



What Was Parliamentary Reporting? A Study of Aims and Results in the London Daily Newspapers, 1780–96^{*}

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The nature of these newspaper reports – that is, the character of their principal content – has never been studied, despite its obvious importance and, as we shall see, its marked differences from our Hansard. This article relates their nature to a vital feature of parliamentary leadership, the ability to lead the argument in debate. The practical reasoning in parliamentary deliberation and justification, especially what speakers contributed towards the outcome or ‘the sense of the debate’, predominated in these reports. This implied a need for reporters to concentrate on the ‘substance’ of speeches and their bearing on the motion. One result was that speeches which were judged to define or develop arguments pro and con were treated at length, the defining speeches most extensively and others in proportion to what they added. Conversely, speeches which reiterated known positions or which were irrelevant to the arguments in hand were omitted or downplayed, even if they were important in some other way, while whole debates which added little to ongoing discussion could be treated quite briefly. But if being a front bencher did not guarantee coverage, being a back bencher was no bar: the criterion was the importance of a speaker’s contribution, while the manner of coverage accented what was contributed. The reporters’ concerns emphasized debates that promised significant change in matters of national importance, but gave relatively little attention to recurrent or localised business as such. Their writing – they were known as debate writers or news-writers – was interpretation answering to evaluative and selective criteria rather than a record in a simple sense. Their work is not to be understood in the same terms as a modern Hansard, and in particular not as a defective Hansard, but rather is such that it requires further work on a wide range of new research questions if it is to be understood to best effect, a requirement which suggests a need to study it critically before using it as source material.

Keywords: debates; Great Britain; Hansard; newspapers; politics; press; reasoning; reporting

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What is well known is not always known well. It is well known that during the last 30 years or so of the 18th century, London newspapers carried reports of parliamentary debates. By contrast, the primary content of this material, that is to say the most extensive content, has attracted surprisingly little attention – so little that no one has asked what sort of reports the writers meant to provide. This article examines the nature of their reports. It indicates that the reports reflected aims that differed radically from those embodied in modern reporting of parliamentary proceedings. The writers aimed to capture especially one essential aspect of political speech, rhetoric, and debate. They addressed most fully what contributed to argument and its development rather than seeking to include all speeches or everything in them.

The inquiry is necessary. These reports address a large number of debates, some at considerable length: they give much more coverage than the published reports for any previous period. These were the debates of the world's leading sovereign assembly and the reports seem to be the first published for any such assembly to survive for an extended period. As Britain stands ahead of Rome in this respect,¹ and as it provided an example to be, or not to be, followed by the USA, France and the rest, we need to know what it gave to the world. The world continues to use this material directly or indirectly, or at least works for the general reader do.² Pundits addressing issues of contemporary concern, such as slavery and its abolition, also need to use it. The same applies to a wide range of historians, for whom it is of the first importance. Yet the judgment of 1959 that 'newspaper reports ... remain a largely untapped field for the study of parliamentary debates',³ holds true today if we mean the *character* of their principal content.

The need for this study is fundamental. To understand the aims and results of the reports is a precondition of discovering what and how much we can hope to obtain from them. Conversely, without such knowledge it is hard to classify and use the material they provide to best effect. Neither is there any alternative to this path. The newspaper reports seem to be the most common source for the versions printed in the periodicals of the day, and thence for the most frequent resort for modern readers, Cobbett's *Parliamentary History*.⁴ The latter is far from being implicitly reliable. For instance, its report of Burke's speech of 28 December 1792 reproduces *The Parliamentary Register*. That makes it the prose equivalent of a cento – a poem composed entirely of others' verses – because the *Register's* report embodies 21 extracts from four different newspapers. Yet an apparently authoritative edition has described *Parliamentary History* as 'the most reliable source' for this speech.⁵ Such versions clearly need critical attention, which presupposes the present inquiry.⁶

¹ *Acta Senatus* probably covered proposals and results, but it is unclear whether it included debate or whether its reports were accessible to non-senators, cf. Tacitus, *Annals*, V.4.1, XV.74.3.

² E.g., William Hague, *William Pitt the Younger* (2004), his *William Wilberforce* (2007), and Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke* (2013).

³ Peter D.G. Thomas, *Sources for Debates of the House of Commons 1768–1774* (1959), x.

⁴ Cf. John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt* (3 vols, 1969–96), i, 671–2.

⁵ *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*. Volume VIII, ed. L.G. Mitchell (Oxford, 1989), 522–3. Recent interpreters of Burke who use *Parliamentary History* for this speech, include F.P. Lock, *Edmund Burke* (2 vols, Oxford, 1998–2006), ii, 438–40, and Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, NJ, 2014), 818–19.

⁶ *Parliamentary History of England* (36 vols, 1806–20), xxx, cols 180–9 = *Parliamentary Register* (ser. 2, 45 vols, 1781–96), xxxiv, 215–24, making small variations in paragraphing, punctuation, etc., and omitting the attribution

There are many ways of writing about parliamentary history. Those that in principle bear most closely on our theme – aims in newspaper reporting and their effects – in practice have pointed towards it rather than come near reaching it. The Porritts's classic work of 1903, for instance, concerned both the character of the Commons itself and its relations with those out-of-doors. But it devoted less than 13 pages out of 1,200 to reporting. Most of these related to the Printers' Case of 1771 and none to the subject before us.⁷ This focus has not moved very far, even though much work about parliament has followed. Substantial works on its character and activities have ranged from the institution and its members, to the legislative process and its effects.⁸ Works on parliament's relation to those out-of-doors have run from lobbying through public opinion to reform.⁹ Part of the ground between the institution and its public was occupied by newspapers. The newspapers of Georgian Britain have attracted considerable attention for over a century now and, besides general works, studies range from the examination of individual papers to physical design via the politics of the press.¹⁰ To link the press with politics certainly implies a need to see how the former transmitted debate to those out-of-doors. Yet it does not seem that these sorts of study have encouraged many historians to meet just the need considered here.¹¹ It seems, to the present writer at least, that to do so requires some changes in historians' habits of thought. Of late, literary scholars have written significant books that relate to reporting, one giving new twists to our understanding of the canonical figures who took a hand at it, another giving an important treatment of parliamentary oratory.¹² There are signs that

⁶ (continued) of a quotation to Edmund Spenser. *Parliamentary Register* used material from the newspapers of 29 Dec. 1792 in the following sequence: *Morning Chronicle* + *Morning Chronicle* + *Star* + *Morning Chronicle* + *Star* + *Morning Chronicle* + *Star* + *Diary* + *Star* + *Star* + *Morning Chronicle* + *Star* + *Morning Post* + *Star* + *Diary* + *Morning Post* + *Star* + *Star* + *Diary*. *Parliamentary Register's* rival, *The Senator* (32 vols, 1790–1802), vi, 153–7, managed 14 passages from four papers: *Morning Chronicle* + *Morning Post* + *Morning Post* + *Diary* + *Morning Chronicle* + *Morning Chronicle* + *Gazetteer* + *Morning Chronicle* + *Morning Post* + *Diary* + *Morning Post* + *Gazetteer* + *Diary* + *Morning Post*. There is also one very short passage which has not proved traceable beyond *Parliamentary Register*. This case casts light on the claim made in *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke. Volume IV*, ed. P.J. Marshall and D.C. Bryant (Oxford, 2015), 37, for 'a reasonable presumption that Burke may have been the source for material which appears in any report of a speech of his in the *Parliamentary Register* which contains passages that cannot be found in any newspaper account'. That claim also discloses no awareness of the variations in content and technique that the *Register* displays, for which see Christopher Reid, *Imprison'd Wranglers: The Rhetorical Culture of the House of Commons 1760–1800* (Oxford, 2012), 90–1.

⁷ Edward Porritt with Annie G. Porritt, *The Unreformed House of Commons: Parliamentary Representation before 1832* (2 vols, Cambridge, 1903), pt iii, ch. 30.

⁸ E.g., *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1754–1790*, ed. Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke (3 vols, 1964), and *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1790–1820*, ed. R.G. Thorne (5 vols, 1986) [hereafter cited as *HPC, 1790–1820*]; O.C. Williams, *The Historical Development of Private Bill Procedure and Standing Orders in the House of Commons* (2 vols, 1948–9); Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman* (Oxford, 1991), ch. 3; Julian Hoppit, 'Patterns of Parliamentary Legislation 1660–1800', *HJ*, xxxix (1996), 109–31.

⁹ E.g., N.C. Hunt, *Two Early Political Associations: The Quakers and the Dissenting Deputies in the Age of Sir Robert Walpole* (Oxford, 1961); Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1998); John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform 1640–1832* (Cambridge, 1972).

