Institutions, Events and the National Palaver: on writing a history of parliament

Paul Seaward

How do you write the history of parliament? or indeed, of any institution? The question arises because, of course, I'm planning to write one, partly because no serious history of parliament exists (there are some books which cover very well periods of parliament's existence, but nothing that claims to deal with the institution over the longue duree); and partly because I think there's plenty that can be said that rarely gets aired. But first one has to work out how a history of parliament should be written. Why, you might say, should this be a problem? People write histories of institutions all the time: the Bank of England, universities, colleges, businesses, football clubs, regiments. There are big and historically reputable accounts of institutions. I can think of major and successful books about, for example, the Holy Roman Empire, the East India Company, the Royal Navy or the Papacy.

But institutional histories are scarcely in the vanguard of historical thinking, and there are very few histories of institutions beyond a monograph study of an institution in relation to a specific period, problem or issue that have struck me as truly memorable (I would be glad of your recommendations if you can think of any that are). Many of them are commissioned, the pious products of ancestor worship or corporate obligation; obliged to provide a blow-by-blow account of the high- and low-lights of the body they deal with, they focus on decisions made by a definable leadership and provide a simple whiggish trajectory towards the glorious present, or perhaps a nostalgic glance back at a once-impressive past. They tend to be lengthy and sleep-inducing or lively and lightweight. Few of them are of much historical interest except as a quarry for those working on much broader projects of financial, commercial, educational, sport, or military history. But even when not commissioned, there are I think very few institutional histories, apart from monographs with a very specific subject and chronological range, that do much more than provide a fairly straightforward narrative account of corporate decision-making.

There is an obvious reason for this. Institutions are, almost by definition, corporate bodies whose very purpose is bureaucratic process; 'institutional' is a word for uninspired, unimaginative, process-driven thought and systems that lack personality or creativity. Institutions don't allow, on the whole, for histories that provide lively narrative or colourful incident, or if they do, they do so by focusing on precisely those elements of the institution that are least institutional (usually a heroic, radical, pernicious or eccentric exercise of individual choice often in the face of institutional imperatives).

It is odd, then, that the way we commonly talk about most institutions implies precisely the opposite: that institutions are like persons, that they have individual agency, they may even have a personality. We say the Bank of England 'raised interest rates', as if this body did it without human involvement; or the government 'decided' to change the law; that Tesco's or Sainsbury's changed its policies. This is not surprising and is largely unavoidable unless we want to be involved in constant and irritating circumlocutions; but it has a peculiar effect on the way we think about these entities.

In an article I wrote last year, I argued that the problem with writing a history of Parliament – the history of any institution, but *especially* a history of Parliament – was precisely this temptation to treat it not just as a subject, but also as an agent, even a sentient agent.[1] The most recent attempt at

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[1] Paul Seaward, 'Why the History of Parliament has not been written', in *Historians and Parliament* ed. David Hayton and Linda Clark (*Parliamentary History* 40, 1, 2021), 1-24.

a history of Parliament, by the Labour MP Chris Bryant, is in fact called *Parliament: the biography*:[2] but the tendency to anthropomorphise institutions like parliament is much more embedded than just this particular instance. We talk not just about agency, but about character and emotion in relation to a parliament – the 'mood of the house' is a common phrase, among contemporary politicians and journalists and among historians who write about the seventeenth century and possibly before. All this is even more peculiar, since parliament is much less of an institution in the 'organization' sense than most. Unlike the Royal Navy, or Tesco, or the government, or the Church or a University, it has no real leader, except in the sense that government provides leadership. When you think about purely parliamentary issues – members' pay, or bullying, or sexual harrassment, or the expenses crisis – it's painfully obvious that no-one is providing effective leadership at all, and certainly not the government. In its crudest sense Parliament is the aggregate of whichever of the 650 people in the commons and around 700 in the Lords happen to turn up to vote on any particular question. It doesn't have a controlling intelligence.

