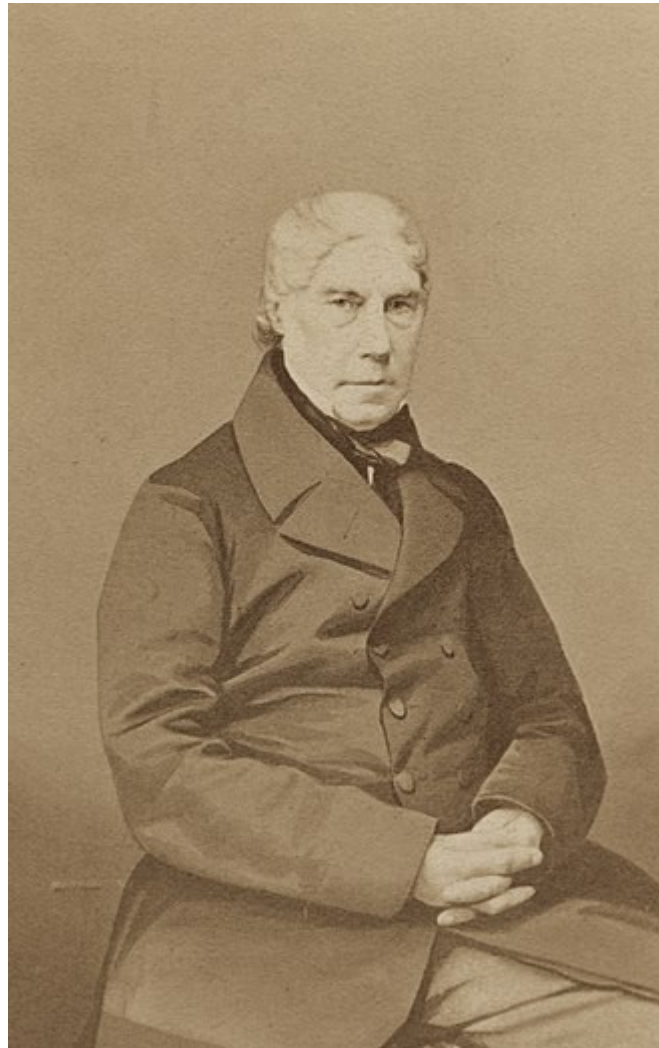


# George Hamilton-Gordon, 4th Earl of Aberdeen

January 1784 – December 1860

***Prime Minister December 1852 – January 1855***



Lord Aberdeen in July 1860

## ***Early Life***

Born in Edinburgh on 28 January 1784, to George Gordon, Lord Haddo, and Charlotte, he was the grandson of George Gordon, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Aberdeen. He lost his father in 1791 and his mother in 1795, and was brought up by Henry Dundas (Viscount Melville) and William Pitt the Younger. Educated at Harrow, and St John's College, Cambridge, he graduated with a M.A. in 1804. But not before he had become Earl of Aberdeen on his grandfather's death in 1801, and had travelled all over Europe.

## ***Political and diplomatic career, 1805–1828***

In December 1805, Lord Aberdeen took his seat as a Tory Peer in the Lords. In 1808, he was created a Knight of the Thistle. Following the death of his first wife from TB in 1812 he joined the

Foreign Service. Appointed Ambassador to Austria, he signed the Treaty of Toplitz between Britain and Austria in Vienna in 1813. He observed the Coalition victory at the Battle of Leipzig alongside the Austrian Emperor, Francis II in October that year. He was one of the British representatives at the negotiations which led to the Treaty of Paris in 1814.

Returning home he was created a peer of the United Kingdom as **Viscount Gordon**, of Aberdeen in the County of Aberdeen (1814), and made a member of the Privy Council.

In July 1815, he married his former sister-in-law Harriet, daughter of John Douglas, and widow of Viscount Hamilton; the marriage was much less happy than his first. During the ensuing thirteen years Aberdeen took a less prominent part in public affairs.

### ***Political career, 1828–1852***

Lord Aberdeen served as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster between January and June 1828 and subsequently as Foreign Secretary until 1830 under the Duke of Wellington. He resigned over the Reform Bill of 1832.

