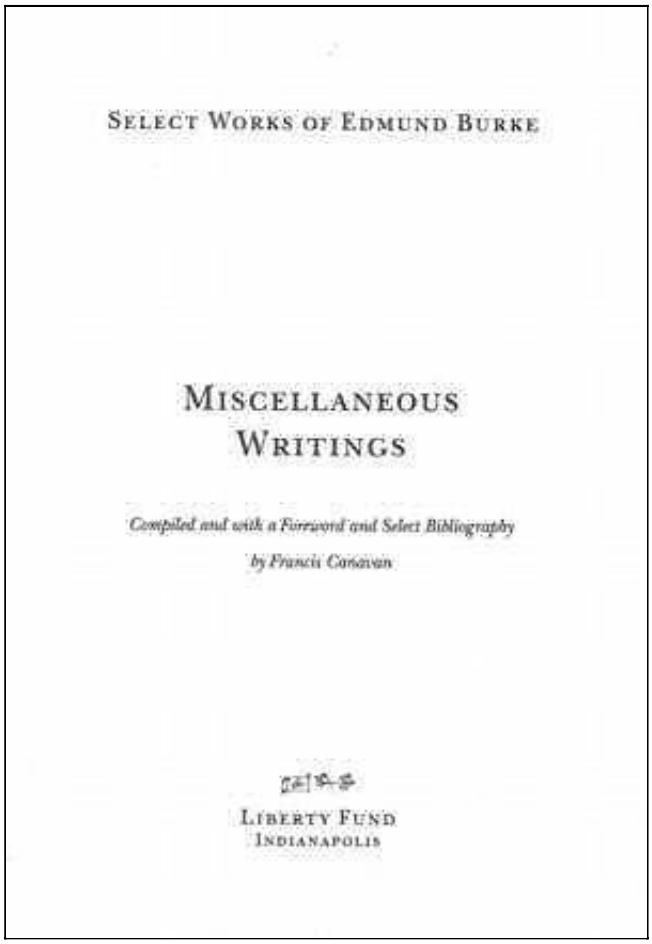
EDMUND BURKE, *MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS (SELECT WORKS VOL. 4)* (1874)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Burke was an English political philosopher who is often seen as laying the foundations of modern conservatism. Although he supported the American colonies in the revolution against the British crown, he strongly opposed the French Revolution, the rise of unbridled democracy, and the growing corruption of government.

ABOUT THE BOOK

This volume contains some of Burke's speeches on parliamentary reform, on colonial policy in India, and on economic matters.

THE EDITION USED

Select Works of Edmund Burke. A New Imprint of the Payne Edition. Foreword and Biographical Note by Francis Canavan, 4 vols (Indianapolis: :Liberty Fund, 1999).

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

FAIR USE STATEMENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EDMUND BURKE, *MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS (SELECT WORKS VOL. 4)* (1874)

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In the three volumes of Liberty Fund's new edition of E. J. Payne's *Select Works of Edmund Burke* are writings in which Burke expounded his Whig theory of limited (and party) government, his views on the imperial crisis that led to American independence, and his views on the great Revolution in France, which he saw as a crisis of Western civilization. This companion volume includes writings that present Burke's views on three additional themes: representation, economics, and the defense of politically oppressed peoples. These themes are touched upon in many of his writings, but the documents selected for this volume are among the clearest examples of his thought on these subjects.

The first theme is Burke's understanding of representative government. Although he was skeptical of democracy as a form of government for any but small countries (and not optimistic even there), he did believe that government existed for the good of the whole community and must represent the interests of all its people. But, as he explained in his *Speech to the Electors of Bristol* after his election there, his idea of representation was not the radically democratic one that saw representation as a mere substitute for direct democracy and a representative as a mere agent of the local electorate whose duty it was to carry out its wishes despite his own best judgment.