The result of forgetting this has generally been to distort our history-writing about parliament. We have written about it as if it is an agent, as if it does things, in some cases as if it has a consciousness of its own. We talk about its growth and development, about (a common phrase, used of multiple different periods by different historians) its 'coming of age' or 'maturity', as if these metaphors were the most natural thing in the world. This way of thinking has not only underlain the 'Whig' approach to parliamentary history; it has also been deeply embedded in its critics, whose response has been to dispute the stage of development that parliament had reached at any particular moment, rather than to question the whole idea of a narrative that is based on an analogy with human agency and development. The problem is, as J.W. Burrow pointed out in *A Liberal Descent*, that by writing histories of things we automatically tend to assume that they have a clear identity: we *ipso facto* reify them into entities that can have a history in the same way that a person can have a past. There is, as he wrote, 'an innate Whiggishness in stories as such, not only in their presentation of a continuing protagonist but in the ways in which, in a well-told story, the parts are subordinate to the whole'.[3]

Is there another way of writing the history of institutions in general, and this institution in particular? The famous approach of the History of Parliament – by assembling individual biographies of all of those who have been members – is too little appreciated as a very valid way of coming at an institution. The elements of a parliament, of any institution, are the people who inhabit them and operate them and use them. But I'd acknowledge that the approach, while it does very many very useful things, doesn't exactly describe the institution itself, even collectively. What is needed is a more comprehensive prior investigation into what institutions are.

We rarely acknowledge the complexity of any institutions: there is a huge tendency to take them for granted, as part of the given landscape. What has rarely happened, beyond some clichés about 'institutions' and 'events' and 'institutionalization', is that historians ask themselves what they really mean when they talk about parliament, that they examine the whole as the sum of its parts. When people describe an institution, they usually start with function – what is parliament *for* – and then they deal with how it fulfils that function, the procedures and mechanisms which achieve that result. A university is *for* tertiary education and research, and it does that through the provision of teachers and researchers, labs and libraries. But such a description only takes one so far and seems to skate

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[2] Chris Bryant, *Parliament: the Biography* (2 vols., 2014)
[3] John Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (1981), 297-8.

over so much that we would want to recognise as important to us in the life of a university. It is, essentially, much too functional.

There is a literature on institutional theory, sometimes referred to as 'new institutionalism' or 'new institutional theory', among sociologists, political scientists and economists. Theorists responded to the unsatisfactory nature of behavioural and rational choice theory, which focused on individual choices, in politics or economics. Their alternative approaches tried to recognise that individual choices were not autonomous but influenced by others and often mediated through institutions. They defined institutions as collections of values and rules and routines to implement and enforce those values, designed to encourage people to behave in line with expectations. This is not that much different to our basic function/mechanism definition and seems exceedingly utilitarian. It's also one that has little interest in historical change and development. There is a sub-specialism called historical institutionalism, often associated with ideas of 'path-dependency', which is largely about tracing current conditions from early institutional decisions, and which will look to many historians like whiggism. There are some good and interesting examples – Deborah Boucoyannis's *Kings as Judges* (2021) is a sophisticated examination of the development of political assemblies in Medieval Europe which comes up with some interesting answers which are very contrary to the whiggish mainstream. But the interest of these approaches in straightforward answers to apparently simple questions, and their tendency to assimilate the subjects of inquiry into pre-determined and sometimes rather artificial categories will usually feel pretty unsatisfactory to historians who recognise, and want to convey, the richness and complexity of any given institution or situation.