¹⁰ Classic examples include D. Nichol Smith, 'Newspapers', in *Johnson's England*, ed. A.S. Turberville (2 vols, Oxford, 1933), ii, 331–67; Stanley Morison, *The English Newspaper: Some Account of the Physical Development of Journals Printed in London between 1622 and the Present Day* (Cambridge, 1932); Arthur Aspinall, *Politics and the Press, c. 1780–1850* (1949).

¹¹ Even the publications of Peter D.G. Thomas touch on this theme fleetingly, e.g., 'The Beginnings of Parliamentary Reporting', *EHR*, lxxiv (1959), 626.

¹² Nikki Hessel, *Literary Authors, Parliamentary Reporters: Johnson, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Dickens* (Cambridge, 2012), chs 3–5; Reid, *Imprison'd Wranglers*.

historians are joining them in attending to the latter.¹³ It is timely, then, to examine the nature of the newspaper reporting. The small literature about such reporting more widely does not address our topic squarely or at length.¹⁴ The standard reference is over 60 years old, and mostly addresses other matters.¹⁵ The importance of the topic seems to be in inverse proportion to the amount of attention it has received.

It may be that unhelpful assumptions have discouraged work. We cannot put out of mind our knowledge of the modern Hansard, the ‘official report’ which provides a *verbatim* record of everything that passes in parliament.¹⁶ Scholars may think of reports even prior to its coming as ‘Hansard’s reports’.¹⁷ A former Speaker certainly treated earlier accounts as Hansard’s predecessor.¹⁸ Such thoughts beg the question asked here, and they suggest a standard for judging these reports which, overlooking their character, criticizes them as if they were a defective Hansard. If the emphasis falls on ‘the absence of anything like a modern Hansard’ then the judgment may follow that earlier reporting had ‘serious limitations’.¹⁹ This is a practical inference, one that treats these items primarily as sources,²⁰ for which purpose a *verbatim* record of parliamentary proceedings might seem ideal and anything else

¹³E.g., the conference on ‘Speaking in Parliament: Politics, History, Rhetoric’, 6–7 Apr. 2016, at Queen Mary University of London, sponsored jointly by its department of English and the History of Parliament Trust.

¹⁴Ivon S. Asquith, ‘James Perry and *The Morning Chronicle*, 1790–1821’, University of London PhD, 1973, pp. 14–16, 96–112 (much of the second passage falls outside this period); *HPC, 1790–1820*, i, 368–9 (which says little about newspapers). Two studies by parliamentary journalists, Michael Macdonagh, *The Reporters’ Gallery* ([1913]), and Andrew Sparrow, *Obscure Scribblers: A History of Parliamentary Journalism* (2003), offer episodic surveys of reporting based mostly on printed sources, with instructive material from their own experience. The first item in note 19 below relates to another period. So do Dror Wahrman, ‘Virtual Representation: Parliamentary Reporting and Languages of Class in the 1790s’, *Past & Present*, No. 136 (1992), 83–113 (despite its title) and Hessel, *Literary Authors*. Hessel, in discussing newspaper reports by Coleridge and Hazlitt, assumes as in place certain practices, e.g., abridgement of speeches (69, 109–12), which appear here as features antedating 1800 (and see below, note 99). Hessel’s emphases fall on standards of accuracy and on competition (e.g., 85, cf. Thomas, ‘Beginnings’, 632), rather than the objects to be made central to a report. Reid, *Imprison’d Wranglers*, addresses some topics related to the one treated here.

¹⁵Arthur Aspinall, ‘The Reporting and Publishing of the House of Commons’ Debates 1771–1834’, in *Essays Presented to Sir Lewis Namier*, ed. Richard Pares and A.J.P. Taylor (1956), 227–57, was concerned primarily with the institutional constraints on reporting, certain behavioural traits of MPs, and compilations of reports; much of its matter necessarily lies outside our period. But anyone who has traversed the same country knows its value. Wahrman, ‘Virtual Representation’, 86–91, depends heavily on it.

¹⁶Parliament’s website, <http://www.parliament.uk> (accessed 5 Oct. 2018), describes Hansard as ‘an edited verbatim record of what is said in Parliament’, including votes, ministerial statements, Commons’ proceedings in Westminster Hall, public bill committees and other general committees. For Hansard’s practices, cf. Stef Slembrouck, ‘The Parliamentary Hansard “Verbatim” Report: The Written Construction of Spoken Discourse’, *Language and Literature*, i (1992), 101–19.

¹⁷For instance, H.V.E. Somerset, ‘Burke’s Eloquence and Hansard’s Reports’, *English Review*, lii (1931), 342–50; Patrick Bullard, ‘Parliamentary Rhetoric, Enlightenment and the Politics of Secrecy: The Printers’ Crisis of March 1771’, *History of European Ideas*, xxxi (2005), 325, suggests that in the early 1770s ‘Luke Hansard had ensured that the publication of whole debates was an established feature of British politics’. Thomas Curson Hansard printed *Parliamentary History* from 1803 and became its proprietor in 1812, *The Auto-biography of Luke Hansard*, ed. Robin Myers (1991), 56 n. 4.

¹⁸Horace Maybray-King, *Before Hansard* (1968). Cf. Robert Woodall, ‘Before Hansard: Parliamentary Reporting When it was Disapproved by Members’, *History Today*, xxiii (1973), 195–202.

¹⁹*Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke. Volume II*, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford, 1981), 35 (Hansard); *Writings and Speeches of Burke, vol. IV*, ed. Marshall and Bryant, 36 (limitations).

²⁰The quotations in note 19 come from the somewhat brief sections headed ‘Sources’ in these volumes of *Writings and Speeches*. ‘Textual Introduction’ would be normal.

defective in proportion to its divergence from it. But that is to pre-empt asking what these reports were and what they were meant to be.²¹

We shall see that a primary concern of these reports, as distinguished from Hansard, goes with writing that was selective about both speeches and debates, that emphasized some speeches and some contents rather than others, and that downplayed or excluded what did not contribute to argument. These characteristics are different from such matters as the uses to which reporting might be put by writers and others, as earning a living, discovering novelty, selling newspapers, promoting someone's interests, or registering dramatic and entertaining events in parliament, and different again from the effects of limited space for reporting, deadlines, and the hazards of the gallery. That is to say, it would be easy to show that these features bear upon what we read; but it is necessary to identify the primary character of the reports before asking about how drama, entertainment, constraint, novelty, sales, use, and so forth affected results generated on the principle examined here. The same applies to questions about political allegiances, intentions and effects; in short, to 'politics and the press'. To establish the nature of the reports is a prerequisite for identifying the relations between them and political engagement. And of necessity these are tasks for another day.

The task for this day addresses parliaments from 1780 to 1796 because that was a period when reporting, which had begun fitfully in 1768, had become a constant feature of the London press and had developed some settled features.²² The newspapers that appeared daily (except Sunday) or thrice-weekly, were joined by Saturday and Sunday papers, and almost all carried reports of parliamentary debates. The material most in view is from the London daily newspapers because by the beginning of our period they were superseding the thrice-weekly newspapers for the most rapid and fullest coverage, and retained that position throughout our period.²³ They had settled not least on a manner of reporting. Settled features make it possible to ask about the primary content of the reports, and some circumstances tend to encourage concentration on just this inquiry. One circumstance is the combination of abundance and scarcity in the evidence. The total mass of newspapers is very considerable.²⁴ That has required this author to read about 6,000 issues so far. The coverage of debates within them is sometimes considerable: a debate may feature in 15 newspapers, and reports sometimes run to the whole extent of a daily newspaper, 16,000

²¹For the 19th century, including developments in Hansard before it reached its current form, M. Donaldson Jordan, 'The Reports of Parliamentary Debates, 1803–1908', *Economica*, xi (1931), 437–49, and Olive Anderson, 'Hansard's Hazards: An Illustration from Recent Interpretations of Married Women's Property Law and the 1857 Divorce Act', *EHR*, cxii (1977), 1202–15.

²²This does not imply either that all of the characteristics discussed below were new in 1780 or that they ceased in 1796, or that all were peculiar to reporting or reporting of parliament. Neither does it rule out developments within their terms. It is necessary to identify fundamental features in order to ask further questions at another time.

²³Gaps in newspaper runs mean that a thrice-weekly on occasion provides the fullest surviving report. Papers sometimes carried supplementary reports, including 'singles'. The latter might have a content and scale that suggests self-reporting, as John Courtenay, *Morning Chronicle*, 19 June 1781, or reporting by some other interested party, as Lord North, *Gazetteer*, 13 Dec. 1782. On at least one occasion, a supplement came from the newspaper. Burke's speech of 14 Dec. 1792, attacking Fox, was omitted by the *Morning Chronicle* in favour of 'Mr. BURKE explained', *Morning Chronicle*, 15 Dec. 1792; but by Monday 17th, the paper referred to its 'rigid impartiality', attributing the omission to 'haste' and 'hurry'; finally, a much fuller report of Burke appeared – with an even fuller reply to Burke from William Adam, *Morning Chronicle*, 18 Dec. 1792. One way or another, such supplements require separate treatment.

