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Parliament, the Press and Foreign Policy

JEREMY BLACK

Historians are often uncomfortable about the extent to which their work is affected by political developments in the world around them. In some ways, such a process appears to challenge everything that scholars seek in terms of insularity from subjective considerations. Yet, the pressures that stem from confrontation with the real world can also be instructive. This has been particularly so since 2002, as contention within the West, particularly, but not only, in the U.S.A. and U.K., highlighted the difficulty of thinking in terms of national interest as if that was a readily apparent goal and course of action. Instead, deep divisions on the head of policy reflected not only prudential considerations about the advisability of particular courses of policy, but also more basic differences about goals and methods. This fundamentally challenged the dominant discourse and theory of the state, or, rather, assumption about public polities: the organic assumption which entailed the view that particular courses corresponded to natural interests, and that others were, in effect, unnatural.¹

This may seem far distant from the world of coffee houses and parliament in the eighteenth century, but the link is a clear one. In essence, the 'organic' view corresponds to the dominant theme in the historiography on international relations. In particular, there is a tendency not to take the public debate over policy too seriously. In the past, most specialists on foreign policy have been diplomatic historians and, on the whole, they have been less than sympathetic to the public debate, in large part because they have taken the official view and perspective on government. Furthermore, there has been a tendency to treat states as the bland, immutable building blocks of the international order. As a result, national interest has not been seen as an issue, an approach that offers a radically different attitude to debate. From this perspective, debate becomes essentially a matter of means rather than ends, as contention over the latter is factious. This is erroneous, as different views on national identity had validity. Once this is established, then it becomes pertinent to consider the public debate over policy not as a curiosity, with factious politicians decrying noble servants of the state, but rather as an intelligent process of contention surrounding the framing of policy goals.²

¹ On the importance of such centrifugal forces for state formation and national identity see *inter alia* J. Black and K. Schweizer 'Jacobitism and British Foreign Policy', in *Multiculturalism and the History of International Relations from the 18th century to the Present*, ed. P. Savard and B. Vigezzi (Ottawa, 1999), pp. 5–11; L. Frey and M. Frey, *Societies in Upheaval* (New York, 1987), ch. 3; M. G. Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain. Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685–1789* (New York, 1997).

² For an illustrative elaboration of this point see J. Black, 'The Tory View of 18th Century Foreign Policy', *Historical Journal*, XXXI (1988), 469–77; K. W. Schweizer, *Statesmen, Diplomats and the Press. Essays on 18th Century Britain* (Lewiston, 2002), pp. 38–42, 56–61.

This re-examination also involves a critique of the standard way in which scholars employ ideas of discourse. A fascination with discourse as subject and approach can lead to an abandonment of source-based and accretional methods, and, instead, to a mishandling of texts, such as pamphlets and speeches.³ There is a tendency to place too much weight on particular texts; for example, specific passages from the speeches of William Pitt the Elder, as if they explained a widespread attitude, without considering them in a broader context, in this case the speech as a whole, the subject and course of the debate in the house of commons that day, the wider state of the debate on foreign policy at that moment, and the precise political context. This is related to a lack of clarity over how far ideas had an independent existence, and how far debate related largely to the political context of the moment. In practice, the latter helped account for partisan bite and political sponsorship, leading to the reformulation of existing ideas for particular contingencies.

Furthermore, there is a tendency to overstate the extent to which there was only one climate of opinion, and a reluctance to probe the consequences of divisions in opinion, not least about operative assumptions.⁴ This is understandable from the perspective of discourse studies, as the assertion of the existence of a dominant opinion can then serve to activate the opinion as a causative force. In addition, there can be a failure to explain adequately the links between a climate of opinion, itself an inadequately defined concept, and policy. Lastly, the stress on discourse generally stems from and ensures a focus on just one participant in the international system, and thus neglects its multilateral character and rationale.

Difficulties such as these are no reason to not attempt a subject, but, rather, serve to underline the methodological problems of the subject, and these need to be borne in mind when reading about it. Most comments need to be prefaced by a qualification. Yet, the importance of the definition and pursuit of national interests ensures that to neglect the topic in favour of a 'safe', more readily bounded issue, would be irresponsible.

