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Leading from the Front: The 'Service Members' in Parliament, the Armed Forces, and British Politics during the Great War

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Abstract

The Great War was widely seen in Britain as a struggle for civilian and constitutional standards of government against the evils of ‘Prussian militarism’. Yet the British political class itself was by no means a purely ‘civilian’ caste. During the war 264 MPs—some 40 per cent of the membership of the House of Commons—volunteered to serve in the armed forces. These men occupied a unique and controversial position both within Parliament and in the forces. A shared experience of military service could provide a common identity, and even a basis for common action, for MPs from rival parties, and many of these men came to support an apparently ‘military’ agenda at Westminster. At the same time, fighting MPs could act as agents of parliamentary oversight and control over the military establishment. Yet the importance of these ‘Service Members’ was not only evident in the realm of civil–military relations, and this article explores the significance and consequences of attempts by Service Members to claim a special political authority as the ‘representatives’ of the armed forces in the House of Commons, to offer an important new perspective on wartime British debates about the workings of representative politics, the nature of political citizenship, and the authority of Parliament as an institution.

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