²⁴Individual issues, however, are very often unique survivals.

words or more. By contrast, it is harder to find manuscript evidence to complement the newspapers. One central archive for a London newspaper survives for this period, but discloses little for our purpose.²⁵ For the rest, manuscript references to newspaper reports are mostly scattered, sparse, and uncatalogued. So attention to manuscript material from some 60 or more manuscript repositories in Eire, France, the United Kingdom, and the USA, has been necessary. Such abundance and scarcity alike are consistent with recognizing that there is instructive material from the years either side of the given dates.

What, then, does this study suggest? It will begin by complementing its attention to the aims of the reporters with attention to another topic which has been less central to thinking about parliamentary history than one might have expected, namely speaking as a vital form of parliamentary leadership. By combining these two, it shows that these reports treated speeches as contributions to the stock of practical reasoning, to what one of our writers called ‘the sense of the debate’.

2

To understand these writers’ work we need to begin with parliament itself. Only parliament had the authority to enact laws, and to endorse or reject the policies of the executive. Only the minds of MPs and the peers determined what parliament decided. Deliberation and justification, of course, were not the only forms of parliamentary speaking. Epidictic and forensic oratory figured during this period, the latter most spectacularly in the Hastings trial, and every year there was at least one item which did not fit any of these categories, namely the king’s speech. Deliberation and justification, however, were the staple of most of parliament’s more important occasions for speech-making because decision about what to do and judgment on what had been done were basic to its functions.

Such argument, of course, was not the only content in parliamentarians’ minds, but it had a force that they had to respect, and which justified their votes. One premier, it was said, never troubled to explain and justify his policies to parliament: ‘the meanest of your predecessors had abilities sufficient to give a colour to their measures. If they invaded the rights of the people, they did not dare to offer a direct insult to their understanding.’²⁶ The standard implied in Junius’s criticism can be illustrated best, perhaps, by examining what happened when ministers really did fail to lead the argument. The North ministry came to rely on its numbers in the Commons. It made no response on 2 February 1778 after Fox made a major speech on the state of the nation. This silence was noteworthy. One MP made only a single remark about parliament in his diary that year. It runs: ‘at the House of Commons on the inquiry by Mr Fox. He spoke for two Hours ... & no body got up to answer him.’²⁷ The omission had an effect, and informed judges agreed about it. Both the earl of Hardwicke and Soame Jenyns, then an MP, thought that government had erred. ‘The Question was call’d for, and carried – 259 against, to 165, a larger minority than has lately been known’, noted a diarist. ‘Both Ld H and S. Jenyns thought it impolitic to

²⁵TNA, C 104/68–9; Robert L. Haig, *The Gazetteer, 1735–1795* (Carbondale, IL, 1960).

²⁶*The Letters of Junius*, ed. John Cannon (Oxford, 1978), 68.

²⁷Barnsley Archives and Local Studies Library, Cannon Hall Muniments, Sp. St. 60635: diary of Walter Spencer Stanhope, 2 Feb. 1778.

make no answer, and that the Ministry lost hands by it. In the Lords the same motion was made, and 91 or 2 Lords were against 31 or 2.²⁸ Fox and George III seldom concurred, but now Fox noted that ministers' silence 'scandalised even their own friends' and the king hoped that 'Gentlemen will be more ready to speak.'²⁹ A subtler technique seems to have been substituted, with worse results. Lord John Cavendish reflected two years later that the government front bench offered no guidance about its measures, but relied upon uninteresting speakers in order to triumph by dullness. He noted that on one occasion:

none of the ministers replied, but lett the debate fall into the hands, least capable of keeping up the attention of the house: this is a piece of management, I have seen made use of several times lately, when a speech has been made, which they were not able to answer; to leave the debate to insignificant people, so as to lett the spirit that has been raised, evaporate, & the house grow dull.

This tactic now failed spectacularly, because the speech to which 'none of the ministers replied', and presumably 'were not able to answer', was Dunning's of 6 April 1780. Dunning's motion heralded a series of major defeats for the ministry.³⁰ A keen observer could connect the virtual absence of 'any thing in the smallest degree similar to argument' from another set of ministerial speakers with 'a very small majority' for their cause.³¹ In short, to argue strongly was a crucial requirement in acquiring and retaining votes on significant issues.³² Leading the argument was important for both sides of the House.

This was a structural feature, for debate had to relate to a motion.³³ This placed speakers in a binary situation – voting counted for or against, and abstention told for one side or the other – and the MPs or peers for or against, however close their positions, were opposed diametrically by their action of voting.³⁴ Arguments for and against were indispensable.

The parliamentary reports corresponded to this situation. If leading the argument was necessary, so, too, was knowing it and presenting both sides of it. This was a demanding task. Difficulty gives rise to debate. Parliamentary debate took place not least because the questions on hand were too complex to be settled by set rules and too circumstantial to be addressed only in terms of principle. For if they could have been settled so easily, debate

²⁸*Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson*, ed. P.O. Hutchinson (2 vols, 1884–6), ii, 182. Horace Walpole noted the effect too: *Last Journals*, ed. A.F. Stuart (2 vols, 1910), ii, 99.

²⁹*Memorials and Correspondence of Charles James Fox*, ed. Lord John Russell (4 vols, 1853–7), i, 168; *The Correspondence of King George III*, ed. J.W. Fortescue (6 vols, 1927–8), iv, 34.

³⁰BL, Add. MS 75690 (unfoliated): Lord John Cavendish to Countess Spencer, 7 Apr. [1780]. The ministry relied on Earl Nugent; the lord advocate made and withdrew an amendment; North spoke only to respond to a personal attack. I.R. Christie, *The End of North's Ministry 1780–1782* (1958), 21, overlooking argumentative guidance, suggests that 'the House seemed to run quite wild'. Contemporaries understood better. *Gazetteer*, 8, 10, 11 Apr. 1780, devoted 20 columns to the debate of 6 Apr. 1780. Ministerial failure to lead the argument was of course not the sole cause of these defeats.

³¹National Library of Scotland [hereafter cited as NLS], MS 11068, ff. 18–19; William Elliot to Lady Elliot, 10 May 1788.

³²Rationality could take other forms. 'There were debates in both Lords & Commons yesterday about foreign affairs ... I did not stay as I was engaged at dinner': *Lady Bessborough and Her Family Circle*, ed. 9th earl of Bessborough with Arthur Aspinall (1940), 92.

³³P.D.G. Thomas, *The House of Commons in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1971), 171–2.

³⁴The phrase 'binary situation' was provided by one of this journal's anonymous readers, to whom particular thanks for it are due.

would have been unnecessary, and equally it would have been hard to find arguments adequate to polarise listeners for or against the proposition before the House. Some element of difficulty was needed as a condition of deliberation and justification. This need required reporters to attend to the evidence and reasoning used on each side if they and their readers were to understand debates.

A central activity for reporters was thus to identify and state argument for and against a proposition, especially important arguments. They took this to be their aim. William Woodfall stated that:

he has rather sought to collect the sentiments of the Speakers, than fastidiously endeavoured to affect a superior degree of accuracy, by stating minutely the trifling occurrences incident to all, and inseparable from most debates ... and has merely noticed such as contributed to elucidate the argument ... If it shall be found, that he has neither marred the meaning, nor weakened the reasoning of those Gentlemen who principally distinguished themselves on each side of the question ... his object and his design will have been fully accomplished

and, though he wrote this about the Dublin parliament, with which he was relatively unfamiliar,³⁵ he had developed the same points about Westminster, emphasizing that ‘the arguments urged upon the occasion’ were what readers should expect, or describing a column as a ‘Sketch’ and three columns as ‘an imperfect sketch’.³⁶ Argument from parliamentarians – whether reasoning or relevant fact – was itself expected out of doors. Tickell’s *Anticipation*, which parodied parliamentary debate, led one reader to tell the lord lieutenant of Ireland that ‘great honour is done to your friend [Hans] Stanley in that admirable piece of ridicule ... by giving him a speech so true, [and] so argumentative’.³⁷ *Anticipation* also parodied reporting, and in doing so implied that such practical reasoning was a prized object of its attention. Its praise of Fox includes the self-deprecatory claim that ‘to do justice to the force of his reasoning ... is totally beyond the utmost efforts of the editor’.³⁸ Argument, for all that, was what a reader anticipated from speakers and newspaper alike. The day before ministers explained their resignations, Baretti predicted that one ‘will inform Parliament of the reasons’, and on the day of the debate itself he advised his correspondent ‘to read the Morning-Chronicle, or the Morning-Herald ... and see in them the reasons given’.³⁹ Argument appeared in abundance: on one occasion ‘a few hints of the principal objections stated, and the replies made’ about the navy estimates on a controversial occasion exceeded eight columns, half of the newspaper.⁴⁰

³⁵William Woodfall, *An Impartial Sketch of the Debate in the House of Commons of Ireland, on a Motion made on Friday, August 12, 1785 ... [and] August 15, 1785* (Dublin, 1785), ii.

