

Parliament, printed petitions and the political imaginary in seventeenth-century England

Jason Peacey

Department of History, University College London, England

SUMMARY

Building on recent scholarship relating to the emergence of printed petitions in Britain in the seventeenth century, this article concentrates on those printed petitions that were designed for more or less discreet or limited circulation in order to lobby parliament. It draws on two collections of such material gathered by the MPs Bulstrode Whitelocke (in the 1650s) and Sir Michael Wentworth (in the 1680s and 1690s). Because print facilitated novel ways of engaging with parliament – not least as problems went unresolved and cases dragged on – printed petitions provide a useful window into the aspirations and frustrations of supplicants, and indeed into their political thinking, however rudimentary this may have been. In tracing what might be called the ‘political imaginary’ of contemporary petitioners, this study recovers evidence of radicalization, but also suggests that the art of petitioning could involve the deliberate avoidance of ideological issues that nevertheless underpinned specific interventions.

Historians of early modern Britain have done much to recognize the growing importance of parliamentary petitioning, in the context of religious and political upheaval, institutional change, state formation and the seventeenth-century print revolution. It is only recently, however, that serious attempts have been made to get to grips with the interpretative challenges that printed petitions pose. Scholars such as Chris Kyle, Derek Hirst and David Zaret have all recognized the importance of examining printed versions of parliamentary petitions with some care, since they did not all have the same purpose. Key here has been the distinction between texts used to *publicize* petitions, most obviously after they had been presented, using commercial pamphlets and broadsides, and those used to *deliver* petitions to Parliament, in the hope of securing official attention. The former have been highlighted to develop ideas about the emergence of a public sphere, while the latter – which began to appear in the early 1620s – have been used to think about how members of the public could ‘make contact’ with representatives at Westminster, in the same way that lobbyists used printed briefs to ensure that peers and MPs made

informed decisions about private grievances and legislative issues.¹ It is the latter form of printed text, and its use for discreet petitioning – namely the targeting of MPs and peers but not wider audiences – which forms the subject of this article.

In terms of why discreet petitioning became so important, it is clearly possible to highlight the mechanical or processual rationale for creating and deploying printed petitions as a participatory device. This involves the possibility of producing many copies of petitions very cheaply, in order to overcome problems relating to the sponsorship and stewardship of supplications which sought to raise and solve specific grievances; that is, getting them adopted and getting them pursued. That printing was thought to be necessary or effective, or both, is evident from the dramatic increase in the frequency with which petitioners used print as a participatory tool, perhaps in ways that increased the overall scale of

¹ J.S. Hart, *Justice upon Petition: The House of Lords and the Reformation of Justice 1621–1675* (London, 1991); C.R. Kyle, *Theater of State: Parliament and Political Culture in Early Stuart England* (Stanford, 2012), chs 5–6; D. Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Princeton, 2000); D. Zaret, ‘Petitions and the “invention” of public opinion in the English Revolution’, *American Journal of Sociology* 101, (1996), pp. 1497–55; D. Hirst, ‘Making contact: petitions and the English republic’, *Journal of British Studies* 45, (2005), pp. 28, 39–42.

petitioning, and although this ensured that politicians became nervous about printed petitions – to the point where they tried to ban them (in 1656) – they were fairly quickly accepted as part of the landscape and became normative by the end of the seventeenth century.²

This article builds upon existing scholarship in two ways, by exploring particular contemporary collections, not least with a view to assessing whether petitioning changed over time, and looking closely at the political ideas they embody. First, it focuses on key repositories, in terms of the printed texts preserved by two MPs: the parliamentarian lawyer, Bulstrode Whitelocke, in the 1650s (33 petitions), and the high Tory MP for Aldborough, Sir Michael Wentworth, in the 1680s and 1690s (35 petitions). Both men seem to have kept printed petitions more enthusiastically than they did scribal petitions, although a few of the latter also survive among Whitelocke's papers. These collections are valuable not just because they help to overcome problems with the survival of petitions caused by their ephemerality and a destructive fire in the Houses of Parliament in 1834, but also because printed petitions are often hard to locate and interpret. Such texts have tended to be overlooked by bibliographers, not least because they were more often preserved within

² J. Peacey, *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013), chs 8–9.

private archives rather than libraries. It can also be difficult to know with certainty whether individual items were produced for public consumption or more limited circulation. With the texts amassed by Whitelocke and Wentworth, however, we can be fairly certain that we are dealing with *discreet* participatory texts, not just because they lack any indications about the stationers by whom they were printed or sold, but also because they betray evidence of having been folded and endorsed by the MPs to whom they were handed and by whom they were preserved. As such we can observe how petitioning was undertaken by a range of different supplicants, from individuals both powerful and weak, grand and humble, to groups including merchants, tradesmen, parishioners and corporations. These collections add significantly to the known corpus of such material. For example, only two of the 33 printed petitions that Whitelocke collected can also be found on the *Early English Books Online* database.³

Because these petitions are known to have been handed to specific MPs, it would be possible to use such collections to analyse these particular members, in terms of their relationships with individual supplicants, their responses to petitions, and their interests. With Whitelocke, for example,

³ Longleat House, Whitelocke Papers (hereafter WP), Parcel 7; Leeds University Library, Special Collections MSS 1946/1 (Papers of the Wentworth family of Woolley Hall, Yorkshire, hereafter Wentworth), vol. 146.

we can certainly show that some petitions came from men already well known to him, including his ‘intimate friend’ and former travelling companion Robert Cole, legal clients like Hugh Audley (an Inner Temple lawyer), and old and ‘hearty’ family friends to whom he was personally indebted, like William Oakley.⁴ Perhaps they, more than others, knew that Whitelocke was sometimes involved in preparing and presenting petitions.⁵ With Wentworth, meanwhile, the petitions provide evidence about the interests of a much less prominent MP. In addition to a range of petitions relating to his native Yorkshire, there are notable clusters relating to contested parliamentary elections, perhaps because Wentworth was himself involved in one such contest, for which he produced his own printed petition.⁶ More interesting still is the cluster of petitions relating to

⁴ WP, Parcel 7/83, 86, 99. For these men, see R. Spalding (ed.), *The Diary of Bulstrode Whitelocke, 1605–1675* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 77–8, 80, 82, 84–5, 461, 476, 600, 646, 658.

