The House of Commons, 1801–1911

Philip Salmon

When in that House M.P.s divide,
If they've a brain and cerebellum too,
They have to leave that brain outside,
And vote as their leaders tell 'em too.

W. S. Gilbert, Iolanthe (1883), Act II

To state that there was scarcely a feature of the 1801 Commons that could still be found in existence in 1911, pace Norman Gash, sounds like hyperbole, but it is not far off the mark.¹ During this period virtually every aspect of the Commons, from its procedures to its relationship with the nation at large, underwent fundamental change. Most historians see a broad link between the internal and external developments taking place, and in particular between the procedural reforms and electoral reforms of the 19th century. But beyond this there remains plenty of argument and debate, about which changes were the most significant, why and when they occurred, and with what consequences. This chapter reassesses the most prevalent ideas currently on offer and introduces some new ones, particularly regarding electoral reform and its connection with the kind of behaviour lampooned in the opening quotation. Before doing this, however, it is worth examining the chamber itself, since this also, appropriately enough, underwent fundamental, though not necessarily radical, change.

The Setting

The cramped and unhealthy conditions of the accommodation in St Stephen's chapel, famously likened to the 'black hole of Calcutta' by James Grant, had long been a source of complaint.² Most sittings occurred at night, when the poor air quality caused by inadequate ventilation was exacerbated by the burning of hundreds of candles and later by primitive gas lighting. Measuring just 57' 6" × 32' 10" (most images make it appear larger), numerous improvements and plans for new premises had been proposed during the 18th century, only to be rejected on the grounds of cost or taste. The addition of an extra 100 Irish MPs in 1801, as a result of the union with Ireland, took the total membership to 658 and forced

² J. Grant, Random Recollections of the House of Commons (1836), 2.
Murder in the Commons’ Lobby

The Lobby of the old House of Commons was 32’ wide by 28’ long, giving an area of about 900 ‘superficial’, or square feet. In the early 19th century it was reckoned that ‘from 300 to 400 Members are on divisions occasionally contained in the present Lobby’. Also ‘in the greater part of the session the Lobby is filled with persons obliged to be there to meet Members on business’. Consequently it seems more than unlucky that on 11 May 1812, the prime minister, Spencer Perceval, was shot while passing through a relatively empty lobby (if contemporary prints are to be believed) on his way out of the House. The shot was fired by one John Bellingham, a deranged merchant, who, it was said by some, mistook Perceval for Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, the foreign secretary, with whom Bellingham had a grievance after being refused government compensation for debts he had accrued in Russia. Perceval died of his wounds almost immediately. The lord chancellor, lamenting ‘a most melancholy and a most atrocious circumstance having taken place in the Lobby of the other House’, ordered ‘[a]ll Officers and attendants of this House to prevent all persons quitting the two Houses of Parliament’. However, there were witnesses to the assassination, including Richard Tayler, a doorkeeper of the Commons, who ‘saw the person fire, [and] heard the pistol go off’. Bellingham, however, remained in the lobby and was immediately arrested. He was found guilty at his trial and, refusing to plead insanity, was executed.

Sources: House of Commons Reports from Committees, xii (1833), report no. 17 (17 August – 22 September 1831), 13, 17–18 20; LJ, lxxviii, 827–8.

the issue. By comparison with the Lords, however, the Commons’ solution was makeshift. While the Lords moved to a larger chamber (78’ x 38’) to accommodate just 28 new Irish peers and four bishops, the Commons crammed in an extra row of benches on each side by removing the wooden panelling, destroying the medieval wall-paintings and dismantling sections of the medieval walls, which added about an extra 3’ on each side of the chamber. Even so, barely two-thirds of the MPs could be accommodated, whether seated or standing. Further modifications included an enlargement of the members’ lobby, where the prime minister, Spencer Perceval, was assassinated in 1812, and the refitting of a refreshment room (Bellamy’s) at the end of the new corridor leading away from the lobby, supplied by kitchens underneath.

In the adjacent areas, a smoking room, committee rooms and a purpose-built library were also added. By the time of the accidental fire of 1834, which completely gutted all these facilities, MPs had been assembling in the midst of what amounted to a perpetual building site for well over 30 years. Almost another 20 years’ disruption then followed before they were
Bellamy’s Kitchen

The kitchen and dining room opened in 1773 by John Bellamy, the deputy house keeper of the Commons, was the first attempt to provide catering arrangements for MPs inside the palace of Westminster. It was made famous by one version of the supposed dying words of the prime minister, William Pitt the Younger, in 1806: ‘I think I could just eat one of Bellamy’s veal pies.’ Originally Bellamy’s was one of a series of places of refreshment built on the west wall of the old Court of Requests facing into Old Palace Yard, including Alice’s and Wagham’s coffee houses. It probably moved to the south-west corner of the new Stone Building built by James Wyatt on the west side of Westminster Hall around 1800, at the time that he was reconstructing and converting the old Court of Requests into the new House of Lords. It is likely that Bellamy’s kitchen occupied the first floor with the dining room above. The ground floor was one of a series of new committee rooms built at that time.

The name Bellamy’s has been revived for eating-places associated both with the parliament at Westminster and with certain Commonwealth parliaments.


able to move to the Commons in the new Palace of Westminster, designed by Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin, during which time they occupied the House of Lords.