As Burke said in his own words in this speech, while he surely would listen respectfully and seriously to his constituents, he rejected the idea of " *authoritative* instructions; *Mandates* issued, which the Member [of Parliament] is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for, though contrary to the clearest conviction of his judgement and conscience." [1] (In his *Speech on the Reform of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament,* which follows this speech in the present volume, Burke explained the political theory that lies behind the view of representation that he rejected at Bristol.) Rather, he argued in his Bristol speech, a representative was to act for the interest of his constituents, to be sure, but as part of a larger national whole, in accordance with the enlightened judgment that could be exercised only at the center of government and in possession of the knowledge available there. If nothing were at issue in politics but the question of whose will should prevail, clearly the will of the electors should. But for Burke, political judgment was a matter of reason: prudent, practical reason.

This view of the function of representative government was compatible with the aristocratic

theory of civil society that Burke set forth in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and in its sequel, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (which may be found in Daniel Ritchie's *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France,* published by Liberty Fund). The British constitution that he admired and loved was a prescriptive one, not based upon the democratic theory of the rights of men, but legitimated by its long service to the welfare of the people. It is explained here in a speech that Burke neither delivered nor published, but which his literary executors found among his papers and included in the first set of his *Works:* the *Speech on the Reform of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament.* Burke's political theory derived the powers of government from the consent of the people, as he had explained in his early and never-completed *Tracts relative to the Laws against Popery in Ireland.* But both there and in this speech, the people's consent was demanded and controlled by their moral obligation to obey a government that served their welfare. It was not derived from Everyman's original right to govern himself in the "state of nature."

The second theme dealt with in this volume is economics. Since Burke never wrote a formal treatise on that subject, his views on it are found in relatively brief form scattered throughout his works. Two examples of them are included here.

The first is *Two Letters to Gentlemen in Bristol on the Trade of Ireland,* which Burke wrote to merchants in Bristol while he was that city's Member of Parliament. He had voted for certain relaxations of the legislation that restrained Ireland's right to export goods to Great Britain. The Bristol merchants, typically, saw Ireland's gain as their loss and wrote to protest Burke's vote as hostile to their interests. Burke replied that trade is not a zero-sum game but a two-way street, the traffic on which benefits both parties.

One must not exaggerate what Burke says in those letters and make him out to be a free-trader *tout court.* He was addressing a particular question, the trade between the two kingdoms under one crown of Great Britain and Ireland. He had no desire to have the British Parliament relinquish its power to regulate commerce within and outside the Empire. In the debate on British policy toward the American colonies, he had accepted the Navigation Acts by which Britain severely restricted American trade because the Americans derived real benefits from their membership in the Empire, and he was content to argue that the Acts were a reason for Britain not to tax the colonies. Nor did he propose opening all of Britain's possessions to international trade on even terms.

Yet we can say that he had a bias in favor of freeing trade from mercantilist restraints. After the controversy over the trade between Britain and Ireland, he wrote to a member of the Irish Parliament that his aim had been "to fix the principle of a free trade in all the parts of these islands, as founded in justice and beneficial to the whole, but principally to the seat of the supreme power." [2] The regulation of trade, however, would remain with the supreme power.

Nor should we exaggerate the import of the next document, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity.* It, too, addresses a narrow question—whether government should subsidize the wages of agricultural laborers in a period of bad harvests—and is not a general treatise on economics. It

is cast, nevertheless, in broad terms that strongly reflect Burke's Whig desire to limit the power of government, particularly over private property, which he regarded as the strong bulwark of liberty. Its meaning, therefore, cannot be limited to the question of agricultural wages, and it implies a laissez-faire theory of economics.

On the other hand, Burke was not always unwilling to have government intervene in economic matters. The next document included here, the *Speech on Fox's East India Bill,* shows that, having earlier defended the chartered rights of the East India Company against efforts to bring it under greater control by the British government, Burke had changed his mind and now advocated stripping the Company of independent power to govern the parts of India that it controlled. The interested reader may also consult the Ninth Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on India, of which Burke is the acknowledged author, for his free-market views, but should be careful not to make him out to be a Manchester liberal before his time.

