'The *Too Clever by Half* People' and Parliament*

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The role of intellectuals in shaping pressure on parliament has often been neglected and still more frequently downplayed. Even intellectuals themselves have doubted their own political importance; hence Walter Bagehot's observation that 'the *too clever by half* people, who live in *Bohemia*, ought to have no more influence in parliament, than they have in England, and they can scarcely have less'. This article considers what it is to be an intellectual in politics – and what political role intellectuals played in Victorian Britain. It concludes that intellectuals were crucial in helping to define the nature of parliament and of the political process, articulating an ideology which shaped the ways in which other groups put pressure on parliament.

Keywords: parliament; intellectuals; pressure groups; British constitution; universities; Jeremy Bentham; Benthamism; Comteian positivists; Walter Bagehot; Erskine May; A.V. Dicey; universities; royal commissions; Social Science Association (SSA)

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In 1668, Thomas Hobbes completed *Behemoth*, his account of the causes of the civil war. A key factor, he argued, was the role of the universities; indeed, he went on: 'The Universities have been to the nation, as the wooden horse was to the Trojans.' It was in the universities that sectaries, presbyterians, and other malcontents had drawn up their programme of treason. It was from the universities that the rebels had fomented rebellion. It was at the universities that he addressed his strongest

condemnation, for 'The core of rebellion', he contended, 'are the Universities.'[1] Three hundred years later, in 1968, Perry Anderson came to a completely contradictory conclusion. He attributed the weakness of contemporary radicalism to the failure of the universities to foster dissent: 'Only where revolutionary ideas are freely and widely available – forming part of their daily environment – will large numbers of students begin to revolt.' The English universities, with their stolid studies and their self-satisfied lecturers, had, he concluded, signally failed to create such an environment.[2] Both Hobbes and Anderson may have been mistaken – although it was once suggested that Hobbes was more acute in his analysis than even he could have imagined.[3] But focusing on whether they were right or wrong in many ways misses the point. More interesting is the question of why they and their contemporaries believed that the universities – and, in particular, university teachers – exercised such a huge influence on British politics.

It seems particularly important to address this question because British universities – and British intellectuals more generally – have on the whole been seen by historians as insignificant political actors. In place of Hobbes's subversive thinkers or Anderson's reactionary elite, most writers have tended to depict Britain's thinking classes as constitutionally inert or politically incapable. Indeed, so ingrained is this assumption that it is even shared by the intellectuals themselves, who tend, like the politician and academic, Shirley Williams – the daughter of an intellectual, twice married to intellectuals, and herself a university teacher – to write off other British thinkers as people who live 'comfortably in their ivory towers, blissfully disregarding the world outside'.[4] Nor was this attitude confined to the late 20th century. Victorian thinkers also shared it, with Walter Bagehot – himself a successful public intellectual – content to observe that 'the *too clever by half* people, who live in *Bohemia*, ought to

have no more influence in parliament, than they have in England, and they can scarcely have less'.[5]

Such a perception has proved especially true when British intellectuals are considered in comparative terms.[6] The significance of the French universities in generating both a class of mandarins and a group of alienated intellectuals is now widely understood.[7] The role of German academics in legitimating state power and of German higher education in creating highly-educated opponents to that power is also generally accepted.[8] The very term 'intelligentsia' is, of course, a Russian one and speaks of the political as well as cultural importance of Russian writers and thinkers,[9] whilst Spanish intellectuals – and especially the 'Generation of 1898' – have been the subject of a significant literature, which again points to their centrality within political debates.[10]

As a consequence of this widely-held assumption, British intellectuals have tended to be studied by cultural and intellectual historians, rather than by writers on more political themes.[11] Those historians that have explored the relationship between thinkers and politicians have tended to focus on particular moments and discrete movements – examining the short-lived role of the Philosophic Radicals or the Comteian positivists as groupings within the house of commons.[12] Moreover, even these few studies have generally concluded that intellectuals have only a limited impact on politics. Indeed, they have, in general, been little more than accounts of failure and disillusionment.[13] This is all a long way away from the political impact of the intellectuals in the Dreyfus affair or the 'State Nobility' of modern France.[14]

This analysis is closely related to a couple of perennial problems within modern British historiography. In the first place, there is the question of whether Britain ever produced anything that could be described as an intelligentsia or anyone

who could be called an intellectual.[15] For some writers, it is clear: 'Britain did not have an intelligentsia'.[16] For other writers, by contrast, Britain not only possessed a class of intellectuals, but granted them greater respect and cultural – though not necessarily political – influence than some continental European countries.[17] As Stefan Collini has argued, this debate is in many ways unhelpful. 'Dreyfus-envy' (as he calls it) has led many to overstate the differences between the British experience and that of other countries – especially France.[18] Yet it is also clear, even if one accepts that there was something like an intellectual class in Britain, that its role and relationship to politics was different from that of its continental equivalents.[19]

The second key theme is about the process of policy making within British government. A generation ago, administrative and political historians were convulsed by arguments over this issue. Some claimed that the 19th century's 'revolution in government' was the result of pure pragmatism: the product of civil servants and politicians responding to self-evident social evils.[20] Some argued quite the reverse, pointing to the importance of thinkers and ideas in shaping policy.[21] Yet others attempted to recast the question completely.[22] As time went on, the heat went out of the dispute, and historians' interest was refocused on identifying the institutions and structures that mediated influence: the pressure groups and public doctrines that informed and agitated for change.[23] In recent years, as a result, we have come to understand much more clearly how specific organisations and particular experts helped shaped government action.[24] It remains the case, none the less, that we have little sense of how particular thinkers and strands of thought shaped parliamentary, rather than governmental, policy. To that extent, at least, the question raised by the administrative historians of the 1950s and 1960s remains to be answered.

