

## A Chemical Satire on the 1809 Change of Government in Britain

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### Abstract

This note provides the context and transcription of a short satiric article published in the *Bristol Mirror* on the political events of 1809. The piece used chemical metaphors to provide an understanding of the circumstances surrounding the change of ministry in Britain in the autumn of that year. The article bears a strong resemblance to early 21<sup>st</sup>-century political satire, including its relationship, or lack thereof, to reality.

### Political Background

It is not every day that two members of a British cabinet attempt to kill each other. Such an event might, especially during a global war, seem a trifle self-indulgent. But that is precisely what happened on Putney Common early on the morning of Thursday 21 September 1809. Two days previously the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh (1769–1822), demanded satisfaction from the Foreign Secretary, George Canning (1770–1827).<sup>1</sup> Castlereagh's immediate grounds were that Canning had blamed him for the disastrous failure of Walcheren expedition designed to open a new front against France and had duplicitously plotted his removal from the government, led by the seventy-year-old Prime Minister William Cavendish-Bentinck, third Duke of Portland (1738–1809), to which they had all belonged since March 1807.

The military crisis brought to a head the long-standing clash of personalities within the cabinet. For two and a half years it had been held together by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Spencer Perceval (1762–1812), who also served as Leader of the House of Commons, that is the government's chief spokesman in the lower house when the Prime Minister sat in the Lords. This made him the second most powerful man in the government. As such Perceval dealt effectively with the scandal surrounding the sale of army commissions, earlier in the war, by the mistress of the Commander-in-Chief Frederick, Duke of York (1763–1827), the King's second son. The scandal emerged at the start of 1809; the Parliamentary enquiry cleared the Duke, but he nevertheless resigned on 18 March.

Though apparently never having fired a pistol in his life, Canning immediately and 'cheerfully' accepted Castlereagh's challenge.<sup>2</sup> Ten paces apart, both dualists missed with their first shots. On the second round Canning was injured, though not seriously, in the thigh (accounts differ as

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Castlereagh to George Canning, 19 September 1809, *The Annual Register ... for 1809*, vol. 51 (published 1811), pp.562-3.

<sup>2</sup> George Canning to Lord Castlereagh, 20 September 1809, *The Annual Register ... for 1809*, vol. 51 (published 1811), p.563

to which one) and the combatants returned to their respective homes.<sup>3</sup> The duel brought a spectacular and speedy end to a government already disintegrating because of the military crisis. Portland had resigned on 6 September, shortly after the defeat at Walcheren became known, but stayed on as caretaker Prime Minister. There followed during September a struggle for succession between Canning and Perceval, the root cause of the duel. However, Canning, evidently recognising the inappropriateness of a Foreign Secretary fighting a duel, resigned the evening before.<sup>4</sup> The duel thus paved the way for Perceval to emerge as Prime Minister in early October with neither Canning nor Castlereagh in the cabinet. As a signal of support for Perceval, Portland remained in the cabinet (without portfolio) until his death at the end of the month following an unsuccessful operation to remove a kidney stone. Perceval invited some of those who had served in the government led by William, Baron Grenville (1759–1834) in 1806–1807, the “ministry of all the talents,” such as Charles, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Grey (1764–1845), to join his cabinet. They declined doubting its resilience and not liking some of Perceval’s policies. In 1811 Perceval reappointed the Duke of York as Commander-in-Chief, which he retained until his death in 1827.

Perceval remained in office until 1812 when he suffered the dubious distinction of being the only Prime Minister, so far, to be assassinated. He was succeeded by Robert Jenkinson, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Liverpool (1770–1828) who immediately brought Castlereagh back into the cabinet as Foreign Secretary and Leader of the Commons. He had to work alongside Canning when the latter joined the cabinet as President of the Board of Control in 1816. Ironically, following Castlereagh’s suicide in 1822, Canning succeeded to both his positions and in 1827, following Liverpool’s resignation, became Prime Minister for just under four months before his death in August. Grenville never held high office again, but Grey served as Prime Minister during the first half of the 1830s overseeing the enactment and implementation of the Reform Act.

#### Chemically Satirising 1809

Needless to say, the press reported all the events of 1809 widely and at great length. One account, published in early December in the Saturday weekly the *Bristol Mirror*,<sup>5</sup> is of particular interest to historians of chemistry. It sought to employ numerous chemical metaphors to outline the events and personalities described above:

#### CHEMICAL PHENOMENON.

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It has been for some time a matter of surprise to Philosophers, that the heterogeneous compound known by the name of the Administration, but which was in fact a neutral salt, in the strictest sense of the term, should not long ago have been decomposed.— The weakness of the affinities between its component parts, was well known, and we are obliged to Berthollet for the term, “complex affinity,” by which it is well described.

A volatile substance, called Canning, having a great capacity for caloric, has, as might have been expected, effected the decomposition;— deflagration and detonation took place, upon exposure at an increased temperature to atmospheric air, on Putney Common: this must have had

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<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 22 September 1809, 2b.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 22 September 1809, 2b.