³⁶‘The public are requested to read the above not as an exact account of the debate on the subject, but as a mere skeleton of the arguments urged upon the occasion; the writer is conscious of the impossibility of an auditor’s carrying away the arrangement of the arguments, or the exact phraseology used by the speakers’: *Morning Chronicle*, 26 Mar. 1774; for ‘sketch’, *Morning Chronicle*, 7 Apr. 1780.

³⁷HMC, *Lothian MSS*, 341.

³⁸Richard Tickell, *Anticipation*, ed. L.H. Butterfield (New York, 1942), 47.

³⁹New York Public Library, Berg Collection, MSS 816, 817: Joseph Baretti to —, 8, 9 July 1782.

⁴⁰*Morning Chronicle*, 14 Feb. 1782.

Attention to the arguments that related to the proposition before the House was the staple of the reports. But the ways in which the writers described this content may seem less clear. A paper stated explicitly that it provided ‘the Substance of the most important Speeches’ in one debate.⁴¹ This usage was recognized but not explained by a provincial newspaper when it reused such reports: it acknowledged that ‘in our *Epitome* of the debates, we have endeavoured to give [the] *substance* of the principal speeches’.⁴² John Campbell, who began by reporting parliament and ended on the woolsack, distinguished ‘the ideas of the speaker’ from ‘the happy phraseology’ in which they were ‘expressed’, and preferred ‘the thoughts of the speaker’.⁴³ What did ‘ideas’ and ‘substance’ indicate about ‘thoughts’?

‘Ideas’ may suggest matters of abstraction as contrasted with the concrete, or perhaps principle as contrasted with other considerations. But ‘idea’ might involve neither abstraction nor principle, as when an architect submitted ‘an Idea for Derby Bridge’, meaning his ‘Drawing’.⁴⁴ Ideas can concern very concrete things. A peer used the term ‘ideas’ in just that way. ‘In the course of the ideas I submitted to the house’, he wrote, ‘I could not refrain from acquainting them with the very violent proceedings of lord North towards you, in advising the king to strike your name off the [privy] council books’.⁴⁵ He was not alone. A shrewd publicist referred to ‘the idea about the animal with two stomachs, to which the 2 battalions were so happily compared’ in his correspondent’s speech.⁴⁶ ‘Ideas’ suggested the content speakers and reporters aimed to convey. ‘Substance’ performed a related function, because it suggested the most important ideas – those that sustained the arguments. It was this ‘substance’ that reporters aimed to capture and to retail to their readers.

Parliamentarians gave speeches that were understood to be individual contributions to the larger process of the House’s reasoning to a decision. That parliamentarians thought of making a collegial contribution can be seen in the anxiety of a new and ambitious MP to find a suitable place for his ‘point of view’ on the question.⁴⁷ It is seen again in a marathon debate on a familiar subject when Pitt, rising late, noted that it was ‘almost impossible’ to speak ‘without recurring to points which have already been mentioned’.⁴⁸ Success was understood in the same way. One MP praised a son’s defence of his dead father, but judged that when ‘he afterwards went on to the general Argument ... he did not Succeed so well’.⁴⁹ A speech was assessed as a contribution to a corporate stock of practical thinking.

⁴¹ *Gazetteer*, 6 Feb. 1778.

⁴² *Bath Chronicle*, 25 Dec. 1788.

⁴³ *Life of John, Lord Campbell*, ed. Mrs Hardcastle (2 vols, 1881), i, 106. Woodfall made the same contrast between ‘substance’ and wording. His disclaimer (*Morning Chronicle*, 26 Mar. 1774, note 36 above), described his report ‘as the substance of the debate’.

⁴⁴ Derby Local Studies Library, parcel 202, section 2/2: Thomas Harrison to [William Strutt], 7 Sept. 1788.

⁴⁵ Warden Flood, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of the Right Hon. Henry Flood* (Dublin, 1838), 178.

⁴⁶ BL, Add. MS 37853, f. 125: William Cobbett to William Windham, 14 July [1804].

⁴⁷ ‘After Mr. Fox – rose Mr. Powys – and very luckily for me – took up the question in the point of view in which I had resolved to consider it – as connected with the subject of the *whole war* – very luckily, I say, because he is not the sort of speaker to anticipate ones *arguments* – but is the sort of man, of weight and consequence in the House, to justify any man who follows him, in taking up the *subject* in a point of view different from other people, which but for such an *authority*, might have looked like *lugging* foreign matter into discussion.’ (*The Letter Journal of George Canning 1793–95*, ed. Peter Jupp (Camden, 4th ser., xli, 1991), 56.)

⁴⁸ 7 May 1793, *Star*, 8 May 1793.

⁴⁹ Blair Adam House, series one, general correspondence 1775: William Adam to John Adam, 3 Feb. 1775. The father was George Grenville, and his son of the same name was the future marquess of Buckingham.

Members of parliament were just that: they were *members* of a body, and the vote of each was as important as the next in its decision about how to act. It followed, as an MP observed, that 'we are all equal in this H[ouse]'.⁵⁰ Such equality provided a reason why the speeches that preceded its decision mattered practically. Equality had the dual effect of elevating the importance of the ablest speakers, because they defined the argument, and might be agents of directing or swaying others, yet also subordinating them to the role of contributor to argument pro or con. As Namier put it: 'a House, just as a team, has a joint personality superior to that of the individuals who compose it; and while its purpose dominates them, there can be little regarding of men'.⁵¹ What was to be regarded primarily was the practical reasoning to which the various speakers made individual contributions.

The business of writers was therefore to record the reasons and facts which the House prefaced to its decisions, as well as persuasive elements like eloquence and humour that seemed effective. That is to say, the character of parliamentary debate as a process by which a decision was reached was one that required that reporters focus on what tended to this end. This required them to concentrate upon the most important considerations – 'the ideas' and 'substance' – that speakers had urged about the decision that was in prospect.

A report therefore conveyed the writer's conception of what mattered in a debate. Judgment was a key activity in this style of reporting. It is noteworthy that one called the work of producing his text 'composition', and that a newspaper regarded 'facility in composition' as 'necessary' for such work.⁵² In a like way, both politician and newspaperman referred to reporters as writers. Abbot wrote of 'the news writers',⁵³ and Palmerston mentioned the 'Newswriters' of the gallery.⁵⁴ 'Debate Writers' figure in the *Gazetteer's* accounts,⁵⁵ and its treasurer referred to 'the Debaters' of other newspapers.⁵⁶ The term 'writers' or 'Debaters' seemed appropriate, for their work embodied judgments about content.

Correspondingly, writer and speaker alike might seek an overall 'idea' of a debate or a speech, that is to say to convey what was *most* important about it. Woodfall acknowledged on one occasion that he had contented himself 'with stating only those passages ... which made the strongest impression on our mind, and which will serve to give the reader a tolerable idea of the whole address'.⁵⁷ The speeches might well contain ideas in this sense. Woodfall supposed that 'a favourite idea often forms the feature of a speech, which of all others a Senator would most wish to impress on his auditory, and on the public'.⁵⁸ Certainly,

⁵⁰Isaac Barré, 25 Mar. 1771: BL, Egerton MS 227, f. 42; diary of Sir Henry Cavendish. Compare the fuller statement from Speaker Cornwall, 15 Mar. 1782: 'it was the root and principle of the freedom of that House, and in all free debates, that there should be no distinction – that all were alike equal in their representative capacities': *Gazetteer*, 16 Mar. 1782.

⁵¹Sir Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (2nd edn, 1957), 11. He was writing with a different reference, but his point has wider validity.

⁵²James Stephen, *Memoirs*, ed. Merle M. Bevington (1954), 291; *Star*, 21 Sept. 1796.

⁵³*Diary and Correspondence of Charles Abbot, First Lord Colchester*, ed. Lord Colchester (3 vols, 1861), i, 24. This was in 1795. He used the same word or words on 24 May 1803 (i, 421).

⁵⁴Southampton University Library, Broadlands Archive, MS 62, BR20/5/25: Viscount Palmerston to Viscountess Palmerston, 17 Dec. 1788.

⁵⁵TNA, C 104/68, Book E, p. 266: proprietors' expenses 1792–7, detailing expenditure, Mar. 1793, on behalf of 'Debate Writers'.

⁵⁶TNA, C 104/68: undated memorandum by John Watkins, loose papers.

