

# Afterword: ‘I will play my part!’, or parliamentary politics in action

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**Andrew Barry**

Department of Geography, University College London, UK

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On the 9th September 2019, the Speaker of the British House of Commons, John Bercow, challenged Boris Johnson’s Conservative Government on its prorogation (temporary suspension) of Parliament. The Government’s action was not, Bercow contended, a ‘normal prorogation’ at all:

I will play my part! This is not, however, a normal prorogation. It is not typical, it is not standard, it is one of the longest for a decade and it represents not just in the minds of many colleagues, but a large number of people outside, an act of executive fiat. (House of Commons, 2019b: 646)

The debate about prorogation, which led to a ruling by the Supreme Court that the prorogation was, in fact, unconstitutional, just one of an extraordinary sequence of events that followed the United Kingdom European Union (‘Brexit’) referendum of 2016. Prorogation referred, for a brief time, not just to a little-known parliamentary procedure; it had become what Marres (2007) would term ‘an issue’ that animated controversy. The form of this controversy is familiar enough to STS scholars. For the Government, prorogation was merely a technical device, part of the black-boxed machinery of Parliament that the Government could utilize as required as it sought to manage its business. In contrast, according to the opposition, including many members of the Conservative Party, the Government had turned prorogation into a tactical political device that was being used illegitimately to prevent MPs from scrutinizing its position on Brexit, including the possibility that its actions could lead to a ‘no-deal’ withdrawal from the European

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## Correspondence to:

Andrew Barry, Department of Geography, University College London, London, WC1E 6BT, UK.

Email: [a.barry@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.barry@ucl.ac.uk)

Union on October 31st of that year. The controversial status of prorogation was further complicated by the question of what Johnson had earlier told the Queen when he requested that she formally grant prorogation – given that it is conventional that a Prime Minister’s conversations with the monarch are confidential. Had the Prime Minister dragged the Queen, who was expected to be a merely titular sovereign and above politics, down into the murky world of parliamentary politics in action?

Yet the Speaker’s statement on prorogation, along with many of his other interventions in the period 2016–19, directs us not just towards the temporal logic of the parliamentary debate about Brexit, but also to some of the wider concerns raised in this collection about parliaments as spaces of political action. Bercow’s successive interventions in the Brexit debate do so in two ways. First, they draw attention to the relation between the technical device of parliamentary procedure and the sovereignty of Parliament. After all, the speaker had consistently sought to defend the sovereignty of the British Parliament – a sovereignty that, according to constitutional lawyers, remains one of the few core principles of the UK’s unwritten constitution (Eeckhout, 2018). If the government was using prorogation as a way of circumventing the sovereignty of Parliament, then the act of prorogation surely was unconstitutional. At the time of the prorogation this question was complicated further because the government, which could normally express the sovereign will of Parliament as it commanded a majority, had no such majority and could no longer do so. As Waldron has observed, arithmetic is the ‘physics of [parliamentary] politics’, because ‘bills do not reason themselves into legal authority; they are thrust into authority *with nothing more than numbers on their side*’ (Waldron, 1999: 127, my emphasis). Numbers matter more than reason. In this context, the issue of Brexit turned out to be a controversy not just about UK membership of the European Union, but about whether sovereignty was embodied in the collective will of the people, in the Government (which claimed to be able to articulate this will), or in the arithmetic result of collective parliamentary work (Brichzin, 2020; Laube et al., 2020). Indeed, the Brexit referendum of 2016 had generated a constitutional crisis by forging an opposition between the sovereignty (or will) of the people, expressed through the result of the Brexit referendum, and the sovereignty of Parliament, embodied in the composition of the membership of the House of Commons, the majority of whom had not supported Brexit prior to the referendum. For individual parliamentarians, the Brexit referendum placed them in a potentially conflicted position. Should they ‘listen to the people’, whose voice had, according to supporters of Brexit, been given authentic expression in the Brexit referendum? Or should parliamentarians follow the principle of representation embodied in parliamentary democracy? The act of representation, as Brichzin (2020) explains, is a quite peculiar phenomenon in terms of action: ‘Democratic representation operates by establishing connections between the represented and the representative; it refers to the form of acting, “on behalf of”.’

