

The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1820-1832

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Though these volumes cover just 12 years of parliamentary history, they are the most substantial yet to be published in the great series that will eventually make up the History of Parliament project. Seven stout volumes contain well over five million words, making their immediate predecessor, the volumes covering 1790–1820 edited by R. G. Thorne, look comparatively svelte. Work on 1820–32 began when the Thorne volumes were published in 1986, and the editor, David Fisher, had been assistant on the previous enterprise, thus devoting an entire career to the project. Of the 1367 biographical articles on MPs, and 383 constituency articles, he alone has written nearly 500. In approach and format, these volumes are a continuation of the Thorne tomes. Not only is the traditional tripartite division of introductory survey, biographical and constituency articles maintained; the content and style of each are essentially unaltered. This is overwhelmingly a work of reference, bulging with fact. Its enormous size is the consequence of the proliferation of source material: division lists, local newspaper accounts of elections, parliamentary diaries. Its relentless factuality is both its greatest strength and its necessary weakness. It is indispensable, but it aims at neither analytical novelty nor analytical coherence – and it would be pointless and unfair for a reviewer to criticise these absences, however much one might regret them. Nonetheless, as many critics have pointed out over the years, the result is not really a history of parliament: there is scant coverage of its institutional and procedural history, the culture of debate, the nature of representation, the operation of interest groups and other lobbies, and much else besides.

The constituency articles are frequently magnificent, and have benefited the most from the increased availability of local material. Not the least of their virtues is to supply a more accurate rendering of the actual results and the size of the electorate. For most scholars, however, the heart of the project will remain the biographical articles, which weigh in at nearly three and a quarter million words. In general these do a

very good job of setting out information on MPs' attitudes to administrations and their voting and speaking behaviour. A great deal of evidence has been quarried, professionally.

On the whole that evidence is left to speak for itself. MPs' character, personality and general political views are revealed mostly by occasional quotations from contemporary material, frequently gossipy and usually presented artlessly and chronologically, not connecting with the surrounding material. So these are not rounded biographies, and contradictory assessments by friends and foes are given with little attempt at reconciliation. Yet some of the contributors make particularly sterling efforts to transcend the limitations of this traditional format, and Stephen Farrell's articles on Canning and Palmerston are a model in this respect. Fisher's approach is more conventional, and since he gets most of the plum subjects, it cannot be denied that the end-product can be hard going, certainly when an article runs to over 32,000 words, like that on Peel. In such circumstances, his astringency can grate, such as when he tells us, after 25,000 plodding words about the 'rather dim ... bore' Joseph Hume, that of the two existing biographies of Hume 'neither is up to much'. But the scholarship is immensely impressive, and it is also welcome that the tendency in the Thorne volumes to group too many references in one footnote has lessened.

One merit of these longer biographical articles is that, albeit intermittently, they give some sense of the skills necessary to lead in parliament, a theme to which historians still do not devote quite enough attention. It was not exactly eloquence that was necessary; Lady Holland regurgitated the *bon mot* that Castlereagh liked all taxes but syntax. He was frequently an uninspired wordsmith who led the Commons by character: a combination of rank, management skills, courage, steadiness and sheer stamina. After his death in 1822, Croker famously remarked (actually in relation to Palmerston's shortcomings) that a political leader needed to be able to 'run on for a couple of hours without, on the one hand, committing the government or, on the other, lowering by commonplaces the station of a cabinet minister'. The latter was important; this was, after all, still the King's government. So Canning's social status was a potential problem, undoubtedly adding to the perception that his political virtue was unreliable. But his oratory more than made up for these defects: Peel remarked on his ability to pick up the range of sentiments voiced or felt by lesser men, so that in his own speeches 'he seemed to a large part of the audience to be merely giving a striking form to their own thoughts'. His command of language, range of literary quotation and noble sentiments allowed him a kind of gentlemanly status. Speech-making of this sort displayed education, intelligence and refinement, and had usually been honed at university. Presumably that was why ambitious young Tories so frequently aspired to the university seats: Peel, Palmerston and Goulburn sat for them during this period, and Canning once took Peel aside and expressed his regret that his pro-Catholic sentiments had ruined his chance of representing Oxford.

In order to get a snapshot of parliamentarians as a whole, it is necessary to turn to the introductory survey, which covers age, social standing, wealth, education, occupation and religion. The average age of MPs remained between 43 and 45, as it had at every election since 1790. 22 per cent of MPs were heirs or younger sons of peers, about the same as in the previous 30 years. 12 per cent of MPs succeeded to baronetcies (which as Thorne remarked were 'a status symbol for country gentlemen and social climbers'), against 11 per cent in the post-1790 period. The pattern identified by Thorne that shows more of the post-1790 MPs attending public schools continued after 1820, with the percentage at Eton rising from about 19 per cent to 23 per cent. As in previous volumes, there are very thorough lists of those who were lawyers and military officers, and some discussion of the self-made wealthy. However none of this coverage changes the established picture of the social composition of the pre-Reform House. The section on religious affiliation is thin and leaves the reader unclear as to whether any religious group, other than the 16 Irish Catholics returned after 1829, operated effectively as a collective entity in the House. More interest is shown in the insane, suicidal and sexually incontinent, even though these traits do not seem to have been demonstrated on the floor of the House.

