

A Non-Euclidian System? Party, Faction, and the Common Good in Early Modern Parliaments: Poland-Lithuania and the British-Irish Isles.



Centre for Polish-Lithuanian Studies,

Research Institute for Irish and Scottish Studies

Centre for Early Modern Studies

**Linklater Rooms
University of Aberdeen**

18 April 2026

The Symposium

Lord, protect us, that we may not be torn apart by factions, and that we may not see our fatherland torn apart. (Michał Obuchowicz, 1664).

In the preface to the second edition of his classic work *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, Sir Lewis Namier wrote:

There were no proper party organisations about 1760, though party names and cant were current; the names and the cant have since supplied the materials for an imaginary superstructure. A system of non-Euclidian geometry can be built up by taking a curve for basis instead of the straight line, but it is not easy for our minds to think consistently in unwonted terms; Parliamentary politics not based on parties are to us a non-Euclidian system, and similarly require a fundamental readjustment of ideas, and, what is more, of mental habits.

In the book, Namier analysed with forensic skill his non-Euclidian system, famously dismissing ideas as ‘flapdoodle’, and concentrating on the types who entered politics, the electoral structure of England, government patronage, and private patronage. He transformed writing about English and British politics, and although historians have reacted against Namierite interpretations, not least the rejection of the force of ideas in politics, Namier’s suggestion that historians have constructed an imaginary superstructure within which they interpret early modern parliaments is still relevant, not least because the terms ‘faction’ and ‘party’ were often used pejoratively: factions and parties were seen during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in negative terms, as putting private or sectional interests before the common good, the *bonum commune*.

This symposium looks at this issue through a comparison of the parliaments of the British Isles and of the Polish-Lithuanian republic. These are the only two political systems that united their parliaments in this period: in 1569 for Poland and Lithuania; in 1707 for England and Scotland, and in 1801 for Great Britain and Ireland. Namier was, of course, a Pole. He was a great admirer of the British political system, but not of the early modern Polish-Lithuanian republic; indeed his suspicion of the role of ideas in politics may have derived from his historical education in partitioned Poland: Polish historians have long viewed the politics of the republic in Namierite terms, stressing the role of patronage and faction in politics, and conceptualising politics round the notion of parties: a regalist party devoted to strengthening the monarchy, and an opposition party that reflected the settled view of the noble citizens. Antoni Mączak and his students have presented Polish-Lithuanian politics as dominated by faction and clientage, while in England and then Britain, the emergence of the Whigs and Tories from the late seventeenth century seems to herald the emergence of political modernity, through the appearance of parties with some attributes of modern political parties. Is Namier right, however, and are historians continuing to apply a Euclidian superstructure of interpretation to a non-Euclidian system? Do historians of parliamentary culture need to readjust their mental habits? This symposium will explore these questions in a comparative framework.

Saturday 18 April 2026

Linklater Rooms

Session 1: 9:30–11:00

Welcome: Robert Frost

Keynote Lecture

Chair: Robert Frost

David Hayton
(Queens Belfast)

'The first age of party' in Britain and Ireland: names, structures, systems and polarities.

11:00–11:30. Coffee

Session 2: 11:30–13:00

Chair: Michael Brown

Laura Stewart
(York)

'If the Scots had not come in where had the liberty been?' Publicising partisan politics during the English civil war.

Paul Seaward
(History of Parliament)

'Contrivers, Sticklers and I-and-No men': The organization of parliamentary politics in seventeenth century England.

13:00–14:00

Lunch

Session 3: 14:00–16:00

Chair: Paul Seaward

Karol Żojdź
(Warsaw)

Power, Patronage, and Representation: the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's Envoys to the Sejm in the Age of Sigismund III (1587–1632)

Robert Frost
(Aberdeen)

Faction, Party, and Zebrzydowski's Rokosz (1606–1609)

Karin Friedrich
(Aberdeen)

'Your Excellency's obedient servant': insights into the structure and functioning of the patronage network of Bogusław Radziwiłł (1620–1669).

16:00–16:30

Coffee

16:30 –17:30: Session 4

General Discussion

Discussants: Michael Brown, Brad Bow (Aberdeen),

Microsoft Teams meeting

Join: <https://teams.microsoft.com/meet/399185736746695?p=K2pSDBY82mVtsCtcdF>

Meeting ID: 399 185 736 746 695

Passcode: x3DS9f29