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Controlling a Complex Metropolis, 1650–1750: politics, parishes and powers

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The period from 1650 to 1750 was not one characterised by major institutional innovation in the government of London, let alone revolutionary structural change. The contrast between the centralised and well-organised government of the City and the atomised and somewhat improvised governmental institutions of the rest of the metropolis was as striking at the end of the period as it was at the beginning. Though the constitutional framework of the corporation by which the City was governed was undoubtedly the focus of considerable contest and controversy, there was in the event little lasting change. Nor was there real change to the situation outside the City, where responsibility for local government was shared by parish vestries and justices. However serious the problems that this structure, or lack of structure, entailed, they had not yet generated enough urgency or concern to lead to significant reform.

However, structural forms are not the only possible locus of change. The nature of government changed and the power relations between national and local government shifted, as did the scope and competence of administrative activity. Many of the characteristic features of today's London's governance emerged or became significant in this period and many aspects of the modern metropolitan experience were formed then.¹

Themes

This paper covers the period stretching from the Civil War of the 1640s, when popular feeling in London sided decisively with Parliament against the Crown, to the 1740s, when, though the capital nourished some Jacobite yearnings, the City establishment effectively backed the Westminster government. The period embraces such episodes on the national stage as the inception and collapse of the republic and the Cromwellian protectorate, the Glorious Revolution of 1688–9, the effective establishment of the Hanoverian dynasty, and Britain's commitment to a series of major foreign and colonial wars and the building of an empire. It saw the capital's population grow by half or two-thirds again, from some 400,000 in 1650 to 675,000 in 1750.² It also saw this population decimated by the last great epidemic of the European age of plague in 1665, when 69,000 people died. London made a remarkable recovery from this and from the Great Fire of 1666 that devastated the core of the walled city, centre of commerce and trade. The Fire resulted in a rebuilding of the city to new standards of space and amenity, but it may also have encouraged the westward spread of retail, entertainment and service industries. Over the period 1650 to 1750 London sprawled more widely, to east and west, and north and south of the river and by the time of John Rocque's map of 1746, the continuously

built-up area stretched from Hyde Park Corner in the west to Whitechapel and Wapping in the east, and from Clerkenwell and Hoxton in the north to Smith Square and the start of the Old Kent Road in the south. The centre of gravity shifted westwards, into the West End with whose outlines we are all familiar.³ In physical terms, modern Londoners would recognise much of the London of 1750, at least in street names and street pattern, as well as building type – the Georgian town-house or terrace and its descendants – if not in presently surviving buildings.⁴ We would recognise many characteristics of mid-eighteenth century Londoners too: the growth of a middling class, a consuming society, employed largely in service industries and the professions, enjoying an increasing degree of domestic comfort and sharing in a public culture of entertainment and sociability.

It was a century of immense political, economic, social and cultural change, but in the context of London's government there were three main developments on which this paper will focus. The overarching one is the politicisation of London government, both as an issue and as a process: that is, the politicisation of the process of choosing or identifying the governors of London, and the increased significance in national party-politics of the stance of London's governors. Underpinning this, and enhancing its importance, is the financial revolution and the invention of 'the City' as we understand the term. The period saw the foundation of the Bank of England and of a new kind of government finance. Relations between the government at Westminster and the City in this sense were of paramount importance, but were complicated by the variable extent of overlap between the great figures of the financial City and the leaders of the City as a corporate local-government authority. Thirdly, I would argue that local government in the rest of London, while still fairly *ad hoc* in its institutions, began to respond to heightened expectations of the quality of life in the metropolis. In the process, however, it encountered a number of new problems, notably that of accountability.

