A Radical Inquiry, Tamed: The Sebastopol Committee of 1855

Running through this special issue is the conviction that public inquiries are political. They are political at an individual level, in that their progenitors are typically elected politicians seeking to absolve themselves of blame for some scandal or disaster (Sulitzeneau-Kenan 2010, 614, Furtado 2023, Rangwala 2023). They are also political at a structural level, generally adopting a "problem-solving" mindset (Cox 1981) that, consciously or unconsciously, constructs, reinforces or restores the legitimacy of the state (Burgess 2011, Thomas 2017, Peplow 2023, Williams 2023) or of associated militarist (Richards 2023), imperialist (Drephal 2023) or elitist discourses (D. Saunders 2023).

My contribution – a case study of the Sebastopol Committee of 1855, Britain's first recognisably modern public inquiry into the use of military force abroad – engages these themes in two main ways. First, like the Russell Tribunal discussed by Drake (2023), the Sebastopol Committee happened because political outsiders attempted to appropriate the forms and customs of state-led (or at least insider-led) inquiries to pursue radical goals. Its author, chairman and chief spokesman, the veteran Radical MP John Arthur Roebuck, saw it as part of a broader assault on the aristocratic basis of mid-nineteenth century British government. The very idea that elected – *elected* – commoners might sit in judgement over their social superiors in government and the military challenged the prevailing order of things. Unlike the Russell Tribunal, however, the Sebastopol Committee was never entirely independent of the political establishment. Roebuck's decision that it should take the form of a House of Commons Select Committee had advantages, but also meant he lost control of its membership, and ultimately its conclusions. In this sense, this case is a cautionary tale.

Second, like the various Afghan inquiries discussed by Drephal (2023), the Sebastopol Committee offers historical lessons relevant in the present day. One reason why Drephal and I are outliers in this special issue, in our focus on nineteenth-century cases, is that the nature of public inquiry shifted in Britain in the run-up to World War Two. The "highly partisan" parliamentary investigation into the Marconi Affair of 1913 triggered a backlash (Beer 2011, 6); a new model of ostensibly apolitical inquiries, often led by judges, emerged in response (Burgess 2011, 3). Despite this, I still think earlier cases are worth studying. Like Baker (2017), reviewing Furneaux's (2016) study of masculinity during the Crimean conflict for this journal, I argue that reflecting on historical events can help us identify deeper themes that persist across periods.

Two such themes stand out here. First, however impartial their conduct may be, public inquiries emerge from and contribute to everyday partisan competition. They are, as Alex Danchev (2004, 437) put it, "a continuation of politics by other means". This was explicitly the case for the Sebastopol Committee, as we shall see. But I would argue that it is always a factor to some extent, and that studying an explicit case might help us understand later episodes when the party-political influences were less overt. Second, public inquiries operate within what we might call an "establishment" mindset; broadly sympathetic to the difficulties governments face, unwilling to damage the interests of the state, and constrained by normative beliefs and expectations shared with policymakers. One reason why the Sebastopol Committee was radical was that it challenged the prevailing aristocratic mode of governmentality. One reason why it achieved less than Roebuck hoped was that too many of its personnel held to essentially aristocratic norms – in particular, principles of 'responsibility' to the state and 'fairness' to individuals.

I begin by explaining what the Sebastopol Committee was, how it came about and how it worked, to enable the reader to situate themselves in the immediate historical context. I then discuss three sets of implications that I draw from analysing this specific case study. First, I show that immediate political calculations mattered more than the substantive issues at stake, both in terms of the fact the Committee happened in the first place, and of its ultimate impact. Second, I discuss how the Committee worked, and highlight how Roebuck's decision to clothe his radical mission in a long-established form undermined his goals. Finally, I argue that, despite Roebuck's disappointment, the Sebastopol Committee set new constitutional precedents that helped shape the terrain for future inquiries.

The Sebastopol Committee

The story of the Sebastopol Committee begins, as the stories of many subsequent inquiries would begin, with policy failure. In September 1854, British and French troops invaded Crimea, planning to destroy the naval base at Sebastopol and undermine Russian efforts to dominate the Ottoman Empire. Though early battles at the Alma, Balaklava and Inkerman broadly favoured the invaders, they failed to make a decisive breakthrough before winter. Scratching out makeshift siege-lines, the two armies soon faced dreadful weather with inadequate supplies. The British suffered more. Lacking fodder for their horses, who died in their hundreds, both artillery and cavalry effectively evaporated. Illness and exposure killed more infantrymen than the three preceding battles combined. Amidst devastating conditions, between November 1854 and January 1855 the fighting strength of the British army in Crimea fell by as much as three quarters.