Accepting the methodological contexts, the key issues are the relationships between public debate, politics and policy and the quality of this debate in both parliament and the press.⁵ These are at once separate and related, because the more important the debate, the more relevant its quality. The focus of this essay will be on the issue of quality as it is generally neglected, but it is first necessary to address that of importance because this is usually presented in a rather crude 'zero-sum' equation, with the key issue being that of the degree to which debate constituted politics and drove policy. This approach is far too simplistic. Indeed, it offers an instrumentalist account of politics that completely fails to allow for the nuances of a political system in which not only were authority and power shared, but, in addition, the practices and ideas of

³ Cf. Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics. The Press and Radical Opposition in Early 19th Century England* (1996), introduction; James Epstein, *Radical Expression. Political Language, Ritual and Symbol in England, 1750–1850* (New York, 1994), ch. 2.

⁴ As, for instance, is stressed in revisionist critique of Habermas' concept of 'public sphere', see *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis, 1993), introduction; Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, p. 6.

⁵ Key aspects of this have been touched upon earlier in *Politics and the Press in Hanoverian Britain*, ed. K. W. Schweizer and J. Black (Lewiston, 1989). See also J. Black, *A System of Ambition. British Foreign Policy 1660–1793* (1993), ch. 3.

parliamentary and public politics were very different to those of today. The very sense of adversarialism as positive element of a democratic culture was absent. Thus, the idea of forcing through a policy was one with which politicians and commentators were unhappy.⁶ It would, moreover, be misleading to ignore other ways in which national interest and foreign policy were debated. Important in their own right, they also affected, and interacted with, the culture of print.

The most important was individual communication between politicians. The source that best survives for this is correspondence, but this needs to be considered alongside the source for which records are scant, conversation. The extent to which Britain remained a face-to-face society is generally neglected. So also is the degree to which this affected politics. In such a forum, the personal weight of the individual was important in the discussion, but this is an element that is difficult to recover.

Correspondence survives in large quantities, and provides one of the major sources for the debate on foreign policy. Letters, however, need to be employed with care. The general use of correspondence was to persuade rather than to explicate, and the purpose of persuasion required specific exigencies that need to be judged in particular contexts.

Furthermore, the survival of correspondence is patchy. Some individuals took care to preserve letters, but most did not. In some cases, moreover, it is clear from the limited number of their letters that survive in the collections of others' correspondence that they wrote relatively little. This was true, for example, of William Stanhope, 1st Lord Harrington, who served as secretary of state for the northern department in 1730–42 and 1744–8, but who left singularly few letters.

There was also the problem of secret correspondence, with the relationships of commission and omission that it established. The deliberate exclusion of others from such correspondence was a particular aspect of debate, because the process of drawing boundaries and deciding whom to include helped establish the parameters of discussion. An analogous situation was provided by manuscript newsletters, which contained more information than (printed) newspapers, but from which most readers were excluded by the factor of cost.

In the first half of the century, these newsletters provided more information on parliamentary debates than the newspapers. These debates were an important aspect of the public debate, especially because they represented the way in which it most readily impinged on the policy making process. This owed much to the government's desire to avoid difficulties in parliament.

The parliamentary debate over foreign policy had a close relationship with the culture of print. In the second half of the century, parliament provided much of the material for newspapers. Earlier, the meeting of the session led to an annual highpoint in the publication of political pamphlets, as efforts were made to delineate the political landscape and to define the key topics for discussion.

The analysis of the printed debate faces several problems. The most serious are omission and commission. Under the first head, a large number of newspaper issues

⁶ This emerges particularly clearly in the duke of Devonshire's diary notations on political developments following the accession of George III in 1760. See *William Cavendish, 4th Duke of Devonshire. Memoranda on State of Affairs 1759–1762*, ed. P. D. Brown and K. W. Schweizer (Camden 4th ser., XXVII, 1982).

and pamphlets that are known to have existed do not survive. Were the non-survivors to be a representative cross sample, the issue would not be overly serious, but this is not the case. Instead, due in large parts to governmental action, the non-survivors are particularly marked among opposition works, especially those of a seditious character. Secondly, there is the problem of commission. The very number of works that survive pose difficulties for any individual reader, one that is exacerbated by the lack of any regular system of headlining in newspapers or of indices in pamphlets. In addition, the practice of anonymous or pseudonymous authorship makes it difficult in many cases to trace authorship.

