**Petitioning in Covenanted Scotland**

***Laura Stewart, University of York***

The civil wars of the mid-seventeenth century have long been seen by English scholars as a transformative moment in which new political associations and practices came into being. Petitions have been central to these debates. Although recent work has critiqued the larger claims made for the printed petition, in particular, as the principle driver of the emergence of modern democratic politics, petitioning and other associated subscriptional activity have nonetheless continued to be seen as important features of what made the politics of the English Revolution so distinctive.

Historians have long acknowledged that petitioning played an important role in the collapse of King Charles I’s government in Scotland. Petitioning has also been closely linked to the 1638 National Covenant, a bond composed and disseminated for mass subscription by opponents of the king’s policies, which would become the foundation text of the new governing regime. Having secured power, however, what had been an oppositional grouping now moved to reinvest institutions with legitimacy and close down the potential for further debate. My recent book (*Rethinking the Scottish Revolution*, 2016) attempted to show that,unlike in England, petitioning did not evolve in Covenanted Scotland into a means by which political groupings could mobilize support outside governing and representative institutions. Political petitioning did not resurface on a significant scale until 1648. An agreement made by leading Covenanter politicians with the king, known as the Engagement, was opposed by clerics and lay elders, whose control over the institutions of the church enabled them to challenge the faction then in control of parliament. What is notable here is that groups petitioning against and, less commonly, in favour of the Engagement sought to claim the authority vested in the institutions of secular and ecclesiastical governance. This activity threatened to open up the spaces in which uncontrolled public debate could take place and foster new types of political engagement, but did not ultimately succeed in doing so.

What some call everyday petitions – the sort presented by individuals and small groups in order to solicit for some favour or benefit – have been almost entirely overshadowed by the important, but far less abundant, political petitions of 1637 and 1648. Although political and everyday petitions, at least in principle, exhibited certain common features, the different purposes to which they were put, and the particular association of the former with public politics, might lead us to question the precise nature of the relationship between them. Everyday petitions submitted to parliament and its proliferating sub-committees enable us to examine one of the key ways in which people engaged with a new government that was being compelled by the demands of war to do innovative things. New forms of taxation, the raising and supplying of armies, the investigation and punishment of so-called ‘malignants’, and the losses incurred by individuals and communities during the royalist rising of the mid-1640s created the circumstances in which more people than ever before, from a wider cross-section of society, had need to petition the authorities.

Parliament was inundated with petitions and the development of its committee structure across the 1640s owed much to the demands of reading and answering them. This paper offers some preliminary thoughts on the process of petitioning and the language in which it was conducted in civil war Scotland. It argues that those seeking favour from the government through petitioning constructed their appeals as narratives that endorsed and legitimised its values and ideals. Whereas the petitioning campaigns of 1637 and 1648 posed potentially very serious challenges to the established norms of political participation, everyday petitioning served to reinforce them.