The politicisation of London government

English politics were polarised by the Civil War and the conflicts of the 1640s and 1650s. There were lasting and bitter antagonisms in post-Restoration England, and no shortage of political issues to keep them alive. The Restoration settlement settled very little in that key matters such as the royal prerogative, parliamentary authority, and religious toleration remained controversial. It would be misleading to imply that roundhead and cavalier simply mutated into the Whig and Tory of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the situation was much more fluid. 'Court' and 'Country' allegiances, the opposition between the landed and the so-called 'monied' interests, and simple rivalry between those who were in power and those who were excluded from it, meant that identities and affinities were often shifting. There is also the important fact that the Whig party moved from oppositionist, libertarian criticism of the regime under Charles II and James II to being the party of power and the author of notoriously anti-libertarian measures in the early eighteenth century, while the Tory party gained popular backing especially for its high-church position. Religious affiliation formed an intrinsic part of ideological and political identities from the Civil War and well into the eighteenth century. Differing attitudes towards toleration or conformity caused sharp divisions between individuals and groups. There was a significant overlap between Whiggism and

Dissent and the monied interest, and a similar overlap between Anglicanism and Toryism, but London contained multitudes and its political temper defies simple or consistent characterisation. At different moments its rulers, its representatives, and the popular voice – which were rarely identical – were parliamentarian, monarchist, independent, presbyterian, Anglican, anti-Catholic, pro-Hanoverian, or mildly Jacobite.

The Civil War had a long legacy in London. The decisive commitment of the City and its resources to the parliamentarian side came about in a combination of direct popular action (including mass petitioning of Parliament), and constitutional upheaval, as a more radical group of citizens took power in Common Council and overthrew the cautious conservatism of the aldermanic elite.⁵ Both popular protest and political division within the governing class were to characterise London politics over the next century. The development of adversarial politics also led to constitutional change and experiment in the attempt to consolidate power in the hands of a particular group; the fact that there appeared to be political polarisation between the Court of Aldermen and Common Council focused constitutional contest on the issue of their relative powers and independence. During the Civil War years, Common Council established itself as the principal authority in the City, largely independent of aldermanic control. Although this position was lost at the Restoration, it remained a significant issue.⁶ What also came to the fore in the Restoration years was the importance of parliamentary contests in the City, which returned four M.P.s. The outcome of both local and parliamentary elections could be influenced, or even decided, by revising definitions of the civic franchise and by the intervention of mayoral or aldermanic authority, so several apparently internal constitutional issues also had an outward impact.⁷

It is thus impossible to separate London politics from national politics under Charles II and his successors. Not every manifestation of this can be illustrated, but one can for example point to the important role that a parliamentarian/republican faction in London, backed by strong popular anti-Catholic feeling, played in the attempt to exclude the Catholic duke of York from the succession to the throne in 1679–81. London's M.P.s were vociferous supporters of the Exclusion Bill, and the City authorities themselves promoted several massive petitions; Charles's decision to hold the third of three shortlived parliaments called during the crisis at Oxford was undoubtedly motivated by fears of the likely intervention of the London crowd. The Exclusion Crisis was also inextricably enmeshed in City politics: shrieval elections, for example, had wide implications, since sheriffs impanelled juries and so could affect the outcome of criminal trials with a political bearing.⁸ After the Exclusion Crisis, the City and the crown went head-to-head again over the City's charter, which the king suspended in 1683, imposing direct rule from Westminster. In this he was motivated possibly by a desire for revenge and certainly by the wish to ensure that London's internal government was in the hands of 'safe men' and that London's M.P.s would be chosen by an electorate purged of his opponents.⁹

London's support was, quite simply, crucial to the success of the revolution of 1688–9. As in the 1640s, this was due to a combination of, on the one hand, popular action, including parliamentary petitioning, and, on the other, the participation of an organised and articulate party of aldermen, common councillors, and subsequently M.P.s in pushing forward a political solution. Equally, once the dust had settled, the internal governance of the City was a pressing issue. James II had

restored the suspended charter but, as the act of a dethroned monarch, this needed to be further secured. A Whig-dominated Court of Aldermen drafted a constitutional bill that would have returned the balance of authority to Common Council and the representatives of the City electorate, though – so quickly did political fortunes change – a more conservative bill was in fact enacted. But there had still been a signal victory for the Whig interest in both national and City politics.¹⁰