Irrespective of survival and identification, there is the issue of significance. Certain newspapers, pamphlets and writers have attracted attention, but, conversely, others have been neglected, with serious consequences for the manner in which the public debate is considered. Partly this reflects the pressure of space, and the desire to present a clear account, but there is also the issue of celebrity status. For example, criticism of government policy in the late 1720s and early 1730s is associated with the *Craftsman* newspaper and the writings of Henry, Viscount Bolingbroke, both of which have attracted great attention. The same is true of the 'Patriot' critique in 1738–9 of an alleged failure to defend national interests against Spain, a critique that encompassed the pen of Samuel Johnson and the parliamentary speeches of William Pitt the Elder.

What came between is neglected. It appears inconsequential, and is certainly difficult to unravel. This failure to engage with the debate is unfortunate, as it ensures that the question of how far the debate influenced government policy is neglected. Thus, the 'feedback' mechanism, the existence of which is asserted for the Jenkins' Ear agitation of 1738–9, appears as if from nowhere.

The mechanisms of debate were far from constant. By the later eighteenth century, the role of pamphlets had declined, while that of newspapers became more important. This ensured that the lengthy disquisitions that had advanced interpretations became relatively less critical. Instead, such length was principally offered by the newspaper reports of parliamentary speeches. Greater freedom in reporting parliament increased its centrality in the public debate, while it bridged this debate with the world of discussions between politicians.

It is also necessary to discount any easy dichotomy of ministerial and opposition views, because there were differences among both. For example, as far as the opposition to the ministries of George I and George II was concerned, there was a serious tension between Tories and opposition Whigs with, in particular, the former far more hostile to continental interventionism than the latter. With regard to divisions within the ministry and among its supporters, it is necessary to allow for serious differences over both interventionism and the Hanover connexion. This helps underline the validity of public opposition to both, and also provides a context within which this opposition had political weight: not forcing a united ministry, but, as in 1739 over Spanish depredations or in 1791 over war with Russia, becoming an important element in tensions within the government. This was clearly seen when Pitt the Elder, still paymaster general, attacked the duke of Newcastle in the Commons in November 1754. Furthermore, parliamentary debate could itself serve to direct the priorities of the press. Thus, in 1739 Richard Blascow of the *Evening Advertiser* wrote to a correspondent: 'Your dissertation upon Informers is friendly, masculine, and clever.'

It will be in Tuesday's paper, as I happen to be furnished with a good Letter for tomorrow, which I choose to insert whilst the debates of Monday last are warm and recent.⁷

In part therefore, the quality to the debate became a matter of its political positioning and consequences; in short, it should not be seen as an abstract criterion. At the same time, aside from the actualizing of foreign policy, international news, and reflections thereupon as political weapons, there were also practical issues in the definition and discussion of interests and policy in semi-public and public contexts. These included the questions of how best to discern national interests, indeed of the validity and shaping of the concept, and then of the extent to which it was proper and prudent to explain, debate, and invite discussion on them. This involved the dichotomy of prerogative and public, and the need to consider strategies to link the two. The incorporation of ideas and information into the debate over policy, as it responded to, and also moulded, events and their perception, helped provide a dynamic dimension to the whole. There was a practical problem in that the international developments to which it was necessary to respond were not all within the parameters of the familiar. In particular, the rise of Austria, Russia and Prussia both changed the international system and was a consequence of changes in it.⁸ This created problems such as how to respond to Peter the Great or to the partitions of Poland, but these issues first entailed the difficulty of understanding what was going on and how to shape it.

To understand that public debate of the period, it is necessary today to have knowledge of what was happening, alongside how it was perceived and to what end, and how well used for partisan ends.

If both parliament and the press were in part 'driven' by events (accepting the caveat that their perception of these events was very important), there was still a major difference: the press was a continual feature of both information society and political world: indeed in London a diurnal feature, whereas parliament was episodic under both heads, a point that all scholars are aware of, but that talk of a parliamentary foreign policy is apt to neglect. Furthermore, there was a further limitation in the case of parliament, namely that what could be discussed was more regulated than in the case of the press, with the possibility of immediate intervention, or summons by Speaker and House and also with regard to the conventions of how far particular topics of debate could be taken.

The episodic and constrained nature of parliamentary debates added to the problems of judging the quality of debate, as issues could rarely be addressed at the ideal moment.⁹ In some cases, there was a delay that was inconvenient for opposition speakers seeking to cause, or exploit, ministerial embarrassment, while, on others, speakers had to respond overly rapidly if the matter was to be handled before the session broke up.

