# Edmund Burke:  Politician
## What Burke Teaches Us About Defining Representation

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Edmund Burke was a politician, not a traditional, canonical political theorist.  His long, statesman's career included a single term as an elected representative of Bristol.  Burke developed the oft-cited "Burkean" (or trustee) model of representation from his own experiences as a legislator.  Burke failed to secure re-election to the Bristol seat, and his difficulties there serve as a caution to modern-day elected officials who choose to emulate Burke's trustee approach.  Modern-day Burkeans must take care not to be perceived as aloof and unengaged in the affairs of the district.  As for scholars, Burke's choice to eschew metaphysics and imaginary hypothetical scenarios in favor of learning from experience, direct us toward more respect for the wisdom that comes from experience, and ultimately, toward more practical and usable theories of representation.

*Keywords:  Edmund Burke, deliberation, Richard Fenno, home style, representation,* Speech to the Electors at Bristol*, trustee.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is striking that Burke was made the purveyor of a *Theory* necessary to healthy politics.  If there is one recurrent theme in Burke's letters, speeches, and writings, it is his emphasis on the moral and political evils that follow upon the intrusion of theory into political practice.  It is theory as such that he rejects; his emphasis on the evils of intrusive theory is not balanced by a compensating reliance on sound theory that men would need as a guide to their politics.  Sound theory, to him, would seem to be self-denying theory.  Harvey Mansfield Jr.[1]

Learning what 'representation' means and learning how to represent are intimately connected.  Hanna Pitkin[2]

Edmund Burke was not a traditional political theorist.  He was a politician.  Burke did not hone his oft-cited concept of representation in an exercise of academic theory-building.  Rather, he did so through his activities in politics and statesmanship. Burke shaped his approach to representation during the brief portion of his career in which he served as one of the elected MP's from the city of Bristol, Great Britain.  In other words, Burke proffered a definition of representation while working, and serving, as a representative.  Traditional scholarship on the Burkean (trustee) model of representation pays little or no heed to the way in which Burke developed his view—that is, through the actual practice of serving as a representative.  The way in which Burke developed his "Burkean" model of representation shows the promise—and pitfalls—of Hanna Pitkin's prescient observation in her quote at the beginning of this paper.

## SCOPE

Here is a word on what this short, tightly-focused paper is *not*.  It is not a comprehensive, temporal biography of Burke like the work of Carl Cone.[3]  It is not a contemporary, thematic biography of Burke in the vein of Conor Cruise O'Brien's recent offering, *The Great Melody*.[4]  It is not a hagiographic introduction to the nuts-and-bolts of Burke's life and career, as is Russell Kirk's *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*.[5]  This paper does not delve deeply in a broad swath of Burke's voluminous speeches and writings, as does Mansfield's work.  This paper's scope is far narrower:  it is concerned only with the method used by Burke to derive his oft-cited trustee, or "Burkean" model of representation, during the short period he served as an elected MP.  Readers interested in learning more about Burke's long career as a statesman are referred to the books cited above for far more comprehensive accounts of his life, career, and advocacy on behalf of Irish Catholics, Indians under the yoke of the British East India Company, and taxed-but-not-represented American colonists. Of course, these and other sources also feature in-depth analyses of Burke's alarm and outrage over the French Revolution, and his foretelling of its bloody aftermath and the rise of a dictator, who later emerged in the person of Napoleon Bonaparte.[6]

### BURKE AS GROUNDED THEORIST:  DEFINING IT BY DOING IT

As scholars observe legislators learning how to represent, we also learn what representation means.  What do actual representatives tell us about defining representation?  Legislators approach representation as a *grounded process*— that is, a process in which the generalizations about what one

is doing evolve together with the activities based on those generalizations as part of one's experiences. Grounded processes are related to the *grounded theory* methodology of qualitative research. That is, grounded theory is the academic study of grounded processes. Barney Glaser argues that grounded theory means "generating theory and doing social research [as] two parts of the same process."[7] Grounded theorists Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1994) continue this thought, adding that "theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection."[8]

I contend that Edmund Burke attempted his own prototypical grounded theory through his own experiences as a legislator. However, he failed to firmly ground his approach to representation in interactions with constituents. He had a general sense of the politics of the district, but also presented himself as aloof and uncommunicative. The "Speech to the Electors at Bristol" is a remarkable attempt to set things right—but one which was too little, too late.

