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1818 and the Westmorland Election

Brougham had confidently predicted in 1814 that ‘the gag is gone which used to stop our mouths as often as any reform was mentioned – revolution first, and then invasion’, and he believed that with peace ‘the game is in the hands of the Opposition’.1 Although he correctly foresaw the discontent that the transition from war to peace would produce, Brougham misjudged his party’s ability to turn it to their advantage. Whigs who accepted public opinion as a useful tool against the government still distrusted what they saw as a fickle and turbulent populace. Parliamentary elections offered a better chance to restore Whig ties to the public by appealing to respectable freeholders in boroughs and shires. Opening constituency politics to national debates during the 1820s marked a key point in the growth of a broader political nation. Brougham saw that parliamentary elections could serve the same objectives as petition and debate tactics while shifting the party contest from the House of Commons to constituencies.

As only one Parliament since 1768 had lasted more than six years, anticipation of a general election grew in late 1817. Ministers found the Commons increasingly difficult to manage as its members sought to gratify their constituents’ wishes at the last possible moment before the poll.2 False rumours of a general election had circulated in the autumn of 1816, and interested parties in the various constituencies undertook arrangements for the next contest. Lord Liverpool began warning supporters about the coming election in May 1818, several weeks before the 10 June dissolution, and observers predicted a greater number of seats to be under contention than usual.3 Lord Darlington, who controlled Brougham’s seat at Winchelsea, believed he would raise his influence and help the party by moving from a pocket borough to a popular constituency. Darlington told Brougham of a confidential
letter inquiring whether he would be willing to be returned along with Canning and encouraged him to contest Liverpool once more.\(^4\)

Brougham had different intentions. Since entering Parliament in 1810, Brougham and his brother James had increased their family’s land holdings in Westmorland and Cumberland. By late 1817, their interest in local politics drew the Broughams into considering a challenge to the Tory Earl of Lonsdale’s control over Westmorland’s two parliamentary seats, an ascendancy that had stood undisputed since the county’s last contested election in 1774. The *Kendal Chronicle* carried an announcement on 6 December, urging freeholders to withhold their votes for ‘a gentleman of independent principles’ who would stand at the next election.\(^5\) Unable to find a willing candidate in the county itself, organizers made little progress until James Brougham pressed his brother into service on 26 January. Brougham’s involvement transformed the situation from a local insurgency against a county’s dominant interest into perhaps the most spectacular case in which party rivalry shaped an election before 1832. A contest that pitted the Lowther brothers against the star of the Whig front bench drew national attention as a symbolic confrontation between government and opposition.\(^6\)

Lord Lonsdale had returned his younger son, Colonel Henry Lowther, for Westmorland in 1812, and the next year filled the county’s other seat with his heir, William Viscount Lowther, when the sitting member died unexpectedly. Lonsdale later claimed that he had done so only after several Westmorland gentlemen declined to stand.\(^7\) Rarely did a single interest control both seats in a county as opposed to a borough, and it was unheard of for two brothers to represent the same county. When the Whig John Lambton entered Parliament for the neighbouring county of Durham in 1813, his uncle, Ralph Lambton, gave up a seat for the city because he felt it neither just nor expedient for one family to hold two of the four seats for the city and county.\(^8\) That example suggests the unease raised by the Lowther monopoly in Westmorland.

The Lowthers had faced ineffective opposition from local Whigs earlier and the Broughams had a history in the county. Before moving to Edinburgh, Brougham’s father had set his modest interest as a Westmorland squire against the Lowthers. Despite his own Whig ties, Henry Brougham had proposed an arrangement to Lonsdale through William Wilberforce in 1806 that would have returned Brougham for Westmorland as a candidate of the Talents government. With support from Fox and Lord Henry Petty, later Lord Lansdowne, Brougham had