

## Erskine May, Vol. II, Chapter IX, pp. 265-278

### Public Meetings and Political Associations

Meanwhile, other means had been devised,—more powerful than the press,—for directing public opinion, and exercising influence over the government and the legislature. Public meetings had been assembled, political associations organised, and 'agitation'—as it has since [266] been termed,—reduced to a system. In all ages and countries, and under every form of government, the people have been accustomed, in periods of excitement, to exercise a direct influence over their rulers. Sometimes by tumults and rebellions, sometimes by clamours and discontent, they have made known their grievances, and struggled for redress.(1) In England, popular feelings had too often exploded in civil wars and revolutions; and, in more settled times, the people had successfully overborne the government and the legislature. No minister, however powerful, could be wholly deaf to their clamours. In 1733, Sir Robert Walpole had been forced to withdraw his excise scheme. In 1754, Parliament had been compelled to repeal a recent act of just toleration, in deference to popular prejudices.(2)

In the beginning of this reign, the populace had combined with the press in hooting Lord Bute out of the king's service; and for many years afterwards popular excitement was kept alive by the ill-advised measures of the Court and Parliament. It was a period of discontent and turbulence.

### The Silkweavers' Riots

In 1765, the Spitalfields' silk-weavers, exasperated by the rejection of a bill for the protection of their trade by the House of Lords, paraded in front of St. James' Palace with black flags, surrounded the Houses of Parliament at Westminster, and questioned the peers as they [267] came out, concerning their votes. They assailed the Duke of Bedford, at whose instance the bill had been thrown out; and having been dispersed by cavalry in Palace Yard, they proceeded to attack Bedford House, whence they were repulsed by the guards. It was an irregular and riotous attempt to overawe the deliberations of Parliament. It was tumult of the old type, opposed alike to law and rational liberty: but it was not the less successful. Encouraged by the master manufacturers, and exerted in a cause then in high favour with statesmen, it was allowed to prevail. Lord Halifax promised to satisfy the weavers;(3) and in the next year, to their great joy, a bill was passed restraining the importation of foreign silks.

### Beginnings of Public Meetings

But the general discontents of the time shortly developed other popular demonstrations far more formidable, which were destined to form a new era in constitutional government. In 1768, the excitement of the populace in the cause of Wilkes, led to riots and a conflict with the military. But the tumultuous violence of mobs was succeeded by a deeper and more constitutional agitation. The violation of the rights of the electors of Middlesex by the Commons,(4) united, in support of Wilkes, the first statesmen of the time, the parliamentary opposition, the wronged electors, the [268] magistrates and citizens of London, a large body of the middle classes, the press, and the populace. Enthusiastic meetings of freeholders were assembled to support their champion, with whom the freeholders of other counties made common cause. The throne was approached by addresses and remonstrances. Junius thundered forth his fearful invectives. Political agitation was rife in various forms: but its

most memorable feature was that of public meetings, which at this period began to take their place among the institutions of the country.(5) No less than seventeen counties held meetings to support the electors of Middlesex. Never had so general a demonstration of public sentiment been made, in such a form. It was a new phase in the development of public opinion. This movement was succeeded by the formation of a 'society for supporting the bill of rights.'

