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Parliament and Opinion 1688 - 1832*

The subject suggested by the National Committee for this conference — Parliamentarism and Society — strikes me as interesting, important, and — certainly on the British side — potentially rather difficult. The eighteenth century — by which, with the usual licence, I mean 1688 to 1832 — used to have the reputation of an historical desert, where prowled savage and ferocious beasts and travellers were wise not to loiter. Among the more formidable beasts was Lewis Namier, who united in his person Poland and England. It has now blossomed in the most remarkable way. Revisionists cluster so thick round most subjects that they elbow each other aside and new revisionism in soon old establishment.

There are, of course, strong parallels between eighteenth century Poland and eighteenth century England. The personal union Poland and Lithuania, dating from 1386, gave way in 1569 to the governmental union: the personal union of the English and Scottish crowns in 1603 gave way in 1707 to the formal union of the two countries as Great Britain. In each country, in the eighteenth century, there was a further link to another state — to Saxony in the case of Poland and to Hanover for England. But the most important aspect, which contemporaries noted, was that the two countries, along with the Dutch Republic, formed notable exceptions to that movement towards absolutism which was running so strongly towards the end of the seventeenth century. In Russia, the Zemsky Sobor, which had played an important part in the election of the early Romanovs, disappeared from the scene as soon as that family was firmly established upon the throne. In France, the *Etats-généraux* was in abeyance from 1614 until 1789 — the very of the Revolution — and though most of the provincial estates and parlements

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survived, they were, under Louis XIV, cowed and subdued. The Great Elector laid the foundations of Prussian absolutism by crushing the estates of Prussia by armed force. The Danish Rigsdag met for the last time for 175 years in 1660 and a formal declaration of absolutism followed in 1665. And so it went on. The King of Sweden declared himself absolute in the 1690s, though the position was reversed after the death of Charles XII in 1718. After the Thirty Years War, the Wittelsbachs disregarded the Bavarian estates; the Cortes of Spain went into decline; the diet of Holstein met for the last time in 1675 and the Sardinian estates for the last time in 1698. Against this powerful tide rowed the Poles and the English — the Sejm maintaining its position against elective monarchs, and the Parliament establishing itself after the Glorious Revolution as a regular and annual part of the English constitution.

In each country, it would not be unfair to describe the political structure as aristocratic oligarchy — the rule of the landed classes, szlachta and magnates, gentry and nobility. Historians of each country emphasise the importance of local issues, local loyalties and local power. It was remarked of Lewis Namier that one reason why he was able to perceive so clearly the structure of eighteenth-century England, which he described as a federation of country houses, was that it was the structure he was familiar with in his youth. His description of the great country houses as centres of civilisation amid as ignorant peasantry could apply to those of the Cavendishes, the Russells and the Cecils as easily as to the Radziwills, the Potockis and the Czartoryskis¹.

But we must not push the parallels too far. Indeed, in some ways, the contrasts are even more remarkable. In England, the eighteenth century was a period of enormous successes, the French held in check, a colonial empire acquired and the foundations laid for a massive industrial and commercial development. Poland, by contrast, fell increasingly into economic, political and military stagnation and suffered, in the three partitions, the ultimate humiliation for any nation.

Why, then, did aristocratic rule in one country produce success and in the other failure? Eighteenth-century Englishmen found little difficulty in offering what, to them, seemed a very convincing explanation. Poles had already noted that the English had a good opinion of themselves: Warszewicki, when discussing which kind of ambassador should be sent to each country, proposed that a handsome man should represent Poland in England — the English would then say what a pity it was that he was not one of them. The explanation offered was that Polish aristocrats had been selfish and shortsighted, while the English had been responsible,

¹ Other interesting parallels are pointed out by Sybilla Holdys in her paper *A General Comparison of Procedure in the English Parliament and Polish Sejm*, published in *The Polish Parliament at the Summit of its Development (16th and 17th Centuries)*, ed. W. Czapliński, Polish Hist. Library, No. 6.

