

A Contested Parliamentary Election of 1461

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'IT IS RIGHT necessary that my Lord have at this time in the Parliament suche persons as longe unto him and be of his menyall servaunts.'¹

This was written by the Duchess of Norfolk to urge the election to Parliament of the young John Howard in 1455. The recipient, John Paston, can hardly have been pleased as he was hoping to be elected himself. Influence was often used in Parliamentary elections; the King expected his lords to ensure that their followers were elected, especially on important occasions. For the attainder of the Duke of Clarence in 1478 a great deal of influence was used and about twenty per cent of the house was closely connected with the central government.²

It is possible that such pressures were being brought to bear six years later in 1461 when John Howard, now Sheriff of Norfolk and in great favour with the King had to supervise the election of two knights to represent the county of Norfolk in Parliament and had the utmost difficulty in doing so. Were local people unwilling to elect 'King's men' to Parliament or was John Paston even more determined this time to get himself elected seeing this as the next rung on his family's climb up the ladder of fortune? The returns are incomplete for this year so it is difficult to be certain how much influence Edward was able to exert over elections to his first parliament but it is more probable that the root of the trouble lay in the long standing rivalry which existed between Paston and Howard. Howard had very nearly lost the election in 1455 because Paston stirred up so much opposition to him that the Duke of Norfolk withdrew his support. One of Paston's men wrote to him at the time that 'Howard was as wode as a wilde bullok.'³ Neither man can have forgotten this episode so dislike and mistrust were probably mutual.

John Howard however does not seem to have been expecting trouble. This may be seen in his own account of what occurred written, presumably at the King's request, to report on the events of the summer of 1461 and to explain his failure to elect the Parliamentary knights.⁴ He first sent his deputy, William Prys, to the Shire House in Norwich to supervise the election but when this unfortunate man read the Proclamation saying that voting was limited to men of substance and forty shilling freeholders,⁵ a certain John Berney shouted 'You Deputy Sheriff say something different than exists in the law of England because any man here is suitable at this time and will have his free choice in electing the knights of the county.' John Howard tells us what happened next in, more or less, his own words.⁶ 'At this there was uproar in the Shire House with some shouting for William Chamberlayne and Henry Grey and others for John Paston and John Berney. When my Deputy tried to find out who was of sufficient standing he found that most of those shouting for Paston and Berney were either unknown in the county or else of an inferior position and having no business to be concerned in an election of this kind. Moreover they came armed in an hostile fashion and accompanied by a band of about fifty other

armed men with whom they had terrorised the county for about two weeks beforehand. These ruffians made such threats against my Deputy that, with the help of three knights—Wingfield, Southwell and Debenham, he escaped from Norwich and fled to the other side of the county. When they realised he had escaped Berney and his gang rode off to look for him shouting that they would kill him. He, in great fear for his life, remained hidden on the other side of the county unable to carry out any of his customary duties for sometime.

'A second election writ duly followed and I, in person, read the two writs to meeting of the whole county and I also caused it to be proclaimed abroad that all men who were forty shilling freeholders and any others of sufficient financial standing who were present on the day might have free choice for the parliamentary knights.' I also made it clear that the election would be held as laid down by law.'

