The City of London and the opposition to government, 1768–74: a study in the rise of metropolitan radicalism
L. S. Sutherland (1958)

Introduction

P. J. Marshall

When Lucy Sutherland delivered the Creighton Lecture in 1958, she had attained a position of high eminence in the historical profession. It was widely known that in the previous year the prime minister, Harold Macmillan, on the advice of Lewis Namier, had nominated her for the Regius Chair at Oxford. Apparently because she could not hold the chair and remain principal of Lady Margaret Hall, she had declined it, clearing the way for what was assumed to be a contest between Hugh Trevor-Roper, who was appointed, and A. J. P. Taylor, who was not. Far too trivial to be mentioned in the same breath as with these great matters, also in 1957, she became the supervisor of what was to be my Oxford D.Phil. thesis. By then she had written two major books: *A London Merchant 1695–1774*, published in 1933, and her magnum opus, *The East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics*, which appeared in 1952. As John Bromley pointed out in an assessment of her life's work, her writings had been marked by an unusual mastery both of the political and of the economic history of the eighteenth century.[1]

London as a political and commercial and financial centre provided the focus of what she had already written and it seems that she was intent on a full-scale survey of London and national politics. Two major pilot studies appeared in the nineteen-fifties. One was entitled 'The City of London in eighteenth-century politics'.[2] The other one follows. The book on London

[1] 'Lucy Sutherland as historian', in *Politics and Finance in the 18th Century: Lucy Sutherland*, ed. A. Newman (1984), p. xi.

[2] In *Essays Presented to Sir Lewis Namier*, ed. R. Pares and A. J. P. Taylor (1956), pp. 41–66; repr. in Newman, pp. 49–74.

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was never to appear, although Dame Lucy, as she had become in 1969, worked on it for a considerable time. I recall discussions with her about Jacobite radicalism in the mid century City. Other commitments took priority, above all in her later years, the massive fifth volume of the *History of the University of Oxford*, which covered the period from 1688 to 1800. She contributed four substantial chapters and edited the whole until the illness which led to her death in 1980.

Her lecture was an exploration of that 'ill-defined surge of opinion which we call eighteenth-century radicalism', focusing on the 'crisis of 1769–70, associated with John Wilkes and the Middlesex election'. She thought that these events had at that time 'aroused far less comment' than later phases of radicalism. Five years later, when George Rudé published his authoritative study of Wilkes's London, called *Wilkes and Liberty*, he concurred.[3] For him to try to answer such questions as 'What were the causes of Wilkes's popularity among such widely differing social classes? How far did his influence extend? What have been the ultimate results and historical significance of the Wilkite movement?' rather than offering another biographical study of Wilkes himself, was to adopt a new approach.[4] Rudé's questions were also Sutherland's questions.

Her concern was not simply with the expression of what might be regarded as radical views by extra-parliamentary opinion, since such views were often elicited by party politicians. It was important to be able to show that the initiative 'had passed from the groups in parliament to groups of persons outside the House'. She believed that there was clear evidence that the City of London was articulating its own independent views from about 1756. She attributed an important role in this to William Beckford, a great West Indian planter, M.P. for London and twice lord mayor.[5] Beckford and others like him began to formulate a programme that appealed to the 'lower middle classes', not only in the City of London but in a much wider metropolitan area. By 1770 Beckford was advocating 'shorter parliaments, a place and pension bill and the more equal representation of the people'. In Sutherland's view, this new radicalism was growing on its own momentum, but it was given immense if short-lived impetus by being associated with the cause of John Wilkes, who had been elected M.P. for Middlesex but

[3] G. Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty: a Social Study of 1763–74* (Oxford, 1962).

[4] Rudé, pp. xiv–xv.

[5] See her very informative short biography of him in L. Namier and J. Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754–90* (3 vols., 1964), ii. 75–8.

had been prevented from taking his seat by the house of commons. She is dismissive of Wilkes: 'His methods were those of inspired opportunism; his ends simple and purely personal'. But she recognizes that his cause attracted support within the metropolitan area on a vast scale. Attempts to engage nationwide involvement were, in her view, largely unsuccessful and London radicalism soon split. Nevertheless, the reform programme, enunciated by Beckford and those who thought like him, became the aspirations of future campaigns.

A lecture delivered in 1958 must now of course be read in the light of much subsequent scholarship. In his *Wilkes and Liberty* and other writings, Rudé extended social analysis beyond the metropolitan activists to those who participated in the defiance of authority in demonstrations and disorder. John Brewer offers a corrective to Lucy Sutherland's dismissive approach to Wilkes, cogently explaining why, if ideologically barren, he was still so potent a figure in popular rituals. He also questions whether Wilkite influence was ineffective outside the metropolis.[6] Nicholas Rogers's work has given us a much fuller account of the early phases of London radicalism.[7] There are many other important contributions to be taken into account. Even so, this article both set trends for much of the subsequent findings and is a tantalizing glimpse of what a full treatment by Lucy Sutherland of London and national politics would have been like.

[6] J. Brewer, 'Personality, propaganda and ritual: Wilkes and the Wilkites', in J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 163–200.

[7] N. Rogers, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989).

The City of London and the opposition to government, 1768–74: a study in the rise of metropolitan radicalism*

L. S. Sutherland (1958)

It is with feelings of gratitude, but also of the liveliest apprehension, that I stand before you today. I am fully aware how great an honour it is to speak to such an audience on such an occasion. The fame of the historian whom this lecture commemorates and the distinction of my predecessors make me very uneasy about my own powers of maintaining adequately so high and reputable a tradition. Consideration of the lectures only of those of my predecessors to whom I am personally indebted for friendship and encouragement over many years – Sir Lewis Namier, mentor of all eighteenth-century historians, and Professor Edwards whose advice no scholar seeks in vain – brings home to me not merely the limitations of my own powers, but also the narrowness of the subject on which I shall be speaking. For while they treated the growth of great institutions, or the vast movements of peoples and nations, I shall be speaking of a few short years in the history of one city, and the heroes of my tale (so far as I have any) are an almost forgotten lord mayor and an only half-remembered demagogue. My only excuse for offering such a subject is that the city of which I shall

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be speaking is one famous and well known to all of us, and that I believe that what happened in it during these years, and to its lord mayor and its demagogue, was of more than local and temporary importance.

In the Guildhall of the City of London, slightly scarred by the mischances of war, there stands a statue erected by the corporation in 1772 to commemorate Alderman William Beckford, twice lord mayor and for sixteen years member of parliament for the City, who had died during his second mayoralty in 1770.[1] It depicts him life-size, in an oratorical attitude, and it bears as inscription the words which he was supposed to have addressed a few weeks before his death to his sovereign George III, when presenting a remonstrance from the City of London arising out of the famous Middlesex election dispute.[2] After assuring the king of the City's loyalty and its affliction under royal displeasure, he is there said to have continued:

> Permit me, Sir, to observe that whoever has already dared, or shall hereafter endeavour, by false insinuations and suggestions, to alienate your Majesty's affections from your loyal subjects in general, and from the City of London in particular, is an enemy to your Majesty's person and family, a violator of the public peace, and a betrayer of our happy Constitution, as it was established at the Glorious Revolution.[3]

[1] William Beckford (b. in Jamaica 1709; d. 21 June 1770), M.P. for Shaftesbury 1747–54 and London 1754–70, lord mayor 1762–3 and 1769–70. The statue, voted in 1770, was declared by his fellow citizens, when displayed to them, to be an excellent likeness (*London Chronicle*, xxxi (11–13 June 1772), 562).

[2] The remonstrance was presented on 23 May 1770.