They took their inspiration from an even older debate, one sparked by A.V. Dicey's 1905 *Lectures on the Relation Between Law and Public Opinion in England during the Nineteenth Century*. Here Dicey argued that 'doctrines' – often 'doctrines which were current, either generally or in the society to which the law-givers belonged, in the days of their early manhood' – undeniably shaped legislation. But Dicey was less than clear about how this process happened and often rowed back from this unsubstantiated claim, arguing – rather like Bagehot – that 'extreme and logically coherent theories have, during the 19th century, exercised no material effect on the law of England', but also, even more confusingly, maintaining that 'men's beliefs are in the main the result of circumstances rather than arguments'.[25] It is evident that there is work still to be done on this issue.

Exploring the impact of intellectuals on parliament thus forces together a number of previously self-contained debates. It requires us to explore the issue of how policy is turned from theory into action. It refocuses attention on the nature of British intellectual life and the existence (or non-existence) of a British intelligentsia. And it does much more besides. In this essay, I will argue that British intellectuals can be understood as a coherent social group – just like those that existed in Europe. I will also suggest that they were a significant influence on parliament and – more importantly – on how parliament was understood by other social groups. Indeed, they were crucial to the process of explaining and legitimating the parliamentary constitution. But this does not mean that the intellectuals formed a coherent pressure group or were effective in directing legislation – far from it. For although the intellectuals took their role very seriously – as Hobbes's and Anderson's and even Bagehot's comments suggest; their impact was always indirect and almost never conclusive. They were also constrained in important ways by the very beliefs they

helped to engender. This tells us something about parliament. It also reveals much about British intellectual life and the lives of British intellectuals.

2. *Intellectuals*

A key part of any such project is to establish a robust definition of an intellectual. This is a genuinely difficult thing to do.[26] Indeed, it has even been argued that no convincing classification of intellectuals can ever be made.[27] For historians, the problem is especially intractable. On the one hand, intellectuals can exist within any society.[28] That is why, after all, historians of medieval Europe are able to write accounts of what they call 'intellectuals'.[29] Although the word would mean nothing to contemporaries, it is argued, it, none the less, can have a heuristic value for scholars.[30] On the other hand, however, the notion of a group of intellectuals – and especially of an intelligentsia – is one intrinsically bound up with modernity and with the creation of a Habermasian public sphere.[31] It is the evolution of public opinion, Habermas argues, that generates a 'stratum of "intellectuals" '; a stratum that is, separate 'from the highly educated bourgeois strata'.[32] Even here, however, there is a lack of clarity. Sometimes Habermas refers to intellectuals as ' "*Intelligenz*" ' – and, in a self-conscious echo of Alfred Weber, to a ' "*frieschwebende Intelligenz*" ' (or free-floating intelligentsia). But he also refers to them as '*Intellektuellen*' (intellectuals) or '*Litersten*' (men of letters).[33] The distinctions are surely important – after all, whilst '*Intelligenz*' is always placed within inverted commas, '*Intellektuellen*' is not. But, as this suggests, a certain fuzziness tends to characterise even the most central texts on the nature and place of the intellectuals.

Within the last decade, Stefan Collini has offered three definitions of the word intellectual. First, there is the intellectual as sociological category. Then there is what

he calls the 'subjective sense', which captures an individual's own commitment to serious-minded and sustained thought. Finally, there is the 'cultural sense': the idea of the intellectual as an authority speaking to a wider public, making pronouncements on matters of cultural importance. For Collini, only the third – cultural – definition is of any real analytical value.[34] This offers us some clarity and a partial solution to the problem – but it does not go far enough. By disregarding the social structures that make such 'authority' possible and the material basis of the 'wider public' to whom the intellectuals speak, this risks producing a partial account. It is, in fact, necessary to engage with all these definitions – and, especially, with the sociological and cultural approaches.

As Habermas suggests, the rise of the intellectual and rise of the public – especially of the notion of public opinion – go hand in hand. The 18th century, as Samuel Johnson claimed, was '*The Age of Authors'*. To some extent, this was an exaggeration: very few writers received Johnson's rewards or achieved his cultural authority. But the sense that this was an age that established the idea of an author is certainly true – and it was true in sociological, cultural, and subjective terms.[35] It was the age of authors because, for the first time, there was a celebration of men, like Johnson, who made a career from scholarship and a life ofwriting free from institutional or courtly support.[36] This itself was only possible because the literary market had expanded enough to support such a vocation. It was in that sense a material as well as a cultural reality.[37] By the same token, it is possible to see the 19th century as the age of the intellectual. It was then that the term was coined, and – more significantly – it was then that a discrete culture of intellectuals emerged in Britain.[38] It was not until the Victorian era, indeed, that the sociological and cultural conditions were right to produce what one might call an 'intellectual' subjectivity.[39]

The underlying causes for this development were threefold. In the first place, the Victorian era witnessed an unprecedented and dramatic transformation in the literary marketplace. Rising literacy and the advent of new technology suddenly created a massively enlarged and profitable field of production. Whilst the 18th century was the age of a few highly-paid authors, the 19th century saw authorship become a career for thousands. More people were writing for more money than ever before. In 1847, G.H. Lewes declared that 'Literature has become a profession.' 'In the present state of things', he went on, 'a man who has health, courage, and ability can earn by literature the income of a gentleman.'[40] The result was immediate and impressive. The 1841 census enumerated 167 authors. The 1881 census counted 6,111. By 1901, there were 11,060 of them.[41] Nor did this exaggerate the numbers involved. All told, more than 24,000 people wrote for Victorian periodicals.[42] This mass production of both literature and of litterateurs had simply never been seen before. In the second place, the growing complexity of modern life and the growing size of the professional middle classes produced an expansion of the public schools and of the universities. In 1801 there were 1,128 students in England. A hundred years later, there were nearly 20,000.[43] Such a dramatic rise in the quantity of students produced a similar increase in the numbers of those paid to teach them. In the 13 years between 1845 and 1858 Oxford saw a 40% increase in the number of college fellows.[44] By 1900, something like 2,000 lecturers and professors were employed by the universities.[45]

