

Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston

1784-1865

Introduction:

Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston, KG, GCB,PC,FRS (1784-1865) was a British statesman, who was twice Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in the mid-19th century, 1855-1858 and 1859-1865. Aged over 70 years Palmerston became the oldest person in British political history to be appointed Prime Minister for the first time. Palmerston dominated British foreign policy during the period 1830 to 1865, when Britain stood at the height of its imperial power. He held office almost continuously from 1807 until his death in 1865 aged 80 a few months after victory in a general election in which he had achieved an increased majority. He remains the last British prime minister to die in office. He began his parliamentary career as a Tory, defected to the Whigs in 1830 and became the first prime minister from the newly formed Liberal Party in 1859. He was highly popular with the British public.

Early Life:

Henry John Temple was born in his family's Westminster house to the Irish branch of the Temple family on 20th October 1784. The family title originated from the Peerage of Ireland, although he rarely visited Ireland. His father was the 2nd Viscount Palmerston and his mother was Mary, daughter of a London merchant.

He was educated at Harrow School, then the University of Edinburgh from 1800 to 1803 where he learnt political economy and was known as well-mannered and charming.

Henry Temple succeeded his father to the title of Viscount Palmerston in 1802 before he had turned 18 and he also inherited a large country estate in Ireland.

He went to St. John's College Cambridge from 1803-1806. As a nobleman he was entitled to take his MA without examinations, but he elected to take College examinations and obtained 1st Class Honours.

After war was declared on France in 1803 Palmerston joined the Volunteers mustered to oppose a French invasion.

In November 1806 he was elected for Horsham but lost his seat in 1807 after a Whig majority in the Commons.

Palmerston was given the post of Junior Lord of the Admiralty in the ministry of the Duke of Portland.

He became a Tory MP in 1807. From 1809 to 1828 he served as Secretary of War, organising the finances of the army.

There was an incident In 1818 he was shot but only sustained a minor injury as he walked upstairs to the War Office, his assailant being a mentally ill retired officer with a grievance. He first attained Cabinet rank in 1827, when George Canning became prime minister, but he resigned from office one year later.

In 1839 Palmerston married his mistress of many years, Emily Lamb, after her husband the 5th Earl Cowper died.

Foreign Secretary:

He served as foreign secretary between the years of 1830 to 1851. In this office, Palmerston responded effectively to a series of conflicts in Europe, being responsible for the whole of British

Foreign policy. His analytical skills were important in forming policies in relation to India, China, Italy, Belgium and Spain which had extensive long-lasting beneficial consequences for Britain. The conflicts he dealt with included the Belgian revolution, the Portuguese Civil War, conflict with Russia in Poland, troubles in Italy and Greece, and the fact that Russia, Prussia and Austria were trying to form an alliance threatening the liberation of Europe. Palmerston safeguarded Britain, maintaining peace, keeping the balance of power and retaining the status quo in Europe. He sought to de-escalate tensions and focussed on a peaceful Belgian settlement. He was in favour of the abolition of slavery.

This does not mean that Palmerston is completely without controversy. Palmerston's leadership during the Opium Wars was questioned and denounced by other prominent statesmen such as William Ewart Gladstone.

He loved wielding power through blunt, imperious despatches, full of bold instructions to British diplomats all round the world. He did not mind offending other countries, or even Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who had different ideas about Europe. In the 1830s he stood up to France in the Eastern Mediterranean, while he pursued a strong but controversial anti-Russian policy on the Indian frontier. Later, he sympathised with some aims of the 1848 revolutionaries in Europe, pleasing many radicals at home. He argued for a firm line against both French and Russian ambitions in the Ottoman Empire in the early 1850s. His abrasive style earned him the nickname of Lord Pumice Stone. Historians rank Palmerston as one of the greatest foreign secretaries due to his handling of great crises.

Home Secretary:

In 1852 Aberdeen formed a coalition government. The Peelites insisted that Lord John Russell be foreign secretary, forcing Palmerston to take the office of home secretary, which he undertook from 1852-1855. As home secretary Palmerston enacted various social reforms, although he opposed electoral reform. Some of the reforms he made included Penal Reform and The Factory Act of 1853 which outlawed all labour by young persons between 6pm and 6am. He introduced the Truck Act which stopped employers paying workmen in goods instead of money, and introduced the Vaccination Act of 1853.