[3] The words engraved on the statue were those published in the press. John Horne (Horne Tooke) claimed, probably correctly, to have written them up for the press, and also to have suggested that the lord mayor should address the king. Much later he gave his support to the rumour that no such speech had been made. W. P. Treloar, who examined the matter in his *Wilkes and the City* (1917), pp. 98–100, was convinced that 'Beckford made no rejoinder … or merely muttered a few indistinct words, and the speech was concocted afterwards'. The contemporary evidence is, however, quite clear. Richard Rigby wrote to the duke of Bedford on the same day, having just come from court, describing the incident and giving the gist of the words, adding 'This is the first attempt ever made to hold a colloquy with the King by any subject, and is indecent to the highest degree' (J. Russell, *The Correspondence of John, 4th Duke of Bedford* (1846), iii. 413–14). James Townsend, present as sheriff, wrote to Chatham, also on 23 May, that the lord mayor's speech 'greatly disconcerted the Court. He has promised to recollect what he said, and I fancy the substance will appear in the papers tomorrow' (J. H. Pringle and W. S. Taylor, *The Correspondence of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham* (1839) (hereafter *Chatham Correspondence*), iii. 458). Beckford, replying to Chatham's congratulations, said that he spoke 'the language of truth, and with that

The satisfaction of the City with the boldness of these words, and their belief in their value to posterity, was shared by others outside their walls. It was echoed by the great William Pitt, Lord Chatham (whose political follower Beckford was), who wrote in congratulation:

> The spirit of Old England spoke that never-to-be-forgotten day … *true Lord Mayor of London*; that is *first* magistrate of the *first* City in the World! I mean to tell you only a plain truth, when I say, Your Lordship's mayoralty will be revered till the constitution is destroyed and forgotten.[4]

Time has dealt less kindly with Beckford and his mayoralty than either his followers in the City or his leader in parliament expected. William Beckford was a man of some note in his day, and a very unusual figure among the sober ranks of the mercantile lord mayors of his time. He was the richest absentee West Indian sugar planter of his generation, owning vast estates and many slaves in Jamaica (a somewhat embarrassing possession for a spokesman for English freedom),[5] was a big landowner also in Wiltshire,[6] where he exercised some political influence, had been since 1756 the devoted henchman of William Pitt[7] and – a vigorous, loquacious and by no means unintelligent man – he was a prominent figure in parliamentary and City life. Nevertheless, his personal fame, such as it was, has been swallowed up in the notoriety of his son, the eccentric author of *Vathek*,[8] while his reputation in the City has been eclipsed by that of the picturesque demagogue John Wilkes, who may be considered his political successor there. Nor does the speech itself, or the occasion on which it was delivered, convey much to the posterity for which it has been preserved. It is a commentary on the fact that

humility and submission which becomes a subject speaking to his lawful king' (*Chatham Correspondence*, iii. 463).

[4] *Chatham Correspondence*, iii. 462.

[5] A rhyme was printed in the *Public Advertiser* on 18 Nov. 1769:
For B[eck]f[or]d he was chosen May'r
A wight of high renown.
To see a slave he could not bear,
– Unless it were his own.

[6] He had purchased the estate of Fonthill, at Fonthill Giffard, Wilts., and greatly enlarged and beautified the house.

[7] When he entered the House he supported the country party in opposition and was known as a tory. After the death of the prince of Wales he gave his allegiance first to the duke of Bedford and then to Henry Fox, but when Pitt's abilities as a war leader became evident he attached himself enthusiastically and permanently to this new leader.

[8] William Beckford, jun. (1759–1844).

no age finds it easy to judge what about itself will be significant to the future that those wishing to honour Beckford should do so by commemorating an incident, in itself but a nine days wonder but charged with the memories of past conflicts, while ignoring others of far greater interest in connection with the events of the time and the struggles of the future. Only a few weeks earlier, also in connection with the Middlesex dispute, the lord mayor had propounded to the Livery in common hall assembled what he called his 'Political Creed' – that 'the number of little paltry rotten boroughs', the placemen and pensioners in the house of commons, and the corruption of electors and elected alike were ruining the state, and that to cure these evils there should be not only fewer pensioners and placemen (an old cry) but better public accounts and 'a more equal representation of the people'.[9]

For the importance of the career of Beckford as a leader in the City, and of his last mayoralty in particular, is to be sought in their relation to that ill-defined surge of opinion which we call eighteenth-century Radicalism, a movement interesting in itself, and of importance in relation to the nineteenth-century movement which succeeded it. The outburst of popular opinion which found expression during the revolutionary wars in the corresponding societies, and that earlier movement organized into the county associations during the latter years of the American war of independence, have received a good deal of attention from historians interested in the history of the Radical movement. The earlier crisis of 1769–70, associated with John Wilkes and the Middlesex election, and in which Beckford was concerned, has aroused far less comment, though Professor Butterfield has noted its significance[10] and it finds a place in Dr. Maccoby's comprehensive work.[11] Nevertheless, this earlier movement prepared the way for both the later outbursts of popular activity, and was accompanied by a remarkable ferment of opinion within the City and its surroundings – what we may call the metropolitan area – which left its mark upon the future.

It is the contention which I wish to advance today that a study of eighteenth-century Radicalism can best begin with an examination of what was actually going on in and around London at this time; that the origins of these events can be traced, in the City of London at least, as far back as 1756; and that the fact that they took place in the metropolis and found as yet little reflection in the country as a whole is the result of a circumstance

[9] *London Chronicle*, xxvii (6–8 March 1770), 225.
[10] H. Butterfield, *George III, Lord North, and the People, 1779–80* (1949), pp. 181 *seq*.
[11] S. Maccoby, *English Radicalism 1762–85: the Origins* (1955).

of some importance: that in the metropolitan area, and at this time in the metropolitan area alone, there existed the predisposing conditions for the development of Radicalism as a political force – an organization adapted to political intervention and a sizeable body of persons, some of them at least with some education and independence of mind, who felt themselves ill-served by and were in consequence critical of their social and political environment.

All movements of public opinion are in their early stages ill-defined and inarticulate, and their characteristics are in consequence hard to isolate. These difficulties of identification are increased in the case of the eighteenth-century Radical movement by the fact that the organization of expressions of extra-parliamentary opinion had long been one of the recognized weapons of eighteenth-century political warfare; and that petitions, instructions and thanks to representatives both from the counties and the City of London were part of the stock-in-trade of parliamentary oppositions of the period. It is not therefore safe to assume that such manifestations necessarily represent in themselves a movement of spontaneous popular opinion. We can be sure that such a movement is in being only when it can be shown that the initiative in organizing such manifestations has passed from the political groups in parliament to groups of persons outside the House. When, in addition, those taking part in such manifestations begin to display an increasingly critical attitude to existing institutions, and their political programmes to reflect this attitude, we can consider that something which may reasonably be called Radicalism has come into existence. This is, I think, precisely what we can see beginning to happen in the City of London in the last years of the reign of George II, gaining momentum in the first eight years of the new reign, and breaking into full expression in the metropolitan area in the general election of 1768 and the Middlesex election dispute which succeeded it.

The City of London had a long tradition of corporate solidarity and also a long tradition of political activity in which this solidarity expressed itself. This is not to say, of course, that there were not differences of opinion among its inhabitants, and often active conflict within it. One of the most permanent of these divisions was one based on some sort of class conflict between a City aristocracy of wealth and office and the main body of what contemporaries called the 'middling' class of their fellow citizens. But it is, nevertheless, justifiable to speak throughout the century of the political opinion of the City since, in times of stress, the climate of political thinking

there was determined not by the prosperous aldermen, the directors of the great joint-stock companies, the rich merchants and the thriving financiers of the London money market, nor by those whom they could carry with them (though in quiet and uncontentious times their influence was considerable). It was determined on the contrary by the lesser merchants, the tradesmen, the master-craftsmen and the host of minor intermediaries who formed the majority in the popular organs of City government and who thronged the meetings and clubs where political opinion was formulated. And while the more prominent citizens tended for a number of reasons to give their political support to the government of the day, the 'middling' citizens tended almost always in times of political controversy to find themselves in alliance with the parties in opposition.[12] It is paradoxical, but true to state, that throughout the first half of the eighteenth century there was no body of men more ready to be swayed by the catchwords of the old 'country' party as advanced by the opposition groups in parliament than these inhabitants of the nation's greatest city. Demands for the repeal of the Septennial Act, for place and pension bills and for the reduction of the standing army – all measures directed at the power of the crown which the seventeenth-century constitutional struggles had taught Englishmen to suspect – were applauded as enthusiastically by the citizen in common council or common hall or in his tavern or coffeehouse, as by any country squire on his grand jury or at the race meeting. But the citizen can no more be called a Radical because he held these views than can the country squire. It was only when the City began to some extent to dissociate itself from the politics of opposition as well as those of government, to feel resentment at its place in a political system dominated by interests in many ways alien to it, that it can begin to be considered a focus of Radicalism as distinct from a centre of traditional anti-ministerialism.