The gap between academics and journalists was not a great one – indeed, many were both.[46] The division between university teachers and those who taught in the public schools was also narrow – and people frequently moved from the academy to the school and back again.[47] There was a whole series of institutions – formal

clubs, dining societies, discussion groups, even walking parties – that drew thinkers from all parts of the country together.[48] But these individuals were conscious of great differences between themselves and other groups within society. This was the third factor in creating an intellectual elite in the 19th century: the sense felt by an ever-increasing number of writers and thinkers that they had created and now inhabited a separate and superior culture.

The intellectuals self-consciously distinguished themselves from the other members of the professional middle classes and from the economic and social elites of their age. It was a process captured in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, where he condemned the aristocratic 'barbarians' and the bourgeois 'philistines' and celebrated the 'aliens' – people who transcend the limitations of 19th-century society to pursue culture and lead lives of 'sweetness and light'.[49] But Arnold was far from alone. From Coleridge's clerisy to Wells's samurai, the ideal of a cultivated, disinterested and learned caste was celebrated again and again.[50] Clergymen like Frederick Temple,[51] scientists like John Tyndall;[52] conservatives and radicals alike: all of them agreed on the need for a 'voluntary nobility',[53] an 'aristocracy of talent',[54] a 'real aristocracy of character and intellect'.[55] This all spoke of a new consciousness, a new culture, a new identity: the construction of a self-conscious elite of intellectuals.

Not all academics were intellectuals, of course; much less all teachers or all writers.[56] Many were avowedly anti-intellectual. The fellows of St John's College, Oxford, greeted the earnest Arthur Stanley's lecture on the Holy Land in the 1850s with the immortal phrase, 'Jerusalem be damned. Give us wine, women and horses.'[57] Others were less philistine, but no less suspicious of abstraction. Montagu James, the distinguished and learned provost of King's College, Cambridge, used to adjure his

students: 'No thinking, gentlemen, please!'[58] Moreover, many academics were content to address a limited audience or to focus on only a few specialised areas of thought.[59] What distinguished the intellectuals from the others was their public role, their willingness to discuss wider questions, and their authority in debate. Intellectuals did not just address one another, they spoke to a wider audience and they were, to adopt Collini's term, always 'public moralists'.[60]

Now there were many publics in 19th-century Britain. Some were well known, and some – as Wilkie Collins pointed out in 1858 – were unknown.[61] The periodical press was segmented by subject, religion, and politics.[62] As the century progressed, so these divisions grew greater and the publishing world grew ever more specialised. But intellectuals' role was to transcend these differences – at least to some extent. They used the cultural capital they had amassed in one field to underwrite their comments in other, broader debates.[63] Just as Matthew Arnold wrote on 'Literature and Science' (1882), so the biologist T.H. Huxley wrote on 'Science and Culture' (1880). Both men wrote on politics and on ethics, too, and in that way they were archetypal intellectuals. Whether it was A.V. Dicey trading on his legal knowledge to intervene in the debate over home rule, Sir John Seeley using history to agitate for an active imperial policy, or even Charles Darwin drawing on his scientific knowledge to oppose racial inequality, what distinguished the intellectuals was this capacity to reach out to a public and make their voice heard.[64]

In all three of Collini's definitions, then, the 19th century can be seen as an age that produced a significant group of intellectuals. These were not like the ideal-type alienated intelligentsia of the sociologists, it is true.[65] But they formed a distinct and coherent social fraction, none the less – what Noel Annan famously identified as an 'intellectual aristocracy'.[66] They owed their existence to real changes in the literary

and educational marketplace. They were also self-conscious about this: sharing a subjective sense of being intellectuals; a sense that was captured in Thomas Carlyle's lecture, 'The Hero as Man of Letters' (1840). The Man of Letters, he declared, was a product of the modern world, and served for contemporaries the function of 'Prophet, Priest, Divinity'. Moreover, Carlyle claimed, 'Of all Priesthoods, Aristocracies, Governing Classes at present in the world, there is no class comparable for importance to that priesthood of the Writers of Books.'[67] Even allowing for his remarkable rodomontade, the fact that he felt able to make such a claim is revealing. And it points to the third way in which the Victorian era produced what can be regarded as a recognizable cultural role for intellectuals. These men of letters were seen more than just writers or teachers: they were prophetic figures, often adopting a quasi-biblical register to make their arguments tell. It was this that led George Eliot to 'venerate' Ruskin as a 'Hebrew prophet', Froude to compare Carlyle to Isaiah, and Arnold to be attacked as an 'elegant Jeremiah'.[68]

3. *The Intellectuals and the Powers*

It comes as little surprise, therefore, that the thinkers, writers, and teachers of the 19th century found themselves called upon to exercise their authority in the political, as well as the cultural, world. Indeed, by the late 1880s, the journalist, W.T. Stead, felt able to claim that 'The Press has become to the Commons what the Commons were to the Lords. The Press has become the Chamber of Initiative.'[69] He overstated his case, of course. But he was right to note the way in which journalists increasingly influenced public debate.[70] Intellectuals could also use the media. A letter to *The Times*, a public lecture, or controversial article could raise issues and prompt action. So familiar was this as a method, that when the influential author and architect, T.G.

