

# London Newspapers and Domestic Politics in the Early Eighteenth Century

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## Introduction

Though public opinion had already emerged as a powerful and unpredictable force by the end of the seventeenth century, it is arguable that popular sentiment in early eighteenth-century England had only a limited impact on the way the country was run.<sup>1</sup> For much of this period, government was decided by a tight circle dominated by the court and the aristocracy, whilst many of the public outcries which did take place were constructed and encouraged by members of the social and political elite, rather than stemming spontaneously from those 'out-of-doors'. However, despite the political dominance of a small class, the secretive and traditional form of politics that they practised was increasingly under attack from a popular print culture that espoused openness; it was often critical of government, and during periods of acute political crisis was able to influence the way politicians chose to act. Thus on a few notable occasions in the opening decades of the eighteenth

century, popular protests – and newspapers – made a decisive impact on government policy. Moreover, even if popular opinion was sometimes orchestrated or influenced by an elite, the fact that it was useful, appropriate or necessary for them to do so, was arguably more significant. Whether 'genuinely' extra-parliamentary in origin or sponsored by the political elite, popular opinion emerged as an important factor in the nation's political life. The newspaper press was increasingly associated with the formation and articulation of such sentiment.

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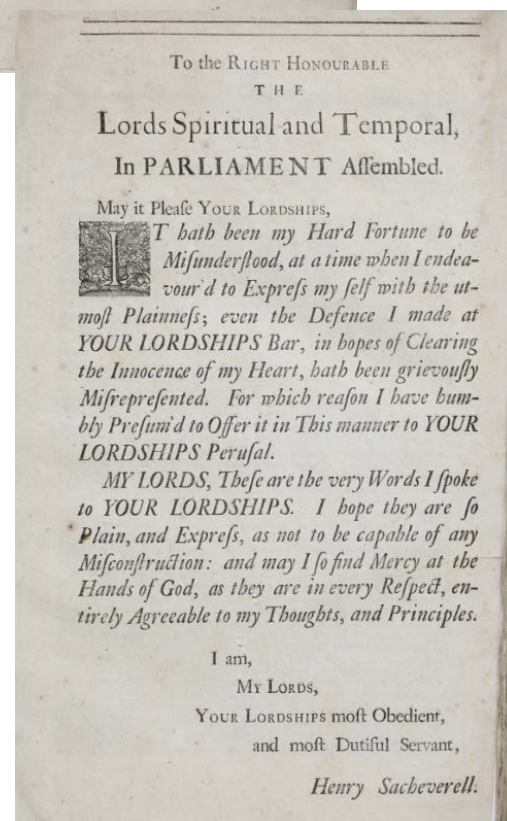
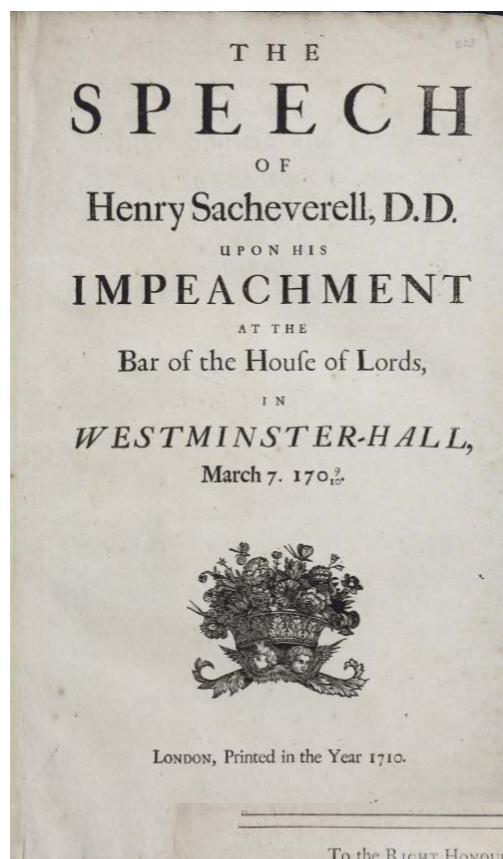
<sup>1</sup> For a broad overview of the eighteenth century, see Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society 1695–1855* (Harlow, 2000).

