Debating Societies, the Art of Rhetoric and the British House of Commons: Parliamentary Culture of Debate before and after the 1832 Reform Act

Taru Haapala[1]

ABSTRACT

British debating societies are here looked at a parliamentary perspective. The main emphasis is on the rhetorical practise of parliamentary debate, which, it is argued, constitutes the main framework of the British culture of debate. This will be approached from the perspective of how the parliamentary practises were reflected in the activities of various debating societies before and after the 1832 Reform Act. I will highlight that the rhetorical traditions of the British House of Commons were not formed in a vacuum, but, rather, shaped and adapted to constitutional changes. After the 1832 reform the practises in debating societies imitated the procedure and rules of the House of Commons more closely than before. The latter part of the essay concentrates on William Gladstone's interpretation of parliamentary debate, himself having actively contributed to various student debating societies. Gladstone's approach on debate in Parliament illustrates a more general shift in rhetorical practise away from the category of public speaking and towards a more proceduralised way of understanding parliamentary eloquence.

KEYWORDS

British debating societies, parliamentary debate, the House of Commons, constitutional change, procedure.

INTRODUCTION

In 1882 *The Times* reported on the first national conference of British parliamentary debating societies held in Liverpool. The Liverpool Parliamentary Debating Society had already been established in 1860 with the aim of conducting debates in the model of parliamentary procedure. The chairman of the conference, Mr. Thomas Cope, was asked to describe the activities of the societies. He said that the aim of the societies, of which there were 105 in existence, was not merely to imitate the House of Commons, but to enable the participants to become debaters despite their different backgrounds (*The Times* 1882, 4). In this sense parliamentary debating societies represented yet another form of the British debating tradition, which, as far as associations and clubs are concerned, goes back to early eighteenth century (see Andrew 1996, 406; Clark 2000, 118). They also represent a parliamentary shift in the British culture of debate that took place after the 1832 Reform Act, which will be further elaborated in this essay.

When considering British parliamentary political culture, it is vital to see the close relation between the rhetorical practises of debating societies and parliamentary life. Previous research shows that, by the mid-nineteenth century, British political culture was distinctly parliamentary in character (e.g. Meisel 2001, Bevis 2007). The British parliament gave inspiration in a wide range of cultural fields. Bevis has, for example, insisted that parliamentary matters touched poetry, literature and drama, as well as the practises of debating societies (Bevis 2007, 15-28). However, general interest in parliamentary affairs had already begun to grow during the eighteenth century.

Press reporting enabled parliamentary affairs to be debated in various societies and clubs. In the 1770s, when press reporting from inside Parliament became an accepted practise, there were only one or two newspapers reporting on the parliamentary debates at any one time. These reports were copied to other newspapers, which gave their own summaries of the course of events (Thomas 1959, 631). Not only did the reporting affect the perceptions of the general public about debate in Parliament, but it also changed the way parliamentarians used rhetoric. Steinmetz, for example, argues that there was a change in parliamentary language around the concept of "public opinion" roughly between the 1780s and 1832. According to him, this semantic change revolved around concepts such as "associations", "movements" and "the press" (Steinmetz 2002, 93). Steinmetz demonstrates that a shift occurred in how parliamentarians referred to social movements. In the eighteenth century, "public movements" were described as something that could be controlled by parliamentary action. However, by 1831 and 1832 the rhetoric of Members of Parliament started to emphasise the "impossibility" of controlling the "public" and "movements" (*ibid*., 93-4).

In his *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (2001) Meisel mainly concentrates on the formation of British public life through the speaking practises of the mid-nineteenth century. Meisel belongs to the Habermasian tradition in so far as he considers parliamentary politics a step towards a "fully developed" public sphere (Meisel 2001, 5; also cf. Habermas 1989, 57-67). My aim, however, is to suggest that it is more useful to consider the British culture of debate from a parliamentary perspective. The House of Commons, it is argued, produced new ideas reshaping the debating tradition into a parliamentary form. More specifically, the changes occurring in the British parliamentary culture of debate after the 1832 reform are represented by the gradual adoption of parliamentary procedure in debating societies. In other words, we should not concentrate on a formation of a "public sphere", but rather on the establishment of a parliamentary nation of debaters.

BRITISH DEBATING SOCIETIES AND ORATORICAL TRAINING

Clubs and societies were, according to Clark (2000, 2), "one of the most distinctive social and cultural institutions of Georgian Britain". According to Fawcett (1980) debating societies differed from literary and dialectic societies, also prominent at the time, in that they conducted formal debates. The formality of debating societies was shown in how they carefully chose their topics, kept to the question at hand, had rules of procedure, and dealt with subjects such as morality, religion, politics and aesthetics (Fawcett 1980, 216).