Jackson, encountered any criticism of his work, his first thought was to fire off a missive to the papers. He even did the same when his house was burgled.[71]

The intellectuals were not, however, limited to these public forums when they sought to make a case. Thinkers and writers were welcomed in the homes of the rich and the powerful. Indeed, as one Russian visitor observed, there was 'no other country where the ruling few mixed so easily with the literary and artistic world'.[72] For university teachers, too, personal connections could prove useful. The Oxford reformer and Master of Balliol, Benjamin Jowett, famously observed that: 'I should like to govern the world through my pupils', and – through the many students who went into parliament or administered the colonies of the empire – he arguably came very close to doing so.[73]

The expertise that the intellectuals possessed also made them valuable to an executive that was, throughout much of the 19th century, understaffed and ill-equipped for policy making.[74] Lawrence Goldman has shown how influential the Social Science Association (SSA) was in shaping policy in the 1850s and 1860s. Its meetings, publications, and the office it maintained in London to facilitate parliamentary lobbying, all contributed to its success. It shaped the Taunton Commission and Endowed Schools Act 1869; the Royal Sanitary Commission and the Public Heath Act 1875; the Married Women's Property Act 1870, the Habitual Criminals Act 1869, and the Prevention of Crimes Act 1871.[75]

The SSA was uniquely important – but it was not unique. The British Association for the Advancement of Science, the Charity Organisation Society, even – for a short while – the National Association for the Advancement of Art, were amongst those organisations that lobbied and sought to influence government action.[76] These were explicitly public bodies, setting out their case in grand public meetings,

using the pressure of public opinion to force change. Naturally, this was not always successful.[77] But the most effective groups backed this public presence with private influence. Politicians were invited to join them – with Salisbury becoming president of the British Association in 1894 and Gladstone invited to address the SSA on numerous occasions. Still more powerfully, smaller, informal groups of intellectuals grew up designed to press for particular policies. The 'X Club', for example, agitated for science – and for its members' careers – in both the Royal Society and the wider world.[78]

The intellectuals were thus able to operate within a network of personal contacts and public forums, helping to shape debate and direct specific policies. Although separate from the world of politics, and distanced by occupation, class, and, indeed, income from the landed elites who governed the country, the intellectuals, none the less, had an entrée to the corridors of Westminster. This was made clear by their role in the numerous royal commissions of the era. Frederic Harrison expressed intense surprise at having been drafted on to serve the royal commission on trades unions of 1867–9.[79] He was only 36 years old and had had little practical knowledge of the subject. But his articles in the *Fortnightly Review* had impressed the cognoscenti (he was even consulted on labour laws by George Eliot), and his minority report was to be influential on future legislation.[80] Less surprising was the involvement of public thinkers on those commissions charged with investigating education. The work of intellectuals in prompting the establishment of the schools inquiry commission in 1864 and in informing its conclusions, is especially noteworthy. In particular, the Oxford philosopher, T.H. Green, proved to be a significant figure as assistant commissioner, using his investigations of schools in the west midlands to shape the report as a whole.[81]

It is fair to say that the intellectuals did not have it all their own way. They were never more than a minority even on those commissions that dealt with educational matters. Their ideas were not always taken up or were subsequently watered down.[82] Yet, increasingly, they were seen as adding something to the debate; providing a contribution that no one else could. As experts, as commentators, as agitators, and as the providers of evidence, intellectuals consequently had a key role to play in shaping Victorian legislation.

As legislators, however, they proved to be much less successful. The political ineptitude of the Philosophic Radicals – that small group of highly-educated and high-principled parliamentarians that gathered round John Stuart Mill in the 1830s – is now notorious. True enough, they did achieve some marginal victories. They were instrumental in the foundation of the Public Record Office; they were central to the establishment of the 1837 select committee on transportation.[83] But the reality was, as William Thomas puts it, that 'the Philosophic Radicals were a political failure'.[84] Inept at tactics, hopeless in strategy, ill-fitted for a parliament increasingly based on party lines, Mill, Molesworth, Grote, Roebuck, and the rest proved to be incapable of forming the alliances or exploiting the opportunities that might have yielded them some measure of success. In Edward Bulwer's damning assessment, they were a 'small, conceited, and headstrong party … the sect of the Impracticables'.[85] Partly, of course, this was due to the personalities involved. But the subsequent experience of intellectuals in politics suggests that wider problems were also to blame.

A generation later, another, broader group of thinkers also became involved in parliamentary politics. Some were the academics and former academics christened the 'Lights of Liberalism' by Christopher Harvie.[86] They formed an oddly-assorted group, including historians like Goldwin Smith and lawyers like A.V. Dicey; Cambridge

men like Lesley Stephen and Oxonians like James Bryce.[87] Others were the Comteian positivists and intellectual journalists studied by Christopher Kent: men like Frederic Harrison and John Morley.[88] Both groups were part of the agitation for franchise reform in the mid 1860s – and in the sense that the Reform Act was passed in 1867, they can be said to have been successful. None the less, their experience of politics after this was universally disastrous. The 1868 election was a catastrophe.[89] The Gladstone ministry was a bitter disappointment.[90] And slowly but surely the intellectuals were driven out of the Liberal Party and out of parliament itself.[91]

This should not have been the case. The British parliament should have been a more conducive arena for the intellectuals. After all, these were people who were paid for their rhetorical and analytical skills. In an age in which speech-making was central to political success, they ought to have been uniquely well-qualified as politicians.[92] Moreover, university graduates had their own seats in the house of commons. Throughout the 19th century, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge each elected two MPs. From 1832 onwards, the University of Dublin also elected two. From 1868, the Scottish universities elected two more MPs between them and the University of London was granted a single member of its own. These seven MPs never amounted to a large block of members, but it did mean that the interests of the universities, their teachers, and their graduates were – in theory, at least – directly represented in parliament.[93] The presence in the upper chamber of figures like Lord Salisbury, who was a notably assiduous chancellor of Oxford, meant that in the house of lords, too, the universities were not without their champions. Indeed, 'defending Oxford was the only reason, other than war or forming a government, for which he [Salisbury] would cut short a holiday'.[94]