Approaches to representation may be studied in careful, qualitative detail by observing representatives as they go about their tasks.[9] In Burke's case, we must reconstruct his approach using his own writings and other historical materials. Burke believed that his district was too divided and fractious to be effectively represented by a "delegate" who reacted and responded to the constituents' instructions. As Ernest Barker notes, the idea of an *instructed delegate* legislator was popular among radicals in Burke's time.[10] Burke saw too much division and conflict in Bristol—and indeed, throughout the growing, industrial society of Britain—for effective delegate representation. He opposed the radicals. As a prototypical grounded theorist, he sought to respond to this with a starkly different alternative: a *trustee* legislator whose decisions are made by his own wisdom, in anticipation of the district's best interests.

Burke had begun to develop his trustee viewpoint before his election in Bristol. Barker points out that in Burke's 1770 essay, "Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents," he articulated opposition both to shorter legislative services and to a ban on legislators' being allowed to hold other public offices. Here Burke began to articulate the argument that the public should not constrain the legislator's ability to act on the basis of his own wisdom and judgment. Burke wrote the "Thoughts…" while serving as Secretary to the Marquess of Rockingham. In this position, Burke served as a Whig leader in the House of Commons without sitting for election in a constituency. This changed in 1774, when he was elected to represent Bristol, though he did not live there (British law did not require Members of Parliament [MPs] to live in their districts.) Before being elected, he articulated the view that

legislators must make decisions in the best interests of the whole nation, and that they should do so based on wisdom, not instructions. His campaign, service, and struggle for re-election in Bristol forced him to sit for election and re-election, thus developing his view of virtual of representation further and articulating it *as an approach to representing his constituents*.

In the "Speech to the Electors at Bristol," Burke defended virtual representation in terms of its fit with his district.[11] In so doing, he succeeded in bringing a powerful approach representation into the canon: the Burkean model, also referred to as trustee or virtual representation. However, Burke failed at re-election. More fundamentally, he failed at developing a successful *home style*: a term later coined by American political scientist Richard Fenno to describe the interaction between an elected representative and those she represents.[12] Burke's success was in bringing to the canon a new way to do political theory: one that is grounded in experience with the concept one seeks to define. Ironically, Burke himself failed to sufficiently ground his own approach to representation; that is, he paid insufficient attention to the interactions between himself as representative, and the constituents that he represented.

## BURKE'S APPROACH TO DOING THEORY

Burke's theory is derived from accumulated experience: both a nation's tradition and his own experiences as a legislator. Burke seeks to preserve accumulated information, wisdom, and prior understanding. Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin refer to this as *grounding*. Of course, a different legislator may not reach the same definition of representation from her experiences as Burke did from his own. This is because, as Donald Searing notes, other representatives have different preexisting biases, and they will have different experiences in different institutional contexts.[13] The resulting grounded process of representation is therefore likely to be different for each representative. But the salient point here is that Burke relied on practical experience and accumulated wisdom to create a new definition of representation.[14]

Staying above the tumult of day-to-day politics was crucial to effective public service, according to Burke. This in turn depended on one's position in a social hierarchy—certain people (not necessarily the wealthiest) were uniquely privileged to develop their education and wisdom. Destroying that social hierarchy, in turn, destroyed the system that produced those so uniquely fit to serve, thus compromising the nation's best interests.[15] Still, Burke did believe that these uniquely fit public servants had a responsibility to return to the district and justify their actions taken in previous legislative sessions. The "Speech" was Burke's attempt at doing just that.

Scholars such as Pitkin derived Burke's view of virtual representation from his 1780 "Speech to the Electors at Bristol." Burke was one of two candidates elected to represent Bristol in Parliament in 1774.[16] Bristol was a thriving port city and cultural center in western England. It featured diverse groups within the constituency. Merchants—especially shippers—were important actors in the electorate. Tolerance and a right to vote for Roman Catholics were issues of some contention, with strong voices raised on both sides. Burke's 1774 election stances included the defense of trading interests and the repeal of anti-Catholic laws.

Burke was one of Bristol's first representatives to be chosen in competitive elections. For the first time in twenty years, 1774 saw the collapse of a gentlemen's agreement in which Tories and Whigs had agreed to divide up the Bristol's two seats, with each party running one unopposed candidate. Though still quite limited, the franchise was expanding in Britain at this time. Bristol was noted for having a particularly high proportion of its citizens in the electorate. Thus Burke faced a new challenge: deciding how to effectively represent this community in a new environment of competitive elections. There was no precedent for him to follow. The task of representation in Britain was undergoing great changes, in the form of an expanding franchise and a changing, industrial-revolutionary society. Burke had to derive his approach to representation without much precedent, and to justify it to constituents. In 1780, he articulated his response to this challenge with the "Speech."

