

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Ihalainen, Pasi

**Title:** Prospects for Parliamentary Government in an Era of War and Revolution: Britain and Germany in Spring 1917

**Year:** 2014

**Version:**

**Copyright:** © Cantabria University Press & McGraw-Hill, 2014.

**Rights:** In Copyright

**Rights url:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

**Please cite the original version:**

Ihalainen, P. (2014). Prospects for Parliamentary Government in an Era of War and Revolution: Britain and Germany in Spring 1917. In K. Palonen, J. M. Rosales, & T. Turkka (Eds.), *The Politics of Dissensus: Parliament in Debate* (pp. 423-448). Cantabria University Press; McGraw-Hill. Social Sciences and Humanities, 2.

**Prospects for Parliamentary Government in an Era of War and Revolution:  
Britain and Germany in Spring 1917**

Pasi Ihalainen

Constitutions are results of long-term processes of redefinition, in which elements of earlier constitutions can survive despite major upheavals in the given political community. European constitutions have been radically reformulated especially in periods of war and revolution such as the French Revolution and the last phase and immediate aftermath of World War I. During these periods, constitutional reforms emerged from transnational interaction between historically related and competing political cultures. This interaction may have partly been built on a shared constitutional tradition, using examples from other countries to justify or to oppose reforms. But it also often involved open hostilities between two political communities, the parties in conflict influencing each other not only by making the other side reinforce the established principles of its political system but also by forcing it to carry out redefinitions as a response to experienced threats. This was the case between France and Britain in the 1790s (Ihalainen 2010) as well as between Britain and Germany in the late 1910s.

My intention in this chapter is to provide a source-based analysis of the various contemporary experiences of the ongoing political change by reconstructing alternative visions of future politics available to various sections of the British and German parliamentary elites in spring 1917. In the conceptual and discourse analysis of constitutional debates that took place in the parliaments' plenary sessions,<sup>1</sup> particular attention will be paid to speech acts in which the basic values of political communities and the future prospects of the nation as a (potential) parliamentary democracy were being defined. Explicit disputes on the meanings of related key concepts will receive particular attention. The speech acts and disputes are related to the dynamics of parliamentary debates in which *pro et contra* argumentation frequently leads to the clarification and radicalisation of the points of view rather than to the emergence of

---

<sup>1</sup> See Kari Palonen's chapter in this volume.

consensus. Instead of focusing on certain predetermined concepts alone, under consideration here will be the most important concepts that were used in arguments defining the relationship between the people and the state, the political or the representative institution in the future polity.

Comparative or transnational studies in parliamentary or constitutional history are still few (Kluxen 1985; Möller & Kittel, eds. 2002; Recker, ed. 2004; Gusy 2008a). Comparative historical research can reconstruct the variety of meanings that were assigned in national parliaments to the key concepts through which the parliamentary polities were being redefined. It is suggested here, furthermore, that instead of a mere comparison of separately treated national contexts, a transnational parliamentary discourse on constitutions needs to be reconstructed and analysed, as far as such a discourse existed side by side with a more academic one.

Reasons for and the exact timing of transitions to parliamentary government and/or democratic suffrage may have been nation-specific in 1917-1919, but the transformations took place simultaneously in several European countries and were more interconnected than nation-state-centred historical research has traditionally recognised. The transformations were related to each other through shared war experiences, constitutional references in war propaganda and a transnational constitutional discourse in which some members of national political and academic elites were engaged. The already ongoing evolutionary processes of gradual constitutional reform in several countries were accelerated by the war in the sense that a reform could no longer be postponed. Most European societies were exhausted by the war and went through reconsiderations of older loyalties, identities and conceptions of proper political order. In its totality, the war experience became an unprecedented force of mobilisation and politicisation of the public even in countries which were not directly involved in battles. State interventions in new areas of life were increasingly felt everywhere. In the course of the war, the politicisation of the public in various countries gave rise to calls for an extended political participation as well (Kaelbe 2001; Wirsching 2007; Gusy 2008b; Wirsching 2008).

A major turning point in both the war and the democratisation processes of European parliaments came in spring 1917 from two global impulses, one originating in Russia, another in the United States.<sup>2</sup> In March 1917, the Russians established a precedent for a revolution against an autocratic monarchy. Independently of this, the Western powers progressively began to adopt 'democracy' as their uniting war aim

---

<sup>2</sup> See the chapters by Jussi Kurunmäki and Raija-Leena Loisa in this book.

since early 1917 onwards, being the President of the United States Woodrow Wilson its major champion. This war aim, together with fears of a spreading revolution, gave momentum to democratisation and parliamentarisation in many countries, including the Western powers themselves (Britain) and eventually Germany. In Britain, the process of parliamentary reform was reactivated before the rise of the essentially American emphasis on fighting for democracy, but the latter accelerated the British process. The fall of the German monarchy in November 1918 provided a unique moment for the reorganisation of political order not only in Germany but also in countries such as Sweden and Finland, where Germany had until that time been generally regarded as a model political community. 1918 and 1919 thus saw one of the major breakthroughs of parliamentary democracy in European history, influenced by external powers such as Russia and the United States, and affecting Britain and Germany on the two sides of the war as well as smaller countries, which were transnationally linked to all the said great powers and therefore needed to rethink their relations to the constitutional models provided by each of them.