Even so, when it came to university business, the intellectuals proved to be ineffectual at Westminster. The story of university reform in the 19th century is one of confusion, missed opportunities, and bungled legislation as a result. The reforms of the ancient English universities in the 1850s satisfied no one.[95] The further reforms of the 1880s were similarly flawed.[96] Oxbridge dons proved to be better at thwarting change than at dictating the terms of reform. Just as they managed to see off legislation in the 18th century,[97] so they were able to exercise a veto over much further investigation well into the 20th century.[98] Scottish universities were also able to defer decisions for decades, not least because of the problems of finding parliamentary time for any contested bill.[99] In any event, the universities' MPs often had little contact with academic opinion and figures like Salisbury eventually gave up any attempt to represent the interests of Oxford on the floor of the house of the lords.[100]

What Salisbury found within his own university was a general problem in all universities. There simply was not a single academic interest to represent. Not only did the electorate include graduates as well as active members of the university, there were also numerous competing groups which formed and reformed around different issues. Some of the greatest politicians of the day learned the difficulty of discerning university opinion. Relying on faulty advice and partial knowledge, for instance, Robert Peel underwent the humiliation of defeat in the Oxford by-election of 1829.[101] The difficulty was not that the university seats were especially volatile. They were rarely contested. There was a convention that candidates did not campaign and 'controversies were either of the symbolic sort … or progressively inward-looking'.[102] But they did not behave like normal constituencies. As F.M. Cornford observed of Edwardian Cambridge: 'the academic democracy is superior in having no organised

parties. We thus avoid all the responsibilities of party leadership (there are leaders, but no one follows them), and the degradations of party compromise.'[103]

Moreover, what was true in the specific case of the university seats can also be seen in the world of the intellectuals more generally. They were always too divided to provide any sort of coherent movement or to work as any sort of convincing pressure group. In the 19th century, claims Michael Bentley, British intellectuals were only completely united on two occasions: for Gladstone in the debate over the 'Bulgarian atrocities' in 1876; and against Gladstone over home rule a decade later. In neither case, he goes on, were they effective.[104] Even this, however, overestimates their unity. There was always a minority of thinkers, for example, who spoke up for some form of Irish self-government – not least the 75 Oxford academics who signed a home rule manifesto in 1888.[105]

The problem was the product of a dual difficulty. First, the very nature of intellectual life was predicated against the formation of cohesive political parties. Not only were there those, like Matthew Arnold, who argued that the true intellectual was one who could 'keep out of the region of immediate practice in the political, social humanitarian sphere'.[106] The fact was that a calling which depended upon originality, individualism, and independence – and which was defended by its advocates as a properly manly, as well as gentlemanly, vocation precisely because of this – was always going to find it hard to produce machine politicians.[107] Second, and more importantly, the intellectuals themselves did not form a coherent ideological bloc. Harold Perkin famously described the intellectuals as 'the forgotten middle class … because they forgot themselves'.[108] Again, this is only partially true. As we have seen, Victorian thinkers were, in reality, acutely conscious of their separate culture and identity. But it is right to say that they did not conceive of themselves as just another

class with its own class interest. Indeed, they rejected such an analysis completely. Arnold's notion of 'aliens' – 'persons who are mainly led, not by their class spirit, but by a general *humane* spirit'– thus gives a good sense of what they saw their role as being.[109] The intellectuals staked their claims to political influence on the grounds that they transcended class, religion, nationality, and occupation. It meant, in other words, that they represented no real constituency and possessed no real unity.

The failure of the intellectuals to cohere around class interests or ideological positions came into sharp focus in the mid-Victorian controversy over Governor Edward John Eyre. In 1865, Eyre was responsible for putting down a rebellion in Jamaica. His supporters maintained that he had rescued the white population from disaster and saved the British empire from acute humiliation. His opponents pointed to the horrific violence that this had involved and argued that he had acted illegally in imposing martial law and in executing hundreds of supposed rebels. The battle over Governor Eyre was the closest Britain came to its own Dreyfus affair. There were arguments about the nature of the state, debates about vested interests and about establishment corruption. There was even – just like Dreyfus – a tragic case of suicide.[110]

Throughout it all, as Catherine Hall has noted, intellectuals played 'a crucial part in defining the agenda for debate'.[111] Yet, despite their importance, they were critically divided. On one side, there were the members of the Jamaica committee, like John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, T.H. Huxley, Goldwin Smith, A.V. Dicey, and T.H. Green, who were Eyre's sworn enemies. On the other side, there were those like Charles Kingsley, Charles Dickens, Lord Tennyson, John Tyndall, and – especially – Thomas Carlyle, who eulogised Eyre and established the Eyre Defence Fund. There were also divisions within each of these opposing camps. The Jamaica committee

split over tactics and was constantly wracked by internal dissention. The Eyre Defence Fund was ostensibly more cohesive, but no less full of competing egos. If this was, as Huxley wrote to Tyndall, 'one of the most important constitutional battles in which Englishmen have for many years been engaged', then it is all the more striking that the intellectuals were so torn by it.[112] That the result of all this angst was a royal commission which suggested that Eyre had acted illegally, and a series of court cases which concluded that he had not, only makes the matter more remarkable. For all the time spent on it, and all the words written about it, the Eyre case came to no clear conclusion. It thus reveals the problems, rather than the power, of the intellectuals.