wise and magnanimous. Horace Walpole, son of the prime minister, commenting on the first partition of Poland, blamed the nobility: they 'harassed Poland, till they saw it parcelled out as if a company of brokers had bought it at an auction — the brokers however would have paid the purchase money'². Fifty years later, Lord John Russell, a younger son of the Duke of Bedford, attributed the stability of England to the prudent conduct of the aristocracy and particularly the Whig section, which had always shown regard for the opinions of the people. 'History tells us', he assured the House of Commons, 'that if great changes accomplished by the people are dangerous, although sometimes salutary, great changes accomplished by an aristocracy, at the desire of the people, are at once salutary and safe'³. And Macaulay, the great historian of the Whigs, would have supported Russell, arguing that the decisive contribution of the aristocracy had been to step forward in 1688 to preside over the Glorious Revolution, and thus prevent a slide into anarchy and disorder.

Now, as an Englishman, with a certain amount of imbibed Whiggery, I find this rather persuasive, but even I can see that it does not provide a total explanation. But you will observe how closely it fits the theme of this conference. What truth is there in the proposition that the English aristocracy was peculiarly responsive to opinion? Was that expressed through Parliament and the representative system or in spite of it? For that matter, is the phrase 'representative system' an appropriate one? Whom did it represent? These are questions very close to the drift of much writing in Britain over the past twenty years.

The debate has centred on two terms, and the relationship between them — oligarchy and stability. You will notice that the terms are so splendidly vague that they afford almost infinite opportunity for historians to debate them without being in great danger of reaching firm conclusions. Although each term must be, essentially, comparative, they are frequently employed as if some absolute standard could be laid down and regimes measures against it.

In 1967 Sir John Plumb published the Ford lectures which he had delivered two years earlier at Oxford⁴. He looked at the transitional period 1675 - 1725 and discerned in it the growth of political stability — a repudiation of the plots, wars, conspiracies and crises of the seventeenth century. He linked the two concepts: oligarchy was the price paid for, or perhaps the mechanism of, stability, and he painted that stability in very strong terms: it was 'of adamant strength and profound inertia'. The techniques had been the skilful use of patronage to build up reliable

² Walpole to Mann, 20 September 1772, *Correspondence of Horace Walpole*, ed. W. S. Lewis, XXIII, 436-7.

³ 25 April 1822, 'Parliamentary History', 2nd series, VII, 85.

⁴ *The growth of political stability in England, 1675 - 1725*.

majorities in Parliament and the development of methods of control that produced an obedient and submissive electorate. The result was the construction, in his own words, of an 'almost impregnable citadel, impervious to defeat, indifferent to social change'.

Plumb's thesis became an organising concept, to be supported or assailed. Even in the excerpts I have quoted here, there are, perhaps, signs of some overstatement. No regime can be impervious to defeat, though some can avoid defeat, and the Hanoverian regime went to considerable trouble not to be defeated. Nor is it likely that any system can indefinitely ignore profound social changes. 'Profound inertia' scarcely does justice to the vitality and dynamism of Hanoverian England, whether imperial or economic. But Plumb's analysis was well received and, by establishing itself as received opinion, became in time the target for a host of revisionist critics.

First of the critics out of the starting-blocks was the Marxist historian, Edward Thompson, whose reputation had been made in 1963 with his massive *The Making of the English Working Class*. He objected that Plumb, in describing the growth of stability, had come close to endorsing the emergent regime, and in a detailed study of the Waltham Black Act of 1723 his *Whigs and Hunters* Thompson described a Whig oligarchy that was greedy and oppressive. More subtle than some other Marxists commentators, Thompson did, however, concede that though the law fundamentally represented a class ideology and was engaged in the protection of property rights, it developed an autonomy of its own and was rarely a weapon of naked class oppression. And though he differed from Plumb on the character of the Hanoverian regime, he did not deny its stability, nor, indeed, its oligarchical nature.

Plumb's thesis was, however, challenged in subsequent Ford lectures published by John Kenyon in 1977 and published under the title *Revolution principles: the politics of party, 1689 - 1720*. Kenyon wrote:

"There was precious little stability in a system in which savage and dangerous rioting was frequent, in which a prime minister could stand in danger of his life at the very door of the Commons, as Walpole did in 1733, or another prime minister could be forced by ill-informed public pressure from outside Parliament to withdraw a modest measure of reform like the Jewish Naturalisation Act of 1753".

