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Why symbolic representation frames parliamentary public engagement

Cristina Leston-Bandeira

University of Leeds (from 1st Oct 2015)

Abstract:

The UK Parliament's activity in public engagement has recently expanded considerably. Faced with declining levels of trust, it has invested considerable time and resources to new activities focusing specifically on engagement: educational resources and cultural events among many others. This embodies a new role for parliament of increasing importance particularly in the context of the twenty-first century parliament. This article analyses the aims of public engagement and its consequences for representation. We explore the potential representative role of public engagement, identifying key changes that have affected the relationship between public and parliament. We utilise evidence from documentary analysis and elite in-depth interviews with parliamentary officials to show that public engagement planning aims to develop amongst the public a sense of connectivity that relies on more collective and symbolic forms of representation, which seek to present the institution detached from its actors and politics. We utilise constructivist representation theories to support our analysis.

Introduction

This article reflects on the role played by public engagement in the relationship between parliament and citizens. Public engagement has become the buzz word of politics in the 21st century. As indicators of political apathy have increased and trust in politics has fallen (Dalton, 2004; Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007), efforts to engage citizens into politics have become a standard theme of modern democracy and a central activity for many organisations and institutions. Parliaments are no different. If anything, they have become the face of political disengagement and, therefore, these institutions have been under particular pressure to develop public engagement strategies (Hansard Society, 2011; IPU, 2012).

Whilst this is still a slow process for many legislatures, this is not the case for some such as the UK Parliament as stated already in 2007 by Kelso, and particularly in the wake of the 2009 expenses

scandal (Fox, 2009). Thus over the last decade we have witnessed a considerable expansion of parliamentary public engagement. This expansion is expressed in a number of ways: the creation of new services specific to the delivery of public engagement activities; the investment in new staff specifically focused on the skills of communication and engagement; the development of activities whose sole purpose is to raise awareness and understanding of the institution of parliament; the creation, or strengthening, of processes that integrate the citizen's voice into parliamentary activity. That is, activities that are not part of core parliamentary business and have one common purpose: to open the institution to citizens.

As this activity has expanded considerably, we propose to explore the role it plays in the relationship between parliament and public in the context of modern society, reflecting in particular on its elements of symbolic representation. Rather than focusing on how people respond to public engagement activities, our goal is to understand the aims behind its expanding development. We focus therefore on the supply side, exploring the UK Parliament's engagement strategy and officials' narratives in shaping the purposes of parliamentary engagement, through elite interviews and documentary analysis.

Research on parliamentary public engagement is still scarce. Whilst there is a wealth of studies documenting the public's increasing levels of political apathy and/or distrust towards institutions (Dalton, 2004, Hansard Society 2004-14; Norris, 2011; Whiteley, 2012), only a few studies have addressed this issue from the point of view of the institution: how is parliament reacting to this trend? Clark and Wilford provide a useful review of the public engagement strategy developed by the Northern Ireland Assembly, analysing the public's reaction to some of its initiatives, establishing therefore a bridge between the institution's plans and the public's reaction. And specific areas of parliamentary public engagement have received some attention in the academic literature, namely those that integrate the citizen's voice in parliamentary activity such as petitions (Miller, 2009; Lindner and Riehm, 2009; Carman, 2010; Hough, 2012; Bochel, 2013; Riehm et al, 2014), but public

engagement includes many more types of activities namely in terms of information and education provision and we still know little about these.

Kelso mapped out in 2007 the areas of development of public engagement in the UK Parliament, showing a strong focus from the institution in improving political information and communication, but still struggling in identifying a collective approach to public engagement (Kelso, 2007). Two years later, Fox would warn against the development of activities just for the sake of it, calling for particular care in matching these with what the public wants (Fox, 2009). More recently, Walker outlined the activities that have been developed under the last two public engagement strategies (2006-11; 2011-16), identifying the lack of knowledge about the institution as one of its key challenges (2012). There is therefore a plethora of activity in developing public engagement but we still have plenty to learn about it.

As this becomes a substantive part of parliamentary activity, it is important therefore to reflect on the wider role played by this new type of activity. Clearly public engagement aims foremost to engage the public with Parliament, making it more accessible and open. But does it also have consequences in the way Parliament re-presents itself to the public? This article discusses the aims of parliamentary public engagement by analysing the narratives of officials in justifying strategies developed to implement this activity. This helps us understand why this type of activity embodies forms of symbolic representation and why this enables a better understanding of the linkage between parliament and citizens in the 21st century. Public expectations towards politics and the way parliament interacts with citizens in the 21st century are vastly different from previous centuries, when our current political institutions were established; and this context needs to be taken into account when evaluating the purposes sought with public engagement. We borrow conceptual tools from the constructivist approach to representation (Young, 2000; Saward, 2006; Saward, 2010; Disch, 2011) to understand the role played by public engagement and whether this adds a new dimension to traditional forms of parliamentary representation, by enabling an expansion of forms of symbolic representation.

Our article is divided in two parts. We first discuss the characteristics of representation in the 21st century parliament in order to understand the potential role of public engagement. This discussion reviews key changes that affect the context of the modern parliament and its relationship with the public. This then leads us to explore different conceptualisations of representation, identifying the particular value of symbolic representation to understand the potential role played by public engagement in the context of the modern parliament. The second part explores the development of the public engagement strategy of the UK Parliament, utilising qualitative research which encompasses documentary analysis and elite semi-structured interviews. We map the extent of the expansion of this activity, demonstrating that this is now a major activity for parliament. We then explore officials' narratives in justifying public engagement strategies. This shows why symbolic values of representation become particularly useful tools to attempt to establish connections with the public.