Ten years later, public meetings assumed more importance and a wider organisation. The freeholders of Yorkshire and twenty-three other counties, and the inhabitants of many cities, were assembled, by their sheriffs and chief magistrates, to discuss economical and parliamentary reform. These meetings were attended by the leading men of each neighbourhood; and speeches were [269] made, and resolutions and petitions agreed to, with a view to influence Parliament, and attract public support to the cause. A great meeting was held in Westminster Hall, with Mr. Fox in the chair, which was attended by the Duke of Portland, and many of the most eminent members of the opposition. Nor were these meetings spontaneous in each locality. They were encouraged by active correspondence, association, and concerted movements throughout the country.(6) Committees of correspondence and association were appointed by the several counties, who kept alive the agitation; and delegates were sent to London to give it concentration. This practice of delegation was severely criticised in Parliament. Its representative principle was condemned as a derogation from the rights of the legislature: no county delegates could be recognised, but knights of the shire returned by the sheriff. Mainly on this ground, the Commons refused to consider a petition of thirty-two delegates who signed themselves as freeholders only. The future influence of such an organisation over the deliberations of Parliament was foreseen: but it could not be prevented. Delegates were a natural incident to association. Far from arrogating to themselves the power of the Commons, they approached that body as humble petitioners for redress. [270] They represented a cause,—not the people. So long as it was lawful for men to associate, to meet, to discuss, to correspond, and to act in concert for political objects, they could select delegates to represent their opinions. If their aims were lawful and their conduct orderly, no means which they deemed necessary for giving effect to free discussion were unconstitutional; and this system,—subject, however, to certain restraints,—has generally found a place in later political organisations. Other political societies and clubs were now established; and the principle of association was brought into active operation, with all its agencies. At this time Mr. Pitt, the future enemy of political combinations, encouraged associations to forward the cause of parliamentary reform, took counsel with their delegates, and enrolled himself a member of the society for constitutional information.(7)

## **Political Associations**

Here were further agencies for working upon the public mind, and bringing the popular will to bear upon affairs of state. Association for political purposes, and large assemblages of men, henceforth became the most powerful and impressive form of agitation. Marked by reality and vital power, they were demonstrations at once of moral conviction and numerical force. They combined discussion with action. However forcibly the press might persuade and convince, it moved men [271] singly in their homes and business: but here were men assembled to bear witness to their earnestness: the scattered forces of public opinion were collected and made known: a cause was popularised by the sympathies and acclamations of the multitude. The people confronted their rulers bodily, as at the hustings.(8)

Again, association invested a cause with permanent interest. Political excitement may subside in a day: but a cause adopted by a body of earnest and active men is not suffered to languish. It is kept alive by meetings, deputations, correspondence, resolutions, petitions, tracts, advertisements. It is never suffered to be forgotten: until it has triumphed, the world has no peace.

Public meetings and associations were now destined to exercise a momentous influence on the state. Their force was great and perilous. In a good cause, directed by wise and honourable men, they were designed to confer signal benefits upon their country and mankind. In a bad cause, and under the guidance of rash and mischievous leaders, they were ready instruments of tumult and sedition. The union of moral and physical force may convince, but it may also practise intimidation: arguments may give place to threats, and fiery words to deeds of lawless violence.(9) Our history abounds with [272] examples of the uses and perils of political agitation.

## **The Gordon Riots**

The dangers of such agitation were exemplified at this very time, in their worst form, by the Protestant associations. In 1778, the legislature having conceded to the Catholics of England a small measure of indulgence, a body of Protestant zealots in Scotland associated to resist its extension to that country. So rapidly had the principle of association developed itself, that no less than eighty-five societies, or corresponding committees, were established in communication with Edinburgh. The fanaticism of the people was appealed to by speeches, pamphlets, handbills, and sermons, until the pious fury of the populace exploded in disgraceful riots. Yet was this wretched agitation too successful. The Catholics of Scotland waived their just rights, for the sake of peace; and Parliament submitted its own judgment to the arbitrament of Scottish mobs.(10)

This agitation next extended to England. A Protestant association was formed in London, with which numerous local societies, committees, and clubs in various parts of the kingdom, were affiliated. Of this extensive confederation, in both countries, Lord George Gordon was elected president. The Protestants of Scotland had overawed the legislature: might not the Protestants of England advance their cause by intimidation? The experiment was now to be tried. On the 29th of [273] May, 1780, Lord George Gordon called a meeting of the Protestant Association, at Coachmakers' Hall, where a petition to the Commons was agreed to, praying for the repeal of the late Catholic relief act. Lord George, in haranguing this meeting, said that, 'if they meant to spend their time in mock debate and idle opposition, they might get another leader;' and declared that he would not present their petition, unless attended by 20,000 of his fellow-citizens. For that purpose, on the 2nd of June, a large body of petitioners and others, distinguished by blue cockades, assembled in St. George's Fields, whence they proceeded by different routes to Westminster, and took possession of Palace Yard, before the two Houses had yet met. As the peers drove down to the meeting of their House, several were assailed and pelted. Lord Boston was dragged from his coach, and escaped with difficulty from the mob. At the House of Commons, the mob forced their way into the lobby and passages, up to the very door of the House itself. They assaulted and molested many members, obliged them to wear blue cockades, and shout 'no popery!'