The election seems to have started peacefully enough with John Paston addressing those eligible to vote, i.e. nobles, men of standing and the aforementioned forty shilling freeholders. Presumably the other candidates for the seats also made speeches and, it appears, were more successful for most of those present nominated William Chamberlayn and Henry Grey to be the county's representatives. When he realised that things were not going his way Paston went outside and sitting astride his horse proclaimed that any man there was entitled to choose the parliamentary knights. According to Howard's account there were about a thousand people outside all armed and nearly all ineligible to vote. On hearing Paston's pronouncement they shouted 'This is a good proclamation, this is a good law!' and shouted even louder for Paston and Berney to be elected. Paston returned inside with about twenty men and while he was being asked to explain his actions the crowd outside broke down the doors, forced their way in and said to Howard and the other landowners 'Ye shall none other knyghts chese here this day but oure Maisters John Paston and John Berney' and made threats against their lives. Dust was thrown into the faces of those who did not support them. Howard, in an attempt to regain control of the situation, told everyone to go to the Castle Yard where there was more room. Once there he attempted to establish exactly who was eligible to vote by examining them in turn. The crowd, however, would have none of it. 'Nay Pleynly Shirif ye shall trie no sufficiente here for every man shall have his election and gif his voyce as oure Maister Paston hath made his crie and so shall ye shiriff make youre retourne and ellys ye shall dy for it!' They then seized the unfortunate lawyer's clerk and forced him to write down that Paston and Berney had been elected. Howard held out against them for four hours refusing to put his seal to the document but eventually had to give in, convinced that it was the only way to get out of their hands alive. Seeing the document duly sealed most of the crowd departed. Paston and Berney, satisfied that they had finally got their way, now demanded that Howard should issue a proclamation announcing their election and informing people that anyone who wanted any business raised at the next parliament should come to them. Howard, however, still had some fight left in him and bravely answered that he would first explain everything that had been done that day to the King and the King's Council. On hearing this Paston, fuming with rage, attempted to call back his supporters but Howard managed to escape through a hail of stones and insults. Nor was this the end of the matter for these armed gangs

roamed the countryside for many days saying they would kill the Sheriff and the landowners if they did not give in to their demands. They threatened to hold the county by force until the first day of the new parliament so preventing John Howard from holding another election.

John Howard's account ends at this point but we do know a little more about what followed from the Paston Letters. Howard hastened to London to report on what had happened to the King and to explain his failure to hold the election. Edward, perhaps suspecting that there was another side to the story, sent for Paston who foolishly ignored the summons. This was a dangerous game to play; Edward, still in the first year of his reign, could not afford to have his authority flouted in this way and Paston's brother, Clement, wrote him a very worried letter from London in which he reports in detail what Edward said—'We have sent two privy seals to Paston by two yeomen of our chamber, and he disobeyeth them; but we will send him anoder to-morrowe, and by Gods mercye, and if he come not then he sall dye for it. We will make all oder men beware by him how they sall disobey our writinge. A servant of our hath made a complainte of him. I cannot thinke that he hath informed us all truely, yet not for that, we will not suffer him to disobey our writinge; but sithen he disobeyeth our writinge, we may beleve the better his gydinge is as we be informed.' Clement also advises his brother to 'come right strong, for Howard's wife made her bost that if any of her husband's men might come to yow thur yulde goe noe penny for your life; and Howard hath with the Kynge a great fellowship.'

Paston came to London in the end and was committed for a time to the Fleet prison. However, his wife soon seems to have had news of his release and of Howard's committal to prison 'for divers gret compleyns that were made to the Kyng of hym!'⁸ Whether this was true or not Howard certainly does not seem to have been out of favour for long for within two months he was made Constable of Norwich Castle and granted extensive lands forfeited by the Earl of Ormond.⁹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. James Gairdner (Ed.), *The Paston Letters*, Westminster (1900). Vol. 1, p.337 letter 244. A 'menyall' servant was someone attached to a household.
2. Charles Ross, *Edward IV*, London (1974), p.343; A. R. Myers, *England in the Late Middle Ages*. London (1952), p.122.
3. G. Brennan and E. P. Statham, *The House of Howard*, Vol. 1, London (1907); *Paston Letters*, Vol. 1, p.340, letters 249 and 250.
4. For all of Howard's account see C. H. Williams A Norfolk Parliamentary Election 1461, *English Historical Review*, Vol. 40. Translated for me from the Latin by Miss M. Chinnery, whom I wish to thank. The parts where Paston's men are speaking are in English and these I have quoted verbatim.
5. This limitation of the franchise had been passed in 1430, see Myers *op. cit.*
6. Williams (from the Latin).
7. *Paston Letters*, Vol. 2, p.53, letter 417; p.61, letter 421.
8. James Dallaway, *A History of the Western Division of the County of Sussex, etc.*, Vol. 2, Part 2, London (1832); *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, Vol. 5, (London) (1783), p.527.
9. *Calendar Patent Rolls 1461-7*, H.M.S.O. (1897), pp.111, 187; *Calendar Close Rolls 1461-8*, H.M.S.O. (1949), p.114.