

# A Lifetime for Justice



Illustration by Willem Hampson

## Edmund Burke and the Speech to the Electors of Bristol

### Learning resource

This pack accompanies the **Lifetime for Justice timeline booklet** and focuses on Edmund Burke's speech on the role of an MP.

### This pack

This pack contains background information, a group exercise and questions to develop students' knowledge of Edmund Burke and an understanding of his views on the role of an MP.

#### Includes:

- An exercise with primary and secondary resources
- Questions to consider
- Glossary of legislation

#### Key learning points

- Key individuals
- Different views on what the role of an MP should be
- Reading speeches aloud
- Being able to listen and discern arguments from speeches.

#### Scholarly rationale

Edmund Burke's philosophical and political perspectives on the role of an MP and the model of Conservatism continue to be heralded and referenced in contemporary politics around the world.

#### Curricular rationale

This lesson is an opportunity for students to understand and debate Burkean views on the role of an MP – and for Bristol area schools explore a nationally significant moment that took place locally.

KS3 History (AQA BB Britain Power and People; Edexcel Crime and Punishment in Britain c1000 to present).

KS4 Politics (AQA 3.1 Government and Politics of the UK; 3.3 Political Ideas; Pearson 1. UK Politics and Core Political Ideas).

## Speech to the Electors of Bristol, 3 November 1774

Edmund Burke, the Irish philosopher and politician, represented the city of Bristol in Parliament between 1774 and 1780.

Having been a Whig MP for almost ten years, representing the Constituency of Wendover in Buckinghamshire, Edmund Burke campaigned to become MP for Bristol. He was elected alongside another MP from his own party, Henry Cruger. On 3 November 1774, Edmund Burke gave a speech to the people of Bristol who had elected him. The speech, known as 'The Speech to the Electors of Bristol', defines Burke's view that an MP's role and opinion is independent from those who had elected them. One of the most famous passages from the speech is:

'Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation with one interest, that of the whole; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not a member of Bristol, but he is a member of Parliament.'

## Exercise

Get into small groups and have one person stand up and read Edmund Burke's speech aloud to the rest of group.

Original Text	Translation
<p>I am sorry I cannot conclude without saying a word on a topic touched upon by my worthy colleague. I wish that topic had been passed by at a time when I have so little leisure to discuss it. But since he has thought proper to throw it out, I owe you a clear explanation of my poor sentiments on that subject.</p>	<p>I'm sorry but I can't finish without saying something about what my worthy colleague [Henry Cruger, also MP for Bristol] has just said. It's a shame that it's been brought up here, when there's not enough time to talk about it properly. However, since he has raised it, here is an explanation of my thoughts on the subject.</p>
<p>He tells you that "the topic of instructions has occasioned much altercation and uneasiness in this city;" and he expresses himself (if I understand him rightly) in favour of the coercive authority of such instructions.</p>	<p>He tells you that "the discussion about whether constituents should force the way in which their MP should vote in Parliament on certain issues has caused many arguments and uneasiness in this city;" and, if I'm to understand him, he believes that local residents should have this power over their MP.</p>
<p>Certainly, gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the law and the constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.</p>	<p>Certainly, it is the dream and wish for MPs to live in unity with their constituents, being always in touch with them. Their wishes ought to have great weight with them; their opinion, high respect; their business, complete attention. It is the duty of an MP to sacrifice their personal priorities and pleasures for their constituents and, above all, ever and in cases, to put the interest of their constituents above their own. But their unbiased opinion, their experience and judgment, their sense of value; these shouldn't be sacrificed to you, or to any person, group of party. This sense of values and belief do not come from wanting to make you happy, nor do they come from the law and the constitution. They are part of what makes us human, given by God and if we act against them, we are answerable to a higher power. Your representative owes you, not only their service, but their judgment; and they betray instead of serving you, if they sacrifice their wisdom and knowledge to your opinion.</p>
<p>My worthy colleague says, his will ought to be subservient to yours. If that be all, the thing is innocent. If government were a matter of will upon any side, yours, without question, ought to be superior. But government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment, and not of inclination; and what sort of reason is that, in which the determination precedes the discussion; in which one set of men deliberate, and another decide; and where those who form</p>	<p>My worthy colleague Henry Cruger believes that he should obey whatever you say. If that was all, that would be fine. If government were a matter of will upon any side, yours, without question, ought to matter more. But government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment, and not of preference; and what sort of reason is that, in which the outcome is decided before talking about it; in which one set of people discuss, and another decide; and where those who make the decision are perhaps three</p>

the conclusion are perhaps three hundred miles distant from those who hear the arguments?

To deliver an opinion, is the right of all men; that of constituents is a weighty and respectable opinion, which a representative ought always to rejoice to hear; and which he ought always most seriously to consider. But authoritative instructions; mandates issued, which the member is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for, though contrary to the clearest conviction of his judgment and conscience,—these are things utterly unknown to the laws of this land, and which arise from a fundamental mistake of the whole order and tenor of our constitution.

Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not member of Bristol, but he is a member of parliament. If the local constituent should have an interest, or should form an hasty opinion, evidently opposite to the real good of the rest of the community, the member for that place ought to be as far, as any other, from any endeavour to give it effect. I beg pardon for saying so much on this subject. I have been unwillingly drawn into it; but I shall ever use a respectful frankness of communication with you. Your faithful friend, your devoted servant, I shall be to the end of my life: a flatterer you do not wish for.

hundred miles distant from those who hear the arguments?

Everyone has the right to an opinion; MPs should always want to hear the opinions of their constituents and take them seriously. But demanding, instructing or mandating MPs, forcing them blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for, even when it goes against everything that they know and believe – this is not how things are done and arise from a fundamental mistake in understanding how our government system works.

Parliament is not a group of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates. Parliament is an assembly where we come together to think as one nation, with one interest, that of the whole. Local purposes and prejudices shouldn't guide discussion but instead the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen them, they are not member of Bristol, but he is a member of Parliament. If a local resident constituent should have an interest, or should form a quick opinion, clearly opposite to the real good of the rest of the community, their MP should be as far as any other from putting it in place. Please excuse me for saying so much on this subject. I have been unwillingly drawn into it; but I will always be respectfully frank when I speak with you. Your faithful friend, your devoted servant, I shall be to the end of my life: you wouldn't want an MP who simply flatters and panders to you.

# Questions

- What do you think of Edmund Burke's speech? Do you agree with him?
- What is the difference between what Henry Cruger believes and what Edmund Burke believes?
- What does Edmund Burke believe Parliament is? – and what is it not?
- Who is the MP where you live? How easy is it to find out what they stand for and what their voting record is?

## Glossary of words and terms

**Constituency:** A constituency is the specific geographical area that is represented by each MP in the House of Commons.

**Constituents:** People who live in an MP's constituency are known as their constituents.

**'The topic of instructions':** The attempt by constituents to force the way in which their MP should vote in Parliament on certain issues.

**Whigs:** The Whigs were one of two major political parties in Britain from the late seventeenth-century through to the nineteenth century.

## Further information and links

Find out more about Edmund Burke

[https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/burke\\_edmund.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/burke_edmund.shtml)

Find vote results from the House of Commons and the House of Lords

<https://votes.parliament.uk/>

Find your MP

<https://members.parliament.uk/FindYourMP>



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