Bercow did not pose the question explicitly in these terms. Instead, throughout 2016–19, he referred not to unwritten constitutional principles, but to the history of Parliamentary procedure, arguably re-interpreted by him for exceptional times. For example, during the final stages of the Theresa May government in March 2019 he explained that ‘what the government *cannot do* is resubmit to the House [of Commons] the same proposition [a particular version of the Brexit withdrawal bill]’ that it had submitted earlier but had been

defeated on in the subsequent vote (House of Commons, 2019a: 776, my emphasis). In drawing attention to the critical importance of Parliamentary procedure – that the same Bill could not be resubmitted for a second vote – and the rules governing the application of parliamentary arithmetic, his interventions also draw attention to a second theme of this collection, that parliaments are places of work that can only function because their procedures are recognized by all of those working as parliamentarians. As Waldron explains, there is a necessary arbitrariness to all parliamentary procedures, yet these procedures generally function, and parliaments can exist as places of more or less routinized practice, because all participants accept both the arbitrariness and the legitimacy of their procedures. For Waldron, ‘persisting disagreement’ is one of the necessary features of politics in action (Waldron, 1999: 153; also Barry, 2002). Yet disagreement can be overcome by parliament, according to Waldron, not through the achievement of consensus, nor by the application of rational calculation, but because, despite disagreement, there is agreement about the procedures through which decisions are performed – notwithstanding the complexity, as Law (2002: 150) reminds us, of what we might mean by ‘a decision’. Implicit or explicit procedural rules govern the organization of parliamentary time and space, or what Dányi terms the ‘temporal logic’ of parliamentary politics.

In making his ruling against the resubmission of the same Brexit withdrawal bill by May’s government, Bercow’s intervention cited precedents – from 1864, 1870, 1882, 1891 and 1912. Given that the procedures of the House of Commons are necessarily arbitrary, and might therefore be illegitimately transformed by ‘executive fiat’, their arbitrariness needs to be stabilized by history (Palonen, 2016). Here an analogy between laboratories and parliaments is instructive. Just as the reliability and accuracy of laboratory procedures needs to be maintained by the ongoing invisible work of technicians, and laboratory instruments routinely need to be recalibrated, the ongoing order of parliament cannot be assumed. The legitimacy of procedure needs to be continually sustained and sometimes re-invented, even in, and perhaps especially in, a period of intense instability. Arguably, it is only in the context of an escalating crisis that the work required to maintain and manage the machinery (the ‘black box’) of parliament becomes particularly visible, as its operation itself becomes controversial. In Westminster, the role of the Speaker is to maintain the machinery in good order and, when necessary, to order the actions of others:

Sometimes you get these pop-up characters [MPs] who think they understand these matters on the basis of minimal familiarity with the said Standing Orders and presume to say that the rules have been broken. They are entitled to their opinions, but they suffer from the notable disadvantage of being completely wrong (House of Commons, 2019b: 520)

What then is the added value of a specifically STS approach to the study of parliamentary politics in action? There are two answers to this question. One is that STS provides a necessary corrective to dominant accounts of parliamentary politics that tend to have little to say about the machinery of parliamentary political action, including the work of those such as assistants and clerks, which is systematically rendered invisible (Laube et al., 2020). As the research of the contributors to this collection makes abundantly clear, the machinery of parliamentary politics is far from incidental to politics. Bercow’s

statements direct us towards the critical importance of the timing and spacing of parliamentary politics in action, the temporal logic of politics and its ongoing management. His interventions became notable not just in relation to major questions such as the legitimacy of prorogation, but apparently minor details to do with the material culture of parliament such as the presence and use mobile phones. Commenting on the conduct of the Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, he observed:

to sit on the bench [ie on one of the back benches rather than on the front bench where Government ministers would usually sit] is one thing ... but to sit there fiddling with an electronic device defies the established convention of this House that such devices should be used – and I remind members – without impairing Parliamentary decorum (House of Commons, 2016: 189).