⁵⁷*Morning Chronicle*, 15 May 1779.

⁵⁸Advertisement for his *Impartial Reports*, *Courier*, 9 Jan. 1795.

speakers hoped that this would be received. One MP asked whether a report conveyed ‘any notion of what I said’.⁵⁹ Another complained that the papers had failed to give ‘an idea of the Debate’.⁶⁰ Whether they did or not, speakers and reporters shared a conception of what they might do.

This idea related to a motion, so the latter was treated carefully. Woodfall ended a report of one of Fox’s speeches, which had filled two-and-a-half columns, with the statement that: ‘Mr. Fox concluded by moving a very long Address to the King, [*which we shall insert verbatim in to-morrow’s paper ...*].’ This duly appeared. One can divine that Woodfall had obtained a text, especially as the earlier issue of his paper had given Stanhope’s parallel motion in the Lords only ‘in substance’, whereas the later one gave it in quotation marks.⁶¹ Care about motions passed into care about procedure so far as it made debate intelligible. When an administration was set to fall, and ministers could look only to a ‘dignified and judicious’ response from the king,⁶² the Commons’ debate of 20 March 1782 became a struggle about procedure. Should Lord Surrey’s tabled motion for the removal of Lord North and his colleagues prevail, or should North be allowed to speak first? The papers emphasized the tussle between ministry and opposition, Fox’s motion that Surrey should speak, Fox’s subsequent advice to Surrey to make his original motion, Thomas Powys’s recommendation that both North and Surrey should withdraw, Frederick Montagu’s observation that the sense of the House was for adjournment, the cries of ‘adjourn’ during John Courtenay’s eulogy on North, Surrey’s assertion that his motion could be put, but gentlemen wished to be gone, and finally the question for adjournment.⁶³ Argument, being related to the proposition or propositions debated, gave meaning to the bare voting figures. ‘The Question and the numbers you will see in the public papers’, an MP told his correspondent, ‘and the arguments against such a motion I think will strike you very forcibly.’⁶⁴

The writers, then, aimed to convey what prefaced a parliamentary vote or other decision. In doing so, they wrote about the speeches which they judged to have bearing on it, emphasizing ‘ideas’ in order to give the ‘substance’ of the debate. They referred to the overall direction those ideas suggested. If Woodfall aimed to convey ‘the reasoning of those Gentlemen who principally distinguished themselves’, he wished also to give ‘the sense of the debate’.⁶⁵ Reporters sought the leading features of deliberation or justification, that is to say, who contributed to practical reasoning, what their arguments and evidence were, and how the debate developed in relation to these.

3

What were the effects of this understanding of reporting upon the presentation of speeches? One important effect was that if a speech was understood as a contribution to practical

⁵⁹NLS, MS 11046, f. 155: Sir Gilbert Elliot to Lady Elliot, 29 Apr. 1788.

⁶⁰*Letters of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, ed. Cecil Price (3 vols, Oxford, 1966), ii, 135.

⁶¹*Diary*, 18, 19 June 1793.

⁶²HMC, *Abergavenny MSS*, 52.

⁶³Especially *Morning Chronicle*, *Gazetteer*, *London Courant*, and *Public Advertiser*, all 21 Mar. 1782. *General Advertiser* of the same date was unusually explicit about what was at stake for the ministry.

⁶⁴HMC, *Carlisle MSS*, 571.

⁶⁵Woodfall, *Impartial Sketch*, ii.

reasoning, it would be rendered according to the reporter's view of its relevance and importance to the discussion. Which speeches defined and developed the argument in hand? So important was its development, indeed, that even an entire debate would be judged in relation to it. *A fortiori* so would the individual contributor to debate. The aim to provide 'substance' implied the further aim of treating debates in ways that answered to judgments about importance.

This need not be a judgment of a kind that speakers would have rejected. Camden, for instance, accepted the judgment of a consensus. He wrote that: 'I am apt to think what I said was material, because I find this morning the whole substance of my argument is industriously supplied in all the daily papers.'⁶⁶ Camden appears in four surviving dailies, with between ten and 30 lines in each.⁶⁷ What did 'material' mean? It meant both relevant and significant. Camden had spoken on Shelburne's motion for papers concerning the suspension of Britain's treaties with Holland. Shelburne's speech emphasized three ideas: that the royal navy's seizure of a Dutch convoy (believed to be carrying supplies to Britain's enemies) was likely to alarm neutral powers; that the concurrent suspension of treaty obligations with Holland would have the same effect; and in particular that Russia, Britain's only potential ally, was likely to be alienated, and even now was preparing a maritime code that reaffirmed the inviolability of neutral shipping. Stormont, replying for the ministry, argued that Holland had ignored both its treaty obligations to support Britain and British remonstrance about supplying the enemy, so that the royal navy's action was justified; and added that it was unlikely that Russia would be alienated from Britain. Camden, who followed Stormont, discussed the Anglo-Dutch treaties, the seizure of the Dutch fleet, the rights of neutrals, their likely attitudes, and the maritime code. His speech was not only relevant but also significant because Camden commented effectively on Stormont's. He observed that under those treaties the Dutch had a right to ship naval stores, and therefore that the seizure of the Dutch fleet violated Britain's obligations; that the Dutch failure to fulfil *their* obligations to Britain followed from that action; that neutrals might well be alarmed; that Chatham, at the height of Britain's glory, had not offended neutral powers; that there was now an anti-British and pro-American alignment on the Continent; that Britain faced a choice between submitting to the Russian code or going to war against Russia among other powers; and that the ministry was unfit to hold office.⁶⁸ The pertinence and power of this speech would be clear even if the next government speaker, Sandwich, had not attacked Camden as 'the best and most powerful advocate the Dutch had yet found'.⁶⁹ The reporters, it seems, judged rightly about the speech, and Camden judged rightly about their criteria.

Concern for the 'material' answered to an interest in the 'sense of the debate'. The reporters' interest in argument went beyond the contents of each speech to the sequence of ideas exchanged by speakers and the movement of the debate towards the vote. This implied a judgment of the importance of each speech as a contribution to the whole. The space accorded to each speech reflected this. Though Camden's contribution was evidently

⁶⁶Kent Archives, Pratt papers, U840 C173/63: Lord Camden to Robert Stewart, 2 June 1780.

⁶⁷*Gazetteer* (13 lines), *London Courant* (ten lines), *Morning Chronicle* (25 lines), and *Public Advertiser* (30 lines), all 2 June 1780.

⁶⁸This interpretation draws elements from all four papers.

⁶⁹*Morning Chronicle*, 2 June 1780.

'material', it was a response to one of the two leading speeches which had set the terms for debate. The *Morning Chronicle* gave three-and-a-half columns to Shelburne and to Stormont one-and-three-quarters, but only 25 lines to Camden. A column comprised over 130 lines.

To state 'the sense of the debate' imposed tasks of identification and selection on reporters. The first question for the reporter was, what was the argument that divided the House? Second, what did a speech contribute to its development, whether pro or con? So fundamental was this need that at an earlier date reports had sometimes focused on the pros and cons of each side of a debate to the extent of not distinguishing the speakers or listing them by name.⁷⁰ The running together of speeches on one side of the question continued in the press on occasions when only a brief report sufficed,⁷¹ and continued, too, among private correspondents.⁷² The regular practice in this period for all important debates, however, was for reporters to distinguish the proponents of arguments. Sometimes the course of the debate was very clearly polarised. In such cases the most important requirement was to give a statement of the fundamental logic of pro and con.⁷³ This procedure sometimes emphasized the argumentative dominance of one side of the question.⁷⁴ Sometimes it was of necessity that one side of the question dominated coverage.⁷⁵ Other debates might manifest more complex patterns, and accordingly a wider range of contributions figured.⁷⁶

Sometimes, indeed, when the opening speech explained the rationale of the debate or its sequel, it was privileged above all subsequent contributions. On 24 January 1782, Fox outlined the reasons for his motion for an inquiry into the failures of the royal navy in the preceding year. Woodfall, 'imagining that the Publick at large will be anxious to know the grounds upon which an enquiry, that has been so much the topick of public expectation, is intended to proceed' gave 'as copious an account of the substance of Mr. Fox's speech' as he could, that is to say five columns. He allotted the rest of the debate under two.⁷⁷ Contributions after the opening statements of argument signified in so far as they produced novel reasoning and further information.

⁷⁰For instance, the report of the Commons' debate of 7 Apr. 1772, on the Royal Marriages Act in *London Evening Post*, 12–14 Apr. 1772, stated the arguments on both sides of the question anonymously. Conversely, the brief report in *Gazetteer*, 9 Apr. 1772 (not listed in Thomas, *Debates*, 51) named Sir George Savile and Charles Cornwall among those pro, North and Burke among those con, and Fox answering them with 'great spirit and force of argument', but did not explore what anyone said.