Historians may feel more comfortable with the approach of the ethnographer. Marc Abélès' *La Vie quotidienne au Parlement européen* (1994) and *Un Ethnologue a l'Assemblée* (2000) were descriptions of the daily life of the European parliament and the French National Assembly respectively that might count as 'thick description'; Emma Crewe's studies of the House of Lords (2015) and the House of Commons (2016) did something similar for the British parliament. All of them were, essentially, attempts to understand parliament through detailed interviews of individual members, describing how they worked and how they saw their work, although their focus tends more to be on politics, how it works and what is wrong with it, rather than more purely trying to understand an institution *as an institution*. Emma Peplow and Priscila Pivatto come closer with their collection of excerpts from the History of Parliament's oral history project in *The Political Lives of Postwar British MPs* (2021). These approaches depend, of course, on direct engagement with those who are involved with the institution, unavailable to the historian. But ethnographic approaches (combined with feminist theory) are noticeably starting to influence historians of political institutions as well. Delphine Gardey's *Le Linge du Palais Bourbon*, which focuses on the everyday life of the French National Assembly from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the 1970s not in terms of its members, but of the management of the building, of its administrative and domestic staff, and of its routine ceremonies, is placed as a work that brings out 'not the private or the exceptional, [but] … the regularities', to suggest how these '*materialités*' play an important part in the meaning of politics, underlining how the Assembly is rooted in a space, in people, technology, rules, organisation, texts.[4] Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, in her study of the Imperial Diet from the late fifteenth century to its dissolution in 1806, also draws on ethnographic insights, though in a rather different register. In *The Emperor's Old Clothes* she reconstructs the history of constitutions as a history of the Empire's 'symbolic language': the ritual actions and symbols that were repeated and

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[44] Delphine Gardey, *Le Linge du Palais-Bourbon: Corps, matérialité et genre du politique à l'ère democratique* (Paris: Le Bord de L'Eau, 2015), 16

re-negotiated at successive diets, and acted to affirm or sometimes contest the obligations, privileges and hierarchies of its participants, and also to define the exact nature of representation.[5]

While all of these approaches have been useful and stimulating, then, there is no very helpful, off-the-shelf, definition of an institution or model for writing the history of one, or if there is, I haven't found it. So how does one do so? Perhaps one should start by recognising that there is no single and inevitable way: all institutions are different, just as all historians are different, and anything that provides a genuine insight into what the things we regard as institutions are and how they operate should be a valuable contribution. One should also assert a distinction. Any attempt to understand the history of an institution does need to start by distinguishing between organizations and institutions. It's an important difference, though the boundaries between the two are very fuzzy, and often only intermittently used. We tend to use the word institution to signify organizations that play a dominant and easily recognisable role in our lives. They are not simply created, because even when a particular founding event can be identified (the setting up of a university, for example, by royal charter), to make it into an institution depends on something more than its pure existence: it assumes that it has become embedded into our everyday lives and relationships and ways of understanding the world that more transient or less dominant organisations have not managed. If this sounds a slightly Burkean way of interpreting political institutions, I'd argue that it is simply to accept that how they work and our attitudes towards them are profoundly affected – for good or ill – by a much more complicated set of considerations than the purely utilitarian ones of the job that they do; to recognise that institutions, and especially parliaments, are not single, simple things, and certainly not organisms; but they are complex entities, composed of expectations, relationships, memory – and much else.

There are many ways of analysing all of these. The way I've chosen to adopt is to view Parliament from a series of different angles across time: as an idea, or package of ideas; as a means to various ends; as a community (or communities); as institutional memory; as a focus for organization; and as a hub, or an exchange – as *the* focus of a constant national debate or conversation about many things. I don't mean any of these perspectives to become fixed, or too determined: they are in themselves easily confounded with each other, and far from easy to pin down. What they mean in practice will change over time, sometimes quite considerably. But they are meant to enable us to understand what parliament is, and has been.

Idea

To start with idea. I don't mean by this to seek to *define* parliament in terms of a specific and single political idea, as historians have usually done – to claim that 'parliament' *means* a sovereign representative assembly, with powers to bind the represented to the decisions it arrived at. To do so is to adopt a whiggish approach from the start: to assume that it is only worth identifying a parliament when it begins to look ('emerge' is the word generally used) recognisably like a modern parliament. It means that we ignore much of the other baggage of ideas that parliament carries with it; it also loses the complexity of practical meanings that can be attached to these ideas. We've tended, for example, to divide the idea of representation into the two camps articulated by Burke (the 'congress of ambassadors' versus 'a deliberative assembly of one nation'). The reality has often been more nuanced than that, and assumptions about the limits of the delegated authority of