Two features, in particular, stand out in all of this. The first is the physical chaos in which an institution traditionally associated with the orderly expansion of the Victorian state and administration of the British empire actually operated. It was not until the 1870s that the site as a whole was finally completed. Structural problems and poor ventilation, however, continued to plague the occupants, and as late as 1905 the treasury still considered that ‘the result cannot be said to be satisfactory’. The second feature is the inherent conservatism of the Commons and its reluctance to leave the historic setting of Westminster, even temporarily. A number of factors were at work here. Striking an anti-democratic note in 1834, for instance, the prime minister, Lord Melbourne, explained to William IV that by remaining on a site where space was so restricted, they could ‘avoid providing much larger accommodation for spectators as well as members’ and escape the ‘fatal effects which large galleries filled with the multitude have had upon the deliberation of public

Bellamy’s and the ‘Rage for Speaking’

I was under the gallery of the House of Commons during the debate on the Catholic question in the year 1825. The house was exceedingly full. Mr. John Leslie Foster rose to speak, and the effect of his appearance on his legs was truly wonderful. In an instant the House was cleared. The rush to the door leading to the tavern upstairs, where the Members find a refuge from the soporific powers of their brother legislators, was tremendous ... The single phrase “Mr. Speaker” was indeed uttered with such a tone as indicated the extent of the impending evil; and finding already the influence of drowsiness upon me, I followed the example which was given by the representatives of the people, who, whatever differences may have existed amongst them upon the mode of settling Ireland, appeared to coincide in their estimate of Mr. Foster’s elocution ... I proceeded upstairs with some hundreds of honourable gentlemen. The scene which Bellamy’s presents to a stranger is striking enough. Two smart girls, whose briskness and neat attire made up for their want of beauty, and for the invasions of time, of which their cheeks showed the traces, helped out tea in a room in the corridor. It was pleasant to observe the sons of dukes and marquesses, and the possessors of twenties and thirty of thousands a year, gathered round these damsels, and soliciting a cup of that beverage which it was their office to administer. These Bellamy barmaids seemed so familiarized with their occupation, that they went through it with perfect nonchalance, and would occasionally turn with petulance, in which they asserted the superiority of their sex to rank and opulence, from the noble or wealthy suitors for a draught of tea, by whom they were surrounded. The unfortunate Irish Members were treated with a peculiar disdain and were reminded of their provinciality by the look of these Parliamentary Hebes, who treated them as mere colonial deputies should be received in the purlings of the state.

I passed from these ante-chambers to the tavern, where I found a number of Members assembled at dinner. Half an hour had passed away, toothpicks and claret were now beginning to appear, and the business of mastication being concluded, that of digestion had commenced ... At the end of a long corridor, which opened from the room where the diners were assembled, there stood a waiter whose office it was to inform any interrogator what gentleman was speaking below stairs. Nearly opposite the door sat two English county Members. They had just disposed of a bottle each, and just as the last glass was emptied, one of them called out to the annunciator at the end of the passage for intelligence; ‘Mr. Foster on his legs’ was the formidable answer. ‘Waiter, bring another bottle’, was the immediate effect of this information, which was followed by a similar injunction from every table in the room. I perceived that Mr. Bellamy owed great obligations to Mr. Foster. But the latter did not limit himself to a second bottle; again and again the same question was asked, and again the same announcement returned, ‘Mr. Foster on his legs!’ The
answer seemed to fasten men in inseparable adhesiveness to their seats. Thus two hours went by, when at length, 'Mr. Plunket on his legs' was heard from the end of the passage, and the whole convocation of comptators rose together and returned to the House.'


Significantly, one of the major complaints about the new Commons chamber, which was first used in 1850, was that, although it had been enlarged to 68′×45½′, it could still seat only two-thirds of the members. And whilst it now had a dedicated press gallery (see below), public accommodation remained limited. Another factor which has been singled out by architectural historians and those interested in the ‘politics of place’ has been the symbolic importance of projecting an image of stability and continuity at a time of unprecedented socio-economic and political change. This was not only manifest in the decision to construct the new palace in a historic Gothic style, with a Commons chamber laid out along very traditional lines, but in the accompanying revival of old ceremonies and the fashioning of new ones. It was in the middle decades of the 19th century that the speakership, for instance, acquired much of its modern-day constitutional mystique, mainly under Charles Shaw Lefevre (1839–57), but also his successor John Evelyn Denison (1857–72), who oversaw the completion of the grandiose new Speaker's House with its unused official state bed. These essentially conservative qualities of the new palace of Westminster, both in terms of its architectural appearance and the revival of pageantry, have in recent years begun to attract much needed scholarly attention. But they can only be fully contextualized when viewed against the backdrop of the rapid political changes taking place, particularly those concerning how the Commons worked and how it was elected. It is these changes that are the remaining subjects of this chapter.

The Growth of Ministerial Control

One of the most widely noted developments in the Commons during the 19th century was the government's increasing control of day-to-day business. More than any other factor, this transformed the routines and functions of the House. From a situation in which it was mainly individual or 'private' MPs who determined the policy agenda and initiated legislation, ministers started to take the lead, especially on public bills and other matters of national interest. By the second half of the century the cabinet,

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4 Lord Melbourne’s Papers, ed. L. Sanders (1890), 214.
according to some observers, had begun to acquire so much power over proceedings that it threatened to undermine the constitutional balance of power. Table 1 lists the main procedural changes associated with this march of ministerial control, which began with two weekdays effectively being earmarked for government business in 1811. Mainly implemented as standing (permanent) orders, these reforms restricted the occasions when individual MPs could speak and vote and tipped the balance of control in favour of the government of the day.