## The Sacheverell Controversy

From the late seventeenth century, several of the capital's newspapers were overtly political. The first London daily, the *Daily Courant*, was Whig in its politics, as was George Ridpath's *Flying Post* and John Tutchin's *Observator*, whilst Abel Roper's *Post Boy* was a Tory paper, and so too were William Pittis's *Heraclitus Ridens* and Charles Leslie's *Rehearsal*.<sup>2</sup> Thus in 1710, Sir John Verney was persuaded to continue sending copies of London newspapers to a poor woman running a coffee house in Stony Stratford in Buckinghamshire because a neighbouring coffee house was supplied by Verney's political rival.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, 1710 witnessed one of the earliest instances in which popular politics and political print had a significant impact on eighteenth-century political life. A year earlier, the Reverend Henry Sacheverell had been impeached by the Whig government for preaching a sermon in which he denied the right of resistance to a legitimate monarch and so, ministers thought, questioned the legitimacy of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The government's action against Sacheverell provoked much public hostility. When the impeachment proceedings took place at Westminster in 1710, they were accompanied by significant public disorder. Sacheverell was found guilty, but was only banned from preaching for three years. Alarmed by the popular criticism it had attracted, the government feared that anything more severe might have provoked even more serious disturbances. Instead, the country witnessed widespread celebrations as a result of Sacheverell's 'victory'. Perhaps as many as 100,000 copies of the printed version of Sacheverell's sermon were circulated, and these were soon joined by several hundred pamphlets, sermons and books concerning the controversy.<sup>4</sup>

Although they contributed to the debate in a limited way in relation to other forms of print, newspapers did not give the Sacheverell controversy a great deal of coverage, paying far more attention to foreign news. However, the trial itself did not pass unnoticed by the newspaper press: its dates were published and on 6 March, 1710 the *Daily Courant* noted that a clergyman had been sacked by the Bishop of London for praying for Dr Sacheverell 'as a person under persecution'. The *Evening Post* further reported Sacheverell's guilty verdict, as well as the riots that ensued.<sup>5</sup> Newspapers therefore did not keep the public abreast of the debates surrounding the Sacheverell controversy, but they did inform it on a daily basis of basic developments in a way that less frequently published printed matter could not.



A pamphlet reporting the speech of Henry Sacheverell during his impeachment, 7 March 1710. Vol. 16B.

<sup>2</sup> William Speck, 'Politics and the press', in Michael Harris and Alan Lee, eds, *The Press and English Society from the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries* (London, 1986), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> H.T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 1995), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> G. Holmes, *The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell* (London, 1973), p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> *Evening Post*, 21 March, 1710.

The Sacheverell trial greatly influenced the general election that followed a few months later, in which many Whigs lost their seats. Here, newspapers appeared as more central to public political debate. In the City of London, the Tory candidates advertised in the newspapers for support. They denied Whig accusations that they were either Jacobites or Papists, and accused the existing government of risking both church and state in their pursuit of power.<sup>6</sup> The Whig/Tory divisions concerning Sacheverell which were evident in the press at the time of the trial, were still clear three years later when his suspension from preaching was lifted. The *Post Boy* reported a 'joyful celebration' on a national scale, and noted that 'the prodigious Multitude of his Congregation is inconceivable to those who did not see it'.<sup>7</sup> The *Flying Post*, on the other hand, described disparagingly 'a very great Mob' who had come to hear him.<sup>8</sup>

