The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England 1715-1785

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Kathleen Wilson's fine study complements earlier work by Peter Borsay and Nicholas Rogers which seek to rehabilitate the role of urban provincial centres as sites of popular political politics with an oppositional focus. Reassessments of the long years of Whig oligarchy in the middle of the eighteenth century are now appearing thick and fast and giving refreshing insights into the energy and vitality of politics during years traditionally presented as static and stifled. A more complex picture is emerging of oppositionist politics composed of disparate, conflicting and fragmented elements which converge at several flashpoints (the excise crisis, the mid-century wars, the Wilkes' affair and so on) to form an effective discourse of resistance to the established Court-Whig ministries. By the 1760s Wilson notes that these opposition groups had come together with a political ideology to challenge the elite orthodoxy that had effectively contained them during the reigns of the first two Georges. However the book is more than a narrative of extra-parliamentary politics during the Walpole to Pitt years, it also acts as a companion volume to Britons: Forging the nation 1701-1837, Linda Colley's majestic and stimulating analysis of British nationhood. Wilson has enhanced the debate about national identity in the eighteenth century by accentuating the role of empire in creating a national consciousness. The empire, which plays a minor role in Colley's survey of the components which helped in the construction of a national identity in the eighteenth century, is centre- stage in Wilson's study of political culture. Trade, empire and war supported the political and cultural infrastructure of the urban renaissance. War was not only good for business but the expansion of the market and influx of new consumables linked ordinary people with the fortunes and favours of the military adventurers, the merchant distributors and retailers. In this way the smallest community was intrinsically connected with Britain's experience overseas. Wilson's multi-faceted approach to examining the content and context of urban politics and culture includes an in-depth study of two important centres – Newcastle and Norwich – giving sharp local definitions to her wider picture.

Wilson is rightly cautious about her definitions and is sensitive to the debate about what constitutes 'urban politics', writing: '"urban" is not to be regarded in this study as the antonym of "rural", neither is it to be taken as a synonym for "modern".' [p. 8] However, it is difficult to see what is distinctive about the contribution of the urban communities to popular politics apart from the providing the space in which political action could take place. Indeed in her analysis of Vernon's popular adulation following his defeat of

the Spanish at Porto Bello in 1741 Wilson illustrates the paradox by claiming that the Vernon campaign impacted upon a '"commercialised", accessible and largely urban political culture' [my italics] following this in the very next sentence by listing the demonstrations for Vernon in, among other places, 'tiny villages'. [p. 151] It is surely significant that these myriad village voices were raised in support for Vernon indicating the range and extent of communications during this period than that the larger populations of towns and cities congregated to advocate his cause. Whilst I have sympathy with the notion that employing an 'urban versus rural' paradigm extends a notion that equates urban with sophisticated and rural with backward; a shared urban identity could surely only be created by emphasising the 'otherness' that towns represented borne out of their daily interactions and negotiations with the worlds outside their boundaries. After all the populations of most eighteenth-century towns often owed higher allegiances to the villages from whence they came than the troubled streets that they now inhabited. The towns could only win over the loyalty of their inhabitants by offering them a status as members of a sophisticated, learned and important local community, comparing themselves favourably with both the communities that made up their hinterland and competing urban centres in the vicinity and beyond. To a large extent this was a class identity created by an increasingly assertive middling group of citizens who monopolised the cultural and social spaces distinguished by Wilson as areas where people perceived themselves as independent political subjects. [p. 11] It was this group that dominated the memberships of voluntary associations, who made up the audiences of debating societies, theatres and assemblies and who were the contributors to local charities. Wilson herself writes of the residents of towns as 'engaged... in a more politicised world' [p. 7] but perhaps the correct term should be 'a differently politicised world'. She could have articulated these different worlds more clearly if she had examined the role of towns within shire politics as well as their actions as parliamentary boroughs on their own behalf. For example, Norwich hosted the Norfolk county elections as well as its own borough contests and a substantial number of citizens of the town were eligible to elect members for the shire. In this way, town and country politics collided and as Cannon has shown urban electorates could be subsumed by the mass of village voters.