The first clear signs of such a development seem to appear, like so many changes, as a result of war, and to have been the outcome of one of the rare occasions on which City opinion was ardently in support of, and not in opposition to, the government. Between 1756 and 1768 its growth can be traced in three stages. In the first, during the great war ministry of William Pitt, when his unique personal supremacy depended on the support of public opinion as much outside as within the House, the City's sense of its political significance as a body was stimulated by the court which was

[12] I have treated this subject more fully in my 'The City of London in 18th-century politics', in *Essays Presented to Sir Lewis Namier*, ed. R. Pares and A. J. P. Taylor (1956).

paid to it and by its share in the exhilaration of victory. In the second stage, during the dissensions accompanying the peace settlement and the confusion following the break-up of the political system of the old reign, the City was again in opposition, and again acting in support of the opposition groups in parliament; but on such matters as its agitation against the peace terms, and its turbulent adherence to the cause of John Wilkes over the North Briton case and the issue of general warrants, it displayed a degree of independence of action greater than it had shown on issues of national importance before. But the third stage, that between 1764 and 1768, was perhaps the most important of all, though during these years there was no issue in national politics which called the City into corporate action. For these were years of bad harvests, high cost of living and industrial changes in the metropolitan area which caused a good deal of hardship and discontent and led to great and persistent labour unrest.[13] From 1764 onwards a strong undercurrent of economic malaise and social unrest is discernible beneath the surface of the life of the metropolis, and though until 1768 no major issue arose to transfer this discontent to the political field, there were already indications that such a transfer was imminent.

The development of these years can also be traced through the career as a City leader of William Beckford, for his entry into City politics in 1754 roughly coincided with it, and his actions did a good deal to further it. Before Beckford's time the political leaders to whom the City paid allegiance were themselves citizens first and foremost, and had risen to prominence through active participation in City government. Beckford, when he first stood for the City, was a man of some note and experience in parliamentary opposition but he had only two years before taken his freedom by redemption and been elected alderman,[14] and these steps

[13] The price of wheat reached a peak in the very bad year 1767, but was high (by comparison with the five years ending 1763) in the period 1764–8 inclusive, and the numbers of cattle and sheep brought to Smithfield market were also significantly lower in most of these years (T. S. Ashton, *An Economic History of England: the 18th Century* (1955), tables I and VII, pp. 239 and 245). The first serious outburst of labour unrest in London was the riot in 1765 of the Spitalfield silk-weavers, automatically protected from French competition during the war. It was followed in the ensuing years by others, more or less serious, among the coal-heavers, sailors, weavers, tailors, hatters, and even (in 1771) by the cabinet-makers against the importation of foreign furniture by abuse of diplomatic privilege. An official return made in 1772 to the City of the number of death sentences passed at the Old Bailey showed an increase from 14 in 1760 to 91 in 1770 (*London Chronicle*, xxxii (3–5 Nov. 1772), 440).

[14] He became a freeman of the Ironmongers' Company, and was alderman for Billingsgate ward.

were taken in preparation for his candidature.[15] He was the first politician of some experience outside the City to see its value as a backing for his personal power and the causes he wished to further, and, at first in self-interest, then with real zest, he worked his way through the offices of the City corporation and increasingly identified himself with his constituents to consolidate his power. As Pitt's supporter he played the chief part in forging the links between the City and the great war minister;[16] as lord mayor in 1762–3 he led their opposition to the peace;[17] and in and after his mayoralty he encouraged their support of John Wilkes, though there was even then no love lost between the two men.[18] And in his speeches and his actions he reflected the growing self-consciousness and dissatisfaction of his constituents, and in doing so he began to earn the reputation of something of a demagogue in the house of commons.[19] As early as 1761 he had extolled the 'middling classes of England' against 'Your Nobility, about 200 <of> men of quality' who 'receive more from the Public than they pay to it'.[20] In 1767 when he voted against a reduction in the land tax he did so, he claimed, because 'relief ought to be given to the poor man in pre-

[15] He was supported by the tory interest in the City, in particular it would seem by Alderman William Benn, a notable City politician of the time. After his election he thanked the electors for the trust they placed in him despite 'the short time I have had the honour of being known to you, and the prejudices that have been injuriously raised against me' (*Public Advertiser*, 8 May 1754).

[16] There is considerable evidence of this in the printed *Chatham Correspondence* and in the unpublished Pitt MSS. in The National Archives of the U.K.

[17] He opposed the preliminaries of the Peace of Paris in the House in Nov. 1762 and in 1763 when the court of aldermen, not daring to summon the common council, voted an address, refused to accompany them to present it (Court of aldermen, repertory book 167, pp. 280 *seq*.; British Library, Additional MS. 32948 fo. 269, T. Walpole to Newcastle, 12 May 1763).

[18] Wilkes attacked Beckford savagely in the *North Briton*, though when writing to Lord Temple, who thought well of Beckford, he tried to blame the hostility shown on Charles Churchill (W. J. Smith, *The Grenville Papers* (1852), ii. 59). Reports made to the secretary of state on Wilkes's movements noted on 8 Nov. 1763 a visit of Wilkes to the lord mayor Beckford at his house (*Grenville Papers*, ii. 158), and on 19 Dec. 1763 Beckford wrote him a friendly letter promising assistance (Brit. Libr., Add. MS. 30867 fo. 242). On 17 Feb. 1764 Beckford spoke and voted in the House against general warrants (MS. parliamentary diary of James Harris).

[19] He was called 'The scavenger to throw dirt upon government' (MS. parliamentary diary of James Harris, 16 Nov. 1763) and 'the Dr. Lucas of the English House of Commons' (Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Emly MSS.*, pt. i, sect. 1, 190 b, 7 March 1765).

[20] Brit. Libr., Add. MS. 38334 fos. 29 *seq*. Apparently an attempt at a verbatim report of Beckford's speech on the address on 13 Nov. 1761.

ference to the opulent land-holder',[21] and in 1768 he voted, as he said, 'on principle' against the Nullum Tempus Act,[22] forced on the government to secure landowners against the dormant claims of the crown. In the light of this attitude, too, may be judged his tentative criticism of the existing political order. At his election in 1761 (though only seven years before he had spent great sums himself in borough elections) he told the City electors that 'our Constitution is deficient only in one point, and that is, that little, pitiful boroughs send members to parliament equal to great cities, and it is contrary to the maxim, that power should follow property';[23] and in 1768 he introduced a bill (repudiated energetically by opposition and government supporters alike) to impose an oath against bribery on parliamentary candidates at elections.[24] And, when he was preparing to fight a contested election for his City seat in the general election of that year, he claimed credit from his constituents for what he had said and done.

If the situation in the metropolis and the attitude of the City leaders be taken into account, it seems indeed fairly clear that even had there been no re-emergence of John Wilkes, and no Middlesex election to bring matters to a head, there would have been a recrudescence after 1768 of political activity in the City in alliance with the opposition groups in parliament, and that the City's share in this alliance would have been far from passive. As it was, the nature of the forces released by these new factors was quickly apparent. When in 1769 the ebullient Parson John Home declared that 'Boroughs are, indeed, the deadly part of our Constitution';[25] when Beckford in 1770, during his second mayoralty, invited the opposition leaders to dine at Mansion House with the intention of springing on them a pledge to a programme of parliamentary reform;[26] and when these leaders, on their way

[21] So he claimed in 1768 (*Public Advertiser*, 22 March 1768). As he was at this time still a supporter of the administration set up by Chatham there may well, however, be other reasons.

[22] H. Cavendish, *Debates of the House of Commons during the 13th Parliament of Great Britain* (1841), i. 241.

[23] *London Evening Post*, 4–7 Apr. 1761, quoted in *Memoirs of William Beckford* (1859), i. 33.

[24] J. Brooke, *The Chatham Administration, 1766–8* (1956), p. 337, n. 4. Sir Roger Newdigate welcomed the proposal as likely to reduce competition for seats from 'Nabobs' and other monied rivals of the landed interests. Cf. H. Walpole, *Memoirs of the Reign of King George III*, ed. D. Le Marchant (1845), iii. 157–60.

[25] He expanded this statement with the condition 'if they are to be the instruments of forcing through those barriers which the Wisdom of our Ancestors has placed between the hereditary and elective legislators of England' (*Public Advertiser*, 8 Sept. 1769).

[26] A. Stephens, *Memoirs of John Horne Tooke* (1813), i. 387–8. Horne's account of this

to the dinner (having evaded the pledge), 'remarked that a great part of the populace had tickets in their hats on which was the following inscription: 'Annual Parliaments. Equal Representation. Place and Pension Bill';[27] no one could doubt that a fully developed Radical movement within the City had come into existence.