The third theme is Burke's genuine concern for oppressed peoples. Burke always claimed to be a reformer, and in many ways he was one. For example, one of the actions that cost him his seat as M.P. for Bristol was his support of a bill for the relief of insolvent debtors. The documents selected here, however, demonstrate his concern for peoples outside Great Britain but under British rule. Burke was always an imperialist but an enlightened one who believed that the Empire could and should be a blessing to all the lands that composed it. Volume 1 of this set presents the arguments he used in favor of the American colonies and against the British policy that drove them into revolt. He did not favor American independence, but when it came he accepted it gracefully and even saw a benefit to the British people in it. If the British government had succeeded in suppressing the American revolt by force, he feared, the result would have been a vast increase in the power of the Crown, and no Whig could approve of that. "We lost our Colonies"; he therefore said, "but we kept our Constitution." [3]

The other great imperial topics he dealt with were India and Ireland. The first of these is the subject of Burke's *Speech on Fox's East India Bill,* which is a lengthy indictment of the East India Company's misgovernment of India. It was followed by his *Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts,* the Ninth Report of the Select Committee, and the long series of speeches in the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the Company's Governor-General of Bengal, whom the Committee failed to convict.

Whether Burke was fair to the Company and to Hastings is a matter of dispute, as is the issue of whether the prosecution of Hastings had much effect on Britain's subsequent government of India. But there is little doubt of the sincerity of Burke's conviction that, as he said in his speech on the East India bill, "Our Indian government is in its best state a grievance," [4] or of his desire to relieve that grievance and do justice to the suffering people of India.

Burke himself was Irish and had been born into a family in which the father had conformed to the Established Church in order to practice law (a profession forbidden to Catholics under the Penal Laws), while his mother remained Catholic. His relatives on his mother's side were numerous, and he remained in friendly contact with them throughout his life. He had an intense

sympathy with their plight under the government of what came to be called the Protestant Ascendancy, and he labored long and with considerable success to relieve Irish Catholics of their legal burdens. His *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* presents a good picture of their situation as it was in 1792 and of what more he thought should be done for them. The interested reader may also consult Burke's document *On the State of Ireland,* written in the same year, and his *Tracts relative to the Laws against Popery in Ireland,* written three decades earlier, when the laws against the Catholics of Ireland were even more severe.

Finally, while Burke did not take much part in the movement to abolish the slavery of African blacks in the British colonies, he did write a document, *Sketch of the Negro Code,* that outlined a typically Burkean plan for the gradual amelioration and eventual abolition first of the slave trade and then of slavery itself. Once again, it shows Burke's genuine concern for politically oppressed peoples. He admired and defended aristocracy, but he did so as a man who truly believed that *noblesse oblige.*

That phrase, *noblesse oblige,* explains what may seem to be a contradiction in Burke's attitude toward the poor and oppressed. He strongly opposed a government policy of relieving their lot in England by subsidizing their wages in a time of poor harvests. Yet he denounced Britain's government for its policies in America, India, Ireland, and the slave-owning colonies.

But we must notice that Burke never proposed that government should support the poor in any of those instances. Even in regard to Negro slavery, his aim was gradually to abolish the slave trade and slavery while training the slaves to learn the social and economic skills necessary for freedom, to acquire property, and thus to be able to support themselves. So also in America, India, and Ireland. He wanted government to stop burdening the peoples of those countries with oppressive policies and to allow them the freedom to earn their own way. But, he thought, it was simply not the function of government to furnish them with their livelihood. Doing that in a period of hardship was a work of private charity and the Christian duty of the aristocracy of property owners, for whom "noblesse" did indeed oblige, not in justice but in charity.

Whether this policy would have been adequate after the Industrial Revolution had transformed Great Britain is a valid question. But although the Industrial Revolution got under way during Burke's latter years (perhaps as late as 1780), it did not hit its full stride until the following century. Burke did not see what it would do to the rural economic order dominated by the land-owning aristocracy, which he thought, rightly or wrongly, could handle the problem of poverty without government intervention in such questions as wages.

I have borrowed freely for the factual information in the footnotes to these documents, usually without explicit acknowledgment of the source when information could have been obtained from other sources as well. The sources I have used most frequently are the *Oxford English Dictionary;* the *Dictionary of National Biography;* The Loeb Classical Library; *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (general ed. Paul Langford); *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* (general ed. Thomas Copeland); Carl Cone's two-volume *Burke and the Nature of Politics;* Thomas Mahoney's *Edmund Burke and Ireland;* and *Edmund Burke: A Bibliography of*

Secondary Sources to 1982, by Clara Gandy and Peter Stanlis, as well as several encyclopedias and general reference works.