## Jacobitism and the Hanoverians

The continuing debates over the rebel cleric were soon overshadowed by the much greater spectre of Jacobite rebellion. During the first half of the eighteenth century the Hanoverian succession was seriously threatened by the ousted Stuarts and their supporters, the Jacobites. The culture of Jacobitism could be found equally in polite society and amongst the lower orders, in part because it was an extremely flexible creed which could be taken up by those with a variety of grievances against the Hanoverians. The use of Jacobite slogans and songs during times of riot and popular unrest can thus be seen as a means of protesting against the iniquity of the social and legal system, as much as a sign of a genuine wish to restore the Stuarts to the throne.<sup>9</sup> During the early eighteenth century, Tory newspapers were credited, as Kathleen Wilson notes, with 'keep[ing] up the spirit of Jacobites and ... inflam [ing] the Mob against the Governement and all good Subjects'. Yet as Wilson points out, papers such as the London *Post-Boy* and a variety of provincial newspapers, published details of the Whig offensive against Jacobitism and the ineffectual nature of the Tory response, as much as they sympathised with the Jacobite cause.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, most English newspapers were supportive of the Hanoverian regime. In London, the *Daily Courant* published a loyal address to the King from the town of Hastings which expressed the freeholders' 'utmost indignation' that the Pretender 'should entertain Thoughts of invading your Dominions'.<sup>11</sup> It was soon followed by addresses from Northampton, Lincoln, Bedford and Kent,<sup>12</sup> and helped to present a picture of national unity against the

Jacobite threat.

Yet despite the frequency with which anti-Jacobitism was expressed by newspapers during the attempted invasions of 1715, and the undoubted importance of such coverage in promoting public hostility towards the Stuarts and their supporters, some Jacobite sentiments were still evident in certain sections of the press throughout the opening decades of the eighteenth century. Nathaniel Mist's *Weekly Journal*, for example, ran for twenty years, first as *Mist's Weekly Journal* and then as *Fog's Weekly Journal*. During its boldest stage between 1720 and 1723, the paper's title illustration included a figure surrounded by rays of light – a representation of James III as a sun-god – with the caption 'Advenit Ille Dies' [that day is coming].<sup>13</sup> The relationship between newspapers and Jacobitism thus reveals the contradictory and complex nature of public opinion, as well as providing some evidence of the role that newspapers played in influencing it.



The *Weekly Journal*, or *Saturday's Post*, 25 August 1722.  
No 196. Vol. 49B.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Ransome, 'The press in the general election of 1710', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 6:2 (1939), p. 219.

<sup>7</sup> G.A. Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 118–19.

<sup>8</sup> William Bragg Ewald, *The Newsmen of Queen Anne* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 77–8.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Rogers, 'Popular disturbances in early Hanoverian London', *Past and Present* (1978).

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 112–13.

<sup>11</sup> *Daily Courant*, 10 August, 1715.

<sup>12</sup> *Daily Courant*, 22 and 23 August, 1715.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Monod, *Jacobitism and the English People 1688–1788* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 29–30, 78.

