

# “What Is the Point of Parliamentary Debate?” Deliberation, Oratory, Opposition and Spectacle in the British House of Commons<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article seeks to open up debate about Parliamentary debate by exploring the history of ideas about Parliamentary debate and rhetoric through the lens of four core concepts: deliberation, oratory, opposition and spectacle. These are not the names of singular ideas let alone schools of thought; they are conceptual fields each of which gives a particular shape to ways of conceiving, criticizing and defending Commons debate. In mapping this topos – identifying historical debates and practices alongside contemporary arguments found in political theory, political science and Rhetoric – I show that our thinking and arguing about the Commons is part of a contested and ongoing history more complex than we acknowledge. I argue that Parliamentary Debate has a number of purposes and that our thinking about it, and evaluation of it, should not be contained within the frame of “deliberation” but should also take account of the political value and importance of oratory, opposition and spectacle.

Keywords: parliaments, Westminster, rhetoric, oratory, loyal opposition, deliberation, political spectacle

## Introduction

At the heart of British democracy is a place for speaking, discussion and parley: Parliament. But love for Parliamentary talk seems scarce. The 2014 *Hansard Society* report on political engagement found that while two thirds of people thought Parliament “essential for our democracy”, only 51% agreed that it “debates and takes decisions about issues that matter to me” (Hansard Society,

2014a: 59). Focus-group research into attitudes towards PMQs – the most famous House of Commons speaking ritual – found people describing it as a pantomime, a pathetic spectacle, a playground scene and “theatre – as in farce” (Hansard Society, 2014b: 5–6). Political Scientists are scarcely more encouraging. A recent comparative and quantitative study confirms the feeling of lay observers when it concludes that “Parliamentary speech rarely has persuasive effects on policymaking. MPs do not normally take the floor with the intention of actually convincing their colleagues of the virtue of their position...” (Proksch and Slapin, 2015: 174). Given this it seems fair to ask what, if anything, is the point of Parliamentary debate?

This is a question asked (sometimes indirectly) in a number of different disciplines and subfields and receiving a variety of different answers. In political science Proksch and Slapin (2015) have identified the benefits politicians hope to gain for themselves via Parliamentary speaking, and McLean (2001) has shown how it enables successful “heresthetical” maneuvers. Interpretive approaches have explored how the symbolic and ceremonial aspects of debate serve to reproduce hierarchical norms of Parliamentary culture (Lovenduski, 2012; Rai et al., 2010) and ideological discourses (e.g. Jarvis and Legrand, 2016). Beyond political science there is excellent work on the uses and effects of Parliamentary activities from fields such as Anthropology (Crewe, 2010; 2015), Linguistics (e.g. Ilie, 2001; Shaw, 2000) and Psychology (e.g. Bull and Wells, 2012).

To these I want to contribute further insights from the history and theory of rhetoric and from political theory, as it renews its interest in political institutions and practices such as Parliamentary debate. As Waldron argues, political theorists should inquire into “the way our political institutions house and frame our disagreements about social ideals and orchestrate what is done about whatever aims we can settle on” (2013: 8–9). Excellent work in this vein includes Weale et al. (2012) which cleverly combined empirical analysis of Commons debate with its evaluation against norms of deliberative reciprocity (see also Steiner et al., 2005). In the present article, however, my aim is not to evaluate Commons debate against some fundamental principle. Instead I take it that part of “the housing” of our political institutions is how we conceive of them – the historical institutions of thought about rhetoric and argument. These form the unfinished (and sometimes unsettled) foundation of our political practices, being simultaneously source and object of dispute.

In this article, then, I seek to remind us of the complexity and contingency of these foundations by looking at some of the history of ideas about Parliamentary debate and rhetoric through the lens of four core concepts: deliberation, oratory, opposition and spectacle. These are not the names of singular ideas let alone schools of thought; they are conceptual fields each of which gives a particular shape to ways of conceiving, criticizing and defending Com-

mons debate. I look at each in turn, discussing historical debates and practices alongside contemporary arguments found in political theory, political science and in the study of rhetoric. In mapping this *topos* I show that our thinking and arguing about the Commons is part of a contested and ongoing history more complex than we usually acknowledge. It certainly exceeds the frame of “deliberation”. In the concluding section I reflect on how appreciating this might affect our thinking about, and research into, parliamentary debate and its reform. Thus the article is intended as a contribution to political theories of rhetoric and democracy but also, and perhaps above all, to Parliamentary Studies.

## Deliberation

The primary way in which we conceive of, analyse and evaluate Commons debate is in relation to ideas of deliberation and rationality. The founding exemplar of this way of thinking is of course Jeremy Bentham. *Political Tactics* (written in 1791 but published in 1843) was not hugely influential in Great Britain. It was more important in France, Spain, Argentina and elsewhere (James et al., 1999: xxxv–xxxviii). But its ideas were known to the Mills and other nineteenth-century reformers and it exemplifies key aspects of the deliberative conception of Parliaments. In the book Bentham presented his design of a Parliamentary building and a procedure which would make it possible to “obtain in its most genuine purity the real and enlightened will of the assembly” (1999: 70). He proceeded negatively, justifying each of his rules as “the prevention of an evil” and the removal of an obstacle on the path to a clearly expressed will (1999: 17). For example, Bentham worried that if in the chamber “any of the seats are so distant that the voice with difficulty reaches them, attention being rendered painful, will not be long sustained”, delegates, unable to concentrate on what is being said, may be “obliged to decide upon a borrowed opinion” (1999: 45) and the primary quality required of participants be not “mental superiority” but physical advantage in the form of sufficient lung capacity to speak across the hall.

