

Henry Addington, 1st Viscount Sidmouth

1757-1844

Prime Minister March 1801 – March 1804.

Addington was the son of Pitt the Elder's physician, who, specialising in treating mental illness, was also one of George III's doctors. Henry was a childhood friend of Pitt the Younger, and like him, went to University (Oxford) and studied Law at Lincoln's Inn.

He entered politics as one of the MPs for Devizes in 1784, and became Speaker of the House in 1789, a role he held until March 1801. When Pitt resigned after failing to get the King to accept any form of Catholic Emancipation, both He and the King insisted that Addington take over as Prime Minister, despite his own objections and his attempts to reconcile the King and Pitt.

Foreign policy was the centrepiece of his term in office. Some historians have been highly critical but others said he conducted a logical, consistent and euro-centric balance-of-power policy, rooted in rules and assumptions governing their conduct.

Addington's domestic reforms doubled the efficiency of the Income Tax. In foreign affairs, he secured the Treaty of Amiens in 1802. While the treaty's terms were the bare minimum that the British government could accept, Napoleon would not have agreed to any terms more favourable to the British, and the British government had reached a state of financial collapse from war expenditure, the loss of Continental markets for British goods and two successive failed harvests that had led to widespread famine and social unrest, rendering peace a necessity. By early 1803, Britain's financial and diplomatic positions had recovered sufficiently to allow Addington to declare war on France, when it became clear that the French would not allow a settlement for the defences of Malta that would have been secure enough to fend off a French invasion that appeared imminent.

At the time and ever since, Addington has been criticised for his lacklustre conduct of the war and his defensive posture. However, without allies, Britain's options were limited to defence. He increased the forces, provided a tax base that could finance an enlarged war and seized several French possessions. To gain allies, Addington cultivated better relations with Russia, Austria, and Prussia, which later became the 3rd Coalition, shortly after he left office. He also strengthened British defences against a French invasion through the building of Martello Towers along the South Coast and by raising more than 600,000 militia.

Although the King stood by him, it was not enough, because Addington did not have a strong enough hold on both Houses of Parliament. By May 1804, partisan criticism of Addington's war policies provided the pretext for a parliamentary “putsch” by the three major factions, supporters of Grenville, Fox and even Pitt. Addington's greatest failing was his inability to manage a parliamentary majority by cultivating the loyal support of MPs beyond his own circle and the friends of the King. That, combined with his mediocre speaking ability, left him vulnerable to Pitt's mastery of parliamentary management and his unparalleled oratory skills. Pitt's parliamentary assault against Addington in March 1804 led to the slimming of his parliamentary majority to the point that he was defeated in the House of Commons, and forced to resign in favour of Pitt.

Addington remained an important political figure because he had gained a considerable following of MPs. He was reconciled with Pitt in December 1804, rejoined the Cabinet as Lord President of the Council in January 1805, after Pitt had insisted Addington accept a peerage (Viscount Sidmouth) to avoid the inconvenience of them sitting together in the Commons. After Pitt's death, Addington was appointed Lord Privy Seal in 1806 in the Ministry of all the Talents that succeeded Pitt. Later that year he returned to the position of Lord President until 1807. His resignation, in opposition to a limited measure of Catholic Emancipation, which the Cabinet was considering despite the opposition of the King, precipitated the fall of the Talents Ministry.

He returned to government again as Lord President in March 1812, and, in June of the same year, became Home Secretary, in which office he countered revolutionary opposition, by being responsible for the temporary suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1817 and the passage of the Six Acts in 1819, following the Peterloo Massacre. He left office in 1822, succeeded as Home Secretary by Robert Peel, but remained in the Cabinet as Minister without Portfolio for the next two years, opposing, along with Wellington, other members of Cabinet, and George IV, British recognition of the South American republics. He remained active in the House of Lords for the next few years, making his final speech in opposition to Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and casting his final vote against the Great Reform Act of 1832.

Addington maintained a home, Bulmershe Court in Woodley, and donated to the town of Reading the four acres of land that is today the site of the Royal Berks. Hospital, and his name is commemorated in the town's Sidmouth Street and Addington Road. However, he died in London in February 1844 of influenza, at the age of 86.