The Invention of ‘the City’

Party-politics and constitutional issues were not the only areas affected by the Revolution of 1688–9. It had important financial aspects, including the invention of ‘the City’ as we understand the term. ‘Revolutionary finance’ or ‘the financial revolution’ are terms used by historians to denote the collaboration of moneyed interests in London and the government at Westminster which greatly enhanced the power of the state.¹¹ The role of London and Londoners in lending financial support – credit and credibility – to governments had been a significant feature of their relationship over the centuries.¹² The Civil War had demonstrated how much could be extracted from the City when it was actively committed to supporting the government at Westminster; but the vicissitudes of party strife and monarchical government in the Restoration years had also shown up the precariousness of this relationship. The wealth of late seventeenth-century London was enormous, but for both technical and political reasons it could not be harnessed to the realisation of government policy. Continuing suspicion about the king’s internal and foreign policies certainly played a part, especially since a significant number of wealthy London merchants belonged to the dissenting interest.¹³ London’s support for a Williamite solution in 1688–9, therefore, was exceptionally important.

After the revolution, the securing of the constitution and the firm commitment of the Whig interest in the City to William III’s government and its policies opened the way to a real and lasting collaboration. This relationship was not a simple or uncontested development, but within a few years it had led to the establishment of the Bank of England and the creation of the national debt, and to a future in which national government could fund its activities through the financial market and public credit. With these resources at its command, William’s government was able to embark on a costly European war on a scale formerly inconceivable. These developments established a close association between successive Whig ministries and the moneyed interest in the city. The Whigs became identified as the party of power and privilege, and could also be seen as in thrall to Dissent: the subscribers to and directors of the Bank of England and the East India Company certainly included numerous well-known Whigs and Dissenters, including some who also served as aldermen in the period. The partisan nature of this collaboration, however, and the huge scale of this novel enterprise, certainly gave rise to anxiety and to attempts to divert or re-form the direction that such matters were taking. The dominant position of the Bank of England was resented in many quarters, as were its failings, and alternative schemes to fund or support government debt were floated.¹⁴

It was in this context – of high taxation to finance European war from the 1690s onwards, and a Dissenting/Whig hegemony in the city – that the Tories took on the mantle of defenders of the popular interest or at least of the small tradesman. They were also able to tap into disgruntled Anglicanism, the ever present

xenophobia of some Londoners, and latent support for the Jacobite cause. The rioting at the end of the trial for sedition of the inflammatory preacher Dr Sacheverell in 1710 graphically demonstrated the strength of popular Anglicanism and hostility to the long ascendancy of the Whig interest.¹⁵ Significantly, 1710–11 was also the moment when the government came closest to ‘losing the City’, in the sense of losing the financial backing of the moneyed interest in the city. But – ironically to modern eyes – this was a Tory ministry. Queen Anne was warned by the Bank that changing her ministers would ‘affect all the public credit’; the subsequent Tory victory at the polls brought on a crisis of credit, only resolved by hard negotiations between the Bank and the Treasury, and leading, among other things, to the floating of the South Sea Company in 1711 to take up further government debt.¹⁶ The Company’s scheme of 1719, which became the Bubble that burst, disastrously, in 1720, was a dubious but not overtly fraudulent proposal to redeem government credit after years of high war expenditure. In the event, though, it proved a disaster for many smaller investors but left the Whig oligarchy in the City and at Westminster strengthened but even more unpopular.¹⁷