In this essay, I discuss the internal and mutual dynamics of British and German constitutional debates from March to May 1917. These debates had already been reactivated in late 1916 but were given new impetus by the Russian February Revolution. The debates were related in Britain to the two first readings of the Representation of the People Bill at the House of Commons, while in Germany to initiatives at the Reichstag to increase parliamentary oversight of foreign policy and to finally introduce a long-debated electoral reform in Prussia. The emphasis here will be on the British debates of 28 March 1917 and 22 to 23 May 1917, and the German debates of 29 to 30 March 1917. All the debates are available in digitised form (Hansard Online; House of Commons Parliamentary Papers; *Verhandlungen des Reichstags*; the following references are to page numbers of the selected debates).

I shall explore, firstly, what kind of conceptual debate on constitutional alternatives (see Norton 2011) was possible in Britain and Germany after the introduction of democracy as a war aim of the Western allies and the outbreak of the Russian February Revolution. How were constitutional alternatives articulated by various political groups in a *pro et contra* debate? Secondly, what kinds of redefinitions of the relationship between the people and the political or the state were taking place (see Gusy 2000: 13-14, 28-9, and Smith 2007) and what were their implications for parliamentary government? How did contested understandings of democracy affect prospects for parliamentarism? How and why were the proper status and powers of parliament and

the meaning of parliamentarism understood differently by various political groups in either country? Had the Britons generally adopted the principles of parliamentarism though remaining doubtful about democracy, whereas the Germans had had some experience of universal male suffrage elections to the Reichstag, not the Landtag, though keeping strong reservations against parliamentarism (Palonen 2008: 17)? Thirdly, what did prospects for a new type of parliamentary government look like in spring 1917? Did the representatives understand parliamentary debate as a means for solving political problems through discussion rather than violence and civil war? Can we find representatives who recognised the plurality of views and dissensus as a self-evident part of parliamentary government?

### **Constitutional Scenes in Early 1917**

The British political elite had been debating universal manhood suffrage, women's suffrage, proportional representation and the reform of the House of Lords long before the outbreak of World War I. In the Parliament Act of 1911, the influence of the House of Lords was radically reduced, which led to intensive Conservative protests and even a threat of civil war (Saunders 2013b). Scepticism rather than optimism towards the functioning of representative institutions was dominant in the country, the political system of which was defined as 'popular government' rather than 'democracy'. The outbreak of the war brought British constitutional debate to a standstill, removing the threat of a civil war. The war experience gave rise to a change in attitudes, so that the contributions of both men and women and the incapability of the previous electoral system based on residence to function during war-time mobilisation were considered to be reasons for extending the suffrage (Machin 2001; Blackburn 2011; Norton 2011). The language of democracy was occasionally used to justify the alliance with France and to get the United States involved in the war; but once the United States did get involved, with the declared aim to fight for democracy, pressures increased to give democracy a more concrete realisation in Britain as well. In late 1916, David Lloyd George's war coalition decided to introduce an electoral reform, and the international developments of spring 1917 made the reform even more timely. While internal impulses, triggered by the war, to introduce reform may have been dominant in Britain, the international context played a role, too. In January 1917, the all-party Speaker's Conference recommended a major extension of franchise to both men and women, but

the bill was introduced to Parliament only on 26 March, after the February Revolution in Russia and before the United States' declaration of war on Germany.

In Germany, too, the degree and nature of parliamentary government had been debated for a long time, given that universal male suffrage was in force since 1871, but in actual policy and decision-making the role of the Reichstag remained marginal. Due to the personal union of the Kaiser and the King of Prussia, Prussian political culture was dominant. With the exception of the Reichskanzler there was no central government of the empire, the Reichstag had no power of dismissing the chancellor and many decisions of its majority were overturned by the veto of the federal Bundesrat. In public discourse, parliamentarism was viewed critically, and the Social Democrats were left alone with their reform demands. The people in Germany were also united by the joint war effort, which led to tendencies on all sides to legitimise political demands by appeals to 'the German people' (Pohl 2002; Bollmeyer 2007; Seils 2011). Major military and economic difficulties and the outbreak of the Russian Revolution gave rise to unprecedented constitutional controversy in the Reichstag as of late March 1917, immediately after a reform bill had been read at the British Parliament for the first time. The German debate could no longer bypass parliamentarism and democracy, but needed to problematise them in relation to the established domestic political order, which was being openly challenged by enemies. Critics of the traditional authoritarian state started to increasingly refer to democracy as an alternative political system (Llanque 2000: 12-13). Since March 1917 onwards there were calls for parliamentary oversight of foreign affairs and demands for an electoral reform in Prussia.

### **Connections between the War and Constitutional Reform**

The political implications of the war experience were present throughout the debates on the Representation of the People Bill in Britain. Several officers but also many civilians emphasised the unique nature of the conflict and its fundamental influence on domestic politics. While the war experience was in principle considered to have united the national community, the constitutional conclusions that were drawn from it varied. One opponent of an immediate reform argued that 'the national existence' of Britain called for a total concentration on warfare instead of debating a constitutional reform of secondary importance (Arthur Salter, *Cons.*, vol. 92, 479). According to an enthusiastic reformer, the war had brought the British Constitution out of balance, having increased the power of Parliament but more particularly that of the government over citizens.

Further implications could be expected, and the anticipated 'crisis after the War' called for immediate constitutional measures in order to avoid deeper political problems (Sir Halford MacKinder, *Cons.*, vol. 92, 512). Many agreed that the war had created a dynamic moment for reform.

Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George presented extended suffrage as essential in preparing the country for the challenges after the war, particularly as Britain was supposed to be ready to show the world the way forward. A constitutional reform was necessary since the entire polity and the environment in which it found itself had been changed as a consequence of the war: there would be a 'new Britain' in 'a new world' (vol. 92, 489). An oppositional argument for a more representative Commons, put forward by Major Edward Wood (Conservative) and repeating pre-war concerns, was that 'this House ought to regain the leadership of the nation, which, in my opinion, it is in danger of losing' (vol. 92, 547). The Conservative Lord Henry Cavendish-Bentinck presented a scenario in which 'the power and the sovereignty of this House' were questioned and the concentration of power in the hands of the Prime Minister and bureaucracy, without direct and constant accountability to Parliament, was being planned (vol. 93, 2408-9).

The reform of the constitution could be presented as a part of warfare. According to the Liberal Sir John Simon, a former home secretary currently in opposition, legislating on suffrage in war time with the aim of a 'fairer distribution of power' was indeed 'a piece of national work not unconnected with the War' (vol. 93, 2201). Walter Hume Long, Conservative secretary of state for the colonies, pushed the argument further, implying that the war would ultimately be won with power 'derived from the people'. The Conservatives of the British government, increasingly claiming that their power derived from the people, thus offered a nationalistic substitute for the rather more American concept of democracy. The implication was that Britain would win the war thanks in part to its pioneering position as regards constitutional reform (vol. 93, 2438).

The war had calmed down previous constitutional confrontations, but awareness of their lingering presence pushed the political elite toward a concession (Aneurin Williams, vol. 93, 2330). Even in the case of Britain, parliamentary reform was seen at times as a means to avoid civil war. This strengthened notion of parliamentarism among the political elite, despite the marginalisation of Parliament in war-time decision-making, was making Britain, too, a parliamentary polity to a higher degree. Even if few voted against the reform, however, some British Conservatives argued fiercely against it,

suggesting for instance that a political situation resembling a civil war might arise as a consequence of such controversial constitutional revisions (Salter, vol. 92, 480).

Awareness of the war's profound influence on the engaged societies was equally high among German parliamentarians: many believed that the war would have implications for the German political system as well. In late November 1916, almost simultaneously with the appointment of the Speaker's Conference in Britain, Eduard David of the SPD pointed out that a new era was dawning and that it required a new spirit, including the rethinking of relations among citizens (vol. 308, 2171). On 27 February 1917, the liberally inclined Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg recognised in an important speech to the Reichstag that the war experience was likely to lead to a restructuring of domestic politics. He conceded that the war had fostered the emergence of 'a new era with a renewed people' and implicitly recognised that it was time to reconsider what 'the right political way to express what this people is' might mean in a monarchical system (vol. 309, 2374-75).<sup>3</sup> According to Otto Wiemer, a leading member of the Progressives to whom Bethmann Hollweg had ties, the people had increased in that their awareness of matters of the state, as well as their recognition of what the maintenance of the state demanded. This active political writer, who was also a member of the Prussian House of Representatives, argued that the German people now exhibited 'a stronger national volition' and 'a resolution to take their fate in their own hands to a greater degree than before'.<sup>4</sup> He ventured to suggest that adopting a democratic constitution had thus become inevitable (vol. 309, 2400).

Extending the political rights of the people at large would have been a recognition of their contribution to the joint war effort. According to Peter Spahn, a monarchist spokesman of the Catholic Centre, a reform of the Prussian suffrage was going to strengthen Germany so that 'the political rights of the entire people, of all strata including the broad masses, would be fully recognised and thereby a joyous contribution to the work of the state made possible' (vol. 309, 2832).<sup>5</sup> Gustav Noske of the SPD suggested that it was in the interest of the Reich to immediately start preparations for reform. Due to Prussian opposition, the economic progress of the country had not led to the necessary political reforms. The Social Democrats were no

---

<sup>3</sup> 'eine neue Zeit mit einem erneuerten Volk ist da'; 'den richtigen staatlichen und politischen Ausdruck für das zu finden, was dieses Volk ist'.

<sup>4</sup> 'ein Volk mit gesteigertem Staatswillen, mit dem Entschluß, sein Geschick mehr als bisher in die eigene Hand zu nehmen'.

<sup>5</sup> 'die politische Rechte der Gesamtheit des Volkes in all seinen Schichten, auch in seinen breiten Massen, voll anzuerkennen und damit eine freudige Mitwirkung an der staatlichen Arbeit zu ermöglichen'.



longer ready to wait for reform until the war would be over, particularly as a reform in Britain had just been launched (vol. 309, 2839-40).

Gustav Stresemann, the leader of the National Liberals who as an opponent of the Chancellor wanted to strengthen the international position of Germany through constitutional reforms, argued during the debates of the end of March that 'the new era demands new justice' and that 'a future reorganisation of things' had become indispensable.<sup>6</sup> What Stresemann mainly had in mind was increasing the accountability of the executive branch to the Reichstag (vol. 309, 2853-54). Not even the Conservatives denied the need to make major decisions on the future of the German people. As far as 'questions of the internal political future' of Germany were concerned, however, they were to be left untouched at a time of crisis. Kuno Graf von Westarp, spokesman of the German Conservative Party and a loyal Prussian civil servant, saw a danger that constitutional debates might only divide the forces that had been united for warfare (vol. 309, 2857).

What connected the British and German debates was a generally shared feeling that the unique war experience had made constitutional changes necessary lest a postwar domestic crisis should ensue. Constitutional reform was also seen as a means of winning the war. There was, furthermore, an awareness in both countries of the weakened constitutional role of parliament during the war and of the need to engage the people in the political process. Though the notion of popular sovereignty was gaining ground in both countries, pressures for reform were more considerable in Britain than in Germany. In both countries, many Conservatives wished to concentrate on warfare instead of reform, but only in Germany did they manage to prevent reform.

