

9 Petitioning and Representation

In May 1814 after presenting a petition signed by at least 11,000 inhabitants from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the local MP Sir Matthew Ridley issued a handbill publicising his attentiveness to his constituents:

I have this moment presented the Petition from the Inhabitants of Newcastle, against the proposed Alteration in the Corn Laws. It is my earnest Wish, as well as my Duty, to pay every Attention to the Interest and the Wishes of my Constituents, and I beg to assure you, that the numerous and respectable Signatures attached to the Petition must and will have that Weight on my Opinions they have so just a right to.¹

This example shows the importance of petitions as mechanisms for representation, including of non-voters, as the estimated ‘voterate’ for Newcastle was only 2,500.² Presenting petitions was a central part of the practice of representation, or what MPs and peers did. Indeed, printed portraits of MPs often depicted them clutching petitions from constituents, explicitly linking their representative role with petitioning.³ Parliamentarians could claim that they represented petitioners through the presentation of their petitions, even if, as in Ridley’s case, whether they agreed with the prayer was ambiguous. If, as Daniel Carpenter has suggested for the United States, nineteenth-century political institutions should be reframed as encounters between citizens and the state, then the development of public petitioning on a colossal scale institutionalised regular interactions between subjects and their parliamentary representatives.⁴ Parliamentarians were not passive recipients of petitions but frequently encouraged them

¹ Handbill, Newcastle petition against the proposed alteration in the corn laws, May 1814, Northumberland Archives, ZRI/25/25.

² ‘Newcastle-upon-Tyne’, in R.G. Thorne (ed.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1790-1820* (5 vols., London, 1986), III, p. 311.

³ W. Sharp, *Filmer Honywood, Esqr MP*, etching, 1804, and S.W. Reynolds, *Thos. Slingsby Duncombe, Esqr MP*, mezzotint, 1831, Department of Prints and Drawings, British Museum, 1841,0313.153, and 1859,0709.1316.

⁴ D. Carpenter, ‘Representation at a Visual Interface: Institutions as Encounters between Early American Government and its Citizens’, in P. Chatterjee and I. Katznelson (eds.), *Anxieties of Democracy: Tocquevillean Reflections on India and the United States* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 50-78, at p. 55.

privately and publicly, not least as they strengthened their legitimacy and authority as representatives.⁵

During the long eighteenth century, Julian Hoppit has written, Parliament ‘became the main site for negotiating between different and dispersed propertied interests’.⁶ Petitions were of critical importance in representing interests on general as well as specific issues, particularly economic legislation.⁷ Eighteenth-century petitioners primarily grounded claims to legitimacy on their representation of interests.⁸ The efficiency of Parliament in attending to the interests of places, including new industrial towns, not formally represented by constituency MPs, was woven into the broader idea of ‘virtual representation’ to justify the status quo and resist calls for reform.⁹ As one MP observed in 1775, ‘necessity has adopted this fiction of a virtual representation, and it is now become our duty to consult the interest of the kingdom in general, in preference to the advantage of our borough or county’.¹⁰

Scholarship on nineteenth-century political culture has addressed questions of representation less directly. Revisionist literature has focused on the role of language and election rhetoric as a form of communication as well as a medium through which politicians claimed to speak for and constitute ‘the people’, or coalitions of popular support. Other accounts have emphasised election rituals as sites of interaction between representatives and those they sought to represent.¹¹ By contrast, American political scientists have examined the

⁵ H. Miller, ‘Introduction: The Transformation of Petitioning in the Long Nineteenth Century (1780-1914)’, *Social Science History* [SSH], 43 (2019), 409-29, at 419-20.

⁶ J. Hoppit, *Britain’s Political Economies: Parliament and Economic Life, 1660-1800* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-62; J. Hoppit, ‘Petitions, Economic Legislation and Interest Groups in Britain’, in R. Huzzey (ed.), *Pressure and Parliament: From Civil War to Civil Society* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 52-71.

⁸ P. Loft, ‘Petitioning and Petitioners to the Westminster Parliament, 1660-1788’, *Parliamentary History*, 38 (2019), 342-61.

⁹ P. Langford, ‘Property and “Virtual Representation” in Eighteenth-Century England’, *Historical Journal* [HJ], 31 (1988), 83-115; D. Judge, ‘Parliament and Interest Representation’, in M. Rush (ed.), *Parliament and Pressure Politics* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 18-44, at p. 26.

¹⁰ P. Seaward and P. Ihalainen, ‘Key Concepts for Parliament in Britain (1640-1800)’, in P. Ihalainen, C. Illie, and K. Palonen (eds.), *Parliament and Parliamentarism: A Comparative History of a European Concept* (New York, 2016), pp. 32-48, at p. 43.

¹¹ See Introduction for a summary of the ‘new political history’.

extent to which MPs' reflected the economic interests of their constituencies on key issues such as the corn laws.¹² A different perspective was provided by Angus Hawkins in his study of parliamentary government, who argued that the 1832 Reform Act reframed constituencies as 'cohesive communities of "interest"', and made MPs more responsive to their constituents.¹³ Summing up the state of the field, Miles Taylor has recently called for scholars to examine how the nineteenth-century representative system worked in practice, and focus less on how it evolved into modern democratic forms.¹⁴ In this spirit, this chapter offers a significant contribution by revealing the centrality of petitioning to representation in the Victorian era.

Analysing how the relationship between politicians and people was shaped through and by the petitioning process contributes to the study of political representation more broadly. In her classic study, Hanna Pitkin argued that at its core 'representation means presenting again, a presenting of something not present'.¹⁵ We have seen that parliamentarians consistently rejected the claim of public petitioners to have a right of presence.¹⁶ Instead, the absent petitioners were to be re-presented through the act of their representative presenting their petition; in the material form of the petition itself; and its later encoding or enumeration in the parliamentary record. Normative political theorists have focused on defining concepts of representation, and have tended to isolate the moment when representatives are held accountable or authorised by constituents, privileging a focus on elections, or providing

¹² G.W. Cox, *The Efficient Secret: The Development of Political Parties in England* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 3; C. Schonhardt-Bailey, *From the Corn Laws to Free Trade: Interests, Ideas, and Institutions in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); W.O. Aydelotte, 'Constituency Influence on the British House of Commons, 1841-1847', in W.O. Aydelotte (ed.), *The History of Parliamentary Behavior* (Princeton, N.J., 1977), pp. 225-46; W.O. Aydelotte, 'Voting Patterns in the British House of Commons in the 1840s', *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, 5 (1962-3), 134-63.

¹³ A. Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (Oxford, 2015), p. 372; J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (Yale, CT, 1993), pp. 72-3.

¹⁴ M. Taylor, 'Parliamentary Representation in Modern Britain: Past, Present, and Future', *Historical Journal* (forthcoming).

¹⁵ H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, CA, 1967), p. 71.

¹⁶ See Chapter 4.

taxonomies of different models of representation.¹⁷ However, Michael Saward, advancing the concept of the representative claim, has reframed representation as a dynamic practice that exists outside as well as within electoral and institutional contexts.¹⁸ Petitioning is unusual in containing two sets of representative claims. First, as we have seen, petitioners claimed to stand for or represent a wider collectivity than just the names in the signatory list.¹⁹ Second, MPs claimed to represent the interests of the petitioners (and the wider community they claimed to represent) through presenting the petition. Studying petitioning thereby expands our understanding of both the historical practice of representation and the process of claim-making in non-electoral contexts.

Within these literatures, the significance of this chapter is two-fold. First, it demonstrates the transformation from the representation of interests to popular, aggregated opinion in the form of petitions, which occurred long before the electoral system moved decisively towards representation by population in 1885. Second, our understanding of the relations between representatives and the represented remains incomplete without recognising the role of petitions. Because petitions had to be presented through the conduit of MPs or peers, one of the most time-consuming duties of parliamentarians was presenting petitions and engaging in near continuous dialogue with petitioners and constituents.²⁰ These activities were central to the practice of parliamentary representation, and underpinned the unspoken assumption that underlay nineteenth-century ‘parliamentary government’: that not all subjects had (or indeed should have) the right to vote, but all had the right to be represented.²¹

¹⁷ B. Manin, A. Przeworski, and S.C. Stokes, ‘Elections and Representation’, in B. Manin, A. Przeworski, and S.C. Stokes (eds.), *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 29-54; Pitkin, *Concept of Representation*, pp. 38-59; J. Mansbridge, ‘Rethinking Representation’, *American Political Science Review*, 97 (2003), 515-28, at 516-20.

