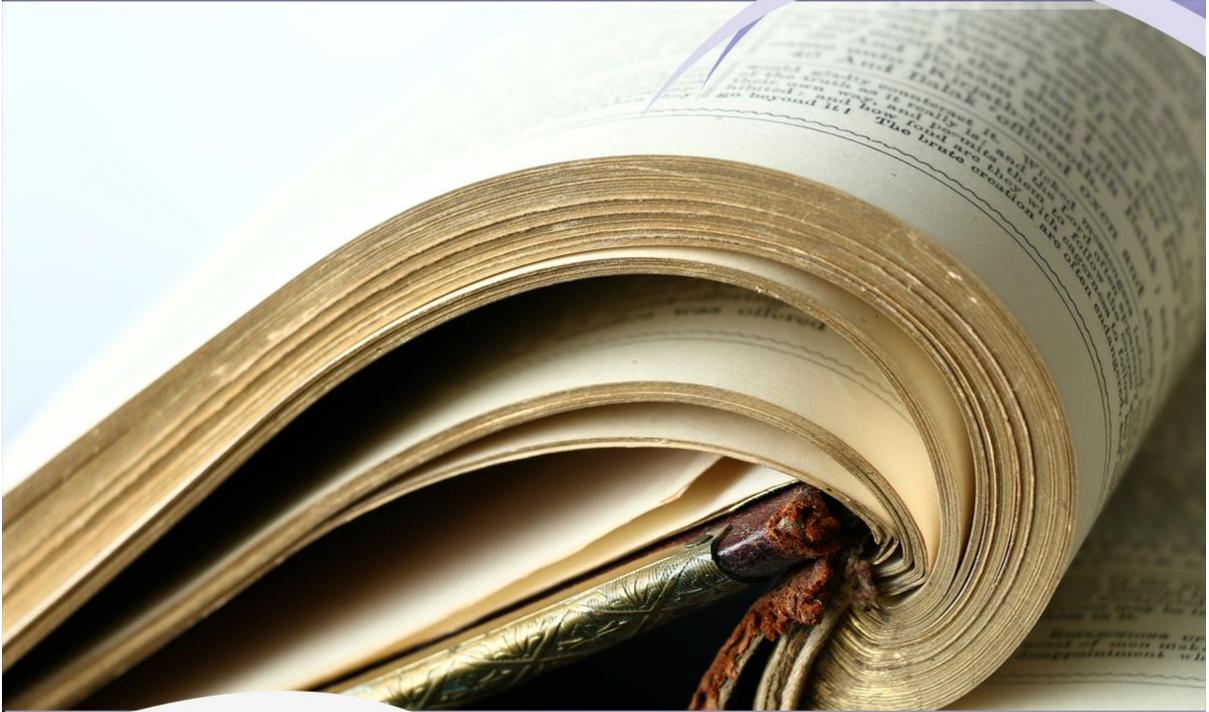


Being Presbyterian Papers



# Presbyterian Polity

Rev Wilfred Orr

January 2021

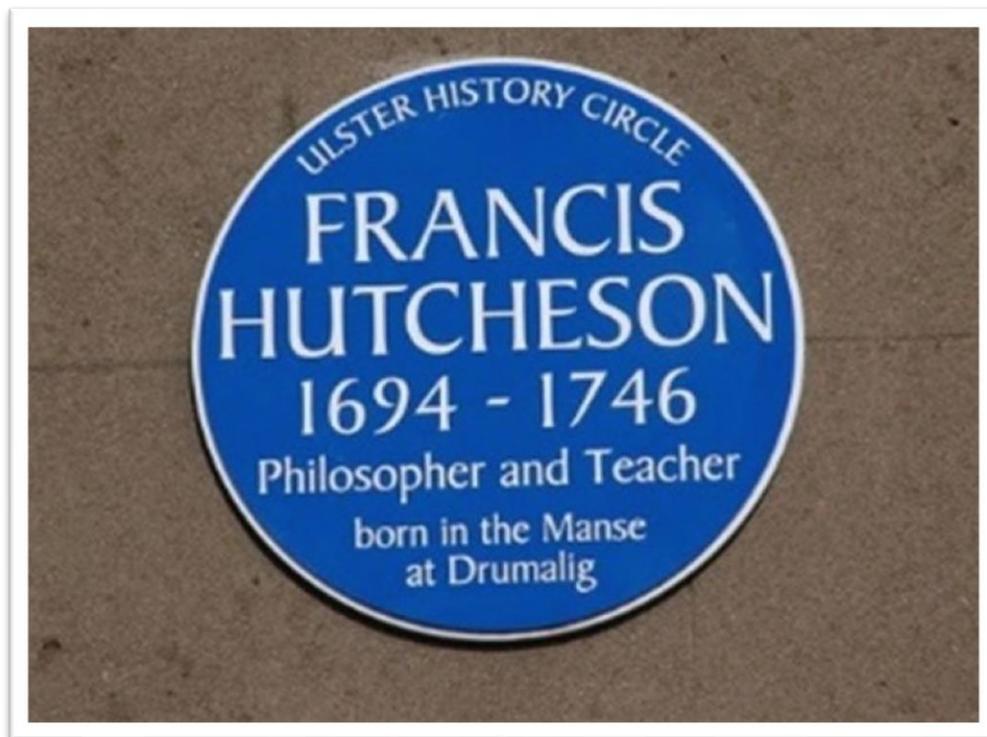
# Presbyterian Polity

by Rev Wilfred Orr

## ‘WE THE PEOPLE...’

One thing I value in our Presbyterian heritage is our form of church government: and more – the contribution we have made – both in thought and practice – to the development of open and representative politics. We call it democracy.

I live in Saintfield and every day I walk up and down the main street – I am reminded of this. I walk past a blue plaque.



It's fixed to the wall of 1<sup>st</sup>. Saintfield Church Hall and it bears the name of Francis Hutcheson. A son of the village where his grandfather was minister, he was ordained himself and eventually appointed Professor of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow University in 1729. A brilliant intellect – he was a man of international influence. I'll come back to Hutcheson later.

There is a drift these days – or intentional move – towards the gathering of power, or decision making, into the hands of the few.

Russia and China come to mind very readily – then a range of smaller nations. The storming of the Capitol Building in Washington DC., however, came as a great shock. Behind this was the rejection of the will of the American people – expressed in a legitimate national vote. It threatened the democratic principles which underlie

the American Constitution and the representative politics which derive from those same principles. Small wonder this action shook the US to its foundations.

Are there hints of this shift – even in Westminster? I think of the Prime Minister's attempt to prorogue parliament in the early autumn of 2019 – perhaps to restrict debate on the Brexit deal of the day. The Supreme Court however, ruled that the government could not prevent parliament “*from carrying out its constitutional functions without reasonable justification*”. The concentration of power and decision making in the hands of an unrepresentative few.

I repeat, one of the things I value most in Presbyterianism is not just its contribution to the thinking behind representative government, but the continuing example it can provide when working well in practice. It holds out a model of open representative democracy: (to be quite correct, a ‘theocracy’, which embodies representative responsibility).

The origins of our branch of the Church lie in the Reformation, which was – amongst other things – a protest against authority being imposed by some church hierarchy or civil power. Our subsequent history is full of examples of this challenging spirit. The Scottish Reformer Melville once told King James 6<sup>th</sup> to keep to his own earthly realm, but not to meddle with the Kirk – he was only ‘*God’s silly vassal*’ in the Kirk whose King is Christ. Move