Three factors combined to convert this battlefield disaster into a political scandal. The first factor was widespread public sympathy for the sufferings of the soldiers, and knowledge of the incompetence fuelling them. This sort of publicity, though familiar to later generations (Blachford 2022, 302), was a new phenomenon in 1855. Benefitting from the (recently invented) telegraph, and under-developed official censorship structures, enterprising newspaper editors despatched the first war correspondents to Crimea. Their reports testified directly to the campaign's mismanagement (Knightley 2003). Recognising their increasingly large readerships' desire for human-interest stories, newspapers also published extracts from ordinary soldiers' letters home. These not only revealed individual hardships but also undermined Wellington's famous claim that British fighting men were 'the scum of the earth'. These were thinking, feeling human beings worthy of pity and support, who were suffering unnecessarily. An outpouring of criticism followed, with editors and MPs alike inundated by complaints from ordinary people – a surge of discontent soon reflected in parliament.

The second factor was Roebuck's decision to propose a Select Committee in response. This was a self-consciously radical step. Though MPs had investigated military failures before, after Saratoga in 1777 and Walcheren in 1808, this would be their first inquiry into ongoing military operations. Roebuck wanted to assert parliament's power in an area of governmental activity defined by royal prerogative – the remnants of absolute monarchy (Joseph 2013). The very notion horrified constitutional traditionalists. But Roebuck's choice of a Select Committee was astute. MPs had delegated the investigation of specific policy questions to small groups of their own number since at least the Tudor period (Keir 1969, 142). Its focus may have been unusual, but the mechanism was not.

The third, decisive factor was the fact that a majority of MPs actually supported Roebuck's proposal. This was far from inevitable. Roebuck had called for such an inquiry before, pushing unsuccessfully for an investigation into the First Afghan War. This time around, he united a broad coalition of supporters driven by widely varying political motives, while Lord Aberdeen's Peelite-Whig coalition government disintegrated. This ensured the Crimean debacle reached the status of a scandal; having failed to block Roebuck's motion, the government resigned.

That a foreign policy scandal brought the Aberdeen government down was typical of this period (Brettle 2010). Mid-nineteenth century MPs were especially willing to challenge governments on questions of foreign policy (Richards 1967; Flinders 2002). In part this reflected the fact that a lot was happening abroad. British troops were engaged in almost constant skirmishes at the Empire's expanding borders. In part, too, it reflected the fact that domestic governments did much less then than they do today. There was no national education system, no National Health Service and no welfare state for MPs to discuss. Foreign policy was what the government did, for the most part.

This was also a time of political possibility and constitutional development; the liberal-bureaucratic state was gradually being born. Just a year before Roebuck condemned the aristocratic way of war, the Northcote-Trevelyan Report recommended reorganising the civil service as a meritocracy rather than a patronage network. Though Britain remained far from democratic, the Great Reform Act of 1832 reduced the aristocracy's power to influence the composition of the House of Commons, eliminating the approximately one third of seats controlled by wealthy patrons whose backing usually determined the makeup of governments. With political parties in their infancy, this left ministers without strong levers to corral their

supporters. Though they were able to sustain coherent voting blocs some of the time (Bylsma 1977), most governments depended on shifting, uncertain, unreliable factional constellations (Crick 1970, 20). Much depended on the individuals involved, and on their avoiding obvious disaster (Vincent 1981). Parliament was powerful, and difficult to control.

Between February and June 1855, eleven MPs sat in committee under Roebuck's chairmanship. During 39 hearing days they took detailed evidence from 63 witnesses – ministers, officials, eyewitnesses and soldiers – who between them answered 21,421 individually-numbered questions. They published four interim reports and detailed transcripts of each evidence session. Their final Report, published in June, gave a clear account of the Crimean campaign's shortcomings, and made several recommendations for improvements. In this sense, the Sebastopol Committee looked very much like later, comparable inquiries, and very different to earlier inquests into military operations.