⁷¹E.g., *Oracle's* report, 14 May 1794, on the Commons' debate of the previous day on a bill for expediting elections, which groups together some contributions pro and con.

⁷²E.g., *Memoirs of Sir Samuel Romilly, edited by his sons* (3rd edn, 2 vols, 1841), i, 154–6; Devon Heritage Centre, Ley of Trehill papers, 63/2/11/6; John Ley to Henry Ley, 22 Jan. 1794.

⁷³E.g., *Gazetteer*, 13 Feb. 1782, treated the debate of the 12th on the French commercial treaty mostly as an exchange between Pitt and Fox, who have nine columns while other speakers received a total of one.

⁷⁴E.g., Rolle's motions about Rodney's recall, 30 May 1782 [*Morning Herald*, 31 May 1782], where the most important contribution after those of the proposer and seconder was George Johnstone's professional judgment on Rodney's behalf.

⁷⁵As Burke's submitting his plan for economical reform, 11 Feb. 1780 [*London Courant*, 12 Feb. 1780], or Wilberforce's moving for a committee on the slave trade, 12 May 1789 [*Morning Star*, 13 May 1789].

⁷⁶As 2 Feb. 1789, a committee on the state of nation, for which *Morning Chronicle*, 3 Feb. 1789, gave 18 contributors in 9.5 columns.

⁷⁷*Morning Chronicle*, 25 Jan. 1782. He was not impressed by the calibre of the subsequent contributions: 'as it has run so much into length, we must of necessity be extremely short for the present on the remainder of the Debate, if it can be called a Debate'.

This sort of judgment could be applied to part of an otherwise compelling speech. In the middle of a report of over two columns, the *Oracle* interjected that ‘we do not think it necessary to follow the Hon. Member through the line of reasoning which had so often before been traced out by others, and shall deem it sufficient to mention what appeared to us as most novel’.⁷⁸ Judgment about novelty attended also to relative frequency. Even a debate on the king’s speech, if it possessed ‘fewer novelties ... than the length of it ... might seem to promise’ would be ‘divest[ed] of all repetition’.⁷⁹ Where issues recurred, the criterion accented absolute novelty, so that ‘*Several of the Speeches are considerably abridged, it having been judged proper to dwell upon the new arguments, than recapitulate the observations of former debates.*’⁸⁰ The same criterion could curtail whole debates if they contained little that was fresh. *The Times* commented on the Commons’ debate of 14 February 1791 about the continuation of Hastings’ impeachment that ‘*the subject matter ... has already undergone such a variety of discussion; and ... almost every person who has paid any attention to this business is already in possession of the facts*’: therefore ‘*we have not entered so fully as we otherwise should have done into the detail of each Gentleman’s Speech*’.⁸¹ A similar treatment could be accorded to a debate which reporters thought inherently unimportant, for instance as being, they thought, merely an *hors d’oeuvres* for a more important treatment. So ‘the serious discussion of the Bill being postponed till its next stage, we have ... briefly described the trifling conversation which arose’ in one-and-a-half columns.⁸² The same criterion applied sometimes in advance to parts of debates. The *Morning Post* claimed that it had planned a report ‘upon the supposition that Messrs. Fox, Pitt, and Sheridan would rise late, and we therefore reserved some of our reporters and a part of this paper for their speeches’.⁸³ The *Morning Chronicle* proceeded more subtly. An expert judged that ‘nobody ... on either side understood’ the Irish commercial resolutions in one Lords’ debate. The paper eulogised the speakers but took care to report one of the last saying that ‘he was worse puzzled than ever ... after all his attention’.⁸⁴ One way or another the ‘sense’ of the debate required new and worthwhile argument.

4

What was included mirrors what was excluded. To give priority to the leading contributions to argument and the sense these imparted to debate implied relatively little attention to what did not contribute to the development of the argument. This aim about what seemed relatively unimportant can be inferred in several ways.

The most notable is the downplaying or exclusion of what was relevant to the sense of the debate but did not seem to add to argument. If their treatment of Camden indicates

⁷⁸ *Oracle*, 1 Feb. 1794.

⁷⁹ *Oracle*, 22 Jan. 1794.

⁸⁰ *Morning Post*, 24 May 1785.

⁸¹ *The Times*, 15 Feb. 1791. The paper had found a debate of greater interest. The editorial comment continued: ‘*We are also obliged to curtail our Report on account of the length of the important decision of the House of Lords on that great Law Question which has so long occupied the public attention respecting fictitious Bills of Exchange.*’

⁸² *Oracle*, 29 Dec. 1792.

⁸³ *Morning Post*, 4 Jan. 1798.

⁸⁴ Lord Ashbourne, Pitt (1898), 133; *Morning Chronicle*, 9 July 1785.

how debate writers received a speech that forwarded discussion, the opposite appears in their treatment of Philip Yorke. The reporters judged that he contributed nothing to the debate on William Pitt's motion of 7 May 1782 for a reform of the representation. Only one newspaper as much as stated that Yorke spoke. His uncle, Lord Hardwicke, having not found him reported, enquired about his speech. Yorke's text suggests the reason for the reporters' silence. His core arguments were: that no one had suggested any specific plan of improvement in the representation, and Yorke could not approve appointing a committee without knowing the plan in view or that the people would approve it; and that the people had not called for it.⁸⁵ These positions were not new to that debate, for Thomas Pitt and Archibald Macdonald had stated them already.⁸⁶ Neither did they provide a positive contribution to the theme before the House. So, Yorke was at most 'strenuously against the motion'.⁸⁷ More broadly, as Woodfall put it, 'gentlemen ... who did not accompany the delivery of their opinion with any new arguments or observations that were new, or more pointedly applied than they had been before by other Speakers' could expect, at best, a mention.⁸⁸

Orators who were left to silence because they added nothing had counterparts in those who added, but not to the purpose in hand. John Hussey Delaval illustrates this for the debate on 7 May 1783 about William Pitt's next call for reform. *Parker's General Advertiser* said only that 'Sir John Delaval was likewise against the motion', while neither the *Morning Herald* nor the *Public Advertiser* mentioned him at all. The *Morning Chronicle* was kinder, but gave only a single remark. This referred to the main lines of the debate, and affords a clue to the reporters' reticence.⁸⁹ Delaval's own account suggests that he had rather more to say, but not for the most part about the topic of the debate. He addressed that very briefly, disclaiming any desire to develop the argument, and instead developed themes of his own:

Mr Speaker Sir

I flatter myself that Gentlemen will not think me so vain as to attempt to rise at this late hour with an intention of entering into a debate upon this Question after the very great ability with which it has been discussed no Sir I rise only to take notice of something that was said by a Noble Lord opposite to me [Earl of Surrey] of great rank in this Country and who holds a very considerable employment in the Administration [a lordship of the treasury] because I think that whatever he said comes with great weight Sir His Lordship was pleased to say that the political death of the Noble Lord in the blue ribbon [North] was occasioned by the secession of the Country Gentlemen now Sir I must beg leave to deny that fact I do not think it was so and for two reasons one of them is because I cannot think the Country Gentlemen (for the Noble Lord [Surrey] stated it in that large way) would after having led the Noble Lord [North] into a scrape afterwards desert him in it and the other because if that had been the Case so many of the Country Gentlemen would not have attended his Lordship upon his political resurrection as do now support

⁸⁵BL, Add. MS 35380, ff. 262–4: Yorke to Hardwicke, 10 May 1782.

⁸⁶*Parker's General Advertiser*, 8 May 1782.

⁸⁷*London Packet*, 6–8 May 1782 (followed by *London Chronicle*, 7–9 May 1782).

⁸⁸Woodfall, *Impartial Sketch*, ii.

⁸⁹All 8 May 1783, except *London Courant*, 9 May 1783. The latter followed *Parker's General Advertiser*.

him. and now Sir I am up I shall only say one word to the proposition of the [Right] Honourable Gentleman [Pitt] Sir I do not think that the safety and preservation of our excellent Constitution can be at all protected or secured by an additional Number of Members of any denomination whatever being sent hither no Sir in my opinion sir the preservation of it depends entirely upon the uninfluenced choice by the Constituents of their representatives and of the honest upright & independent conduct of the Members after they have taken their seats here, and Sir when I consider the blessing we enjoy under our happy constitution. Which is the envy & admiration of all foreigners and the safety and protection of ourselves and of all our fellow subjects under which our rights our liberties and privileges have been hitherto preserved I am heartily against any innovation in it, and I therefore earnestly hope that the propositions offerd by the [Right] Honourable Gentleman will be rejected and by a very large majority such a one Sir as may prevent any motion of a similar nature from ever being proposed again but if contrary to my hopes and to my firm belief it should meet with the approbation of the House I make no doubt but that part of the remainder of the [Right] Honourable Gentlemans plan is that this House should be dissolved for Sir if we should declare that in its present Form it is improperly constituted and prefer other principles upon which we decide it should be constructed I say Sir we ought not to continue sitting a day longer after such a determination & I hope we shall not but be sent back again into the Country to a new Election.