It was, however, the almost unheralded, and quite uninvited, return of John Wilkes during the 1768 general election from exile in France (into which he had fled from justice four years before), and the renewal of his old claim to popularity during the excitement of a contested City election, which brought these forces into the open. His subsequent election for Middlesex, the muddle of his arrest, his sentence to imprisonment for his former offences, and his long contest from behind his prison walls with the ministry and the majority of the house of commons, brought about a surge of popular feeling under the pressure of which latent suspicions and hostilities became overt, and strange and unsuspected forces were suddenly released.

The impact of John Wilkes and his grievances on the political life of the nation in this, his second period of political activity, forms an odd interlude in the history of George III's reign. Historians have noted the constitutional precedents created by the Middlesex election dispute, but have not found it easy to determine the importance of the episode in the politics of the time. It is, I think, only possible to do so with any accuracy if it is recognized, first, that the forces released by the excitement of his cause were those already taking shape within the metropolitan area, and that the ferment which prevailed there had only a transient effect outside its bounds; and, second, that the activities resulting from the ferment within the metropolitan area had little to do with Wilkes as a person or as a political leader, and arose only indirectly out of his grievances. To make clear why these propositions are correct it is necessary to analyse the character and career at this time of Wilkes himself, and the nature of the sentiments which he called forth, and the situation which was created within the metropolis by the outburst of these feelings.

John Wilkes was said to have observed some years later of one of his followers, 'He was a Wilkite, ... I never was',[28] and a recognition of the

incident is supported by a letter from Chatham (*Chatham Correspondence*, iii. 431, n. 1).

[27] *London Chronicle*, xxvii (24–27 March 1770), 296.

[28] He was alleged to have said this to George III of Sgt. John Glynn. The story was widely reported (see H. Bleackley, *Life of John Wilkes* (1917), p. 376).

truth of this admission is the first step to an understanding of his career and what was going on at this time. To many of the issues which most deeply concerned the more thoughtful and intelligent of his followers Wilkes himself was profoundly indifferent, and the fervent loyalty of his less sophisticated followers also raised in him no more than a cynical acceptance. The qualities which brought him success as a demagogical political leader were: a strikingly original, if disreputable, personality, a great deal of assurance, a skill in exploiting the resources of the press unparalleled up to that time (unlike most demagogues Wilkes was a poor public speaker),[29] and considerable success in those arts of political management which have in more recent times been associated with the office of a 'political boss'. His methods were those of inspired opportunism; his ends simple and purely personal. The gamble of his return from France in defiance of the law and his creditors was largely an enforced one, for his debts in France were too heavy for him to be able to remain there. His intention in this return was to make use of his old popularity and the excitement of a general election to raise, as a supporter frankly said, 'a storm … under which you may get into port'.[30] The port he was making for was a seat in the house of commons with the protection this would bring him from his creditors, and the improved bargaining power with an unfriendly administration which the status might be expected to carry with it. After his failure in the City, and the check to his success at Middlesex, the extraordinary outburst of feeling which he evoked opened up an alternative course for him as soon as he should have served his prison sentence. From early in 1769 when (with still more than a year's sentence to run) he was elected an alderman of the City in his absence,[31] he set himself deliberately to the conquest of the City's corporate machine, seeing in it, no doubt, a new sphere of political power and a possible source

[29] He had a weak voice and was unable to sway large assemblies, e.g. the large and contentious meeting at Westminster Hall on 31 Oct. 1770, at which Wilkes completely lost control of proceedings. He himself referred to his 'weak and bad voice' (*London Chronicle*, xxviii (8–10 Nov. 1770), 456).

[30] Brit. Libr., Add. MS. 30869 fo. 175, H. Cotes to J. Wilkes, 15 Dec. 1767. Some time before 16 June 1767 Wilkes had suggested to his friends that he might stand for the City (Brit. Libr., Add. MS. 30869 fo. 131, Heaton Wilkes to J. Wilkes, 16 June 1769). They were uniformly discouraging. He nevertheless persisted, and on 6 Oct. 1767 a letter from him to Arthur Beardmore, a City politician, was printed in the *St. James's Chronicle*. Cotes thought Westminster more hopeful.

[31] He was, on 2 Jan. 1769, elected alderman of the ward of Farringdon Without. His eligibility for election was challenged, but legal action was not taken, and after his release from prison he was sworn in. The question is fully treated in Treloar, pp. 70 *seq*.

of revenue when the financial bounty of his followers should be exhausted.[32] And so great was the popular support which he called forth that the very City leaders whom he was working to supplant, including Beckford himself, had to assist his rise in order to preserve their own popularity.[33] Though as time went on during this struggle he was obliged, in competition with those who had been his friends and became his rivals, to advance some programme of reform, in the years when metropolitan Radicalism was taking shape under the pressure of the forces his cause had released, he displayed not the slightest interest in its manifestations, and, indeed, deprecated any widening of the issue raised by the Middlesex election[34] as likely to distract attention from his own grievances and person.

If then the Radicalism of these years owed nothing to Wilkes but was the outcome of the feelings aroused by his cause, it is necessary both to try to analyse the nature of this feeling and to determine how and by whom it was bent to Radical ends. Though every effort was made by propaganda in the press to suggest that the personal popularity of Wilkes was strong throughout the kingdom, an examination of the evidence soon makes it clear that there was nothing in the nature of a vigorous and lasting Wilkite movement outside the metropolitan area. All the parliamentary opposition parties were both slow and reluctant to take up his cause against administration (well suited though it obviously was for opposition purposes), and when they did, they sought to isolate the cause of the electors of Middlesex from that of their chosen representative.[35] And that they were not merely politicians out of touch with public opinion but reflected the views of the politically

[32] As early as 1770 it seems clear that he was trying to get profitable jobs in the City for friends and relatives in the proceeds of which he might share (*Public Advertiser*, 27 May 1771 *seq*.). In 1779, after a three-year struggle, he achieved the climax of his personal ambition, the highly lucrative position of City chamberlain.

[33] Camden congratulated Beckford on Wilkes's failure to be elected for the City (letter of 28 March 1768 in the Hamilton MSS.), though during the election Beckford and the other popular candidate Barlow Trecothick had treated Wilkes 'with much civility' (Walpole, *Memoirs*, iii. 185) and supported Wilkes's candidature for Middlesex, and for election as alderman.

[34] *Public Advertiser*, 22 May 1771. H. Cotes in a letter to John Horne said that the breach between Horne and Wilkes really began over the Middlesex petition of 1769, which Wilkes had wished to be confined entirely to the rights of the electors of that county.

[35] Edmund Burke wrote to his friend Charles O'Hara on 9 June 1768: 'The plan of our party was … not to provoke Administration into any violent measure upon this subject … besides we had not the least desire of taking up that gentleman's cause as personally favourable to him' (pr. in R. J. S. Hoffman, *Edmund Burke, New York Agent* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1956), p. 434).

active classes as a whole was shown clearly by the events of the petitioning movement of 1769–70.[36] It is true that in some parts of the country, and particularly in the commercial cities and great seaports and in some of the industrialized areas, there were signs of a sympathetic response to the clamorous exaltations of the metropolis, a response due no doubt to some similarities in their general conditions and attitude of mind;[37] but even here it was for the most part evanescent and it found at this time no organization to give it permanent force. And even the presence of the demagogue himself when he made a triumphal tour through the provinces after his release from prison did not succeed in giving the movement the vitality it was to show some years later.

The Wilkite movement was thus essentially, as the later Radical movements were not, a product of the metropolis. Here the personal devotion which he evoked was of a curious kind, impervious to disillusionment and discreditable revelations, and unaffected by the leader's unconcealed contempt for his followers. Edmund Burke, marvelling at his 'imprudence' and the fact that it did nothing to discredit him in the eyes of his fellows, remarked acutely that 'it may perhaps be … some unusual and eccentric kind of wisdom'.[38] The devotion of the rank and file of these followers seems

[36] See below..

[37] The response in different parts of the country varied greatly and can only be understood in relation to local conditions. One of the most interesting accounts in the press was a letter in the *London Chronicle*, xxvii (10–12 May 1770), 452 from one signing himself 'Viator', whose business, he said, took him much about the kingdom: 'There is scarce an inn, shop, or private house, into which I enter, but the pleasure of conversation, and the regular despatch of business, are hindered by discourse and altercations about Wilkes, Grievances and Middlesex Election'. He adds that he was in Worcestershire when Wilkes was released from prison and that in some places he passed through on 17 and 18 Apr. no business could be done, that Worcester itself was a scene of confusion, but that in Kidderminster the 'Vicar of the Parish, the Bailiff of the Borough, the Master-weavers and principal inhabitants' had managed to prevent riotous behaviour by 'journeyman-weavers, their apprentices and others of the vulgar'. In Bristol there was in 1769 a considerable body of discontent, described by Richard Champion in his MS. letter book (in the possession of Miss P. Rawlins, of Denbigh, N. Wales) as having 'a great and formidable appearance, and a real strength'. The local friends of Wilkes 'took advantage of the times to head' it but behaved 'with such a wildness of popularity and so little attention to common sense' that they 'frightened away many worthy men'. At Plymouth there were riotous rejoicings when the news was received in June 1769 that John Sawbridge and James Townsend had been elected sheriffs. The crowd changed the name of H.M. ship *Barrington* to *Liberty*, and burned jack-boots and an effigy of Bute. They were said to be led by an 'eminent attorney' (*Gentleman's Magazine* (1769), p. 361).