The Tory leadership had lost heavily in 1714–15, but popular Toryism remained a feature of London politics and certainly influenced the attitude of Walpole’s ministry, engaging it, inevitably, in defence of the Whig and moneyed interest. The perception that Common Council was dominated by Tories, or at least by anti-ministry feeling, led to Walpole’s City Elections Act of 1725, which in the name of beneficial reform redrew the City franchise and asserted the aldermanic veto over Common Council’s actions. The balance of power between aldermen and Common Council had been a recurrent theme in London politics since the 1640s and although this act only remained in force until 1746, it demonstrates yet again how London’s government and constitution could be a pawn in manoeuvrings on the national political board.¹⁸ In the longer term, however, the Corporation and the financial City began to diverge: the great merchants and financiers no longer took up public office, as they had in the past, and the financial institutions dealt directly with national government rather than through the corporation. The national significance of the politics of City government declined, though it could reappear as a focus of political attention at moments of crisis.

The Rest of London

What of the rest of London? It is not inappropriate that the politics of City government has dominated this discussion, since that was arguably the most significant arena of constitutional debate and development. But at the same time, most Londoners were not directly party to these dissensions. Well over half the population of London at the start of the period, and at least three-quarters or even four-fifths by the end, lived outside the area of jurisdiction of the Corporation. While Londoners in general might participate in political activity, especially in Parliamentary elections in the Westminster constituency, which had a very wide franchise, and in crowd action on numerous occasions, there was little connection between party politics and the reality of local government in the rest of the metropolis. Focusing on the City is relevant here as well, however, since it does seem likely that the factious and contested condition of City politics, and the City’s significance to the Westminster government of the day, helped to postpone

consideration of London's government as a whole. If the government – whether the Stuart monarchy or the Whig ministerial oligarchy – believed that popular political attitudes in London were essentially oppositionist and critical (which on the whole they were) then there was little incentive to reform or democratise London's local government. This is not necessarily to say that national government conspired to stifle real pressure for change, but in the existing circumstances significant reform was unlikely.

The rest of London, therefore, had to make the best of its existing institutions. Both inside and outside the city, a considerable degree of authority lay in the hands of the parishes – tiny units of a few hundred houses within the walls, huge areas of densely-built development outside the city. In both cases, the parishes came under some superior authority, either the wardmotes and legislative councils of the City, or the justices of the peace for Middlesex and Surrey, who often exercised significant control.¹⁹ The alliance of parishes and J.P.s, institutions of fundamentally different origin, reflects the tendency of institutional evolution to co-opt useful structures and adapt them to changing ends. And indeed, many of the issues with which local government was confronted had both moral/religious and legal dimensions. The problem of poverty, for example, was addressed partly by raising and distributing monetary relief, and partly by disciplinary and punitive measures, but also by agitation for moral reform and the reformation of manners. In contemporary Paris the creation of a Lieutenant of Police, and the large-scale enclosure or institutionalisation of the poor, embodied both these demands and a means of solving them; in London, they had to be met by a much more *ad hoc* series of measures, empowerments, and expedients. In practice this reaffirmed the dependence of local authorities on the central state: in order to satisfy new needs, existing institutions needed new powers which could only be granted by the state.²⁰

Conclusion

How effective was local government in later seventeenth and eighteenth-century London? Certainly, major problems remained, but by the end of the period there had been progress in several areas. One of these was the beginnings of rationalisation of the parochial network to reflect the growth and shift of population. New parishes were created west of the City and south of the river in the later seventeenth century; more, both west and east, under the Fifty New Churches Act of 1711 (itself a product of the then Tory government's concern with the Church of England's loss of ground to Dissent in the capital).²¹ Creating new parishes had both religious and welfare dimensions, and though the effectiveness of the measure depended on the local personnel, it did at least offer the chance of an improved local context in which problems could be addressed. The period saw an increasing demand for effective local government, as expectations of safety and comfort rose. These expectations entailed the maintenance of order, protection for individuals and property, increased environmental amenity, and the control of poverty and the poor. The impression is that demands were growing stronger and more articulate in the first half of the eighteenth century, and that the midpoint of the century saw a critical advance on several fronts – lighting, paving, police, care of the poor. Because of the fragmentation of authority these advances were mostly piecemeal and local, usually under powers granted by the central state but

sometimes the result of private initiative and charity. The City obtained a Lighting Act in 1736, Spitalfields in 1738; Westminster got a Paving Act in 1762, and other parishes followed. The Bow Street police office was set up in 1749, and the Foundling Hospital in 1745.²²