Fawcett also identifies Parliament and courts of law as providing inspiration for the founding of debating societies around the mid-eighteenth century. According to him, the oldest known popular debating society was a London debating club called the *Robin Hood Society* (1747), which had meetings that were attended by 100-300 debaters. In the Robin Hood Society, debates were usually conducted as "harangues", referring to declamatory style of public speaking rather than to deliberation. All questions before its meetings were decided before-hand to leave time for preparation. Weekly meetings had participants from various trades. They included artisans, clerks, and students of law and letters. The Society attracted attention and was even parodied in journals in the 1750s (Fawcett 1980, 216-9). *Westminster Forum*, one of the imitators of the Robin Hood Society in the 1770s, gave 15 minutes for each speaker to deliver their speeches, which was three times longer than the latter had allowed: "According to its constitution the Westminster Forum was intended for the benefit and instruction of the public at large and as an oratorical training ground for would-be preachers, barristers, and members of Parliament" (Fawcett 1980, 218).

The Robin Hood Society was a prototype for other public forums until the 1790s. At the turn of the 1780s the so-called popular debating societies were opened in London in unprecedented scale. Andrew maintains that they had some of the same characteristics as the Robin Hood Society, but were more commercial (Andrew 1996, 405). The meetings were advertised in newspapers and were generally open for all who paid for admission. Politics and religious issues were freely discussed, which later made them a target for the authorities, who suspected them of spreading radical politics. Indeed, some radical reform leaders are known to have frequented these popular assemblies (Fawcett 1980, 218-9).

In the latter part of the century, popular debating societies also started appearing outside of London, for example, in Manchester, Birmingham, Norwich, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Following the French Revolution the political atmosphere in the country was tense, partly due to extra-parliamentary movements advocating parliamentary reform. From 1792 onwards popular debating societies became targets of governmental restrictions, and some of them dissolved completely (Clark 2000, 120). In 1795 the Seditious Meetings Act was passed despite opposition in the House of Commons. This act required debating societies to be licensed by magistrates, which rendered the existence of popular debating societies increasingly precarious.

Thereafter debating societies began to operate again rather privately, although earlier examples of semi-private organizations existed. According to Fawcett (1980, 220), *The Select Society of Edinburgh* is a transitional institution in that it was selective in its membership, but it cannot be considered small in numbers. Established in 1754, it soon attracted more than one hundred members, a considerable number of whom were lawyers. It folded ten years later when *The Speculative Society of Edinburgh* was founded.

The Speculative Society was established by university students "for improvement in Literary Composition and Public Speaking" (The Speculative Society of Edinburgh 1905, 2). It restricted membership to only twenty-five members. In 1780 the number rose to thirty, where it stayed until the early twentieth century. The Society's weekly sessions were for members only. Its activities attracted students as well as those with well-established credentials in such fields as law, literature and politics.

The College Historical Society of Trinity College in Dublin has been referred to as the oldest student debating society in the United Kingdom (e.g. Samuels 1923). It was established as "The Club" already in 1747. One of the founders was Edmund Burke, the famous political thinker and Member of Parliament. The aim of the Club was "the improvement of its members in the more refin'd, elegant, and usefull parts of Litterature", as was written in their

first minutes, so as to utilise their "minds and manners for the functions of Civil Society" (cited in Samuels 1923, 204). The founders of the Club agreed that only through practise in a society would the benefits of their academic degrees be of use. Oratorical practise would benefit "enriching our judgement, brightening our wit, and enlarging our knowledge and of being serviceable to others in the same things" (Samuels 1923, 204).

Members were not only required to deliver their own orations, but also to engage in debates on assigned subjects. The debate topics revolved around current political events, but historical and literary subjects were also introduced. Sometimes the debates were performed in the form of role play in which historical figures appeared. On one occasion the Club "resolved itself into a mimic Parliament" (Cooke 1898, 282). A bill was introduced in the meeting, and all argumentation for and against was recorded.