Apparently incapable of overcoming their differences, Victorian thinkers failed to form anything like a unified pressure group. Their impact on parliament was consequently diffuse rather than decisive, and indeterminate rather than direct. Some contemporaries even imagined that it was almost entirely negligible. They assumed that the intellectual was constitutionally incapable of acting effectively as a politician. And, as Bagehot's dismissal of the '*too clever by half* people' makes plain, this criticism was even shared by the intellectuals themselves. 'The man of culture is in politics one of the poorest mortals alive', observed Frederic Harrison in 1867:

> For simple pedantry, and want of good sense, no man is his equal. Any quantity of ingenious arguments, based on wholly fictitious premises, he will give you. No assumption is too unreal, no end is too unpractical for him. But the active exercise of politics requires common sense, sympathy, trust, resolution, and enthusiasm, qualities which your man of culture has carefully rooted up, lest they damage the delicacy of his critical olfactories.[113]

He went too far, of course, and he did so to rhetorical effect: criticizing in one sweep Matthew Arnold, Robert Lowe, and all those who opposed widening the franchise.

Yet the utter failure of his own political career suggests that his analysis was – ironically enough – not entirely wrong.[114]

4. *The Intellectuals and the Public*

Does this mean, however, that the intellectuals were, in fact, unimportant players in British political life? Does it mean that they exercised no influence on parliamentary debates or political discourse? Does it ultimately mean that they provided no pressure on parliament whatsoever? The answer is clearly, no. Although the intellectuals were more effective at directly influencing the executive than the legislature, and although they proved strikingly ineffective in directly shaping party policy or primary legislation, this did not mean that they were unimportant. Indeed, they played a crucial role within the wider world of British politics. For it was the intellectuals who established the ground rules for political life; who defined and determined the structures and processes of parliamentary practice; and who – above all – legitimated British politics and the British constitution. The key influence they exercised on parliament itself was thus positive: defending the institution and helping to articulate both the ways that pressure was applied by other groups and the means by which parliament itself responded to the demands of an ever-increasing electorate.

The centrality of the constitution to political discourse in the 19th century is now well established. It was the constant reference point for the political elite.[115] It was also a key element in the debates of the politically marginalised.[116] Indeed, with understandable hyperbole, James Vernon has claimed that the constitution 'was central to the way people imagined themselves as both individuals and members of a sex, a class, a political movement as well as, perhaps most forcefully of all, a nation'.[117]

None the less, at least at the turn of the 19th century, the nature of the constitution was highly debatable. As George Dyer put it in 1812: 'We have at present three predominant parties in the country … yet they all talk of rallying round the Constitution like different religious sects, who all appeal to the same code.'[118] In the first few decades of the century, indeed, politics hinged on these variant versions of the British constitution; there was no consensus over what it meant or how it worked.[119] For radicals, it was even possible to imagine that parliament itself was the problem; that reform would require an anti-parliament – a grand convention which would sweep away oligarchy and abolish the restricted assembly at Westminster.[120]

By the middle of the 19th century, however, such an idea was anathema even to the most advanced political thinkers within Britain. As Peter Mandler puts it, far from being supplanted or replaced, parliament 'became instead the national cynosure, the centre of a whirlpool of demands and pressures from without'.[121] The nature and function of the constitution had also become more firmly fixed, with a general agreement emerging between governed and governing that the sovereignty of parliament and the constitutional monarchy were the guarantors of Britain's greatness. It was an attitude satirised in Dickens's comic character, Mr Podsnap, the man who believed that the constitution had been bestowed by providence and that England was thus uniquely blessed.[122] Podsnap was a caricature – but he was funny because he was true.

In part, this constitutional consensus rested on not much more than economic growth. Social, economic, and political stability went hand in hand.[123] But there was also an ideology underpinning all this – an ideology made and shaped by Britain's intellectuals. They had a vested interest in defending the parliamentary system. Not only were they closely connected through ties of friendship and fellow feeling to the

governing elite. They also had a personal – emotional, indeed, vocational – interest in defending a system based upon free expression and government by debate. Whatever his scepticism about Bohemian intellectuals, in 1872 Walter Bagehot celebrated the British political system as one that 'gives the premium to intelligence' because it was based on discussion. 'Nothing promotes intellect like discussion', he went on; 'and nothing promotes intellectual discussion as much as government by discussion.'[124]

This belief explains why even the most advanced intellectuals tended to defend this aspect of parliamentary practice, although they sought to reform the institution as a whole. Jeremy Bentham, for one, never wholly lost the conviction that:

> the rules that suggested themselves as necessary to every assembly turned out to be the very rules actually observed in both assemblies of the British Legislature. What theory would have pitched upon as a model of perfection, practice presented as having been successfully pursued: never was the accord more perfect between reason and experience.[125]

Such was his admiration, he even recommended that the French Estates General of 1789 should adopt the rules and debating practices of Westminster.[126] Likewise, despite John Stuart Mill's commitment to radicalism, his defence of free speech has rightly been seen as a highly elitist one. His emphasis on cultivated intelligence and dispassionate debate excluded the ill-educated and linguistically less-assured from public discourse.[127] His defence of liberty was seen even by his contemporaries as 'one of the most aristocratic books ever written'.[128] And one of his chief contributions to the debates about parliamentary reform was his assertion that in any future extension of the franchise 'a member of every intellectual profession' should be granted as many as five or six votes.[129]