Methodology

Our study adopts a qualitative research methods approach, exploring an in-depth analysis of the meanings attributed and pursued in the development of the public engagement activity in the UK parliament. We utilise evidence from a series of elite in-depth semi-structured interviews developed with parliamentary officials, clerks and MPs, between October 2010 and January 2013 in the UK Parliament. These interviews were developed in the context of a larger comparative project that encompassed five European parliaments, though in this article we focus mainly on the UK. Overall, the project included 58 interviews, of which 15 for the UK Parliament. Our interviews explored the aims, processes and structures in place in parliaments to develop and implement public engagement tools and activities. Our interviewees were selected through a purposive sampling strategy, according to their role in the management and implementation of Parliament's public engagement. Interviewees include thus mainly officials working in the services delivering public engagement, but also officials, clerks and MPs with non-engagement specific roles, comprising therefore key senior figures in the

management of parliament, its administration and public engagement. But also interviewees at a junior level, who are more directly involved in the actual delivery of public engagement. All of our interviews were undertaken in confidence and therefore quotes used have been anonymised.

The interviews complemented extensive documentary analysis of key documents informing on the management of the institution and particularly on the strategies developed to implement public engagement. This includes the annual reports of the House of Commons Commission from 1999/2000 to 2013/14, as well as reports from key relevant select committees such as the Administration Committee, the Finance and Services Committee and the Modernisation Committee. The documentary analysis was used to map the expansion of public engagement and its respective key priorities, as well as to triangulate the interviews. Our research focuses therefore on the narrative presented by the institution and its officials.

The importance of officials' narrative in the establishment of parliamentary public engagement strategies should not be underestimated. Whilst parliamentary officials' contribution always matter, they matter particularly in the case of public engagement. One key characteristic of parliamentary public engagement is that the role of the official is much more visible and prominent than it would be, say, in activities supporting the roles of legislation and scrutiny. Legislation and scrutiny are far more political areas and, therefore, determined mainly by political actors – representatives. Public engagement has developed mainly as an activity parallel to core parliamentary business, which explains the importance of the specific role of officials. On the one hand it is often the official who delivers public engagement activities to the public, and on the other it is also down to the officials to determine what should be developed, seeing the largely non-political nature of this type of activity. Hence our focus on parliamentary officials besides the institution's activity as a whole.

Representation in the modern parliament

From the **Gentlemen's Club Parliament** *to the* **Mediator Parliament**

In order to understand the aims of parliamentary public engagement and its consequences for representation, we need first to recapitulate key changes that have affected the role played by parliament in the link between society and governance. Parliament's role has changed significantly over the last two centuries following transformations in governance and society and this has consequences for how legislatures engage with the public.

From what we name as the *Gentlemen's Club Parliament* in the 19th century, we have moved to what we term as the *Mediator Parliament* in the 21st century. The Gentlemen's Club Parliament was a small, elitist, gathering of dignitaries, with a very fluid and close linkage to government. This is a time of very limited franchise; those voting are those also in power. Parliament is mainly about the big debates and minimal legislation, with no real linkage to the rest of society. This would eventually lead to what we name the *Representative Parliament*, from the beginning of the 20th century up to its end. This parliament is concomitant with the development of mass parties and the expansion of the franchise. Governance becomes mediated by the party system, and parties become the key political actors. As governance grows, legislation becomes increasingly a task for the Executive, and parliament turns more and more towards scrutiny and representation. Political participation takes place mainly through elections, every four or five years, and parliament acts according to the delegation model, whereby 'popular sovereignty is exercised through delegation from citizens to politicians and collective actors' (Müller et al 2003, p.3). Parliamentary representation is closely associated to the electoral chain.

With the 21st century, the *Mediator Parliament* emerges. The focus shifts from the executive to citizens. Legislation, scrutiny and representation are still key functions of parliament, but besides this legislatures are expected to actively reach out to the public. This leads to the development of the public engagement function, whereby parliament needs to be seen as open and transparent, but also enabling citizens to put forward their views on governance. Parliament becomes the most exposed political institution and assumes a key role as mediator between society and governance. The external environment of the Mediator Parliament is characterised by an informed citizenry and expanding

forms of participatory democracy. Despite the indicators on rising political apathy, we have today a very active citizenry; if they can act and speak for themselves, inevitably their perceptions of those elected to represent will change.

The modern legislature – the Mediator Parliament - exists therefore in a very different environment from the one that led to many of the institutional arrangements that still today justify parliament's legitimacy. A fundamental principle of this institutional arrangement is the basis of representative democracy: that parliaments are elected on the principle that representatives will act on behalf of their represented. This is the fundamental principle that provides legitimacy to parliamentary decisions. However, in the context of the modern parliament, the primacy of this representative legitimacy is increasingly questioned; both through indicators showing disapproval of the institution's performance (e.g. low voter turnout, low trust in parliament – Norris, 2011) and through the expansion of non-representative forms of democracy (Fung and Wright, 2003; Rosenberg, 2007; Smith, 2009). The pressures resulting from this dual development explain the recent expansion of parliamentary public engagement, as we shall see below; they also have consequences for how we perceive parliamentary representation.

