



From Monarchist to Patriot: The London conversion of Ben Franklin 1757 -1775.
By Lady Reid

As early as 1754 Franklin had a plan to unite the American Colonies under some form of Presidential representative of the King of Great Britain. When this was turned down by the Colonists, he wrote often of the concept of a Commonwealth drawing together the Governmental experience of Britain with the potential expansive riches of the American land mass in one great Civilisation. Franklin, during the years 1754 to 1757 had to suffer a great deal of petty, factious arguments with the Assembly and the Proprietor of Pennsylvania. He complained constantly about the inability of sections of the community to work together, so that, when he was sent to London as an Agent for Pennsylvania, he genuinely thought he was coming to the seat of rational enlightened Government.

Britain was "home", and, since he already had several friends in the printing and book business he had no trouble settling into a comfortable middle class intellectual life. He was a member of the Society of Arts and the Royal Society, and these were the people with whom he mixed and judged to be the arbiters of philosophic discussion. It was not long before he realised that in order to deal with the Ministers of the Government and servants of the King he would need skills of patience and forbearance beyond his capabilities. It was not just the procrastinations and delays that frustrated him, but the protocols and etiquette required in order to progress any petition or plea, left him with little confidence in any of the departments of government dealing with the Colonies. However he had great optimism about the personality of the new young king George III and attended his coronation with enthusiasm.

Franklin returned from Philadelphia to London in 1764, with the new task of trying to wrest Pennsylvania from the Proprietors, and petition that it become a Royal Colony. He was still convinced that a Benevolent Monarchy would serve his compatriots best. But he was thrown into the maelstrom of the Stamp Act, which was passed shortly after he arrived back. Although he disapproved of Internal Taxes, he advised the Colonists to go along with the Act, partly because the taxes imposed were already accepted in Britain, but also because he thought that by accepting them the Colonies would be able to demand concessions on other impositions. He sadly underestimated the Colonies' reaction to the Act, and found himself before the House of Commons explaining the determination of the Colonies not to comply with the Mother Country's laws.

The Stamp Act was repealed, but Franklin found no calm water. The maverick way in which government ministers changed jobs and imposed Bills of taxation on the Colonies, forced him to question his fundamental loyalty to a system that was inexorably pushing the individual colonies into civil disorder and rebellion. His reactions to the tensions were inconsistent. On the one hand he did everything he could to bring people and policies together to seek reconciliatory measures, whilst on the other hand he broadcast private letters of Colonial servants which denigrated colonial activities and caused enormous fury against him from both sides. Franklin ended up before the Privy Council being denounced almost as a traitor. From this moment Franklin cast aside his loyalty and became a committed patriot of the cause of American Independence.

His sacrifice was not only public, as, since his son was the Loyal Royal Governor of New Jersey, he broke with him also, and never renewed the relationship. However bitter and difficult Franklin found his break from Britain and his son, he remained firm friends with a range of British correspondents, and ended his life in Philadelphia after eight years in France, writing once again most optimistically about the future of both the countries he loved.