When MPs debated the Sebastopol Report, in July, Roebuck pressed unsuccessfully for a censure motion against Aberdeen's successor, Viscount Palmerston. This time he found the House far less accommodating. Although some Tories and some Radicals supported Roebuck for a second time precisely because they wanted Palmerston out, the majority demurred. Too few MPs were willing to turn out a government over its predecessor's failures, no matter how many ministers served in both (Hansard 1855e, 1171). Though the Report detailed serious failures, it also blamed antiquated bureaucratic processes rather than individuals for the worst shortcomings. Since the Palmerston government had already done much to reform those processes, and conditions on the ground in Crimea had in fact improved (the end of winter helped), Roebuck was unable to reassemble his earlier coalition. The fact the Sebastopol

Committee happened in the first place wound up having much more of a political impact than anything it found.

Politics

The first general implication we can draw from this specific case is that inquiries can emerge from – and influence – everyday politics for reasons unrelated to their ostensible objects. Although the general pattern is that inquiries happen in response to specific criticism of the government's conduct in a particular policy area (cf. Rangwala 2023), that was not quite what happened in 1855. Roebuck's inquiry motion split the government, united the opposition, and thereby produced a temporary House of Commons majority in its favour. But the fact it did these things reflected ordinary partisan calculations more than it did a genuine sense among MPs that an inquiry was the proper response to conditions in Crimea. Had the government not been a coalition between Peelite and Whig factions; had the Whig leader, Lord John Russell, not chosen this moment to resign in the hope of regaining the premiership; and had the Tory party not believed it could use Roebuck to lever itself into power, the Sebastopol Committee would never have happened.

The first immediate political reason why the Sebastopol Committee happened was that the governing coalition – between Lord Aberdeen's Peelites and Lord John Russell's Whigs – was inherently unstable. Though the two factions later coalesced under Palmerston into the Liberal Party, contemporary observers considered their combination "strange" (Queen Victoria 1854), and an "experiment" dependent on the individuals involved (Queen Victoria 1855b; Gladstone 1855f). As ex-Tories who followed Sir Robert Peel into exile over free trade, the Peelites were historic rivals of the Whigs. All that held the two groupings together was a shared desire for

power and an uneasy partnership forged between Aberdeen, presiding as prime minister from the House of Lords, and Russell (a "lord" by courtesy as a younger son of the Duke of Bedford), representing the government in the Commons (Langford 2006). Because Aberdeen did not sit in the Commons – the real centre of political power whatever the ceremonial order of precedence – he had relatively little to do with the government's back-bench supporters. Because Russell had appointed half of the cabinet, Aberdeen had limited power over them (Aberdeen 1854b). The government was structurally flawed even before Roebuck.

The second reason was Russell's decision to resign rather than vote against Roebuck's motion, which effectively stripped the government of its majority (Briggs 1955, 67; Conacher 1968, 554; Bylsma 1977, 628-629). Characteristically (R. Saunders 2005), Russell's move reflected both personal ambition and deep conviction. Despite agreeing to support Aberdeen's coalition, he made no secret of his desire to return to the premiership, initially refusing to accept a subordinate office (Russell 1854c) and then repeatedly threatening to resign over minor matters (Russell 1854a; 1854b; 1854d). Though he was careful in writing to focus his criticism of the war effort on the Duke of Newcastle, Secretary of State for War, he apparently made his personal ambitions clear in conversation (Graham 1854). At Cabinet on 7 December, for example, Russell not only pushed for Palmerston to replace Newcastle at the War Office, but strongly intimated that he himself should resume the premiership (Aberdeen 1854f). Palmerston complained to Foreign Secretary Clarendon (1854b) that Russell was using him as a "wedge" to break up the coalition for his own benefit. Palmerston (1855a) himself accused Russell of letting ambition cloud his judgement.

Ambitious though he was, Russell's decision to resign over this specific issue reflected genuine doubts about the government's approach – it was a political move, but it was not *only* a political

move. In letters to Aberdeen in November, and in a long memo to Cabinet at the end of December, he laid out a range of serious practical concerns (Russell 1854f; 1854g). In his resignation speech he told the House that he could not vote against Roebuck's motion because he agreed that the government was failing, and because he felt his efforts to do something about it from within had been ignored (Hansard 1855a, 960-974). These public statements echoed what he had said in private for months.