This belief in parliamentary government and in the intrinsic virtue of the constitution shaped intellectual work in Victorian Britain. Lawyers and historians devoted themselves to a justification of the British way of political life.[130] They

defended and defined a constitution which they believed to be the guarantor of their own role within public life; a constitution which ensured that the voice of the mob was drowned out by the writings of the educated elite. 'Our country', rejoiced the historian E.S. Creasy, in his *Rise and Progress of the English Constitution,* was a place where thinkers were given their due. It was 'the peculiar domicile of mental authority'.[131] Nor was it just academics and writers that defended this political settlement. Across the country, artists and architects embodied the constitution in their work: from the houses of parliament to the smallest town hall, the whig interpretation of history – a vision of the national past that celebrated the constitution in the national present – was evoked in murals, sculptures, and the buildings themselves.[132]

Of course, the constitution remained open to reform. Even its admirers admitted that it was 'a somewhat rambling structure … convenient rather than symmetrical'.[133] Hence Carlyle's contempt for parliament as 'a poor self-cancelling "National Palaver" ', for example.[134] Moreover, as the franchise was widened, as politics became more democratic and demotic, many intellectuals expressed their doubts in tones that grew ever more shrill.[135] But even at the end of our period, the constitution remained the touchstone for intellectual debate and the loadstone of the intellectuals' political world.[136]

The consequences of this relentless focus on parliament – on parliamentary practice and on the place of parliament within the constitution – were threefold. In the first place, the dominant notion of politics as a rational process shaped by informed debate helped to determine how the intellectuals engaged with the public sphere. They were encouraged to present themselves not as bold and provocative speculative thinkers, dealing with lofty philosophical concepts, but as practical, sensible, down-to-earth, experts. When Bagehot, for instance, praised the 'sound stupidity' of the

English, he was not just contrasting the empiricism and stability of his native land with the revolutionary anfractuosities of France, he was also, implicitly, defining himself against dangerous French thinkers. The same was true of even such an archetypal intellectual as John Stuart Mill, who likewise regretted 'as much as it is possible to do, the habit which still prevails in France, of founding political philosophy on … abstractions'.[137] What Noel Annan termed 'the curious strength of Positivism in English political thought' may owe something to this suspicion of abstract concepts in politics.[138] Certainly, this attitude underpinned modes of self-fashioning that would prove surprisingly long-lasting, helping to shape the British intelligentsia – and their rejection of terms like intelligentsia – for generations. 'I shouldn't like anyone to call me an intellectual: I don't think any Englishman would!', observed George Bernard Shaw in *Fanny's First Play* (1911).[139] In this he spoke for many thinkers who wished to distance themselves from an idea that was thought somehow intrinsically unpatriotic.

In the second place, and still more importantly, by legitimating the constitution in general, and parliamentary practice in particular, the intellectuals provided a template for political activity at all levels of society. Continental revolutionaries complained that the British were incapable of organising a revolution. Instead, they organised committees. 'Even the most serious persons are sometimes over-come by the fascination of mere forms and manage to convince themselves that they are in fact doing something if they hold meetings with a mass of documents', wrote Alexander Herzen. 'England teems with hundreds of associations of this kind: solemn meetings take place which dukes and peers of the realm, clergymen and secretaries attend: treasurers collect funds, journalists write articles, all are busily engaged in doing nothing at all.'[140] Little wonder; this was precisely how one might

move a parliament which you had been taught was amenable to rational argument and the pressures of 'wise, thoughtful, and consistent' public opinion.[141]

At a more popular level, the impact was just as great. As Ross McKibbin has shown, amongst the working classes, 'Crown and … parliament possessed an ideological hegemony which, if anything, increased throughout the [19th] century.' Parliamentary procedure was widely imitated and parliamentary practice shaped innumerable debating societies up and down the land. It proved as significant to the 'St Pancras Parliament', where the young Ramsey MacDonald learnt his politics, as it was to the house of commons itself.[142] 'We were extravagantly delighted at the chance of calling each other the honourable or right honourable member', recalled the poet Edwin Muir of his time in the 'Faldside Parliament' and, although he later came to see the experience as a rather sterile one, it is clear that the imitation of parliament had consequences for many others.[143] 'It was here', observes John W. Davis, of the South Lambeth parliament, that working-class men and women 'were able to develop their intellect, their powers of argument and oratory', as well as serving a sort of political apprenticeship.[144] In that way the intellectuals' account of the constitution not only shaped the content but the form of extra-parliamentary pressure.

Third, the intellectuals' description of parliamentary practice shaped how the institution operated itself. At a basic level, parliamentarians found themselves bound by the rules and conventions that the intellectuals drew up. Self-evidently, these included such fundamental works as Erskine May's *Parliamentary Practice* (1844), a text that came to standardise Commons' procedure. But they also encompassed more contentious volumes like Bagehot's *English Constitution* (1867). The unwritten constitution was similarly shaped by the opinions of lawyers and historians – for as they pointed out, within this system, custom was just as significant as statute law.[145]

More importantly still, when considering the impact of the intellectuals on parliament, it is clear that they helped establish the tone of parliamentary debate and the style of parliamentary practice. It was Bagehot who praised the 'general intellectual tone' of MPs' discussions;[146] Erskine May who claimed that 'One of the proud results of our free constitution has been the development of parliamentary oratory.'[147] This general presumption that political speeches would be 'long, serious, detailed, well-informed' was shaped by the ideas developed by the intellectuals.[148]

'The first principles of government are no longer in dispute', wrote Erskine May; 'the liberties of the people are safe: the oppression of the law is unknown. Accordingly the councils of the state encourage elevated reason, rather than impassioned oratory.'[149] This was a prescription as much as a description – a self-fulfilling prophecy. Inside, as well as outside, parliament the intellectuals thus helped shape the contours of debate.