It would be misleading, however, to place too much emphasis on the rules themselves as the actual mechanism of ministerial control. Many of them merely formalized what had already become accepted procedure, amounting to little more than a codification of convention. The suppression of debates on petitions, for example, was in place long before it became a standing order in 1843. More significantly, new ways of side-stepping regulations and fresh tactical ruses were always available to intrepid troublemakers and those determined to act independently, as the activities of the Irish amply demonstrate. The rules assisted control, but they never guaranteed it. Despite many attempts at regulation, for instance, the committee of supply developed into what has been termed a ‘paradise of the

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<tr>
<td>1811</td>
<td>Order days: precedence given to public bills on Mondays and Fridays</td>
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<td>1835</td>
<td>Wednesdays added as order days</td>
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<td>1835</td>
<td>End of debates on petitions (confirmed by standing orders in 1843 and 1853)</td>
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<td>1837</td>
<td>Ban on moving amendments to orders of the day</td>
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<td>1848</td>
<td>Ban on moving amendments on going into committee (on certain bills)</td>
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<td>1854</td>
<td>Number of stages at which bills could be debated dramatically cut</td>
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<td>1872</td>
<td>Restrictions on amendments on going into committee of supply (Mondays)</td>
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<td>1881</td>
<td>Introduction of motions to close debates (ordinary closure); mover must have support of 100 MPs; made standing order in 1882</td>
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<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>Restrictions on amendments on going into committee on supply (Thursdays)</td>
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<td>1882</td>
<td>First standing committees (miniature houses) established, confirmed by standing orders in 1888 and expanded in number and importance in 1907</td>
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<td>1887</td>
<td>‘The Guillotine’: introduction of cut-off points for debating separate parts of urgent or major bills</td>
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<td>1896</td>
<td>‘The railway timetable’: fixed number of days for bills before closure (embodied in standing orders in 1902)</td>
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<td>1902</td>
<td>Introduction of written answers to parliamentary questions</td>
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private member’ by the 1880s. With plenty of scope left for independent activity, ministers clearly assumed control of the Commons much more by consent than coercion. Why, it must be asked, did the much revered ‘private member’ surrender his liberties so willingly?

The Increase of Public Business

Many accounts have focused attention on the unprecedented growth of parliamentary business in the 19th century as the key reason behind this development. ‘The great increase of debates and the annual accumulation of arrears of public business have combined to make it practically impossible for bills introduced by private MPs to become law, unless by the active assistance of the government’, observed a commentary of the 1860s. Charles Abbot, Speaker from 1802 to 1817, reckoned that the business of the House had almost doubled between 1801 and 1813 alone. Legislative output not only expanded in terms of its volume and complexity, from an average of 237 pages of public acts per year in 1831–2 to 514 in 1868–74, but was also accompanied by a burgeoning culture of investigation into the social and economic problems of the age. In these circumstances, it has been suggested, some restraint upon the ‘complete freedom’ enjoyed by private members and a broad acceptance of the necessity for leadership on complex issues became ‘inevitable’.

A closer look at how parliament dealt with all this state activity, however, suggests that its impact on the Commons was not as straightforward as many believed. Too much can be made of the supposed link between the expansion of public business and the squeeze on parliamentary time, and hence the private member. During the first three decades of the century, in particular, many traditional functions of the Commons were either delegated to civil servants or transferred to new bodies, in what amounted to a mini revolution in state management. In two areas in particular, changes were implemented that helped to limit the Commons’ exposure to external pressures.

The first concerns private bill legislation, which was of immense importance in providing the infrastructure and services associated with industrialization and urbanization. Mainly comprising bills for local projects (enclosures, roads, canals, railways, jails, harbours, bridges, gas, water, and lighting), the number of private acts passed in each session continued to exceed the number of public acts throughout the 19th century, with roughly 2,000 being passed per decade. What has been called a ‘landmark’ in their administration occurred in 1810, when Speaker Abbot

established a private bill office to oversee their preparation. With parliamentary agents taking on more and more of the routine work, and with the development of draft templates from the 1840s onwards, select committees on private bills often became little more than a rubber stamp. In a telling rejoinder to the widely held view that parliament was becoming ‘overwhelmed with business’, a Commons clerk with 16 years’ experience told an 1837 inquiry:

An unopposed bill is generally attended by only one Member ... The agent having previously submitted the bill to the chairman of committees in the other House ... he generally tells the Member that everything is right, that he need not give himself the trouble of looking into the clauses; he need only sign the bill and put his initials to the clauses, and in the course of five minutes a bill of considerable length is disposed of in that way, though the House has entrusted it to a committee to look narrowly into the matter.

The second area in which the Commons experienced limited exposure relates to parliamentary inquiries. From the 1790s onwards the number of select committees appointed to investigate matters of public concern steadily increased. Between 1801 and 1817 the number appointed per year doubled to almost 40. By the 1820s the select committee inquiry and its printed report had become the standard precursor to most public bills and an integral part of the wider perception of parliament as the so-called ‘grand inquest of the nation’. The growing use of royal commissions, however, gradually removed much of this work from the Commons, forestalling what might otherwise have become an overpowering task. Appointed directly by ministers and mostly staffed by up-and-coming lawyers, royal commissions had eclipsed committees as the main method of inquiry and basis for legislation by the late 1830s, when the number of select committees appointed per year fell back to its 1801 level.