Though full notice had been given of such an irregular assemblage, no preparations had been made for maintaining the public peace, and securing Parliament from intimidation, The Lords were in danger of their lives; yet six constables only could be found to protect them. The Commons were invested: but their doorkeepers [274] alone resisted the intrusion of the mob. While this tumult was raging, Lord George Gordon proceeded to present the Protestant petition, and moved that it should be immediately considered in committee. Such a proposal could not be submitted to in presence of a hooting mob; and an amendment was moved to postpone the consideration of the petition till another day. A debate ensued, during which disorders were continued in the lobby, and in Palace Yard. Sometimes the House was interrupted by violent knocks at the door, and the rioters seemed on the point of bursting in. Members were preparing for defence, or to cut their way out with their swords. Meanwhile, the author of these disorders went several times into the lobby, and to the top of the gallery stairs, where he harangued the people, telling them that their petition was likely to meet with

small favour, and naming the members who opposed it. Nor did he desist from this outrageous conduct, until Colonel Murray, a relative of his own, threatened him with his sword, on the entrance of the first rioter. When a division was called, the serjeant reported that he could not clear the lobby,—and the proceedings of the House were suspended for a considerable time. At length, a detachment of military having arrived, the mob dispersed, the division was taken, and the House adjourned.

The scene at Westminster had been sufficiently disgraceful: but it was merely the prelude to riots and incendiarism, by which London [275] was desolated for a week. On the 6th of June, the Protestant petition was to be considered. Measures had been taken to protect the legislature from further outrage: but Lord Stormont's carriage was attacked, and broken to pieces; Mr. Burke was for some time in the hands of the mob; and an attempt was made upon Lord North's official residence, in Downing Street. The Commons agreed to resolutions in vindication of their privileges, and pledging themselves to consider the petition when the tumults should subside.

Meanwhile, the outrages of the mob were encouraged by the supineness and timidity of the government and magistracy, until the whole metropolis was threatened with conflagration. The chapels of Catholic ambassadors were burned, prisons broken open, the houses of magistrates and statesmen destroyed; the residence of the venerable Mansfield, with his books and priceless manuscripts, was reduced to ashes. Even the bank of England was threatened. The streets swarmed with drunken incendiaries. At length the devastation was stayed by the bold decision of the king. 'There shall, at least, be one magistrate in the kingdom,' said he, 'who will do his duty;' and by his command a proclamation was immediately issued, announcing that the king's officers were instructed to repress the riots; and the military received orders to act without waiting for directions from the civil magistrate. The military were prompt in action; and [276] the rioters were dispersed with bloodshed and slaughter.(11)

The legality of military interference, in the absence of a magistrate, became afterwards the subject of discussion. It was laid down by Lord Mansfield, that the insurgents, having been engaged in overt acts of treason, felony and riot, it was the duty of every subject of His Majesty,—and not less of soldiers than of citizens,—to resist them. On this ground was the proclamation justified, and the action of the military pronounced to be warranted by law. His authority was accepted as conclusive. It was acknowledged that the executive, in times of tumult, must be armed with necessary power: but with how little discretion had it been used? Its timely exercise might have averted the anarchy and outrages of many days,—perhaps without bloodshed. Its tardy and violent action, at the last, had added to the evils of insurrection a sanguinary conflict with the people.