Francis Canavan

Fordham University

Endnotes

[1.] See below, p. 11.

[2.] *Letter to Thomas Burgh, Esq.,* New Year's Day, 1780, *W&S* 9:550.

[3.] *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796), *W&S* 9:152.

[4.] See below, p. 126.

Editor's Note

The texts used in this volume have been chosen from their original publication in accordance with William B. Todd's *Bibliography of Edmund Burke* (Godalming, Surrey: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1982). Burke's *Speech on the Reform of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament* and *Sketch of the Negro Code,* however, were not published in Burke's lifetime and were included by his literary executors in their New Edition of *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 16 vols., 1808–27), from vols. 10 and 9 of which, respectively, they are taken here. *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* also did not appear in print in Burke's lifetime, but is taken here from the pamphlet under that title published by his executors prior to their publication of his *Works* (in vol. 7 of which it is reprinted).

Burke's speech at Bristol on November 3, 1774, is taken from *Mr. Burke's Speeches at His Arrival at Bristol and at The Conclusion of the Poll* (London: J. Dodsley, 2nd edition, 1775).

Two Letters from Mr. Edmund Burke to Gentlemen in the City of Bristol on the Bills Depending in Parliament Relative to the Trade of Ireland, 1st edition, was published in London by J. Dodsley in 1778.

Burke's speech on Fox's East India Bill is taken from *Mr. Burke's Speech on the 1st December 1783, upon the question for the Speaker's leaving the chair in order for the House to resolve itself into a committee on Mr. Fox's East India Bill* (London: J. Dodsley, 1st edition, 1784).

Burke's *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* is taken from *A Letter from the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, M.P. in the Kingdom of Great Britain, to Sir Hercules Langrishe, Bart. M.P. on the subject of Roman Catholics of Ireland, and the Propriety of Admitting Them to the Elective Franchise, consistently with the Principles of the Constitution as Established at the Revolution* (London: J. Debrett, 2nd edition, corrected, 1792).

Thoughts and Details on Scarcity, originally presented to the Right Hon. William Pitt, in the month of November, 1795, by the late Right Honourable Edmund Burke was first published in London in 1800 by F. and C. Rivington and J. Hatchard.

Burke's spellings (including in particular Indian and other foreign names), capitalizations, and use of italics have been retained, strange as they may seem to modern eyes.

I take this occasion to express my thanks to the staff of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University for providing the text of Burke's speech at Bristol, and to the staff of the Boston Athenaeum for providing the text of the two letters to gentlemen in Bristol. I owe special thanks to Ms. Carol Rosato of the Duane Library at Fordham University for her help in providing the texts of the speech on Fox's East India Bill, the letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe, and *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity.*

I also thank my friends and fellow Burke scholars Professors Peter J. Stanlis of Rockford College and Daniel E. Ritchie of Bethel College for their very helpful comments on my work for these Liberty Fund volumes.

SHORT TITLES

The Annual Register *The Annual Register* (began publication by J. Dodsley in London in 1758, under Burke's editorship, and continues publication to the present day).
Corr. 1844 Burke, Edmund, *Correspondence of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke between the Year 1744, and the Period of his Decease, in 1797,* eds. Charles William Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, 5th Earl Fitzwilliam, and Sir Richard Bourke. 4 vols. (London: Francis and John Rivington, 1844).
Corr. Copeland, Thomas W., gen. ed., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke.* 10 vols. (Chicago and Cambridge: University of Chicago Press and Cambridge University Press, 1958–78).
Parliamentary History *The Parliamentary History of England from the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the year 1803,* ed. W. Cobbett. 36 vols. London: T. C. Hansard, 1806–20).
Works *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke.* A New Edition. 16 vols. (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1808–27).
W&S Langford, Paul, gen. ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke.* 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981–).

SPEECH TO THE ELECTORS OF BRISTOL

[November 3, 1774]

Burke was elected in 1765 to the House of Commons from the borough of Wendover, which was "owned" by Lord Verney (its voters were his tenants and did his bidding). But in 1774, Lord Verney told Burke that financial difficulties prevented him from renominating the impecunious Burke in that year's election.