But, if one may now criticize the critics, Kenyon's remarks seem rather extreme. The rioting of eighteenth-century England was a consequence of an almost nonexistent level of policing, which indicates the basic strength of the regime: in none of the riots, not even the Gordon riots which convulsed London for several days and did enormous damage, was either the government or the regime in the slightest danger. It may well be true that Walpole was threatened at the door of the Commons

in 1733: so was Lord North later. But one can be too impressionistic in these matters. No first minister has lost his life at the hands of a mob, nor was any member of Parliament ever seriously injured. As for the example of the Jew Bill, the argument really cuts the other way: most first ministers showed a sensitivity to public opinion, whether the opinion was wise or foolish. You will remember Walpole's famous remark on the Excise Bill — 'this dance will go no further'. It is an unreasonable test of stability to demand that in should ignore opinion and we should beware of drifting into the position which finds stability only with the Napoleons and Stalins of this world.

Work which reinforced the Plumb thesis came from myself in *Parliamentary Reform* and from Geoffrey Holmes. In an appendix to *Parliamentary Reform*, published in 1973, I printed a list of election contests gleaned from newspapers, poll books and correspondence. The amendments to the list since then have been rather fewer than I had anticipated and it looks as if the basic electoral pattern is reasonably clear. I pointed out that, as the result of various techniques of control, the number of contests diminished substantially during the early Hanoverian period. In 1710, 23 of the 40 English counties went to a poll and at least 104 of the 205 boroughs — i.e. well over half. The same proportion was repeated in 1715. But fifty year later, in 1761, only 4 counties were contested and no more than 42 boroughs — i.e. down to less than 20%. This is a remarkable change over a comparatively short period and suggests that the command of the landed classes was growing more secure.

Geoffrey Holmes in *The Electorate and the national will in the first age of party* (1973) offered the thesis of a volatile and sizeable electorate in Anne's reign, giving way to a smaller and more sedate one in the Hanoverian period. In a contribution to *The Whig Ascendancy*⁵ in 1981 he suggested that one factor promoting stability was the growth of the professions which, by offering careers to landless younger sons, helped to lessen social tensions and he developed the thesis into a book in *Augustan England: professions, state and society 1680 - 1730* in 1982.

Over the past few years, something of a counterattack has developed, with varying degrees of success. H. T. Dickinson, in a chapter of *Britain in the age of Walpole*⁶ suggested that the degree of oligarchical control may have been exaggerated.

I am sure he is right to remind us that control usually had to be tactful and could rarely be taken for granted. The number of boroughs

⁵ *The achievement of stability: the social context of politics from the 1680s to the age of Walpole*, in *The Whig Ascendancy: colloquies on Hanoverian England*, ed. J. A. Cannon, pp. 1-27.

⁶ *Popular politics in the age of Walpole*, in *Britain in the age of Walpole*, ed. J. Black, pp. 45-68.

like Malmesbury where the voters were said to have remarked that it was 'as master pleased' or Thirsk where the control of the Frankland family does not seem to have been disputed to a poll in more than 150 years was comparatively small. He is also right to reiterate that interest in political matters extended far outside the limited group of people entitled to vote. But some of the other comments seem less persuasive. He remarks that the regime was an oligarchy only if one concentrates on court, parliament and country houses. But if one is interested in the mechanics of political control, it would be strange in the eighteenth century not to concentrate on court and parliament, where power was exercised. There were no parties, no bureaucracy to act as rival centres of power, and though there is no doubt that some members of the electorate could wield influence, it tended to be spasmodic, uncoordinated and fitful. Dickinson also insists upon the vitality of politics in some of the larger constituencies, adding 'the majority of voters lived' there. In fact, the majority of the voters were forty shilling freeholders living in the counties — 61⁰/₁₀₀ according to *History of Parliament* for 1715-1754 and about 63⁰/₁₀₀ for 1754-1790. Consequently, and contrary to what is sometimes suggested, the diminution in the number of contests must have deprived the greater part of the electorate from casting a vote with any degree of frequency, in which case, it may be suggested that their franchise was little more than a theoretical right.