Thus, one of the contributions of STS to the study of parliamentary politics mirrors the contribution of STS to studies of markets and economic arrangements. ‘An economic arrangement is one that renders behaviours and processes economic ... [where] the meaning of what is to be “economic” is precisely the outcome of a process of “economization”, a process that is historical, contingent and disputable’ (Muniesa et al., 2007: 3). Likewise, STS studies of parliamentary politics insist on the importance of attending to the specificity of arrangements that serve to render parliament as a distinct space of representative democracy, within which decisions can be reached despite continuing disagreement. Rather than assume that the capacity of parliament to perform representative democracy is stable, STS-inspired studies of parliaments attend how it is assembled and reassembled in practice. The figure of Bercow is instructive precisely because his actions came to illuminate the fragility of this assembly.

There is a resonance here between the STS approach to the study of parliamentary politics and the work of political theorists such as Crick, who once launched what he termed a ‘defence of politics’. Writing in the early 1960s, Crick was critical of those who understood politics primarily in terms of ideologies or interests – in other words, in his terms, as something like economic activity. Rather, Crick insisted, as Weber had previously, that parliamentary and party politics have their own specificity as historical practices: ‘politics is politics, to be valued as itself, not because it is like or “really is” something more respectable or peculiar’ (Crick, 2000: 16). Politics, as Asdal and Hobæk (2020) remind us, ‘is a particular form of work’. An STS approach has value for the study of parliamentary politics, then, not because parliamentary politics is ‘like science’, but because many of the concerns of STS researchers serve to illuminate aspects of politics that are systematically ignored by political scientists. Rather than the rationalizing programme of analysis advanced by political scientists, STS accounts of parliamentary politics have been concerned as much with ‘the detail of the concrete’ (Oakeshott, 1962: 63).

If the contributors to this collection inevitably draw attention to the limitations of political science, then the second value of STS studies of parliament is that that they direct us to consider the limits of existing STS accounts of politics. One of the key contributions of STS has been to shift the focus of analysis away from the machinery of established politics (including parliaments and states), and to reorient attention not just towards the analysis of social and political movements, as is common in political

sociology, but towards forms of political actors that are typically not regarded as political at all. For Latour, ‘the machinery of what is officially political is only the tip of the iceberg compared with many other activities generated by many more “activists” than those who claim to do politics *per se*’ (Latour, 2007: 813). And for Marres (2007) the key contribution of STS is to offer an ‘object oriented’ analysis of politics that considers how objects, as they become issues, animate political engagement.

How do STS studies of parliament complicate or problematize the account of politics proposed by Latour and Marres? How is it possible not just to analyse what is below the water, but to re-describe the ‘tip of the iceberg’? One observation appears, at first sight, banal. In parliaments, issues never exist in isolation. Issues struggle to find time and space and compete for the attention of parliamentarians who, as Brichzin observes in this volume, are constantly in motion. Issues co-exist in parallel in parliaments, blocking, colliding and combining with each other (Brichzin, 2020). On the day on which Bercow denounced the Government’s claim that the prorogation of Parliament was normal, a range of other matters were also addressed, however briefly, including the quality of apprenticeships (House of Commons, 2019b: 480), the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act, and the UK government’s response to Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas (House of Commons, 2019b: 24WS). In this light, a focus on specific issues is far too limited. In parliaments, issues powerfully interfere with each other, and become folded into other issues, as was the case in September 2019 when the question of whether or not withdrawal from the European Union would or would not lead to a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland became increasingly critical to the Brexit debate. On September 10th in particular, the debate about prorogation restricted discussion of the government of Northern Ireland to a minimum. According to one MP, ‘prorogation was inappropriate precisely because of the volume of work on Northern Ireland that needs to be done in this House – then we would have made more time and space for debates on Northern Ireland across all the issues that the House will not be able to debate tonight’ (House of Commons, 2019b: 519). Working in a laboratory, a scientist would never attempt to carry out more than a few distinct experiments at any one time, and never claim to be an expert in both pharmaceutical chemistry and climate modeling when speaking in public. But in parliaments radically distinct issues need to be processed in parallel, and sometimes rapidly, with unexpected consequences. ‘The decisive historical experience of the Westminster parliament is the proliferation of items on the agenda that began after the 1832 reform act’ (Palonen, 2016: 195). In these circumstances the management of parliamentary time matters greatly, so that in Westminster the role of Speaker is critical (Palonen, 2016: 175). It is no surprise that Jeremy Bentham was concerned, amongst many other questions, not just with the architectural space of parliamentary assemblies, but also with the timing of debate and votes, when adjournments were permissible and desirable, and the proper role of the President of the Assembly – who, as Bentham noted, was referred to as the Speaker in the British Parliament (Bentham, 1791: 2).