In short, Delaval, a much more experienced parliamentary hand than Yorke, used the debate for purposes of his own. In order to reply to Lord Surrey, and in particular to emphasize an important point about back-bench support for North, Delaval mostly bypassed the debate. Perhaps he recorded his own speech because he knew that others would not.⁹⁰ Whatever Delaval had in mind, no paper gave him much attention. Indeed, the reports of Surrey's speech omitted the point on which Delaval commented. If members said something without contributing much to the 'sense of the debate', even something important in another way, reporters gave them minimal attention.

This signified neither discrimination against back benchers nor in favour of front benchers. If the 'sense of the debate' need not allow subsequent speakers to reiterate a received position, an eminent speaker with little to say would receive little attention. Sheridan 'made a variety of remarks which we must necessarily omit', though the paper then found rather more space for Fox.⁹¹ Delaval received attention when he became the subject of debate. On 16 July 1784, Philip Francis claimed that Sir John had altered his view of Pitt because the latter had triumphed by dint of popular support. Delaval, who was not then in the chamber, duly arrived and responded at length. His self-reporting here ran to nearly 1,000 words, and if the *Morning Chronicle* gave him rather less, it, nevertheless, gave him much more than in the debate on Pitt's motion the previous year.⁹² The debate writer's at-

⁹⁰Northumberland Archives, Delaval papers, 2DE/49/4/11: 'As near as I can recollect what I said in reply to Lord Surrey upon Mr Pitts motion on May. 7. 1783.'

⁹¹*Diary*, 8 May 1793.

⁹²Northumberland Archives, 2DE/49/4/16: 'As nearly as I can recollect what I said in the House upon coming into it and having been told that before my coming Mr Francis – had in his Speech said I had very much changed my opinion of Mr Pitt and had given it as my reason for doing so that he had been brought in upon the shoulders of the people'; *Morning Chronicle*, 17 July 1784.

tention was proportioned to the importance of Delaval's contribution to the debate: limited on one occasion, greater on another.

The different degrees of attention accorded to Delaval emphasize the characteristics of the reporting genre in another way. Experience would guide the reporters in seeking the play of argument. They would be ready to record Fox or Pitt, but their attention would relax when certain other speakers rose: not from hostility, but from a practiced sense of the irrelevance or unimportance of their likely contribution.⁹³ If Sir John Miller was 'speaking under the gallery, very little was heard' noted one paper, adding 'and perchance, very little lost'.⁹⁴

If reporters were no respecters of persons who said little to the purpose, they were attentive to speakers who, though usually silent or insignificant, made an important contribution on the day. Richard Hippisley Coxe was an MP for Somerset from 1768 to 1784, but seldom spoke in his second parliament. On 11 March 1778, as his fellow-member for the county noted, Coxe uttered 'only one sentence' in a 'great Debate' about naval affairs.⁹⁵ 'Only one sentence' may not sound very promising; but this one was important. Coxe said that he had 'lately left the Kingdom of France, and ... was perfectly convinced a war would very soon break out between Great Britain and that country; that France was arming with the utmost alertness; that troops were marching in large bodies to the sea-ports, and that every thing wore the appearance of military preparation'.⁹⁶ This was information of the first significance. Coxe, along with North and Keppel, was identified by name as a contributor to the debate, and otherwise arguments for and against sufficed.⁹⁷

A number of other features common among these reports fit this rationale. Campbell's preference for 'the ideas of the speaker' over 'phraseology' fits with attention to argument. So, too, does reporting which usually was not *verbatim*,⁹⁸ and was recognized as such.⁹⁹ Compression naturally marked this work, so that, for instance, 80 minutes of Fox might be represented by less than 31 lines.¹⁰⁰ Such compression, of course, fitted a medium which could not have accommodated debates at full length, but which could select, as it claimed, 'ALL the GREAT LEADING FEATURES – the PROMINENT CHARACTER of ev-

⁹³ Later, 'a common toast of reporters at social meetings was "Joseph Hume getting up, and George Canning sitting down." The meaning was this: the reporter who had to report the one so abridged his task that a quarter of an hour's subsequent work was all that was required of him, while to have an hour of Canning implied three or four hours' toil at the office': Samuel Carter Hall, *Retrospect of a Long Life* (2 vols, 1883), i, 113.

⁹⁴ *World*, 6 Dec. 1787, reporting a committee of supply.

⁹⁵ Somerset Heritage Centre, Phelps of Montacute papers, SHC DD/PH/183: diary of Edward Phelps, 11 Mar. 1778.

⁹⁶ *General Evening Post* and *London Chronicle*, both 10–12 Mar. 1778, and *Morning Post*, 13 Mar. 1778, all print this one rendering.

⁹⁷ *General Advertiser*, 12 Mar. 1778, for 'principal speakers'.

⁹⁸ Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: The Political Representation of Class in Britain, c.1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995), 130, claims that the *Morning Chronicle*, *Star*, and *True Briton* gave a 'purportedly verbatim report' of a speech of 14 Dec. 1797, but examination of these papers for 15 Dec. 1797 reveals no signs of this purport, such as inverted commas. The latter appeared, for instance, when Pitt quoted from a published report: *Morning Chronicle*, 1 May 1793.

⁹⁹ Someone new to England recognized that a report provided 'an extract' from his correspondent's speech: BL, Add. MS 47582, f. 198: Charles Saladin to Richard Fitzpatrick, 30 Dec. 1796. James Stephen wondered at 'those who imagine that a Newspaper Report is a full length picture of any debate', because 'the fullest report they can receive is but a brief abridgement of what was actually said': *Memoirs*, 292–3.

¹⁰⁰ *Parker's General Advertiser*, 17 June 1784, which gives the duration of his speech.

ery Debate'.¹⁰¹ Inclusion and exclusion alike attested a key characteristic of these reports, namely that they focused upon argument, and considered speakers in relation to what they contributed to debate.

5

Debate writing, whatever claims it made about 'every Debate', focused upon matters which were of interest in principle to all those subject to a sovereign power which included, besides the monarch, the two assemblies that were Lords and Commons. Parliament made laws and decisions which could, and did, affect everybody in Britain, and some beyond. The newspaper reports dwelt on that: on recognizable change in public matters.

Thus, discussions about public measures achieved greater prominence than matters which did not call for decision that might affect the whole community. For example, the papers reported the debates about emending Hardwicke's Marriage Act in June 1781 at some length,¹⁰² but gave rather less attention to Gooch's Divorce Bill that year, or to Stewart's in 1793.¹⁰³ Business of localised importance, if mentioned, was rarely treated at length. All we learn about Burke's sponsorship of an Enclosure Bill for Preston Bissett, though it was surely eloquent and extended, is that he introduced it. His action was merely mentioned, and by only one newspaper.¹⁰⁴ Though Wilberforce was heard to 'speak very spiritedly in favour of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal Deviation', the *Sun* tells us only that he moved it and took part in 'a short conversation'.¹⁰⁵ The Dudley Canal Bill attracted more attention, because it had implications for the security of private property, while the coal trade at Newcastle-upon-Tyne was nationally important.¹⁰⁶ Private business did not usually feature prominently,¹⁰⁷ and parliamentary committees, except committees of the whole House, might go unreported.¹⁰⁸ So could the evidence connected with petitions. An exception disclosed the rule. Though 'it has not been the practice ... to enter into details of evidence given in Committees of either House', yet because the implications of one petition against the tobacco excise were general, attention was accorded. For 'there is no species of manu-

¹⁰¹ *World*, 25 Nov. 1790.

¹⁰² E.g., for the second reading of 15 June 1781, *Morning Chronicle*, *Morning Herald*, and *Public Advertiser*, all 16 June 1781; *Lloyd's Evening-Post*, 15–18 June 1781; *London Chronicle*, *St. James's Chronicle* and *Whitehall Evening-Post*, all 14–16 June 1781.

¹⁰³ 15 Feb. 1781; *Morning Chronicle*, 16 Feb. 1781, 14 Mar. 1793, e.g., *Oracle* and *Gazetteer*, both 15 Mar. 1793. Gooch's case may have attracted such attention as it did because the co-respondent was Venanzio Rauzzini. Bayntun's case attracted attention because the law lords got to work, e.g., *Morning Post*, 16 Apr. 1783.

¹⁰⁴ 25 Apr. 1781, *Morning Herald*, 26 Apr. 1781.

¹⁰⁵ *A Lancashire Gentleman: The Letters and Journals of Richard Hodgkinson*, ed. Florence and Kenneth Wood (Stroud, 1992), 44; *Sun*, 6 Mar. 1794; *Morning Chronicle*, 6 Mar. 1794, states only that there was 'a short debate'.