The latter contributed to the volatility of political news, which created a particular problem for parliamentarians. Although precise information on this point is lacking,

⁷ 15 Nov 1789. Cobbett, *Parl. Hist.* XI, 29–30.

⁸ See Hamish Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution* (Oxford, 1990).

⁹ P. D. G. Thomas, 'The Beginnings of Parliamentary Reporting in Newspapers, 1768–1774', *English Historical Review*, LXXIV (1959), 623–56.

this probably encouraged opposition speakers to rely on general issues of integrity and reliability in the defense of national issues, a reliance that was further fostered by the extent to which the government both kept diplomatic news to itself and could choose to release it when most expedient and in a manner that was particularly useful. Uncertainty, however, was also particularly acute for ministers who needed to know what to tell parliament at the beginning of each session, as the debates on the address would provide opportunities for opposition attacks on foreign policy.

This uncertainty, of both ministry and opposition, the two joined in a linked dance of ignorance and speculation, throws light on the printed debates over policy as that can suggest a false clarity over policy, in which diplomatic and military strategists were apparently predetermined by partisan political traditions, the weight of history interacting to this end with defined partisan viewpoints. This, in fact, underrates the problems created for both parliamentarians and newspapers by the unpredictability of events. For example, between 1710 and 1730 Britain was allied to, and at war, or close to war, with Austria, France, Prussia and Spain. Even from 1731, when Anglo-French rivalry, if not hostility, became more of a constant, there were still major variations in relations with Austria, Prussia, Russia and Spain. These shifts furthermore could be both abrupt and unanticipated, most obviously in 1756.

The sense of uncertainty created problems for ministers, with the public character of politics ensuring that British ministers were more exposed to scrutiny than continental counterparts. Aside from the difficulty of knowing how best to respond, there was also the question of how to understand and conceptualize this very volatile international world. The optimistic interventionist schemes of the 1710s, the congresses of the 1720s, and the politics of prudence of the 1730s were, at one level, each strategies for an intellectual response. Whichever strategy was followed, however, the unpredictabilities that stemmed from the role of monarchs were a problem – would for example, Louis XV's reaching his majority 'dispose the present system of Europe to change',¹⁰ or would his marriage have this affect, or, indeed, would he live any longer than his cousin, Philip V's son Louis I, who was only briefly king of Spain in 1724? In 1722, there was speculation that the death of Augustus II of Saxony-Poland 'would soon have the world in an uproar',¹¹ as it was indeed to do, but not until 1733, while Townshend felt it necessary to ask the Sardinian envoy about a league of France, Spain and Russia intended to force Charles VI to provide a territory for 'James III and VIII'.¹²

The belief that governments in states with representative assemblies could readily be subverted or overthrown by domestic action or foreign bribery was an equivalent to uncertainty about dynastic outcomes. Thus, in 1726, the Austrian envoy in London reported that the British were using bribes to win Dutch and French support.¹³ Some foreign envoys sought to co-operate with the parliamentary opposition in Britain, while the implications of any jacobite action were also considered. The instructions

¹⁰ The National Archives (Public Record Office), SP79/14: Henry Davenant to Townshend, 25 March 1721.

¹¹ B.L., Add. MS 37388, ff. 216, 300: Tilson to Whitworth, 27 Mar.; 13 Apr. 1722.

¹² Turin, Archivio di Stato, L.M. Ing. 31: Cortanza to Victor Amadeus II, 20 Apr. 1722.

¹³ Cambridge University Library, Cholmondeley Houghton Papers, 1514: Palm to Count Königsegg, 7 Mar. 1726.

to the new French envoy in 1726 noted that opponents of the Anglo-French alliance made no secret of their hope that the death of George I would bring change.¹⁴ Whatever the type of government, the extent to which policy was a response to specific conjunctures (a course urged by the French diplomat Chavigny in 1720 when he criticized closeness to Britain)¹⁵ created problems for those seeking predictable order, as did what was perceived as a willingness to wait, if not procrastinate, in order to see if more favourable circumstances arose.¹⁶