A second observation is suggested by the work of Asdal, who has criticized actor-network theory for its surprising indifference to the significance of history. As Asdal rightly argues, history should not be understood as a given context that can be used to account for events. ‘Rather than putting actor-network theory in opposition to history,

actor-network theory may be employed as a historicizing method that may serve to fruitfully problematize a conventional contextualizing approach' (Asdal, 2012: 398). In parliamentary politics, history is continually reactivated and given new significance. On the one hand, the legitimacy and machinery of parliaments need to be sustained and maintained, as we have seen. The constitution of a parliament does not just exist in the present; its continual assembly and reassembly depends on the use of historical materials. No wonder that Bercow, in a moment of crisis, and lacking any recourse to a written constitution, needed to invoke historical precedent in order to refuse the government's request to present the same Brexit bill for a second time. On the other hand, the historical formation of existing parliamentary assemblies may also need to be systematically questioned. Dányi and Spencer observe that in the Northern Territory, Australia, 'a series of initiatives have been aimed at refiguring governance practices', contesting the forms of systematic exclusion and violence associated with the ongoing presence of colonialism in Australian parliaments (Dányi and Spencer, 2020). The idea of a parliament as a singular space for the articulation of what Latour termed a 'common world' (Latour, 2004: 239) remains problematic in the context of a 'bitter history' of a system of government that continues to fail to recognize the standing of indigenous law (Yolngu people, 2008).

Moreover, the events that come to animate parliamentary deliberations are also drawn from historical elements. These include the history of bureaucratic cases (Asdal and Hobæk, 2020), and much more besides. Elsewhere I have argued that studies of knowledge controversies need to attend to the ways in which controversies may draw together and reactivate multiple historical vectors of contention (Barry, 2013). Rather than focus narrowly on particular issues or matters of concern, there is a need to consider shifting and contested political situations that may bring apparently distinct issues together in unanticipated configurations. One of the practical skills of the politician in parliament is to be alert to the ways in which, on certain occasions, procedure may enable issues to be articulated with other issues or, equally, to be kept quite separate. Parliament is a diagram of political power (Dányi, 2020; Deleuze, 1988: 40): a set of spaces, instruments and procedures that makes new combinations possible, while blocking or rendering invisible others. Parliament is also an apparatus, one might say, that simultaneously creates the possibility for events while both containing and enlarging their consequences (Ingram, 2019).

STS researchers and political sociologists alike have long recognized the limitations of state-centric vision of politics and, indeed, have demonstrated that the 'state' can be understood as an effect of the operation of power rather than as its source. Yet although it is necessary to decentre politics and to interrogate the operation of political power beyond the state, this does not imply that 'everything is political', or that science is a form of politics by other means. Rather, it is necessary to trace the ways in which things become or can be made political, wherever this takes place. Given that STS has sought to direct attention towards the objects of politics (the issues) and away from the intentions and interests of well-known political actors, is there not a danger that, by focusing on parliament, STS researchers will end up re-inventing the idea that power is something that is produced centrally, by the sovereign power of governments or parliaments, and only subsequently flows outwards? This is not, however, a lesson that we should draw here. Rather, the essays in this volume should be understood as fragments of a different

political geography, which is dispersed across multiple sites of political action that include but are not centred on parliaments. Within this distributed model of politics, parliaments may of course come to generate unexpected events. But the specific role they play can only be understood if we attend not just to the maneuvers of parties and governments, but also to the architectures, procedures and practices that characterize parliaments – including the neglected practices of those figures who are integral to their ongoing existence.

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### Author biography

Andrew Barry is Professor of Human Geography, University College London, and author of *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society* (2001) and *Material Politics: Disputes along the Pipeline* (2013). While a graduate student he worked as Research Assistant to Jeremy Bray MP, Labour Party Spokesperson on Science and Technology in the House of Commons.