5. *Conclusion*

Seeking to trace the influence of intellectuals on politics, one might look at the executive or the legislature, at legislation or at discourse. In each field, the evidence suggests a different conclusion. Personal connections and the policy-making vacuum of the Victorian state led thinkers to be prized by the government. True enough, they were not always directly influential and sometimes failed to convey their ideas. Many, like Bentham himself, proved to be politically naïve, acting 'as if men in power only wanted to know what was right that they might do it'.[150] But others proved to be more assured operators, shaping policy through their advice and their place on royal commissions or in the public eye. Expertise even opened the corridors of power to

women, with the popular political economist, Harriet Martineau, and the poet, Amelia Opie, both called in to give guidance about specific issues.[151]

Within parliament, by contrast, the intellectuals had less influence and far less immediate impact. 'A strongly idiosyncratic mind, violently disposed to extremes of opinion is soon hounded out of political life', wrote Bagehot, 'and a bodiless thinker, an ineffectual scholar, cannot even live there for a day.'[152] Many intellectuals, who were ill-disposed to party discipline and ill-equipped for the plotting and planning of practical politics found this to be true. Again, in part, this was a product of individual predilections. It was also, however, a predictable result of the ideology of the intellectuals. Rewarded for their idiosyncrasies as writers and teachers, they found it hard to adapt to life as legislators. Committed to the idea of disinterested decision making and highly resistant to the notion of class politics, they found it difficult to respond to the changing circumstances of the political world.

Nevertheless, at a discursive level the intellectuals did have a major part to play in shaping pressure on parliament. In this 'country and epoch of parliaments and eloquent palavers', the intellectuals were crucial intermediaries for MPs and those they claimed to represent.[153] They interpreted the workings of parliament and legitimated them, helping to establish the increasingly hegemonic interpretation of the constitution that emerged after the 1840s. They also disseminated knowledge about parliament, shaping practice within Westminster and amongst those who sought to influence it – and even informing those who wanted to reform the system altogether. They likewise provided guides for other intellectuals seeking to participate in the political process.

In 1896, W.H. Lecky reflected on impact of ideas on the workings of Westminster, and rather conventionally concluded: 'in England, speculative opinion

has not usually much weight in practical politics, and English politicians are apt to treat it with complete disdain'. But he went on to defend the importance of thinkers despite this: 'no one who has any real knowledge of history can seriously doubt the influence over human affairs which has been exercised by the speculations of Locke, of Rousseau, of Montesquieu, of Adam Smith, or of Bentham'.[154] Nearly a decade later, A.V. Dicey made a similar point, stressing the significance of the 'known leaders of public opinion' such as Mill, Martineau, and Dickens, and especially emphasizing the importance of the Benthamites in moulding legislation.[155]

Both Lecky and Dicey were writing with an agenda in mind, of course; and neither was entirely clear about the means by which ideas influenced political decisions. Yet each was right to stress the difference between the direct and indirect impact of intellectuals on parliament – and right, too, to see the intellectuals as an important indirect influence on British politics. Not because any one doctrine or policy became dominant, much less because Benthamite principles can serve as an all-purpose explanation for government action. But because the intellectuals helped create the conditions in which political debate was undertaken and political decisions could be made. In other words, they provided the context – the language, the rhetoric, the rules, the discourse – with which pressure on parliament could be articulated by other groups.

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[3] Mark H. Curtis, 'The Alienated Intellectuals of Early Stuart England', *Past & Present*, No. 23 (1962), 25–43.

[4] Shirley Williams, *Climbing the Bookshelves* (2009), 239.

[5] Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (1963), 179.

[6] See Christophe Charle, *Les Intellectuels en Europe au XIXe Siècle: Essai d'histoire comparée* (Paris, 2001).

[7] Christophe Charle, *Naissance des 'Intellectuels', 1880–1900* (Paris, 1990).

[8] Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (Cambridge, MA, 1969).

[9] *The Russian Intelligentsia*, ed. Richard Pipes (New York, 1961).

[10] Donald Leslie Shaw, *The Generation of 1898 in Spain* (1975).

[11] A key exception to this is Julia Stapleton, *Political Intellectuals and Public Identities in Britain since 1850* (Manchester, 2001).

[12] Joseph Hamburger, *Intellectuals in Politics: John Stuart Mill and the Philosophic Radicals* (New Haven, CT, 1965); William Thomas, *The Philosophic Radicals: Nine Studies in Theory and Practice, 1817–1841* (Oxford, 1979); Christopher Kent, *Brains and Numbers: Elitism, Comtism, and Democracy in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Toronto, ON, 1978).

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[15] M.S. Hickox, 'Has There Been a British Intelligentsia?', *British Journal of Sociology*, xxxvii (1986), 260–8.

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[18] Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford, 2006), 5.

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[20] Oliver MacDonagh, 'The Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Government: A Reappraisal', *Historical Journal*, i (1958), 52–67.

[21] Henry Parris, 'The Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Government: A Reappraisal Reappraised', *Historical Journal*, iii (1960), 17–37; Jennifer Hart, 'Nineteenth-Century Social Reform: A Tory Interpretation of History', *Past & Present*, No. 31 (1965), 39–61.

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[26] José Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870–1914* (1994), 222.

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[32] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge and Oxford, 1989), 174.

[33] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Nieuwand, 1962), 45, 46, 47, 192.

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[84] Thomas, *Philosophic Radicals*, 3.

[85] *Edinburgh Review*, lxxi (1840), 282–3.

[86] Harvie, *Lights of Liberalism*.

[87] To take only the authors of *Essays in Reform* (1967). The other writers were G.C. Brodrick, R.H. Hutton, Lord Houghton, John Boyd Kinnear, Bernard Cracroft, C.H. Pearson, A.O. Rutson, Sir George Young.

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