¹⁸ M. Saward, *The Representative Claim* (Oxford, 2010); M. Saward, *Making Representations: Claim, Counterclaim, and the Politics of Acting for Others* (Lanham, MD, 2020). See also Introduction.

¹⁹ See Chapter 5.

²⁰ By contrast, contemporary e-petitions systems are ‘direct’ in that they allow citizens to submit petitions to legislatures without going through an intermediary: C. Bochel, ‘Petitions Systems: Contributing to Representative Democracy?’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 66 (2013), 798-815, at 802-3.

²¹ Taylor, ‘Parliamentary Representation’.

The chapter, first, identifies a shift from representing interests to aggregated popular opinion through petitions. The rest of the chapter focuses on the practice of representation, particularly through examining the correspondence between parliamentarians and petitioners, and how the presentation of petitions enabled geographic and issue-based representation. Overall, the chapter alters our existing understanding of the shifting relationship between politicians and the people by revealing how the latter were represented through informal practices. Moreover, it shifts attention from theories of representation to considering the wider culture, practice, and performance of representation within a given polity.

Petitioning and Representation

The presentation of petitions in the late eighteenth century was commonly conceived by parliamentarians as representing interests within a system of ‘virtual representation’.²² The language of interests remained important deep into the nineteenth century.²³ Moreover, the Whig view that prevailed after 1832 contended that MPs should represent ‘social “interests”, cohesive communities, not individual voters’.²⁴ In practice, this meant that MPs were expected to diligently further their constituency’s interests through presenting petitions, sitting on committees, accompanying deputations, and other, generally unsung, activity.²⁵ Petitions continued to stand for interests in Parliament and were a key component of how MPs represented local interests.

Alongside this continuity, there were two significant developments that had important implications for petitioning and representation. First, parliamentarians increasingly sought to quantify petitions as representing aggregated popular opinion, following petitioners, who, in

²² *Parliamentary Register*, i, 104, 114 (23 Jan. 1775); xviii, 31, 38 (3 May 1785); xxxv, 67-9 (13 Mar. 1793); xl, 447-8 (16 Feb. 1795).

²³ See Chapter 5.

²⁴ Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, pp. 158, 173.

²⁵ M. Cragoe, ‘“A Cheaper Sort of Member”? Welsh MPs, Select Committees, and the Representation of Local Interests in Parliament, 1852-1865’, *Parliaments, Estates, and Representation*, 14 (1994), 133-48; M. Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847-1860* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 14-15, 21-2, 33-4, 68, 81-3; ‘Harris, Richard’, ‘Cavendish, George Henry’, ‘Stracey, Sir Henry Josiah’, in P. Salmon and K. Rix (eds.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1832-1868 [HP, Commons, 1832-1868]* (forthcoming).

the UK and elsewhere, increasingly based their legitimacy on numbers.²⁶ In debate MPs and peers placed ever-more weight on numbers, although they remained sensitive to considerations of the ‘quality’ of petitioners.²⁷ Even those averse to popular politics recognised the importance of numbers. Speaking against the first English reform bill in March 1831, the Tory MP John Wilson Croker listed the small number of petitions in favour of reform from 1821 to 1830 (seventy-four in total) as evidence that the reform agitation was the product of Whig incitement rather than genuine public feeling.²⁸ Taking the lack of petitions as evidence of popular indifference implicitly conceded the significance of numbers however. In 1840, a Leicestershire MP confessed to local protectionists that it ‘was the number of signatures, not acres, which gave importance to the petitions’.²⁹ From the early nineteenth century, numerical strength in terms of petitions and signatures became increasingly central to the representative claims made by parliamentarians as well as petitioners.

As part of this trend, politicians and officials increasingly sought to monitor and record the number of public petitions on important issues even before the SCPP was established in 1833. The papers of the Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, John Foster, include a memorandum from 1800 stating that the Irish Parliament had received petitions containing 109,519 signatures against the proposed legislative union with Britain.³⁰ Clerks for the Lords kept tallies of the number of petitions on major issues, such as Catholic relief and the corn laws in the later 1820s, which were written out in numerically sequenced lists.³¹ By 1831, the Lords was classifying the reform petitions it had received depending on their prayers, anticipating the

²⁶ D. Carpenter and D. Brossard, ‘*L’eruption Patriote: The Revolt against Dalhousie and the Petitioning Explosion in Nineteenth-Century French Canada*’, *SSH*, 43 (2019), 453-85, at 453-4.

²⁷ E.g. *Hansard*, 1st series, xxxii, 1057-8 (4 Mar. 1816), xxxv, 79-80 (29 Jan. 1817); 2nd ser., xiii, 484-7 (10 May 1825), xiv, col. 969 (1 Mar. 1826), xx, 806-7 (6 Mar. 1829), 3rd ser., vii, 1118-30 (4 Oct. 1831), xxi, 1195, 1197 (6 Mar. 1834), lvii, cols. 1474-7 (6 May 1841).

²⁸ *Hansard*, iii, 87 (4 Mar. 1831).

²⁹ *Leicester Chronicle*, 8 Feb. 1840, p. 3.

³⁰ Paper endorsed by John Foster, State of Petitions to the House on the Union, 1 Mar. 1800, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, D207/10/27.

³¹ Main papers, session 1825, Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/JO/10/8/706; Main papers, session 1826-7, PA, HL/PO/JO/10/8/780; Main papers, session 1829, PA, HL/PO/JO/10/8/858.

SCPP's system of categorisation.³² Elite politicians too recorded petitions on certain issues.

The Prime Minister Earl Grey kept lists of the number of reform petitions from England and Scotland, including a brief note of their prayer.³³

The SCPP's quantification of petitions data was part of a proliferation of official statistics in the 1830s and 1840s, which has usually been presented as an instrument of 'governmentality' by bureaucrats seeking to rule a 'society of strangers' through the application of new systems of knowledge, expertise, and classification.³⁴ The petitions data was a source of information for politicians, but it was also was a resource to strengthen their representative claims, authority and legitimacy, in speaking for an aggregated, quantifiable public opinion.

Second, particularly in the 1830s and 1840s, petitions were widely seen as a mighty instrument of popular power. Rhetoric about petitions speaking the voice of an unrepresented people was nothing new, as early modern scholarship has demonstrated.³⁵ In 1800 one pamphleteer wrote that 'When the people of England raise their voice in clamorous petition and remonstrance, the power of parliament itself is compelled to yield to its better judgment, and the prerogative of the crown is abandoned to the demand of popular opinion.'³⁶ Such comments from petitioners, political associations, but also, crucially, politicians became ever-more commonplace. The view that mass petitioning was irresistible was a plausible interpretation of the popular and parliamentary politics of the late 1820s and early 1830s. A further implication was that mass petitioning could challenge Parliament's authority. As the

³² Parliamentary Papers 1830-31 (65), *Classification of Petitions presented to the House of Lords on the Subject of Parliamentary Reform, 1830-31*, cclxxxviii, pp. 1-4.

³³ List of reform petitions from England, [c. 1831] and Reform petitions from Scotland [c. 1831-2], Durham University Library, GRE/B46/1/22/1, GRE/B46/1/71/1-4.

³⁴ T. Crook and G. O'Hara, 'The "Torrent of Numbers": Statistics and the Public Sphere in Britain, c. 1800-2000', in T. Crook and O'Hara (eds.), *Statistics and the Public Sphere: Numbers and the People in Modern Britain, c. 1800-2000* (Basingstoke, 2011), pp. 1-31, at p. 10; P. Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 192; J. Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain became Modern* (Berkeley, CA, 2014), pp. 51-76.