Even in the area of public acts, where there was a doubling of output between 1832 and 1874, it does not follow that there was a corresponding increase in the demand on parliamentary time. Throughout the century various reforms helped to streamline the whole law-making process. Between 1848 and 1854, for instance, the number of occasions on which a bill could be fully debated on going to a vote was drastically cut, from 18 to just two, and a few years later the variety of amendments permitted at different stages was also whittled down. Another major development involved splitting the House into two or more miniature houses (standing committees), so that a number of different bills could be dealt with simultaneously. This was first implemented in 1882 and later augmented by standing orders in 1888 and 1907. By this latter date the pressure on

12 PP 1837–8 (679) xxiii, 439, minute 431.
Commons’ time had also started to be mitigated in an altogether different way, via the increasing use of delegated or secondary laws. Issued directly by government departments and other authorized bodies, the number of statutory instruments (the most common type of delegated law) rose substantially in the first decade of the 20th century, from 995 per year in 1900 to 1,368 by 1910, and continued to grow steadily thereafter.

For a variety of reasons then, the Commons did not become as ‘overwhelmed’ with business as is often assumed, and the decline of the private member cannot be directly attributed to the pressures of state expansion on parliamentary time. Of far greater importance was the growing tendency for MPs to speak and intervene in proceedings, not just in greater numbers but also more often and at increasing length.

The ‘Rage for Speaking’

The culture of speaking in the House remains something of an understudied phenomenon and accurately assessing this (or indeed any other) activity in the Commons is problematic, with no method being free from flaws. But what is abundantly clear from all the available evidence is an upward trend in terms of participation in debate, the asking of parliamentary questions, the moving of amendments, and voting in divisions. Before 1832 it has been estimated that the ‘speaking and business of the House’ was conducted by a hardcore of about 150 members (23%). This number rose to 231 (35%) in 1841, 300 (46%) in 1861 and 385 (59%) in 1876. The indexes to the debates in Hansard, listing members who spoke, asked questions, moved motions or otherwise intervened, show a similar trend. Whereas only 31% of the House merited inclusion in 1820, 60% were listed in 1833, 68% in 1874 and an impressive 86% in 1896. MPs like Henry Lowther (1812–67) or Sir Graham Montgomery (1852–80), who between them sat for 83 years without uttering a single word, still existed, of course. But by the 1830s they were fast becoming dinosaurs, a quaint reminder of a disappearing age of the lax attender and silent sycophant. As Sir Robert Inglis, Tory MP for Oxford University, noted around this time, ‘Formerly very few members were wont to address the House; now the speaking members are probably not less than four hundred.’

This widely noted tendency for more MPs to speak prompted one of the most significant but least studied procedural reforms of the 19th century, which marks a major divide between the Hanoverian Commons and its Victorian successor. The reform in question concerns the practice of petitioning parliament, usually in order to highlight a grievance or demand some form of action. As expressions of opinion, public petitions had become an essential ingredient of the wider perception of parliament as the ‘grand inquest of the nation’ and an important barometer of popular

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13 R. Heron, Notes (1850), 203.
14 Todd, Parliamentary Government, ii, 401.
feeling, and as such they enjoyed a privileged status. Petitions not only took priority over normal business, but could also be presented repeatedly from different places, even if they were on the same topic. Most crucial of all, each petition could be used to initiate a debate, in effect providing an opportunity for a subject to be discussed *ad infinitum*. This was less of a problem while the number of petitions remained modest. Between 1801 and 1805, for instance, roughly 250 were presented per year. By 1811–15, however, the number had more than quadrupled to 1,125 per annum; by 1827–31 it had risen to over 6,000; and by 1837–41 it had reached almost 17,600, a remarkable 70 times higher than at the start of the century.

Coupled with the growing tendency for MPs to speak, the petition and its associated debate became a defining feature of the early 19th-century Commons, and often hijacked the day's planned events. And though ostensibly initiated outdoors, they soon became a standard vehicle through which a campaigning MP (or group of MPs) might repeatedly pester the entire House with their particular obsession, as is amply demonstrated by the 900 or so petitions about Indian missionaries presented by William Wilberforce in 1813 or the incessant petitions for emigration schemes produced by Wilmot Horton during the 1820s. In short, public petitions became something of a fanatic's paradise, providing a determined minority with disproportionate access to the floor of an unprepared House.

Far more work needs to be done on the subtle devices used in the chamber to rein in the over-zealous – from verbal intimidation to complete walk-outs – but in this instance the remedy could not have been more bold. In 1833 debates on petitions were sidelined to morning sittings, when there was usually a very thin attendance. Two years later they were scrapped altogether, by an extraordinary informal agreement between the two front benches. How the broader culture of public petitioning was effected by this change remains unclear. Petitions continued to be presented to the Commons in their thousands, and to provide an invaluable means of popular expression. However, it is perhaps telling that the number of petitions presented per annum peaked at almost 34,000 in 1843, the very year in which the debates on them were formally abolished by standing order.