With such challenges in mind Bentham proposed that the debating chamber be a circular amphitheatre at the centre of which would be an elaborate mechanism for display of the motions to be decided: a gallery above the chair of the presiding officer, composed of frames of nine feet by six and visible from everywhere. It would prevent “irregular movements, reciprocal interruptions, confusion and noise” and enable the smooth delivery of arguments since nobody would have to remember the motion: “There ought not to be a necessity of seeking for words when there is already too much to do in seeking for argu-

ment", he wrote, and "the hesitation occasioned by such a search disturbs the current of the thoughts" (Bentham, 1999: 46). The "table of motions" would "contribute to the perfection of the debate" protecting against errors, "insidious representations" and digressions which arise from "weakness of the mind" (Bentham 1999: 47). Bentham is alert to the material and physical aspects of Parliamentary debate but what underlies his concerns with design is characteristic of more disembodied theories of deliberation: a desire to unify the elements of the debate process, bringing reading, thinking, speaking and listening into an alignment such that, from their interaction, the rational and common might crystallize and be incontrovertibly apparent to all.

This way of thinking is also evident in Bentham's *Handbook of Political Fallacies* written as a response to W.G. Hamilton's *Parliamentary Logick*. Hamilton served in the Commons from 1754 to 1796. Famous for delivering a lauded oration at the start of his career but never speaking again "single speech Hamilton" (as he was known) attended closely to the speeches of others and compiled a handbook to aid the would-be Parliamentarian (published posthumously in 1808). It consists of a series of maxims and aphorisms, some of which are versions of themes from classical rhetoric while others are of his own invention or specification. He advises one to consider "what ought to be proved, and how probably it will be evaded... you know the consequences you want; find out a principle to justify them" and then presents techniques with which to do so. As Palonen observes, with advice such as "When an argument is brought to prove one thing, shew that it likewise prove another" (Hamilton, 1808: 2) and to debate by running a "vice into a virtue, and vice versa" Hamilton indicates how deeply was the eighteenth-century Parliament embedded in a Renaissance rhetorical culture of argumentation rather different from that idealized by Philosophical radicals or by contemporary post-Kantian theorists of the public sphere and ideal speech situation.

Bentham did not approve: "What Machiavelli has sometimes been supposed to have aimed at" he wrote, Hamilton "not only aims at, but aims at it without disguise" (Bentham, 1952: 12). He condemned Hamilton for treating Parliament as "a sort of gaming-house" in which "disingenuousness, lying, hypocrisy, fallacy - all are the instruments employed by the players on both sides for obtaining advantages in the game" (1952: 13). He hoped that his Handbook would aid in the elimination of rhetorical actions such as appeals to "ancient" authority and the "hobgoblin argument" (better known today as "project fear"). These, Bentham wrote, should be met "not with a cry of 'Order! Order!' but with voices in scores crying aloud 'Stale! Stale! Fallacy of Authority! Fallacy of Distrust.'" (1952: 259)

Bentham's ideal Assembly was built on the rejection of Renaissance practices of disputation (to which we shall return shortly). He wanted to perfect a circuit of communication by cleansing debate of the sorts of language and

argument that might disrupt the manifestation of the will of the assembly. Underlying this is the conviction that the rational common will already exists and is waiting to be distilled from deliberations which are revelatory rather than constitutive. Failure triggers a search for the element which hinders the process so that it may be subtracted and the equation resolved.

Such thinking has shaped many arguments about how Commons debate should work – past and present, favourable and critical. For example, Schmitt, in his diagnosis of the “crisis” of Parliamentary Democracy (1923) who describes Bentham as a “fanatic of Liberal rationality” embraces the utilitarian’s conception of Parliamentary deliberation so as to claim that it is now hopelessly redundant. According to Schmitt the “intellectual foundation” of Parliaments lies not in their representative nature but their commitment to “a process of confrontation of differences and opinions” out of which a political will is established. He defines Parliamentary debate as “an exchange of opinion that is governed by the purpose of persuading one’s opponent through argument of the truth or justice of something, or allowing oneself to be persuaded of something as true and just” (Schmitt, 1923: 5). Laws, then, are made on the basis of a clash of opinions rather than of interests, and debate requires “independence from party ties and freedom from selfish interests”: “public debate and public discussion, parley” writes Schmitt takes place “without taking democracy into account”. But in mass democracy parties represent economic and social interests, winning assent for their authority through propaganda and appeals to the passions. Parliament thus no longer has an intellectual foundation or meaning. Popular representation has upset the balance of power and debates are now a “façade” (1923: 49) hiding the fact that “all public business has become an object of spoils and compromise” (1923: 4). In a striking image Schmitt describes the norms and rules of Parliament as “like a superfluous decoration, useless and even embarrassing as though someone had painted the radiator of a modern central heating system with red flames in order to give the appearance of a blazing fire” (1923: 6).