The Club was re-established as The College Historical Society of Dublin, but expelled from Trinity College in 1794. It was admitted again in 1813, but dissolved in 1815, after which it was re-founded in 1843 (Samuels 1923, 205). In 1783 it had established a "mutual membership agreement" with the Speculative Society of Edinburgh, as they had similar self-educational aims. The Speculative Society dissociated itself from the College Historical Society in 1806, and the relations were not re-established until 1863. The disconnection had probably something to do with the fact that the College Historical Society had become more open to radical views than the Speculative Society. From 1797 until 1805 the Speculative Society had enjoyed exceptionally lively discussions due to the political situation after the French Revolution. Its more distinguished members included Lord Lansdowne, who became the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1806, and Henry Brougham, one of the founders of the *Edinburgh Review* and who became an influential Whig leader in the country. The idea of founding academic debating societies seemed to travel down to England with students from Scottish universities during the Napoleonic wars (Fawcett 1980, 223). John Stuart Mill, for instance, founded the *London Debating Society* in 1825 on the model of the Speculative Society, and was also inspired by the Union Society in Cambridge (Mill 1955, 106). In the English universities, prior to the foundation of the *Cambridge and Oxford Union Societies*, there had already existed several smaller, more private student debating societies.[2] In 1815 the Cambridge Union Society was founded through the merger of three debating societies from different colleges.[3] The

---

2   As an example, there was a debating club at Oxford University founded by George Canning, who later became Prime Minister (see Fawcett 1980, 227).

3   It appears that the Union, later known as the Cambridge Union Society, had connections with both, the College Historical Society in Dublin and the Speculative Society of Edinburgh. Cradock quotes one George Pryme's autobiography: "Of the predecessors of the Union the most

Oxford Union Society was established in 1823. At first, the Union Societies had much the same self-improvement objectives as did their Scottish and Irish forerunners. By mid-nineteenth century, however, they had adopted parliamentary characteristics in an unprecedented manner, as they sought to apply the House of Commons procedure as far as practicable.

In 1832 the Cambridge Union Society passed a new rule that shows quite clearly the interest its members had in parliamentary affairs: "During the period that Parliament is sitting, provided the number of Contributing and resident Honorary Members exceed Three Hundred and Eighty, the number of Daily Papers taken in shall be at least Twenty-four" (CUS laws 1832, 10). Also in the Oxford Union Society, reference to parliamentary rules was clearly made when one of the members in a meeting appealed for precedent to the practice of the House of Commons (OUS minutes 1858, February 4th).

According to van Rijn (2007), who has studied parliamentary debating societies, which were popular in Britain in the 1880s and 1890s, the Cambridge and Oxford Union Societies were the only places, besides Westminster, where parliamentary rules were applied before parliamentary debating societies were formed. Van Rijn has concentrated on the appeal of the theatrical side of parliament which, he argues, led the British public to imitate parliamentary rules at the associational level (*ibid*., 55). As mentioned in the beginning of this essay, however, the emphasis here remains on the procedural practise of parliamentary debate. As will be argued below, the application of parliamentary rules represents a connection between the British debating tradition and the constitutional role of the House of Commons.

PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE AND THE GLADSTONIAN INTERPRETATION OF DEBATE

Lord Campion's *An Introduction to the Procedure of the House of Commons*, of which the first edition was published in 1929, was intended as a practical guide for Members of Parliament. In it Lord Campion describes the historical development of parliamentary procedure and maintains that the procedure embodies the actual power relations inside Parliament. He suggests that the British constitution is a by-product of the power struggles inside Parliament where, historically, the House of Commons has played the most active part and amended the procedure in accordance with the established

---

important appears to have been the Speculative, named after the Edinburgh debating society. John Patteson, afterwards judge of the King's Bench, and Charles Richard Sumner, afterwards Bishop of Winchester, were among its members" (quoted in Cradock 1953, fn. 3). The contact with the Dublin College Historical Society was recorded in the rules of the Union in 1848.

framework (Campion 1958, 4). Hence, he seems to suggest that procedural changes necessarily involve constitutional changes.

The proposition is indirectly confirmed by Bagehot's account of the constitutional effects of the 1832 Reform Act. In his *The English Constitution* (1867) he maintains that the lower house had turned into the "true sovereign" that governed Britain in the form of a public meeting (Bagehot 2001, 98-9). The way Bagehot formulated the constitutional arrangement of the period implies the function of debate as the foundation of government: while acquiring more influence, the lower house had come to resemble a public meeting where all the grievances of the nation were debated *pro et contra*.

According to Meisel, the famous student debating societies, the Cambridge and Oxford Union Societies, were "training grounds" for Victorian parliamentarians: "By the end of the [nineteenth] century, the training of the debating society was understood to be a considerable asset to the politically ambitious" (Meisel 2001, 70). Meisel fails to take into account the important point, however, that members of the Union Societies were adopting parliamentary procedure in their debates. The debates were meant to give training, not just in performing public speeches, but in the very practise of government of the time through the learning of rules and procedures.