⁵ Spalding (ed.), *Diary of Bulstrode Whitelocke*, p. 483.

⁶ Wentworth, Box 15: *For Sir Michael Wentworth* (undated) *The Case of William Adderley* (1695); Wentworth, vol. 146: *The Case of the Burrough of Truro* (1689); *The Case of John Lewes* (undated) *The Case of Marlborough* (1689?); *Friday, November 7, 1690* (1690); *The Case of the Ancient Burrough of Knaresborough* (1689); *Cricklade Election* (undated); *The Case of Theodore Bathurst* (1689); *The*

issues outside his constituency, such as prisons and poor prisoners, who complained about being ‘buried alive in the dismal grave of close imprisonment’, about ‘merciless creditors’, ‘horrid and cruel exactions’ and ‘deplorable’ conditions, and about oppressive gaolers and children who ‘cry daily for bread’. These complaints were sometimes tied, moreover, to parliamentary attempts to erect ‘courts of conscience’ that might help poor litigants.⁷ Together with the other printed texts that Wentworth amassed and preserved – newspapers, political ballads, parliamentary acts and orders, speeches and votes and lists of MPs, as well as other assorted tracts relating to political developments, military affairs and legal proceedings – this collection makes it possible to revise the impression, from parliamentary journals and diaries, that he ‘was not an active member’.⁸

Case of the Kersey-Clothiers (1700?). See also Wentworth, vol. 143, *A Word in Season* (1688).

⁷ Wentworth, Box 15/1, 5; vol. 146: *Humble Proposals concerning the arrears* (1690); *An Answer to Mr William Eyres his case* (undated); *The Case of the Undertakers* (1685); *Reasons for passing a bill* (undated); *The Humble Petition of the Poor Prisoners* (1700?); *The Bankrupts Case* (1689).

⁸ Wentworth, Box 7/4/1; Box 15; Box 57; vol. 143; vol. 146; B.D. Henning (ed.), *The House of Commons, 1660–1690*, 3 vols (London, 1983), vol. III, pp. 685–6; D.

Rather than using printed petitions to explore the interests of the MPs to whom they were given, however, the second aim of this article is to focus on their content, not in terms of specific grievances and demands, but rather in terms of ideas about politics and the political system. The aim, in other words, is to use these discreet petitions to illuminate what might be called seventeenth-century political ‘imaginaries’. This involves what the philosopher Charles Taylor referred to as the kind of clear but unsystematic political thinking that can be observed in everyday words and actions, even if it is not embodied in overtly theoretical discourses and treatises, and that provides a useful way of recovering ‘popular’ ideas about politics.⁹ Elsewhere, I have argued that printed petitions provide a particularly useful way of understanding contemporary perceptions about Parliament, and contemporary ideas about parliamentary processes and the challenges involved in parliamentary participation. Petitioning reflected hopes and aspirations regarding Westminster processes, and since printed petitions often emerged after other more traditional methods had failed, they tend to embody strategic thinking and to reveal tactical and rhetorical escalation in the face of the difficulties involved in navigating parliamentary obstacles.

Hayton, E. Cruickshanks and S. Handley (eds), *The House of Commons, 1690–1715*, 5 vols (Cambridge, 2002), vol. V, p. 825.

⁹ C. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (London, 2003).

Petitions often provide evidence, in other words, of strained patience and mounting anger, as individuals and interest groups reflected on the performance of MPs, mused on political corruption and responded to frustrated expectations with radical generalizations about the ills of the parliamentary system.¹⁰ This article will build on these insights by recovering neglected aspects of the political ‘imaginaries’ of contemporary petitioners, and exploring what printed petitions reveal about contemporary assumptions regarding the political process. This means revisiting contemporary justifications for petitioning and expectations of the political system, and using what anthropologists refer to as extended case studies – petitions that related to protracted attempts to resolve grievances – to trace the dynamic of particular campaigns, and to observe something surprising about the ways in which politics and ideology both did and did not figure in printed petitions.

Petitions, political rhetoric and genre

What emerges very clearly from this material is that petitioners who deployed print understood the place, value and limitations of Parliament as a forum for resolving their problems, and that over time the form that texts took was modified in the hope of making interventions more effective.

¹⁰ Peacey, *Print and Public Politics*, chs 7–11.

Petitions, therefore, did more than merely set out grievances and problems in basic ways; very often they shaded into more elaborate rhetorical productions, not least by emphasizing the centrality of parliament. This sometimes involved cramming onto single sheets substantial lists of ‘reasons’ which explained grievances and justified petitioners’ demands at greater length.¹¹ More obviously it meant endorsing the power and authority of parliament, and many petitioners made it clear that they were appealing from other institutions to MPs and peers, as members of the highest court in the land, having been told that other courts, committees and commissions were ‘not impowred’ to deal with particular cases.¹² In the early 1650s the Eastland merchants who traded in the Baltic turned to parliament after struggling with the Navy Committee, the Council of Trade and the Council of State.¹³ Hugh Audley appealed from the commissioners of the great seal in 1653, while the Gloucestershire gentleman (and sometime MP) Sir Robert Tracey turned to ‘some other place’ when the lords of Chancery could not give him relief; and in later decades a Derbyshire freeholder called William Inge appealed

¹¹ WP, Parcel 7/80.