### **Transnational References**

British parliamentarians may not have followed reform debates in other European countries but they shared an understanding of the British political system as a universally valid model. Transnational pressures were interpreted in various ways, either countering or calling for a reform towards universal suffrage. One Conservative argument against the reform was that the British should consider carefully the implications of such changes for the entire British Empire and also for the wider world (Arthur Salter, vol. 92, 481). The opposite argument maintained that, as the Constitution

---

<sup>6</sup> 'Die neue Zeit fordert ihr neues Recht'; 'eine Neuordnung der Dinge in der Zukunft'.

was a model case for much of the world, it also needed to be updated in time (Walter Hume Long, *Cons.*, vol. 92, 521).

Only the dominions of the British Empire were, due to the British origins of their population and previous visits from Members of Parliament, seen as truly relevant in this constitutional debate (Richard Chaloner, *Cons.*, vol. 92, 525), which reflects the dominance of imperial notions in British discourse. Continental examples were bypassed even by former Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald, according to whom it was best to keep to Britain's 'political methods, practices, machinery, and ideas' and to reject such notions as proportional representation, which were 'absolutely meaningless to apply to our particular system of Government' (vol. 93, 2230, 2233). The smaller European states were rarely seen as relevant objects of comparison. The Liberal John Bertrand Watson, however, argued for proportional representation on the grounds that it had been successfully employed in countries such as Belgium, Switzerland, Sweden and Finland (vol. 93, 2168). Aneurin Williams, another Liberal, referred in the same context to Switzerland, Belgium, Finland, Sweden, Württemberg, South Africa and Tasmania. These, along with the United States, the British colonies, the Netherlands, Russia and Romania were for him 'democratic nations' whom Britain should have joined in this respect. He even mentioned German Social Democrats as proponents of proportional representation (vol. 93, 2250, 2324).

The outbreak of the Russian Revolution unavoidably affected the atmosphere in which the British reform was debated in late March 1917. Conservatives concerned about any revolution suggested that the war cabinet was attempting to carry out a revolution in Britain with the bill (Arnold Ward, vol. 92, 499-500; see also Saunders 2013a). The bill was, in the Conservative Richard Chaloner's terms, 'the greatest revolution which has ever happened in any country of the world', leading to the female majority taking over power from men (vol. 92, 526).

There were also representatives who suggested that a revolution of the Russian kind might reach Britain if nothing was done to reform the electoral system. The anti-war Ramsay MacDonald pointed out that 'the people outside' were concerned with very concrete problems, which they expected Parliament to solve. In case the current Parliament was to fail to carry out a reform, an actual revolution might come about even in Britain (vol. 93, 2222). The Labour leader was playing the same card that moderate Leftist reformers had at their disposal everywhere: if not themselves, more extreme Leftists might revolt. As a response, the Conservative Sir Henry Craik maintained that there was no need for a revolution in a country like Britain with long traditions of

liberty. In Britain, democracy was making an evolutionary, peaceful progress (vol. 93, 2237).

Once the Conservatives had introduced the vocabulary of revolution to the debate, individual speakers continued to imply that the lack of reform that would reunite the people and Parliament might lead to more revolutionary developments, and these might destabilise the established political order and institutions such as Parliament. Labour representative George James Wardle justified this point with British historical examples of parliamentary reforms, which showed that outright revolution and violence could be expected from the side of the people if a proper reform was not timely carried out by Parliament (vol. 93, 2367-68).

International references played a much more important role in the German constitutional discourse. An evident object of comparison was the allied Austria, which provided for the anti-war opposition a warning instance of how a parliament and people could be completely ignored in wartime decision-making (Georg Lebedour, Leftist Social Democrat, vol. 93, 2369). The three most important European great powers against which Germany was fighting – Britain, France and Russia – were generally recognised as relevant objects of comparison. The constitutional aspect could no longer be dismissed once even the Chancellor had recognised the constitutional challenge that the Western powers posed to Germany (vol. 309, 2375).

Awareness of British politics remained high, given the traditional German interest in Britain as an alternative political system worth emulating as well as the fact that Britain had been construed in war propaganda as the current leading enemy. Gustav Noske argued on 29 March 1917, on the day following the first reading of the Representation of the People Bill in the House of Commons, that England was planning to change its electoral system in the middle of a war. Noske's conclusion with reference to Germany could not have been clearer: 'In this case the Chancellor might learn from the enemy' (vol. 309, 2841).<sup>7</sup> He justified an immediate electoral reform with the good impression it would make on the masses, raising the enthusiasm of the troops in the field and, once they had returned home from the trenches, removing the sense that they were ranked as the third class of Prussians and of citizens in the Reich (vol. 309, 2841-42).<sup>8</sup>

Like in Britain, the central argument for reform was the need to recognise the sacrifices that the soldiers and the people at large had made. The Prussian Conservative

---

<sup>7</sup> 'Der Reichskanzler möge in dem Falle von dem Feinde lernen'.

<sup>8</sup> A direct reference to the 'three-class franchise' (*Dreiklassenwahlrecht*) of the Prussian Landtag.

counter-argument asserted that the German rules of suffrage were already ‘the freest in the world, freer than [those] in England, the mother of all parliaments’ and were thus in no need of extension (Erich Mertin, vol. 309, 2921).<sup>9</sup>

Eduard David argued that the Prussian political elite could no longer appeal to the Russian model when postponing electoral reforms. In brief, the Herrenhaus as ‘the Prussian Duma has now happily managed to isolate itself from the rest of the world’ (vol. 309, 2904).<sup>10</sup> For the Far Left, the Russian Revolution constituted a great historical moment which made a reform in Prussia unavoidable (Hugo Haase, vol. 309, 2887-88). Hugo Haase, a radical Social Democrat in opposition within his own party, made an implicit suggestion that a revolutionary change was becoming possible in Germany as well – though he did not suggest that the circumstances in Russia and Germany were directly comparable and denied the existence of an immediate threat of revolution (vol. 309, 2889).