What interests me here is that Schmitt cleaves to the Benthamite formulation even as he opposes Parliament. He wants to show that deliberation is corrupted by the intrusion of parties and sectional interests so that we will agree on the need to remove them in order for the national will to be made manifest. It’s a line of thought that would ultimately lead Schmitt to advocate *Führerprinzip*. The step from wanting to purify deliberation through subtraction to subtracting deliberation altogether is not a hard one to take. And something like the Schmittian charge that Parliament has been corrupted by parties, elections or sectional interests is a commonplace across ideological lines. It is there in Miliband’s criticisms in *The State in Capitalist Society* and in Lord Hailsham’s famous lecture on “elective dictatorship” which argued that “Until recently, debate and argument dominated the Parliamentary scene. Now it is

the whips and the party caucus. More and more, debate, where is not actually curtailed, is becoming a ritual dance, sometimes interspersed with catcalls" (Hailsham, 1976). Of course, the point here is not to suggest that Miliband or Hailsham are Schmittians. Rather, it is that a concept of deliberation shapes celebratory conceptions of Parliamentary debate *and* critical accounts of its decline. It inspires reformers to look for sources of corruption, obstacles or absences which prevent the emergence of a settled will. That may lead to efforts to purify the deliberative process by ensuring that Members act as unsullied representatives. Alternatively, it may lead to demands for a more "descriptive representation" such that the debaters more precisely mirror those on whose behalf they debate. In both cases the "problematic" – the "matrix or the angle from which it will become possible and even necessary to formulate a certain number of precise problems" (Maniglier, 2012: 173) – is the same: how to assemble and arrange the elements of the deliberative process such that the true will is revealed.

In *Political Tactics* Bentham recommended that members wear a distinctive form of dress so that there should never be any uncertainty as to who was who, and who was authorized to be where they were (in James et al., 1999: 51–2). It is a rule indicative of the approach: good deliberation requires the institution of boundaries between inside and outside which prevent contamination and corruption. Schmitt was opposed to the inclusion within debate of the interests of the people outside; left-wing critics are hostile to the presence inside the chamber of private and powerful class interests; radical democratic critics want more of the outside to be on the inside. Within this problematic the deliberative conception can seem like it encompasses the entire universe of debate about Parliamentary debate. It does not.

## Oratory

Deliberation is the most common and the dominant framework for assessments and interpretations of Commons debate. But it is only one such framework. Historically, almost as common have been those which focus on oratory. However, as democracy extended and deepened, and as the boundary between the inside and outside of Parliament became blurred and contested, there was increased critical discussion of the extent to which such "dignified" speech compromised the demands of "efficiency" – a discussion countered by claims about the intrinsic qualities of great oratory.

In the nineteenth-century encomia on the fine art of Parliamentary debate were both invocations of a lost Golden Age and ideological celebrations of a "unique" English liberty (Palonen, 2016). Erskine May, closing the first vol-

ume of his *Constitutional History of England* with a review of Parliamentary oratory, called it “an honour and ornament to our history” and “one of the proud results of our free constitution” (May, 1861: 480). His assessments focused on the beauty, skill and genius of individual Parliamentarians, the passion or authority of their delivery, the vividness of their language and their wit. But May realised that styles were changing to suit the needs of a new kind of government. Excellence in debate had suffered from the “multiplied demands of public affairs” (1861: 495) and Parliamentarians addressed themselves “more to reason and less to the imagination, the feeling and the passions of their audience”. Further, “They confront not only the members of their own body but the whole people – who are rather to be convinced by argument than persuaded by the fascination of the orator” (1861: 490). Here, in contrast to the Benthamite, deliberative perspective, publicity is thought to contribute to a decline in Parliamentary oratory by making it more reasonable and this is accounted a loss.

Decline is a commonplace of writing about Parliamentary Oratory. Before May we find it, for example, in DeQuincey for whom the prevalence of bills on matters such as roads, energy companies and the exchequer rendered “the face of public business vulgarized by details” (DeQuincey, 1828: 154) and before that in Hume, writing in 1742, for whom eloquence had sadly declined far below classical precedent. Throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth-century reflections on Parliamentary eloquence hark back to past glories while emphasizing that their time has passed. Lord Curzon, in his reflections on *Modern Parliamentary Eloquence* delivered at Oxford in 1913, lamented that oratory was no longer recognised as an art (Curzon, 1913: 4). There were, he suggested, still those in whom “the silver of ordinary speech is turned into gold on his lips” and whose speech “strikes a chord in our heart which thrills as though it has been touched by celestial fingers” – but these were the minority. Decline, he thought, had a number of causes not least that a Parliament composed of members who had neither read Demosthenes nor translated Cicero, learning instead from the debating society and platform, was no longer a place for the leisurely exchange of quotation and allusion (1913: 11); members were uninterested in “imagery, metaphor, antithesis, alliteration, trope”. But the root of the change was that Parliament had of necessity become “a gigantic workshop” (1913: 13) preoccupied with an increased volume of legislation making members ever busier in the libraries, reading rooms and lobbies rather than in the chamber. Outside the House, press reporting and the rise of the platform had drained the energy from Commons debate and injected it with the anxiety of publicity. The rise of the whips, the “tyranny of the party machine” had destroyed the independence of mind necessary for great oratory giving rise to speeches of a standard, conventional and commonplace kind.

