Parliamentary Security Politics as Politicisation by Volume

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Abstract: The assumption that the policy area of security has depoliticising effects has diverted attention from the diverse ways in which parliamentarians are increasingly active on security. This development represents a shift away from the traditional executive-dominated security state and a challenge to security theories that assume security to be characterised by depoliticisation in the form of democratic marginalisation. The security literature assumes parliaments to be at worst irrelevant and at best a variable affecting the decisions of states, governments, and leaders. Analysing the work of UK parliamentary committees from the 1980s to the present, this article presents an original understanding of politicisation that subverts this view. This is politicisation by volume – increased amounts of parliamentary activity – in contrast to the more usually understood qualitative forms of politicisation such as increased polarisation, controversy or contestation (although the different forms of politicisation are not mutually exclusive). The article finds that parliamentary committee activity on security has increased from a base of almost nothing in the 1980s and before to regular and broad engagement in the present.

Keywords: Politicisation, security, parliaments, committees, arena-shifting, UK

Introduction

Although controversies and episodes of intense contestation are important points of punctuation in security politics, general increases in parliamentary activity on security may be more revealing of changes in security politics over time. As the English constitutional commentator Walter Bagehot once wrote, ‘we may easily miss the permanent course of the political curve if we engross our minds with its cusps and conjugate points’. The article makes the case for a novel understanding of politicisation based on volume of activity, rather than more qualitative measures such as controversy. Politicisation by volume and qualitative forms of politicisation are not mutually exclusive; for example, controversies may of course generate increased political activity, and increased political activity may include the substantive contestation of policy. However, the concept of politicisation by volume captures

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the significance of increases in more routine forms of political activity that are not necessarily controversial or polarising.

This is a particularly important move in security studies, which as a discipline is used to dealing with security as a depoliticising ‘exception’ to normal politics rather than as an area of ‘normal’ political activity. It is also significant in the context of security policy and practice, from which – historically – parliaments were excluded in favour of executive prerogative and secrecy. While qualitative forms of politicisation may be seen, for example, in episodes of parliamentary struggle over war powers, intelligence scandals or draconian anti-terrorism legislation, in contrast, politicisation by volume often stems from a general increase in routine parliamentary activity, where greater numbers of debates, inquiries, votes and so on indicate increased ‘politicisation’ of an issue, whether controversial or not. This focus on parliamentary security politics simultaneously addresses a recognised gap in the literature: as recently as 2016 Julie Kaarbo and Daniel Kenealy stated that ‘there is little systematic research on parliaments’ role in security policy because it is assumed that parliaments are unimportant’. This is now beginning to change. For example, James Strong has examined how the UK has been developing a constitutional norm of parliamentary votes on military action. This issue has been a productive for scholars elsewhere too.

However, this emerging literature still conceives of security in traditional conceptual terms and does not account for the broadening of security governance in recent decades, which as this article argues, is a central factor in increased parliamentary activity on security. For example, in their introduction to a recent special issue on ‘Parliaments and Security Policy’, Patrick A. Mello and Dirk Peters write, ‘the general focus of the Special Issue as a whole...rests primarily on ‘hard’ security issues related to war involvement, military operations, and the use of force.’ And when their contributing authors discuss the politicisation of security they mean qualitative forms mentioned above: increased controversy, contestation and partisanship around security issues. While not unimportant, what these studies miss is the long-run trend of increasing parliamentary activity on security – the
‘permanent course of the political curve’ rather than its ‘cusps and conjugate points’—which this article calls politicisation by volume.

In short, the argument rests on two empirical claims. First, UK parliamentary activity on security has increased since the 1980s. Second, the meaning and practice of ‘security’ has expanded in the same timeframe. In the UK in the 1980s and before, security was a matter of executive prerogative, secrecy and disavowed intelligence agencies. Security was a constitutionally exceptional form of government that it would be fair to describe as a ‘secret state’. There was little parliamentary activity on security for three reasons: first, the government jealously guarded its executive prerogatives; second, many (but not all) parliamentarians deferred to these prerogatives and felt it was right not to ask too many questions; and third, security itself was a much narrower policy area than today and offered fewer opportunities for parliamentary activity. In more technical language this configuration could be described as ‘institutionalised securitisation’: a sedimentation of security signifiers and exceptional prerogatives as posited by Buzan et al.

Today, these depoliticising hindrances have declined and there has been a quantifiable increase in activity on security: parliamentarians have scrutinised a slew of new security-related legislation since 9/11, debated intelligence matters and military deployments, and approximately a quarter of all parliamentary committees have to date conducted substantive inquiries into aspects of security, including many non-traditional security problematisations such as energy security, counter-extremism, and cyber. ‘Security’ has come to span multiple and perhaps even all government departments and policy areas, as it has in many countries. As Tara McCormack argues: ‘Effectively, security has become normalised – it is no longer the core existential area of state policy protected from the normal political procedures but something subject to the same stresses that other aspects of policy are.’

As such, politicisation of security by volume in the UK is a product of the way parliamentary activity tracks the increased security activities of government. For example, the role of departmental select committees is to oversee the activities of specific government departments. As the meaning and practice of ‘security’ have expanded over the decades, ‘security’ has entered the work of more government departments, and hence appeared in the activities of a greater number of oversight committees.

8 Bagehot, The English Constitution, 17.
10 For more on the political sociology of parliamentary marginalisation and deference on security, see Andrew W. Neal, Security as Politics: Beyond the State of Exception (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). One exception was the repeated creation and renewal of anti-terrorism legislation, where parliament acted as a perennial rubber-stamp despite intense politicised debates (in the qualitative sense). See Andrew W. Neal: “Terrorism, Lawmaking and Democratic Politics: Legislators as Security Actors,” Terrorism and Political Violence 24, no. 3 (2012b).