³⁵ D. Coast, 'Speaking for the People in Early Modern England', *Past & Present*, 244 (2019), 51-88.

³⁶ J. Pern Tinney, *The Rights of Sovereignty Vindicated* (London, 1800), p. 156.

Anti-Corn Law League urged supporters in 1841: ‘Let there be at least two millions [signatures] this session, and it will be a fool-hardy legislature indeed which dares to resist the prayer.’³⁷

Radical MPs were naturally convinced of the efficacy of petitioning, and happy to encourage subscriptional activity from Westminster. Thomas Attwood, MP for Birmingham, argued in 1834 that ‘Petitions, to produce any effect, must come in great numbers, be presented by different members, and the battery be discharged daily, for a whole session, as they were on the Slavery question. Petitioners can only make themselves attended to by becoming troublesome, by rousing the fears of the House, by creating alarm, and by being never-ending.’³⁸ Addressing a public dinner in 1833, the MP for Wigan, Richard Potter declared that ‘if the country wanted any abuses corrected’ it was essential to ‘petition’.³⁹

Anti-Catholic Tory MPs too could regard petitions as embodiments of popular will that could challenge the authority of Parliament when it failed to uphold the ‘Protestant Constitution’. In 1829 William Duncombe, MP for Yorkshire, urged a flood of petitions to block Catholic emancipation, because ‘it is very desirable that the Representatives of the People should know the real sentiments of their constituents’.⁴⁰ His fellow MP, James Wilson, asserted that ‘nothing but the Vow of the People can now save the cause – I shall remain firm & I trust that Petitions will come in from all quarters’.⁴¹ The logical conclusion, if the Commons ignored the thousands of petitions opposing the state endowment of the Catholic seminary at Maynooth, one ultra-Protestant clergyman argued in 1845, was that petitioners were ‘not represented’, with implications for their acceptance of the authority of Parliament.⁴²

³⁷ *Anti-Bread Tax Circular*, 5 May 1841, p. 10.

³⁸ *Parliamentary Review*, I (1834), 246.

³⁹ *Manchester Times*, 19 Jan. 1833, p. 1.

⁴⁰ William Duncombe to John Headlam, 11 Feb. 1829, Durham Univ. Lib., HHM/A9/53A.

⁴¹ James Wilson to John Headlam, 13 July 1829, Durham Univ. Lib., HHM/A9/59A.

⁴² A.S. Thelwell, *Proceedings of the Anti-Maynooth Conference of 1845* (London, 1845), p. 105. See also *Manchester Courier*, 26 Apr. 1845, p. 2.

Rhetorical claims of the potency of popular petitioning were common currency among Whigs. Sir George Strickland, MP for the West Riding of Yorkshire, declared in 1837 that ‘I know that there is a mistaken opinion that petitions are not attended to in the House of Commons. Undoubtedly many unsupported petitions, perhaps relating to private matters, produce no effect; but as influencing and promoting any great public measure, they are all-powerful.’⁴³ In his famous ‘Edinburgh letter’ in late 1845, the Whig leader of the opposition Lord John Russell called for a wave of petitioning to seal the triumph of free trade: ‘The Government appear to be waiting for some excuse to give up the Corn Laws. Let the people by petition, by address, by remonstrance, afford them the excuse they seek.’⁴⁴

Within the nineteenth-century system of ‘parliamentary government’, petitions were perceived to quantify public opinion. It was also widely recognised that petitioning was a powerful force, and one that might even potentially rival the authority of Parliament.

Petitioning and the Practice of Representation

Presenting petitions and corresponding with petitioners, who typically accompanied their petition with a covering letter, was part of the everyday work of parliamentarians. Not only did MPs receive and present more than one million petitions that were sent to the Commons between 1780 and 1918, they were also the preferred conduits for forwarding petitions to the Crown and government. As Matthew Cragoe has observed in his study of Victorian Wales, ‘MPs received endless letters and petitions requesting them to cast their votes in certain ways in forthcoming divisions.’⁴⁵ So routine did this business become that parliamentarians rarely remarked upon this activity in their private papers, except when the volume seemed noteworthy. Confiding to his diary on 9 February 1846, the Whig Lord Morpeth, recently returned at a by-election, noted ‘a foretaste, I must say an unexampled one to me, of a West

⁴³ *Leeds Mercury*, 4 Nov. 1837, p. 5. I am indebted to Kathryn Rix for this reference.

⁴⁴ *Glasgow Herald*, 1 Dec. 1845, p. 1.

⁴⁵ M. Cragoe, *Culture, Politics, and National Identity in Wales, 1832-1886* (Oxford, 2003), p. 259.

Riding MPs post; I had 64 letters, they were chiefly about Petitions. I answered above 50', and he presented 99 petitions in the Commons that day.⁴⁶ Two years later, the radical MP for Birmingham, George Muntz acknowledged receipt of a letter from a petitioner and cited 'the 50 petitions, which I have this day presented, no opportunity for the presenting of Public Petitions having occurred during the previous two days'.⁴⁷ In May 1869, one of the West Riding MPs, Viscount Milton, listed the fifty-eight petitions, mostly from nonconformist congregations in favour of a bill to prohibit the sale of alcohol, which he had received in a single day.⁴⁸ Writing in 1888, Justin McCarthy, MP for Londonderry city, told a correspondent, 'I am carrying a little budget of letters to be replied to and two huge petitions to be presented to the House from some of my constituents – one petition for closing public-houses on Sundays and another *against* it.'⁴⁹ Some MPs were very conscientious in dealing with the petitions they received. As James Erskine Wemyss, MP for Fifeshire, told his constituents when standing for re-election in 1841:

I know every parish [of Fife]; ... I know who signs his own name to petitions, and who employs another to do it for him. When a petition comes to me I don't merely fold it up and write my name on the corner of it; I read every name, and if I find any forgeries, I send them back again. I do this with all your petitions. With your Kirk petitions, with your corn petitions, and with all kinds of petitions. I have plenty to do without going down to present forged petitions.⁵⁰

As these examples suggest, dealing with petitions and petitioners was part of the everyday work of MPs, and, as the rest of the chapter will show, was central to the practice of representation.

⁴⁶ SCPP, *Reports* (1846), pp. 61-4; Diary of Lord Morpeth, 9 Feb. 1846, Castle Howard Archives, CH/J19/8/10, quote reproduced with permission of Castle Howard Estate Ltd. I am indebted to David Gent for this reference.

⁴⁷ George Frederick Muntz to William Livesey, 7 June 1848, Lancashire Archives, DP 451/2.

⁴⁸ Viscount Milton, 'Petitions in favour of the Permissive Liquor Bill', 12 May 1869, Sheffield City Archives (SCA), WWM/T/57.

⁴⁹ Justin McCarthy to Mrs. Campbell Praed, 18 June 1888, quoted in R.C. Praed, *Our Book of Memories: Letters of Justin McCarthy to Rosa Campbell Praed* (London, 1912), p. 154.

⁵⁰ M. Spychal, 'Wemyss, James Erskine', in Salmon and Rix, *HP, Commons, 1832-1868*. I am grateful to Kathryn Rix for this quote.

i) *The Duty of Representation*

Judged on their practice, parliamentarians believed that all subjects had a right to be represented through their petitions, whether they agreed with them or not. In 1795, the future speaker Charles Abbot agreed to present a petition from his Helston constituents against the seditious assemblies bill, a measure he told the petitioners that he was going to support.⁵¹ Twenty years later the radical MP for Westminster Sir Francis Burdett presented his constituents' petition against the corn bill while 'saying he thought it of no value whatever, nor anything else but a reform of Parliament.'⁵² Anti-reformers presented petitions in favour of reform in the early 1830s, while protectionist MPs presented petitions for the repeal of the corn laws in the 1840s.⁵³ Writing in 1854, Richard Cobden informed a correspondent that while he would 'duly present' a petition in favour of a ten hour day for factory workers, 'I feel bound in frankness to say that I am opposed to such legislation.'⁵⁴ A few years later a Welsh correspondent to the Prime Minister, the Earl of Derby, asked him to present a petition for the abolition of church rates, but correctly anticipated that the peer 'may differ from the prayer'.⁵⁵ Presenting a petition against Irish church disestablishment in 1869, the Earl of Devon told fellow peers that 'it would be disingenuous of me if I did not explain that I cannot agree with the prayer of the petition'.⁵⁶

In the 1870s, the Marquess of Londonderry, presenting a petition from north London in favour of women's suffrage in the Lords, remarked that he 'did not agree with the prayer of the petition', while Charles Newdegate, one of the most vociferous opponents of women's

⁵¹ Lord Colchester (ed.), *The Diary and Correspondence of Charles Abbot, Lord Colchester* (3 vols., London, 1861), I, pp. 9-10 (24 Nov. 1795).