¹² WP, Parcel 7/82.

¹³ WP, Parcel 7/85.

from the Duchy of Lancaster court.¹⁴ The earl of Meath explained in the early 1650s that ‘no other court of justice can do your petitioner right’.¹⁵ In some cases, as with the Yorkshire gentleman Theodore Bathurst, this was a response to legal troubles created by people who were seeking to derail his parliamentary proceedings and a proposed act of parliament to secure jointure lands, through ‘multiplicities of suits and vexatious proceedings’ and a ‘false malicious indictment’.¹⁶ In other cases what was required was to overcome delays elsewhere. During the English republic, a group of Bristol merchants asked parliament to ‘finally resolve’ an issue – a discussion of the effect on their trade of domestic tobacco growing – that had become stuck – albeit ready to be reported – in the committee for the navy and customs.¹⁷ In yet other cases, petitioners complained about how official decisions were being ignored. During the Rump Parliament, the Huguenot cleric and historian, Lewis du Moulin, turned to parliament in frustration when his agreement with Sion College, regarding a rectory and a pension, was overturned by the Cromwellian soldier, MP and councillor

¹⁴ WP, Parcel 7/86, 105; Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of William Inge* (undated).

See *The Case of Thomas Eyre* (1684).

¹⁵ WP, Parcel 7/91, *The Humble Petition of Edward Earle of Meath* (1654).

¹⁶ Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of Theodore Bathurst* (1689).

¹⁷ WP, Parcel 7/93.

of state, Colonel Philip Jones.¹⁸ The commonalty of the Weavers' Company, meanwhile, complained that even a parliamentary decision – the order of 9 March 1649 which gave them control over the company and its premises – had been ignored, despite addresses to the committee of indemnity and other bodies, where 'all was denied'.¹⁹

With the Weavers, moreover, we get a clear sense that while petitioners looked to parliament as a means of solving their problems, they were also willing to complain about the efficacy of parliamentary processes. In some cases, of course, grumbling was provoked when considerable efforts had been brought to nothing, as matters became lost with the dissolution of particular parliaments.²⁰ Other complaints were rather sharper, indicating a sense of grievance that such dissolutions entailed the wasting of money that had been paid in fees at different stages of the legislative process and gently suggesting that this was rather unfair.²¹ Beyond this, petitioners also referred to proceedings that had been halted by the Commons, hearings that resulted in no action, and draft bills that

¹⁸ WP, Parcel 7/98.

¹⁹ WP, Parcel 7/101. See *Journals of the House of Commons* (43 volumes, HMSO, London, 1803, hereafter *CJ*), VII, pp. 104–5, 106, 119–20, 121–2, 127–9, 136–8, 141–3, 148, 161.

²⁰ WP, Parcel 7/111; Wentworth, vol. 146, *The French Protestants Case* (undated).

²¹ Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of the Undertakers* (1685).

were lost after being shuttled between the two Houses.²² References were made to well-meaning and ‘noble’ MPs being unable to ensure that witnesses appeared before committees, or that decisions could be successfully implemented.²³ Petitioners reflected on business that had made some progress, but which did not result in full hearings, or which involved petitions, orders and bills becoming stuck, not least in the hands of the parliamentary clerks.²⁴ Others reflected upon the *inconsistency* with which petitions were taken up and acted upon.²⁵ Numerous petitioners complained about delays and ‘the trouble and charge of attendance’, with ‘long’ or ‘daily’ attendance over periods of years, and about being ‘wearied out and consumed by expenses and fruitless attendings’.²⁶ A good example of such grievances involved the duchess of Hamilton, who in 1653 claimed that since September 1652 her petition and case ‘hath waited on the parliament for a dispatch’. She noted that she had ‘divers times attended in person at the door and presented printed copies thereof unto all or most of

²² WP, Parcel 7/80; Wentworth, vol. 146: *The Humble Petition of divers persons of several callings* (1689); *Mr Kenyons Case* (undated).

²³ WP, Parcel 7/84, 87.

²⁴ WP, Parcel 7/102, 108, 110.

²⁵ WP, Parcel 7/109.

²⁶ WP, Parcel 7/83, 87, 94, 95, 96, 107, 114; Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of the Undertakers* (1685).

the particular members’, adding that her petition was ‘not read’ for six months, ‘remaining now in the clerk’s hands’.²⁷

More intriguing is evidence that petitioners were ultimately willing to conclude that individual MPs were either corrupt or overly susceptible to the power and influence of interested parties. The Cumbrian parliamentarian John Musgrave complained about people who ‘abuse their trust’, bemoaning that the state was abused by those who had ‘sinister respects’, and who sought ‘private lucre’, although he mostly seems to have had in mind clerical officials rather than MPs.²⁸ Others were less reticent. A London leather-seller called Josiah Primatt blamed his troubles in the 1640s and 1650s on the illegal and self-interested actions of one MP, Sir Arthur Hesilrige, whose power had ensured that accepted processes were subverted and that sympathizers in Parliament were ‘over-ruled’. He concluded that ‘the influence of Sir Arthur... hath more prevalency... than the rules of justice and right’.²⁹ The Weavers, similarly, complained that the ‘late governors’ of the company, who were supposed to have been supplanted by a Commons order in 1649, managed to bend the rules in order to protect their interests, and they thus complained about being

²⁷ WP, Parcel 7/102.