Let us examine the point in a little more detail. County contests were always important events and we can be fairly sure that our record in the mid-eighteenth century is almost complete. The 32 years from 1735 to 1767 included four general elections and covered a long generation. 27 of the forty counties were not contested at any general election in this period, and another 10 were only contested once. Only three counties, Hertfordshire, Rutland and Westmorland were contested at two out of the four general elections. If we pretend that the electorate was static over this period (which of course it was not) then some 110,000 freeholders never had a chance to cast a vote at a general election, while some 50,000 might have done. We should note that the counties most contested tended to be the smaller ones, since in large counties, the expense of a contest was a very serious deterrent. Moreover, before we too readily salute the light of liberty still burning in our three twice-contested counties, we should note that in Rutland the contests were caused by three magnates struggling for control, and in Westmorland by an unsuccessful attempt to resist the Lowthers from establishing a monopoly of both seats. In 1792, contests had ceased and the county was said to be 'as much under the command of an individual as the most rotten borough in the kingdom'¹. We should also note that at some

¹ T. H. B. Oldfield, *History of the Boroughs*, quoted in *History of Parliament, The House of Commons, 1754-90*, ed. L. B. Namier & J. Brooke, I, 403

of the general elections, the number of votes cast was derisory — note more than 400 freeholders in Lancashire in 1747 and probably less than 400 in Rutland in 1754.

The pattern is not much modified if we extend the enquiry to include by-elections for the same counties. There were ten by-election contests for all forty counties during the same period, including one at Westmorland in 1759 when the losing candidates polled only 13 and 9 votes respectively. Since there were 114 by-elections in the period under review, the incidence of contests was much the same as at general elections — i.e. rather fewer than one in ten. This does not give much support to the thesis of a free and vigorous electorate. When we add that, of the 205 boroughs, 86 were uncontested during this period and another 56 were contested at only one of the four general elections, we can see that the suggestion that the electoral system was approaching moribundity is not a complete myth.

In this context, it seems rather doubtful whether the protracted and rather inconclusive discussions over deference are of more than marginal interest. It is not clear that this is a word that will bear the weight of interpretation placed upon it or that it is capable of registering the subtleties and complexities of human relationships. Professor Dickinson rightly draws a distinction between deference and servility and discusses what the ideal of deference was, but, with respect, it may be doubted whether many Hanoverian voters knew what the classical theory of deference was, nor even that there was one⁸. We must also remember that, in the vast majority of cases, the only evidence we command is the bald statement of a vote, which may have been cast with vast enthusiasm or grudging resentment. In any case, since there was no contest of any kind in Shropshire between 1722 and 1831, it scarcely matters for our purposes whether the freeholders were deferential or rebellious, because they were not called upon, as voters, to do very much⁹.

A number of other studies have confirmed Dickinson's point that there was a widespread interest in politics outside the gentry and the electorate. This is, in fact, an inference which one would draw from the astonishing growth in the number and circulation of newspapers, national and local, in the course of the century, and from the fact that, increasingly, they devoted space to political questions and to readers' letters and opinions.

⁸ Pp. 48-9, referring to J. G. A. Pocock, *The Classical theory of deference*, „American Historical Review”, LXXXI (1976) 516-23.

⁹ An interesting attempt to argue that wider participation did not necessarily mean greater independence is made by Norma Landau, *Independence, deference and voter participation: the behaviour of the electorate in early-eighteenth century Kent*, „Historical Journal”, 1979, pp. 561-83. She suggests 'a model of participatory deference'. But it is not easy to get such an argument into focus, nor would it be wise to generalise from voting behaviour in so small an area for so short a time.

John Brewer in an important book in 1976 *Party ideology and party politics at the accession of George III* challenged the Namier view directly, and argued for a wide concern with politics in the 1760s and 1770s, which Wilkes and Junius had been able to exploit. It undoubtedly supported a lively radical movement aiming at reform and, to that extent, it represented a force for the future, but it is less clear that it had much impact on immediate events. John Phillips in a detailed study *Electoral behaviour in unreformed England* drew attention to an increase in electoral activity towards the end of the eighteenth century and argued that the towns succeeded in modifying aristocratic and landed policies.