⁵² *Ibid.*, II, p. 533 (10 Mar. 1815).

⁵³ P. Salmon, 'Lygon, Henry Beauchamp', in D.R. Fisher (ed.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820-1832* (7 vols., Cambridge, 2009), VI, p. 202; H. Miller, 'Popular Petitioning and the Corn Laws, 1833-1846', *English Historical Review*, 127 (2012), 882-919, at 893.

⁵⁴ Richard Cobden to Joseph Firth, 11 Apr. 1854, West Yorkshire Archive Service (WYAS), Bradford, 69D82/7/4/6, quoted in A.C. Howe and S. Morgan (eds.), *The Letters of Richard Cobden* (4 vols., Oxford, 2012), III, p. 27.

⁵⁵ T. Davies to Derby, 22 June 1858, Liverpool Record Office, 920 DER 14 75/1/61.

⁵⁶ *Hansard*, cxcvi, 1279 (7 June 1869).

suffrage, presented a series of petitions from constituents in favour of the measure.⁵⁷ In 1874 Sir Henry James, anti-suffragist MP for Taunton, denied that he had ever promised to change his opinion if over half the women householders in his constituency petitioned in favour. Promising his ‘strenuous opposition’ to the measure, James was upholding his independence from petitioners in a manner consistent with the other parliamentarians we have examined. Yet he was careful to emphasise that ‘I will present the petition ... as I should any other forwarded to me from the locality.’⁵⁸ Summing up the practice of many parliamentarians, Joseph Cowen, Radical MP for Newcastle, told constituents in 1885 that he would present ‘any petition to Parliament that any number of citizens sign and send me, provided it is respectful and in legal form’.⁵⁹

MPs, like Parliament, were permissive towards petitions, yet could be less accommodating to irregular requests or petitions to other authorities. In 1820, Ridley declined to present an address to Queen Caroline.⁶⁰ In 1852, Lord Derby declined to read out a lengthy memorandum from St. Andrews council on the Scottish burghs bill.⁶¹ When Sir John Ramsden, MP for the West Riding, was asked to accompany a deputation of protectionist paper manufacturers to see Lord Palmerston in 1865, he refused as he ‘would have been placing myself in a false position’ given his free trade views.⁶²

By retaining their discretion to decline to present petitions, parliamentarians asserted their authority and upheld their independence. Yet examples of refusals, such as when the Duke of Wellington declined to present a petition on the Irish poor law bill in 1838, ‘as he had not

⁵⁷ Manchester Society for Women’s Suffrage, *Sixth Annual Report* (Manchester, 1873), p. 25, Archives+, Manchester Central Library (MCL), M50/1/4/6; SSCP, *Reports* (1872), p. 695, (1874), pp. 450, 897, (1877), p. 647.

⁵⁸ Handbill, May 1874, Archives+, MCL, M50/1/10/45.

⁵⁹ J. Cowen, *Speeches delivered by Joseph Cowen as candidate for Newcastle-upon-Tyne at the General Election, 1885* (Newcastle, 1885), p. 144. See also F. Wicks, *The British Constitution and Government* (London, 2nd edn., 1873), p. 90.

⁶⁰ William Andrew Mitchell to Sir Matthew Ridley, 2 Dec. 1820, Ridley to Mitchell, draft [n.d.], Northumberland Archives, ZRI/25/37.

⁶¹ William Woodcock to Lord Derby, 21 May 1852, Liverpool RO, 920 DER 14 39/6/5.

⁶² Sir J. Ramsden to Richard Bracken, 2 May 1865, WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/44/4.

the pleasure of being acquainted with the good people' of the locality, were extremely rare.⁶³ Other apparent instances, on closer inspection, resulted from MPs seeking to pre-empt the rejection of a petition. In 1881, Baron Henry de Worms, MP for Greenwich, declined to present a petition on the Bradlaugh case as he believed it would be rejected for accusing Parliament of illegality. The Speaker argued that the MP was within his rights to decline, but left the question of whether the petition should be received to the House.⁶⁴ Over a decade later, there was a court case over whether a voter had the right to compel their MP, Sir Julian Goldsmid, to present their petition to the Commons. In fact, Goldsmid had already presented the constituent's petition twice, but it had been thrown out by the clerks for not conforming to the rules, and for this reason, he declined to present the unchanged petition a third time.⁶⁵ Not only are there very few examples of parliamentarians declining to present petitions, but MPs who were unwilling to do so risked public criticism from constituents and the local press. Radnorshire inhabitants 'resented' the failure of their MP, Thomas Frankland Lewis, to present their reform petition before the dissolution in 1831.⁶⁶ In 1865 Edward Hartopp was reproved by his constituents and local newspapers for his reluctance to submit petitions from North Leicestershire against the malt tax.⁶⁷ Generally, however, parliamentarians acknowledged that subjects had a right to have their petitions presented, and acted accordingly.

i) Parliamentarians and Petitioners

The correspondence between parliamentarians and petitioners was a significant component of the practice of representation, and reveal how the relationship between representatives and those they represented was a dynamic, continuously renegotiated process outside of episodic

⁶³ William Adams to Marquess of Londonderry, 9 June 1838, Durham County Record Office (CRO), D/Lo/C521/(6).

⁶⁴ *Hansard*, cclxii, 859-60 (20 June 1881).

⁶⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 28 Oct. 1893, p. 7.

⁶⁶ 'Lewis, Thomas Frankland', in Fisher, *HP, Commons, 1820-32*, VI, p. 107.

⁶⁷ *Leicester Chronicle*, 29 July 1865, p. 3.

elections. These interactions had added importance given that nineteenth-century MPs were absent from their constituencies for lengthy periods.

The distinctive political culture and petitioning communities of different constituencies shaped the relationship between MPs and petitioners.⁶⁸ John Blackett, MP for Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the early 1850s, received many letters from the Coal Trade Office to present petitions, forward memorials, and accompany deputations.⁶⁹ As a county MP in the mid-1860s, Ramsden was used to corresponding with farmers grumbling about poor rates. By contrast, after transferring to Newport boroughs in 1868, a hotbed of Welsh nonconformity, he was bombarded with correspondence from petitioners about temperance.⁷⁰

As well as being presenters of petitions and potential advocates, parliamentarians were a valuable source of information. Writing in 1785 to Yorkshire manufacturers opposed to the Anglo-Irish Commercial Resolutions, the Whig peer Earl Fitzwilliam informed them that ‘the business will be of some length & give time for the gentlemen in your area to petition’.⁷¹ In 1870, Ramsden tipped off a petitioner that the government was likely to abandon a bill due to the opposition raised against it.⁷² Parliamentarians also advised petitioners about procedure. In 1809, Northumberland farmers were advised by a London lawyer that a petition regarding property tax would be inadmissible.⁷³ On the contrary, Grey informed them, such a petition was permissible.⁷⁴ In other cases, parliamentarians intervened to prevent petitions being rejected for technicalities, such as being printed rather than handwritten as stipulated.⁷⁵ Legislators attempted to informally filter the content of petitions to pre-empt their rejection.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 6.