Wilson is more successful in arguing for the development of a 'national' political culture which was shared by villages, towns and cities in the eighteenth century. This counters the traditional (both Namierite and Whiggish) view which claims that politics was intensely local in this period in contrast to the nineteenth century when the establishment of a 'modern' democratic state sustained by mass communications and a vast organisational infrastructure ensured that engagement in political action filtered down the social scale. One telling illustration of this 'national' outlook is skilfully demonstrated by Wilson in her discussion of the effectiveness of opposition groups in hi-jacking the political calendar for their own ends. Thus official presentments of loyalty to the government or Hanoverian monarchy were effectively confronted by disaffected groups by the establishment of their own anniversary celebrations complete with the display of symbols such as the white rose (the badge of loyalty to the Stuarts) or the chalking up of the number '45' in support of Wilkes. The presence of 'alternative royals' giving opportunities to celebrate competing anniversaries and to display rival symbols and colours whilst professing similar expressions of loyalty and patriotism was a feature of the eighteenth-century which has recently been echoed by the twentieth-century crowds mourning Diana, Princess of Wales. Diana, like the Stuarts and successive estranged Hanoverian heirs to the throne, set up her own court on the periphery of the establishment to great popular effect and was a powerful force mobilising opposition to that establishment. It is the scope and extent of these exhibitions of opposition (in addition to the thousands involved in 'official' commemorations) which convey the impression that there was a national flavour to politics in the eighteenth century and further that it evinced extensive popular support. That is not to reject the hypothesis which emphasises the intense localism of eighteenth-century politics, merely to paint a more complex picture where national occasions and issues were intertwined with local events and concerns.

Another definition that causes problems for me is Wilson's use of "popular". She sums up her approach thus: 'The term "popular" is used like "populist" to describe language or arguments that are supported by, or that champion the rights of, "the people" in political debate and activities. Hence she writes that 'my [Wilson's] examination of "popular politics" is an investigation of socially inclusive or accessible forms of political

activity'. [fn. p. 12] She is determined to adopt an inclusive definition, positing that a dichotomous approach emphasising high versus low, patrician versus plebeian etc. only exaggerates the role of the middling sort and conceals the extent to which popular culture was a shared culture. However, if members of all social groups could 'appropriate' all aspects of political activity the question has to be 'what is popular politics?' The danger with Wilson's definition is that although it seeks to be inclusive it is so extensive that it ceases to have any meaning at all. Elite politics remains the prerogative of the aristocracy and the middling sorts _ politics where the mass of the population are excluded by dint of their illiteracy, status or poverty _ popular politics, using this definition, can also be the domain of the elite with the rest of the population appropriating cultural forms when and if the context was right. There is also a suspicion that by adopting this definition it is possible to pay lip service to the social historians' vision of the 'popular' whilst in reality describing a world populated by those more familiar to 'traditional' political historians. This suspicion is reinforced when looking at Wilson's specific examples. Her first chapter entitled: Print, people and culture in the urban renaissance describes a world familiar to readers of Peter Borsay, R J Morris and John Money: an urban landscape with a developing print culture, a network of political, literary and social clubs and societies and the evolution of a voluntary welfare system. Of course, the mass of the population were in contact with this world but as recipients of its various outputs rather than participating members. The 'people' are not activists in this vision of eighteenth century politics: the political and cultural initiatives come from above. Similarly the "people" are defined as 'a rational, libertarian political public to which the state was to be held accountable...' [p. 20] (although she acknowledges that this is but one construct among many disputed and contradictory versions) rather than the mass of the population who, one suspects, may fall outside this interpretation.

Wilson criticises the psephological approach to the analysis of political behaviour for putting forward a definition of popular politics 'solely in terms of conformity to elite party definitions'. [p. 14] However, it is difficult to imagine an analysis of electoral behaviour without reference to the fortunes of political parties and their ability (or inability) to attract voters to their cause. It is certainly something that Wilson herself does not attempt to do in her analysis of Newcastle and Norwich elections. For example she writes of Whig success in the 1722 election in terms of the pulling power of a local hero which transcended party loyalties noting that 'many who split their votes in 1722 between a Tory and Carr [the Whig candidate in 1722] voted for two Tories in 1741'. [p. 324, n. 26] Moreover, the psephological assessments of eighteenth-century politics do not purport to be studies of 'popular politics' but studies of a particular community within the political system. Many studies do address the question of interactions between the electors and the non-voting population as well as connections between patrons and voters but none would argue that their interpretations would give a panoramic view of popular politics. It must also be an irritation to those writing on electoral behaviour that Wilson first categorises assessments of party politics as having 'led to a number of conceptual blind alleys' [p. 14] and then proceeds to give descriptions of urban electorates which ignore many of the methodological tools they have carefully developed. For example, she regularly gives figures for turnout: 'in Ipswich an overwhelming 99 percent voted for [Admiral] Vernon in a 92 per cent turnout' [p. 150]; 'the [Newcastle] contests of 1722, 1734, 1741, 1774, 1777 and 1780 were hard fought and bitter with consistently high turnouts of about 85 per cent' [p. 302]; 'in the 1735 [Norwich] by-election... in another large poll with a high turnout' [p. 395] There is no information about how these figures were arrived at (incidentally they appear suspiciously high especially for the earlier period) neither is there a warning about the large margin of error that should be taken into account with any calculation of turnout before 1832 when voters first began to be registered. She compares a number of disparate sources on various occasions in her analysis of political behaviour, for example: 'the [Newcastle] freemen's petition was signed by 900 men, 526 of whom were electors...' [p. 341] but there is no acknowledgement of the difficulties inherent in such a comparison (indeed psephological and demographic historians have uncovered an a large range of problems with linking the same sources together over time let alone adding unconnected data) or an indication of the methodology employed. Finally her occupational analyses follow the traditional but problematic categorisations of: professionals, merchant/manufacturers, retailers, crafts/artisans and agricultural (even her analysis of women's occupations in the appendix) rather than employing a multi-dimensional approach in order to bypass the myriad difficulties associated with such groupings recently identified by a number of