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[5] Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Des Kaisers Alte Kleider*, 2008; *The Emperor's Old Clothes: constitutional history and the symbolic language of the Holy Roman Empire* (Oxford: Bergahn, 2015)

individual members have often depended on political circumstances. Indeed, our tendency to assume an intimate connection between the process of formal election and representation rather encourages us to downplay the elements of delegation in the early history of parliament. It also means that we have not only tended to ignore the linkages between parliaments and the earlier assemblies of pre-conquest, Norman and Plantagenet kings (though John Maddicott, Levi Roach and others have been changing that) but we have also attributed insufficient importance to the survivals of a non-electoral sense of representation within the later parliamentary tradition: to the recognition of parliament as the gathering of a political community at its most complete and unified. It is at its most obvious when one recognises those who have been deliberately excluded: Catholics, for example, and those of non-Christian religion; and, most obviously, though also a rather special case, women.

Representation and sovereignty are not the only concepts routinely attached to parliament: over time concepts of 'mixed government', 'balance', 'moderate' and 'responsible government' have all become applied to it, and a history of parliament has to work out how and why and with what meaning they have been applied. The idea of *parlementarisme* or *parlamentarismus*, familiar in continental political theory but almost ignored in anglophone theory refers to a package of linked concepts that we might refer to as responsible and representative government. The Finnish political theorist, Kari Palonen, has argued that the 'parliamentary way of politics' is encapsulated in the idea of 'government by discussion', supported by the notion of maintaining a sort of level playing field in which that discussion can take place.

But to take a legally and philosophically rigorous approach to the idea of parliament, to try to determine, like a judge might do, some sort of single, objective, verdict on the nature of parliament at any particular time, is deeply unrealistic. What I mean is to try to understand what contemporaries *thought* parliament meant, what was its value to them, what mixture of ideas – both positive and negative – it conjured up. For example: the association of parliament with talking, negotiation, discussion and a failure to achieve anything useful goes back almost as far as the word has been used, from at least the fourteenth century: the application to parliament of the fable of the mice and rats, who could agree on a strategy to place a collar and bell round the cat's neck, but not on who was going to carry it out, was current before William Langland used it in the 1370s in *Piers Plowman*. It's most memorably articulated by Thomas Carlyle in the 1840s as 'endless jargoning, debating, motioning and counter-motioning'; 'an enormous National Palaver existing mainly for imaginary purposes'.[6] Whatever parliament might mean in political theory is only part of the story: the judgements of participants and ordinary observers – what it meant to them – are just as much part of how its history should be assessed.

Device

My second way of seeing parliament is as a device, a means to an end, a mechanism for achieving things. You might use the term 'function' or 'role', which is often how we frame this discussion. But I think that makes us think in too much of an architectural manner, as if parliament had been built by constitutional engineers, who had a reasonably clear idea of what it was intended to do, and designed it to do them; it also makes us think of these activities as somehow essential to the existence and meaning of these political assemblies, to associate their histories with their place within modern constitutional systems as legislatures. I'm not suggesting that one should accept the

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[6] Thomas Carlyle, 'Downing street' in *Latter-Day Pamphlets* (London, 1898), 99.

alternative, evolutionary, understanding, as if parliament changed by some ineffable but inexorable and inevitable movement. Change is achieved through individual and collective human agents: the institution of parliament has developed through the often contradictory demands and pressures placed upon it, in directions that have been determined through the creative exploitation of potential mechanisms for achieving their ends by politicians, by litigants and petitioners, and by the relative political or economic strength of those making those demands or finding it useful to support them. Parliament was not always the best way of achieving them, and other avenues – the courts, or petitions directly to the crown, or other mechanisms created by government such as tribunals or the planning process – may have been more effective: parliament was neither the inevitable, nor the only channel for these activities, and parliament's history has to deal with why at some points it came to seem a useful way of processing them, and at others it seemed less useful.