⁶⁹ T.D. Lambert to John Blackett, 17 Mar. 1853, and 25 Feb. 1853, Thomas Doubleday to Blackett, 21 Jan. 1853, Northumberland Archives, ZBK/C/1/3/9/117, 116, and 46.

⁷⁰ See the letters to Sir John Ramsden in WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/41/3.

⁷¹ Earl Fitzwilliam, draft letter (n.d. 1785), SCA, WWM/F/65/27.

⁷² Sir J. Ramsden to W. Morgan, 19 July 1870, WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/41/3.

⁷³ Henry Brummell to Earl Grey, 6 Jan. 1809, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B8/6/2/1.

⁷⁴ Ibid. and Brummell to Grey, 12 Jan. 1809, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B8/6/3/1.

⁷⁵ T. Preston Ball to Lord Derby, 12 June 1869, and Derby’s annotation, Liverpool RO, 920 DER 14 97/25; see also Ramsden to A. Isaacs, 18 May 1870, WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/41/3.

On receiving a petition from the inhabitants of Belfast in 1821, Grey replied that it was unlikely to be received given its language about the upper house. However, the petitioners refused to alter the text because the ‘petition is the act of the People which no individual or individuals could consistently alter or amend’, neatly expressing the view of petitions as embodiments of popular will.⁷⁶

Because the relationship between petitioners and authority was an unequal one, the correspondence between them reflected asymmetries of power and status. Petitioners met silences with further letters revealing their anxieties that their petition may have been lost or met with disfavour from the parliamentarian.⁷⁷ In some cases their fears were well-grounded. In November 1846, for example, after a constituent wrote to enquire about a petition he had sent, Henry Tancred, MP for Banbury, confessed that ‘I have a very bad habit, not of losing papers entrusted to me, but, what is very nearly as bad, which is, putting them in places where they are overlooked & forgotten. This was the case with the petition in question.’⁷⁸ For these reasons, petitioners often asked to be notified when the petition had been presented.⁷⁹ Writing to Milton in 1868, a correspondent on behalf of the Leeds Working Men’s Conservative Association, complained that he had seen no news of the presentation of their petition. The writer observed that ‘we ... naturally feel somewhat disappointed ... & express the hope that you would feel it compatible with your duty to represent them’ as an MP, even if a Liberal one.⁸⁰ In fact, Milton, who secretly suffered from epilepsy, had been recuperating abroad, and had arranged for the petitions to be presented by a colleague.⁸¹ Other petitioners worried about

⁷⁶ James Munford to Grey, 19 Mar. 1821, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B41/12/8/1.

⁷⁷ J. Jackson to Grey, 3 Aug. 1832, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B37/1/6/1; Anon., to Edward Stanley, 29 Mar. 1833, Liverpool RO, 920 DER 14 65/3/17; Henry W. Triall to Blackett, 31 May 1853, Northumberland Archives, ZBK/C/1/B/3/9/186.

⁷⁸ Henry Tancred to William Munton, 9 Nov. 1846, quoted in B. Trinder (ed.), *A Victorian MP and his Constituents: The Correspondence of H.W. Tancred, 1841-1859* (Banbury, 1967), p. 26.

⁷⁹ Adam Dickey to Earl of Durham, 5 June 1839, Durham Univ. Lib., JGL A26/5/25; G.R. Wythen Baxter to Fielden, 17 Feb. 1840, JRULM, FDN/1/2/1/54; Edward Houghton to Milton, 30 Mar. 1868, SCA, WWM/T/57.

⁸⁰ J.B. Rayner to Milton, 4 Apr. 1868, SCA, WWM/T/57.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*; K. Rix, ‘Fitzwilliam, William Wentworth, Visct. Milton (IV)’, in Salmon and Rix, *HP, Commons, 1832-1868*.

making a bad impression with politicians on account of the material form of their letter or petition. One correspondent to Lord Althorp in 1834 apologised for ‘writing on such shabby paper ... It is the best I can command.’⁸²

Petitioners were equally anxious to impress the legitimacy of their representative claims on parliamentarians. Letters to Ramsden emphasised the numbers signing the petition, the respectability of the signatories, as in the case of a 1859 Leeds petition that was ‘signed by many of our most influential and intelligent townsmen’, and in another instance, highlighted that ‘many’ of the signatories ‘will be known to you’.⁸³ Petitioners from rural villages might emphasise the unanimity within their community as part of their representative claim to MPs.⁸⁴ A recurrent refrain of petitioners was that if only they had more time they would have garnered even more names. Writing to Ridley in 1814, the mayor of Newcastle stated that had the anti-corn law petition been ‘open for subscription a few days longer it must have doubled or tripled its length’.⁸⁵ Correspondents also reassured MPs about the respectability of the signatures that they were being asked to present.⁸⁶

The correspondence between parliamentarians and petitioners also reveals tensions about what the practice of representation entailed, particularly regarding the timing of presentation, and whether MPs or peers would support the petition with their ‘Vote and Interest’.⁸⁷ While political theorists have examined the extent to which representatives act as delegates or independent trustees, the examples here show the fluid way in which

⁸² W.T. Haley to Lord Althorp, Feb. 1834, British Library Additional Manuscripts 76433.

⁸³ Joshua Fielden to Sir John Ramsden, 4 Mar. 1865, Thomas Harvey to Ramsden, 24 Feb. 1859, Rev. J. Bradbury to Ramsden, 23 Apr. 1861, WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/44/4, 109/49/1, 109/66/4.

⁸⁴ Rev. P.W. Hulbert to Ramsden, 21 Feb. 1881, Hulbert to Andrew Fairbairn, 5 Aug. 1882, WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/71/9, 109/71/10.

⁸⁵ Thomas Smith to Sir Matthew Ridley, 30 Apr. 1814, Northumberland Archives, ZRI/25/25; John Galloway to Althorp, 24 May 1834, BL Add. MS. 76433; Joseph Garnett to Ramsden, Feb. 1859, WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/47/1.

⁸⁶ Rev. William Ritchie to Visct. Howick, 22 Mar. 1838, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B121/8B/1.

⁸⁷ Petitioners of Altofts to Ramsden, 20 Mar. 1865, WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/44/4.

representation was negotiated in practice by parliamentarians and petitioners.⁸⁸ Petitioners pressed parliamentarians, while the latter sought to uphold their independence as the same time as performing their duties with regard to petitions.

In particular contexts, such as during the fast-moving political events in May 1832, when Grey's reform ministry resigned and was then reinstated, petitioners deferred to MPs judgment as to when and if petitions should be presented, or as one Whig MP wrote in his journal, 'Petitions to stop supplies pouring in – But in the delicate situation of affairs it is thought as well not to present them.'⁸⁹ Petitioners typically asked for the petition to be presented 'on an early day', as soon as was convenient, or at the 'proper time'.⁹⁰ On other occasions, petitioners wanted presentation delayed until the question was discussed, or when would be most advantageous, but still left it to the MP or peer's discretion.⁹¹

However, petitioners also attempted to dictate the timing of presentation to MPs. Durham shopkeepers, petitioning against various taxes in 1819, bossily told their local MPs to 'have the goodness to communicate with Mr. Stuart Wortley, the member for Yorkshire who has had a similar petition sent from Leeds. The petitioners don't wish this petition until after the Leeds pet[itio]n has been presented.'⁹² Pro-Catholic petitioners from Cork were equally specific in addressing Grey when they 'request[ed] that you will originate a discussion as early thereon this session; provided that no discussion be likely to take place on the petition

⁸⁸ Pitkin, *Representation*, pp. 144-67; A. Rehfeld, 'Representation Rethought: On Trustees, Delegates, and Gyroscopes in the Study of Political Representation and Democracy', *American Political Science Review*, 103 (2009), 214-30.

⁸⁹ J. Carr to Viscount Howick, 19 May 1832, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B80/14B/1; Edward John Littleton journal, 16 May 1832, Staffordshire Record Office, D260/M/F/5/26/8, f. 36.