## Robert Walpole and the Excise Crisis

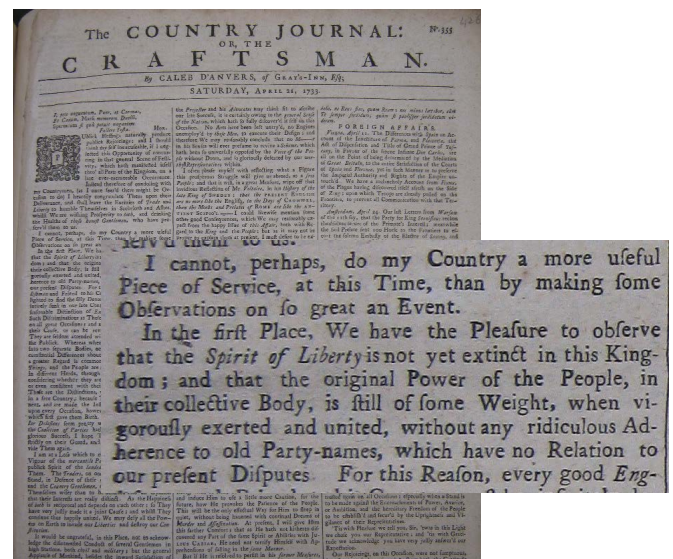
The potential of the newspaper press to shape opinion was not lost on the most prominent politician of the early eighteenth century, Sir Robert Walpole, who attempted to use it to consolidate his power. However, despite his best efforts to tar all his opponents with a Jacobite brush, a lively opposition press still emerged from the later 1720s which was not generally Jacobite, but which challenged his rule as one of corruption and undue influence. Two of Walpole's greatest and most famous critics were William Pulteney and Lord Bolingbroke, who joined forces in the essay paper, *The Craftsman*. They espoused 'country' politics, as opposed to those of the court, and campaigned for shorter parliaments and against both a standing army and Walpole's corrupt use of the Crown's influence. As H.T. Dickinson has shown, they were not alone in their attacks on Walpole, and the majority of the provincial press was largely hostile towards the Prime Minister, often reprinting material from journals such as *The Craftsman* to prove it.<sup>14</sup>

For the most part, the constant tirade of press criticism which Walpole encountered did not seem to affect his rule. Thus Walpole's premiership outlived titles such as *The Craftsman*, which folded in 1736, and he survived general elections, the accession of a new king, and scandals such as the South Sea Bubble crisis. But Walpole was profoundly affected when press criticism coincided with particularly powerful bursts of public sentiment, most notably in 1733 and between 1739 and 1740.

The first of these accompanied the Excise crisis of 1733–4. Walpole had hoped to abolish Land Tax by increasing the excise on tobacco and wine, yet the uproar which this action caused took the government by surprise. Fifty-four counties and boroughs sent formal constituency instructions against the measure to MPs, and the country was flooded with pamphlets, broadsides and newspapers condemning Walpole's actions. As the *London Evening Post* noted, 'the Sense of the People in general is against the Promoters of the Excise and other pernicious Projects'.<sup>15</sup> Horror stories exploited fears that the extensive powers of search given to revenue officers would put traditional privacy over property at risk and that the right to trial by jury was also under threat.

One of the causes of both the wave of alarm which swept the country and Walpole's ultimate and humiliating defeat was the advance news of the scheme disseminated by the press, and by *The Craftsman* in particular, during the winter of 1732.

Rumours spread like wildfire in the newspapers, where they were copied assiduously. According to the government paper, the *London Journal*, 'had not some Gentlemen, out of Power, set up *Incendiary Journals to deceive and inflame*, not one Man in a thousand would have said a Word against the Administration'.<sup>16</sup> Once the constituency instructions to MPs began to appear, these too were published by opposition newspapers, as were lists showing how individual MPs voted when the measure was presented in parliament.<sup>17</sup> Most contemporary accounts would seem to back the *London Evening Post's* claim that 'no other Cry is heard than what is the universal Voice of the People throughout the Country, No Excise, Liberty, and Property'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, when the *London Daily Courant* made disparaging remarks about the merchants who opposed the bill, it was burnt in the city by the common hangman.<sup>19</sup> The withdrawal of the scheme prompted widespread public celebration, confirming, Paul Langford asserts, 'that perseverance would have been dangerous indeed'.<sup>20</sup> In the aftermath of the agitation, *The Craftsman* claimed that 'The Spirit of Liberty is not yet extinct in this Kingdom ... the original Power of the People, in their collective Body, is still of some Weight, when vigorously exerted and united'.<sup>21</sup>



The Country Journal, or the Craftsman, 21 April 1733  
No 355. Vol. 80D

<sup>14</sup> Dickinson, *Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, pp. 206–7.  
<sup>15</sup> Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 128.  
<sup>16</sup> Paul Langford, *The Excise Crisis: Society and Politics in the Age of Walpole* (Oxford, 1975), p. 48.  
<sup>17</sup> Speck, 'Politics and the press', p. 57.  
<sup>18</sup> G.A. Cranfield, 'The "London Evening Post", 1727–1744', *Historical Journal*, 6 (1963), p. 24.  
<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989), p. 53.  
<sup>20</sup> Paul Langford, *Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 30–1.  
<sup>21</sup> Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 134.