The third reason was that the government remained in office to face Roebuck's motion despite knowing that Russell's resignation meant it was doomed. Had Queen Victoria (1855a) not intervened strongly, the rest of the ministry would have stood down rather than lose the vote (Gladstone 1855a). This was significant. Had the government resigned immediately, there would (probably) have been no inquiry. Moreover, Roebuck could only have succeeded in the immediate aftermath of Russell's resignation. A relatively small number of MPs (mostly Roebuck's fellow Radicals) genuinely considered an inquiry a good idea. A larger group (mostly Tories supporting Derby and Disraeli, plus some Russellite Whigs) saw Roebuck's motion as a tool to overturn a tottering ministry and get their own faction into power. Several of those who spoke in the debate highlighted this conjunction. Richard Milnes claimed that "if the Motion was dissevered from its political character as a vote of want of confidence in the Government, not twenty men would be found to vote for it" (Hansard 1855a, 1018). Lord Granby did not see how an inquiry could possibly work, but felt it was "impossible to give a vote of confidence in the Government" (Hansard 1855a, 1019). Tory members cheered when Sir George Grey accused them of planning to reverse Roebuck's motion once their party was in power (Hansard 1855a, 1039-1040). This was a highly partisan vote.

Things could easily have been different. Had the government held together, or had the opposition failed to coalesce, the motion would not have passed and there would have been no inquiry. Had the Queen not persuaded the government to stay in office after Russell's resignation, there could never have been a vote. Russell might not have resigned; he had made and withdrawn the threat before. He might have been placated – if not indefinitely, at least for long enough for conditions to improve on the ground. Far from there being a general swell of support for a Select Committee, Roebuck's motion passed because Tory MPs wanted to throw Aberdeen out, while most Whigs followed Lord John Russell in abstaining in the hope that he would benefit. This was a political inquiry in the purest sense; for most of its supporters, its purpose was to help their party win power.

Form

The second general implication of this specific case is that the form an inquiry takes both reflects its immediate political circumstances and prefigures its political impact. Roebuck gained two advantages from his decision to use a House of Commons Select Committee for his inquiry. First, Select Committees had power. They could demand testimony, hold hearings, publish their findings and make recommendations. No government could avoid their scrutiny. Second, Select Committees had legitimacy. MPs were familiar with the model, although its use to investigate an active military operation was new. Roebuck could present what he was doing as 'business as usual'.

There is, however, a fundamental contradiction between the official form of a public inquiry and Roebuck's radical objectives (Salter 1989, 174). Though the Russell Tribunal mirrored the aesthetics of the Nuremberg Trials, it was conceived as a protest and remained independent of

any state (Drake 2023). By actually using a Select Committee, rather than just mimicking one, Roebuck surrendered control, most obviously over personnel. Having planned mainly to appoint Radicals like himself, he realised during February that, if he did so, MPs might decline to approve the actual appointment of the Select Committee – a distinct process from the decision in principle already made. During the debate on Roebuck's motion, Palmerston hoped "that the dissensions which prevail may be confined to the overthrowing of the Government" (Hansard 1855b, 1224-1225) rather than continuing through several months of inquiry hearings. With the government overthrown, and Palmerston in power, Roebuck was right to be concerned.

Palmerston, however, decided not to try to reverse Roebuck's motion directly. Gladstone (1855b) recorded that, at first, Palmerston "was of opinion that [the appointment] should be resisted", telling the Cabinet on 8 February that he thought the House would accept a Commission of Inquiry under the Crown instead (Gladstone 1855c). As a tool of the executive rather than the legislature, such a Commission would be able to shield witnesses (and their evidence) from publicity, and to implement changes without generating political opprobrium or singling out individuals for blame. Palmerston's (1855b) own report of that Cabinet, however, is more sanguine; he told Victoria that he thought Roebuck's plan ought to be resisted, but that doing so effectually would be hard given the political forces ranged behind it. Palmerston effectively did what Sulizteneau-Kenan (2010, 614) tells us leaders often do; he accepted the short-term cost associated with conceding that there should be an inquiry, in the hope of longer-term benefits if it produced favourable results.