⁹⁰ Alexander Mitchell to Earl Grey, 25 Feb. 1867, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B115/9B/1; Joseph Walker to Fitzwilliam, 10 May 1813, SCA, WWM/F/65/18; Arthur Thorold Wood to Milton, 1 Apr. 1868, SCA, WWM/T/57; John Fenwick to John Lambton, 5 May 1824, Durham Univ. Lib., JGL A26/1/15.

⁹¹ Christopher Thornhill to Grey, 7 Apr. 1813, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B54/11/11/1; Thomas Fletcher to William Huskisson, 31 Mar. 1827, Liverpool RO, 328 PAR 3/70; John Hill to Ramsden, 23 May 1870, WYAS: Kirklees, WYL 109/41/3.

⁹² Thomas Wilkinson to Durham city MPs, 22 Mar. 1819, Durham County Record Office (Durham CRO), DU 1/29/29.

forwarded by the Catholic Association in Dublin.⁹³ Occasionally, other demands were made as well. In the slightly pompous tone of local officialdom, the Boroughreeve of Manchester, writing to one of the MPs for Lancashire, commented that ‘It would be the wish of the Committee to have the Petition read at length provided the House is inclined to permit it, and to have it printed in the Votes.’⁹⁴

Petitioners could do little to compel parliamentarians to follow their instructions with regard to timing, yet this did not stop them from asking, and some MPs responded with enthusiasm. Asked to present an anti-slavery petition by his Durham constituents in 1826, Michael Angelo Taylor replied that while absent from Westminster on account of ‘the severe & protracted indisposition’ of his wife, if required, ‘I will set out for town immediately.’⁹⁵

Bernard Manin has argued that representative government combines the free expression of public opinion with independent decision-making power for representatives: petitions, the press, demonstrations, or meetings do not bind legislators.⁹⁶ Yet the practice, as opposed to the theory, of representation involved a complex and continuous interplay between representatives seeking to maintain their independence, and petitioners pushing their demands. We can see this most clearly when petitioners pressed MPs and peers to vote or act in support of the prayer of their petition.⁹⁷

The covering letter for the petition provided a convenient opportunity for making such requests, as well as more general exhortations.⁹⁸ In this vein, in 1814, a correspondent asked

⁹³ Jeremiah Murphy to Grey, 28 May 1824, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B41/12/10.

⁹⁴ David Bannerman to John Blackburne, 2 May 1829, Archives+, Manchester Central Library (MCL), M91/33/1, f. 381.

⁹⁵ Taylor to J. Hutchinson, 4 Feb. 1826, Durham CRO, DU 1/29/34.

⁹⁶ Manin, *Principles*, pp. 164, 166-7, 170, 173.

⁹⁷ John Buckworth, to Fitzwilliam, 28 Apr. 1813, SCA, WWM/F/65/19; George Grundy to Robert Peel, 27 Apr. 1825, BL Add. MS. 40377, f. 148; Bulkeley Price to Lord Lansdowne, 11 Feb. 1830, Archives+, MCL, M91/33/1, f. 403; Andrew Lawson to Duke of Newcastle, 8 Feb. 1830, Nottingham University Library, Ne C 6779; Durham Corporation, Resolutions of meeting to petition the Lords to pass the reform bill, 26 Sept. 1831, Durham CRO, DU 1/29/44; John Smith to Viscount Althorp, 3 May 1834, BL Add. MS. 76433; John Vincent to Earl Grey, 4 Mar. 1856, Durham Univ. Library, GRE/B129/9D/2; Edward Smith to Derby, 19 June 1858, Liverpool RO, 920 DER 14 86/2/9; John Adams to Milton, 12 Mar. 1868, SCA, WWM/T/57.

⁹⁸ John Taylor to Milton, 6 May 1869, SCA, WWM/T/57.

John Lambton, MP for Durham, and future Earl of Durham, not only to present an anti-slavery petition from Sunderland, but to help ‘enforce its prayer’.⁹⁹ By making such entreaties, as when a Huddersfield clergymen wrote to Ramsden that we ‘trust that you will support their Petitions by your vote’ against Irish church disestablishment, petitioners were inviting their representatives to make a commitment or otherwise to explain their refusal.¹⁰⁰ Signatories might even send copies of their petition to a number of MPs asking them to attend and speak in favour of a petition presented by another.¹⁰¹ When the bill to abolish the slave trade met with opposition in both houses in 1807, Durham corporation wrote to the city’s MPs to ‘request you will attend & ... please to give your utmost support to the ... bill’, in the manner of a three-line whip.¹⁰² Some correspondents asked an MP to vote in support, even when they knew they disagreed with their prayer, as in the case of the pro-corn law petitioners who addressed Viscount Howick, Grey’s heir and a noted free trader.¹⁰³

The generally permissive attitude of MPs was taken in some instances by petitioners as licence to express broader criticisms. In 1835, a Manchester Quaker sent a letter to Howick asking him to support the prayer of an anti-apprenticeship petition. Perhaps displaying the unworldliness of his sect, the correspondent went on to criticise the 1833 Act, which Howick had helped to frame, that had instituted the apprenticeship system as ‘a proof ... of the disappointment that results from legislating merely on state expediency & of legislators not allowing themselves to be guided solely by principles of justice & equity’.¹⁰⁴ The peppery Howick responded that he ‘had strongly disapproved’ of the apprenticeship clauses, ‘and did

⁹⁹ G.W. Headley to Lambton, 1 July 1814, Durham Univ. Lib., JGL A26/1/4.

¹⁰⁰ J.P. Dowse to Ramsden, 24 Mar. 1865, WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/44/4.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Brodigan to Grey, 26 Apr. 1824, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B8/1/8/1; B. Wells to John Fielden, 2 Mar. 1836, JRULM, FDN/1/2/1/10.

¹⁰² Durham Corporation, Draft letter from mayor to MPs, 12 Feb. 1807, Durham CRO, DU 1/29/11.

¹⁰³ Robert Jobson to Howick, 8 Mar. 1839, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B112/5E/1.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Clare to Howick, 31 July 1835, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B81/1C/3.

all that lay in my power to prevent their being adopted', but as they were due to lapse in 1840 'I should not now feel justified in supporting a motion for their repeal'.¹⁰⁵

When the opinions of MPs and their constituents aligned, representatives lost nothing by underlining their common objectives. When in 1818 the Durham city MPs were asked by local inhabitants to present a petition in favour of regulating chimney sweeps, Richard Wharton wrote that he would 'make a point of attending that day; and then and on every subsequent stage of the bill I shall do my best to forward the point we all have at heart.'¹⁰⁶ Agreeing to present a petition against Irish church appropriation in 1835, William Duncombe emphasised his agreement with his constituents: 'as my votes have already shown, that my sentiments are entirely against such a principle of spoliation.'¹⁰⁷ Regarding the 1826 Durham anti-slavery petition, Taylor promised that he should 'not fail in giving to the prayer of it, every support in my power.'¹⁰⁸

While always willing, with few exceptions, to present petitions, MPs were far more reluctant to vote as petitioners requested, although they did compromise in some cases. Responding to a petition from his Liverpool constituents for the repeal of the tax on wool in 1821, George Canning wrote:

I cannot promise that I will vote in support of the Repeal of a Tax which, according to the best of my judgment at the time I concurred in imposing. But, if upon full consideration I am not converted to the view of the ... petitioners, I assure you that I will at least abstain from voting *against* the prayer of the Petition.¹⁰⁹

Privately, MPs might be more blunt. As John Campbell noted in his diary in 1831, 'I have received a copy of a Cupar petition for Ballot, with a request to support it, but I shall certainly

¹⁰⁵ Howick to Clare, 3 Aug. 1835, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B81/1C/3.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Wharton to town clerk, 11 Feb. 1818, Durham CRO, DU 1/29/21(2).

¹⁰⁷ William Duncombe to John Headlam, 2 June 1835, Durham Univ. Lib., HHM/A9/115A.

¹⁰⁸ M.A. Taylor to J. Hutchinson, 4 Feb. 1826, Durham CRO, DU 1/29/34.