At the last moment, however, after the public poll (which went on for days) had already begun in Bristol, Britain's second most important port, Joseph Harford and Richard Champion, merchants of that city, nominated Burke for one of Bristol's two seats. Burke rushed to Bristol and delivered a speech on his arrival there. What is printed here, however, is Burke's speech at the conclusion of the poll, after he had been elected. It has become the classic exposition of a certain view of the role of an elected representative.

To understand some of the things that Burke says in this speech, one will need a bit of historical background. In those days, each parliamentary constituency elected two members of Parliament. Bristol's previous incumbents had been Lord Clare (a courtesy title, since, if he had been a nobleman, he could not have sat in the Commons), a Whig, and Matthew Brickdale, a Tory. But the Whigs were dissatisfied with Lord Clare, who had gone over to the court party, and thought they could take Brickdale's seat as well in the 1774 election.

Their first nominee was Henry Cruger, Jr., who came of a prominent commercial family. Some of the Crugers had emigrated to New York, and Henry's uncle, John Cruger, was the Speaker of the New York Assembly when that body elected Edmund Burke in 1770 as the colony's agent at the British royal court. Burke was acquainted with him through official correspondence, and he was still the Speaker at the time of the election in Bristol.

His nephew, Henry Cruger, was a political radical, as radicalism was reckoned in that day, and some of his faction of the Whigs had sounded out Burke for the second candidacy. When the two of them met in Burke's home in Beaconsfield, however, it became clear that they had important differences in political philosophy, and Cruger declined to stand for election with Burke. Burke's last-minute nomination was the result of Lord Clare's suddenly withdrawing on the day the poll opened, because he had been assured of a safe seat in another constituency. Harford and Champion, men of more moderate views than Cruger's, now nominated Burke and urged him to come at once to Bristol.

Cruger was easily elected, but Burke won only after a closely contested poll. Brickdale, following a custom of losers still practiced to the present day, sought to have the election results nullified on grounds of fraud. A large number of those who had voted, he alleged, were not freemen of Bristol and therefore not entitled to cast a vote. He petitioned the House of Commons not to seat Burke; a committee held hearings and reported in Burke's favor, and the House accepted its recommendation.

The important part of this speech, however, is Burke's declaration of the independence that an elected representative ought to enjoy in Parliament. He not only stated his view but acted on it, in ways which his Two Letters on the

Trade of Ireland, *printed below, illustrate. One may well believe that on the issues on which Burke acted contrary to the wishes of his constituents, he was right and they were wrong. But the discontent he caused in them made it obvious that he could not win in the election of 1780, so he withdrew from the poll and accepted a safe seat from his parliamentary patron, Lord Rockingham, which he held until his retirement in 1794.*

MR. EDMUND BURKE'S SPEECH TO THE ELECTORS OF BRISTOL

[On his being declared by the Sheriffs, duly elected one of the Representatives in Parliament for that City, on Thursday the 3d of November, 1774]

GENTLEMEN,

I CANNOT AVOID SYMPATHIZING strongly with the feelings of the Gentleman who has received the same honour that you have conferred on me. If he, who was bred and passed his whole Life amongst you; if he, who, through the easy gradations of acquaintance, friendship, and esteem, has obtained the honour, which seems of itself, naturally and almost insensibly, to meet with those, who, by the even tenour of pleasing manners and social virtues, slide into the love and confidence of their fellow-citizens; if he cannot speak but with great emotion on this subject, surrounded as he is on all sides with his old friends; you will have the goodness to excuse me, if my real, unaffected embarrassment prevents me from expressing my gratitude to you as I ought.

I was brought hither under the disadvantage of being unknown, even by sight, to any of you. No previous canvass was made for me.[1] I was put in nomination after the poll was opened. I did not appear until it was far advanced. If, under all these accumulated disadvantages, your good opinion has carried me to this happy point of success; you will pardon me, if I can only say to you collectively, as I said to you individually, simply and plainly, I thank you—I am obliged to you—I am not insensible of your kindness.