While transnational influences in the Westminster Parliament were mostly limited to the dominions and Continental examples were bypassed, accusations and suggestions of a revolution of the Russian kind were in the air. In Germany, the majority Social Democrats were making use of the British model and even employed similar arguments, which calls for an exploration of the contemporary press as a potential mediator. Challenging the Prussian order with the Russian example was also common.

### **The New Political Role of the People**

In the British Parliament, debate on citizenship tended to focus on the need of extending it to include women. Yet there were statements about the readiness of the British citizens at large to exercise the right of suffrage. The Liberal Herbert Samuel, former home secretary, pointed out that the political elite had to ‘take the mass – the good and bad – and trust to them, and, in the long run, they shall prove trustworthy’ (vol. 93, 2346). The Conservative Colonel Henry Cavendish-Bentinck recommended likewise that Parliament should ‘throw open widely the gates of liberty’ as ‘liberty will be justified of its children, and we may look forward to the future with confidence and hope’ (vol. 93, 2409). Such trust in the people at large as the basis for building a better future was rarely expressed in wartime constitutional debates. According to Sir Halford

---

<sup>9</sup> ‘Das Reichstagswahlrecht, das im Grunde genommen das freieste Wahlrecht der Welt ist, freier als dasjenige in England, der Mutter aller Parlamente, bedarf einer Ausdehnung nach keiner Richtung’.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Die preußische Duma hat es glücklich fertiggebracht, sich in der ganzen Welt zu isolieren’.

MacKinder, a Conservative and active home front campaigner from Scotland, extensive popular involvement would become an option in case the politicians in Parliament were not to fulfil the expectations of the people and ‘adapt our Constitution to the new time’ (vol. 92, 508-509). The Members of Parliament of 1917 had the duty to create a constitution that could efficiently serve the needs of a modernising polity.

In Germany, only the Social Democrats were ready to make such appeals to the people in spring 1917. Gustav Noske presented the people and not the monarchy or the leading ministers as the force that would ultimately determine the pace of constitutional reform (vol. 309, 2842). In case of failure by the government and the bourgeois majority to introduce ‘a democratic reorganisation’, a cruel campaign would commence on the issue immediately after the war. Instead of such a battle over the constitution after the war, ‘the German people’ (not ‘parliament’) would need to dedicate all of their power to heal the wounds of war. A reform during the war, in contrast, would create ‘free paths for the free people in a new era’ and save the country from unnecessary confrontations (vol. 309, 2842).<sup>11</sup> This argument for reform reminded the British government: the war provided an opportunity for introducing a reform that would have been much more complicated to carry out during time of peace. In the German case, however, only a minority in the Reichstag came to adopt such an understanding of the necessity of reform. Decisions on politics were made elsewhere, by the executive and army leadership.

### **Democracy at Home and Abroad**

In March 1917, ‘democracy’, a traditionally contested concept, was not the means by which the British parliamentary elite preferred to define their constitution. The effects of Woodrow Wilson’s speech to Congress on 2 April began to be felt during the second reading of the bill. As John Bertrand Watson talked about Prime Minister Lloyd George ‘waging a great fight for democracy’ (vol. 93, 2168), both war and reform were being redescribed with this rising concept. The advance of democracy within the British political system had become a topic since the late nineteenth century, politicians competing on the definition of the concept especially from the late 1880s onwards (Saunders 2013a). Yet Wilson’s speech encouraged some British parliamentarians to conceptualise the war and reform as advancements of democracy in a new way.

---

<sup>11</sup> ‘... schafft freie Bahn für das freie Volk in der neuen Zeit schon jetzt und erspart uns die Auseinandersetzungen nach dem Kriege, wo wir Besseres zu tun haben’.

Democracy was once again becoming a contested concept within British domestic politics as well. Especially from May 1917 onwards, some Conservatives expressed their opposition to the reform through their selective use of the language of representative democracy, which they had employed in oppositional discourse since the 1880s and increasingly after 1906 (Saunders 2013a and 2013b), suggesting that they were defending true democracy against governmental challenges to the constitution. One of them, William Burdett-Coutts, said that the government was acting in ‘a spirit of dictatorship’ and hinted that the British system was moving towards ‘autocracy’. The preparation of the bill demonstrated to him ‘how far a War Government can get from the fundamentals of a democratic Constitution in matters of domestic legislation’ (vol. 93, 2173-76). Burdett-Coutts was the first in the reform debates to explicitly define the British Constitution and government as ‘democratic’ while rhetorically redescribing the concept to oppose the reform. Sir Henry Craik argued likewise that Britain had already been making progress towards democracy with such considerable steps that no reform of the proposed kind was necessary (vol. 93, 2237). Following the model of previous constitutional opposition, several Conservatives adopted the role of defenders of democracy in order to maintain the established British order. Yet more sincere reconsiderations of the meaning of democracy had also taken place among the Conservatives: Henry Cavendish-Bentinck advised the leaders of his party to ‘cultivate friendly relations with the great forces of democracy’. If the party was to ally with them and set out to promote the welfare of the people, it would win ‘a great and glorious future’ (vol. 93, 2409).