²⁸ WP, Parcel 7/84.

²⁹ WP, Parcel 7/95.

‘overborne by the prevalency of the said late governors and their adherents’. The latter, the commonalty claimed, had acted ‘in a surreptitious manner, on an unlawful day for motions and contrary to the known rules’ of parliamentary committees, and it was even claimed that counsel for the commonalty had ‘pressed the irregular proceedings of their adversaries’ before a parliamentary committee, only to find that ‘all was denied’.³⁰

Doubtless as a result of such problems, the practice of petitioning became ever more refined as time passed. Examined closely these petitions demonstrate that from the 1650s onwards petitions took on a greater variety of forms, and came to be used much more precisely. In some cases – as with the duchess of Hamilton – very brief printed texts were produced merely to remind MPs about other, earlier and more substantial petitions.³¹ Whitelocke preserved a printed note regarding charitable bequests to the poor of Framlingham and Debenham in Suffolk which referred its readers to a longer text, *The Humble Petition of the Inhabitants of Framlingham*, perhaps in order to ensure that the latter was eventually considered by the Commons.³² Some examples reveal the emergence of professional agents

³⁰ WP, Parcel 7/101.

³¹ WP, Parcel 7/102. See *CJ*, VII, pp. 342–3, 484–5, 491–2.

³² WP, Parcel 7/89–90. See *CJ*, VII, pp. 283–4.

– like the men who acted on behalf of the Bristol and London merchants whose petition to the Rump has already been mentioned – who facilitated the process of petitioning and who promised to put any parliamentary orders into effect without charge to the state.³³ Other ways of making petitioning more efficient included ‘blank’ *pro forma* petitions, which left spaces to insert the names of particular petitioners who encountered a common kind of grievance and who wanted to raise their concerns without going to the trouble of preparing a new and bespoke text. During the commonwealth, for example, a petition prepared for use by anyone who had been prosecuted for supposed delinquency at Haberdashers’ Hall after 1649.³⁴ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, by the late seventeenth century petitions began to be produced with the express purpose of being deployed on very precise occasions. The printed text regarding the disputed Truro election in 1689 was produced ahead of a specific meeting, and it noted that the matter was ‘to be heard before the committee this afternoon’.³⁵ The small printed sheet produced regarding the election at New Radnor was headed ‘Friday, November 7, 1690’, and explained that the matter ‘is to be heard this afternoon, between Robert Harley, esq.,

³³ WP, Parcel 7/93.

³⁴ WP, Parcel 7/94.

³⁵ Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of the Burrough of Truro* (1689).

petitioner against Sir Rowland Gwynn the sitting member'.³⁶ Another 1690 text regarding arrears of money due for support given to the army in the late 1670s noted that the matter was 'to be debated in the House this day'.³⁷ In 1689, *The Case of John Lewes*, meanwhile, in relation to the Cardiganshire election, noted that the matter 'is to be heard before the committee of elections, on Friday the 17th of this instant May, on the petition of John Vaughan'.³⁸

Petitions and political thinking

What makes printed discreet petitions particularly interesting is that reflections on the problems involved in participating at Westminster also led to texts embodying more substantive political ideas, even if only in rather crude and under-developed ways. Rather than merely drawing attention to specific instances of bad – or indeed illegal – behaviour, therefore, petitioners sometimes made reference to more abstract concepts. Most obviously this involved demands for, and the expectation of, 'justice', and many petitioners made much of the fact that they were appealing to Parliament because they expected 'nothing but justice and legal equity' and

³⁶ Wentworth, vol. 146, *Friday, November 7, 1690* (1690).

³⁷ Wentworth, vol. 146, *Humble Proposals concerning the arrears* (1690).

³⁸ Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of John Lewes* (undated).

because ‘no other court of justice can do your petitioner right’.³⁹ Very often, of course, this language was used because of perceived illegality, and because justice was not being found; because ‘there is not held forth to the free people of this nation any relief’, and because individuals did not want injustice to ‘prevail above one age together’.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that grievances could be expressed not just in relation to negative experiences but also in terms of positive aspirations, noble ideals and generalized principles. Josiah Primatt was being rather pointed when he reflected on the need for ‘justice and right without respect of persons’, as was the London merchant Richard Chambers, who demanded ‘his due right’ and the ‘discharge of justice’ in the 1650s by describing himself as ‘the martyr of the commonwealth by his sufferings’.⁴¹ The most pointed of all was the Dorset gentleman and former MP Sir Richard Strode, who complained of feeling ‘like slaves debarred with tyranny from equal justice’, and that ‘selling and delaying of justice hath set the whole nation

³⁹ WP, Parcel 7/86, 91, 102.

⁴⁰ WP, Parcel 7/83, 91; Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of the Kersey-Clothiers* (1700?).

⁴¹ WP, Parcel 7/107.

in such a dangerous combination which may enduce foreign enemies to invade us whiles we are so distracted by the advancing covetous idolatry'.⁴²

More interesting are comments – at least within the petitions collected by Whitelocke during the republic – about the need for Parliament to honour promises, which reveal petitioners thinking through the logical implications of parliamentary rhetoric. Petitions reminded members to ‘maintain the honour and dignity of parliament, which doth consist in doing justice and right without respect of persons’, and Richard Chambers complained that he had ‘to his great grief... so long and so many years depended upon all the... faithful words, promises, engagements and votes [of] so honourable and successful a parliament’.⁴³ One particularly aggressive petitioner reminded MPs that they had declared their ‘abhorrency of all wickedness opposite to godliness and honesty and... against such offences as tend to the corrupting and dissolution of humane society’, but grumbled that ‘diverse adversaries... combining with the sellers and delayers of justice for enriching themselves... do... obstruct the due execution of the great charter of England’s liberties’ [i.e. Magna Carta]. He referred, moreover, to ‘your intended execution of the fundamental laws’, and to things ‘mentioned at the beginning of this

⁴² WP, Parcel 7/92.