This is all that I am able to say for the inestimable favour you have conferred upon me. But I cannot be satisfied, without saying a little more in defence of the right you have to confer such a favour. The person that appeared here as counsel for the Candidate,[1] who so long and so earnestly solicited your votes, thinks proper to deny, that a very great part of you have any votes to give. He fixes a standard period of time in his own imagination, not what the law defines, but merely what the convenience of his Client suggests, by which he would cut off, at one stroke, all those freedoms, which are the dearest privileges of your Corporation;[2] which the common law authorizes: which your Magistrates are compelled to grant; which come duly authenticated into this Court;[3] and are saved in the clearest words, and with the most religious care and tenderness, in that very act of Parliament, which was made to regulate the Elections by Freemen, and to prevent all possible abuses in making them.

I do not intend to argue the matter here. My learned Counsel has supported your Cause with his usual Ability; the worthy Sheriffs have acted with their usual equity, and I have no doubt, that the same equity, which dictates the return, will guide the final determination. I had the honour, in conjunction with many far wiser men, to contribute a very small assistance, but however some assistance, to the forming the Judicature which is to try such questions. It would be unnatural in me, to doubt the Justice of that Court,[1] in the trial of my own cause, to which I have been so active to give jurisdiction over every other.

I assure the worthy Freemen, and this Corporation, that, if the Gentleman perseveres in the intentions, which his present warmth dictates to him, I will attend their cause with diligence, and I hope with effect. For, if I know any thing of myself, it is not my own Interest in it, but my full conviction, that induces me to tell you— *I think there is not a shadow of doubt in the case.*

I do not imagine that you find me rash in declaring myself, or very forward in troubling you. From the beginning to the end of the election, I have kept silence in all matters of discussion. I have never asked a question of a voter on the other side, or supported a doubtful vote on my own. I respected the abilities of my managers; I relied on the candour of the court. I think the worthy sheriffs will bear me witness, that I have never once made an attempt to impose upon their reason, to surprize their justice, or to ruffle their temper. I stood on the hustings (except when I gave my thanks to those who favoured me with their votes) less like a Candidate, than an unconcerned Spectator of a public proceeding. But here the face of things is altered. Here is an attempt for a general *massacre* of Suffrages; an attempt, by a promiscuous carnage of *friends* and *foes,* to exterminate above two thousand votes, including *seven hundred polled for the Gentleman himself, who now complains,* and who would destroy the Friends whom he has obtained, only because he cannot obtain as many of them as he wishes.

How he will be permitted, in another place, to stultify and disable himself, and to plead against his own acts, is another question. The law will decide it. I shall only speak of it as it concerns the propriety of public conduct in this city. I do not pretend to lay down rules of decorum for other Gentlemen. They are best judges of the mode of proceeding that will recommend them to the favour of their fellow-citizens. But I confess, I should look rather awkward, if I had been the *very first to produce the new copies of freedom,* [1] if I had persisted in producing them to the last; if I had ransacked, with the most unremitting industry, and the most penetrating research, the remotest corners of the kingdom to discover them; if I were then, all at once, to turn short, and declare, that I had been sporting all this while with the right of election: and that I had been drawing out a Poll, upon no sort of rational grounds, which disturbed the peace of my fellow-citizens for a month together—I really, for my part, should appear awkward under such circumstances.

It would be still more awkward in me, if I were gravely to look the sheriffs in the face, and to tell them, they were not to determine my cause on my own principles; nor to make the return upon those votes, upon which I had rested my election. Such would be my appearance to the

court and magistrates.

But how should I appear to the *Voters* themselves? If I had gone round to the citizens intitled to Freedom, and squeezed them by the hand— "Sir, I humbly beg your Vote—I shall be eternally thankful—may I hope for the honour of your support?—Well!—come—we shall see you at the Council-house." —If I were then to deliver them to my managers, pack them into tallies, vote them off in court, and when I heard from the Bar— "Such a one only! and such a one for ever!—he's my man!" — "Thank you, good Sir—Hah! my worthy friend! thank you kindly—that's an honest fellow—how is your good family?" —Whilst these words were hardly out of my mouth, if I should have wheeled round at once, and told them— "Get you gone, you pack of worthless fellows! you have no votes—you are Usurpers! you are intruders on the rights of real freemen! I will have nothing to do with you! you ought never to have been produced at this Election, and the sheriffs ought not to have admitted you to poll."