Virtual representation was Burke's own way of responding to the needs of a growing electorate in a district where opinion was often divided. In the "Speech To The Electors," he told them, "I could wish, undoubtedly, if idle wishes were not the most idle of all things, to make every part of my conduct agreeable to every part of my constituents. But in so great a city, and so greatly divided as this, it is weak to expect it."[17] He sought an approach to help him avoid the controversy and tumult of his electorate. Burke said, "I must first beg leave just to hint to you that we may suffer very great detriment, by being open to every talker."[18] For Burke, being open to every talker threatened to remove the representative from more important matters—those which were simultaneously of local and national importance. Like the American James Madison, Burke was particularly fearful of the dangers of factions, saying, "[F]actions in republics have been, and are, full as capable as monarchs of the most cruel oppression and injustice."[19] For Burke, factions posed a danger not only to the state and to each other (factions oppress other factions), but also to his own re-election.

Burke sought an approach to representation that would keep him above the fractious fray. He sought to *stay above* the district's tumult, rather than to successfully *negotiate* it. Thus Burke turned to a 'whole nation' focus. Six years before the "Speech to the Electors," he made history with a shorter speech to supporters. According to Cone, that earlier speech "is the first recorded instance of a candidate [for British MP] explaining to voters his views on national questions."[20] In that earlier speech, he stressed his commitments to commerce and tolerance of Catholics.

For Burke, the district's interests in national matters were best understood by the deliberating representative. But the electorate's immediate opinions were another matter. Constituents may be impulsive or foolish. The philosophy of virtual representation is often illustrated with the following famous quote:

> I did not obey your instructions: No. I conformed to the instructions of truth and nature, and maintained your interest, against your opinions, with a constancy that became me. I am to look, indeed, to your opinions; but to such opinions as you and I must have five years hence.[21]

This quote is remarkable for two reasons. The first is the way in which Burke reached this conclusion, and the second is his focus on *time*. In the "Speech," this comment *followed* Burke's criticism of colonial policy toward Ireland and America. Burke argued that the British policies toward Ireland and America only served to provoke violence and war, thus dividing the British realm. In both cases, he notes, many of his own constituents were adamantly in favor of the no-compromise positions. Yet he relied on his own past and present experiences to judge what would be best for the nation and the district. He argued that unrest in Ireland and the successful revolt of angry, overtaxed colonists in America both served to harm Britain. They also hurt the trading interests so crucial to Bristol's economy. Burke's views did not derive merely from his interest in serving Bristol. An Irishman of mixed Catholic-Protestant heritage himself, Burke had a passion for repealing anti-Catholic laws that stemmed from his own life experiences.[22] Still, he was able to articulate his own interest in terms of the district's best interest, even on an issue so close to his heart. Furthermore, Burke had less of a personal stake in the American Colonies than he did in Ireland, and his view of that matter did derive heavily from his view of what was best for Britain, and for Bristol. According to Burke, those calling for no-compromise positions on America and Ireland had not thought carefully about their own interest. The representative must not act upon these constituents' immediate demands or he will sacrifice both national and local interest to popular passions.

For Burke, the public servant had the resources—and the duty—to deliberate on such policy matters and learn from events. The experiences of being caught between a divided and passionate constituency, on one hand, and his own deliberations on the nation's long-term interests, on the other, formed the basis of his philosophy. For Burke, the legislator must take *time* to distinguish a nation's and community's true interests from the immediate popular passions back home.

## Time: The key to deliberation

For modern legislators, as for Burke, there is one particularly important resource at her disposal: one which is required for proper deliberation. Fenno writes, "*time* is a House member's most precious resource."[23] This insight is readily generalizable to *any* legislator. Note the stress on time in the 'I did not follow your instructions' quote. Burke told the electors, "I am to look… to such opinions as you and I must have *five years hence*." For Burke, the legislator must both use time to deliberate properly, and *consider the effects* of time as he does so. Several years earlier, Burke had said, "nothing shews a more weak undetermined unsystematic spirit than to fall into a little hurry of weak premature, undigested measures either of force or of Policy and not to rest steadily."[24]

Pitkin interpreted Burke's argument as follows, "Voting, the counting of noses in Parliament, is of no importance; what is required is that all the facts and arguments be accurately and wisely set forth." She added, "Deliberation is the heart of 'the representative function' for Burke."[25] For Burke, *taking* and *using* time was more important than passing laws. Improper deliberation is the basis of bad law, and "bad laws are the worst sort of tyranny."[26]

This is not to suggest that simply taking time is an adequate approach to representation. Time is for deliberation, not simply an excuse for inaction. Consider how Burke spoke of his opponents regarding a bill to repeal anti-Catholic laws (Burke favored the repeal).