Parliamentary representation beyond interests

The view of representation as a mechanism through which the interests of a community are expressed has dominated the parliamentary studies literature, despite other strands of political science having developed considerably more complex and varied conceptualisations of representation. The typical debates emerging from the legislative studies centre on the discussion about the style and focus of parliamentary representation, or about the match between descriptive and substantive representation. The debate on the style and focus of representation has revolved around the old Burkean dilemma between the trustee and delegate type of representation (Birch, 1971; Eulau et al, 1978; Thomassen, 1994; Judge, 1999). Another key focus has been whether better descriptive

representation leads to better substantive representation. This literature has focused on the idea that the more representatives mirror the social characteristics of the society they represent, the more likely they are to be able to represent their interests effectively; a line of reasoning followed through in particular by the literature on gender and politics (Phillips, 1995; Celis and Childs, 2008).

The parliamentary studies literature assumes therefore a specific understanding of representation: the representation of interests; the debate being merely about the extent to which representatives actually represent specific interests and the extent to which there should be some individual judgment from the representative in this process of representation. One way or another, it is about representing interests. However, we argue that this is a narrow way of understanding parliamentary representation, particularly in the context of modern society where it is so much more difficult to identify homogenous groups of interests. Political theorists have demonstrated that representation is a far more multifaceted activity; we argue this is equally applicable to *parliamentary* representation. Not only are voters today moved by far more particularistic issues (Dalton, 2004), but there is also considerable cross-over between different groups of people. In different contexts, citizens may be moved by different types of issues for different purposes; or they may simply connect to a specific idea, because overall they identify themselves with this. In short, it would be very difficult to fit them into one box category at all times; they are moved by specific and different issues according to each specific context.

Parliamentary representation beyond elections

Besides the focus on "interests", parliamentary representation has also been conceptualised predominantly in relation to the key moment of elections, often taken as the only constitutive element of the representative relationship between MP and constituent. As David Judge states, 'in such an account the period between elections is something akin to a participatory black hole' (2014, p.135). Elections provide the legitimacy for the representative link and the key mechanism to demonstrate

approval or disapproval of representatives. And yet, in today's world of considerable expansion of non-representative forms of democracy, the once isolated importance of elections has waned considerably. This is not because elections do not matter; they are obviously the main mechanism supporting our democracies, but simply because of the expansion of the many other forms of participating in democracy that take place between elections.

Pateman's much celebrated 1970 book on *Participation and Democratic Theory* emerged already then as a recognition of 'the impetus of demands (…) for new areas of participation to be opened-up' (p.1). Since then these calls and actual forms of participation have multiplied and become all the more complex. If for a long time participative democracy was essentially about informal politics taking place in parallel with formal politics, this has changed considerably more recently. See, for example, the expansion of locally based participatory budgets since the 1986 pilot in Porto Alegre, Brazil or of mini-publics style of deliberation (Fung and Wright, 2003; Rosenberg, 2007; Smith, 2009; Geissel and Joas, 2013). The expansion is real, well documented and increasingly integrated into formal political institutions. If elections matter, what happens in between increasingly matters too. This has consequences for our understanding of parliament and its representative role, as well as the role public engagement may play in this relationship between institution and citizen.

Cain, Dalton and Scarrow's 2003 book utilised extensive empirical evidence to demonstrate that pressure for political reform has already led to systematic reinforcement across advanced industrial democracies of new modes of democracy, namely direct and advocacy democracy, besides *representative* democracy. The expansion of advocacy modes of democracy is of particular significance for our discussion, as it illustrates how conceptualising representation only around the elective chain increasingly misses out a considerable part of modern politics. Importantly, however, the authors show that the expansion of these forms of democracy has been **concomitant** to equal expansion of representative democracy, reflected, for example, in the creation of new representative institutions (eg. devolution). Likewise Saward has shown that different models of democracy (deliberative, direct, participatory, representative) should not be seen as separate and opposing systems (2001, p.363;

2010, p.162). Young goes as far as to say that 'representation and participation are not alternatives in an inclusive communicative democracy, but require each' (2000, p.132).

The expansion of new modes of democracy does not question therefore the significance of representative democracy and of the elective chain as key for ensuring political legitimacy, but they do indicate that we need to widen our understanding of representation, parliament and democracy, if we are to fully grasp the role of the modern parliament and public engagement.

Parliamentary representation as symbolic representation

The legislative studies' traditional perspective of parliamentary representation has therefore been delimited by a one-dimensional view of a relationship between principal and agent around the formal electoral chain and centred on interests. This however is insufficient to understand the complexity of parliament's representative role in the 21st century and in particular how public engagement fits with this. As we shall see below, in developing strategies for public engagement, parliamentary officials utilise ideas that clearly express symbolic representation concepts, in great part because they avoid the party politics element of representation. For a more useful understanding of public engagement in the Mediator Parliament, we need to linger on the concept of symbolic representation, as well as borrow the conceptual tools developed by the constructivist approach to representation; the so-called 'constructivist turn' to political representation, which shifts its understanding from 'a rational individualist to an environmental or contextual account of preference formation' (Disch 2011, p.102) and in particular Michael Saward's concept of the 'representative claim' (2006; 2010).