This aesthetic conception of Commons debate – the view that it should be beautiful, powerful and moving and that the opposite is evidence of decline – is part of a history of thinking for which eloquence is both a cause and an index of virtue. It is a classical idea, reinvigorated – with ambivalence – in eighteenth-century Britain (Potkay, 1994). In the nineteenth-century it was identified with an aristocratic conception of politics and, by supporters and opponents alike, opposed to egalitarian and thus demotic ideas of politics. Debate about debate, about what politics should sound like, was a vehicle for arguments about what politics should be like, the functions of Parliament, and the risks and benefits of substituting a chamber of gentlemen thinking for one of bureaucrats doing.

In his study of nineteenth-century writings on Parliaments Palonen (2016) shows practitioners and observers working themselves out from under classical oratorical precedent, recognizing and refining a specifically Parliamentary form of disputation requiring skills quite different from those needed for the beautiful oration: shorter speeches, a Parliamentary persona, skill in silencing opponents. In the twentieth-century this developed into claims about the redundancy of Parliamentary debate. Balfour, in a 1924 speech, could “not imagine anything less suited to the efficient administration of public affairs than a House of Commons... entirely composed of ingenious and eloquent orators” (quoted in Palonen, 2016: 127). On the other side of the political spectrum not all would go quite as far as G.D.H. Cole but he was far from alone in feeling – in the context of economic and political crisis – that no socialist government should lose hundreds of its members “to sit day after day in Parliament listening to one another talk” when they might be doing “pioneering” work. Parliament, he suggested, should meet ‘only so often as needed for some clearly practical purposes’ adding that “there will be no time for superfluous debating while we are busy building the Socialist commonwealth” (Cole, 1933: 73). For both Balfour and Cole Commons debate is conceived of as distracting from complex legislative issues requiring specialist knowledge. Laski, in 1944, noted how the substance of debates had shifted from matters of quality to quantity, from great and general issues such as Ireland, toleration and the franchise to “the future of export trade, the ownership and control of the mining industry, and the amount of the allowance for the dependents of men and women in the forces”. Under such conditions, he continued, “...the type of oration which, as with Mr. Burke, was a spoken book, or with Mr. Gladstone, was like a Bach cantata, is utterly unsuited to the medium involved” (Laski, 1944: 350).

The evaluation of styles of Parliamentary oratory changes as part of a broader change in the theory and practice of government, one which is in part legitimated by the distinction between an aristocratic and aesthetic form of speech and another which is technical, practical and businesslike; between what Oakeshott would, in 1959, see as the language suited to a free society of

“conversationalists” and that of practical activity made from words with agreed symbolism and learned through imitation (Oakeshott, 1962). Bernard Crick, in a Fabian Pamphlet published in the same year thought the strong executive demanded publicity and criticism (Crick, 1959: 2) but that these could be engendered through professionalization: increased office support for MPs, better research facilities, the refinement of specialist scrutinizing committees. Informed and well-disseminated criticism could be encouraged and facilitated but not primarily in the debating chamber itself. Many shared the view of the political scientist A. H. Hanson who in 1964 wrote of the “manifest incapacity of a body of 630 amateurs, employing a procedure devised in other days for other purposes, to supervise an administrative machine now become so ubiquitous and complex that it penetrates every corner of the national life” (Hanson, 1964: 285). Rather than “an arena in which the rival parties fight their wordy battles” Parliament should be an advisory body, working through committees. In the managerial society of Schumpeterian democracy procedure needed to be rationalized and futile, time-consuming debates curtailed.

This sort of thinking has guided some significant reforms of Parliament. But it is a paradox too little attended to that reform of a speaking place should aim to define “good” speaking out of existence, and it is a concern that proposals to free the House from speech rules and rituals unintelligible to the public (e.g. Digital Democracy Commission, 2015) neglect to consider the extent to which a decision to change the language the House uses to do politics is also a change to the politics it does. Debate about what makes great speech great is itself a dimension of political debate and one thing Parliament and Rhetoric scholars might do is recover and reinvigorate a lost vocabulary for oratorical criticism. That would enable and enrich reflection on when it is best to speak in a simple and plain, bureaucratic and workmanlike style and when a grander, ornate or more passionate discourse is required. After all, Parliamentarians do keep speaking, the debating chamber is what most people think of when they think of the House, and assessment as well as celebration of the capacity of individual speakers to produce fine and moving words remains a mainstay of both journalistic commentary and political memoir. Sketch writers may not often use the terms of classical rhetoric but they will refer to speakers’ qualities of voice, bearing, forensic skill and wit and occasionally a great speech or speaker grabs the attention. At the time of writing the 2015 maiden speech of Mhairi Black (the member for Paisley and Renfrewshire) has received over 700 000 views on You Tube suggesting at least some degree of public interest in a powerful and characterful speech delivered in the Chamber. “As far as most normal citizens are concerned”, said Speaker Bercow in a 2010 speech, “the Chamber is Parliament at work and if there are not very many people there then Parliament cannot be working that hard”. It was, he said, a simplistic critique but “not a stupid one” (Bercow, 2010). Indeed.