Such was the sad issue of a distempered agitation in an unworthy cause, and conducted with intimidation and violence. The foolish and guilty leader of the movement escaped a conviction for high treason, to die, some years afterwards, in Newgate, a victim to the cruel administration of the law of libel; [277] and many of the rioters expiated their crimes on the scaffold.

## **The Slave Trade Issue**

A few years later another association was formed, to forward a cause of noble philanthropy,—the abolition of the slave trade. It was almost beyond the range of politics. It had no constitutional change to seek: no interest to promote: no prejudice to gratify: not even the national welfare to advance. Its clients were a despised race, in a distant clime,—an inferior type of the human family,—for whom natures of a higher mould felt repugnance rather than sympathy. Benevolence and Christian charity were its only incentives. On the other hand, the slave trade was supported by some of the most powerful classes in the country,—merchants, shipowners, planters. Before it could be proscribed, vested interests must be overborne,

ignorance enlightened,—prejudices and indifference overcome,—public opinion converted. And to this great work did Granville Sharpe, Wilberforce, Clarkson, and other noble spirits devote their lives. Never was cause supported by greater earnestness and activity. The organisation of the society comprehended all classes and religious denominations. Evidence was collected from every source, to lay bare the cruelties and iniquity of the traffic. Illustration and argument were inexhaustible. Men of feeling and sensibility appealed, with deep emotion, to the religious feelings and benevolence of the people. If extravagance and bad taste sometimes courted ridicule, the high purpose, just sentiments, and eloquence of the leaders of this movement won [278] respect and admiration. Tracts found their way into every house: pulpits and platforms resounded with the wrongs of the negro: petitions were multiplied: ministers and Parliament moved to inquiry and action. Such a mission was not to be soon accomplished. The cause could not be won by sudden enthusiasm,—still less by intimidation: but conviction was to be wrought in the mind and conscience of the nation. And this was done. Parliament was soon prevailed upon to attempt the mitigation of the worst evils which had been brought to light; and in little more than twenty years, the slave trade was utterly condemned and prohibited. A good cause prevailed,—not by violence and passion,—not by demonstrations of popular force,—but by reason, earnestness, and the best feelings of mankind.

### Footnotes.

1. 'Pour la populace, ce n'est jamais par envie d'attaquer qu'elle se soulève, mais par impatience de souffrir.'—Mem. de Sully, i. 133.
2. Naturalisation of Jews, 1754.
3. He wrote to Lord Hillsborough to assure the master-weavers that the bill should pass both Houses.—Rockingham Mem., i. 200-207.
4. Supra, p. 13.
5. Ann. Reg., 1770, p. 58, 60. On the 31st October, 1770, a large meeting of the electors of Westminster was held in Westminster Hall, when Mr. Wilkes counselled them to instruct their members to impeach Lord North.—Adolphus' Hist., i. 461.
6. Supra, p. 63.
7. See resolutions agreed to at a meeting of members and delegates at the Thatched House Tavern, May 18th, 1782, in Mr. Pitt's own writing. St. Tr., xxii. 492; also Mr. Pitt's evidence on the Trial of Horne Tooke.—Ibid., xxv. 381.
8. 'L'association possède plus de puissance que la presse.' . . . 'Les moyens d'exécution se combinent, les opinions se déploient avec cette force, et cette chaleur, que ne peut jamais attendre la pensée écrite.'—De Tocqueville, Démocr. en Amérique, i. 277.
9. 'On ne peut se dissimuler que la liberté illimitée d'association, en matière politique, ne soit, de toutes les libertés, la dernière qu'un peuple puisse supporter. Si elle ne la fait pas tomber dans l'anarchie, elle la lui fait, pour ainsi dire, toucher à chaque instant.'—De Tocqueville, Démocr., i. 231.
10. *Infra*, Chap. XII.
11. Ann. Reg., 1780, 265, et seq. Nearly three hundred lives were known to have been lost; and one hundred and seventy-three wounded persons were received into the hospitals.

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