Lingering on the symbolic element of representation helps us appreciate better the potential role of public engagement and understand the strategies put in place by parliaments. Pitkin established symbolic representation as *standing for*, on the grounds of symbols, which by their presence make the meaning of representation be present (1967, p.92). Pitkin gives the example of a flag, which can represent (make present) a whole nation's identity. Likewise, the objects within a

parliamentary building can represent a nation's historical heritage and therefore a collective sense of belonging to a community. As Loewenberg states 'although it would appear to be the most abstract aspect of representation, symbolic representation finds a specific application in the contribution that legislatures make to nation building, to giving a set of separate communities the sense that they belong together as a nation' (Loewenberg, 2011, pp.33-34).

Symbolic representation does not limit itself, therefore, to either the acting for specific interests or to an electoral link between representatives and represented; it is about a subjective sense of identification and of sharing a common identity (Brito Vieira and Runciman, 2008). Its abstract and collective nature offers an important dimension to understand the linkage between parliament and public, particularly in the context of our post-industrial society where citizens encompass such a specialised, volatile and complex multitude of interests (Inglehart, 1990; Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2011). As Webb summarised, modern politics is often more about articulation of interests than aggregation of interests (Webb, 2013), which means that it is increasingly difficult for all citizens to be represented at all times within a parliamentary institution; inherent to this is the fact that at any one time, someone will be disappointed with whatever action parliament may take. This perception is clear in the way parliamentary officials justify engagement strategies through a more collective and abstract form of identification with the institution rather than individual MPs and/or parties, as we shall see below. Addressing the relationship between parliament and citizens beyond a static one-dimensional representation of interests helps us therefore understand how parliamentary public engagement has been developed.

Parliamentary representation as a dynamic process of claims

Saward's constructivist approach to the representative claim (2010) gives us further tools to understand parliamentary representation and how this links to public engagement activity. Saward sees representation as a dynamic process, context driven and shaped, of "claim-making" and "claim-

receiving" that goes beyond formal and public institutions, where claims of representation are made and received (or rejected) in a variety of contexts, which are not bound by the electoral link. Each time "claims" may take different meanings, according to the subject and object of representation, but also to the ideas being portrayed in the act of representation. According to this perspective, representation doesn't take place only when, for example, an MP puts a question to the government about fisheries on behalf of the main industry of their constituency, but also when the same MP visits the local market. Likewise a representative claim takes place when a school group visits parliament and is guided through that visit by a parliamentary official. As Saward puts it: 'If, as I have suggested, representation can be seen as a widespread process of claim-making and claim-receiving, within and outside formal political structures, then representation "happens" in a great variety of spaces and scales in any society' (2010, p.161).

The dynamic value of the representative claim fits also with the profile of the modern voter where fragmentation and particularistic interests predominate. Rather than fitting into homogenous groups, we move between groups and identities, led by different issues in different contexts. It also helps us to step away from a fossilised understanding of parliamentary representation, which determines the value of a specific action according to how legitimate or democratic it is; representation does not happen only in a formal and electoral situation. And the symbolic value of that claim may be the main element that matters, rather than an actual rational output or a formal electoral foundation. The meaning and identity given to a specific representative claim, and whether they connect with it, may often be what touches people. The higher levels of satisfaction that specific MPs enjoy (as opposed to MPs in general) indicate the value of representation as connections – constituents are able to identify more clearly with these representatives and to establish connections through identification. Representation is therefore also about connections (Young, 2000: pp.128-132). It embodies social intersubjective processes of meaning-formation between different actors, according to variable contexts.

Viewing parliamentary representation through its symbolic meaning and as a dynamic relationship (rather than a process of delegation from principal to agent for legitimate action), enables us therefore to better understand the role played by public engagement in parliament's wider representative role. It helps us, in particular, to better understand parliaments' recent efforts to reinforce the *presence* of the actual institution rather than the political actions of MPs, as we shall see in the next section where we explore the public engagement strategy of the UK parliament and parliamentary officials' narratives in implementing this strategy.

