

## *Sir Thomas More Defending the Liberty of the House*

by Vivian Forbes, 1927, © The Palace of Westminster

This painting is one of eight depicting “The Building of Britain” in St. Stephen’s Hall, the main entrance to the Palace of Westminster (Great Britain’s Parliament). Beneath the painting is the caption: “Sir Thomas More as Speaker of the Commons in spite of Cardinal Wolsey’s imperious demand refuses to grant King Henry the Eighth a subsidy without due debate by the House 1523.”

In 1523 Sir Thomas More, in his official position as Speaker of the House of Commons, used the fruits of his learning and experience to defend through wit and shrewdness the liberty of Parliament to discuss public business without the intrusion of the Crown or its officers.<sup>1</sup> Before and after this event, More showed the importance of courageous and strategic silence in the defense of law. Ten years earlier, in his *History of King Richard III*, More depicted a similar use of silence as a strategy used by London citizens. Twelve years later, More used silence as a legal strategy in defending himself at the end of his life.

In this life-size painting, More calmly points to the mace and the book of laws that are on the table, symbols of an authority greater than Cardinal and Lord Chancellor Thomas Wolsey or himself. The scarlet backward curves of Wolsey’s attire and the opulence of his gloves contrasts with More’s subdued dress and open-handed manner. Wolsey’s lavishly attired and youthful attendants carry the instruments of Wolsey’s royal and ecclesiastical power: “his maces, his pillars, his pole-axes, his crosses, his hat, and the Great Seal, too”; behind More are the older and serious faces of the burgesses and knights of the shire.

In this same Parliament of 1523, More made the first petition and defense ever recorded for freedom of speech.<sup>2</sup> Henry VIII granted it for that Parliament, but for none afterwards. In Elizabeth I’s reign and thereafter, however, this petition became traditional.

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<sup>1</sup> See William Roper’s *Life of Sir Thomas More, Knight* (Oxford University Press, 1935), pp. 16-19; Edward Hall’s *The Lives of the Kings: Henry VIII* (London, 1904): vol. 1, pp. 285-286; *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII* (Longmans, 1882): 3.1355, #3267 (24 August 1523).

<sup>2</sup> William Roper, pp. 12-16; Edward Hall, vol.1, p. 279