One might think, nevertheless, that there is a clear history of a narrowing of functions towards a stable, modern, focus on legislation. But parliament as an agent for legislation has scarcely been stable: within a lifetime we have seen the rise, and fall, of European legislation; the growth in delegated legislation and especially Henry VIII clauses which broaden the path of executive law-making; the arguments over judge-made law; the removal of most of what was left of private legislation into a statutory planning process; and so on. The legislative process itself has been subject to considerable change, with the dropping of the sessional cycle for much government legislation and the introduction of formal programmes for bills. Petitioning is another obvious example of how parliamentary mechanisms are developed, expanded and abandoned, in response to the changing demands of different individuals and groups, from Edward I setting off a campaign of administrative reform in the 1270s by inviting complaints against his officials,[7] to the remarkable growth of petitions against the activities of monopolists in the 1620s and the explosion of petitioning in the early 1640s and the development of mass petitioning into an effective and overwhelming campaigning tool in the late 1670s and 1680s. Its use as a partisan device to interrupt government agendas in the 1810s and afterwards led to governments finding ways of closing down the link between petitions and action on the floor of the House, rendering petitions effectively irrelevant to actual proceedings – until, over the last twenty years the link between petitioning and action within parliament has been, albeit tentatively, revived. Parliament should be seen, in other words, not as a relatively simple process of evolution towards a settled platform for legislative sovereignty, but a dynamic platform on which competing interests pursued their aims in the most effective way possible.

Community

My third perspective on parliament is to regard it as a community. This may seem, in some ways, counter-intuitive. The parliament we recognise now is one in which hostile camps devote their time and energy to intense competition largely in the hope of affecting the outcome of the next general election. And yet the sense of a broadly tolerant and cooperative community is constantly reflected in memoirs and commentaries about both houses of parliament. Historians have often built it, or something like it, into their ideas of the 'maturity' of parliament, arguing (as John Maddicott did in 2010) that the 'increasingly frequent attendance of the commons, and the frequent re-election of

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[7] Maddicott, 294-5

individual MPs, must have strengthened the *esprit* of the entire *corps*, helping to create a continuing and corporate persona largely absent in the days of the commons' more intermittent summoning'.[8]

There are two things going on here. The first is the social relationships between members built up through regular encounters, the 'good fellowship' of the House of Commons, as the Liberal minister Augustine Birrell described it in an essay in 1901. Some of this is the result of the social, cultural and economic homogeneity of members. But there are also plenty of divisions along those lines across the history of parliament, from the hierarchical ones between knights and burgesses, to the jealousy of the unsuccessful for the successful, and so on. Generations of politicians who self-consciously regarded themselves as outsiders have both objected to and been rejected by it —radicals like Henry Hunt or Joseph Hume; the Irish Party which Charles Parnell deliberately tried to cut off from too much casual association with its opponents, at least until its strategic association with the Liberal party; the early Labour party and the hostility of some of its more determined members to the 'aristocratic embrace'. The tendency still observable in some members. Party, of course, is the most evident solvent of community. And there's much to be said on the way 'good fellowship' is manifested: the requirement to provide social facilities close to, or in, the Palace of Westminster that determines much of how the late Victorian palace develops; and on the varying social cultures and the reactions to them – most visibly in the reactions of, and reactions to, women, both as visitors and observers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and as members in the twentieth and twenty-first.

The second is the 'corporate spirit' of parliament: the idea that parliament is a body with its own corporate identity, an identity that becomes embodied in forms of ritual and, crucially, in the notion of privilege, of distinctive rights conferred on the body as a whole and on its members individually. Parliament's corporate development, while often celebrated in the whig canon in terms of freedom of speech, is curiously under-explored in much of the literature: and yet it is clear that for both Houses privilege becomes an obsession from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. The celebration of the corporate identity of Parliament in general and the House of Commons in particular is central to its history; and so is the often outrageous exploitation of that identity through attempts to use it to protect (and sometimes aggressively advance) the personal interests of individual members – a development that might easily eventually have radically undermined parliament's legitimacy were it not for a comprehensive reform of 1770.