Neither the parishes nor the benches of justices were democratic institutions; both showed some strain under their new powers and responsibilities. A third or more of the larger parish vestries were, or became, closed or select vestries, restricting administrative and executive decision-making to a small and often self-perpetuating group of ratepayers. Arguably, this could make for better, more efficient administration, and it certainly helped to keep party political contest at the local level to a minimum, but it also concentrated the profits and patronage of the office in a few hands and could encourage venality or corruption, as the complaints of excluded parishioners in certain cases make clear. Vestries were sometimes literally, and often in a more general sense, unaccountable. As local government became more active, in response to rising demands, and the sums of money it handled increased, so the problem grew, and not only in relation to closed vestries. One notorious feature was the manipulation of rating assessments, to favour friends and associates and also, at times, to include or exclude voters. Similarly, the benches of justices were made up by nomination and co-option, and the office was liable to subversion. In George Rudé's words 'the fact remains that the promotion of men of humble means to unpaid positions of authority, often involving considerable out-of-pocket expenses, opened the way for the unsavoury scandal of the "trading justice" ', who depended for his remuneration on the quantity of legal business he transacted.²³ There were certainly active, public-spirited, reforming justices, just as there must have been conscientious, responsible, disinterested vestrymen, but the misdeeds of their opposites have attracted more attention.²⁴ Corruption of an explicit kind did become a feature of London's public life in this period: though earlier practices had undoubtedly served the interests of the 'better', senior, wealthier part of society, and disfranchised the rest, they had probably not been overtly corrupt or corruptible in the same way. But as later developments have shown, a rewards system is one incentive to participation in public life; in the absence of an ethos of professionalised public service it is hard to see how local administrations could otherwise have been filled.

Individual contributions to a sequence of papers that deals with centuries of chronology and development can hardly offer universal conclusions. However, each one needs to make a point, to highlight the crucial events or developments in its allotted span, before the next paper presents a different perspective. In the period 1650 to 1750, then, London government changed, not so much in structure or institutions, but in character: it became highly politicised, entangled with national political issues, not least because of the development of revolutionary finance. Expectations of what both the state and local government could deliver rose; London's various authorities responded, often inventively and constructively, within their limitations, but new problems, notably that of accountability, emerged.

NOTES

1. For what follows, in addition to specifically cited works, see Barry Coward, *The Stuart Age. England, 1603–1714* (2nd. edn., Harlow, 1994); David L. Smith, *A history of the modern British*