In sum, the introductory survey often descends to a card-index job, better at specifying details about individual MPs than at painting an interesting picture. Some paragraphs occupy a whole double page and more; in fact the one on pp. 346-50 attempting to assess MPs' partisanship after the 1830 election must be nearly 2,000 words long, with a muddy conclusion to boot. It is understandable that these surveys should

take a very factual form, rather than following the latest historical fashions which might quickly show their age. Even so, an opportunity has been missed, because the editor and his staff are almost the only people who will ever read through all the entries and who might be able to make well-grounded generalisations on the basis of them. There is almost no analysis of MPs' roles as legislators or promoters of local interests. Though there is a chapter on the procedure and business of the House, by Margaret Escott, it does not engage with suggestive arguments such as Boyd Hilton's that for many years Liverpool used select committees as policy-making bodies in order to keep policy disputes as far as possible out of cabinet. The three pages on 'speeches and speaking' do not embark on any linguistic analysis, beyond a frustratingly perfunctory suggestion that MPs 'became accustomed to regional accents'. For the editorial staff to confine themselves very largely to a sociological survey of MPs, which many historians now regard as of limited value in understanding the Commons, in fact shows the age of the project. And it is not as if slick value judgments are ruled out; indeed they pop up when least expected, such as in references to the 'aristocratic and nepotistic coalition' of November 1830, or the 'shabby select corporation of tradesmen and small shopkeepers' in East Retford.

Fisher's brief analysis of government patronage reinforces the now largely-accepted view that the 'influence of the Crown' was already much feebler by 1820. He computes that the number of sinecurists, which had been 26 in the 1807 Parliament, had fallen to seven in 1826. As Thorne showed, there were over 130 placemen in total in the 1790 parliament, but only 79 in 1818; by 1830 there were around 60. Of course borough owners still had considerable power: about half of English boroughs still returned MPs sponsored by a patron, though 35 of the 202 were entirely open, as against 19 in the 1790–1820 period. Aristocratic influence was not significant in 13 counties, and it is asserted that as much as half the electorate was urban in Cheshire, though on the whole the constituency articles do not try to estimate the percentages of urban voters, and we are still reliant on John Cannon's 1972 research for the fact that the highest percentages of urban voters in a contested county election in this period were in Surrey and Durham (34 per cent each). The editors have found very few examples of landlord intimidation or reprisals for independent voting in either counties or boroughs.

On the other hand, party affiliation is shown to be generally strong by the early 1820s, on an interesting analysis of a larger number of division lists than previous historians of this topic have quarried. 56 per cent of MPs were firmly attached to either government or opposition, while 37 per cent more were 'more tenuously attached, though in the majority of cases the extent of their deviation was comparatively slight'. In the 1820–6 parliament the government was only defeated nine times, because most of the opposition fringe, let alone the real waverers, did not want a Whig government. The analysis also confirms the view that the intensity of party feeling waned from the mid-1820s, though residual identification remained strong. Tory crisis and popular excitement between 1828 and 1830 weakened Wellington's command of parliament, but it is still striking that early in 1830 the opposition Whigs, Radicals, Ultras and Huskissonites only numbered 210, with 55 more unlikely to vote for government, against 293 government men plus 86 fringe supporters.

Interesting changes of political culture were afoot in these years, and it would have been useful to consider how widespread alternative ways of thinking about political affiliation were by the late 1820s. In particular, as the biographical entries show, the word 'liberal' was increasingly used by those who wished to signal their openness to public opinion – for example by Goulburn in discussing Cambridge University politics in 1826, by Jeffrey to describe Canning's government in 1827, and by Palmerston to define those who withdrew from Wellington's government in 1828. The great increase in petitioning in the late 1820s is also instructive: whereas the average number of petitions presented to the Commons was 900 per year in 1811–5, for 1827–31 the figure was 4898. The upsurge began in 1826–7, when there were 4104, many for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. By the late 1820s many more MPs were becoming aware of the need to be responsive to demands from their constituents.