⁴³ WP, Parcel 7/95, 102, 107.

parliament', as well as to the kind of slavery (i.e. Ship Money) which Parliament had originally set out to address.⁴⁴

The flip side of such complaints involved justifications for petitioning based upon service and loyalty. This involved suggestions that help should be offered as a result of services rendered by petitioners during the civil wars, either in terms of quiet references to military rank and experience or bold statements about suffering incurred through offering logistical and financial support. Many referred to their 'fidelity', 'publique service' and 'constant affection', having 'laid out and ventured so much for the parliament's victories', or having been 'active and passive in the cause of the parliament'.⁴⁵ What is intriguing about such statements, however, is that they sometimes contained implied threats about the conditional nature of such loyalty. Petitioners explained that parliamentary help would be 'an encouragement to others to undertake things of the like nature for the public good', and that failure to help would 'be a great discouragement... and a retarding of the commonwealth's service'.⁴⁶ Ultimately, some petitioners came close to advocating something like the need to make a 'credible commitment' regarding property rights, of the

⁴⁴ WP, Parcel 7/92.

⁴⁵ WP, Parcel 7/88, 92, 96, 101, 103, 106, 109, 111, 114.

⁴⁶ Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of the Undertakers* (1685); WP, Parcel 7/106.

kind that Douglass North and Barry Weingast associated with the rhetoric of the Revolution of 1688–89. According to North and Weingast, the significance of the Glorious Revolution lay in the way in which constitutional and institutional arrangements protected – or made a credible commitment to – property rights, and undermined the power of arbitrary rulers, and that this made governments credit-worthy and investment more secure. In the late 1680s, therefore, a petition from ‘officers, clothiers and inn-keepers’ suggested that finding a way to protect the financial interests of those creditors who had loaned money to the regime in order to make it possible to disband the army would ‘greatly encourage them and others to give a further credit upon any such or the like occasion’.⁴⁷

Extended case studies

Perhaps the most valuable contribution made by this material is the help it offers in reconstructing extended case studies, and what anthropologists call the ‘social dramas’ involved. This does not necessarily mean subjecting particular petitions and petitioners to close and detailed scrutiny,

⁴⁷ Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of the Officers, Clothiers and Inn-Keepers* (undated); D.C. North and B.R. Weingast, ‘Constitutions and commitment: the evolution of institutions governing public choice in seventeenth-century England’, *Journal of Economic History* 49, (1989), pp. 803–32.

but rather recognizing that many petitions formed part of extended campaigns to rectify grievances. Printed petitions were, intrinsically, staging posts in more or less protracted processes of resolving disputes and grievances, and even if they represented an increasingly normalized way of intervening in parliamentary affairs they were often produced in the wake of earlier attempts to petition more discreetly, and as such they highlight the need to think about the history of particular cases.⁴⁸ Only by mapping such extended campaigns, and situating individual petitions within them, is it possible to gain a satisfactory understanding of the tactical and strategic decisions that individual petitioners made.

In part, this involves mapping the exchange of petitions and printed texts that sometimes occurred. One petition from 1690 contained a *True Information* noting that ‘whereas the creditors of the Goldsmiths [Company] have printed their case and delivered it to the respective members of Parliament’ (in a text called *The Case of the Assignees of the Goldsmiths*), nothing had yet been heard from the ‘original patentees’, who

⁴⁸ V. Turner, ‘Social dramas and stories about them’, *Critical Inquiry* 7, (1980), pp. 141–68; M. Kempny, ‘History of the Manchester “school” and the extended-case method’, *Social Analysis* 49, (2005), pp. 144–65; J. van Velsen, ‘The extended-case method and situational analysis’, in A.L. Epstein (ed.), *The Craft of Social Anthropology* (London, 1967), pp. 129–49.

thus felt duty-bound to vindicate themselves from allegations ‘ventilated... in that honourable house’.⁴⁹ Another text from the late seventeenth century represented an explicit response to ‘a printed paper dispersed entitled *The Case of William Eyre*’, whose author had responded with a scribal petition to a parliamentary bill regarding prisons in Southwark which affected his interests, but who then printed a text in the hope that ‘a day may be appointed him to be heard by his counsel... before the passing of the said bill’. In this situation, his opponents clearly felt compelled to respond to this escalation of tactics with a printed text of their own.⁵⁰ Another such exchange related to a protracted and convoluted case involving John Davies, a prisoner in the Upper Bench prison, and a parliamentarian naval captain, Charles Saltonstall, in the late 1640s and early 1650s. This had seen Saltonstall arrested more than once for the recovery of an alleged debt, wrangling in Parliament, and referrals to the law courts, at which point both men resorted to print, in connection with renewed official proceedings in the summer and autumn of 1651.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Wentworth, vol. 146, *A True Information... of the case of Sir Jeremiah Snow* (1690).

This responded to: Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of the Assignees of the Goldsmiths* (1689).

⁵⁰ Wentworth, vol. 146, *An Answer to Mr William Eyres his case* (undated). This was a reply to: *The Case of William Eyre* (1675?).

⁵¹ WP, Parcel 7/103, 106; *CJ*, VI, pp. 613–14.