Public engagement and symbolic representation in the UK Parliament

The expansion of public engagement in the UK Parliament

Parliaments' public engagement activities are broadly characterised by activities with a strong educational and/or cultural component, with only some directly aiming to facilitate actual participation into the parliamentary process. They build on collective ideas of representation, which tend to be a-political and symbolic, with the purpose of building a social capital whereby the public can relate to the institution of Parliament, as we shall see below. Ultimately these activities also aim to redress trust in the institution – but at first glance they are simply about information, education and culture. And this type of activity has expanded greatly since the beginning of the 21st century and in the UK since 2005.
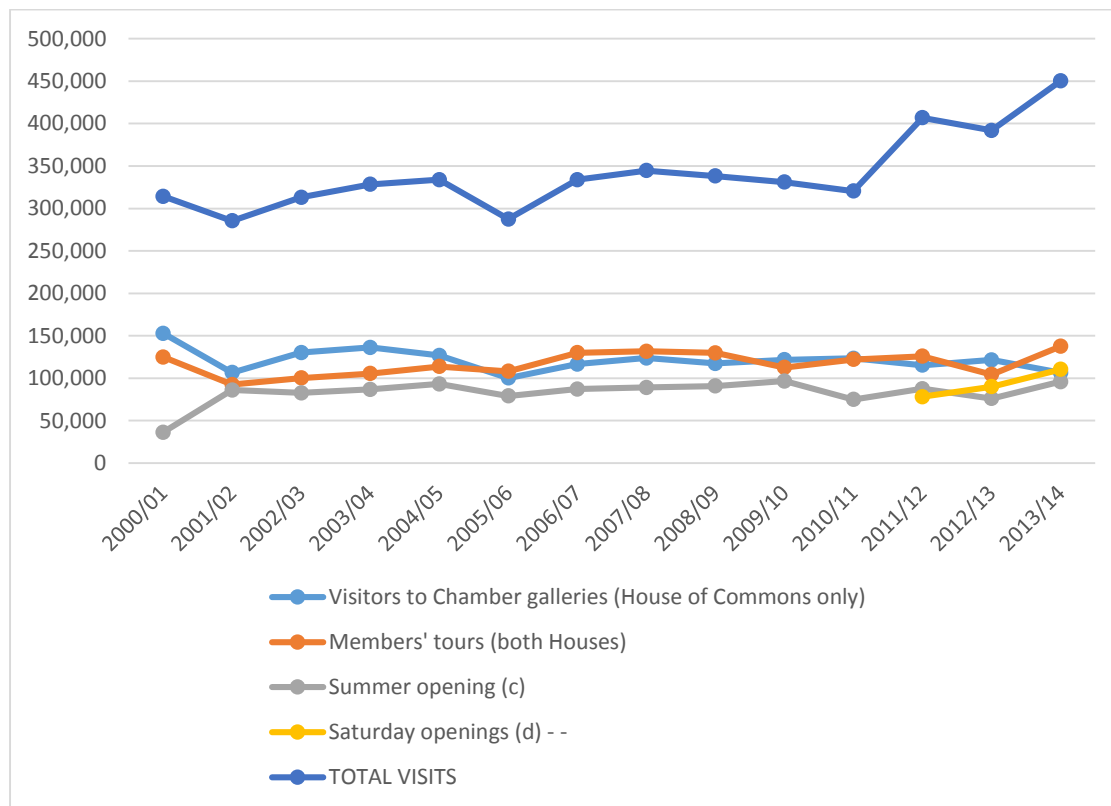
Although many parliaments have had a public engagement role for some time, this consisted of small units focused on specific activities, often disconnected and not necessarily tagged as public engagement services; it encompassed visiting services, for instance, or the provision of information about the institution, namely with a focus on education. But these were limited sectors of parliamentary activity and with little, if any, expansion over a long period of time. The difference over the last decade is the professionalization of this role, through a consistent and strategic investment in this area, particularly clear in the UK parliament, but also a much more explicit reflection on the

purpose of this type of activity and how it fits with parliament's role. This investment is reflected in the creation of new services specifically responsible for the delivery of the engagement agenda and in the considerable expansion of new types of activity.

Despite the many criticisms towards the institution (or perhaps because of these as we shall see below), the UK parliament illustrates this expansion very clearly. See, for instance, the restructuring of its information based services. Until 2006/07, public information was managed by the Library Department (House of Commons, 2007, p.102); since 2007/08 this has been renamed into the Department of Information Services (House of Commons, 2008, p.92), recognising the expansion of its outward-facing services of offering information to the public, besides the provision of information and research for internal purposes. Today two of its main directorates are wholly focused on outward-facing services, with one of these being named Public Engagement (House of Commons, 2014, p.42). In 1999/00 the Library Department comprised 203 members of staff (House of Commons, 2000, Annex B); ten years later it had expanded to 307, of which 104 worked specifically in the outward-facing information services.[1] In less than 10 years, the UK Parliament has therefore effectively developed a new branch of activity for parliament: the one of public engagement.

According to our interviews, this re-structuring of services and expansion of engagement came as a result of two key reports: the Modernisation Committee's report on *Connecting with the Public* (2004 - see also Walker, 2012), which received a very strong seal of approval in January 2005 with 375 votes in favour and only 14 against,[2] and the Putnam Commission's report (Hansard Society, 2005). As an official put to us, the services felt then, particularly after the vote, that "there was a mandate in both Houses to take public engagement seriously, which there really hadn't been before".[3] It "prompted significant investment in public engagement activities" (Walker, 2012, p.271). What followed was a strategy that specifically addressed engagement with the consequent creation of many new areas of activity accompanied by considerable expansion and enhancement of some of the more traditional engagement activities. Figure 1 illustrates this expansion by showing the steady increase over the past decade of visits to the Houses of Parliament from 314.214 in 2000 to 450.166 in 2014.

Figure 1 – Visits to the UK Parliament (2000 – 2014)

Sources: Annual Reports of the House of Commons Commission (available at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/house-of-commons-commission/publications/)

Notes: (c) from 2011/12 onwards, this includes figures for Saturday openings that occurred within the summer opening period; (d) from 2011/12 onwards, this excludes figures for Saturdays during the summer opening period

This expansion is confirmed by the considerable increase in education visits from schools, from 9.000 in 2002 to over 46.000 in 2014, as Figure 2 shows. We are not assessing the actual impact of these activities in this article, but it is also worth noting that this increase of activity has come with a conscious effort to try to reach to a wider public. This is illustrated in the introduction of a travel subsidy to encourage the participation of state schools from further afield. The limited data available shows an increase in 2009 from one third to two thirds of schools booked from outside London and

the South-East. The same data also shows a rise from 80 to 90 percent of visits from state schools (Pullinger and Hallam-Smith, 2010, p.11).