One of the greatest success stories of the Oxford Union Society has been the political career of William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898) who has often been quoted as having been "discovered" as a promising politician at one of the meetings of the Society and was afterwards offered a seat in Parliament (e.g. Hollis 1965, 42). Gladstone came from a Scottish middle-class family and was educated at Eton. There he took active part in the Eton Society, known as "Pop". He also founded an essay club called W E G in Oxford (Reid 1953, 265). He was active in the Oxford Union Society between 1830 and 1831, and served as secretary, as well as president, of the Society. In addition to his practise in oratory, young Gladstone was well acquainted with the classics, including the Greek and Roman orators and rhetoricians (Austen 1958, 244).

In 1836, after already holding a seat for Newark in the House of Commons for three years, Gladstone began writing an essay entitled *Public Speaking*, which he finished two years later.[4] It illustrates his understanding of the art of rhetoric in relation to parliamentary debate. He argues, firstly, that "healthy constitution of moral and intellectual character" is dependent on education in public speaking. He also laments the lack of education for public speaking: "We have little or nothing that can be called clerical, or political, or rhetori-

---

4   "Public Speaking" by William E. Gladstone is published in Reid 1953, 266-72. The essay was never published during Gladstone's lifetime.

cal education" (in Reid 1953, 266). While there was no education available for training in practical rhetoric, he proposes "to observe upon the subject of public speaking, particularly as it is and should be practised, under the peculiar circumstances of the time, in the British House of Commons" (*ibid.*, 267). Thereafter he gives us a definition of the study of eloquence: "The art of eloquence is to work upon subject matter where passion and prejudice exercise a preponderating influence". He goes on to separate eloquence from philosophy and poetry. Philosophy, in his opinion, deals with subject matters but do not involve passion and prejudice. Poetry, on the other hand, is not limited to any subject. It affects the mind, as eloquence does, but poetry does not have as its aim "exhibition of facts" (*ibid.*, 268).

Furthermore, Gladstone makes a distinction between eloquence as a subject of study and "that which is born in the very excitement of debate" (in Reid 1953, 268). According to him, a subject can be treated brilliantly in a written declamation, but when it is performed in front of an audience, the same becomes too pompous. In Gladstone's view, the artificiality of a written speech becomes clear when it is uttered. His explanation for this is that public speaking is dependent on a "great principle of sympathy, and of command over audience to be attained through manifested sympathy" (*ibid.*, 269).

For Gladstone, the highest form of eloquence is debate. Without the confrontation of a debate, feelings are not touched, sympathy of the audience is not attained, and the rhetorician remains unable to move the minds of his listeners. Gladstone compares parliamentary speaking to conducting an orchestra. The conductor shows "by his motions the law of time and style to the performers: whereas the speaker of a declamation is more like one of those performers himself executing a piece before the company" (in Reid 1953, 269). He describes a debater as someone who has all the elements and order of the speech in his head. After preparation the debater "flings himself at once upon the sea of passion and sentiment around him" (*ibid.*, 269). A merely rhetorical speaker, however, or a "reviewer", as he calls this type of a public speaker, delivers speeches without taking into consideration the "mood of the moment". Therefore the reviewer ruins the chance to make the most of the situation and can never be sure whether the audience is sympathetic to him and his cause, "hence, surely, the fluctuating fortunes in Parliament of this class of speakers", Gladstone writes (*ibid.*).

Gladstone uses the expression "mood of the moment" to describe the parliamentary debate which refers to, what he calls, the "great principle of sympathy" and the debater's "command over an audience". In his view the debater has to be able to create sympathy toward his own cause and make use of it.

The emphasis on making use of every opportune moment implies the procedural aspects of the debating situation. According to the established custom of the House of Commons a member is only allowed to speak once in a debate.[5] In this sense, anyone taking part in the debate has to be concise in their argument, as well as to be able to take into account the earlier arguments in the debate. The debater also must consider those among whom he forms a party, as he "rises as it were on behalf of those among whom he sits" (*ibid*., 270). As Gladstone demonstrates here, parliamentary debate is deeply rhetorical: the debaters have to be aware of their target groups in the specific parliamentary setting.