Rhetoric scholars do not see Parliamentary speech as mere speech; it is the wrought representation of thought as it appears in the political arena. Such a view can be congruent with versions of deliberation in as much as it leads to a Burkean ideal of delegates free from the direct constraints of constituents and so able to develop thinking and speaking which resonates or is in harmony with the principles embedded in evolving political institutions. From this perspective Parliamentary debate necessarily declines if fine speech is displaced by commitment to the bureaucratic forensic of Committees where virtue resides in procedural propriety. But fine speech may also be conceived of as that which most effectively expresses, perhaps against the wishes of the Executive, the discontents of those outside the House. To this we now turn.

## Opposition

Deliberative approaches are often hostile to the most obvious and distinctive feature of the Westminster chamber: its antagonistic design. As we have seen, Bentham's charge against Hamilton was that he was cynical, self-interested, Machiavellian. Hamilton urges a speaker to "State the question to be proved and the arguments made use of to prove it. By colouring one, and softening the other, you will gain an advantage" (Hamilton, 1808: 5). Reading this it is hard not to think of him as perpetuating what is often denounced as the Commons "Punch and Judy show". But, as we have already noted, Hamilton's thinking has its roots in a Renaissance conception of disputation which forms an important part of our historic tradition of thinking about Parliamentary debate.

Opposition is well understood to be fundamental to the British House of Commons. It is enshrined in the topography of the House, in the institutional support given to the shadow front bench and in the rules and practices of debate. Political theorists tend to think of this in relation to principles such as the separation of powers, checks and balances, the alternation of office holders and so on (Fontana, 2009). In the standard story the origins of the Opposition are found in the early eighteenth-century, concomitant with the rise of Prime Ministerial authority and the development of clear divisions in the House. It consists of recognition of a right to oppose and criticize the government (in speech) and to seek to replace it (Johnson, 1997).

The term "Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition" dates from 1825 but its "constitutional" status was not formally recognized until the granting of a salary in 1937 and of Short money in 1975. Such recognition was described in 1924 – by Harvard President Lawrence Lowell – as "the greatest contribution of the nineteenth-century to the art of government" (quoted in Fontana, 2009: 550).

In 1961 Ivor Jennings – Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge – saw it as an expression of the historical achievement of freeing Parliament from the monarchy. “To find out whether a people is politically free” he wrote “it is necessary only to ask if there is an Opposition and, if there is, to ask where it is” (Jennings, 1961: 86). In this and similar readings the most important feature of Opposition is the institutionalization of alternative government (Johnson, 1997; Shapiro, 1999; Waldron, 2016; Webber, 2016). But such institutionalisation is also a source of criticism in the form of anxiety that it entails co-optation and the growth of “cartel parties” (Katz and Mair, 1995). After all, the Opposition has no real veto power (Helms, 2004), governments have all the advantages and, as Anthony King put it, “most of the time Oppositions can draw on only two resources in their relations with Governments: good reasons, and time” (King, 1976: 18). Here we get to the heart of the matter. Opposition fundamentally involves the presentation, in debate, of “good reasons” to reject the government position; it is a *rhetorical* activity.

That activity predates the start of the standard story of opposition. Long before the eighteenth-century the House had arranged itself in divisions and adopted turn-taking in debates. In the Elizabethan Parliament ordinary members could oppose councilors, and sometimes see their views prevail, (Mack, 2002: 240) taking part in a form of debate shaped by a grammar school curriculum which included Humanist training in rhetorical disputation (Mack, 2002; Chapter 1). They believed the powers of speech extensive and profound and, as students of Cicero, thought their use central to political practice not only in the form of grand orations but also as adversarial debate (Peltonen, 2012). Indeed, such was a central duty of citizenship (2012, 131–2). Accordingly, speaking to a controversy and on both sides of the question – *in utramque partem* – was, by 1593 established (Peltonen, 2012: 139). School pupils learned how to structure speeches, employ commonplaces and how to refute adversaries (2012: 85) and in the House, writes Mack, “The form of debate and the shared experience of disputation, together with the possibility that disagreement would be resolved by majority vote, produced some obligation on government speakers to answer arguments, to give reasons, and to respond to messages”. The Queens’ councillors in the House, he says, “evidently found it an ordeal to be called even to this weak form of account” (see also Hockin, 1971: 51–6).