Although Walpole survived, he lost the clear support of the electorate and the propertied public to which he could lay claim previously. During the 1734 general election, the Excise Bill was still an important issue and greatly affected the government's electoral standing. The Duke of Dorset did not hesitate to blame this on the popular resentment created by the bill.<sup>22</sup> In the most populous constituencies, those MPs who had voted for the excise found themselves in serious trouble.<sup>23</sup>

According to the *London Evening Post*:

'Despite the vain Boastings of the Friends of the Excise Scheme ... For tho' your little Boroughs are venal and corrupt, almost all the Counties in England are sound and untainted, as may be seen by those Counties which have already elected the Representatives; which plainly shows that the Sense of the People in general is against the Promoters of the Excise and other pernicious Projects'.<sup>24</sup>

Walpole remained in power, but his majority in parliament was much reduced and he was left with very little room for manoeuvre.

## War with Spain

Between 1738 and 1742, Walpole was again subjected to a popular and broad-based anti-ministerial coalition, this time deeply critical of his conduct regarding Spain. Whilst Walpole favoured a peaceful policy, much of the rest of the country was more bellicose, with attacks on British trade being held up as a just cause for war. In 1738, petitions from London, Bristol, Glasgow and Liverpool were accompanied by well-orchestrated press campaigns. Against the backdrop of further public hostility in 1739, Walpole narrowly secured a majority in the Commons to ratify a treaty with Spain. This prompted another round of protests, and by the end of the year war was formally declared. Walpole was deeply unhappy, but was powerless in the face of both a parliamentary opposition and a public clamouring for war, the mood of which had infected some of his colleagues in government. In this national atmosphere, London newspaper cries for war with Spain and the end of corruption at home were echoed by provincial papers.<sup>25</sup> In 1740, the Bishop of Chester complained to the Duke of Newcastle of 'the unwearied industry of some to poison the common people with ill thoughts of the Administration'. 'This poison is', he claimed, 'chiefly conveyed by a course of newspapers dispers'd all over these and neighbouring parts'.<sup>26</sup>

Much of the popular opposition to Walpole became focused on the figure of Admiral Vernon, the hero of the naval success

against the Spanish at Porto Bello in 1739. When news of his victory reached England in March 1740, public celebrations were held in his honour. Vernon was fêted by merchants in particular, but he was popular amongst a much wider section of society since, like Drake and Raleigh before him, he represented 'the intrepid naval commander of a Protestant island battling the Catholic foe'.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, as a former MP and vocal critic of the government, he was a powerful focal point for opposition to Walpole's ministry: a patriotic antidote to Walpolean corruption. As the *London Evening Post* argued in April 1740, 'a certain great Man should interpret all the Applauses heap'd upon Admiral Vernon as so many Satires upon himself'.<sup>28</sup> Newspapers played a key role in championing Vernon's cause, and not only acted to disseminate news of Vernon's exploits, but also endowed them with specific political significance.<sup>29</sup> The press as a whole was full of reports of Vernon's successes, and newspaper reports were accompanied by pamphlets, prints, poems and ballads.