[38] E. Burke to C. O'Hara, 19 Nov. 1773 (Hoffman, p. 551).

to have been compounded of appreciation of a personality so foreign to their own, sympathy for him as the victim (so they believed) of persecution by the great whose privileges they resented, and a delighted admiration of the insolence and imperturbability with which he defied and put out of countenance these persecutors. It would seem as if inarticulate resentment and dissatisfaction which had been piling up within the metropolitan area for years had suddenly found an outlet and a solace in identification with him and his cause. So new a phenomenon was this popular feeling that it has sometimes been suggested that it derived its strength from the emergence into political awareness of classes hitherto submerged, of the unorganized and ill-paid manual workers of the metropolis, and its wretched and degraded underworld. But, though the labour unrest of the recent years reached a climax about the time of the Middlesex election and its accompanying disorders, there seems good reason to believe that it had little direct connection with the Wilkite manifestations,[39] and the support of such allies would, in any case, have checked rather than assisted Wilkes's rise to power.

It is clear indeed that the backbone of Wilkes's support in the metropolis was precisely the same classes as that of the earlier popular leaders, what we should call its lower middle classes. In the City's corporation it was the common hall, composed of the liverymen of the City companies, which was always the bulwark of his power, and his voting strength there depended largely on the liverymen of the numerous lesser companies, for which the livery fines were low and many of which still retained to a considerable degree their old craft associations.[40] And outside the City, in other parts of the metropolis, the position was very similar. In Westminster, for instance, a list of twenty of his most active supporters drawn up in 1770 included the names of three apothecaries, two carpenters, a well-to-do poulterer, a

[39] See G. F. E. Rudé, 'Wilkes and liberty, 1768–9', *Guildhall Miscellany* (July 1957); and 'The London "Mob" of the 18th century', *Historical Jour.*, ii (1956), 1–18. There was much unrest among the merchant seamen in the Thames-side just at the time of the riots accompanying Wilkes's election for Middlesex, but even his enemies made no attempt to suggest he did anything to exacerbate these disorders. Rockingham, reporting to the duke of Newcastle on 10 May 1768 the dispersal of the mob which had collected outside the house of lords, said that the justices returning reported that the crowds were 'much diminished but … that they [*sic*] were still some who cried Wilkes and Liberty and some who cried that bread and beer were too dear and that it was as well to be hanged as starved' (Brit. Libr., Add. MS. 32990 fo. 36v).

[40] J. R. Kellett, 'The breakdown of gild and corporation control over the handicraft and retail trade in London', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., x (1958), 381 *seq.*

stable-keeper, an engraver, a bookseller, an upholsterer, a coachmaker and a working jeweller – as well as a baronet, two parsons (one of whom was respectable), a barrister and a solicitor.[41]

But though the classes on which Wilkes's power ultimately rested were the same as those who supported his predecessors, the very strength of the feeling he elicited made fundamental changes in the movement which was coming into being. In the first place his influence extended over a wider area than that of any of his predecessors. London had long outgrown its ancient city boundaries and the city of Westminster, the borough of Southwark, much of the county of Middlesex and even some of the county of Surrey were already becoming for all practical purposes part of the same great urban centre. But this expansion of the City had so far been reflected only very partially in a unity of political actions and ideas.[42] The strength of the City leaders of the past had depended on their control over the corporate organization of the ancient City, and they had only occasionally concerned themselves with stimulating the political opinion of the surrounding areas and never with giving it a permanent organization. Now, with all these areas united in a community of feeling, co-ordinated action could be planned and was in fact carried out. Not only were their corporate activities now synchronized, but a network of interrelated clubs and societies was created, through which enthusiasm could be maintained and the views of the various parts of the metropolis kept in line.[43] The famous Radical Quadrilateral, or even the Quintuple Alliance, of the future was thus foreshadowed. Wilkes has a claim to be considered at the same time the last of the old City leaders, whose strength rested on their control over the corporation, and the first of the new metropolitan popular leaders who relied on less tangible but more wide-flung support.

[41] List of the signatories to the Westminster remonstrance, with their occupations, inserted by 'Sly-boots' in the *Public Advertiser*, 7 Apr. 1770.

[42] L. B. Namier, *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (2nd edn., 1957), pp. 65 *seq*.

[43] Wilkes was an honorary member of a wide variety of convivial clubs, most of which had some political significance. The most important of the societies primarily political in their purpose were, besides the Supporters of the Bill of Rights who met at the London Tavern, the Sons of Freedom who met at Appleby's Tavern in Westminster, the Society which met at the Standard Tavern, Lincoln's Inn Fields, and the long-established Society of the Antigallicans whose annual meeting was said in 1771 to be 'the most numerous meeting of the year of the Middlesex Freeholders' (*Public Advertiser*, 25 Apr. 1771). The annual May Feast at Southwark was also this year used for political ends (*Public Advertiser*, 29 May 1771).

In the second place, and partly because the area over which his influence extended was thus enlarged, the cause of Wilkes attracted to him a type of supporter whose alliance earlier leaders had never enjoyed. These were the men, all of some education and some of considerable standing, who formed the nucleus of the Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights, a society founded early in 1769 to buy off Wilkes's creditors, but which became in these earlier years the mainspring of the movement's policy. Few of these men were freemen of the City; but most of them had strong interests in the metropolitan area, and the greater number of them pursued their careers there. They were a highly diversified group of men, but they were all for one reason or another dissatisfied with the existing order; with few exceptions they were rather young, and a high proportion of them belonged to the rising professional classes (they tended to be the less prosperous and well-established members of the less socially regarded of these classes) for which, like the ordinary merchant and trading classes of the City, the existing political and social system made little provision.[44] And though, at first at any rate, most of them were warmly attached to the cause of Wilkes as a person, they were basically more concerned with the wider issues to which the Middlesex election dispute gave rise. The most prominent among them were the able but erratic and misfit Parson John Horne (later to be known as Horne Tooke),[45] and two new and idealistic members of parliament, James

[44] In the earlier years of the Society several country gentlemen were members: Sir Francis Blake Delavel, Bt., of Seaton Delavel, Northumberland, 1754–68 M.P. for Andover; Sir Robert Bernard, Bt., of Brampton, Hunts., who was returned by the popular interest for Westminster in 1770 and held the seat until 1774; a young Welsh gentleman Robert Jones of Fonmor Castle, near Cardiff, and Hill Street, Berkeley Square, 'a gentleman of good character, but not esteemed to be a man of very extensive literature and knowledge' (Brit. Libr., Add. MS. 35632 fo. 49, John Vernon to 2nd Lord Hardwicke, 12 June 1769); and Lord Mountmorres, the younger brother of the patriotic Irish peer Lord Charlemont. They each seem to have had different private reasons for their allegiance, to have been concerned chiefly with the activities in Westminster, and to have detached themselves from the movement after the split within the Society in 1771. Another highly individualistic supporter, and one who remained personally attached to Wilkes throughout, was old Dr. Thomas Wilson, prebendary of Westminster, an ardent admirer of the republican historian Mrs. Catherine Macaulay, sister of John Sawbridge. Among the legal supporters were Sgt. John Glynn, M.P. for Middlesex 1768–79, Wilkes's counsel, two young barristers William Adair and Robert Morris, a Welshman, the attorneys Charles Martin and John Reynolds (the latter Wilkes's attorney), George Bellas, proctor of the admiralty court, Arthur Beardmore and John Boddington. Sir Joseph Mawbey, Bt., brewer and distiller and M.P. for Southwark 1761–74, represented the older type of popular leader.

[45] 1736–1812. For him, see A. Stephens, *Memoirs of John Horne Tooke* (2 vols., 1813).