While Conservatives were going through rhetorical and actual conversions to democracy, surprisingly few Liberal or Labour Members of Parliament used democracy as a programmatic concept, which allowed the Conservatives to freely adopt it for their purposes. The former Liberal Home Secretary Herbert Samuel thought in terms of a controlled version of democracy, which, as a form of government, nevertheless linked Britain to the other political systems going through constitutional changes. What distinguished Britain from Russia was that it looked for a controlled reform, avoiding revolution (vol. 93, 2186). Only during the third reading and debates of the Lords’ amendments at the turn of 1917 and 1918 did a broader debate on democracy emerge. By that time, the war propaganda of the Western allies was starting to realise itself within British constitutional debates, reviving prewar controversies on democracy.

Democracy was debated more extensively in the German Reichstag. The debate opened once the Chancellor cited the British and French prime ministers, who had

declared that their goal was to liberate Germany from Prussian militarism and ‘to endow the German people ... with democratic liberties’ (vol. 309, 2375).<sup>12</sup> By then there was no denying the existence of an ideological challenge to which the German parliamentary elite needed to relate itself. Responding to this speech, the Progressive Otto Wiemer claimed legitimacy through referencing the soldiers when arguing that reforms had become necessary and that only ‘the development of the state in a democratic direction’ could be the correct solution (vol. 309, 2400).<sup>13</sup> Just like in Britain, soldiers in the trenches were used as the authoritative source of public opinion determining the proper constitutional settlement. Count Westarp from the National Conservatives rejected, on the other hand, all calls for rethinking domestic politics simply from the perspective of ‘the democratisation of our entire constitution’ (vol. 309, 2404).

The war gave rise to a new concept of ‘Western democracy’ as well. This concept, which was still emerging during 1917, addressed itself to the political systems of Britain, France and the United States in contrast to the German political order (Llanque 2000: 12-13). Even most German parliamentarians interpreted it this way. In the Reichstag, Gustav Noske of the SPD recognised the significance of such contempt for German political institutions while pointing out that institutions of Western democracies also had their deficiencies. Noske rejected many Western accusations as unfounded given that the Germans enjoyed universal male suffrage, but he did concede that reactionary policies of the Prussian kind were losing credibility since Germany, already being ‘surrounded by democracies not only in the west, north and south but hopefully now also in the east shall always and evermore have a democracy as a neighbour’ (vol. 309, 2839).<sup>14</sup> Noske clearly saw German constitutional development as bound to an ongoing pan-European transition to democracy. Eduard David of the SPD likewise advocated a transition to ‘a constitutional democratic body politic’ (vol. 309, 2902).<sup>15</sup> This meant, first of all, the introduction of democratic suffrage in all German states, including Prussia. David did not accept simplifying representations of Germany by the Western allies as a non-democratic country, as a barbarous and backward land. According to him, Germany was lagging only in its political institutions due to Prussian dominance, and it was now time to update them (vol. 309, 2902, 2009-10). Among the National Liberals,

---

<sup>12</sup> ‘... das deutsche Volk von sich aus mit demokratischen Freiheiten zu beschenken’.

<sup>13</sup> ‘... Ergebnis alle dieser Erwägungen wird ... eine Staatsentwicklung in demokratischer Richtung sein’.

<sup>14</sup> ‘... nicht nur im Westen, Norden und Süden von Demokratien umgeben ist, sondern nun hoffentlich auch im Osten für alle Zeit eine Demokratie zum Nachbar hat’.

<sup>15</sup> ‘einem konstitutionell demokratischen Staatswesen’.

Gustav Stresemann, a supporter of harsh warfare, denounced nevertheless the German tendency to look down on 'the democratically governed states' (vol. 309, 2854).<sup>16</sup>

From the point of view of the Right, there was no need for any democratic development of the suggested kind. According to the National Conservative Count Westarp, there was no reason for Germans to change their constitution merely because Russia had joined the so-called 'democratically governed, liberally administrated countries' (vol. 309, 2859).<sup>17</sup> Albrecht von Graefe, also of the National Conservatives, challenged Noske's claim that Germany was surrounded by democracies and would hence be forced to 'fully democratise' its own government. Germany should retain its monarchical political order instead (vol. 309, 2919).

What seems decisive is the rhetorical (and actual) shift of the British Right to the side of democracy, which did not happen in Germany. At the same time, the parties of the Left and Centre were more cautious about speaking explicitly in favour of democracy in wartime Britain than in Germany. The emerging concept of 'Western democracy' affected parliamentary debates in both countries, speakers in the British Parliament gradually adopting it and applying it to domestic disputes, the German Social Democrats interpreting it to imply a need for reforms in Germany, and the German Right questioning the Western political order.

### **The Meaning of Parliamentarism**

British parliamentarism had its problems, and these were openly recognised in the House of Commons. A frequently mentioned issue was that Parliament in its current form did not really represent the interests of the majority of the people. Many felt also that power had been transferred from Parliament to the executive government during the war. Lord Hugh Cecil, a Conservative of Oxford University, suggested furthermore that the state of war made public opinion redundant as an extra-parliamentary element of the decision-making process (vol. 93, 2186-87). Legitimate representative parliamentary government should have included the participation of the press, and through the press the public at large, who could have assisted in developing a bill through debate.

In the German Reichstag, parliamentarism, being a more contested concept, was debated more extensively. Gustav Stresemann called for a 'parliamentary system' in

---

<sup>16</sup> 'die demokratisch regierten Länder'.