Gentlemen, I should make a strange figure, if my conduct had been of this sort. I am not so old an acquaintance of yours as the worthy Gentleman. Indeed I could not have ventured on such kind of freedoms with you. But I am bound, and I will endeavour, to have justice done to the rights of Freemen; even though I should, at the same time, be obliged to vindicate the former[1] part of my antagonist's conduct against his own present inclinations.

I owe myself, in all things, to *all* the freemen of this city. My particular friends have a demand on me, that I should not deceive their expectations. Never was cause or man supported with more constancy, more activity, more spirit. I have been supported with a zeal indeed and heartiness in my friends, which (if their object had been at all proportioned to their endeavours) could never be sufficiently commended. They supported me upon the most liberal principles. They wished that the members for Bristol should be chosen for the City, and for their Country at large, and not for themselves.

So far they are not disappointed. If I possess nothing else, I am sure I possess the temper that is fit for your service. I know nothing of Bristol, but by the favours I have received, and the virtues I have seen exerted in it.

I shall ever retain, what I now feel, the most perfect and grateful attachment to my friends—and I have no enmities; nor resentment. I never can consider fidelity to engagements, and constancy in friendships, but with the highest approbation; even when those noble qualities are employed against my own pretensions. The Gentleman, who is not fortunate as I have been in this contest, enjoys, in this respect, a consolation full of honour both to himself and to his friends. They have certainly left nothing undone for his service.

As for the trifling petulance, which the rage of party stirs up in little minds, though it should shew itself even in this court, it has not made the slightest impression on me. The highest flight of such clamorous birds is winged in an inferior region of the air. We hear them, and we look upon them, just as you, Gentlemen, when you enjoy the serene air on your lofty rocks, look down upon the Gulls, that skim the mud of your river, when it is exhausted of its tide.

I am sorry I cannot conclude, without saying a word on a topick touched upon by my worthy Colleague.[1] I wish that topick had been passed by; at a time when I have so little leisure to discuss it. But since he has thought proper to throw it out, I owe you a clear explanation of my poor sentiments on that subject.

He tells you, that "the topick of Instructions[2] has occasioned much altercation and uneasiness in this City"; and he expresses himself (if I understand him rightly) in favour of the coercive authority of such instructions.

Certainly, Gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a Representative, to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion high respect; their business unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and, above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But, his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you; to any man, or to any sett of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the Law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your Representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

My worthy Colleague says, his Will ought to be subservient to yours. If that be all, the thing is innocent. If Government were a matter of Will upon any side, yours, without question, ought to be superior. But Government and Legislation are matters of reason and judgement, and not of inclination; and, what sort of reason is that, in which the determination precedes the discussion; in which one sett of men deliberate, and another decide; and where those who form the conclusion are perhaps three hundred miles distant from those who hear the arguments?

To deliver an opinion, is the right of all men; that of Constituents is a weighty and respectable opinion, which a Representative ought always to rejoice to hear; and which he ought always most seriously to consider. But *authoritative* instructions; *Mandates* issued, which the Member is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for, though contrary to the clearest conviction of his judgement and conscience; these are things utterly unknown to the laws of this land, and which arise from a fundamental Mistake of the whole order and tenour of our Constitution.

Parliament is not a *Congress* of Ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an Agent and Advocate, against other Agents and Advocates; but Parliament is a *deliberative* Assembly of *one* Nation, with *one* Interest, that of the whole; where, not local Purposes, not local Prejudices ought to guide, but the general Good, resulting from the general Reason of the whole. You chuse a Member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not Member of Bristol, but he is a Member of *Parliament.* If the local Constituent should have an Interest, or should form an hasty Opinion, evidently opposite to the real good of the rest of the Community, the Member for that place ought to be as far, as any other, from any endeavour to give it Effect. I beg pardon for saying so much on this subject. I have been

unwillingly drawn into it; but I shall ever use a respectful frankness of communication with you. Your faithful friend, your devoted servant, I shall be to the end of my life: A flatterer you do not wish for. On this point of instructions, however, I think it scarcely possible, we ever can have any sort of difference. Perhaps I may give you too much, rather than too little trouble.