Such a classically inspired ideal of disputatious rhetoric on both sides of a question, would be seen by both Hobbes and Locke as a source of disorder and faction. But it remained influential. For Hume, eloquence mattered because it was an essential feature of popular government and, crucially, a means of Opposition to the corruptions of the Walpole ministry (Potkay, 1994: 40–4). Appreciation of the necessity of rhetorical antagonism was a structuring element of later thinking focused on both deliberation and oratory including

some, such as Mill, in the Benthamite tradition (see López, 2014). The oppositional principle of debate can, indeed, be congruent with that of balanced deliberation but in its implicit perspectivism, and openness to the effects of persuasion it is some distance from the Rousseauian ideal of a silent assembly of individuals listening to what the heart tells them and waiting for the Will to reveal itself. As Palonen observes the institutionalization of Opposition in Parliamentary debate is rooted in recognition of a claim made by Socrates' ancient interlocutor Protagoras: for every question there are always at least two opposing arguments which may answer it. Dissensus, then, is the *raison d'être* of Parliaments and Hamilton's maxims are tools "for increasing the chances to oppose the proposition at hand, not to accept any governmental proposal at face value" (Palonen, 2008b: 89). From this perspective Oppositional speaking is about more than free speech and alternative government. It enables, engenders (even *induces*) the presentation of views in opposition to established authority or consensus. Where some propose that the outcome of free discussion, given enough time, will be a better approximation of the truth Palonen wryly remarks that "we could rather claim that the longer we debate, the more time we will have to construct different and opposite points of view" (2008a: 143). Members politick over agendas, debate times and closure (Palonen, 2008a: 17) using rules and arguments to try and break open fixed majorities, reordering voting preferences so that losers might become winners (see Shepsle, 2003).

The oppositional principle can be seen as a Madisonian bulwark against elective dictatorship, the ambition of the opposition countering the ambition of government. In contrast to those hoping that deliberation might make a common will or common good visible the oppositional perspective sees in Parliament a place not only for the completion of formal business but also for the public articulation of opposition, and things going wrong when opposition is lacking, insufficient or incompetent. This is an agonistic conception of Parliamentary debate as something which, far from establishing the sovereignty of the popular, national or rational will proves its plurality and its potential for transformation.

Today, some observers – worried that too much opposition disrupts deliberation or sets a bad example to the watching public – advocate the replacement of the Commons chamber with a horseshoe-shaped simulacrum of consensus. But for agonists the question is how to give counter-publics expression within as well as against the chamber. Stuart Hampshire celebrated a politics which included the public staging of the contest between rival and contradictory elements of the "soul" of a polity (Hampshire, 1999: 39). Contemporary studies show that MPs participate in debates primarily in order to "signal" positions to the electorate (Proksch and Slapin, 2015). That makes it seem merely rational self-interest. But it is also a way of doing public politics. For Jennings the Op-

position was the “spearhead” of an attack on government, one which reflected public opinion, bringing to the House and expressing in public “the questions raised in the factory, the railway carriage and the office” (Jennings, 1961: 87). Earlier, in 1935, he had pointed out that “Opposition members debate the government’s measures and go into the division lobbies against them not because they expect to be successful but because they consider that a formal protest is necessary” (1935: 211). Their audience is the public outside of the House and “debate is propaganda... an appeal to the reason or to the prejudices of sections of the electorate to vote against the government candidates at the next election” (1935: 212). It was also a focus for activities taking place outside of Parliament, in the media, at public meetings and demonstrations (1935: 218). As Hockin concluded in 1971 “the spectacle of Opposition political parties not only talking to Parliament, but campaigning, propagandizing and demonstrating outside of Parliament is all part of the style of modern public party Opposition” (1971: 64). It is to such spectacle we must now turn.

## Spectacle

Nineteenth-Century observers of Parliament understood something of its spectacular function. Bagehot (1867) famously described the Commons as “the great scene of debate, the great engine of popular instruction and political controversy” and he did so against the backdrop of an explosion of political discourse including the platform, debating societies and local Parliament Clubs thirty-five thousand of which were active in 1883 (Meisel, 2001). As a *Times* reporter put it in 1873, “In the course of these fifty years we have become a nation of public speakers. Everyone speaks now, and tolerable well too... We are now more than ever a debating, that is, a Parliamentary people” (quoted in Bevis, 2003: 1). In this context Bagehot saw in Parliamentary debate the fulfillment of a crucial educative function. “To teach the nation what it does not know” was, he said, a more important function of Parliament than legislating. Its debates instructed by marshalling and re-presenting facts and argument but also by being exemplars. Similarly, Earl Grey conceived of Parliamentary debate as “contributing much to the instruction of the nation at large on all subjects deeply concerning its interests” and as “an instrument for forming and guiding public opinion” (Grey, 1864: 36–7). Here, then, Parliament is but one component of a much larger national political debate if, for Bagehot, the most important. The apex of political discussion and its most ideal form, its speeches should be a means for “arousing, enlivening and teaching a people” with both an “expressive function” to “express the mind of the English people” (Bagehot, 1873: 119) and a “lyrical function”: “it pours out in

characteristic words the characteristic heart of the nation. And it can do little more useful" (1873, 140).