On 18 February the Cabinet split on the issue; Gladstone and his fellow Peelites insisted that Palmerston should either block the Committee or resign (Queen Victoria 1855c). Palmerston

thought this proposal "ridiculous" given the context in which his government was formed (Queen Victoria 1855d; Palmerston 1855c). At Cabinet on 21 February, Sir James Graham admitted he had expected that Palmerston's appointment would persuade the House to reverse course, while Gladstone insisted that the fact that MPs still wanted an inquiry meant they lacked confidence in the new government too (Gladstone 1855e). Palmerston held his ground, and Graham, Gladstone and Sidney Herbert – the three leading Peelites in the government following Aberdeen's departure – resigned. Palmerston narrowly averted disaster by persuading Russell back into office, restoring Whig support.

The Whigs greatly outnumbered the Peelites in the House of Commons, and the Peelites were in any event unlikely to vote with the Tories against the government. That meant Palmerston was secure in power, but unsure of his ability to block Roebuck – especially given Russell's stated view that an inquiry was necessary. Roebuck, equally, knew he could probably still get his inquiry despite the doubts of many of those who voted for his motion, provided he cut a deal on personnel that made it look less radical. The two men consequently agreed that Roebuck and Disraeli should nominate five committee members, while Palmerston and Russell chose the other five. Roebuck himself would serve as the committee's eleventh member and chair (Hansard 1855c, 2062-2063).

And so the Sebastopol Committee, despite its radical origins, initially comprised four Tories, two Whigs, one Peelite, two Independents and just two Radical members – Roebuck, and Richard Layard. When one of the Independents, the Irish MP John Ball, joined the government in April 1855, a fifth Tory – John Gladstone, brother of William – took his place. In its final form, the Sebastopol Committee included seven MPs who voted for Roebuck's motion, three who voted against it, and one (the Peelite John Hanmer) who abstained. Four of the seven "yes"

voters were Tories likely motivated more by a desire to turn out Aberdeen than by a commitment to parliamentary oversight of government (a distinctly un-Tory notion). Three of them (Thomas Bramston, John Gladstone and James Lindsay) subsequently voted against Roebuck's censure motion against Palmerston, even though success might have heralded a Tory government. Three committee members – Gladstone, Lindsay and Jonathan Peel – had served in the military. Three – Edward Seymour, John Pakington and Edward Ellice – had been ministers, the latter two at the War Office. Two – Gladstone and Peel – had more famous elder brothers closely associated with Aberdeen. Roebuck was an outsider; the bulk of his committee were not.

Very much like a post-1979 Select Committee, then, the Sebastopol Committee brought together parliamentarians from across the political spectrum, with different expertise, and different philosophical views. This helped make its findings more authoritative. It also meant that they were unlikely to be too radical. Palmerston's success in influencing the Committee's composition pointed to what would later become a theme of such exercises. As Elliott and McGuinness (2002, 17) put it, in an ideal world "government does not seek to interfere with the [inquiry] process itself, but simply appoints someone who will not need to be interfered with" (see also Peplow 2023). Albeit via a roundabout route, that was what happened here.

The final Sebastopol Report largely substantiated the key criticisms raised in January 1855. The army had indeed been decimated because of poor logistics. Confirming this publicly mattered. Publicity is a critical tool for holding "incompetent or ill-intentioned" governments to account (Thomas 2020, 79; see also Finn 2021, 336). It also helps fulfil what Williams (2023) calls "a duty of candour" to those who have suffered from official mismanagement or wrongdoing. But Roebuck had promised, and wanted, more. After all, MPs expressed "no

doubt" that the Crimean campaign was a disaster *before* they approved the Committee (Hansard 1855b, 1153). Roebuck wanted culprits, and individual punishment, as a precursor to wider reform.

Here the composition of the Committee intervened. Roebuck's colleagues did not share his commitment to identifying wrongdoers, let alone to constitutional reform. Nor were they as blasé as he about the risks their inquiry posed to the ongoing military campaign. Worried about disrupting military operations, they avoided topics that might embarrass Britain's French allies, including the crucial question of whether French troops had survived the winter better because the British were doing all the work. They also declined to summon serving officers home to give evidence – unlike the Russell Tribunal a century later (Drake 2023), participant testimony would not play a major role in the Sebastopol Committee's work. Unwilling to censure individuals unfairly, they decided they could not criticize anyone who had not had the chance to explain and justify his conduct in person, and then further decided that they could not criticize anyone else since that might imply that the men on the ground were entirely innocent.