Subsequent scholars, with their preference for schematic accounts and long-term trends, have done a major disservice to our appreciation of the disjuncture and sense of uncertainty of the period, and this very much affected debate. It was scarcely surprising that, on 9 August 1755, Pitt told Hardwicke that he would require prior consultation about the policies he was to defend in the Commons. The problem, however, was that it was unclear what it would take to defend Hanover and how it would be possible to reconcile this with other goals within the parameters of what was politically acceptable, and this was a problem, until 1758, for both Pitt and the press, although far more so when in, or supporting, government than from the comfortable shelter of opposition. The ready response of parliamentarians to constitutional points affected their significance in the discussion of foreign policy, the extent to which they were graspable, and the flexibility they offered as points for debate. They could also serve, apparently, to show whether ministers could be relied upon to protect the constitution, which was another aspect of the protection of national interests. Thus, when, on 10 December 1755, the subsidy treaties with Hesse-Cassel and Russia were debated, Henry Fox, the secretary of state for the southern department, recorded:

Lord Barrington proposed to refer the treaties to a committee. Mr. Porter opposed referring item, on account of their being illegally concluded, as being made for the defense of Hanover without consent of Parliament, in violation and defiance of the Act of Settlement, and charged, besides, the payment of the Hessian levy money in the summer as a criminal misapplication of the public money. And without entering into the expediency or tendency of the treaties, thought for these reasons, the House should not give them so much countenance as to refer them. We tried, but in vain, to stop this debate and go onto the committee. The debate went on, in which Hume Campbell signalized himself in an exceeding good speech. But very unguardedly said, that a member should not inveigh against, but accuse a minister, and it could not make good his charge should suffer and hoped that these eternal invectives would not only be restrained but also punished.

Murray spoke admirably keeping closely to the point and unanswerably, Pitt fell on both ... As to Hume Campbell's doctrine he treated it as tending to destroy all liberty of speech, privilege of the House, and fundamental security of

¹⁴ Paris, Archives des Affaires Étrangères, Ang. 354, f 170: instructions for Broglie, 9 Mar. 1726.

¹⁵ 'Correspondance de Lafitou, Évêque de Sisteron, et du Chavigny, Ambassadeur à Gênes 1719–1720', ed. J. G. Gossel, *Documents d'Histoire*, 1 (1910), 354: Chavigny to Lafitou, 2 Jan. 1720.

¹⁶ T.N.A. (P.R.O.) SP80/46: St Saphorin to Townshend, 25 Apr. 1722.

this constitution. He quoted what Sir John Eliot had said against the Duke of Buckingham in James I's time.¹⁷

If constitutional points proved a ready recourse, because in part they were important, there was nevertheless a need to defend, and thus also criticize, specifics. Indeed, in 1739, Newcastle drew attention to major changes in opposition arguments over the previous five years, which, with reason, he attributed to the opposition's determination always to oppose governmental policy. The press was of value in providing information for parliamentarians. They based their views on reading, discussion and assumptions: although information on these points is scanty. However, they combined to ensure that parliament, like the press and, indeed, the world of diplomacy were parts of an information society. Instead of separating out these aspects, there was a flow of information and opinion as part of a rising demand for, and provision of news, about the outer world. The provision of information was an aspect of a growing concern with the need for self-consciously instructed decision-making. This can be related to the drive for what was termed 'political arithmetic', a drive that in part reflected the greater prestige attached to scientific methods and theories. In the specific case of international relations, the obvious manifestation was the 'mathematisation' of power as an integral aspect of balance-of-power thought. The balance brought an apparent precision to the relations between states, or at least encouraged a sense of normative behaviour. It can therefore be associated with the concepts of perfectibility that were so important to the political discourses of the period. Related to this was an emphasis on inherent (natural) state interests, and thus a limited acceptability for differences of opinion over policy. Thus, information and opinion combined to serve a debate over policy in which the participants drew on neo-Platonic ideas of essential character that were also expressed in terms of the apparent precision of the laws of the natural world. The use of this language, however, should not hide from us the very different views that contemporaries held over interests. While using deductive theoretical language to justify views, they in practice used intuitive assumptions to define and advance interests. This use of intuition was understated in terms of the acceptable discourse of the period, but there is no reason for modern scholars to neglect its importance. Indeed intuitive suspicion of the Bourbons emerged throughout the century as a major element of parliamentary and press discussion. This chapter suggests therefore that there is need for a major methodological debate on how best to approach the subject. Certainly, the simplistic assessment that eighteenth-century commentators can be readily understood as if they were contemporaries, has to be challenged by a searching consideration of the assumptions illuminating debate.

¹⁷ Duke of Devonshire, Chatsworth House, Derbys., Chatsworth MSS: Henry Fox to Duke of Devonshire, 11 Dec. 1755.