From the first hour I was encouraged to court your favour to this happy day of obtaining it, I have never promised you any thing, but humble and persevering endeavours to do my duty. The weight of that duty, I confess, makes me tremble; and whoever well considers what it is, of all things in the world will fly from what has the least likeness to a positive and precipitate engagement. To be a good Member of Parliament, is, let me tell you, no easy task; especially at this time, when there is so strong a disposition to run into the perilous extremes of servile compliance, or wild popularity. To unite circumspection with vigour, is absolutely necessary; but it is extremely difficult. We are now Members for a rich commercial *City;* this City, however, is but a part of a rich commercial *Nation,* the Interests of which are various, multiform, and intricate. We are Members for that great *Nation,* which however is itself but part of a great *Empire,* extended by our Virtue and our Fortune to the farthest limits of the East and of the West. All these wide-spread Interests must be considered; must be compared; must be reconciled if possible. We are Members for a *free* Country; and surely we all know, that the machine of a free Constitution is no simple thing; but as intricate and as delicate, as it is valuable. We are Members in a great and ancient *Monarchy;* and we must preserve religiously, the true legal rights of the Sovereign, which form the Key-stone that binds together the noble and well-constructed Arch of our Empire and our Constitution. A Constitution made up of balanced Powers must ever be a critical thing. As such I mean to touch that part of it which comes within my reach. I know my Inability, and I wish for support from every Quarter. In particular I shall aim at the friendship, and shall cultivate the best Correspondence, of the worthy Colleague you have given me.

I trouble you no farther than once more to thank you all; you, Gentlemen, for your Favours; the Candidates for their temperate and polite behaviour; and the Sheriffs, for a Conduct which may give a Model for all who are in public Stations.

FINIS

Endnotes

[1.] In fact, Richard Champion and others had been working for two or three months to win support for Burke.

[1.] Matthew Brickdale.

[2.] The municipal corporation of Bristol.

[3.] The electorate of Bristol.

[1.] The House of Commons.

[1.] This seems to charge Brickdale with being the first of the candidates who scoured the countryside outside the city, and even places far away, for persons with a title to being freemen of Bristol and with having brought them in to vote.

[1.] A footnote in the original publication states: "Mr. *Brickdale* opened his poll, it seems, with a tally of those very kind of freemen, and voted many hundreds of them."

[1.] Henry Cruger, Jr., who spoke before Burke at the conclusion of the poll, had pledged himself to a "radical" program.

[2.] Instructions given by constituents to their representatives in Parliament.

SPEECH ON THE REFORM OF THE REPRESENTATION OF THE COMMONS IN PARLIAMENT

[May 7, 1782]

On this day, William Pitt the Younger (1759–1806) made a motion in the House of Commons for a committee to inquire into the state of the representation of the Commons in Parliament. The geographical distribution of seats in the House of Commons had changed little in centuries (and was not to be changed until 1832). The right to send representatives to Parliament was therefore a product of history and conformed to no discernible rational pattern. Populous cities of recent growth elected no members of Parliament, while "decayed," thinly populated, old boroughs elected two; counties suffered disparities, since large counties had only two members of Parliament, just as small ones did. In addition, seats in the Commons were shamelessly bought and sold.

A demand for the reform and more even distribution of the representation of the people had been first formulated only a decade earlier. The parliamentary reform movement was at the beginning not a widely popular one; the great unrepresented towns showed no enthusiasm for it. England was still a predominantly agricultural country ruled by a landholding aristocracy, and the nation was content to have it so. Even the reformers, by and large, sought only moderate changes in the representative system, but the American, and later the French, revolutions fostered radical ideas of democracy based on the natural right of individual men to govern themselves. It was characteristic of Burke that he focussed his attention on this radical ideology and attacked it as a deadly threat to the aristocratic constitution under which England had flourished for so long.

Yet Burke, and the Rockingham Whigs whose spokesman he was, were, in their own way, reformers. As they saw the matter, the corruption of politics was due to the undue influence of the Crown on elections to and votes in Parliament. To reduce this influence, Burke had proposed his "economical reform" bill in 1780