psephological historians.

Wilson's book is a multi-layered analysis of political society during the mid eighteenth century and an important sub-theme to her work is the role of women in politics. She adds much to the hitherto rather simplistic debate by uncovering the paradoxical treatment of women in the public sphere. At times of national crisis or war for example, as has been noted by historians examining the wars of the twentieth century, women were important players on the home front articulating the patriot cause, raising subscriptions and billeting troops. At these times active women were lauded by the state. However, the empire and imperial adventurers were simultaneously presented as the antidote to aristocratic effeminacy and weakness, presenting a masculine vision of citizenship which excluded women. Thus the mid-century wars presented opportunities for women to participate more widely in the public sphere but at the same time exposed the limitations of their participation. The contradictions continued in the Wilkite ideology of the 1760s. Wilson illustrates how the Wilkites, in order to promote their vision of a wider and more inclusive male and middle class political nation, sought to exclude women and confine them to the domestic sphere. The attack on the petticoat politics of the Princess Dowager, the definition of wives and daughters as male property and the representations of the aristocracy as effeminate and weak were all elements of Wilkite propaganda which restricted citizenship to the propertied, male Englishman. That is not to say that this rhetoric was successful in excluding women from public life. Like Colley, Wilson notes that the emergent 'separate spheres' ideology was more pronounced in periods of intense female political activity and thus was as much a product of male anxiety than a description of public life. Her book is littered with examples of active female participants in all political, social and cultural arenas. Women produced, distributed and consumed the burgeoning print culture, they were often pivotal in the credit and money lending networks that financed the industrial and commercial revolution, they participated in demonstrations, celebrations and festivals and were active in all aspects of electoral politics from canvassing to treating (everything that is, except voting). Of course, women were subject to public pillorying and private vilification if they transgressed the boundaries of accepted behaviour. The familiar example of the Duchess of Devonshire in the 1784 Westminster election is one example of this and Wilson also presents the case of Catherine Macaulay ostracised after her marriage to a younger man of lower social status. In an aside [p. 50, n. 59] she notes how far political news and views penetrated women's (and men's) private lives by pointing to role of the extensive correspondence (to which might be added oral/gossip) networks which were pivotal in the exchange of ideas and the distribution of information. These relatively informal methods of communication where women could participate fully were in contrast to the more closed, male worlds of clubs and associations where their role was often passive and strictly defined.

Kathleen Wilson has added much to our knowledge of extra- parliamentary politics in the mid-eighteenth century by her skilful analysis of both familiar and less well known sources. [A note to the publishers, Cambridge University Press: the author's detailed and careful examination of prints, paintings and artefacts was often marred by restricting the illustrations to one half of the page] The fortunes of opposition politics in Newcastle-upon- Tyne and Norwich offer alternative perspectives to the views from the metropolis and other more noted provincial centres. It would have been interesting to know more about the reasons for choosing these two cities. Wilson states that they were chosen 'as prosperous provincial centres with lively political traditions...' [p. 26] but does not add that they were losing their places in the pecking order of substantial regional centres as the century progressed. Norwich for example had been England's second city (in terms of population) from 1520, dropped to third place in 1750 and by 1801 could only manage tenth place, its population having stabilised at 36,000 whereas other urban centres experienced dramatic increases. Newcastle followed a similar trajectory, it was fourth or fifth in the schedule of great towns between 1600 and 1750, but by 1801 had sunk to ninth place, in spite of a population rise of 13,000. A contrast with some of the rising stars may have proved illuminating as would a placement of the two towns more firmly in their local context: uncovering their relationship to their hinterlands as well as their rural outreaches. She puts flesh on a model of eighteenth- century politics partially uncovered by earlier writers and ensures that we can never return to the Namierite or Plumbian vision of mid-century stability and stagnation. Finally, she constructs a narrative of opposition politics in Hanoverian England, based on the people's inalienable rights

to resist and to call governments to account for their actions, which she convincingly claims still have currency today.

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