The idea of a corporate identity of course goes to the heart of what we mean when we think of the institutionalization of parliament. But with the collapse of efforts to enforce corporate privilege, its corporate identity started to slide: neither House took direct responsibility itself for the management of its staff or buildings until the creation of the House of Commons Commission in 1978 gave those functions to a committee of the lower House. Even then, as the continuing failure to take a positive decision about the reconstruction and renewal programme for the palace of Westminster shows, the body's ability to act as a coherent unit remains feeble, vitiated by competing interests and attitudes that are not suppressed by organisational hierarchies. And the commitment to a 'parliamentary' ideal (for example the principle that parliamentary standards should be paramount in the conduct of politics), while evidence of a corporate spirit, is often contested at least in its application to individual cases. The contested and contingent nature of parliament's corporate identity is both a feature, and a complication, of its history.

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[8] Maddicott, *Origins*, 388. Cf. 320.

Memory: Time and Space

Nevertheless, a corporate spirit, however attenuated or contested, does exist and has existed; and in some sense or other it is closely related my fourth perspective, which we might call memory. Institutional memory is one of our most familiar phrases when we talk about institutions. We can apply it to the knowledge and experience collected by those who are involved routinely in their activities, an understanding of the way in which an institution works; but it can also describe the way in which practices become routinised and ingrained, the habit of following precedent.

All of this tends to be seen in terms of the framing of the Westminster Parliament as a profoundly historically determined institution, one in which change is gradual, evolutionary, organic, Burkean. As the great nineteenth-century clerk of the House of Commons and historian, Sir Thomas Erskine May, observed in the first (1844) edition of his Treatise on parliamentary law, 'step by step the legislature has assumed its present form and character; and after many changes its constitution is now defined by "The clear and written law,--the deep-trod footmarks / Of ancient custom."'.[9] May's quotation, wrenched out of context, is from Coleridge's 1800 translation of Schiller's play *Wallenstein*, originally written in 1798, and is an indication of the reflections of both men, sparked by the French revolution and the seizure of power by Napoleon Bonaparte, on the dangers of revolutionary change. For this stress on the customary nature of law could carry the implication – so very common in the nineteenth century – that anything other than the most gradual and careful alteration of the hallowed practices of an institution might have unintended consequences and risked dangerous change.

There is a reverent tone to much of this Burkean type of commentary that probably induces scepticism among historians wise to invented tradition. And it's true – though interesting – that some of the traditions are invented. But plenty of them aren't, and more importantly, plenty of them constitute a set of symbolic practices that do, for some at least, validate certain understandings of the nature and meaning of the institution.

Beyond this, there's a more practical aspect to institutional memory: the establishment of a bureaucratic and procedural practice; the development of an archive, of manuals of practice; the physical embodiment of the institution in a single customary location. All that has to do with time, and the routinisation of a political process. This sort of thing has often been seen in terms of the distinction between parliament as an 'event' or an 'occasion', and as an institution, to try to identify a point at which regularity induces a settled status. Plucknett used the distinction in 1922 referring to the fourteenth century;[10] A.R. Myers in 1981 claimed of the fifteenth century that 'even if parliaments could be infrequent… parliament was now more than an occasion';[11] though Conrad Russell had argued in 1979 that 'even in a period of frequent parliaments such as the 1620s, a parliament was an event and not an institution'.[12] The fact that it has been used of so many different periods might encourage us to be dubious: for events can be institutions, and institutions can be events, and while there is undoubtedly a connection between regularity and bureaucratisation, while regular repetition is obviously habit forming, the event vs. institution dichotomy is one of those metaphors that is doing the thinking for us. Institutional memory can come through repetitive actions; but it is also built in deliberate acts of creation and reform which often represent the institutional interests of bureaucracies or individual interest in the processes of