The tendency for more MPs to speak was clearly of central importance in triggering some of the key procedural reforms of the 19th century. But what lay behind this phenomenon? Why, as the Liberal MP Sir Robert Heron noted in 1833, were MPs becoming 'almost all seized with a rage for speaking'?¹⁵

**Parliament and the Public**

Two factors in particular have been singled out by historians, both of which helped to reconfigure the relationship between MPs and the public. The first concerns the electoral reforms of the 19th century, starting with

¹⁵ Heron, *Notes*, 203.
the 1832 Reform Act's disfranchisement (complete and partial) of 85 'rotten' boroughs and the creation of new constituencies, especially in the industrial north. The MPs elected for the newly enfranchised boroughs, it has been shown, were over twice as likely to participate in debate than those who had sat for the old 'rotten' boroughs, often as the silent nominee or paying guest of a patron. The role of electoral reform is examined in more detail further on. What it cannot explain, of course, is the rise of speaking that occurred before 1832. Between 1820 and 1828, for instance, there was a 20% increase in the number of MPs who warranted inclusion in the indexes of Hansard.

This is where the second factor, that of public interest in parliament, assumes a central significance. Since the 1770s unofficial reporting of Commons' speeches and proceedings had grown steadily, both in the expanding newspaper press and reviews such as the Parliamentary Register. The regency crisis and the war with France, in particular, then polarized political thinking and encouraged unprecedented levels of popular engagement with national politics. Press coverage of parliament exploded, and with it came literally hundreds of printed speeches, often issued as corrigenda to erroneous reports. (Some MPs even began to issue speeches before they had been given, or extended accounts of what they had intended to say.)

By 1803 public interest was sufficiently strong for William Cobbett to start publishing his version of the debates commercially – something that would be inconceivable today. Nine years later his Parliamentary Debates was taken over by Thomas Curson Hansard, whose family became synonymous with the title.

By then even the most obscure provincial newspapers were carrying verbatim reports of parliamentary debates, often on their front pages. Nationals like The Times and the Morning Chronicle provided in extenso accounts and division lists on an almost daily basis. Amazingly, this virtually continuous press coverage, with an estimated readership of above 2 million, occurred in direct contravention of the 'official' orders of the House of 1711 restricting the entry of strangers and the publication of proceedings, which were not lifted until 1845. Much has been made of the provision of a special 'press gallery' in this respect, in the temporary chamber used after the 1834 fire, an innovation which became a central feature of Barry's new building. But although there was no 'reporters gallery' as such in the old Commons, since 1803 the back seat of the 'strangers' gallery had been reserved for their exclusive use by the doorkeepers, who received three guineas a session from an estimated 60 to 70 reporters. They also had their own 'rest room' above the division lobby where they could wait their turn. As one historian has recently suggested, in terms of public awareness of parliamentary business, 'something akin to an “information revolution”' had already occurred by the 1830s.16

16 Jupp, Governing of Britain, 207.
Hansard and the Printed Parliamentary Debates

Thomas Curson Hansard (1776–1833) was the eldest son of Luke Hansard (1752–1828), whose printing business, the largest in London, was responsible for the printing of parliamentary materials under the authority of the Speaker of the Commons. In 1805 Thomas Hansard purchased his own printing business. From 1809 he took over the printing of William Cobbett’s Political Register, and in the immediately following years three other major publications by Cobbett: Parliamentary Debates, Parliamentary History and State Trials. In 1812 he purchased all four from the financially embarrassed Cobbett. ‘While Cobbett had the foresight to initiate these important publications, Hansard had the determination and industry to continue their production on a regular basis ... the main burden of the work fell on Hansard, whose Parliamentary Debates was soon recognized as the standard record.’ Thomas Hansard’s eldest son, named after his grandfather Thomas Curson (1813–91) continued to publish the debates until 1889.

Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates was, however, not a first-hand record of what was spoken in parliament, being collated from press reports. Yet it provided a much fuller report of debates than any one paper, and without any suspicion of bias. Thomas Curson Hansard the younger received a public subsidy from 1877 ‘on condition he included reports of debates on private bills, committee debates on supply and public bills, and post-midnight debates, areas that were largely ignored in the public prints. It therefore became necessary for him to employ his own reporters in the Press Gallery’. After 1889 Hansard was published by a series of printers, for whom, however, it became an increasingly burdensome financial commitment, and the problems of delay and inadequate reporting did not satisfy MPs. Thus in 1909 the Commons set up its own reporting staff and the officially printed 5th series ran to 1981 and the 6th series saw the separation of the Lords’ reports into their own volumes.

Soon after 1833 Hansard became a colloquial term for the published record of parliamentary debates. In 1909, with the establishment of the official reports of debates, the name of Hansard disappeared from their titles. However, in 1943 the Commons reinstated the name to the title page, and it is now used in many Commonwealth parliaments.


This connection between greater publicity and the ‘rage for speaking’ was clearly recognized by MPs themselves, though not always viewed favourably. As one disgruntled tory noted in 1833:

In consequence of the publication of debates, Members were anxious that their constituents should see that they took part in the
discussion, and the consequence was that honourable gentlemen delivered arguments that had been urged by former speakers, not regarding what had been previously stated, provided they had the opportunity of delivering their sentiments.\textsuperscript{17}

The perception that the Commons was becoming, in effect, a platform for addressing the entire nation, rather than a \textit{de facto} debating chamber, as this MP implied, clearly had all sorts of implications for parliamentary oratory. The few studies of ‘public speech’ currently available suggest that the kind of deliberative rhetoric associated with the age of Pitt and Fox, with its penchant for classical allusions, gradually fell out of favour after their deaths in 1806, to be replaced by a more theatrical and declamatory style of oratory which was more akin to preaching and better suited to public consumption.\textsuperscript{18} The effect of banning the reporters (or audience) could be dramatic. When the Irish MP Daniel O’Connell had the regulations enforced and made MPs debate behind ‘closed doors’ in 1833, following a row with the press, it was noted that:

The absence of strangers and reporters had a most paralysing effect on their eloquence. There was no animation in their manner, scarcely an attempt at that wit and sarcasm at each other’s expense so often made on other occasions. Their speeches were dull in the highest degree, and ... had the merit of being short ... The secret of all this was, they knew their eloquence would not grace the newspapers of the following morning.\textsuperscript{19}

Public interest in parliament not only helped to reshape the nature of political discourse in the Commons, but also the very notion of the politician himself. It is no exaggeration to say that by mid-century parliamentary debates had become one of the mass entertainments of the Victorian age, assuming a role not unlike a soap-opera, and that many MPs had acquired the equivalent status of modern celebrities. ‘We come here’, declared Disraeli, ‘for fame’.\textsuperscript{20} Politicians, of course, had long been feted and commemorated, most notably by their own class. What was different about the 19th century was the scale of popular engagement with political figures and the growing commercialization that ensued, with spin-off products and publications catering for every taste and pocket. Fuelled by a cult of domesticity bordering on the obsessive, non-elite Victorians crammed their homes with political mementos and trinkets ranging from pottery busts and transferware to medallions and paperweights, all of which tended to glorify the individual politician rather than the political

\textsuperscript{17} Hansard, \textit{Parliamentary Debates}, 3rd ser., xv, 1013 (C. W. Wynn).

\textsuperscript{18} J. S. Meisel, \textit{Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone} (New York, 2001), passim.

\textsuperscript{19} [Grant], \textit{Random Recollections}, 48–9.

\textsuperscript{20} Cited in G. H. L. Le May, \textit{The Victorian Constitution: Conventions and Contingencies} (1979), 154.
event. The ‘cult’ of the politician had arrived. At another level, the diaries, letters, memoirs and biographies of MPs began to be published on a hitherto unprecedented scale, sometimes only a few years after the events they described. Political tracts and treatises also sold well, but the real sensation of the period was the political novel, that fictional blend of hustings satire and state-of-the-nation theorizing most conspicuously associated with Dickens and Disraeli.

This public hunger for politics in the broader sense was essentially a cultural phenomenon, and as such has yet to receive the multi-faceted and inter-disciplinary treatment it deserves. Electoral reform and the development of political parties, however, also played a crucial role in reconfiguring the relationship between the Commons and the public, as the last section makes clear.

Electoral Reform

The three reform acts of the 19th century – 1832, 1867, 1884/5 – dramatically increased the number of (male) voters who could vote in parliamentary elections as well as redistributing seats to new places of importance. In this sense, these reforms amply deserved the status accorded them by earlier generations of historians, as milestones ‘on the path to democracy’ that helped ensure Britain’s peaceful transition to modern representative government. Table 2 presents the basic data associated with these major extensions of the UK franchise, including an estimate of the proportion of adult males who were entitled to vote before and after each reform.

I use the term ‘estimate’ advisedly, as recent scholarship on the nature and impact of electoral reform has identified a whole raft of problems

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Table 2: UK electors and constituencies, 1801–1911

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Estimated no. of electors</th>
<th>Percentage of adult male population</th>
<th>No. of constituencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1801</td>
<td>503,640</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831</td>
<td>497,197*</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>811,443</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>1,364,000</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>2,477,713</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>3,152,000</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>5,708,000</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>7,904,000</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>643</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* About 175,000 Irish freeholders were disfranchised in 1829, as part of the ‘securities’ that accompanied the admission of Catholics as MPs (Catholic emancipation). It was not until 1850, with the passage of the Irish Franchise Act, that the extra qualifications placed on Irish electors were effectively lifted.

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affecting traditional quantitative approaches to electoral history. Not only do the available figures for the electorate include ‘plural voters’, meaning individuals with votes in more than one constituency, but they also tend to count individuals with multiple voting qualifications within each constituency more than once. The resulting duplicate entries on the post-1832 registers may have inflated the size of the electorate as much as 10–20%, severely compromising studies of electoral turnout, for example. The difference between the number who in theory had ‘the right to vote’ (the electorate) and the number who actually had the ‘opportunity’ to vote (the so-called ‘voterate’) was further complicated throughout this period by the continued existence of uncontested elections, in which there were no rival candidates and hence no poll. It has long been assumed by historians that uncontested elections occurred because of political inactivity, and that plotting the number of contested elections therefore provides some form of barometer of political vibrancy. But as my own work on electioneering has shown, uncontested elections often occurred precisely because the intensity of pre-election political campaigning had made the outcome of a poll inevitable, persuading one side to withdraw and avoid the expense of a pointless contest. At the same time many contested polls, far from being genuine struggles, were simply token or ‘vexatious’ oppositions whipped up by local troublemakers, sometimes by proposing ‘phantom’ candidates who never even showed up.  

It is for these and similar reasons that this chapter offers none of the commentary usually associated with the data in the first two columns of Table 2, but instead concentrates on the issues raised by the final column, which simply shows the number of UK constituencies.