<sup>5</sup> Although usually called the *Bristol Mirror*, the banner title in 1809 read ‘*The Mirror, Late Bonner and Middleton’s Bristol Journal*’. It was first published in 1773.

the effect of the Galvanic battery, as a piece of metal of a spherical form, supposed to be Mr. Davy's potassium, was projected from a tube containing nitrate of pot-ash, sulphur, and carbon.

Thus was Mr. Perceval's famous compound decomposed; Canning yielded red fluid, of the colour of human blood, highly concentrated sulphuric acid, and an impure alkali of a caustic nature.

Castlereagh gave a considerable quantity of aqueous fluid, and an oxyde of lead, which had of course lost all its metallic splendour. The residuum, consisting of vapours, and of various weak solutions, was not thought worthy of analysis. Professor Perceval, still bigotted to his theory, is endeavouring to demonstrate this phenomenon synthetically. Dr. Grenville and Dr. Grey have given it as their decided opinion, that it is impossible.

Although we certainly respect the ingenuity of Professor Perceval, which was so successfully exerted in the famous York analysis, we must be allowed to say, that we have met with nothing in the annals of science, since the time of the alchemists, so visionary as his speculations.<sup>6</sup>

It is not often, when going through nineteenth-century newspapers which are normally seriously earnest, that one laughs out loud, but I did so when I came across this article. The use of these chemical metaphors provides a wonderful commentary on what the author thought of the political situation. For example, the reference to Canning being volatile and caustic reflected the widely held view that, despite Castlereagh issuing the challenge, Canning was largely responsible for the dual. In many ways the style of the piece closely parallels that of the English satirical fortnightly *Private Eye* more than two centuries later.

Without any archival evidence, it is impossible to identify the author. Clearly, they had followed the political reporting during 1809 and had some acquaintance with contemporary chemistry. That may suggest someone connected to the Bristol circle of the radical (Jacobin) physician Thomas Beddoes (1760–1808) who had died nearly a year previously. It was Beddoes, of course, who had employed Humphry Davy (1778–1829) as Superintendent of the Medical Pneumatic Institution for two and a half years between 1798 and 1801, before he moved to the Royal Institution in London.<sup>7</sup>

The author suggested that the bullet that led Canning to yield 'red fluid' was made of potassium and fired from the pistol by gunpowder. Davy had discovered potassium electro-chemically (hence the reference to the Galvanic battery) towards the end of 1807, but did not publish his results until early 1808 with a description of its volatile properties.<sup>8</sup> Its volatility would have made the use proposed here rather improbable and does raise questions about the extent of the author's chemical understanding, though Davy had suggested, in an 1808 Royal Institution

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<sup>6</sup> 'Chemical Phenomenon,' *Bristol Mirror*, 2 December 1809, 4a.

<sup>7</sup> Frank A.J.L. James, 'Gas and Poetry: Humphry Davy in Bristol, 1798–1801,' *Essays in Romanticism* 26 (2019): 131–57 and 'The Subversive Humphry Davy: Aristocracy and Establishing Chemical Research Laboratories in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century England' in *Compound Histories: Materials, Governance and Production, 1760–1840*, eds. Lissa Roberts and Simon Werrett (Leiden, Brill, 2017), 269–88.

<sup>8</sup> Humphry Davy, 'The Bakerian Lecture, on some new Phenomena of chemical Changes produced by Electricity, particularly the Decomposition of the fixed Alkalies, and the Exhibition of the new substances which constitute their bases; and on the general Nature of alkaline Bodies,' *Philosophical Transactions* 98 (1808), 1–44.

lecture, that sodium and potassium might be deployed for warfare.<sup>9</sup> Another significant reference was to ‘complex affinity,’ a term used several times in the English translation of the *Essai de statique chimique* (1803) by the French chemist Claude-Louis Berthollet (1748–1822).<sup>10</sup> As with the reference to Davy and potassium, this too seems slightly off key, since Berthollet used the term when discussing double decomposition reactions while in the article the term described the lack of coherence in Portland’s cabinet.

It seems to be the case that the author had come across these chemical ideas, the words of which sounded as if they well suited the politics, personalities and events of 1809, rather than provide any close chemical metaphors – *Private Eye* continues to do much the same. Nevertheless, it was a worthy effort at deploying recent chemistry in political discourse and is perhaps not so very far from what satiric caricaturists of the time, such as James Gillray (1756–1815), did visually. One cannot expect reality from satire.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Memoirs of the Progress of Manufactures, Chemistry, Science, and the Fine Arts,’ *The Scots Magazine* 70 (July 1808): 522–4 on 523. For further discussion see Harriet Olivia Lloyd, *Rulers of Opinion: Women at the Royal Institution of Great Britain* (University College London PhD thesis, 2018), 176.

<sup>10</sup> Claude-Louis Berthollet, *An Essay on Chemical Statics*, 2 vols. (London: Mawman, 1804). See Mi Gyung Kim, ‘The Layers of Chemical Language, I: Constitution of Bodies v. Structure of Matter,’ *History of Science* 30 (1992): 69–96, esp. 81.