In this, the Sebastopol Committee looked a little different to later inquiries, which have tended to blame individuals in ways that exonerate the system (Elliott and McGuinness 2002, Coole 2005, Thomas 2017), though its convenient use of 'fairness' as an excuse sounds more familiar (Peplow 2023; Williams 2023). This distinction should not be taken too far, however. The aristocratic system that Roebuck sought to overturn was based on individuals – individual responsibility, individual initiative, individual connections and individual honour. Concluding that the aristocrats responsible were not at fault, but simply needed to update their processes, was tantamount to finding that the aristocratic system itself did not need reform. Finally, given both parliament and public supported it wholeheartedly at the time, the Committee concluded

it would be wrong to attack the original decision to invest Sebastopol – the one decision in which Palmerston, who as Home Secretary had otherwise taken a back seat, had a hand (Hansard 1855d, 966; 986). Self-restraint limited the Committee's critical bite, in sum.

The resulting report was much milder than Roebuck wanted. On 6 June, the Committee voted to base their conclusions on Seymour's draft, rather than Roebuck's more critical version (Sebastopol Committee 1855, 52). On 18 June, Roebuck tried to re-introduce a section from his draft directly blaming Lord Raglan, the military commander in Crimea, for key failures. Only Layard supported him (Sebastopol Committee, 1855, 36). He had to use his casting vote to include the vague statement that "the sufferings of the army resulted mainly from the circumstances in which the expedition to the Crimea was undertaken and executed" (Sebastopol Committee 1855, 22). Even this bland line went too far for five committee members, and it stopped far short of questioning the strategy or ascribing blame.

Raglan died on 28 June, sparing him criticism when the House debated the Sebastopol Report on 17 and 19 July. He probably was more directly culpable than any other individual, failing repeatedly to tell London of the severity of conditions in Crimea. Both Newcastle and Aberdeen told the Committee (1855, 6) that it would have been dishonourable to act on information they received from private communications and the press absent official confirmation from Raglan. Aberdeen (1854g) complained at the time to the Queen about the lack of detail in Raglan's despatches. Newcastle (1854b; 1854c; 1855) wrote repeatedly, and fruitlessly, demanding more information. Communications were already difficult, due to the distances involved. At one point during September 1854 the government spent a week under the mistaken impression that Sebastopol had already fallen. Newcastle (1854a) and Aberdeen (1854c) celebrated prematurely, though Russell (1854e) and Palmerston (1854a) were more circumspect.

Clarendon (1854a) complained that “the non-arrival of real information is enough to drive one mad”. The six committee members who had served in the military or as ministers likely sympathised.

Both Aberdeen and Newcastle could have been criticised further. Aberdeen (1854a; 1855), for example, admitted that he lacked enthusiasm for war, and lamented his own lack of “energy and vigour”, though he nevertheless blamed Russell’s “treachery and deceit” for his eventual downfall. His greatest shortcoming, however, was an unwillingness – borne of an aristocratic sense of honour – to take decisive action against failing subordinates, epitomised by his paralysis in the face of Raglan’s poor communication. Believing it ungentlemanly to dismiss someone merely for under-performance, he defended Admiral Dundas to Newcastle (Aberdeen 1854d) and Newcastle to Russell (Aberdeen 1854e) even though he considered neither man up to his task.

The final Report offered more detail but no real new information beyond what was available when Aberdeen and Newcastle fell from office (Hansard 1855d, 985) – and they had already been convicted and punished. The Committee’s decision not to demand evidence from commanders in the field, or to criticize France, further lessened its impact. Though many MPs considered its findings interesting and important, several maintained that it would be unfair to condemn individuals on the basis of an incomplete report (Hansard 1855d, 982; 998; 1013; 1017; 1855e, 1061; 1135). Though Pakington denied the report “was incomplete as regards the question to which it applied” (Hansard 1855d, 1007), the criticism stuck.

Two further factors blunted the Report’s impact. First, Aberdeen and Newcastle had begun to address the main issues it identified before they lost office. Within days of Roebuck’s victory,

one of Newcastle's correspondents in Crimea reported "improvement on many most important points" (Ward 1855). Second, the new government adopted and built upon these reforms. By July, Palmerston could report – without fear of contradiction – that "the army now is in as fine a condition as any army which ever existed" (Hansard 1855e, 1172). Given the Committee's decision to focus, in effect, on what officials and ministers thought went wrong in Crimea, it was perhaps inevitable that its report echoed the government's own assessments. This meant not only that most of its recommendations were already in hand, but that supporters of the government welcomed and even praised its findings (Hansard 1855e, 1152; 1162). Hardly the hammer-blow against the system that Roebuck sought.