Townsend[46] and John Sawbridge,[47] both of families with City antecedents, though they themselves had not hitherto displayed interest in its affairs. They were all in their thirties, were all to be prominent in Radical agitation for many years to come, and it was to a considerable degree through their influence that the fervour of the Wilkites was, in these early years, harnessed to Radical ends.

It might, however, be asked how it was that, with a leader like Wilkes, himself indifferent or even hostile to the raising of such issues, they were able to bring about this result. The answer lies in the fact that until his release from prison in April 1770, Wilkes was not in a position to exercise leadership over the forces he had raised. The easy discipline of the king's bench prison in which he was confined permitted him, it is true, to keep himself in the public eye and to fight his battle with the house of commons, but he could neither take part in the corporate activities of the City, nor exercise a preponderant influence over the day-to-day activities of his supporters in the rest of the metropolis, until he was able to be present in person. In the City it was in consequence William Beckford who, until his sudden death in June 1770, reaped the fruits of Wilkes's popularity, and between Beckford and these new and ardent recruits the links both of personal friendship and similarity of ideas were strong. In particular, both Townsend and Sawbridge adhered in parliament to the Chatham group of which Beckford was an old supporter.[48] And when in the summer of 1769 Beckford persuaded both of them to take up the freedom of the City, and arranged for them not only to be elected aldermen but also sheriffs for the year,[49] and when in November he himself was for the second time chosen lord mayor,[50] the control of the popular forces both in the City and in the

[46] 1737–87. Son of Chauncy Townsend, merchant and contractor; M.P. for West Looe 1767–74 and for Calne 1782–7; took up his freedom by patrimony 1769; alderman 1769; sheriff 1769–70; lord mayor 1772–3 (see W. P. Courtney, 'James Townsend, M.P.', *Notes & Queries*, 11th ser., v. 2–4).

[47] *c.*1732-95. M.P. for Hythe 1768–74; for London 1774–95; took up his freedom by redemption in 1769; alderman 1769; sheriff 1769–70; lord mayor 1775–6.

[48] In 1771 Townsend called Beckford 'my intimate confidential friend' (*London Chronicle*, xxx (10–12 Oct. 1771), 360).

[49] John Horne in a letter signed 'Roberto' in *The Gazetteer*, 25 Sept. 1771, described Beckford's initiative in this manner.

[50] Beckford's nomination was organized by James Townsend. Beckford wrote to Shelburne, 24 Oct. 1769, 'Our friend Townsend has, by his encouragement, brought this about' (Bowood MSS.). When his name was put forward with that of Trecothick, the hostile majority in the court of aldermen, believing his protestations that he would not stand,

metropolis as a whole was placed firmly in their united and friendly hands.

Since the alliance between Beckford and Wilkes was purely one of convenience – Beckford never joined the Supporters of the Bill of Rights and even in the two months between Wilkes's release from prison and Beckford's death it began to wear thin – Beckford had every reason to stress rather the general issues arising out of the demagogue's cause than his personal grievances. Moreover the main issue which could be extracted from the Middlesex election dispute, the threat to the rights of the electors from what might be considered a corrupt house of commons, fitted in well with the tentative ideas about electoral and parliamentary reform which he had already been advancing. Thus the sympathies of the new recruits and the ideas of the old City leader were easily assimilated. In consequence it was during the short period between the rise of the Wilkite movement and the struggle of Wilkes himself to assume control of it that the main contributions were made by the metropolis to the development of eighteenth-century Radicalism. In this period something in the nature of a programme of parliamentary reform was adumbrated; an attempt was made to set on foot a nationwide agitation in support of their views, and (less important, but equally significant of the forces at work in the metropolis) a plot was laid to force a pledge of support for a reform programme on the leaders of the opposition groups in parliament.

The first of these contributions was that of the most permanent importance. It would seem to have been Beckford who took the lead here. The first step was taken at the beginning of 1769 when the metropolitan constituencies decided to send instructions to their representatives protesting against the actions of the House against Wilkes, and advancing other grievances. Both Middlesex and Westminster adopted and published their instructions before the City did, but it was the City's instructions, in the preparation of which Beckford was actively concerned, which first raised the issue of electoral and parliamentary reform.[51] The City representatives were instructed to work for shorter parliaments and a place and pension bill (both echoes of the old oppositions with which Beckford was familiar) and for the imposition of the oath against bribery at elections which Beckford

elected him in order to force on another election. When Beckford permitted the Livery to persuade him to change his mind, they considered this a disreputable trick.

[51] The Middlesex freeholders met to agree on instructions to their representatives on 12 Jan.; those of Westminster on 25 Jan. The City instructions were agreed on 10 Feb. 1769. For Beckford's part in this, see *Public Advertiser*, 11 Feb. 1769.

had demanded in his abortive bill at the end of the last parliament. (A further proposal advanced that voting might be by ballot is of more uncertain origin, and does not occur again.) Further, throughout the rest of 1769 Beckford began to dwell in his speeches in the House on the 'little paltry boroughs' he had complained of as early as 1761, and on the undue influence which they gave to the aristocracy and to other borough owners.[52] And by 1770 he had produced the threefold programme of reform – shorter parliaments, a place and pension bill and the more equal representation of the people – which he tried to force on the unwilling parliamentary opposition, and which obtained widespread support in the metropolis. It was a programme based on the assumption that representation and property were closely related, and it was in no sense a demand for popular sovereignty, but it was (largely for this reason) one which was to remain acceptable to most English reformers for many years to come.

More immediately striking, however, though of less long-term significance, were the attempts in these years to extend the movement inside the metropolis to the nation as a whole. The course of these attempts illustrates so well both the strength and the limitations of this Radical movement of the metropolis in relation to the country as a whole, that it is worth going into it in some detail. A first attempt made by the City on its own at the time of the publication of its instructions to its representatives was an almost complete failure.[53] Even in the commercial centres where it was accustomed to stimulate common action on commercial issues, it ran into unexpected difficulties, and in the counties its contacts were too slight

[52] On 29 Feb. 1769 he stated, 'The fact is, a number of great men are got together to parcel out every thing, without regard to the people' (Cavendish, *Debates*, i. 150). On 1 March 1769 he stated, 'We should cut off the small paltry boroughs' (Cavendish, *Debates*, i. 281) and the next day he spoke of M.P.s whose seats were obtained by 'bribing some paltry borough' (Cavendish, *Debates*, i. 304).

[53] *The London Chronicle*, xxv (2–4 Feb. 1769), 114, reported that Essex was said to be considering instructions and that Bristol 'and the capital places in the kingdom, are impatiently waiting the sense of the City of London' to draw up their instructions. In all between 31 Jan. and 9 Feb. the paper reported four cities – Norwich, Exeter, London, Bristol – and six counties – Devon, Middlesex, Essex, Wiltshire, Hampshire and Berkshire – as awaiting the London lead. Copies of the London instructions were sent by post to all parts of the kingdom 'with a view to animate other Counties and Boroughs to follow the example' (*London Chronicle*, xxv (9–11 Feb. 1769), 144). Bristol sent instructions. For their reaction, see W. R. Savadge, 'The west country and the American mainland colonies 1703–83, with special reference to the merchants of Bristol' (unpublished University of Oxford B.Litt. thesis, 1951).

to bring forth a response.[54] A second attempt in the summer of 1769 was made under more auspicious circumstances, and met with more success. It did so because it was undertaken in collaboration with the opposition groups in parliament. As soon as the house of commons had resolved on 15 April 1769 that, Wilkes being incapable of sitting, Colonel Luttrell, the rival candidate, be declared elected in his stead, a meeting of Middlesex freeholders was summoned, at which James Townsend announced 'the necessity of seeking out some new remedy for a new grievance'.[55] Shortly afterwards a deputation of the Livery of the City asked for a common hall for the same purpose;[56] and it soon became known that the 'new remedy' proposed by both Middlesex and the City was the presentation of petitions to the crown, which would not only demand redress of various grievances, but (a definitely unorthodox departure) would also protest to the king against the actions of the house of commons. Early in May it was rumoured that 'a petition of a very extraordinary kind is actually preparing, to be sent through every county in England in order to be signed by such freeholders … as may approve of its contents'.[57]

Before any petition was formally adopted, however, on the last day of the parliamentary session a dinner was held at the Thatched House Tavern, attended by the house of commons members of all the opposition groups, at which it was agreed to take common action during the recess to stir up expressions of public opinion throughout the country in protest against the Middlesex Resolution.[58] All those metropolitan leaders who were also members of parliament were present; the toast of 'the City of London, not forgetting the Livery thereof'[59] was drunk, and though no statement was made about the means to be employed to voice the country's protest, it

[54] Its chief effect was to stimulate a crop of loyal addresses to the crown, organized by the supporters of the administration. They were duly printed in the *London Gazette* from the beginning of Feb. until the end of May 1769.