Figure 2 – School visits through the Education Service (2005 – 2014)
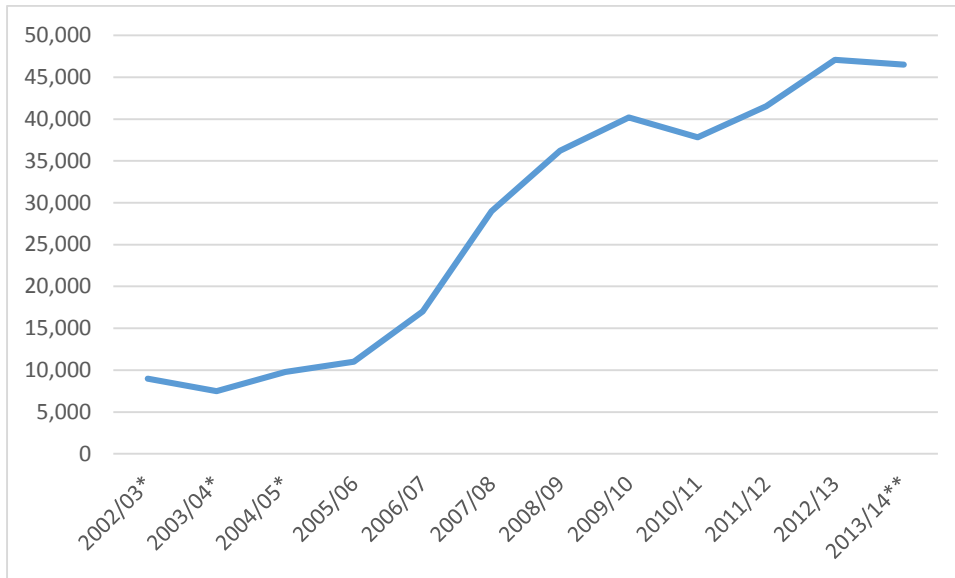
Sources: 2005/06 to 2013/14: Annual Reports of the House of Commons Commission (available at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/house-of-commons-commission/publications/);

2002/03* to 2004/05*: Parliament's Education Service, (2015, 2 February). Email message to author.

Note: ** Overall values are actually 65.112, if we include schools on Members' Tours (Parliament's Education Service, (2015, 2 February). Email message to author).

Besides the increase of activity, there has been an active effort to push parliament to the public, as illustrated by the decision to pilot a Parliamentary Outreach Service in 2006 (Cowan, 2012, p.4-5). As the then Directors of the Information Services of both houses explain, the main focus used to be "on those people who approached Parliament seeking information" with the new emphasis being "to take Parliament to all citizens across the UK" (Pullinger and Hallam-Smith, 2010, p.13). It is a shift from a passive assumption to an active role beyond traditional parliamentary business. Figures from the Outreach Service's Director show that by 2011, this service had organised over 500 events in the UK with attendance of over 20.000 people (Cowan, 2012, p.6-7). This development is not specific to the UK, many other parliaments have followed suit (Hansard Society, 2011; IPU, 2012), as confirmed

by our interviews in other parliaments.[4] But the UK does represent a very considerable move towards the reinforcement of engagement as a multi-faceted activity translated into multiple types of initiatives, some of which could be classed as political but most being mainly educational and cultural events.

Whereas most other parliaments' expansion has mainly focused on enhancing visiting facilities (IPU, 2012), the UK Parliament's development of public engagement includes an array of other types of activities that range from face-to-face and digital outreach, in isolated events or integrated with parliamentary business, to additional programmes of events such as *Parliament Week*, as illustrated by the activities listed in an overview of the Public Engagement directorate by its director (Walker, 2014). This expansion is now comparable to the Scottish Parliament, a pioneer legislature in the conceptualisation of parliamentary public engagement (Modernisation Committee 2004, p.Ev20-24; Carman, 2009; Clark and Wilford, 2012). As one of our interviewees in the UK Parliament said "public engagement now runs through the slice of rock rather than just being a brick in the wall".[5] Over the last decade the UK Parliament has thus experienced a considerable expansion of its public engagement activity, with an increase of both activity and complexity.

The aims sought through public engagement

Other than a general principle of seeking openness and accessibility, what is the purpose of this public engagement expansion though? Our interviews show that in developing this activity there has been a recognisable focus on reinforcing the identity and image of the institution. Interestingly, Kelso signalled movement towards this development back in 2007: "Yet Parliament is gradually working towards building an institutional identity for itself, consciously or otherwise, the lack of which is unquestionably at the heart of the whole issue of how Parliament approaches the public and engages with it" (Kelso, 2007, p.372). Once the political decision is made to develop engagement, it is up to officials to develop strategies and apply implementation. If this is true in all areas of parliamentary

business, it is particularly so in public engagement – since traditionally this is not part of the core business of parliament and often engagement activities are delivered solely by officials. The officials' own narrative on the purpose of parliamentary public engagement is therefore dually important: because they are the actors developing the strategies to implement the policy, but also because they are often the ones delivering it.

