6 Parliament: Debates, Committees, Petitions and Returns

Although legislation was a major function of Parliament and therefore deserving of discrete analysis, it was only one part of the business of Parliament. Other activities included debate, enquiry and the application of pressure by petition. It is these aspects of parliamentary life that form the subject of this chapter.

As in the case of legislation, our knowledge of these matters, although improved of late, is patchy. In the case of debate, Roland Thorne has established that within the context of a quintupling of all forms of Commons business from 1760 to 1820, approximately 60–5 per cent of all members intervened on at least one occasion, but that major debates were dominated by a hard core of members, the number of which grew after the deaths of dominating oratorical ‘giants’ such as Pitt, Fox and Sheridan. He also suggests that Peel and the new generation of politicians who entered the House after 1807 made a conscious effort to abandon the inflated oratory of the ‘giants’ and to develop a plainer form of speaking.¹ In addition, Professor Aspinall has shown how the reporting and publishing of the Commons debates was transformed in the 60 years after 1770, the key developments being the reluctant acquiescence of the House to the unofficial reporting of the debates in the newspapers and the parallel increase in the extent of that reporting: in the 1770s there were a few reporters who managed to smuggle their way into the chamber; by 1833 there were 40–50 who paid the annual fee to occupy seats in the Strangers’ Gallery facing the Speaker.² Although there has been no comparable research into debate in the House of Lords over the same period, it is commonly assumed that the same developments took place there and it is certainly the case that the reporting of Lords debates in the newspapers increased by roughly the same degree.

In the case of another vital function of Parliament – the gathering, assessment and dissemination of information – the bare outlines of its history have been established but there has been no

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systematic study of the detail. Broadly speaking there were three main ways this function was exercised. One of these – the setting up of Royal Commissions – was the preserve of ministers rather than Parliament, but it is worth mentioning at this point as its general history is similar to that of the others. The two historians of the subject have therefore demonstrated that governments established Royal Commissions with increasing frequency after 1780, particularly in the period 1800–31 when at least 60 came into existence.\textsuperscript{3} Increasing ministerial resort to commissions was matched by the increase in the two means by which Parliament gathered and assessed information: the select committee and the ‘returns’. In the case of select committees, which could be established on virtually any subject in either House and which consisted of as little as a dozen members or as many as 40, the number appointed rose from approximately 16 per year before 1780 to 25 or more thereafter, a development that led in 1811 to the creation of an extra five committee rooms to cope with the increased workload.\textsuperscript{4} As for the ‘returns’, these consisted of information on any topic that a member might request from a government department which was then printed and made available to Parliament and the wider public. Here again there was a remarkable increase in both the number of returns sought and the number of copies of individual returns that were printed. In round terms there was a near threefold increase from the 1780s to the 1820s, from about 140 to 380 per annum, in the number of returns requested; and a similar increase in the number of copies of key returns that were printed, from an average of 1,000 to 2,500 copies.\textsuperscript{5}

However, despite our knowledge of the general contours of what amounted to a transformation in the volume of information available to parliamentarians comparable to that in the public’s knowledge of parliamentary proceedings, neither select committees nor returns have been subjected to detailed analysis. We therefore know little of how committees were selected, the number and type of members who sat on them, how they conducted their business, who was responsible for returns and what use was made of them. Above all, there has been no assessment of the contribution both committees and returns made to the relationship between Parliament and the wider public.

Finally, there is the case of petitions from members of the public pressing Parliament to act on their behalf, or in contemporary parlance, ‘to redress grievances’. Once again the general history of