From the constituencies themselves, there is some evidence that at the beginning of the period voting was clearly on party lines in many of the most open contested seats, particularly the counties. The analysis of borough contests is more equivocal about the relative importance of party and money. (There is also a

striking throwaway line that ‘no significant new information on party organization has come to light’ in researching these volumes.) Again it is regrettable that the introductory survey did not do more to pull together the findings of the 383 constituency articles about the strength of particular parties and issues at specific elections. Even so, it seems that there was less evidence of traditional party conflict in the open seats by the time of the 1830 election, and that the most dramatic and significant contests were on other lines. Incumbents were defeated in a host of county seats, almost across the Home Counties – Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk, Surrey and Sussex – and the constituency articles on each are well worth attention. This was largely a revolt of tax-burdened freeholders and country gentlemen against the political order, made easier because aristocratic influence in those more commercialised counties was less strong than elsewhere. It was seen, quite rightly, as a sign of discontent with the country’s social and political leadership, and a demand for a different relationship between politicians and public opinion. The 1830 election was no less important in Ireland, where it destroyed the Wellingtonian majority, despite the savage reduction in the county electorate that had accompanied Catholic Emancipation: the number of his supporters among Irish county MPs fell from 38 to 25, as Farrell’s excellent introductory article on Ireland shows.

The 1831 election was simply a referendum on Reform. Only six of 34 English county MPs who had voted against the new government’s Reform Bill survived the election, while the Whigs gained a further six Irish county seats from the Tories. Even in *ancien regime* Scotland, which had voted disproportionately against the Reform Bill, a slender Reform majority was now returned, mainly because of the burghs. As Fisher remarks, the 1831 parliament showed ‘overwhelming evidence of partisan voting’ on the issue of ‘reform or no reform’, with almost no waverers.

The most interesting comments on the impact of the Reform Act itself come from Philip Salmon, in a valuable article at the end of the introductory survey which pulls together the evidence from the constituency articles about the electorate before 1832. The editors estimate that electorates rose dramatically in the 1820s: in the English counties by 39 per cent between 1820 and 1831 and in the English boroughs by 37 per cent after 1818, with particularly significant increases in large boroughs such as Leicester, Liverpool, Newcastle, Bristol, Norwich and Nottingham. For example there were 2211 freeman enrolments in Liverpool and 1776 in Newcastle in the period, in anticipation of contests, despite the fact that the effort that each party put into securing its position often meant, as at Newcastle after 1820, that it was wiser simply to share the representation without one. However in general there were more contests in this period, at least partly reflecting the increased public interest in politics that I flagged above. In the 92 English freemen boroughs, 41 per cent of elections were contested against 34 per cent in previous period. In Irish seats the rate of contests rose from 22 per cent in the previous period to 31 per cent in this one. There were 40 contests in English counties and 47 in Irish counties in the four elections 1820–31 as against 33 and 31 in the four previous elections.

Salmon uses the substantial increase in the electorate, and the increased taste for contests, to argue that in terms of the franchise the effects of the 1832 Act were not great, and merely continued the existing trend of change. Overall the electorate increased by an estimated 41 per cent in England in 1832, but in many places the expansion was no greater than had occurred over the previous decade, and it was at least partly due to the extension of borough boundaries. In fact, 42 of 146 English boroughs had a smaller electorate after 1832 than before; in 31 of 86 boroughs contested both and before and in 1832 there was a fall in the number voting under the new electoral dispensation. This was owing partly to the disfranchisement of non-resident freemen and partly to the expense and bureaucracy of the registration process. As the Liverpool constituency article points out, the extent of corruption in big towns in 1830 was widely used to discredit the case for a major urban franchise increase. Salmon agrees with those of us who have long suggested that the framers of the 1832 settlement were not mainly concerned with the franchise and that, insofar as they were, a major need was to make the political class more accountable. The number of electors per county MP had risen by a third between 1820 and 1831; the Reform Act merely reduced it to its earlier level.

The underlying themes of these volumes, then, are the suggestive changes that took place across the 1820s in the relationship between parliament and voters. But overwhelmingly they are a colossal and enduring

monument to scholarship, rather than to synthetic analysis. Once the decision had been taken not to alter the traditional format, the editors have worked within it as well as they could. They can only be admired for a stamina of which Castlereagh himself would have been proud, though one hopes that it does not lead to a similar end. It makes sense that the History of Parliament project should maintain a uniform approach throughout the period up to 1832, even though the amount of information available for these last years demonstrates the increasing strain of doing so. It would be impossible to do the same for any subsequent period, and in many respects unnecessary. It is fortunate that the Parliament team now turn to that period at the precise point when so many digital online resources are becoming available to supplement our knowledge of MPs and constituencies. These resources can, indeed have to, be harnessed in different ways. If done well, the result might be an even more useful searchable and interactive database of globally available material, but this will set major new challenges to the editorial team. For that reason, the volumes under review are, in more than one sense, the end of a long and arduous road.

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