He was Secretary of State for War and the Colonies in the first Peel ministry (December 1834 – April 1835), and again Foreign Secretary between 1841 and 1846 in Peel's second ministry. It was during his second stint as Foreign Secretary that he had the harbour settlement of 'Little Hong Kong', on the south side of Hong Kong Island, named after him. It was probably the most productive period of his career; he settled two disagreements with the US: the north-east boundary dispute by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty (1842), and the Oregon dispute by the Oregon Treaty of 1846. He worked closely with Henry Bulwer, ambassador to Madrid, to help arrange marriages for Queen Isabella and her younger sister the Infanta Luisa Fernanda, which helped stabilize Spain's internal and external relations. He sought better relations with France, relying on his friendship with Guizot, but Britain was annoyed with France on a series of issues, especially French colonial policies, the right to search slave ships, the French desire to control Belgium, disputes in the Pacific and French intervention in Morocco.

### **In opposition;**

Aberdeen again followed his leader and resigned with Peel over the issue of the Corn Laws (after Peel's death in July 1850 he became the recognised leader of the Peelites). The August 1847 General Election resulted in a majority for the Tory party, but they were hopelessly split on a variety of issues. While the Peelites agreed with the Whigs on issues dealing with international trade, there were other issues on which the Peelites disagreed with the Whigs, which prevented them from joining the Whig government of Lord John Russell. Additionally, 113 of the members of Parliament elected in 1847 were Free Traders, who agreed with the Peelites on the repeal of the Corn Laws, but they felt that the tariffs on *all* consumer products should be removed. Furthermore, 36 members of Parliament elected in 1847 were members of the "Irish Brigade", who voted with the Peelites and the Whigs for the repeal of the Corn Laws because they sought an end to the Great Irish Famine by means of cheaper wheat and bread prices. But, the Free Traders and the Irish Brigade had disagreements with the Whigs on other matters that prevented them from joining with the Whigs to form a government. This led to the Tory/Conservative Party leader the Earl of Derby being asked to form a "minority government". The subsequent General Election of July 1852 had no clear winner.

When in December 1852 Deby's Chancellor, Disraeli, submitted his budget to Parliament on behalf of the minority government, the Peelites, the Free Traders, and the Irish Brigade were all alienated by its proposals. Accordingly, those groups suddenly forgot their differences with the Whig Party and voted with the Whigs against it. The vote was 286 in favour of the budget and 305 votes against. The defeat of the Disraeli budget was a "vote of no confidence" in the minority government and meant its downfall. Lord Aberdeen was asked to form a new government, and Gladstone became his Chancellor.

## **Prime Minister, 1852–1855**

Lord Aberdeen was able to put together a coalition of Peelites, Whigs and Free Traders that held 53.8% of the seats of Parliament. Although united on international trade issues and on questions of domestic reform, his cabinet also contained Lord Palmerston and Lord John Russell, who were certain to differ on questions of foreign policy. It was acknowledged that this group would need very strong and careful management, something Aberdeen was unable to provide. During the administration, much trouble was caused by the rivalry between Palmerston and Russell, and over the course of it Palmerston managed to out-manoeuvre Russell to emerge as the Whig heir apparent.

One of the foreign policy issues on which Palmerston and Russell disagreed was the type of relationship that Britain should have with France and especially France's ruler, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoleon. The younger Bonaparte had been elected to a three-year term as President of the Second Republic of France on 20 December 1848. The Constitution of the Second Republic limited the President to a single term in office. Consequently, on 2 December 1851, just before his term expired, he staged a coup, disbanding the elected Constituent Assembly, arresting some of the Republican leaders, and declaring himself Emperor Napoleon III of France, upsetting many democrats in England as well as in France. Some British government officials felt any close association with Bonaparte would eventually lead Britain into another series of wars, like those dating from 1793 until 1815. British relations with France had scarcely improved since 1815. As prime minister, the Earl of Aberdeen was one of these officials who feared France and Bonaparte.

