

RESEARCH

Five Hundred Years of Representative Politics

The History of Parliament Project

by Paul Seaward

The History of Parliament is a research project which is building up a comprehensive account of the working of parliamentary politics in England, then Britain, from their origins in the thirteenth century up to – for the moment – the Reform Act of 1832. Unparalleled in the comprehensiveness of its treatment, the History has been generally regarded as one of the most ambitious, authoritative and well-researched projects in British history: reviews of our most recent publications have stressed the scale and enterprise of the project – on a scale and in a level of detail none other has been able to match – and the depth and quality of its scholarship.

Each of the History's publications so far consists of detailed studies of elections and electoral politics in each constituency, and of closely-researched accounts of the lives of everyone who was elected to Parliament within the period, together with surveys drawing out the themes and discoveries of the research and adding information on the operation of Parliament as an institution.

Twenty-eight volumes covering eight periods have already been published. They deal with 1386–1421, 1509–1558, 1558–1603, 1660–1690, 1690–1715, 1715–1754, 1754–1790, and

1790–1820: in all, about 20 million words, 20,000 pages, 17,000 biographies, covering 281 years of parliamentary history. The History's staff of professional historians is currently researching the House of Commons in four more periods: 1422–1504, 1604–1629, 1640–1660 and 1820–1832. When these are complete, the History will provide a continuous and authoritative account of the House of Commons and electoral politics over four hundred and fifty years, from 1386 to the Reform Act of 1832. The History has recently also begun to research the House of Lords in the period from 1660–1832, and is developing a new approach for the different type of institution this represents.

The History owes its existence to the concerted enthusiasms of two figures of exceptional energy: Colonel, later Lord, Wedgwood, originally a Liberal, but later a Labour Member of Parliament, Minister in the Ramsay Macdonald government of 1924, and local historian; and Sir Lewis Namier, an adoptive Briton of Russian parentage, and the most prominent historian of his generation.

Wedgwood became passionately interested in his forebears as Members of Parliament in Staffordshire, wrote a book on the subject,

and began in the 1920s to canvass his colleagues and the government for a full-scale project to write memoirs of all of the individuals who had ever been Members of the House of Commons. His interests were explicitly linked to a profoundly romantic interest in parliament and parliamentary institutions which he was coming to see as under threat across Europe. 'York or Lancaster, Protestant or Catholic, Court or Country, Roundhead or Cavalier, Whig or Tory, Liberal or Conservative, Labour or Unionist, they all fit into that long pageant that no other country in the world can show. And they one and all pass on the same inextinguishable torch – burning brightly or flickering – to the next man in the race, while freedom and experience ever grow. These men who have gone by, who have had the glimmer of the torch on them for a little time, are those whose memories I want to rescue'.¹

At the same time Namier was developing a historiography of eighteenth-century British politics based on an analysis of the family alliances and personal interests of individual politicians, stressing the significance not just of the major figures, but also of the countless backbenchers. Namier's belief was that the work as a whole would become a sort of gigantic social history of England: 'From the analysis of the House through the ages will emerge a social and economic history of the nation such as has never yet been attempted ... The individual biographies when strung together will supply a pattern of the history of families and classes; of their rise and decline'.²

Namier and Wedgwood joined forces – they were

already friends and political allies through a shared interest in the Zionist cause. Wedgwood succeeded in getting sufficient Parliamentary interest in his proposal to set up a Committee which reported on the scale of and justification for the task, but became bogged down in differences between the professional historians and the enthusiastic amateurs on the nature of the project. In the end Wedgwood began work on the project himself, with a band of fellow amateurs, and published two volumes before the war. The project went into abeyance with the war and with Wedgwood's death in 1940; but it was revived in 1951, finally achieving the public funding for which Wedgwood had argued so strongly. Since 1995 the History has been principally funded by the two Houses of Parliament. It is governed by a body of Trustees who are mainly drawn from Members of the House of Commons and House of Lords, and has an editorial board of academic historians who are responsible for the scholarly quality of the enterprise. It is based close to the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London, on whose collections it heavily relies.

Some have argued that the History's prosopographical approach fails to capture completely the life and work of the institution of Parliament. Certainly, the History has not been a conventional account of the body; yet Parliament is far from an ordinary institution. Unlike a government department, a university or a company, there is no clear single purpose which Parliament is intended to achieve; its functions might

LIBERAL HEROINES

Some of the Liberal Democrat History Group's earliest conference fringe meetings explored the theme of 'Old Heroes for a New Party'. Leading party figures nominated their favourite hero (Liberal or non-Liberal) and discussed what they found inspirational about the heroes' actions and thoughts.

Now we repeat the idea, with a difference. **Sandra Gidley MP, Baroness Emma Nicholson MEP** and **Baroness Liz Barker** nominate the women from history who have inspired them most, and explain why.

8.00 p.m., Friday 14 March

Cavendish Room, Grand Hotel, Torquay

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be summarised as to provide a forum in which individuals advance the arguments and defend the interests of those who put them there, and try to persuade others to share their own moral or intellectual convictions. Its history includes many different histories: of communities, economic and social interests, ideologies and the body itself. The History of Parliament's biographies form the best way of linking all of these various histories to one another, of showing how national, local, political and personal histories are so closely intertwined.

Ending with 1832, the History does not, at present, deal with the days of the Liberal Party, although its work on the early nineteenth century is already unearthing much about the prehistory of the party and of many of its Members: the 1820–32 section is dealing with the early days of reformed Irish politics, for example, with its impact on the Whigs. The History

certainly does plan to move on to the period beyond 1832 when resources permit, although this is unlikely to be in the short term. Further information about the History of Parliament is available from our website at www.histparl.ac.uk/hop or the Director, Paul Seaward, at The History of Parliament, 15 Woburn Square, London WC1H 0NS, Tel: 020 7862 8800; Fax: 020 7862 1442; email: pseaward@histparl.ac.uk.

The History's publications are available to readers of the *Journal of Liberal History* at specially discounted rates: please contact Paul Seaward for details at the above address.

- 1 J.C. Wedgwood *History of Parliament: Biographies of the Members of the Commons House 1439–1509*, London 1936, p. lii.
- 2 Julia Namier, *Lewis Namier: a Biography*, London 1971, p. 290, quoted in Linda Colley, *Namier*, London 1989, p. 83.

Liberal Democrat History Group on the web www.liberalhistory.org.uk

The History Group's website is steadily being developed as a resource for subscribers to the *Journal of Liberal History* and to students of Liberal history everywhere. Complete listings of back numbers and past meetings are already available, and in the next few months the first twenty issues of the *Journal* will become available for free download (as pdf files).

The site's 'resources' section currently contains listings of party leaders, chief whips, cabinet ministers, and so on. We aim to expand this section extensively in the coming months and years.

The site also gives you access to a new email mailing list, which we will use to send out details of forthcoming meetings and new publications to anyone who wishes to sign up (whether or not they are a member of the Group). This will be your fastest way of finding out about meeting dates and details.

If you would like to join the list, log on to the site and click on 'want to join our mailing list?' in the navigation bar.