It is certainly true that, even in the period of closest control, the electoral system was never entirely sealed. The continued existence of number of contests gave an appearance of vitality, even if that was something of an illusion. Contests in London and Westminster, in particular, attracted much attention, and every generation saw some spectacular county clashes. The Staffordshire election of 1747 was 'bitter and violent', and that for Oxfordshire in 1754 has been described as 'the most notorious county election of the century'¹⁰. But perhaps more significant than the contests themselves is the fact that Oxfordshire had not been contested previously since the reign of William III and was not again contested until 1820, while Staffordshire, last contested in 1708, did not go to the poll again in the rest of the unreformed Parliament. In addition, there was a good deal of nonparliamentary activity which provided opportunities for interest and participation: the municipal politics of many boroughs was lively and there were a number of offices in local government that were regularly up for election.

We have scarcely time to do justice to other important studies in recent years that have attempted to modify Plumb's thesis of a solid stable oligarchy. Linda Colley in *In defiance of oligarchy*, published in 1982, pointed out that we must not pre-date the triumph of the Whigs and showed that a well-organised and formidable Tory party survived in opposition well into the reign of George II. J. C. D. Clark in two recent publications, *English society 1688 - 1832* and *Revolution and Rebellion* has argued the continuing importance of the monarchy, and though, in my view, he inclines to overstate his case and downgrade the Glorious Revolution unduly, there is no doubt that Hanoverian rulers retained much greater powers than their counterparts in Poland or Sweden.

Perhaps the most concerted effort to challenge the concept of stability has come from the revival of interest in the Jacobite movement. Again,

¹⁰ The House of Commons, 1715 - 54, ed. R. R. Sedgwick, I, 319; The House of Commons, 1754 - 90, I, 356.

there is a Polish connection, since the Old Pretender married the granddaughter of Jan Sobieski, and Bonnie Prince Charlie was half-Polish. The reassertion of Jacobitism usually takes the form of postulating a far greater loyalty to the exiled Stuarts than has hitherto been supposed, much of it hidden under the guise of Toryism; and sees in the rebellions of 1715 and 1745 very serious threats to the Hanoverian position. Neither assumption has however gone unquestioned. Professor Speck has challenged the reliability of the largely French and Jacobite lists of possible supporters that has been used to identify large numbers of Tories as crypto-Jacobites¹¹. He has also questioned the assumption that a sizeable proportion of the English remained Jacobite at heart. Fortunately, there is a test which cuts through the complexities of lists and comes as close to a laboratory demonstration as the poor historian is ever likely to get. Jacobite sympathisers in England would never have a better chance than on 4 December 1745 to show their true feelings since Bonnie Prince Charlie, at the head of a victorious army, was encamped in the very heart of England at Derby. They did not stir. Lord George Murray, the most experienced of Charles' commanders, remarked mordantly that 'if there was any party in England for him, it was very odd that they had never so much as sent him money or intelligence or the least advice what to do'. Charles rightly sent to his principal supporter in England, Lord Barrymore, the appeal that it was 'now or never'. It was never¹².

Dr. Black has argued that Jacobitism was a destabilising factor¹³. In one sense of course this can hardly be denied, since it was the object of the Jacobites for more than sixty years to drive their rivals from the throne by plot, rebellion or invasion. But, in another sense, it may be suggested that Jacobitism was a force making for national unity. The repudiation of James II, though primarily the work of the aristocracy, was overwhelmingly endorsed by the nation as a whole, whose dislike of Catholicism and mistrust of French-inspired absolutism ran very deep. We do not need the example of George Orwell's *1984* to remind us that the existence of a terrifying external enemy may be a source of considerable strength to a regime. The Stuarts in exile could hardly have been better, since they were both menacing and inept. We see in the behaviour of Sir Robert Walpole the skill with which the Jacobite card could be played to smear his opponents, divide the opposition, and construct a powerful political dynasty.

If, as I see it, these attempts to shake the original Plumb thesis and to overthrow the concept of a landed oligarchy have succeeded in modi-

¹¹ *The Whig Ascendancy*, pp. 57 - 59.

¹² W. A. Speck, *The Butcher: the Duke of Cumberland and the Suppression of the 45*. (1981), 91.