[55] *London Chronicle*, xxv (15–18 Apr. 1769), 366.

[56] The calling of a common hall was first demanded on 27 Apr. 1769, the day on which the Middlesex petition was passed, but owing to obstruction the petition from London was not presented until 5 July 1769.

[57] *London Chronicle*, xxv (11–13 May 1769), 456. There was a precedent. The petition of the City to the crown against the Cider Tax in 1764 was said in the House to be 'the first instance of a petition to the King against Parliament' (MS. parliamentary diary of James Harris, 16 March 1764).

[58] The dinner was held on 9 May 1769. A list of the 72 members of the opposition in the house of commons present is included in *Chatham Correspondence*, iii. 359–60, n. 1.

[59] *London Chronicle*, xxv (11–13 May 1769), 450.

was obviously generally accepted that petitions to the crown as proposed in Middlesex and London should be pressed on all counties and some of the larger boroughs, and that the leaders of metropolitan opinion and the parliamentary opposition groups should work alongside each other in the campaign.[60] There are even some signs of a definite 'deal' between the two groups of allies. All sections of the parliamentary opposition shared, together with their dislike of Wilkes, a suspicion of the Radicalism of the metropolis. They were, in consequence, anxious to confine the petitions to the issue of the Middlesex election alone.[61] It may therefore be of some significance that a circumstantial account appeared in the press a few days before the Thatched House dinner of a meeting between George Grenville and William Dowdeswell, the leaders of the two main opposition groups in the house of commons, with some persons in the City,[62] to discuss possible modifications in the terms of the Middlesex petition; and it may also be noted that, though the petitions of Middlesex and the City ultimately came out in their original form, those from other parts of the metropolis, which were drawn up later, followed the pattern set by the rest of the country and confined themselves to the Middlesex issue.[63]

The popular leaders of the metropolis had thus succeeded in reaching an agreement with the parliamentary opposition to work for a nationwide expression of public opinion, and had imposed on them their own plan of action – though they may have done so at the cost of narrowing the issues on which the support of the nation was to be sought. In the implementing of the plan they also took an active part. In the county of Surrey[64] as well

[60] There was no formal agreement on the steps to be taken.

[61] The marquess of Rockingham suspected the followers of Grenville and Chatham of a desire to introduce radical matters into the petition. He wrote to Burke about the proposed Buckinghamshire petition expressing gloomy suspicions of the attitude of Lord Temple and his supporters. 'Lord Temple will try to include all the matters mentioned in the City and Livery Petition, he will do it politically as a compliment to them and I even should scarce be surprized [*sic*] if annual or triennial Parliaments were recommended' (Sheffield, FitzWilliam MSS., Rockingham to E. Burke, 17 July 1769). But in fact Temple and Grenville fully accepted the desirability of confining the petition 'to the principal point, and to express themselves upon that with vigour and decency' (FitzWilliam MSS., T. Whately to E. Burke, 23 Aug. 1769).

[62] *London Chronicle*, xxv (4–6 May 1769), 430.

[63] The Westminster petition was, however, the first to call for the dissolution of parliament, a point on which they were later followed by the Yorkshire petition.

[64] See p. 141. An account of the popular activities in Surrey at this time was published by Sir Joseph Mawbey under the title of 'Surriensis' in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1788), pp. 1052–3.

as throughout the metropolitan area it was they who made the running; they were also able to exert some influence over the commercial centres with which they were in contact, and individuals among them could help in stimulating opinion in counties further afield. It was reported in August that 'many of them are dispersed in different parts of the country endeavouring to stir up meetings of the freeholders',[65] and Sergeant John Glynn in Cornwall and Exeter,[66] Beckford in Wiltshire and Somerset,[67] John Sawbridge in Kent,[68] and possibly one or two others elsewhere were active and prominent in this work.[69]

These activities mark, however, the extent of what they could do to further the progress of the campaign. The appeal was primarily to the counties, and by the very nature of the case, the chief part in arousing support in the counties had to be taken by the political leaders whom they trusted, and it is significant that almost without exception the influence exerted by individual metropolitan leaders in the counties arose from the fact that they were property owners there. More general efforts to exercise influence from the metropolis over the course of events were unsuccessful. An attempt by the Supporters of the Bill of Rights by circularizing the counties to encourage the setting up of permanent local organizations to correspond

[65] Brit. Libr., Add. MS. 35632 fo. 51, John Vernon to the 2nd Lord Hardwicke, 16 Aug. 1769.

[66] He was a freeholder in Cornwall and was recorder of Exeter. At the Cornish meeting of freeholders at Bodmin on 6 Oct. 1769 he spoke for an hour. At Exeter at a meeting at Guildhall in the same month he attended as recorder and made an excellent speech (Brit. Libr., Add. MS. 30870 fo. 213, [unsigned], Exeter, 24 Oct. 1769).

[67] Beckford attended the Wiltshire meeting at Devizes on 16 Aug. 1769 with Lord Temple who was visiting him, and spoke. The duke of Grafton considered the petition largely the work of 'our old friends Popham and Beckford' (*Autobiography and Political Correspondence of Augustus Henry, 3rd Duke of Grafton*, ed. W. R. Anson (1898), p. 239). He was unable to attend the meeting at Wells in Oct. to pass the petition from Somerset, but he sent a letter giving 'my sentiments freely and a copy of the chief grievance', which he authorized his correspondent to make public if necessary (Bowood MSS., W. Beckford to Shelburne, 24 Oct. 1769).

[68] In Kent a petition was, after a good deal of difficulty, stirred up despite the opposition of the gentry. John Sawbridge was among those active in furthering it (*Chatham Correspondence*, iii. 365, J. Calcraft to Chatham, 25 Nov. 1769; Walpole, *Memoirs*, iii. 393: 'Sawbridge and Calcraft obtained … a petition from the county of Kent, though all the magistrates shrunk from it, two gentlemen only appearing there and they dissenting').

[69] Horace Walpole reported that Sir Joseph Mawbey and Calcraft, assisted by Sir Robert Bernard, also took the lead in obtaining the Essex petition (Walpole, *Memoirs*, iii. 400) without the support of the gentry.

with, was very coldly received;[70] and the intervention of John Horne, Sir Robert Bernard and others in the borough of Bedford to defeat the mayor favoured by the duke of Bedford,[71] did not (as it was confidently hoped) prove the beginning of a movement of revolt by boroughs against their patrons,[72] and would have been highly unpopular with their parliamentary allies if it had.

When the campaign had once been agreed on, therefore, the Radical forces in the metropolis could hope to play only a minor part in its course. Their influence was further weakened, moreover, by the open suspicion with which they were regarded by at least one section of the parliamentary opposition and by large sections of public opinion throughout the country. While that part of the opposition which followed the lead of Chatham and the Grenvilles were prepared to work amicably with them, this was by no means the case with the party supporting the marquess of Rockingham. The marquess himself for a long time resisted the proposal to promote a petition in his own county of Yorkshire, and did so largely because of his dislike of the metropolis and its motives. 'I *must say*', he wrote, 'that the thing which weighs most against adopting the mode of petitioning the King is, *where* the example was first set'.[73] And the course of the campaign showed that this suspicion was so widely shared by those whose signatures were being sought, that in many parts of the country the support of the metropolis was a hindrance rather than a help in the agitation. William Dowdeswell, the leader of the Rockinghams in the house of commons, lamented from Worcestershire that 'Wilkes's character … and the advantage

[70] The Supporters of the Bill of Rights at a meeting on 31 May agreed to dispatch a circular 'invoking the friends of Liberty throughout the whole British Empire to concur in promoting the Constitutional Purposes for which this Society was established'. Two complementary letters were sent out. Copies, dated 20 July, are reproduced in the *London Chronicle*, xxvii (17–20 Feb. 1770), 174–5. Dowdeswell, who received a copy, decided not to reply (Ann Arbor, Michigan, Clements Library, Dowdeswell MSS., W. Dowdeswell to E. Burke, 10 Aug. 1769). Walpole reported that it received little response (Walpole, *Memoirs*, iii. 372).

[71] For this incident, see *Public Advertiser*, 6 Sept. 1769, *seq*.