It often comes as a surprise to those unfamiliar with this period to learn that an extra 263 parliamentary constituencies had been created by 1885, an increase of some 70% on the number that existed in 1801. More surprise follows the discovery that this dramatic increase of constituencies occurred without any significant rise in the number of MPs. Instead, the number of MPs grew by only a dozen (barely 2%), from a norm of 658 from 1801–85 to 670 thereafter. How was such an apparently conflicting alteration possible?

The answer is that before the 1885 Redistribution Act most constituencies elected two MPs (a few even more), and most electors therefore had two votes. The ability of each elector to deploy just one of these votes, by casting a ‘plumper’, or to cast votes between candidates from different parties, in what was termed a ‘splitter’ or ‘split vote’, created a highly complex set of electoral dynamics at the constituency level, where voters faced some six choices if there were three candidates and an astonishing ten options if there were four, and 15 if there were five. The range of subtle and overt campaigning devices that accompanied this system, in which

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the withholding of a vote could prove as influential as casting it, made for an entirely different culture of electoral politics to that associated with the modern single-member constituency. By electing both a winner and a runner-up, double-member seats injected an important element of proportional (or minority) representation into Victorian democracy. Most important of all, they offered the opportunity for ‘mixed’ returns of MPs from different parties, through which non-partisan forms of electoral behaviour and local cultures of political independence might be cultivated and sustained. By contrast, single-member constituencies, as the political economist Nassau Senior noted in 1850, were apt to disfranchise all but the members of a single party.23

By assessing the level of cross-party votes cast in these double-member seats (split-votes and non-partisan plumps), historians have charted the growing significance of party-based voting behaviour in British elections during the 19th century. Scholars disagree about the speed of this development, with some opting for 1832 and others for 1867 as a major turning point. They also prioritize different reasons for the rise of voter partisanship, with some arguing that the expansion of the electorate made personal campaigns impossible and the party platform indispensable, and others blaming the activities of local party associations or changes in political culture, such as those mentioned earlier. The overall move towards an electoral system dominated by national parties, however, is beyond dispute. Figure 1, based on a sample involving some 4.5 million voters, shows the percentage of cross-party votes cast in double-member seats at general

elections held between 1818 and 1910. The broad trend, though far from linear, is clear. Whereas some 40% of electors cast a cross-party vote in 1818, 1830 and 1847, from 1868 onwards the proportion never exceeded 10.5%. By December 1910 it was barely 6%.

The Development of Parties

These findings are important not only in terms of charting electoral partisanship, but also in terms of helping to explain one of the most dramatic developments within the Commons during the 19th century, namely the rise of party-based voting in the division lobbies. A number of statistical surveys employing ‘roll-call analysis’ have concluded that ‘the more split votes an MP received when elected, the more often he dissented from his party’s position in parliament’. In addition, MPs from different parties showed a greater propensity to defy their party whip if they had been elected alongside a party rival. This latter finding, in particular, would seem to indicate that there was a genuine ‘local basis to indiscipline’ in the lobbies, and that any long-term decline in the level of cross-party voting in elections, such as that revealed in Figure 1, ought to have been accompanied by a corresponding drop in cross-bench voting among MPs.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of ‘whipped’ divisions in certain years in which more than one out of ten MPs dissented from their party line and cast a cross-bench vote. After reaching very high levels in the 1850s and 1860s, following the split of the Conservative Party and the subsequent confusion of party alignments, indiscipline in the lobbies began to decline as the two main parties regrouped. This drop in cross-bench voting, though again not smooth, became most conspicuous from the late 1880s onwards, when dissidence plummeted to new lows. By 1903 only 14% of the divisions were failing to produce a strict two-party vote. Modern party-cohesion, or at least something approaching it, had arrived.

A broad correlation between the rise of party voting in the electorate and in the legislature seems pretty clear from these two sets of data. Indeed, it has often been suggested that partisanship in the Commons grew out of partisanship in the constituencies. What, of course, is not revealed in this analysis is the declining significance of the double-member seat itself in British electoral politics. As the number of multi-member seats fell, the type of cross-party voting shown in Figure 1 became a form of behaviour restricted to fewer and fewer constituencies. It therefore affected fewer MPs. Before the 1832 Reform Act, for example, 274 (72%) of the UK’s 380 constituencies were multi-member. Cross-party voting in these circumstances therefore had the potential to influence 552 MPs (almost 84% of the total). The 1832 and 1867 reforms, however, reduced the number of these constituencies to 224 out of 420 (53%), lowering the

number of MPs affected to 462 (70%). From a situation in which almost three-quarters of the UK’s constituencies were multi-member in 1832, the proportion had fallen to a little over a half 35 years later. This development alone suggests an important dimension to the rise of partisanship, both locally and nationally, which has yet to be fully explored.

It was the 1885 Redistribution Act’s almost complete abolition of multi-member seats, however, which most dramatically transformed the UK’s political landscape and ushered in a new age of party. Just 27 double-member seats survived this wholesale destruction of the old electoral communities and their replacement by artificial ‘winner-takes-all’ single-member districts. Cross-party voting was now only feasible in 4% of the United Kingdom’s 643 constituencies, and at best could influence a mere 54 MPs (8% of the total). By far the most salient feature of Figure 1, in this context, is not so much the overall decline of cross-party voting across the century, but the continued existence of non-partisan behaviour in the handful of places where it was still possible. In 1906, for instance, the level of cross-party voting in the remaining double-member constituencies was 10.5%, a rate almost identical to that experienced 65 years earlier in the 1841 election. What had mattered numerically in 1841, however, when there were 248 multiple-member seats electing 505 MPs, had by 1906 become an irrelevance, a quaint reminder of a by-gone age of ‘splitters’ and ‘plumps’ and ‘mixed’ returns. Non-partisan voting clearly still clung on, wherever it was possible, but the very small number of double-member seats after 1885 meant that it no longer played any part in national political life.