¹⁰⁹ George Canning to William Ewart, 10 Apr. 1821, Liverpool RO, 328 PAR 4/1.

oppose'.¹¹⁰ Generally, however, their response to petitioners was conciliatory. The veteran Radical MP for Montrose burghs Joseph Hume regretted his disagreement with anti-Maynooth petitioners from his constituency, explaining that as a longstanding advocate of the 'principles of civil and religious liberty' he could not consent to their demands.¹¹¹ While retaining their independence, MPs nevertheless sought to explain and justify their position when it diverged from petitioners.

In the 1870s, Liberal MPs were subjected to growing pressure from local activists to support temperance legislation. Many expressed sympathy even when they declined to commit their votes. Replying to a petition for a Sunday closing bill from religious ministers in his Bradford constituency, W.E. Forster wrote that while acknowledging their 'weighty & important' views he could 'not undertake to vote for the second reading'.¹¹² Responding to prohibitionists from his Newport constituency in 1870, Ramsden said that he had always been clear that he did not support their preferred permissive bill, and regarding the matter of closing public houses on Sunday, 'I wish to hear what the promoters of the bill ... have to say in its favour before committing myself'.¹¹³ Addressing temperance petitioners from Morpeth in the same year, Sir George Grey wrote with 'regret that I could not support the Bill, ... while feeling sympathetic'.¹¹⁴

On other occasions, presenting petitions was not enough for petitioners who sought to exert pressure on their MPs, in some cases publicly, leading to potentially damaging ruptures in the relationship between representatives and their constituents. In these examples, petitioners claimed to represent constituency feeling better than their representatives. For example, in 1838

¹¹⁰ Diary of John Campbell, 27 Feb. 1831, quoted in Mrs. Hardcastle, *Life of John, Lord Campbell* (2 vols., London, 1881), II, p. 503.

¹¹¹ *Montrose, Arbroath and Brechin Review*, 9 Apr. 1852, p. 6.

¹¹² W.E. Forster to W.S. Nichols, 28 June 1875, WYAS, Bradford, DB4/C1/1-22.

¹¹³ Ramsden to William Watkins, 28 June 1870, WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/41/3.

¹¹⁴ Sir George Grey, letter, 15 July 1870, in The Brooks Collection of Autographs, vol. XIV, Northumberland Archives, SANT/BEQ/4/14/46/B.

Bradford sent sixty-four anti-slave apprenticeship petitions in six weeks, and passed a public resolution expressing regret at the West Riding MP, Lord Morpeth's vote against immediate emancipation. At the meeting one speaker declared that 'his emotions [were] poignant and grievous on ascertaining *that his Lordship had voted in opposition to the petitions of his constituency...* a constituency which had always felt it to be their pride to be the foremost in the ranks of the friends of the enslaved Negro'.¹¹⁵

An even more acrimonious example was in 1845, when the Protestant opposition to the Maynooth bill led many electors to petition their MPs as well as Parliament. In Nottinghamshire, constituents told the high profile pro-Maynooth Conservative MP Lord Lincoln that they would not vote for him 'if you be in favour of enlarging the grant to Maynooth' as 'no man of true Protestant principle could have introduced it'.¹¹⁶ Accordingly when local Wesleyans asked Lincoln to present an anti-Maynooth petition, this was not just a routine request from petitioners to their MP, but a test.¹¹⁷ Another printed petition to Lincoln bluntly informed him that 'whatever personal respect we may feel for yourself, as our Representative, it must remain [a] matter of serious consideration whether our suffrages can be given to any man who, for such a purpose, can appropriate the public money.'¹¹⁸ Another dispute occurred in Armagh, where the local MP John Rawdon was also a supporter of the bill. Criticising his conduct by pointing to local anti-Maynooth petitions, the *Armagh Guardian* argued that "'the representative" is bound to support its prayer if he represents us properly'.¹¹⁹

Not coincidentally, these cases come from the 1830s and 1840s when the notion that petitions might challenge the authority of representatives was at its height. Even so, these extreme instances show the latent pressures and tensions that were usually contained within

¹¹⁵ *Leeds Mercury*, 14 Apr. 1838, p. 8. Italics added. I am indebted to David Gent for this reference.

¹¹⁶ W. Bury to Earl of Lincoln, 26 Mar. 1845, Nottingham Univ. Lib., Ne C 9254.

¹¹⁷ J. Maltby to Earl of Lincoln, 9 Apr. 1845, Nottingham Univ. Lib., Ne C 9262.

¹¹⁸ Inhabitants of Bingham, printed petition to Earl of Lincoln, 22 Apr. 1845, Nottingham Univ. Lib., Ne C 9266.

¹¹⁹ *Armagh Guardian*, 22 Apr. 1845, p. 3.

the interactions between petitioners and parliamentarians. While the latter were generally successful in upholding their independence, they took great care to respond to petitioners, and were conciliatory when explaining votes contrary to petitioners' prayers. While public ruptures were rare, petitioners were fully aware that one of the main levers they had to exert pressure on MPs was the possible threat of losing their support. Such pressure was usually expressed obliquely, as when a Doncaster petitioner writing to Milton in 1869 regarding temperance legislation, noted that 'a large number of your supporters here are earnestly in favour of this measure'.¹²⁰

ii) Presenting Petitions

Examining petitioning has confirmed that the relationship between 'the represented and the representative is mutually constitutive' as Seward has put it.¹²¹ On the one hand, in selecting parliamentarians to present their petitions, petitioners acknowledged them as representatives; on the other, representatives represented petitioners through presentation, enabling geographic and issue-based representation.

Petitioners usually chose parliamentarians to present petitions either on the grounds of constituency connections, or known sympathies. Because places were often represented by borough and county MPs, and constituencies typically returned more than one MP, petitioners had a range of options when considering which parliamentarian to approach to present their petition. Local representatives were usually the first-choice destination for petitions, especially as considerations of etiquette were involved. In 1831, Alnwick reformers had planned to send a petition to Howick, MP for Morpeth, 'but it was suggested ... that passing over the county members was disrespectful, and would be probably so felt by them'.¹²² If local representatives were absent, then petitioners might address other parliamentarians associated with an issue. In

¹²⁰ Jos. H. Calm to Milton, 4 May 1869, SCA, WWM/T/57.

¹²¹ Seward, *The Representative Claim*, p. 120.

¹²² John Carr to Grey, 9 Feb. 1831, Durham Univ. Library, GRE/B9A/11/3/2.

1814 Durham inhabitants planned to send their petition against the slave trade to the county and city MPs, and if they were absent, to the abolitionist MP William Wilberforce.¹²³ Their petition to the House of Lords was to be directed to peers with local connections (the Earl of Darlington and the Bishop of Durham), and in their absence, the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson was given the authority to forward it to another.¹²⁴

Geographical connections between petitioners and MPs were not always based on a constituency connection. John Campbell, MP for Stafford, was asked to present petitions against slavery from his native town of Cupar, with which he ‘was connected with them by the ties of early acquaintance and friendship’.¹²⁵ A Cheshire correspondent preferred Ramsden to present his petition because ‘as a Yorkshireman & a [non-resident] voter for the West Riding I have felt an interest in your recent election’.¹²⁶ In the case of peers, geographical ties were typically based on patterns of landownership. For instance, a list of petitions presented by peers in favour of women’s suffrage in February and March 1873 reveals a close correlation between petitions and the regions where magnates possessed estates: the Earl of Ellesmere (Cheshire), Lord Leigh (Birmingham and Warwickshire), the Duke of Bedford (Bedfordshire), and the Earl of Rosebery (Edinburgh and Midlothian). In other cases such as Lord Ripon and Lord Derby, peers presented petitions from constituencies they had represented before succeeding to the peerage.¹²⁷ On occasion landownership and previous service as an MP combined to determine to which peer petitioners appealed. After his elevation to the peerage, Lord Durham was asked to present a petition from a former constituent, who wrote ‘trusting that though you are not now actually, they may still be allowed to consider you as virtually their representative’.¹²⁸

¹²³ Mayor of Durham to Thomas Clarkson, 9 Feb. 1814, Durham CRO, DU 1/29/16.