[72] A good deal of propaganda was put out in the press to encourage it, and an unsuccessful attempt was made to repeat the operation against the duke of Grafton at Thetford (*Public Advertiser*, 20 Sept. 1769). On 11 Oct. the same paper reported that such was the feeling throughout the corporations of the kingdom that at their annual elections of officers they 'seem determined to make choice of those gentlemen only whose conduct has proved them to be steady friends to their Country' – an obvious piece of propaganda quite unrelated to fact.

[73] FitzWilliam MSS., Rockingham to E. Burke, 1, 3 Sept. 1769.

which he necessarily must receive from the restitution made to the Public of its rights … have checkt this proceeding in most places', and he added 'The injudicious list of grievances, which filled the first petitions [i.e., those of Middlesex and London], still more disinclined the sober part of the People to signing petitions'.[74] While in Surrey the highly respectable Sir Anthony Abdy, battling in vain against the incursion of metropolitan organizers into the county, protested at 'the wild and warm proceedings of Messrs. Home, Bellas etc. and others of the London Tavern, the generality of whose opinions and ideas I cannot agree or subscribe to'.[75]

The campaign as a whole had only a limited success. Only eighteen out of the forty English counties[76] and over a dozen of the larger boroughs[77] finally presented petitions, and these often took months to procure despite strenuous efforts on the part of those promoting them. Whether from suspicion of metropolitan Radicalism or dislike of Wilkes, or for other reasons, there was little sign that the country gentry as a whole were anxious to make a protest even on the limited issue of the Middlesex Resolution. It was probably true that in most counties there were enough of what Rockingham called the 'young men' and 'the warm spirits'[78] to get a petition through a county meeting if they were given a lead by those whom they were accustomed to follow. It was also true that here and there they took the initiative without such a lead, or, as in Yorkshire itself, forced their leaders into action. In consequence in most counties where members of the parliamentary opposition were influential petitions were set on foot. But when it came to circulating the petitions for signature the organizers often found a good deal of unwillingness to sign. 'It is amazing', complained Dowdeswell, 'how in most places people of rank and fortune shrink from this measure; and with what deference all others below them

[74] Dowdeswell MSS., W. Dowdeswell to E. Burke, 5 Sept. 1769.

[75] FitzWilliam MSS., Sir Anthony Abdy to Sir George Colebrooke (copy), 1 July 1769.

[76] Middlesex, Surrey, Devonshire, Cornwall, Wiltshire, Somersetshire, Gloucestershire, Buckinghamshire, Yorkshire, Essex, Worcestershire, Derbyshire, Cumberland, Herefordshire, Kent, Dorset, Northumberland, Durham.

[77] It is not always easy to be certain which of the petitions discussed in the boroughs were actually delivered, particularly in the case of those which came late in the movement, when the arrangements for publicity were uncertain. The following seem, however, certainly to have been presented: Westminster, Southwark, Canterbury, Exeter, Bristol, Liverpool, Berwick-on-Tweed, Worcester, Durham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Coventry, Wells and Hereford. The official *Gazette*, which so carefully included all the earlier loyal addresses, ignored the petitions completely.

[78] FitzWilliam MSS., Rockingham to E. Burke, 1–3 Sept. 1769.

wait for their leaders'.[79] And if there were unwillingness among the gentry, there was ignorance among the freeholders. There were indeed some signs of independent approval of the movement among the more substantial class of freeholder. John Robinson, suspiciously watching the progress of the Yorkshire petition from the neighbouring county of Westmorland, wrote, 'It gives me concern to find that the Quakers and Dissenters are so infatuated … as to sign and support it'[80] and the notably independent freeholders of Kent, and apparently those of Essex,[81] supported petitions against the wishes of most of the local gentry. But in general the situation seems to have been much as Lord Temple described it in Buckinghamshire where he 'found the freeholders in general totally ignorant of the question, and but very little affected with it'.[82] The duke of Richmond also gave an admirable account of the position in an out-of-the-way county, that of Sussex, when explaining why, despite his personal sympathies, he did not organize a petition there:

> You will naturally say then, well why do not the effects appear? The reason is that from the distant situation of Sussex from London, … from the weight of Government on account of the many dependants which so many Seaports occasion, from many of the leading men being in place or attached to Court; from the long habit in which the Duke of Newcastle had brought the Whigs of approving all the measures of the old Court, the attachment of the Torys [*sic*] to the new Court, and from the natural indolence of men who do not feel the immediate effects of oppression. From all these causes, there was a supineness, that of itself would not stirr, tho' they must and do see that things are not right. I could plainly see that there was discontent enough, if it was encouraged to do the business of a Petition, but I must have stirred it up, and in so doing I should have appear'd factious.[83]

Nor was the response of the boroughs, even the more important ones, much more encouraging. Even in Bristol, though a petition was set going with enthusiasm, it hung fire so much that at one time doubts were felt

[79] Dowdeswell MSS., W. Dowdeswell to E. Burke, 5 Sept. 1769.
[80] Brit. Libr., Add. MS. 38206 fo. 149, J. Robinson to C. Jenkinson, 3 Nov. 1769.
[81] See above.
[82] FitzWilliam MSS., E. Burke to Rockingham, 9 Sept. 1769.
[83] Rockingham MSS., Richmond to E. Burke, 2 Sept. 1769.

whether it would ever be presented,[84] and at Liverpool a petition from a body of freemen was immediately offset by a counter-petition from the corporation. In view of the conflicting interests among those sponsoring the petitions, and the evidence of widespread indifference and even dislike of the measure among those who were approached, it is not surprising that the administration, at first alarmed at the prospect of an outburst of public feeling on a nationwide scale, ended by ignoring it altogether, nor that the movement petered out.

With the dying away of the agitations of these years, the bid which the Radical forces of the metropolis had made to enlist the country in their cause was virtually over. Beckford's attempts in 1770 to pledge the leaders of the opposition to his programme of reform were easily evaded and were thus of comparatively little significance,[85] and the Remonstrances of the same year, in the course of which he won his posthumous statue from his fellow citizens, called forth little response outside the metropolis. And with his death and the violent internal dissensions which accompanied the succession of Wilkes to power, the breach between the metropolis and the rest of the country was further widened. When in 1771 the lord mayor, Brass Crosby, was committed to the Tower by the house of commons during the dispute between the City and the House over the printing of the Commons' Debates, the incident aroused in the country as a whole, as Edmund Burke mournfully observed,[86] little general comment or even surprise.

Nevertheless, the events of these years had a real importance in the history of eighteenth-century England. It was not without cause that Christopher Wyvill, leader of the famous Yorkshire Association ten years later, printed as the introduction to his political papers the proceedings in Yorkshire in 1769–70,[87] and in the metropolis itself forces had been set at work which did

[84] Brit. Libr., Add. MS. 30870 fo. 190, J. Green (of Wine Street, Bristol) to J. Wilkes, 16 Sept. 1769.

[85] See p. 144 above. Besides the attempt to pledge the opposition leaders into a programme of reform, they also tried to trick Chatham into pledging his support of triennial parliaments (*Chatham Correspondence*, iii. 464, n. 1). He rejected the idea, though on 1 May 1771 he declared himself converted to it.

[86] He wrote to Charles O'Hara, 2 Apr. 1711 (pr. in Hoffman, p. 488): 'The people of the City have habituated themselves to *play* with violent measures. A Mayor of London sent to the Tower in his year of office, would at any other time have been a very dangerous symptom. It is now no indifferent one; but not what it would have been formerly'.

[87] C. Wyvill, *Political Papers, chiefly respecting the Attempt of the County of York and other Considerable Districts, … to effect a Reformation of the Parliament of Great-Britain* (York, n.d.), I, ix, *seq*.

not again die down. Moreover the sketch of a programme of parliamentary reform had been drawn up which was to serve as the basis of the ideas of the majority of reformers for many years to come, and which might also serve as a starting point for more revolutionary proposals. In 1771 when Wilkes and his friends felt obliged to advance proposals for reform they adopted Beckford's propositions en bloc,[88] but five years later, when Wilkes made his speech on reform in the new parliament in which he was permitted to sit, Beckford's 'more equal representation of the people' had developed into the principle 'that every free agent in this kingdom should … be represented in parliament'.[89] And even when Wilkes spoke, Major Cartwright's famous pamphlet *Take Your Choice*, in which he advocated universal suffrage, was being shown round in manuscript in preparation for publication.[90]

[88] The Bill of Rights Society first adopted this programme at a meeting on 11 June 1771 (*Public Advertiser*, 13 June 1771).

[89] *Parliamentary History*, xviii. 1295.

[90] F. D. Cartwright, *The Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright* (1826), i. 95.