Few today are likely to claim that Commons debate really leads the "national conversation" or exemplifies enlightened and proper political conduct. Yet it is a focus of political reporting and something like Bagehot's conception is implicit in critiques of the unbecoming conduct of members, demands for Parliament to be recalled in order to address emergency matters, and insistence that major announcements be made first before the House rather than the press. Such calls recognise that the Commons contributes to the "housing" of our disputes not only through representing the people outside on the inside but also through the way in which the inside is represented outside. The right to make and consume such representations has been a significant dimension of political struggle and laws such as those preventing the use of footage of Parliament "in any light entertainment programme or in a programme of political satire" are not only struggles over liberty of expression but also over understandings of the relationship between Commons debate and national debate as a whole. In Britain the Parliament is, to adapt a phrase Frank Ankersmit used to describe political parties, "one of the indispensable political *dramatis personae*" (1997: 63).

Some deliberative approaches in the British tradition are in favour of publicity, as a check on members, a way of communicating information between governors and governed, as a source of legitimacy (Bentham in James et al., 1999: 29–44). Here the matter of publicity is the facts of proceedings, the votes cast, the arguments made. But discourses of Parliamentary "spectacle" concern more than this and recent political theory helps to see why they are right to. The deliberativist thinks in terms of "voice" and sees publicity as a way of opening Parliament to the public voice and including it in the legislative processes. To this focus on the power of voice Jeffrey Green proposes we add a concept of "ocular" power, of the capacity of publics to see what leaders are doing and to exercise the judgemental power of the gaze. For Green, democratic citizens exercise judgement over laws but also over leaders and this requires commitment to "candour", an "institutional requirement that leaders not be in control of the conditions of their publicity". They must, he writes, make public appearances which are "neither rehearsed, preplanned nor managed from above but rather contain all the risk and uncertainty of spontaneous public events" (Green, 2010: 14). Here Green distinguishes between the disfiguring effects of "pseudo-events" (stage-managed walkabouts, over-managed conferences) and "eventful events" in which "we do not observe merely what we already know or what someone else wants us to know, but rather something that is revealed in the course of the happening itself" (2010: 20). At such events the inequality of ruler and ruled is challenged by a "negative" egalitarianism bringing leaders down to our level. It is worth

noting in this context that US Presidents are *obliged* to deliver inaugural and state of the union addresses; party leaders *must* deliver a speech to their party conference; Prime Ministers Questions is compulsory in practice if not in statute (see Finlayson and Martin, 2008; Atkins et al., 2014). All are chances for spectators to exercise their power of judgement over leaders brought down to eye-level.

Spectacle is not only a means of education through exemplarity of the sort Bagehot described. It is also about the creation of collective experiences constitutive of democratic political identities. As John Parkinson argues “democracy is not merely the interplay of arguments and reasons in some abstract public sphere but is performed by people, with aims, on stages” (Parkinson, 2012: 23) of which there are many (meeting halls, committee rooms, town squares, demonstrations, occupations, TV studios). These stages have always pressed in on the Commons challenging its priority. A question for theory and analysis is how the Commons contributes or responds to arguments, claims and narratives circulating in and around various public spheres. That includes, in a phrase of Laski’s, how well it connects with the “ventilation of grievances” (Laski, 1938: 437-8), the extent to which the aggrieved or opposed outside see themselves represented inside. At a broader level it concerns the “representative claims” to “represent or to know what represents the interests of someone or something” (Saward, 2010: 38) that are made, through Commons performances, by individual MPs and by the House as a whole. Here, then, the problematic shaping thinking about Parliamentary debate is not that of who or what to include or exclude from deliberation but that of how the spectacle is to be produced, the capacity of members to represent the outside on the inside and of publics to see them doing so and to judge them.

Recent cultural sociologies of politics lend credence to this view. These show the extent to which the public sphere is not only a forum for rational debate but also a stage on which political and other actors perform their reasoning in “dramas tailored to audiences whose voices have become more legitimate references in political conflicts” (Alexander, 2006: 51). In Durkheimian parlance politicians embody “collective representations”, expressing values, beliefs and the “moods and meanings of the nation’s democratic life” (Alexander, 2010: 18). Such performances are not necessarily corrupting of politics, and spectators are not necessarily passive. A spectator, as Rancière argues, “observes, selects, compares, interprets” linking what they see with things seen elsewhere and judging the whole (Rancière, 2009: 13). And when a performance involves argument *in utramque partem* audiences may compare the rival versions, seeing common norms and cultural-political assumptions played out before them. Such rhetorical spectacles are opportunities for different groups to see their “common sense” invoked or represented and to exercise a power of judgment over the performers and thus also over

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themselves and that common opinion (Farrell, 1993: 76). To adapt Bagehot, Parliament might be thought of as a stage on which performers, rather than teach the people what they do not know demonstrate the implications of what they believe.