¹⁰⁶ *Morning Chronicle*, 1 May 1793; *Public Advertiser*, 15 Apr. 1788.

¹⁰⁷ *London Courant*, 16 Dec. 1779, opening its account of the Commons' proceedings: 'The private business being dispatched, Mr Pennant, in a speech of great moment and information, called the attention of the House to the present defenceless situation of the island of Jamaica.'

¹⁰⁸ But the select committee relating to India in 1781 was reported: *London Courant*, 17, 21, 22 Feb. 1781; *Aurora*, 1 Mar. 1781. These are not listed in *Writings and Speeches of Burke*, vol. IV, ed. Marshall and Bryant, or *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke. Volume V*, ed. P.J. Marshall (Oxford, 1981), though Burke made his presence felt on these occasions.

facture to which the Excise laws can be less applicable than to the manufacture of Tobacco'. This examination of witnesses received nearly two columns.¹⁰⁹

One locality was a partial exception to the rule. London newspapers, though their debates drew an audience broader than the metropolis, functioned as local newspapers. If the *Morning Chronicle* sometimes led among papers reporting parliament, it was the *Morning Chronicle*, and *London Advertiser*.¹¹⁰ So the doings of the king and the archbishop of Canterbury sat beside vacancies for domestic servants, while parliamentary remarks on grain shortages in London,¹¹¹ on its justices of the peace,¹¹² or on obstructions to the approach ways of the house of lords¹¹³ made their appearance at greater length than if they had belonged to Dublin or Edinburgh.

If public matters predominated, the quest to command attention from readers excluded or minimised other matters again. Just as concern with what added to argument implied the inclusion and extended treatment of some types of debate, so also it implied the exclusion or compression of some debates about certain public matters.

A desire for novelty excluded or diminished the routine, and so tended to downplay the repetitive work that was a staple of parliamentary existence. The annual Mutiny Bill, though vital, might attract little notice.¹¹⁴ The debate on the army estimates might figure at greater length than usual if it became the occasion of parliamentary conflict.¹¹⁵ Otherwise, as a secretary at war who was also a distinguished speaker noted: 'there was little room for observation'.¹¹⁶ The naval estimates mattered more when they allowed the opposition to attack the admiralty. Sometimes 'the ordinary business of the day' was sacrificed altogether to more compelling topics.¹¹⁷ Conversely, if a newspaper sent someone to the Commons, he would report tersely what common business passed, giving short notices of a large number of transactions.¹¹⁸ One way or another, much in parliamentary work was unreported or reported very briefly. Again, content that reporters judged hard for readers to follow or uninteresting to them was downplayed.¹¹⁹ The calibration of this interest varied. One paper provided a lengthy account of the speech about the Westminster scrutiny from Welbore

¹⁰⁹ *Gazetteer*, 17 Mar. 1790.

¹¹⁰ On the London theme in other respects, see Aspinall, *Politics and the Press*, 7.

¹¹¹ 10 Apr. 1793 (Corn Harvest Bill), e.g., *Diary*, *Morning Chronicle*, *Oracle*, *True Briton*, all 11 Apr. 1793.

¹¹² 21 June 1793, e.g., *Diary*, 24 June 1793, *Morning Chronicle* and *Sun*, both 22 June 1793.

¹¹³ 7 May 1793, e.g., *Diary*, *Morning Chronicle*, and *Public Advertiser*, all 8 May 1793.

¹¹⁴ 'In a Committee went through the Mutiny Bill with several amendments; to be reported on Monday': *Morning Post*, 15 Mar. 1783.

¹¹⁵ As 9 Feb. 1790, when Burke made his first major statement about the French revolution, drawing significant responses from Fox and Pitt, as well as exciting Sheridan's enmity. Woodfall, *Diary*, 10 Feb. 1790, noted that the debate on the estimates themselves contained little new argument or interest so that he covered it more briefly than the Burkean part.

¹¹⁶ William Windham, in the debate of 20 Nov. 1795: *Morning Chronicle*, 21 Nov. 1795. The ensuing debate was only in part about the estimates.

¹¹⁷ *London Courant*, 21 Mar. 1782.

¹¹⁸ E.g., *Morning Post*, 9 May 1783, ran from the engrossing of the Trent Navigation Bill to the deferral of a Pay Office Bill.

¹¹⁹ 'It is impossible for us to do common justice in an attempt to state fully what Mr. Fox said ... neither would ... the law arguments of Mr Mansfield and the Solicitor General be very interesting to our readers': *London Courant*, 28 Mar. 1783, on Williams's Divorce Bill. Woodfall, *Diary*, 18 Dec. 1790, 'purposely' avoided 'follow[ing] the Law Arguments in detail' as being beyond his powers.

Ellis, that master of parliamentary procedure, while another called it ‘a very uninteresting detail’.¹²⁰ The need to provide novelty might even encourage rationing: one editor claimed, privately, that in order ‘to prevent the publick of being tired of having too much of one matter before them I have declared my intention of giving them only one debate a week’.¹²¹ Indeed, on an occasion when his reporting was in arrears he emphasized his need for new content, appealing to his correspondent for ‘any points ... which have not appeared ... in the Papers already’.¹²²

6

This, being the first study about the nature of these reports, has emphasized their primary content. That concern refers us back to modern Hansard. If Hansard is a *verbatim* record of all parliamentary proceedings, debate writers in the later 18th century plainly provided something very different. It therefore becomes important to ask what they meant to do, and what that implies. This article has suggested that these reports treated debates and speeches primarily in terms of arguments pro and con in deliberation and justification. It follows that these reports were interpretations made according to evaluative and selective criteria about practical reasoning rather than, in any simple way, records. They were interpretations because their authors made judgments, and addressed what difference a speech made to parliamentary debate or the contribution each debate made to ongoing discussion. They were not intended to record or summarize the whole content of an MP or lord’s speech or a debate or some subject matters but to convey the ‘substance’ that reporters judged the more important debates to contain and the contributions made to discussion in them. This concern had an effect upon the length at which speeches appeared, guided by whether they defined or advanced the discussion. Conversely, if speeches added nothing or were irrelevant to the ongoing discussion of matters of public interest being debated, they might receive no attention.¹²³

This account suggests not only that these reports were very different from our Hansard but also that they are to be understood in very different terms. Because these reports were not a prototype for this Hansard, they need not be understood as defective Hansards. Thus, they become rather more important and interesting. From the finding that these speeches were interpretations guided by criteria of importance, an agenda for further research into their character follows. This can be observed in at least two ways. One is that a question from which we all begin, ‘what did he say?’, has been joined by another question, which requires a prior answer: ‘what was he judged to have contributed to debate?’. Second, this expansion of attention implies, because this writing was interpretative, that we need to study its canons of interpretation more fully, and also what bears on them. Thus, the origins and

¹²⁰ *Morning Herald* (one-and-two-thirds columns), *Morning Post*, both 9 June 1784. *Morning Chronicle*, same date, which had followed earlier proceedings on the scrutiny, excused itself from what ‘would be in a great measure only a repetition’.

¹²¹ Aspinall, *Politics and the Press*, 434.

¹²² Blair Adam Archives, series one, general correspondence 1784: Woodfall to Adam, 24 Feb. 1784.

¹²³ Because the reporters’ selectivity implies that there was more than we have, it suggests many further questions. Two may be mentioned here. Manuscripts may evidence unreported rather than undelivered speeches, and leading speakers may have acquired greater prominence in retrospect than they had on the day.

development of such writing, the understanding of ideas and truth they imply, differences of interpretation, the limitations inherent in the conditions of production, the opportunities for political uses implied in their interpretative character, their acceptability and utility for readers, and the difference that they made to the politics of the day all present themselves as topics for investigation. We could go further. There arise questions about other sorts of material: as about the character and rationale of parliamentary diaries and how Hansard came to be what it is. It suggests, too, the more general question of whether there are different models of reporting, what these are and what distinguishes them. All this lies beyond the scope of an article, which can only point to a need to ask about them. But it has established a field for future research by identifying the primary concern of this debate writing.

By the same measure, it implies that prior to using these reports as source material for historical writing it will be important to study them according to the criteria they embody. This article signals an end to the curious situation in which, though parliamentary speaking drew visitors from Britain, Ireland, the Continent, and North America,¹²⁴ the information in newspapers about it has not been studied intensively or critically by historians. It is clear now that this material compels such attention.

¹²⁴E.g., C.P. Moritz, *Journeys of a German in England in 1782*, trans. Reginald Nettel (1965); 'The Grand Tour Diary of Robert C. Johnson, 1792–1793', ed. Vernon F. Snow, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, cii (1958), 60–105.