



Making the Empire Work: London and American Interest Groups, 1690-1790

Alison Gilbert Olson

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The British government had few imperial administrators in the American colonies and perhaps fewer ways to exert its authority by force, yet Americans rarely questioned that authority until the eve of the American Revolution. The empire worked and Americans accepted British rule not because they feared the government, but rather because they had effective methods for influencing it to their own benefit.

Alison Olson reveals a source of that influence in networks of interest groups working cooperatively in England and America. Between 1640 and 1790 voluntary interest groups emerged in English politics. They began in London and gradually formed loose connections with smaller but similar interests in the English and American provinces. When the London groups became capable of lobbying the national government, they were willing to use their influence on behalf of the provincials as well. This “representation” of the Americans, though never official, was crucial to keeping the colonists content within the empire.

The type of interest group that could accommodate colonial participation was the associational, identified by the voluntary character of its membership. It included religious and ethnic communities?Presbyterians, Jews, Lutherans, Quakers, Baptists, Huguenots?and merchant groups. London lobbyists, acting as intermediaries between the colonies and the imperial government, gave American interests a vitally important role in the making of English imperial decisions and gave the English government a key source of information on just what decisions would and would not provoke American resistance. When these connections collapsed, the dissolution of the first British empire was not far away.

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