What many cases reveal is the use of print repeatedly in successive phases of protracted campaigns. This can be seen with the case of John Musgrave, a serial petitioner and pamphleteer, and with Sir Richard Strode, Josiah Primatt and Richard Chambers, each of whom produced a flurry of printed petitions in the 1640s and 1650s, as well as with other petitioners in the 1680s.⁵² A case in point involves William Inge and Thomas Eyre of Gray's Inn, relating to a land dispute in Derbyshire which dated back to the 1630s. Eyre launched his claim in 1674, and Inge felt compelled to launch a printed campaign in 1684, when the Duchy of Lancaster court issued a ruling in Eyre's favour, and then to produce at least one more petition in 1688.⁵³ Meanwhile, when the commonalty of the Weavers' Company produced a printed petition in the wake of the failure to implement a parliamentary order in the spring of 1649, it was their third such intervention within a year. It came in the wake of *The Case of the Commonalty of the Corporation of Weavers*, which appeared following their failure to benefit from an order allowing them to participate in company elections, and in response to a bill in the interest of their opponents, which 'lies before the committee'. It also came in the wake of

⁵² Peacey, *Print and Public Politics*, pp. 278, 284, 290, 291, 390, 391.

⁵³ Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of William Inge* (undated). See *The Case of Thomas Eyre* (1684).

a second petition containing a text which had been presented to a committee containing their charge against the governors, and which demanded production of the company's accounts, in line with an earlier order, and asked for a prompt hearing to resolve the dispute.⁵⁴

The particular value of being able to reconstruct extended case histories lies in the possibility of exploring both the dynamic and politics of individual campaigns. In part, this is a matter of both radicalism and radicalization. Some of those who expressed radical ideas were long-time radicals – like John Musgrave, a religious sectarian, troublemaking activist, and friend of Levellers and army agitators. By the early 1650s, Musgrave had been complaining for some time about his service and suffering, and making dramatic allegations about political corruption, the ‘breach of faith and trust’ and ‘misgovernment’ by MPs like Sir Arthur Hesilrige, and his radicalism was exacerbated, rather than caused, by his dealings with an unresponsive parliament.⁵⁵ Others, however, seem to have been radicalized by their experiences at Westminster, and in such cases the dynamic

⁵⁴ WP, Parcel 7/101; *The Case of the Commonalty* (1648); *The Humble Representation of the commonaltie of the Weavers* (1648).

⁵⁵ J. Musgrave, *True and Exact* (1650), pp. 5, 37; J. Musgrave, *The Humble Adresse of John Musgrave* (1651), pp. 3, 7; British Library, Additional Manuscript 78262, fo. 122.

involved frustration, exasperation and mounting anger the longer that grievances remained unresolved. Richard Chambers gradually became more pointed in his petitions, shifting from being a patient victim of Caroline policies with hopes about ‘this blessed parliament’, to someone who felt misled by the false promises and ‘persuasive encouragements’ of MPs, and who eventually bemoaned not just ‘fruitless and wearisome waitings’ for ‘justice’, but also parliament’s failure to honour long-stated principles.⁵⁶ Similar radicalization can be seen in the case of Sir Richard Strode, who had been pursuing a land claim since the 1610s, whose bill had been lost in committee in the opening months of the Long Parliament, and whose service for the parliamentary cause resulted in debts that eventually drove him into the Fleet prison by 1652.⁵⁷ Needless to say, his frustration grew over time. In 1645, he sought pity having ‘for many years together endured so much tyranny, oppression and contempt’ from the Caroline regime, for things like opposition to Ship Money, and pointed out that he was unpaid as a parliamentary scoutmaster, hoping that ‘this

⁵⁶ *The Humble Petition of Richard Chambers* (1646); *The Humble Petition of Richard Chambers* (1652); *The Brief Remonstrance and Humble Petition of Richard Chambers* (1654).

⁵⁷ *CJ*, II, pp. 7a, 84a, 160b; *CJ*, III, p. 319a; M.A.E. Green (ed.), *Calendar of the Proceedings of the Committee for Advance of Money*, 3 vols (London, 1888), vol. I, p. 38; The National Archives, Kew, C 3/462/85.

happy parliament' might offer relief. By the early 1650s, however, he was an angry man, and he launched a tirade about 'covetous idolatry' and how the 'selling and delaying of justice' had 'set the whole nation in such a dangerous combustion which may enduce foreign enemies to invade us whiles we are so distracted'. He also proposed appointing 'three knights in each county' who could punish 'such breakers of the greater charter of liberties', and insisted on the need to refill the Commons 'to discharge that trust and prefer our grievances, which others of the long robe have relinquished, to the great damage of the country'.⁵⁸

Josiah Primatt, meanwhile, shifted from an emphasis on the inefficiency of parliament and the ineffectiveness of its orders to aggressive complaints about the 'power and influence' and 'oppression and tyranny' of Sir Arthur Hesilrige, and even about Hesilrige's menacing physical gestures. In an initial printed petition to the commissioners for compounding in 1649 or 1650, he did little more than grumble about hearings that had been delayed and orders that had not been obeyed, but in subsequent texts he was more critical of the 'power and influence' and 'unjust actings' of Hesilrige, which meant that he had been 'delayed and

⁵⁸ Parliamentary Archives, Westminster, House of Lords Main Papers, HL/PO/JO/10/1/189: *The Humble Petition of Sir Richard Strode* (1645); R. Strode, *To the Right Honourable Lords* (1646); WP, Parcel 7/92.