## Conclusion: So, What Is the Point?

In this article I have sought to show something of the length and breadth of our tradition of thinking about Parliamentary debate, and of the place within it of some positions in more recent political science and political theory. Our thinking about what Parliamentary debate is for is part of a long and messy history made from commonplaces about the virtues and vices of oratory, the shifting ideological and cultural meanings of eloquence, the unstable relationship between efficiency and debate, the value and cost of opposition and the changing role and place of publics in politics.

More specifically, we have seen how reflections on Parliament, both celebratory and critical, play out differently if the central concept is that of deliberation or oratory, opposition or spectacle. Identifying, clarifying and elaborating the workings of these concepts is, I believe, useful because it enhances our self-knowledge. As Pocock once remarked, "Each of us speaks with many voices, like a tribal shaman in whom the ancestor ghosts are all talking at once" (1973: 31). Historically minded political theory can help us to become more conscious of the pre-existing conceptual, descriptive and analytic vocabularies we draw on when arguing about something such as Parliament, and also of the power they exercise over us. But in the case of Parliament, the presence of varied voices making claims about what debate is for is of more than antiquarian or existential interest and should not wish to reduce the cacophony to a simple harmony. After all, it tells us something important about political debate and points to something essential to Parliament itself. When we seek to solve a political dispute through parley we affirm that parley is a good way to proceed and at the same time demonstrate a way in which it might take place. In the House of Commons where there are procedural rules based on custom and precedent, open to interpretation and sometimes broken, the practices of debaters, not to mention the expectations and responses of their auditors, are also interpretations and reinterpretations of the rules. Parliamentary debate is always debate about debate - who can take part, how they must conduct themselves, the terms of discussion, what it is for, what can and can't be said. Parliamentary debate doesn't take place despite divisions over style and substance, dignity and efficiency, reason and passion, speech and action, inside and outside - it takes place because of them and within them.

With this in mind, when seeking to understand and evaluate Parliamentary debate, and in reflecting on its reform, we must break free from the tyranny of “deliberation”. It is of course a central aspect of Parliaments, and rightly so. I am not opposed to deliberation. But exclusive emphasis upon it, and the effort to perfect the deliberative dimensions of Commons practice, obscures from view the range of things that debate is for and that it can do, the rich histories that have shaped our practices of it, and the contestation which is central to it. As Jeremy Waldron argues political theorists’ study of institutions should involve not only normative judgments but also thinking about “the importance of history, of political aesthetics and the symbolic, ceremonial, maybe even the sacramental, aspects of the processes we use for assembling and deliberating about the common good” (2013: 14). These aspects are becoming ever more prominent – sometimes because of their absence – yet the way we often think about our Parliamentary practices inclines us to resist them and to search instead for ways to remove the obstacles to perceived deficiencies of deliberative quality. We should at least consider the possibility that noisy opposition and dramatic spectacle are not symptomatic of decline in the quality of debate nor necessarily in contradiction with the ideal of Parliament as a centre of rational deliberation. They are ineradicable dimensions of Parliamentary practice, reassertions of suppressed aspects of our Parliamentary tradition, and vital to the connection of “we the people” with Parliamentary politics.

Attending to historical tradition does not mean that we need be timid or conservative in remedying present discontents. If we are mindful of the distinct ways in which we might think of the point of Parliamentary debate we can perhaps think more radically about varieties of reform. There must of course be clear deliberation and forensic scrutiny but, conscious of the ways in which the public disputation of issues has value even when not part of legislative actions we might also think about ways of staging different kinds of Parliamentary debate so as to ensure spontaneity and “candour” while “ventilating” grievance. There must be effective performances of opposition and instances of fine speech with the capacity to capture and to give public presence to a moment and a feeling. Here reformers might, for example, focus on the skill and capacity of Parliamentarians when it comes to speaking well (and on the ability of journalistic commentators to assess them according to standards internal to the practice of debate as well as according to personal whim or editorial demand). The challenge is to find new ways to stage confrontations of opinions and interests and to rearticulate the relationship between such performances and the multiplicity of audiences that might be included within them.

We noted at the start of this article that public rejection of Parliamentary debate sometimes turns on the view that it is “theatre – as in farce”. By widening and deepening our understanding and our use of the concepts which shape thinking about Parliament we might see that the Commons is held in

disrepute not because it is too theatrical but because it is bad theatre: amateur dramatics, old plots and bowdlerized scripts indifferently performed by actors insufficiently concerned with, or aware of, who is watching them or of the place of their performance alongside those taking place outside its walls in Parliament Square and beyond. Remedying this situation is a matter of some urgency and one which will require attention to Parliamentary deliberation, Parliamentary oratory, Parliamentary opposition and Parliamentary spectacle.

## Endnote

- 1 This article is based on work presented in various locations over a wide span of time including the Political Thought Conference organized by the Association for Political Thought at Oxford in 2013, a workshop organized by colleagues at the University of Jyväskylä in February 2016 and the conference "Speaking in Parliament: History, Politics, Rhetoric" at Queen Mary, University of London in April 2016. I am grateful for the invitations which enabled me to test out the work and to the responses of audiences which helped me improve it. Helpful commentary was also received from Samuel A. Chambers and Sophia Hatzisavvidou.

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