Walpole's standing did not improve once war was declared. Indeed, his position became increasingly untenable as his conduct of the war was attacked. Again, part of the pressure on him came from newspapers. The *London Evening Post* claimed that 'it is as common for them [the Spaniards], notwithstanding the War, to drink *Don Roberto's* Health, as it is his Catholick Majesty's; tho' some Wags have upon this jocularly replied, *They have good Reason for that: they know their Friends*'.<sup>30</sup> Such was the weight of public opinion against Walpole that the Duke of Newcastle predicted that 'If we go on despising what people think and say, we shall not have it long in our power to direct what measures shall be taken'.<sup>31</sup> A failed attack on Cuba in 1741, which was blamed on the government's failure to send Vernon sufficient support, proved to be the final straw for many and helped to topple Walpole's government.

<sup>22</sup> Dickinson, *Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, p. 52.

<sup>23</sup> Langford, *The Excise Crisis*, p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> Cranfield, 'The "London Evening Post", 1727-1744', p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Bob Harris, 'The London press, popular power and the fall of Sir Robert Walpole (1741-1742)', *Journal of History and Politics*, 7 (1989), 49-76; Cranfield, *Development of the Provincial Newspaper*, pp. 132-3.

<sup>26</sup> Dickinson, *Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, pp. 206-7.

<sup>27</sup> Gerald Jordan and Nicholas Rogers, 'Admirals as heroes: patriotism and liberty in Hanoverian England', *Journal of British Studies*, 28 (1989), pp. 205-6.

<sup>28</sup> Cranfield, 'The "London Evening Post", 1727-1744', p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Kathleen Wilson, 'Empire, trade and popular politics in mid-Hanoverian Britain: the case of Admiral Vernon', *Past and Present*, 121 (1988), p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Cranfield, 'The "London Evening Post", 1727-1744', p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Rogers, 'Resistance to oligarchy: the city opposition to Walpole and his successors, 1725-47', in John Stevenson, ed., *London in the Age of Reform* (Oxford, 1977), p. 9.

The *Daily Post* reported on 17 December that letters from Vernon declared that ‘he has zealously labour’d for the Glory and the Good of the Nation, as long as he thought himself in a Condition to do so’, but having sailed to Cuba he had found himself ‘destitute of Necessaries to finish his Expedition with Glory’. Nothing in defence of the government appeared in the paper to counter Vernon’s claims.<sup>32</sup> Press attacks against Walpole did not end upon his fall from power. The *London Evening Post* expressed typical fury and demanded an inquiry into Walpole’s rule:

‘Should any Great M–n–st–r, after a blundering Administration of twenty Years be permitted at last to retire with the Spoils of his Country; and without mentioning the immense Sums he has in that Time squander’d, enjoy at Ease the vast Fortunes he has rais’d, the stately Palaces he has built ... and for his glorious Services created a [Peer] of the Realm ...?’<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

Though popular clamour had a limited effect on government prior to 1750, it could make a difference at times of political crisis. During such periods, newspapers gained increasing prominence, although arguably they were still not as important as pamphlets or essay papers in influencing the nature of public debate. As we have seen, the newspaper press was involved in the Sacheverell agitation at the start of the century, and played an important part in publicising and promoting anti-Jacobite sentiment in the face of the 1715 rebellion. Newspaper involvement in the anti-excite agitation of 1733–4 was more emphatic and contributed to the government’s abandonment of its new taxation plans, as well as seriously weakening Walpole’s grip on power. He was finally forced to relinquish this power following the failure of his Spanish policy. Walpole’s downfall was as much the result of popular hostility outside parliament as it was from a more powerful opposition within it. According to Wilson, ‘it was one of the many occasions in the eighteenth century when the “sense of the people” had direct and material results, despite the structural odds against its doing so.’<sup>34</sup> As we have seen, much of the popular anti-Walpole sentiment was directly related to newspaper coverage. Though they were not the only factor in his political downfall, newspapers, alongside other forms of print, had helped to seriously weaken Walpole’s grip on power, giving some indication of the way in which the press would increasingly influence English political life in the coming decades.

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<sup>32</sup> Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 163.

<sup>33</sup> Cranfield, ‘The “London Evening Post”, 1727–1744’, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 163.