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[9] Erskine May, *Treatise*, 2nd edn. (1851), 1.
[10] Clarke, *Medieval Representation and Consent*, 213.
[11] A.R. Myers, 'Parliament 1422-1509' in Davies and Denton, *The English Parliament in the Middles Ages*, 144.
[12][12] *Parliaments and English Politics*, 3.

parliament. Among the deliberate acts, for example, are the foundation of an archive for the House of Lords in the 1620s; the practice of a number of members to take notes in the House from the late sixteenth century, and later on to turn them into narratives; the decision to print the daily Votes of Proceedings in 1689; the reform of private bill procedure in the 1770s; the reforms of Charles Abbott's period as speaker in 1802-17 in much of the organisation of the Commons; and the development of a procedural manual by Thomas Erskine May in 1844; and so on.

Organization:

All this needs to be distinguished from my fifth perspective on parliament, through the strategic and tactical organization required to use parliament to achieve something. An assembly of people is in itself amorphous, directionless: to achieve anything it is necessary not only that it be *moved*, but also that any proposal can be pursued to a decision that will stick. This is commonly thought of as a narrative concerning the rise of party. Undoubtedly the efforts of governments to find ways of controlling and obtaining coherent decisions from either house of parliament is, and should be, a key element of any attempt to provide a narrative history of it. But it also includes questions of the forms of decision-making, a movement from a style of political engagement that prioritises negotiated consensus to one that is more comfortable with institutionalised division. William Bulman has recently produced a thesis about this in the English context in *The Rise of Majority Rule in Early Modern Britain and its Empire* (2021). He sees it as a question that can be separated from the story of party. That seems to me to be implausible; but it is true that there is much more going on than just the party question. The management involved is of time as well as of people, and its implications stretch far beyond the matter of party lists and government whips to the whole organisation of society in Britain from the seventeenth century onwards through structures of patronage and social interaction among the elite.

Moreover, 'party', and government control, is just one element: for governments were not and are not the only bodies with agency in parliament, or who are using it to achieve some particular aim. A catalogue would include the individual and family interests that seek to promote private bills; the developers promoting legislation to permit or facilitate their projects; the sectional interests that try to obtain public bills to support their industries or enterprises; political campaigners for the further reformation of the Church, against monopolies, or for the abolition of the slave trade or slavery, or for Catholic emancipation, or for women to be able to vote in parliamentary elections; the political factions before party and within party that compete for dominance; the partisan opponents of government, whose agendas may relate to and intersect with those of campaigners, but also have their own logic too.

Forum

All of which brings me to my last, and possibly the most significant, angle from which to view the history of parliament, and one that probably is more applicable to it, than to the history of most other institutions. One might equate it to the various activities that Walter Bagehot, in *The English Constitution* of 1867, referred to as parliament's 'expressive function' – 'to express the mind of the English people on all matters which come before it'; its 'teaching function' – 'to teach the nation what it does not know'; and its 'informing function' – to bring the state of the nation to the attention of its government. But 'function', as I've suggested above, is an inadequate and too precise word to apply to a much more amorphous and more interesting reality; Bagehot's high-Victorian manner,

moreover, seems to imply a controlling intelligence at work, which is entirely the opposite of what is going on. Sir Geoffrey Elton's 'Point of Contact' – the place where the centre meets the localities – may be a more helpful description, a more straightforward acknowledgement that parliament is the place where different worlds encounter each other. But even this gives a rather meagre sense of the rich interactions going on within the general framework of a parliament. It's difficult to find the right word to encompass all of what I mean: 'communicative space' might be the academic expression, but to me it fails to convey the intensity and significance of what is going on.[13] Perhaps two metaphors of interchange and communication do it better.