¹³ *Britain in the age of Walpole*, 4 - 6.

ying it, in trimming it of some excesses, but not essentially in overthrowing it, my opening question must remain — why did regimes in Poland and England, so similar in many respects, produce, in the end such different results?

One must resist the temptation to try to provide one all-embracing and total answer to so complex a problem, and, at this stage, any suggestions must be tentative. But I would like to draw attention to two points which I have already raised, as well as one that I have not.

The first is that, during the period of narrowest oligarchy, many of the boroughs remained open and contested. One must not, of course, be sentimental about them. The sixty or so which, according to my estimates, remained open included some very obscure little places, and I am not suggesting that Callington, Weobley, Bedwyn and Wootton Bassett saved Britain from disaster. But there were also in the list some very flourishing towns — London itself, Exeter, Norwich, Hull, Liverpool — certainly enough to form an effective lobby on behalf of trade and commerce. The situation in Poland was very different. In many of the towns, the mercantile population was German or Jewish, and hardly regarded as part of the body politic. It is significant that Polish towns were not represented in the Sejm. In the reform movement before the second partition, 141 towns petitioned for representation in December 1789 and were granted it in the constitution of 3 May 1791. Eighteenth-century Polish towns were in sharp economic decline: Potocki in 1744 observed that 'the ruin of the cities is universal' and in 1765 it was remarked that 'every street was an open field'. I am not, I hope, pursuing a simple economic reductionist argument, since the *szlachta* used its political power to by-pass the towns and pursue its own interests. But the absence of urban representation in the Sejm must have made it easier to pursue such a policy.

The second point is that within that rather blanket term 'oligarchy' are important differences of detail. Although the Glorious Revolution, in my view, effected a permanent shift in the balance of power within the English constitution, it did not by any means leave monarchs helpless. 'Carrying on the King's government' remained a realistic phrase. Two areas in which, by tradition and inclination, monarchs retained very great influence were foreign policy, where they were often dealing with their cousins and uncles, and the armed forces, where the old medieval idea of the king as battle-leader had left a special responsibility. English aristocrats were as aware as their continental brethren of the way in which standing armies had been used to suppress representative institutions and had a rooted mistrust of them. At the very least, they were reluctant to prepare for war and anxious, as soon as it was over, to disband at once. But their disapprobation of the army was mitigated by their own control of it — never after 1660 was it allowed to become an

independent political force — and, in part, by the protection afforded it by successive rulers.

The third point will be wearisomely familiar to the conference since Polish historians have for generations emphasised the importance of geographical considerations in their country's history. Here, perhaps, we have an extreme contrast — one country with very little in the way of natural boundaries, the other with the protection that a narrow strip of water afforded and that was of strategic significance from 1588 to 1940. Of course, we must be careful how we interpret this. Poland had the same geography in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when it was a powerful and expanding nation. The illusion of being surrounded by enemies, which Poles felt acutely in the 1770s, is one from which many other states have suffered — Brandenburg-Prussia, Austria, France. It is not so much that her geographical position made Poland peculiarly vulnerable as peculiarly volatile, and it may be that she paid a heavy price for political errors that, in other countries, would have been less heavily punished. One would not be at all sure how Britain would have fared had it been possible for the armies of Louis XIV, of Frederick the Great, of Catherine the Great, or of Napoleon to have marched, overland, to London.

I should like to conclude by restating my question as the basis for our discussion, and perhaps I can do so by referring once more to the most interesting article by Sybilla Holdys in the volume *The Polish Parliament at the summit of its development*. She wrote:¹⁴

"The two representative bodies differed in the quality of their members. The English MPs seem to have had a deep feeling of responsibility for their country, such as was not often felt in the Polish Sejm, where the gentry's status was dominant".

You will forgive me for saying that, in this kindly passage, Sybilla Holdys sounds a little like Lord John Russell again, or, perhaps, Lady John Russell. The explanation cannot be in terms of the social composition of the two parliaments for, as we have seen, the English parliament was as much dominated by the aristocracy and gentry as was the Sejm. But, certainly, the question of responsibility is at the heart of the matter, and one can pose in forthright terms the problem we ought to try to answer — *who spoke for Poland in 1750?*

¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 210.