¹²⁴ Mayor of Durham, Draft letter to Thomas Clarkson, 9 Feb. 1814, Durham CRO, DU 1/29/16.

¹²⁵ Diary of John Campbell, 3 Dec. 1830, quoted in Hardcastle, *Life*, II, p. 495.

¹²⁶ Samuel Ellis to Sir J. Ramsden, 2 Mar. 1859, WYAS, Kirklees, WYL 109/47/1.

¹²⁷ Manchester Society for Women’s Suffrage, *Sixth Annual Report* (Manchester, 1873), p. 25, Archives+, MCL, M50/1/4/6.

¹²⁸ John Grey to Lord Durham, 22 Feb. 1828, Durham Univ. Lib., JGL A26/1/17.

Petitioners often directed their petitions to parliamentarians on account of their known sympathies or interests, or in combination with geographical connections. Earl Fitzwilliam was widely regarded as a representative of Dissenting causes from the West Riding, where he possessed vast estates, on account of ‘his well-known attachment to the principles of religious toleration’ as one Leeds correspondent put it.¹²⁹ A Glasgow merchant wrote in 1853 that a petition regarding Jamaica had been entrusted to Lord Eglington, ‘as being connected with this part of the country, and having some interest in Jamaica property’.¹³⁰

Grey’s reputation as an advocate of civil and religious liberty and reform ensured that he received petitions from outside his native county of Northumberland, including from Ireland.¹³¹ A Berwick correspondent informed Grey in 1812 that his fellow petitioners were ‘most desirous that the petition should be presented by [your] Lordship on account of the honourable testimony which you have been to the Dissenters in Northumberland and with which we are so closely connected.’¹³² As a cabinet minister known – at this time – for his opposition to Catholic emancipation, Robert Peel was entrusted with anti-Catholic petitions from all over the country in the mid-1820s.¹³³ Howick’s ‘known sentiments on the Slavery question’ made him a magnet for abolitionist petitions in the 1830s.¹³⁴ Some years later, a rector from Devon asked the 3rd Earl Grey (as Howick became in 1845) to present a petition on church rates in 1856 ‘having observed the expression of your opinion in the last session on the issue’.¹³⁵ Late Victorian moral reform campaigns often looked to bishops in the upper house as

¹²⁹ Thomas Langdon to Fitzwilliam, 19 Apr. 1813, SCA, WWM/F/65/3, MF 44.

¹³⁰ H.E. Crum to Earl Grey, 28 June 1853, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B81/18/3.

¹³¹ Jeremiah Murphy to Grey, 28 May 1824, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B41/12/10.

¹³² James Graham to Peel, 24 Feb. 1812, Durham Univ. Lib., GRE/B18/6/1/1.

¹³³ George Grundy to Peel, 27 Apr. 1825, BL Add. MS. 40377, f. 148; Peter Bennett to Peel, 30 Apr. 1825, *ibid.*, f. 222; Petition of Mayor and citizens of Norwich against Catholic claims, 2 May 1825, *ibid.*, ff. 301-2; Henry Gauntlett to Peel, 5 May 1825, *ibid.*, f. 337; J. Stockdale to Peel, 22 Mar. 1825, BL Add. MS. 40375, f. 45; R.F. Wilson to Peel, 6 Apr. 1825, *ibid.*, f. 389.

¹³⁴ Rev. William Ritchie to Howick, 22 Mar. 1838, Durham Univ. Library, GRE/B121/8B/1.

¹³⁵ John Vincent to Earl Grey, 4 Mar. 1856, Durham Univ. Library, GRE/B129/9D/1.

sponsors for their petitions as well as peers like Lord Shaftesbury who were associated with their cause.¹³⁶

The presentation of a petition by an MP enabled geographic representation, chiefly of their constituencies. However, active, vocal, or effective MPs were in their other parliamentary duties, they confirmed their status as representatives by presenting petitions. Tellingly, the petitions data shows that even those parliamentarians who had otherwise undistinguished parliamentary careers were diligent in dealing with petitions. Edward Basil Farnham, MP for North Leicestershire, 1837-59, was unfavourably compared to a plank of wood by one election opponent on account of his silence in debate, yet he presented over 400 petitions from his constituency.¹³⁷ Henry Cecil Lowther, MP for Westmorland, 1812-67, was known as the ‘silent colonel’, but presented over 400 petitions from his constituency and contiguous localities after 1832.¹³⁸ Edward Richard Littleton, a generally inactive and absentee MP for Walsall, 1847-52, and South Staffordshire, 1853-7, presented sixty-four petitions. Lord Eliot, briefly MP for Devonport, for 1866-8, still managed to present twenty-eight petitions from his constituents in that time.¹³⁹ The broader point is that privileging parliamentary speech and *Hansard* reports as an measure of MPs’ activity misses out important elements of the regular work parliamentarians undertook and allows us to re-assess what we might think of as an effective nineteenth-century representative.

The presentation of petitions also enabled issue-based representation, or what Jane Mansbridge has defined as ‘surrogate representation’, that is ‘when legislators represent constituents outside their own districts’.¹⁴⁰ In this case the connection between petitioners and parliamentarians was based on issues. While it was customary for petitions to be sent to a local

¹³⁶ *Alliance News*, 4 May 1872, p. 325.

¹³⁷ *The Times*, 15 July 1852, p. 2.

¹³⁸ ‘Lowther, Henry Cecil’, in Salmon and Rix, *HP, Commons 1832-1868*.

¹³⁹ Data in this paragraph based on SCPP, *Reports* (1833-1918).

¹⁴⁰ Mansbridge, ‘Rethinking Representation’, 514, 522-5.

MP, in some cases petitioners clearly preferred a parliamentarian more sympathetic to their cause. For example, in 1833, Manchester subscribers to a petition in favour of the ten hours bill decided against sending it to their local MP, Mark Philips, who was opposed to the measure, and instead opted for Lord Ashley, the bill's parliamentary sponsor, or failing that, 'the agricultural members, who were, almost to a man, opposed to the present factory system'.¹⁴¹

The importance of presenting petitions for issue-based representation is confirmed by the petitions data. The MPs who presented the greatest number of petitions after 1832 typically combined lengthy careers with representing large populous constituencies, but also acted conduits for petitions on particular issues. To give just a few indicative examples: Charles Newdegate, MP for North Warwickshire, 1843-85, and William Wheelhouse, MP for Leeds, 1868-80, presented many petitions on behalf of ultra-Protestant and anti-Catholic causes, while the proposer of late Victorian prohibition bills, Sir Wilfrid Lawson, was the natural repository for temperance petitions from all over the country beyond the constituencies he represented in Cumberland. Noted free traders such as Charles Villiers, or Joseph Hume, were magnets for anti-corn law petitions from across the country in the 1840s.¹⁴² The regular practice of presenting petitions, as well as their correspondence with petitioners, underscored parliamentarians' status as representatives, not only of their constituents, but of broader bodies of opinion on specific issues.

Conclusion

Petitioning was essential to the practice of representation. In the nineteenth century, petitioning was reconceived as a means of representing the people and quantifiable public opinion rather than just 'interests'. In an era of parliamentary government, MPs agreed that while not everyone deserved the right to vote, all in practice, deserved to have their petitions presented.

¹⁴¹ *Report of the Proceedings of a Public Meeting ... in support of Mr. Sadler's Ten Hours Bill*, cutting from *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, c. Feb. 1833, Archives+, MCL, M71/1/3/2.

¹⁴² Miller, 'Popular Petitioning', 892-3.

Henry Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners: Petitions and Petitioning in the United Kingdom, 1780-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), chapter 9: Petitioning and Representation AAM

Through innumerable letters and other exchanges parliamentarians and petitioners negotiated the meaning of representation, and the presentation of petitions enabled geographic and issue-based representation. Recognising these interactions not only restores one of the central parts of the nineteenth-century relationship between representatives and those they represented, but also redirects our attention away from theories or models of representation to the importance of the practice of representation.