on more than 300 years -still in Scotland – the ‘Disruption’ of the mid 19<sup>th</sup>. Century was a protest against the tradition whereby – in many parishes – the local laird had the right to nominate a new minister in a vacancy. But many opposed this, claiming that a congregation had the right and freedom under God to call the minister of their choice. Nobody tells us as Presbyterians what to think or do unless we have been consulted or properly represented or given our consent. But it’s much more than a stubborn resistance to anything imposed on us.

This brings me back to Francis Hutcheson – a pioneer and seminal Presbyterian thinker in his day. It was he who began to set out the moral and theological justification for this wider sharing in the responsibilities of government. For Hutcheson every human had a natural dignity – being made in the image of God. Freedom, consent and opportunity to share in representative government belonged to that dignity.

Hutcheson, as part of this ‘enlightened’ thought, was very influential. In the 18<sup>th</sup>. Century, Irish students for the ministry most often took their education in Glasgow and absorbed his teaching. They came back to Ireland to find that it chafed to have power in the hands of the English Establishment. This led to some Presbyterians challenging the lack of representative government, rebelling not only on their own behalf but in support of Catholic emancipation.

The same seeds were carried across the Atlantic to colonial America by prominent Scots/Ulster Scots settlers and took root in their institutions of higher learning. John Adams, who would become the second President, records in his diary how he sat one frosty morning reading Hutcheson. In the move for independence, the cry “*no taxation without representation*” was more than a spasm of anger, it rose from this

enlightened moral philosophy. Many of the draftsmen of the American Constitution were familiar with Hutcheson. There is at least an echo of his voice in its sentiments – the preamble opening with three words writ large ‘*WE THE PEOPLE.....*’. This came easily to Presbyterians and from Presbyterians. It wasn’t just the mood of the day. It was of the essence and polity of their Presbyterianism with its system of ‘courts’: Kirk Session – Presbytery – General Assembly. We have this system of ‘courts’ as a buttress against any centralised authority – save that of God – and Presbyterianism works by this system, openly providing information, debate and shared decision making.

This is more than a heritage to be cherished in the memory. It is a charter of government by consent which stands in opposition to any tendency towards control by the few.

For Presbyterians, it is a declaration of what we believe about the dignity of everyone made in God’s image.

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