When Aberdeen's coalition fell in 1855 over its handling of the Crimean War, Palmerston was the only man able to sustain a majority in Parliament, and he became prime minister.

Prime Minister 1855-1858 and 1859-1865:

First Term;

Palmerston took a hard line on the Crimean war; he wanted to expand the fighting, especially in the Baltic where St. Petersburg could be threatened by superior British naval power. His goal was to permanently reduce the Russian threat to Europe. Sweden and Prussia were willing to join, and Russia stood alone. However, France, which had sent more soldiers to the war than Britain, and had suffered far more casualties, wanted the war to end, as did Austria. In March 1855 the old Tsar died and was succeeded by his son, Alexander II, who wished to make peace. However, Palmerston found the peace terms too soft on Russia and so persuaded Napoleon III to break off the peace negotiations until Sevastopol could be captured, putting the allies in a stronger negotiating position. In September Sevastopol finally surrendered and the allies had full control of the Black Sea. Russia came to terms. In Feb 1856 an armistice was signed and after a month's negotiations an agreement was signed at the Congress of Paris. Palmerston's demand for a demilitarised Black Sea was secured, although his wish for the Crimea to be returned to the Ottomans was not. The peace treaty was signed in March 1856. In April 1856 Palmerston was appointed to the Order of the Garter by Queen Victoria.

Second Opium War 1856

Palmerston during his time as Prime Minister was forced to evoke a strong patriotic spirit once more in 1856 in China. The Chinese seized the pirate ship Arrow and this was cited as having insulted the British flag. In a series of events Palmerston showed his unwavering support to the local British official Harry Parkes whilst in Parliament the likes of Gladstone and Cobden objected to his approach.

Domestic Reform

Although he generally avoided controversial domestic reforms, Palmerston was instrumental in getting Parliament to approve the creation of the Divorce Court in 1857. Before this, people wanting a divorce had had to get a private act of Parliament passed.

Palmerston's Popularity

Palmerston was popular with a large section of the workers, the growing middle classes and the country's commercial and financial sectors. His nickname was Pam by his supporters.

Lord Palmerston became enormously popular thanks to his assertive foreign policy which proclaimed Britain's values as a model for the world to follow. He controlled public opinion by stimulating British nationalism.

Although Queen Victoria and most of the political leadership distrusted him, he received and sustained the favour of the press and the populace. Palmerston's alleged weaknesses included mishandling of personal relations and continual disagreements with the Queen over the royal role in determining foreign policy.

Palmerston was Prime Minister for most of the last ten years of his life. He brought the Crimean War to a generally successful conclusion and survived the embarrassment of the Indian Mutiny in 1857. He put through the Government of India Bill in 1858, transferring control of the East India Company to the Crown.

Palmerston resigned after he lost a vote in the Commons on the Conspiracy to Murder Bill. The Bill was to make it a felony to plot in Britain to murder someone abroad. As he lost the second round of voting he resigned and was in opposition from 1858-1859.

Second Term;

Historians usually regard Palmerston, starting in 1859 as the first Liberal prime minister. In his last premiership Palmerston oversaw the passage of important legislation. The Offences against the Person Act 1861 codified and reformed the law, and was part of a wider process of consolidating criminal law. The Companies Act 1862 was the basis of modern company law.

Foreign policy continued to be his main strength; he thought that he could shape if not control all of European diplomacy, especially by using France as a vital ally and trade partner. However, historians often characterise his method as bluffing more than decisive action.

He proved his popular appeal through high-handed behaviour towards China and by presenting Italian unification (1859-60) as a victory for Britain over France, Austria, Russia and the Pope. His strong defence policy was widely approved. In the 1860s there was less scope for a vigorous stance abroad, but the economy was in a very healthy state and his government made large cuts to income taxes and food duties, adding to his reputation, and especially that of his Chancellor William Gladstone.

Palmerston continued to avoid controversial domestic reforms, which would have weakened his image as a centrist politician. He won another general election in July 1865 increasing his majority. When he died in October 1865 aged 80 and still in office, many people thought that an era had definitely ended, and that parliamentary and Irish reform, and a more vigorous party

politics, were now urgently needed. He served in government for 46 years. Although Palmerston wanted to be buried at Romsey Abbey the Cabinet insisted that he should have a state funeral and be buried at Westminster Abbey. He was the fifth person not of royalty to be granted a state funeral (after Robert Blake, Sir Isaac Newton, Lord Nelson and the Duke of Wellington).