In explaining the aim of this type of activities, officials speak of a collective sense of representation, where politics is avoided, which naturally pushes them to refer to symbolic elements of representation. This is illustrated, for instance, in the way this official sees preserving a memory of the institution as one of the aims of engagement: "I feel that sometimes we're dealing with an institutional memory of our service[parliament]".[6] Or in this other official's explanation, where parliament is presented as an abstract representation to be preserved for future generations:

> "Parliament itself is an abstraction, a kind of fiction. It's a way of managing disagreement and that makes it very difficult to articulate exactly what its role and objective should be. We've got the additional complication that we work in a historic Parliament on a world heritage site and therefore there is a strong sense of an obligation to posterity, to maintain buildings and objects."[7]

This is where the constructivist turn approach to representation is useful to frame the role played by parliamentary public engagement. In justifying the purpose of their engagement services, officials recurrently referred to two key aims: showing parliament's relevance to people's lives and making the public value it, as the following quotes from different officials illustrate:

> "The key message is that this is their Parliament."[8]

> "[Our aim is to show that] Parliament is a worthwhile institution, it's something that should be valued and is relevant to people's lives. (…) So when we were looking at our new strategy, looking forward to the length of this Parliament, we wanted to link

Parliament and democracy so that our main overarching aim now is that we want people

to realise that Parliament is the heart of our democracy."[9]

"I would like to see evidence of that valuing and that ownership where people feel that

Parliament is theirs."[10]

Officials see this sense of ownership as a key part of what public engagement aims to achieve, as they are well aware that simply providing information about the institution does little in developing a connection between citizens and institution, as the following illustrates: "You need to make Parliament seem much more an institution of the people rather than just explain to people what Parliament does."[11] In fact opinion poll data show that over the past decade the level of knowledge about parliament has improved, at the same time as satisfaction with the institution has gone down. Ipsos Mori data show a drop from 34% of people satisfied with Parliament in 1995 to 24% in 2014 (Ipsos-Mori 2011b; Ipsos-Mori 2014); which is supported by the Hansard Society's Audits of Public Engagement, with data showing a drop from 67% in 2014 to 61% in 2015 of people who believe that Parliament is essential to democracy (Hansard Society 2015, p.40). At the same time, though, these polls also show an increase of perceived knowledge about parliament from 33% of the public in 2004 who thought they knew a fair amount or a great deal about Parliament, to 47% in 2015 (Hansard Society, 2015, p.27).[12]

Behind the planning of public engagement, there is an explicit effort therefore in developing amongst the public an appreciation of the institution as part of the fabric of their lives, rather than as an institution that is elected every five years. In many ways, it is an explicit aim of making the attachment to parliament part of, in Easton's terms (1975), diffuse support, rather than limited to specific support – distinguishing office and office holders.

In explaining their strategy, officials explicitly avoid politics, scaffolding engagement instead on more general ideas such as democracy, as the following senior official explained: "The first block

of things in the corporate strategy is the respect for the House of Commons as an institution and the whole goal of the administration is to present the House of Commons as the central institution in our democracy." [13] This is in great part because officials need at all points to be neutral and therefore non-party political, but there is also an explicit wider aim of reinforcing a more valued image of the institution; one that is not *tarnished* by politics. There is a clear sense that politics is bound to disappoint at some point and that therefore a focus on the value of the institution more generally is likely to be more successful, as the following interviewee explained: "Personally I think you have to separate Parliament from politicians. In other words I think the only hope for Parliament is probably to explain and create an image of Parliament the institution (…), rather more than as the House in which all the politicians work."[14] Or as the following interviewee explained in justifying how they work: "It's not our job to disseminate the work of Members, (…) it would be inappropriate for us to do so. We're here to promote awareness of the institution and the role and the processes of the institution." [15] In this respect, the symbolic elements of the institution become the key tool of engagement.

The symbolic representation elements of public engagement

Inevitably this approach leads to the development of events and activities founded on symbolic representation ideas, whereby the public is encouraged to relate to parliament as a key institution of our democracy, rather than as an institution of politics. Either because most public engagement is implemented by officials (who have to be non-party political at all points) or because of the activities' inherent purpose, much of parliamentary public engagement is therefore an expression of symbolic representation values. Through public engagement, parliamentary services hope not only to educate and inform but also to develop a sense of ownership of the institution amongst the public. To do this, the services develop activities which enable the public to relate to the institution, beyond politics.

Hence the focus on one hand on education to develop an understanding of what parliament is for, separate from its political identity and from government. The differentiation between parliament and government is in fact seen as one of the most important aims of parliamentary engagement activities, as mentioned by nearly all of our interviewees and often repeated in relevant documentation.[16] Though again poll data show there is huge work to be done on this, as in 2008 51% of the public thought that Parliament and Government were the same thing (Hansard Society, 2008, p.5-7). And, on the other hand, the focus on culture which aims to create non-political spaces where the public relates to the institution without necessarily a political aim. Here it is about developing in the public a sense of connection with the institution of parliament, regardless of the politics it embodies. These activities may not represent substantive representation moments, but they do embody symbolic representation elements and provide for flexible and dynamic processes of representation where, in Saward's terms, representative claims can be interpreted according to varied contexts.