denied the ordinary course of proceedings'. He even alleged that Hesilrige had appeared in committees to plead against him, 'contrary to law', and that he had 'overawed' commissioners. By the time he wrote *The True State of the Case of Josiah Primatt* in 1651, he complained about 'grievous oppression', and about how 'the foundations of property were... subverted'. He also catalogued Hesilrige's abuses, referring to his being 'high and violent', his subversion of due process, and how his 'carriage and language' in hearings was 'very high'. He noted not just that Hesilrige tended to dominate proceedings by interrupting the chairman, but also that he expressed his views in other ways, by 'knitting of his browes', while his stooges 'showed their dislike... by lifting up their eyes and hands'.⁵⁹ Needless to say, it was the printing of such allegations, in texts that were delivered to MPs and then distributed more widely by Leveller leaders like John Lilburne, which ensured that Primatt was called before parliament, where his petitions were declared to be 'false, malicious and scandalous'

⁵⁹ J. Primatt, *To the Honorable the Commissioners* (1651); WP, Parcel 7/95, *The Humble Petition of Josiah Primat* (undated); J. Primatt, *The Humble Petition and Appeal* (1651), pp. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

and a breach of privilege, and ordered to be burnt by the common hangman, while Primatt himself was fined £3,000 and sent to the Fleet prison.⁶⁰

In these and other cases we can see clear evidence that people were prepared to use petitioning to vent political anger and even to reveal ideological beliefs and motivations. Theodore Bathurst certainly provides clear evidence of how petitions could be framed in ideological terms. Bathurst's 1689 complaint reflected on problems faced during the reign of James II, at the hands of 'several papists' like Archibald Douglas, who had 'clandestinely' solicited an illegal inquisition, instigated 'malicious', 'vexatious' and expensive proceedings, and undermined his attempt to secure a parliamentary seat, which would have been an 'inconvenience of the then fashionable [i.e. Catholic] interest'.⁶¹

Petitions, radicalization and tactical moderation

Crucially, however, not all petitioners allowed frustration to result in inflamed rhetoric, or framed their cases in overtly ideological ways. What is interesting about the Weavers' petition of 1649 is that it was somewhat

⁶⁰ *The Proceedings of the Parliament upon the Petition and Appeal of Josiah Primat* (1651[2]), pp. 1527–8, 1532, 1534.

⁶¹ Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of Theodore Bathurst* (1689). See Hayton, Cruickshanks and Handley (eds), *House of Commons*, vol. III, pp. 154–6.

more subdued than the ones by which it was preceded. It certainly complained that the governors of the company ‘contemptuously withhold... sundry books of accounts’, and it bemoaned being ‘overborne by the prevalency of the said late governors and their adherents’. Nevertheless, the petitioners not only refrained from blaming MPs overtly – concentrating their attack instead on the old governors and their underhand manoeuvres – but also pulled back from the aggressive ideological rhetoric of earlier petitions.⁶² These previous texts had been much more strident. They had bemoaned ‘our Egyptian taskmasters’ and ‘their worm-eaten sovereignty’, and cited London’s ancient constitution, and English liberties that had been corrupted by ‘wicked’ barons under Edward III, in order to make a powerful case for free and ‘general’ popular elections, not just within livery companies but also for Parliament. In addition to citing the example of London’s Common Council, where elections involved ‘all the free inhabitants of every parish’, and the Mercers’ Company, where ‘the whole commonalty’ were involved, they had made a clear statement of a general point: ‘legal representatives must be legally chosen by the persons represented, or else they cannot, or at least ought not to be bound by their determinations’. These earlier texts had also been much more aggressive towards MPs. They had criticized a system

⁶² WP, Parcel 7/101.

which was open to abuse by those who paid ‘large fees’, retained lawyers and caused delays through ‘long pleading’; they had bemoaned waiting ‘time after time’ upon committees, ‘and still our governors have had the liberty to bring in new matter which hath obstructed the reporting of it to the houses of Parliament’; and they had demanded that the committee ‘would be pleased to sit this present Wednesday *according to their orders*... [to] take a full account from us and our governors, and make a report to the house according to their order, that we may not wait any longer, for it consumes our estates and it will bring us to ruin’. The weavers had even grumbled in these earlier statements about waiting for relief ‘nigh eight years to this House’, and although they had noted that by offering help MPs would ‘engage them... for the future, to stand by you in your greatest necessities’, they had also hinted at more radical views, imagining what might happen if ‘we shall be left without all future possibility of relief herein, there being no appeal from Parliament’. Finally, these earlier pamphlets had made explicit reference to the fact that, while many ordinary weavers had supported parliament during the civil wars, their governors were ‘generally malignant’.⁶³

⁶³ *The Humble Representation* (1648), pp. 5, 7; *Case of the Commonalty* (1648), pp. 2, 5–6, 8. See WP, Parcel 7/101.

This willingness to tone down as well as to ratchet up political rhetoric opens up new avenues of enquiry. Some petitioners deliberately seem to have downplayed the broader political context of their disputes and problems. It is intriguing how many of these private petitions involved grievances dating back many years, originating in politically contentious circumstances and events, and involving significant frustrations with legal, political and parliamentary processes as well as involving ideological tensions, and yet did not make such things explicit.⁶⁴ For example, many parliamentarian petitioners, such as Sir James Stonehouse, Robert Cole and Hugh Audley, made little or nothing of the royalism of the people against whom they were making claims in the early 1650s, such as the Kentish royalist Richard Thornhill of Olantigh.⁶⁵ Hugh Audley bemoaned the fact that Sir William Fleetwood refused to pay his debts – thereby leading to legal suits between the two men – without mentioning that Fleetwood was a royalist.⁶⁶ The same was true of two gentlemen, Timothy Littleton and William Oakley, who had secured an act to purchase land from Sir Robert

⁶⁴ WP, Parcel 7/80, 84, 85, 86, 91, 92, 95, 99, 100, 107, 110; Wentworth, vol. 146, *The Case of William Inge* (undated).