> "Parliament," they assert, "was too hasty, and they ought, in so essential and alarming a change, to have proceeded with a far greater degree of deliberation." The direct contrary. Parliament was too slow. They took fourscore years to deliberate on the repeal of an Act which ought not to have survived a second session.[27]

For Burke, deliberation was intended for understanding the county's interests, not to justify inaction in the face of bad laws. Bad laws, in turn, exclude certain interests from representation—interests such as those of the American colonists, the Irish, and Roman Catholics.[28]

Deliberation was crucial. It was the key to understanding these objective interests, and for shaping appropriate policy to serve them. A legislator must use his most precious resource of all—time—to determine these interests and decide a course of action. Constituents, by contrast, can often be impulsive. They may act without taking time to deliberate, and without considering the effects of time ("five years hence.") Burke said, "Such a representation I think is to be in many cases even better than the actual… The people may err in their choice; but the common interest and the common sentiment are rarely mistaken."[29]

Burke was optimistic that the constituents would also come to understand better the true interests of community and nation, in time. On his opposition to debtors' prisons, he told the electors that constituents would come to embrace his own position "as we become enlightened."[30] Yet Burke also believed that the representative faced the unique opportunity and duty to anticipate these changes of opinion—to vote as they would wish him to, five years hence. Constituents can deliberate, too. But the representatives' *own* deliberation must be a few steps ahead of the constituents'.

Burke defined deliberation as a sort of settling process, in which the true interests of community and nation can be isolated from temporary passions and divisions. He illustrated this point with his discussion of the Reformation. He wrote,

> The Protestant religion in that violent struggle, infected, as the Popish had been before, by worldly interests and worldly passions, became a persecutor in its turn… It was long before the spirit of true piety and true wisdom, involved in the principles of the Reformation, could be departed from the dregs and feculence of the contention with which it was carried through.[31]

Here Burke deplored Reformation-era Protestants for their *behavior*, not their *ideas*. Time played a key role, in allowing for the true best interests of the Reformation to be separated from worldly interests and passions ("it was long before…."). (A few years later, Burke would be horrified by the French Revolution, with its violent trampling of accumulated traditions, interests, and attachments that had settled over time.)[32] Burke thus exhibited profoundly mixed views of the human character—including the character of his own constituents. Caught up in these passions, people often overlook the *true* interests of community and country. They may be blinded by prejudices or a thirst for revenge (both of which combined to bring about the anti-Catholic laws which Burke voted to repeal). They may be simply impulsive. The deliberating representative must anticipate what true interests will come into clearer view, once time has allowed them to settle.

Clearly, time is an indispensable resource to any legislator.[33] Yet, Burke's own approach to time—using it to set himself above, and apart from, constituents—ultimately failed him as an approach to home style.

### What Burke got wrong

Burke's virtual representation was not a successful strategy for his re-election. Barker notes that immediately before the 1780 election, Burke withdrew, realizing he had no hope of a second term. According to Cone,

> Unfortunately, amid the clash of interests that developed during the following six years [after his election], Burke's lofty views of the proper relationship between a member of parliament and his constituents became uncongenial to the people of Bristol. Less justifiably, Burke's aloofness and his failure to nurse his constituency did him irreparable damage by the time the next election occurred.[34]

Heinz Eulau criticized Burke for his excessive party loyalty and his tendency to ignore his constituency. "The core problem involved in representation," Eulau wrote, "is the relationship that exists between representative and represented."[35] On this score, Eulau noted, Burke fell disappointingly short. Eulau relied heavily on Barker's discussion of Burke and Bristol for his background information on Burke's career. Barker noted that Burke did not live in his district and visited less than once per year. More fundamentally, Barker argued that Burke failed to develop a successful strategy of interaction with the constituents. Barker wrote,

> His normal belief of the union of minds was confined to a narrow circle, and the area of discussion was an area of the *elite*. He hardly regarded himself as engaged in discussion with the people of Bristol, or the people of Bristol as engaged in discussion with him....[36]

In essence, Barker argued that Burke failed to develop a successful home style. Instead, Burke developed a view of deliberation featuring a distinct elite bias. That is, it excluded the perspectives of nonelites.[37] He sought to *rise above* the tumult within his district, rather than to successfully *negotiate* it. Thus he became perceived as aloof and unresponsive.