A guided tour of a building or an arts exhibition may hardly seem an act of representation. However, if we view it in its context and question its constitutive elements, it becomes apparent that claims of representation do take place. Two elements matter here: the context of the actual space where the activity of engagement takes place, and the claims of representation that the activity of engagement enables. The public's access to a parliamentary space, such as the building of a legislature, matters in terms of what that space may represent to the public's collective sense of culture and history. As Rai states, "it matters (…) in its reflection of the culture in which political institutions such as parliaments are embedded [and] in terms of the re-presentation of statehood, sovereignty and legitimacy through architecture, political objects, props and symbols" (2014, pp. 4-5). A visit to parliament is therefore more than a leisurely activity – it is a vehicle for the expression of symbolic representation which officials hope to strengthen a sense of attachment to the institution.

Engagement activities also enable the development of countless representative claims. Saward identified five elements constituting a representative claim within the following general form:

"A *maker* of representations ('M') puts forward a *subject* ('S') which stands for an *object* ('O') that is related to a *referent* ('R') and is offered to an *audience* ('A')" (Saward, 2010, p.36); the object being the idea represented. Although this is obviously not rationalised as such by officials in the planning of engagement activities, their overall aim to strengthen the identification of an identity for parliament as an institution and to encourage the public to establish connections, does lead to the development of activities where countless representative claims can take place.

Applying this to a specific activity helps to clarify the type of claims that may be developed; for example, the Arts in Parliament programme in the summer of 2012, which was developed to coincide with the Olympics in London.[17] Taking place over several weeks, it included dance, art, poetry and music, all held within the Palace of Westminster. Each of these events provided for endless representative claim opportunities, open to different interpretations according to the experience of each member of the public attending them. By organising these events, Parliament puts forward ideas of democracy for the public to relate to, even if led by non-political purposes. One representative claim may be the Houses of Parliament (M) utilising its own space to share contemporary art (S) as evocative of perceptions of democracy (O), to the public (A). Members of the public attending the exhibition may accept or reject this claim, or may see it as evocative of other ideas such as peace or challenging issues faced by society. In short this type of engagement activities acts as a vehicle to reinforce symbolic representation elements that relate to the institution of parliament rather than to politics, or specific instances of substantive representation, in line with the aims outlined by officials in pursuing a public engagement strategy for parliament.

Conclusion

Public engagement is an expanding and complex activity for parliaments, hence the value in understanding its wider role for how the public relates to the institution. This article sought to understand the aims of public engagement and their consequences for parliamentary representation,

through the views of officials responsible for developing and implementing this activity in the UK Parliament. We combined different theoretical approaches to representation to understand the purpose of the public engagement strategy being implemented in today's Parliament. The modern parliament is a very different institution to the one conceptualised by the liberal democratic tradition, coexisting with a radically different society and citizenry. Public engagement is simultaneously a consequence of this new environment and a part solution to understand the modern parliament and its mediating role between governance and society. And the voice of the officials developing and implementing public engagement is particularly important in determining the purposes served by this type of activity.

Their narrative is therefore particularly useful for us to understand potential roles played by parliamentary public engagement. This activity is dismissed by many as marginal, as it does not constitute the main business of parliament. Indeed it does not constitute core parliamentary business, but it is by no means marginal. Public engagement performs important functions of representation and connectivity. The recent expansion of public engagement activities may in fact contribute towards a shift in the nature of our modern parliamentary representation. This shift does not question the traditional electoral value of representation, but it *expands* it to a wider and more flexible form of representation, which may be expressed in many more activities than those strictly linked to a formal representation of interests, or indeed beyond the MP-constituency link.

As we have shown, the environment of the modern parliament is characterised by a questioning of traditional forms of representative democracy, expanding forms of participatory and advocacy types of democracy, as well as an informed and critical citizenry which encompasses both a politically disengaged public and a highly participative one; crucially, this is an environment where interaction between the legislature and citizens can take place every day, not just every five years. It is also a context of steady declining levels of trust on political institutions. In this context, public engagement plays an important part in the interface between parliament and citizens. However, the legislative studies' conceptual framework to date does not fully explain the consequences of this new

dimension of parliamentary activity. This is why we employed the conceptual tools developed by the 'constructivist turn' approach to political representation to understand the consequences of public engagement to the way parliament re-presents itself to the public.

This helps us understand in particular how officials view public engagement, conceptualising it in terms of symbolic representation ideas within contexts that go beyond the formal substantive representation act. In developing public engagement activities, there is a clear aim of nurturing connections between the public and the institution, rather than with specific political actors; that is, a more collective sense of representation that goes beyond MPs, constituencies or specific interests. It is also a type of re-presentation of the institution that comes detached from politics. Acutely aware that politics is bound to disappoint, there is a clear effort in public engagement to encourage attachments that rely on more symbolic ideas such as democracy and the country's historical heritage. Hence a strong focus on educational and cultural public engagement activities. These events potentially enable the development of different intersubjective interpretations according to each participant's context, stimulating different types of connections between the public and the institution of parliament. Of course, this only speaks of potential. Further studies would be needed to explore how the public does indeed receive these events and whether multiple representative claims do take place, on one hand, and on the other, whether this has any effect on the public's perception of the institution. But the article shows that public engagement has been developed to fill in a gap in symbolic representation and why this matters in today's context. It also indicates that public engagement can contribute towards an amplification of parliamentary representation, enabling new forms of re-presenting the institution.

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