways about colonial politics and policies is the same reason that they saw reform come into the Board of Trade through Bedford and Halifax.

A conflict between the two groups was coming, and it was based on the internal administration of the colonies. The power of colonial assemblies and royal governors were beginning to weaken, and a lot had to do with the fact that many of the colonists had been ignored by the home country for generations now. The point had come where many subjects of the crown did not see themselves as so anymore. This caused controversy for parliament. On one side Bedford and Halifax wanted to see this change, and on the other, the Pelham brothers, who had this point had seen their relationship strain mainly because of greed between them. The single biggest issue is leaders in parliament had no idea what it was like in America and that the people judging the job of the colonial governors were leaders that did not appoint these people to these positions. One thing was for sure. The appointment of Bedford and Halifax in 1748 brought an end to the buddy system that flourished under the era of Newcastle. Royal

¹² Henretta 288

officials began being judged on a scale of performance instead of how much money or power they could bring to the Pelhams. Times were changing in British politics, especially politics dealing with the American Colonies.

In 1754, his brother died, and Newcastle finally ascended to Head of the Treasury.¹³ A spot he had eyed from his early days from Walpole. What he never realized was that the costly decision he made in 1748 to give control up of the Southern Secretary to Bedford, would cost him all his power. Bedford and Halifax could sense that war was coming with France in America and they knew that if something did not happen about colonial administration, Great Britain could suffer a defeat. As head of the Treasury, Newcastle tried to push things through as he had done for years, but those tactics would not work anymore. He no longer had control of Parliament. Outside factors such as the Seven Years War also derailed him from being able to control the way he wanted to. His support was gone, and so was the power that he and his brother had fought for since 1721. When Newcastle was out of office in May 1762, Parliament saw what forty-one years of corrupt policy had done to the colonies. Even with pushes by reformers such as Bedford and Halifax, it was too late. Salutary Neglect had sat in.

These three men dominated the political climate of the colonies for forty-one years. Through greed and power, they stacked colonial positions to favor their interest. Not once did they show in compassion for the colonies. The greatest tragedy is the fact that their decisions to help themselves hurt Great Britain. Through not dealing with colonial problems head-on or only dealing with them when it could damage their stature, they alienated the colonies from

¹³ Reed Browning, *The Duke of Newcastle* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1975), 194.

Great Britain. The colonies began to see themselves as a free and self-governing body. The greatest evidence of this is the attitude of the colonies coming out of the Seven Years War when Great Britain attempted to make the colonies pay for it, and they refused. The colonist saw what these men and people in parliament were doing by ignoring them and putting unproven and unknowledgeable people in charge of the colonies. Robert Walpole, Henry Pelham, and Thomas Pelham-Holles, the First Duke of Newcastle left the colonies in solitude and neglected them every day they were in power.

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