⁶⁵ WP, Parcel 7/10, 83. For Thornhill, see P.R. Newman, *The Old Service: Royalist Regimental Colonels and the Civil War, 1642–46* (Manchester, 1993), pp. 282–5.

⁶⁶ WP, Parcel 7/86.

Howard during the Interregnum, with the help of Howard's brother, the republican grandee Lord Howard of Escrick. When they issued a petition to Parliament, in the face of opposition to this deal from Howard's widow and her new husband, they said nothing about Sir Robert's royalism, even though his delinquency might have helped to make the case for this sale.⁶⁷

There are, of course, grounds for caution when assessing whether the politics of such cases were being suppressed deliberately. Nevertheless, it is sometimes possible to make stronger claims for the importance of political and ideological machinations that are not reflected in printed petitions. Charles Doilie, a former member of Sir Thomas Fairfax's lifeguard at the Battle of Naseby and parliamentarian governor of Newport Pagnell, referred to the fact that between June 1647 and September 1649 his military commission from the Committee for Irish Affairs had been blocked in favour of another officer, and he then complained about being 'totally laid aside by the admission of Colonel Scrope'. Doilie made no reference to the political factionalism that was almost certainly involved,

⁶⁷ WP, Parcel 7/99. The attempt to overturn this sale continued after 1660, although the petition of Littleton and Oakley must date from the 1650s, sometime after Howard's death in 1653: *CJ*, VIII, p. 110.

arising from his links to powerful Presbyterians at Westminster.⁶⁸ Beyond this, it is sometimes possible to observe ideological divisions being alluded to in a knowing but minimal fashion. In the dispute between John Davies and Charles Saltonstall, the former made an allusion to his ‘good affection’, while the latter made a mocking aside about his opponent’s ‘religious pretences’, adding that Davies had cast aspersions against him ‘in a private and subtle way’.⁶⁹ As yet, historians have done far too little to explore the strategic thinking that might lead petitioners to tone down their rhetoric: scholars need to think through the historiographical implications of situations in which the ideological dimensions of particular cases were being concealed during parliamentary lobbying.

Conclusion

Petitions – at least the kinds of printed petition that were used discreetly to lobby MPs and peers that have been considered here – provide insights not just into parliamentary processes, the role of individual MPs, and the ways in which citizens engaged with Parliament, but also into how Parliament

⁶⁸ WP, Parcel 7/114. See Peacey, *Print and Public Politics*, p. 272; A. Woolrych, *Soldiers and Statesmen* (Oxford, 1987), p. 150; British Library, Additional Manuscript 70006, fo. 7.

⁶⁹ WP, Parcel 7/103, 106.

was perceived by ordinary citizens, and how ideas about Parliament related to the ways in which people conceived of politics. Petitions reveal petitioners' understanding of parliamentary processes, how the institution functioned, what problems petitioners encountered, and how these might be overcome. More than this, however, such petitions provide a valuable means of recovering political thinking on the part of citizens of all kinds. This might involve notions about the role and purpose of parliament, and both hopes and expectations about how it ought to help people, as well as – particularly when parliament did not perform as expected – ideas about broad and even abstract issues of good governance. These included 'justice' and what MPs and peers needed to do to honour their promises and to respect the logic of former resolutions, votes and orders, sometimes even involving references to history, the ancient constitution, and iconic texts like Magna Carta. Such thinking, moreover, was not merely the preserve of those, like Josiah Primatt, with connections to radical agitators and Levellers. Intriguingly, at least some petitioners seem to have been working through or towards ideas that would only later become much more visible elements of political discourse, not least ideas about how constitutional arrangements relating to property rights might have important consequences for the financial viability of particular regimes.

Of course, the kind of political thinking that is revealed by such petitions tended to be more or less unsystematic, and perhaps even

somewhat inchoate, but it nevertheless reveals an extremely interesting way of responding to and reflecting upon parliament and political experience, which is why the term ‘political imaginary’ is appropriate. Central here is the kind of political thinking that involves – and is revealed at the intersection of – informal rhetoric and everyday practice, and it is perhaps evident most strikingly in cases which rumbled on unresolved for some time. Thus, while discreet petitions are intrinsically important sources for understanding Parliament and its publics, cases which extended over protracted periods – and which sometimes involved the repeated deployment of printed texts – offer particularly interesting ways of observing how citizens from various walks of life expressed their political assumptions, aspirations and ideas about what made a good and effective polity, as well as about what constituted the ‘corruption’ or ‘imperfection’ of the political system. The Whitelocke and Wentworth papers prove especially useful for reconstructing extended case studies which provide access to a radical political imaginary. These also reveal a political imaginary in which it was thought necessary to downplay or strip out the ideological dimensions of grievances when cases reached parliament, or when petitioners became especially concerned about their reliance upon parliament for help. It is this latter possibility that might have the most intriguing implications for our current understanding of the dynamic of public politics in early modern England, and about what might be thought

to be problematic historiography relating to the relationship between ideology, political radicalism, print and parliament.

Notes on Contributor

Jason Peacey is Professor of Early Modern British History at University College London. He edited *The Regicides and the Execution of Charles I* (Basingstoke, 2001) and *The Print Culture of Parliament, 1600–1800* (Edinburgh, 2007), co-edited *Parliament at Work* (Woodbridge, 2002), and is the author of *Politicians and Pamphleteers: Propaganda in the Civil Wars and Interregnum* (Abingdon, 2004), and *Print and Public Politics in the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013). He is currently writing a microhistory relating to a long-running legal dispute from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that witnessed a great deal of petitioning, and innovative use of print for both petitioning and lobbying.