<sup>17</sup> 'auch Rußland in die Reihen der demokratisch regierten, freiheitlich verwalteten Länder eingetreten sei'.



which ministers and under-secretaries would have been responsible to the Reichstag for their actions. For Stresemann, the military strength of Britain and France had demonstrated that 'the parliamentary system is indeed the glue that provides strong cohesion between the people, the government and the state' (vol. 309, 2854-55).<sup>18</sup> Enhancing the role of parliament in the political process was to strengthen the monarchy by demonstrating that the government enjoyed the support of the majority of the people. Germany was, furthermore, ready for parliamentarism thanks to the political schooling that was provided to the people by the war (vol. 309, 2855).<sup>19</sup>

German Conservatives rejected such calls for extending the Reichstag's political influence as incompatible with a true monarchy (vol. 309, 2860). For them, the constitutional system meant that the crown and the representative institution had equal, independent powers in forming their opinions, and this balance would have been destroyed if the monarch was to be made into a mere 'body of parliament', as then the parliament would have 'exercised absolute rule' (vol. 309, 2920).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the future of parliamentarism as a system was also questioned: according to Erich Mertin, a member of the Prussian House of Representatives from the German Reichspartei, parliamentarism as a form of government was declining, demonstrated by the fact that it was now replaced by bureaucracy even in countries which before the war had claimed to practise parliamentarism (vol. 309, 2921).

We thus have indications that the British were aware of the weakening of parliamentary sovereignty and publicity during the war and willing to restore these principles. While some German Leftists and Centrists spoke positively about a parliamentary system of the British kind, the German Right consistently rejected excessive parliamentarism.

### **Constitutional Developments until Summer 1919**

In Germany, the issue of parliamentarisation (in the sense of placing the control in the hands of the executive government) was brought up again by the Social Democrats and some Centre politicians in summer 1917, but opposition to democratisation and to the

---

<sup>18</sup> 'das parlamentarische System doch einen engen Kitt und Zusammenhang zwischen Volk, Regierung und Staat schafft'.

<sup>19</sup> 'Die Erziehungsarbeit des Krieges hat uns auch politisch weitergebracht'.

<sup>20</sup> 'Wenn man aber vom König verlangt, daß er durch die zwangsweise Wahl seiner Minister aus der jeweiligen Mehrheit des Parlaments gewissermaßen nur zum Organ der Volksvertretung wird, dann übt doch das Parlament die Alleinherrschaft aus, und dann ist der König als solcher nichts weiter als ein Schattenkönig; ...'

introduction of a parliamentary system was stronger. Members of the Reichstag lacked the experience in parliamentary government and had difficulties in defining what they wanted. The Reichstag was too weak in constitutional questions to carry out the reforms that some representatives so eagerly envisioned. In wartime Germany, much of the political power was placed not only in the hands of the Chancellor but also with the army headquarters, which did not want to hear any mention of political reorganisation. No noteworthy parliamentarisation of the political system took place, and the German population seems to have lost their belief in the government's capability to introduce any major reforms during the war (Llanque 2000: 133, 206-208).

The Russian October Revolution provided a vision for a future international revolution that would remove bourgeois democracy and parliamentarism and bring about a direct democracy in the form of the soviets as a representation based on imperative mandate and recall. Whereas in Germany the soviets had a strong influence especially in 1918-1919, the Russian events seemed remote in Britain. Yet they found their reflections in the reform debates of autumn 1917. The British Representation of the People Act changed the political system more radically than any previous or later reform towards a representative parliamentary democracy based on an almost universal suffrage (Machin 2001: 146). In the meantime, German constitutional debates at the Reichstag had come to a standstill.

In autumn 1918, Britain was waiting for peace in order to hold elections. The German high command, facing a defeat, demanded on 29 September that the German government should be restructured on a parliamentary basis, and the country was turned into a parliamentary monarchy by the end of October. The fall of the monarchy in November finally led to circumstances in which a republican constitution could be drafted. At the Weimar National Constituent Assembly in spring 1919, the people were generally regarded as the source of political authority, but members of the Reichstag continued to hold highly divergent conceptions of democracy, popular sovereignty and parliamentarism (Pohl 2002; Bollmeyer 2007). A dominant stand was that the parliament alone was insufficient to represent the will of the people in a democratic republic, and thus it was supplemented by a strong presidency and referenda.

## **Conclusion**

Even though national contexts set the pace of the democratisation and parliamentarisation of representative governments to some extent between 1917 and

1919, a transnational constitutional transformation was taking place. The war between Britain and Germany had by 1917 turned into a battle about constitutions – not only between but also within the two nations. From the beginning of 1917 onwards, the Allied powers increasingly presented themselves as fighting under the banner of democracy. This political concept would, during the year, become a uniting and normative concept that even affected the way the political elites of the Allied powers understood themselves. Several countries went through parallel processes of constitutional reform and the redefinition of the key concepts of their constitutions. Many of the same themes around suffrage and the parliamentarisation of government were discussed, and the debates were peppered with numerous explicit and implicit cross-references.

The conceptual level of the constitutional debates in parliaments was not particularly high due to the dominance of acute economic and social questions and the tendency of representatives to politick with regard to particular details of the proposed reforms. Yet constitutional alternatives became clearly articulated and the meaning of concepts debated. The themes of connections between the unique war experience and the need for an immediate reform, the relevance of foreign examples, the increasing role of the people in politics and the state, the meaning of democracy and the functioning of parliamentarism were debated simultaneously in several countries, side by side with more nation-specific issues. Parallel, ideologically motivated constitutional views could be found in all countries, but there were also differences, especially in the adaptation of the old elites to democracy. In Britain, ‘democracy’ was adopted also by the Conservatives as a vague slogan which was not necessarily linked with universal suffrage, something that was seen as essential in German discourse on ‘democracy’. The relationship between the people and the political or the state was redefined within each debate in a variety of conflicting ways. In British debates, appeals to popular activity remained few in wartime. Democracy rose during 1917, again, into an instrument of domestic political disputes, the Wilsonian language affecting British conceptualisations of their own political system. In Germany, changes in political attitudes obviously did not always correspond with the gradual breakthrough in the language of democracy in Leftist and Liberal circles.