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2. E. A. Wrigley, ‘A simple model of London’s importance in changing English society and economy, 1650–1750’, *Past & Present* 37 (1967), 44–70; V. Harding, ‘The population of London, 1550–1700: a review of the published evidence’, *London Journal*, 15 (1990), 111–28.
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 4. Cf. Elizabeth McKellar, *The Birth of Modern London: the development and design of the city, 1660–1720* (Manchester, 1999).
 5. R. Ashton, ‘Insurgency, counter-insurgency, and inaction: three phases in the role of the City in the Great Rebellion’, in S. Porter (ed.), *London and the Civil War* (1996), 45–64; V. Pearl, *London and the outbreak of the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford, 1961); R. Ashton, *The city and the court, 1603–43* (Cambridge, 1979); R. Brenner, *Merchants and revolution: commercial change, political conflict, and London overseas traders, 1550–1653* (Cambridge, 1992).
 6. Ashton, ‘Insurgency, counter-insurgency, and inaction’, 45–64; Pearl, *London and the outbreak*, esp. 107–59, 246–50.
 7. Henry Horwitz, ‘Party in a civic context: London from the exclusion crisis to the fall of Walpole’, in Clyve Jones (ed.), *Britain in the First Age of Party, 1680–1750: essays presented to Geoffrey Holmes* (1987), 173–94; Gary S. De Krey, *A Fractured Society: the politics of London in the first age of party, 1688–1715* (Oxford, 1985).
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 9. J. Levin, *The Charter Controversy in the City of London, 1660–1688, and its Consequences* (1969).
 10. Horwitz, ‘Party in a civic context’; R. A. Beddard, “The “Violent Party”: the Guildhall revolutionaries and the growth of opposition to James II”, *Guildhall Miscellany* 3(2) (1970), 120–36; John Miller, *The Glorious Revolution* (1983); De Krey, *A Fractured Society*, esp. 45–73.
 11. Henry Roseveare, *The Financial Revolution, 1660–1760* (1991); P. G. M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: a study in the development of public credit, 1688–1756* (1967); D. W. Jones, ‘London merchants and the “crisis” of the 1690s’, in Peter Clark and Paul Slack (eds), *Crisis and order in English towns* (1972), 311–55.
 12. See R. R. Sharpe, *London and the Kingdom* (3 vols., 1894–5); E. J. Davies and M. I. Peake, ‘Loans from the city of London to Henry VI, 1431–1449’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 4 (1926–7), 165–72; Caroline M. Barron, ‘London and the Crown, 1451–61, in J. R. L. Highfield and R. Jeffs (eds), *The Crown and Local Communities in England and France in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1981), 88–109; G. D. Ramsay, *The City of London in International Politics at the Accession of Elizabeth Tudor* (Manchester, 1975); Ashton, *The City and the Court*; R. Ashton, *The Crown and the Money Market, 1603–40* (Oxford, 1960).
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 14. Horwitz, ‘Party in a civic context’; De Krey, *A fractured society*, esp. 74–212; Roseveare, *Financial Revolution*, 29–51.
 15. G. Holmes, ‘The Sacheverell riots: the crowd and the church in early eighteenth-century London’, *Past and Present* 72 (1976), 55–85; De Krey, *A Fractured Society*, 247–58; W. Speck and W. A. Gray, ‘Londoners at the polls under Anne and George I’, *Guildhall Studies in London History*, 1 (1975), 253–62. Cf. Tim Harris, ‘Was the Tory reaction popular? Attitudes of Londoners towards the persecution of dissent, 1681–6’, *London Journal* 13 (1987–8), 106–20.
 16. B. Hill, ‘The change of government and the “Loss of the City”, 1710–11’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd. ser., 24 (1971), 395–413.

17. Roseveare, *Financial Revolution*, 52–67 ; Cf. N. Rogers, ‘Popular protest in early Hanoverian London’, *Past and Present* 79 (1978), 70–100.
18. Speck and Gray, ‘Londoners at the polls under Anne and George’; I. G. Doolittle, ‘Walpole’s City Elections Act (1725)’, *English Historical Review* 97 (1982), 504–29; N. Rogers, ‘The City Elections Act (1725) reconsidered’, *English Historical Review* 100 (1985), 604–17; idem, ‘Resistance to oligarchy: the City opposition to Walpole and his successors, 1725–47, in J. Stevenson (ed.), *London in the Age of Reform* (Oxford, 1977), 1–29.
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21. E. G. W. Bill (ed.), *The Queen Anne Churches* (1979); M. Port (ed.), *The Commissions for Building Fifty New Churches* (London Record Society 23, 1986).
22. Rudé, *Hanoverian London*, 134–42.
23. Rudé, *Hanoverian London*, 128–349.
24. Cf. R. Paley (ed.) Justice in Eighteenth-century Hackney: the justicing notebook of Henry Norris and the Hackney Petty Sessions Book (London Record Society 28, 1991).