CONCLUSION

In this essay the British parliamentary culture of debate has been reflected from before and after the 1832 Reform Act through the activities of debating societies. From mid-eighteenth century onwards academic debating societies in Ireland and Scotland introduced public speaking as a means of self-improvement. The increased reporting of parliamentary debates undoubtedly had a considerable influence on increasing general interest in parliamentary affairs, especially after the 1770s. Popular debating societies, which were at first a distinctly English phenomenon, introduced commercialized oratory. They were directed at a very broad audience, and were later suppressed by the government due to concerns over their radical connections.

By the time of the Reform Act of 1832 the rhetoric inside Parliament was changed. Afterwards the House of Commons gained more influence, and the procedure became the framework in which debates were conducted. The 1832 reform, therefore, represents a turning point, after which the House of Commons gradually became viewed, according to Bagehot, as a public meeting governing the country. Bagehot's argument seems to correspond to Lord Campion's remark that the British constitution directly connects with parliamentary procedure. The constitutional arrangement was then assimilated into the activities of Union Societies through the procedure and later the parliamentary debating societies as well.

Gladstone's interpretation of parliamentary debate reminds us that parliamentary speaking is not just one-sided delivery of speeches, but should take into account the interactive aspects of the on-going debate. As Gladstone sees it, parliamentary eloquence is a form of rhetoric where close attention and persuasive skills are required to get a hold of the plenary situation in parlia-

---

5   Excluding committees, e.g. in the Committee of the Whole House, members of the House of Commons are allowed to speak multiple times. See Thomas Erskine May's *A Treatise upon the law, privileges, proceedings, and usage of Parliament*, London, 1844, 224.

ment. As shown above, the British parliament was not just another form of the public sphere in the Habermasian sense, but a constitutive element in the wider debating culture of the nineteenth century. In this sense "parliamentary", instead of "public sphere", seems a more suitable category for understanding the politics of the period.

REFERENCES

Andrew, Donna T. 1996: "Popular Culture and Public Debate: London 1780", *The Historical Journal*, 39:2, 405-23.

Austen, Albert A. 1958: "The British Orators, IV: Gladstone's Characteristics as a Speaker", *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 44, 244-54.

Bagehot, Walter 2001 (1867): *The English Constitution*, second edition, edited by Paul Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bevis, Matthew 2007: *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Campion, Gilbert [Lord] 1958 (1929): *An Introduction to the Procedure of the House of Commons*. London: Macmillan.

Clark, Peter 2000: *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cooke, John 1898: "A Famous Students' Club (1747)", *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 163:988, 273-84.

Cradock, Percy 1953: *Recollections of the Cambridge Union, 1815-1939*. Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes.

CUS laws 1832: *Laws and transactions*, vol. 4. Cambridge: Cambridge Union Society.

Fawcett, Trevor 1980: "Eighteenth-Century Debating Societies", *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 3:3, 216-29.

Habermas, Jürgen 1989: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence, first published in German in 1962. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hollis, Christopher 1965: *The Oxford Union*. London: Evans.

Martin, Ged 2000: *The Cambridge Union and Ireland, 1815-1914*. Edinburgh: Ann Barry, available at http://www.gedmartin.net/index.php?Itemid=11&id=146&option=com_content&task=view.

Meisel, Joseph S. 2001: *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mill, John Stuart 1955 (1873): *Autobiography,* with an appendix of hitherto unpublished speeches and a preface by Harold J. Laski. London: Oxford University Press.

OUS minutes 1858: *Minute book*, vol. VIII. Oxford: Oxford Union Society.

Reid, Loren 1953: "Gladstone's Essay on Public Speaking", *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 39:3, 265-72.

van Rijn, Jaap 2007: "Parliamentary Debating Societies and the Education of New Elites", in Stefan Couperus, Cristianne Smit, Dirk Jan Wolffram, eds., *In Control of the City: Local Elites and the Dynamics of Urban Politics, 1800-1960*. Leuven: Peeters, 53-67.

Samuels, Arthur P. I. 1923: *The Early Life Correspondence and Writings of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The Speculative Society of Edinburgh 1905: *The History of the Speculative Society, 1764-1904*, Edinburgh.

Steinmetz, Willibald 2002: "'A Code of Its Own': Rhetoric and Logic of Parliamentary Debate in Modern Britain", *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, 6, 87-104.

Thomas, Peter D. G. 1959: "The Beginning of Parliamentary Reporting in Newspapers, 1768-1774", *The English Historical Review*, 74:293, 623-36.

The Times 1882: "Conference of Parliamentary Debating Societies", *The Times*, Thursday, April 27, 1882, p. 4, col. F.