Again, this outcome would become more familiar in subsequent inquiries. The Sebastopol Report was "hegemonically successful" in Brown's (2003, 96) terms, in that it was "wholly or largely uncritically accepted as providing a comprehensive and accurate account… seen to be fair in its assessment of culpability and the allocation of blame, and…[made] seemingly appropriate recommendations". Although it did offer potentially useful 'lessons learned' (Stark 2019, 397), the main reason it gained such wide approval was because it broadly vindicated the status quo (Sulitzeneau-Kenan 2006, 623). Roebuck erred in failing to anticipate how he would lose control of the process once the Committee began its work (Stark and Yates 2021, 346). Blinded by his initial success in January, he underestimated Palmerston's strength – both in February and July. Roebuck may have been radical, but his inquiry was not. It took an established form, consisted predominantly of members with backgrounds in government or the military, and gathered most of its evidence from current and former ministers and officials. As a result, it showed a strong commitment to principles that weakened its radical potential, namely 'responsibility' – defined as not risking undermining the war effort – and 'fairness' –

defined as not criticizing any individual without overwhelming evidence of personal culpability, a threshold that proved extremely high. Lord Aberdeen would have approved.

Precedent

The third general implication of this specific case is that new constitutional precedents around inquiries can emerge unexpectedly from routine political contestation. For all its shortcomings from a Radical perspective, the Sebastopol Committee nevertheless established that MPs could legitimately investigate ongoing military operations, and that such investigations need not disrupt the country's ability to wage war – the two key arguments levied against Roebuck's motion in debate. Precedents carry real weight in Britain's "political" constitution (Griffith 1979). Even a single precedent, backed by reason and political consensus, can change the conventions governing how power is used (Jennings 1959; Marshall 1984; Lagassé 2019); the fact that something happens proves that it *can* happen (Keir 1969, 154; Seaward 2003, 98; Strong 2022, 403). This is especially true in times of constitutional "softening", when crisis conditions and changing societal norms combine to make the case for unprecedented action (Barry, Miragliotta and Nwokora 2019, 667). This was what happened in 1855; MPs did something unprecedented, thereby establishing that future generations could legitimately do the same.

Roebuck was not alone in demanding greater parliamentary influence over the executive during the mid-nineteenth century. Against a backdrop of growing industrial wealth, an expanding middle class, and the changes brought about in the composition of the House of Commons by the first Reform Act, MPs increasingly challenged the aristocratic traditions of British government (Greenaway 1985, 160-161). Ministers were obliged to answer questions and

publish information in the House of Commons to an unprecedented degree. Most governments fell between rather than at elections, having lost their majority (Taylor 1957, 42; Langford 2006, 393-394).

Russell's resignation both transformed the situation at Sebastopol into a political crisis and helped catalyse the constitutional shift, already under way, toward greater ministerial accountability to the House of Commons in times of war. Aberdeen fell in part because, as a peer, he could not defend himself directly; Palmerston fared better because, as an MP (his Irish peerage neither qualifying him for the Lords nor excluding him from the Commons), he could. Though other Prime Ministers would sit in the Lords in future, this moment was one of several that underlined how hard it was to make that setup work. That was the constitutional direction of travel, and the new precedent set by the Sebastopol Committee added to it.

To underline the point that what happened in 1855 was both novel and constitutionally significant, we need only look to the arguments made in debate. Though Roebuck himself deprecated "purely technical" constitutional objections to what he proposed (Hansard 1855b, 1229), and Disraeli called it "perfectly constitutional" (Hansard 1855b, 1209), many of his supporters were more circumspect, recognising the risk of setting a precedent, but concluding that the situation in Crimea demanded action (Hansard 1855a, 1025; 1855b, 1167-1168). This was a crisis, and its nature as a crisis required innovation, exactly as Barry, Miragliotta and Nwokora (2019) suggest. Neither the precedents of Walcheren nor of Saratoga applied. The Walcheren inquiry happened after the expedition concluded, while the debates on Saratoga took place because their chief protagonists – Admiral Howe and General Burgoyne – were themselves members of the House. What happened in 1855 was new (Hansard 1855b, 1165, 1224-1225).