One is the exchange, or forum. John Stuart Mill regarded 'discussion' as the essential activity of parliament: the exchange, evaluation and challenging of information. We tend to think of this rather restrictively as within the formal structures of parliament, speeches in chambers. But by the time exchanges reach the floor of a debating chamber they tend to be rather stylised and formal. We should think more broadly than that and allow parliamentary discussion to encompass the less structured spaces around it: an intense network of contacts and debates, which largely depends on its existence on proximity to the centres where much political news was generated, within parliament and within the court at Whitehall. Those spaces include Westminster Hall, a centre for the exchange of political news; the Court of Requests and the Painted Chamber and other sites within and just outside the Palace itself; Old and New Palace Yards, sites of public protest and assembly (as Westminster Hall could also be), and the inns and hotels around them, used for meetings of political clubs and pre-parliamentary negotiation; the houses and lodgings of the parliamentary elite – and so on.

It extends way beyond Westminster, too: newsletters, pamphlets, the official Votes and Proceedings, and later the newspapers, distributed those conversations into pubs, clubs and homes across the country and beyond it; the publication by parliamentary orders of evidence and reports – the blue books – built a new type of data-driven, deeply empirical, discussion of public policy that gingered up parliamentary discussion itself, through organisations such Social Science Association in the late nineteenth century.[14] And of course, and most significantly, the dialogue works in both directions: for parliament is the focal point of complaint and of calls for change and redress, the place where campaigns focus their attention and the attention of the public, where members of the public focus their scrutiny and fury at the state of politics.

The second metaphor is theatre. It is applied to parliament from at least the seventeenth century: the opportunities for both performance on the one hand, and spectacle and entertainment on the other, are obvious, and have been remarked on for much of parliament's existence ('better than a play', Charles II was notoriously supposed to have said of the House of Lords). It defines, for many, what they instantly summon to mind when they think of parliament – the aggressive exchanges across the Table of the Commons, or tense dialogues with a witness in a Select Committee meeting. By their chamber performances is how we largely evaluate politicians, and how they largely evaluate each other. From at least the sixteenth century individual members were listening to and remarking on, each other's performances; in the eighteenth century, as Christopher Reid has shown, they could devote enormous attention to the preparation and dissemination of their classically-inspired

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[13] See Werner Patzelt, 'Das Parlament als Kommunikationsraum. Funktionslogik und analytische Kategorien', and the other essays in Andreas Schulz and Andreas Wirsching, *Das Parlement als Kommunikationsraum* (Droste Verlag, 2012).
[14] Lawrence Goldman, *Science, Reform and Politics in Victorian Britain: the Social Science Association 1857-1886* (2002).

orations.[15] The performative aspects of politics often get in the way of more intelligent debate; they are often and justifiably seen as negative and problematic, even exclusionary, for many involved; but they remain strikingly important to how parliament remains a centre of activity and attention.

Narrative

There is a remaining issue, I think, with narrative. A history that is more than a monograph is, inescapably, some sort of narrative, and it has to tell a story. It will have a character or a particular subject as its focus; and, as John Burrow suggested, it will be a story of development from one state to another, often one of growth, maturity and decay. Both of these things contradict the way in which I aim to write about parliament. To focus on a single subject or character is to try to reassemble all of the elements I have identified above into one single story, whereas in reality they are, and have, many different stories. To describe development will be to be tempted into the Whig anthropomorphic narrative of growth, maturity and decay; it will be to be tempted to restrict the story those elements in its development that are strongly replicated in parliament now, to go by the familiar route and avoid the many roads not travelled. And beyond that point there is a more fundamental question: does it make any real sense to treat the institution now as essentially the descendant of the thing that existed in the seventeenth, fifteenth, thirteenth, even tenth century?

These are all critical points. My answer for the moment is to suggest that if we try, as far as we can, to overcome the idea of an institution, with a life of its own, and think about parliament more as a way of doing things, these problems largely disappear. We can see the history of parliament not as a story of directed development, but more as an account of practices and attitudes that are constantly changing under the force of other changes and demands: like a history of the landscape, the ecology of politics, a construction that changes along with political, social and economic change. My six perspectives are points from which we can observe that changing landscape as it is adapted, by its inhabitants, to the changes in their own conditions of life.

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[15] Christopher Reid, *Imprison'd Wranglers: The Rhetorical Culture of the House of Commons 1760-1800* (2012).