Other factors, of course, reinforced these trends. The gradual
elimination of ‘treating’ in elections and the introduction of strict spending limits, mainly as a result of the Corrupt Practices Acts of 1854 and 1883, obliged candidates to rely ever more on the army of volunteers that only nationally oriented party associations could muster, intensifying a tendency already apparent after each extension of the franchise. The adoption of the secret ballot in 1872 also helped to undermine the electoral significance of local influences and personal allegiances, although the use of numbered ballot papers (unlike the so-called Australian ballot) did not provide the complete anonymity that many had hoped for and probably mitigated any effect before the enfranchisement of 2.5 million new voters in 1884. More broadly, the increasing reliance on party ties in the constituencies necessitated greater control in the lobbies, since no elector would wish to support a party that was too undisciplined to deliver its policies once elected. The number of whips therefore steadily increased, from a maximum of three per party before 1880 to seven by 1895. Local party associations also began to select candidates themselves, for much the same reasons, and many of the traditional links between MPs and their constituencies started to disappear. Between 1868 and 1900, for instance, it has been estimated that there was a halving in the overall incidence of direct connections, such as an MP owning property or having been born in the constituency. Even the socio-economic composition of the Commons, for so long dominated by the landed aristocracy, began to alter, with a steady rise in the number of MPs having industrial, commercial and financial interests becoming evident after 1868, although most of these were also landowners. Real change in this respect, including a substantial influx of workers’ representatives, would have to await the introduction of MPs’ salaries in 1911.

Summary
The developments outlined in this chapter provided the United Kingdom with a recognizably modern Commons, dominated by ministers and elected by a representative system where voters polled for candidates of nationally organized parties led by a potential prime minister. The decline of the private MP and the huge rise of popular interest in parliamentary politics were fundamental in bringing this about. Within the House itself, it was not so much the increase of state business as the ‘rage for speaking’ that forced the pace of change, leading to a growth of ministerial control over proceedings that was for the most part consensual rather than coercive. In the constituencies, meanwhile, an ever-expanding electorate and restrictions on spending undermined older forms of personal campaigning and necessitated an ever greater reliance on the party platform and party association. The dominance of party, however, was far from complete. Traditional idioms of non-partisan politics lingered on, especially in the double-member seats, affecting voters and MPs alike. And it is here that the move to single-member districts, first gradually and then
overwhelmingly in 1885, assumes a central significance. By altering the
basic unit of Victorian representation and eliminating electoral cross-par-
tisanship, the primary modes of political engagement were transformed
and the two-party system became far more permanently entrenched both
locally and nationally. With the obvious exception of universal (includ-
ing female) suffrage, the foundations of the 20th-century representative
system were now in place. The extent to which a Commons elected by
such a system should have the right to dominate both houses of parlia-
ment, however, had yet to be decided.

Chronology

1801
Act of Union with Ireland adds 100 Irish MPs, bringing total membership to
658

1803
Reporters unofficially allotted seats in public gallery; William Cobbett starts
Parliamentary Debates, later taken over by T. C. Hansard

1810
Private bill office established by Speaker Abbott to oversee private legislation

1829
Catholic emancipation enables Catholics to formally sit as MPs

1832
Great Reform Act (England and Wales) redistributes 143 seats and extends
franchise to new groups, including £50 occupiers in counties and £10
householders in boroughs; measures also passed for Ireland and Scotland

1834
Commons chamber and surrounding buildings destroyed by fire; Commons
moves into House of Lords (formerly Court of Requests)

1836
Charles Barry wins public competition to rebuild Palace of Westminster

1836
Commons starts to publish official division lists

1841
Fine Arts Commission established to oversee decoration of new palace

1841–2
Acts to prevent bribery in elections and increase powers of election committees

1845
Orders prohibiting entry of strangers and the publication of debates formally
repealed

1850
New Commons Chamber used for the first time

1850
Irish Franchise Act enfranchises £12 occupiers in counties and £8 occupiers in
boroughs
1854
Bribery Act restricts bribery and ‘treating’ in elections

1855
Chairman of ways and means (who presides over committees of whole House) assumes role of deputy Speaker

1858
Repeal of Act requiring MPs to own property worth £600 in a county and £300 in a borough

1867
Second Reform Act (England and Wales) redistributes 52 seats and extends franchise to new groups, including borough householders (resident ratepayers and £10 lodgers); measures also passed for Ireland and Scotland

1869
Compound ratepayers (whose rates are included in their rents) formally enfranchised

1872
Ballot Act: secret ballot introduced for municipal and parliamentary elections

1883
Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act restricting election expenditure

1884
Third Reform Act (England and Wales) extends franchise to resident householders and lodgers in counties and £10 occupiers of business premises; measures also passed for Ireland and Scotland

1885
Redistribution Act: single-member constituencies become the norm

1902
Second deputy Speaker appointed

1909
Parliament takes over Hansard, which becomes verbatim and official

1909
House of Lords rejects ‘People’s Budget’

1911
Payment of MPs: £400 a year plus expenses; Parliament Act: Lords loses control of money bills and its powers reduced to two-year delay

Further Reading


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