Heinz Eulau and Paul C. Karps suggested that *symbolic responsiveness* is one of a representative's essential tasks.[38] Malcolm Jewell placed that task at the very core of home style.[39] Symbolic responsiveness refers to the way in which a representative shows, through actions, words, and priorities, that she is connected to her constituents, understands their values and interests, and responds to them. Because of this failing, Burke had limitations as a grounded theorist. This is not to argue that re-election is the ultimate test for a political

theory's validity. Burke's is a deeper problem: his failure to ground his theory. His unsuccessful re-election bid was a *symptom* of that problem, it was not the problem itself. Barker noted Burke's failure to develop a grounded theory of representation, writing,

> Burke had many Quaker friends... But there was one Quaker idea which he never really learned. It is the idea of 'the sense of the meeting,' the idea of a union of minds, in a common purpose, attained through a process of general thought to which we may all contribute, and by a mode of amicable discussion in which we may all participate. *It is this idea which underlies any grounded belief in democracy*.[40]

This is not to argue that a trustee (Burkean) legislator is doomed to failure. But even modern-day Burkeans must develop successful patterns of interactions with constituents in the right environment.

Eulau noted a remarkable number of modern legislators who do take a "Burkean" approach—stressing their own judgment over the instructions of constituents.[41] I found two such legislators in my own research. I labeled them, simply enough, the "Burkeans." Their words and actions were much along the lines of what Burke suggested. They stressed making decisions based upon their own wisdom, not upon a survey of district opinions. One legislator, a former academic, delighted in discussing his "friend" Burke's ideas with me. Another said, "my district elect[s] me based on who I am to come down here and make some decisions.... You don't elect somebody down here that's 'gonna take a poll,' because if you do, you don't need me down here. And so that's my attitude."[42]

Yet these Burkeans implemented Burke's own principles more successfully than Burke himself did. They returned to the home district much more frequently to explain and defend their votes to the constituents. They also struggled to show clearly the relationship between the good of the state and the good of the district. And finally, they engaged in rather mundane name recognition activities that Burke would probably have seen as beneath him. Imagine Burke handing out rewards to high-school wrestlers, or riding on a float for the "skillet days" parade. Modern Burkeans put virtual representation into practice more successfully than Burke himself, in districts where the approach seems a better fit.

### Conclusion: Burke the politician, defining representation

Burke ultimately failed at grounding his approach to representation in interactions with constituents. What are the consequences of this shortcoming, for the Burkean model of representation? Eulau suggested that the entire dichotomy between trustees and delegates—a dichotomy which Eulau

himself had integrated into his own previous research—was radically challenged by Burke's shortcoming.[43] According to Eulau, because Burke was not able to master the relationship between representative and represented—the core problem of representation—the trustee/delegate dichotomy is not particularly useful to us today in understanding representational styles.[44]

Eulau's critique of Burke's failures is valid. The trustee/ instructed delegate framework is not well-grounded in empirical studies of legislator-constituent interactions. It is not responsive to the fact that legislators may respond differently on different issues, for example, by systematically taking a trustee approach to certain policy categories and a delegate approach to others.[45] It is idealistic, and presupposes that a legislator can 'rise above' his own identification with factional interests within and beyond the district, as well as his own prior biases. Further, it does not include a role for party loyalties.[46] This is notable, because Burke was so heavily involved in the factional struggle to define the values and policies of his own party, the Whigs.[47]

Eulau's critique also has a downside: it ignores what Burke got right. Eulau noted, with seeming frustration, that Burke's trustee/delegate dichotomy survived too long and is in need of replacement, not repair. This is true. But Burke's own approach points the way toward developing that replacement. Burke's single term as an elected MP leaves us with this core insight: the concept of representation may be usefully defined by engaging in its *practice*. This is a major challenge to the ideas that representation is defined, for example, through a list of assumptions, an imaginary state of nature, or metaphysics.[48] In attempting to define representation by doing it, Burke fell short. He did not develop an effective home style grounded in representative-represented interactions. Yet he pointed the way for political theorists to continue studying the concept. Burke triumphs by showing us that representatives define representation through their own engagement the concept, that is, by putting it into practice. He falls short in negotiating the nexus between who is representing, and who is being represented. Politicians and states-persons take note: *approaches* to representation must be thoroughly grounded in legislator-constituent interactions, or they will not succeed. For academics, it follows that *definitions* of representation are much more useful when they derive from empirical observation of those interactions.

## NOTES

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