In Britain, the reform was claimed to be strengthening the popular legitimacy of parliamentary government, but it may have strengthened the relative power of the executive branch instead. Rhetorical and also actual shifts among Conservatives to the side of democracy removed prewar threats of civil war, and the value of parliamentary

debate was emphasised even in wartime. In Germany, doubts concerning parliamentary government were not successfully removed by a process that was seen by many as imported from other countries or even as a result of domestic conspiracy. Parliamentary government was not able to lift the atmosphere of a latent civil war in this case.

### **Primary Sources**

HANSARD ONLINE, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/>.

HOUSE OF COMMONS PARLIAMENTARY PAPERS (database).

VERHANDLUNGEN DES REICHSTAGS. XIII. Legislaturperiode. II. Session. Band 308. STENOGRAPHISCHE BERICHTE. Von der 61. Sitzung am 7. Juni 1916 bis zur 80. Sitzung am 12. Dezember 1916. Berlin, 1916, [www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/index.html](http://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/index.html).

VERHANDLUNGEN DES REICHSTAGS. XIII. Legislaturperiode. II. Session. Band 309. STENOGRAPHISCHE BERICHTE. Von der 81. Sitzung am 22. Februar 1917 bis 101. Sitzung am 5. Mai 1917. Berlin, 1917, [www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/index.html](http://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/index.html).

### **Secondary Literature**

BLACKBURN, Robert (2011): Laying the Foundations of the Modern Voting System: The Representation of the People Act 1918, *Parliamentary History*, 30:1, 33-52.

BOLLMAYER, Heiko (2007): *Der steinige Weg zur Demokratie. Die Weimarer Nationalversammlung zwischen Kaiserreich und Republik*. Frankfurt am Main & New York: Campus Verlag.

MÖLLER, Horst (2002): *Demokratie in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918-1933/40. Beiträge zu einem historischen Vergleich*, ed. Horst Möller and Manfred Kittel. Munich: Oldenbourg.

GUSY, Christoph (2000): Einleitung: Demokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik – Entstehungsbedingungen und Vorfragen, in *Demokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Christoph Gusy. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 11-36.

GUSY, Christoph (2008a): Auf dem Weg zu einer vergleichenden europäischen Verfassungsgeschichte der Zwischenkriegzeit – Ein Tagungsbericht, in *Demokratie in der Krise. Europa in der Zwischenkriegzeit*, ed. Christoph Gusy. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 417-39.

- GUSY, Christoph (2008b): Verfassungsumbruch bei Kriegsende, in *Demokratie in der Krise. Europa in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, ed. Christoph Gusy. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 15-51.
- IHALAINEN, Pasi (2010): *Agents of the People: Democracy and Popular Sovereignty in British and Swedish Parliamentary Debates, 1734-1800*. Leiden: Brill.
- KAELBE, Hartmut (2001): *Wege zur Demokratie. Von der Französischen Revolution zur Europäischen Union*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt.
- KLUXEN, Kurt (1985): Britischer und Deutscher Parlamentarismus im Zeitalter der industriellen Massengesellschaft. Ein verfassungsgeschichtliche Vergleich, in *Deutscher und Britischer Parlamentarismus. British and German Parliamentarism*, ed. Adolf M. Birke and Kurt Kluxen. Munich: Saur.
- LLANQUE, Marcus (2000): *Demokratisches Denken im Krieg. Die deutsche Debatte im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- MACHIN, Ian (2001): *The Rise of Democracy in Britain, 1830-1918*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- NORTON, Philip (2011): Introduction: A Century of Change, *Parliamentary History*, 30:1, 1-18.
- PALONEN, Kari (2008): *The Politics of Limited Times: The Rhetoric of Temporal Judgment in Parliamentary Democracies*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- POHL, Tina (2002): *Demokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Nationalversammlung*. Hamburg: Kovac.
- RECKER, Marie-Luise, ed. (2004): *Parlamentarismus in Europa. Deutschland, England und Frankreich im Vergleich*. Munich: Oldenbourg.
- SAUNDERS, Robert (2013a): Democracy, in *Languages of Politics in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Britain*, ed. David Craig and James Thompson, forthcoming.
- SAUNDERS, Robert (2013b): Tory Rebels and Tory Democracy: The Ulster Crisis, 1900-1914, in *The Foundations of the British Conservative Party*, ed. Richard Carr and Bradley Hart, forthcoming.
- SEILS, Ernst-Albert (2011): *Weltmachtsstreben und Kampf für den Frieden. Der deutsche Reichstag im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- SMITH, Jeffrey R. (2007): *A People's War: Germany's Political Revolution, 1913-1918*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- WIRSCHING, Andreas (2007): Einleitung, in Andreas Wirsching, ed., *Herausforderungen der parlamentarischen Demokratie. Die Weimarer Republik im europäischen Vergleich*. Munich: Oldenbourg, 9-19.

WIRSCHING, Andreas (2008): Verfassung und Verfassungskultur im Europa der Zwischenkriegszeit, in *Demokratie in der Krise. Europa in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, ed. Christoph Gusy. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 371-89.