However, other British government officials were beginning to worry more about the rising political dominance of the Russian Empire in eastern Europe and the corresponding decline of the Ottoman Empire, Palmerston was one of them, and had, by his cavalier actions whilst Foreign Secretary in Russell's Whig Government, required Russell to demand his resignation. Palmerston took his revenge by voting against Russell in a "no confidence" vote, bringing down the Russell government, triggering the 1852 General Election and Earl Derby's minority government, which led eventually to Aberdeen forming a government.

In order to form his coalition government, the Earl of Aberdeen had been required to appoint both Palmerston and Russell to his cabinet. Because of the controversy surrounding Palmerston's removal as Foreign Secretary, Palmerston could not now be appointed Foreign Minister again so soon after his removal from that position. Accordingly, on 28 December 1852, Aberdeen appointed Palmerston as Home Secretary and Russell as Foreign Minister.

### **The "Eastern Question";**

The differences of opinion within the Lord Aberdeen cabinet over the direction of foreign policy with regard to relations between Britain and France under Napoleon III, led to debate raging within the government. Aberdeen eventually led Britain into war on the side of the French and Ottomans against the Russian Empire, eventually called the Crimean War, but throughout the foreign policy negotiations which would surround the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, and which would continue throughout the middle and end of nineteenth century, the problem would be referred to as the "Eastern Question".

The cabinet was bitterly divided. Palmerston stirred up anti-reform feeling in Parliament and pro-war public opinion to out-manoeuvre Russell. The result was that the weak Aberdeen government went to war with Russia as the result of internal British political rivalries. Aberdeen accepted Russian arguments at face value because he sympathised with Russian interests against French pressure and was not in favour of the Crimean War. However, he was unable to resist the pressure that was being exerted on him by Palmerston's faction. In the end, the Crimean War proved to be the downfall of his government.

## **Crimean War 1853–1856;**

What began as a confrontation between Russia and the Ottomans rapidly escalated as France and Britain joined in against Russia. However, the conduct of the war, including the Battle of Balaclava (and the Charge of the Light Brigade) and culminating in the Battle of Inkerman, caused dissatisfaction over its conduct to grow in Britain, which led to a motion in Parliament demanding an investigation by a select committee.

Treating this as a vote of no confidence in his government, Aberdeen resigned, and retired from active politics, speaking for the last time in the House of Lords in 1858. He told the Queen: "Nothing could have been better, than the feeling of the members towards each other. Had it not been for the incessant attempts of Lord John Russell to keep up party differences, it must be acknowledged that the experiment of a coalition had succeeded admirably. We discussed future possibilities & agreed that nothing remained to be done, but to offer the Government to Lord Derby,..."

## **Relations with the United States;**

British-American relations had been troublesome under Palmerston, but Aberdeen proved much more conciliatory, and worked well when as Foreign Secretary in the 1840s he worked with Daniel Webster, the American Secretary of State who was himself an Anglophile. However, as prime minister, Aberdeen had trouble with the United States. For example, negotiations for a reciprocal trade agreement between the United States and Canada dragged on for eight years until a treaty was reached in 1854.

## **Legacy**

Aberdeen was generally successful as a hard-working diplomat, but his reputation has suffered greatly because of the lack of military success in the Crimean War and from the ridicule of enemies such as Disraeli who regarded him as weak, inefficient, and cold. Before the Crimean debacle that ended his career he scored numerous diplomatic triumphs, starting in 1813-14 when as ambassador to the Austrian Empire he negotiated the alliances and financing that led to the defeat of Napoleon. In Paris, he normalized relations with the newly restored Bourbon government and convinced London it could be trusted. He worked well with top European diplomats such as his friends Klemens von Metternich in Vienna and Francois Guizot in Paris. He brought Britain into the centre of Continental diplomacy on critical issues, such as the local wars in Greece, Portugal, and Belgium. Simmering troubles on numerous issues with the United States were ended by friendly compromises. He played a central role in winning the Opium Wars against China, gaining control of Hong Kong in the process.

Lord Aberdeen died at Argyll House, St James, London on 14 December 1860, and was buried in the family vault at Stanmore Church.