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Reviewed by James Conniff (Department of Political Science, San Diego State University)

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English Politics on the Eve of the Great Reform Bill

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The unreformed politics of Newcastle has perhaps received more than its fair share of attention from scholars. In part, this is because Newcastle politics followed a trajectory which is both fascinating and instructive in its own right. Between 1750 and 1790, during a period when the influence of the Leveson Gower family was dominant, only one contested election took place in Newcastle. However, in the next forty years, twelve elections were contested and those contests were often closely fought with frequent changes in the balance of power. For example, in 1790 a seat was decided by only two votes out of about a thousand and in 1807 another by three out of some twelve hundred. At first, the Leveson family prevailed but, as the influence of other forces—of other family connections, an independent and reformist bloc, and the city corporation, among them—steadily grew, the constituency became increasingly open and subject to all the forms of political persuasion which were then being perfected. By 1832, Newcastle's political system was beyond the control of any authority or faction, for some thirty percent of the city's adult males had the vote and

over seventy percent of all families had at least one voter. On the eve of the Reform Bill, Newcastle was one of the most competitive and sophisticated political battlegrounds in England.

The attention paid to Newcastle's politics is also partly due to the rather fortuitous completeness of its record. Substantial evidence exists in such collections as the Sutherland Papers in the Staffordshire Record Office and the Newcastle Museum's material pertaining to the Newcastle-under-Lyme Corporation. The volume under review here adds to the record over three hundred broadsides originally printed for the elections held between 1790 and 1832. These broadsides, single printed sheets—in prose, verse, or song—were printed in great numbers (sometimes in the thousands) and reached a wide audience of voters and non-voters alike. Broadside were common enough in other constituencies but no other collection exists in anything like so great numbers or such completeness. Moreover, some forty of the Newcastle broadsides are reprinted in their original form to give the modern reader an idea of what they looked like to their contemporaries.

Read in isolation, they offer a richly entertaining picture of early representative democracy. However, when placed in the context expertly provided by Barker and Vincent's introduction, and especially when that context is further filled out by reference to the many fine recent works on the unreformed electoral system, the broadsides become an integral part of a renewed appreciation of just how early nineteenth-century government worked. For any one who loves the game of electoral politics and wants to know more about its origins, they are must reading.

I can only mention a few of the topics and issues raised by the broadsides which I find most interesting. Particularly noteworthy, I think, is the way in which the Newcastle elections followed a pattern, one is tempted to say a dance, of electoral courtship which brought together the elitist candidates and their middle and working-class supporters. The intent seems always to have been the preservation of a balance between various demands—for example, between participatory rights and the need to maintain stability and order or between the representative's responsibility and the elector's deference. The candidates began the process with a public announcement of their willingness or desire to stand for election. They then arrived in the constituency with a great display of carefully arranged public support. Touring the district, the candidate talked to a range of electors to test the electoral waters and to build support, often in the forms of pledges which were considered morally binding precursors of votes.

Since Newcastle-under-Lyme returned two members of Parliament, there generally followed a period of alliance-building and maneuvering. Sometimes candidates would work together, splitting the two votes of the electors, and sometimes they would urge their supporters to "plump," that is, to cast a single ballot for themselves and to discard their other ballot. Finally, several days of balloting, combined with frequent expressions of confidence of victory and exhortations to vote would follow, the results would be announced, and the candidates would depart with appropriate expressions of gratitude or perhaps complaints about the unfairness of their treatment.

As a political scientist, I find nearly as interesting the context within which the politics of Newcastle operated. There is, it seems to me, an inherent drive to representative politics which moves it toward ever greater inclusiveness and democracy. The logic of representation both encourages involving all the members of the

community in its politics and also deprives of rationality most attempts at exclusion. This drive can be seen at work in Newcastle and in the role of the broadsides in its politics. The broadsides appealed to voters and non-voters alike. For the former, they provided information and appeals to party unity, but they also helped to incorporate the latter into the community by making them privy to insider knowledge and giving them a role, albeit not a complete one, in the political process. The broadsides similarly bridged the gap between the literate and the illiterate. In a society where some sixty to seventy percent of the males and between thirty to sixty percent of the women were literate, the broadsides provided an important link, for by being read or sung aloud they could reach people who might otherwise be outside the margins of the political system. Indeed, as Barker and Vincent point out, print in general, and the broadsides in particular, provided an effective, cheap, and often profitable means of political communication in early nineteenth-century Newcastle. And yet matters did not always go smoothly, for the broadsides also bear witness to a continuing struggle over maintaining elite control. Indeed, throughout the period, the corporation routinely created new voters, called Tow-heads by their critics, in often successful attempts to determine the outcome of elections.

Finally, the broadsides help us chart the changes in Newcastle's and England's politics over time. To be sure, some things remain stable. Throughout the period, one sees regular appeals to independency on the part of both electors and representatives. At first, the target, more often than not, was the Leveson Gower family. Voters were urged to stand up to the overbearing patron and the ideal of the independent voter, above partisanship and of sound and open patriotic mind, was constantly reasserted. Later on, the Corporation or the national administration became more popular candidates for abuse as candidates regularly swore that they were beholding to no man or party. Again, over the forty year time span covered by the broadsides, we see national issues and ideological appeals replace appeals to deference and the preservation of a mythically unified community. It is probably safe to say that local concerns seem to predominate at any given time but there is hardly a major national issue which does not get some play in the Newcastle broadsides. The 1790s see discussions of Charles James Fox and William Pitt, the growth of radicalism, and the war with France. By the 1820s, debate shifts to Queen Caroline, parliamentary reform, and Catholic Emancipation. Thus, in the 1820s, Robert John Wilmot can be found

citing Edmund Burke in defense of his support for a resolution calling for the discussion of Catholic Emancipation and being re-elected in spite of vigorous [and scurrilous] personal attacks. Similarly, as 1832 nears, the candidates increasingly wrestle with parliamentary reform as they seek to combine meaningful reform with the preservation of Newcastle's privileged place in the old electoral system.

In short, the Newcastle broadsides offer a fascinating glimpse of a politics close enough to us to be in-

structive and interesting and yet alien enough to stimulate thought. In addition, they provide incentive for the reader to go further in the study of the politics of their time, for they require the complement of other sources to achieve their fullest impact. The introduction by Barker and Vincent can serve as a good jumping-off point for that investigation but is not intended to be and cannot be the end of the road. The editors have made the broadsides accessible and the Boydell Press has done a thorough job of reproducing them. The rest is up to the reader.

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