As the Peelite ministers' resignation from Palmerston's government made clear, (small "c") conservative parliamentarians saw the Sebastopol Committee's existence as more of a threat to effective government than anything it might uncover. As Herbert put it, they thought that Roebuck sought illegitimately to disrupt the cherished balance of power between crown and legislature established during the seventeenth century (Hansard 1855a, 1001). Even before Roebuck's motion, Gladstone (1854) asserted that "the business of the House of Commons is not to do, or to re-do, the business of the Executive", and that inquiries into ongoing government actions crossed over into that realm. On 29 January he accused Roebuck of inducing the House into "violating the laws which fix its place in the constitution" (Hansard 1855b, 1200-1202). Whatever practical challenges might ensue from a second government collapsing within three weeks, Gladstone (1855d) believed Palmerston's cabinet should fall rather than tolerate such a dangerous precedent.

Neither the Sebastopol Committee's supporters, nor its opponents, got its constitutional significance right. It *did* establish a precedent, one that for example influenced debates around the Dardanelles and Mesopotamia inquiries during the First World War, which likewise commenced while operations were ongoing (see Hankey 1916). It also helped further undermine the aristocratic model of government, not least by laying bare the shortcomings of a system based on social hierarchy and gentlemanly honour over one focused on getting things done. As an essentially technocratic exercise – aimed at 'fact finding' – its very existence reinforced this shift. At the same time, however, the Sebastopol Committee clearly *did not* destroy the prerogatives of the Crown in matters of military action, which remain in place today (Joseph 2013, Strong 2018). Gladstone may have been right to argue that inquiries draw

legislators into policy questions normally reserved to the executive, but he was wrong to suggest that this inevitably circumscribed executive power.

Conclusions

The House of Commons' decision to establish the Sebastopol Committee of 1855 had much more of a political impact – both immediate and lasting – than the Committee's eventual Report. It overthrew the Aberdeen government. Even in the chaotic 1850s, overthrowing a government was a big deal. It established the principle that MPs could legitimately inquire into ongoing military operations, an area of government activity previously considered beyond parliamentary purview. Later inquiries, from the Dardanelles to Butler, owed something to Roebuck in this regard. Yet its actual findings lacked bite. It did not convict individuals of causing the army's sufferings. Nor did it immediately revolutionize parliamentary oversight of war, or trigger a further censure of the ministry. Roebuck was understandably frustrated by this result.

The most interesting thing about the Sebastopol Committee in the context of the wider literature on the politics of inquiries is the fact that its substantive subject matter proved less important than the partisan manoeuvres that shaped its inception, form and reception. Unlike its successors, the Sebastopol Committee did not claim to be a neutral exercise aimed at finding 'the truth'. This, I argue, made it more honest. It was *explicitly* a political device, supported by different factions for their own specific motives, whose impact (or lack thereof) derived entirely from the peculiar composition of its coalition of support, and its constitutional context. It happened because it divided the ministry and united the opposition at a critical moment,

triggering the Aberdeen government's downfall. It failed to have more of an impact because, by the time its Report came out, the political situation had moved on.

More familiarly, the case of the Sebastopol Committee reminds us that public inquiries rarely deliver radical conclusions, whatever forces originally motivated them. Roebuck gained power and authority by adopting the familiar form of a Select Committee for his inquiry. He lost control, having to compromise on the question of personnel. Because it included MPs from every parliamentary faction, and a majority who had served in government or the military, the Sebastopol Committee appeared authoritative and impartial. It was also sympathetic to government, and ill-disposed toward Roebuck's ultimate goal of remaking the entire political system.

Finally, it shows us that truth-seeking need not be the main political purpose – or consequence – of an inquiry. The Sebastopol Committee was a tool for changing the government and challenging the constitutional order more than it was an exercise in 'finding out what happened'. It achieved a lot, by that standard, despite disappointing its progenitor. It lent authority to the various informal reports of official mismanagement emanating from the battlefield, not so much 'identifying' facts as 'establishing' them, rendering them part of an established, official narrative. We might call this 'truth-making', the practice of reifying and depoliticising criticism of the government, transforming it from an attack from the outside into common-sense 'lessons learned'. Though this blunts the criticism, it normalises it too. Perhaps that is the best we can expect from inquiries as liberal-bureaucratic, political-administrative tools – whether in the mid-nineteenth century, or the twenty-first.

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