Labour's reform of the House of Lords

A travesty of democracy

Editorial Board
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Anyone concerned with democratic principles must view the existence of the British House of Lords as an affront. This unelected second chamber, which dates back to feudal times, consists mainly of hereditary peers. Its abolition has long been regarded as an essential component of any struggle for a more just, egalitarian society.

Yet last month Prime Minister Tony Blair negotiated a secret deal with the then Tory leader in the Lords, Viscount Robert Cranborne, that will preserve a large hereditary component within Britain's government into the next Millenium. This allows 91 hereditary peers--one-tenth of the total number of peers--to retain voting and speaking rights during the first phase of the chamber's long-awaited reform, with another 16 to remain as officials alongside the existing Life Peers. According to the present proposals, Blair--who as prime minister has the power to appoint Life Peers--will then make 50 such appointments to bring Labour's numbers in the Lords into line with the Tories.

Labour's 'challenge' to the hereditary principle is so farcical that it not only won the overwhelming support of the Lords, but of the monarch herself. Blair has been in secret discussions with the Crown for months and promised Her Majesty that the measures would have no impact on her own considerable privileges and role as head of state.

The immediate outcome of this subterfuge is the creation of a largely appointed second chamber, whose composition will be determined by political patronage.

Constitutional changes were a major part of Labour's 1997 election manifesto. Two factors motivated this commitment. It enabled Labour to posture as a 'radical' alternative to the Tories, despite its appropriation of much of the latter's social and economic policies. Blair claimed that his constitutional measures would extend democracy to 'the people' and ensure that the Tory party could never again dominate British government for so long.

This met up with widespread, though politically inchoate, demands for change by working people at the time of the last general election. Almost two decades of job losses and attacks on welfare provisions produced a degree of social inequality not witnessed this century. Increasingly, Parliament and its second chamber were seen as a Tory institution in league with big business against ordinary people.

Labour's constitutional reforms, however, were never aimed at righting this 'democratic deficit'. They articulate the strident demands for change from within sections of the bourgeoisie itself.

Over the course of the last two decades a new layer of the 'super-rich' has emerged, whose fortunes have been accrued through investment on the global markets, in the new hi-tech industries, or by cashing in on the speculative boom and the Tory government's privatisation programme in the 1980s.

This development has altered the composition of the British establishment. Although the hereditary peers represent an aristocratic elite who still possesses large fortunes, they no longer constitute the most influential sections of the bourgeoisie. In 1989 the *Sunday Times* began to compile a 'Rich List' of the top 200 wealthy in the UK, each requiring at least £30 million to qualify for entry. At that time, inherited wealth accounted for 57 percent of this total. By 1998 the list was enlarged to the cover top 1,000 with the entry qualification lowered to £20 million. Inherited wealth had dwindled to just 30.7 percent.

This year the *Sunday Times* noted: 'When the first Rich List was compiled in 1989, Gordon Crawford was a 33-year-old computer specialist working to establish London Bridge software, his two-year-old business, in the City. Last year he floated the company at £47m and kept a stake worth £35m. By the time of our valuations in January this year, his stake was worth £89m. At the end of March, beyond our valuation date, his stake had risen to just under £170m. Thus, in a little over 11 weeks, helped by the bull market, he added £81m to his paper fortune, or about £1m a day.'

Britain's new millionaires and billionaires were intensely dissatisfied with many aspects of the Tory government's policy, in particular its divided and incoherent stance on European Monetary Union (EMU). Moreover, they felt that the existing constitutional set-up restricted their ability to exercise a political influence in keeping with their economic weight.

Faced with the collapse of the Tory party, these layers looked to the Labour Party to articulate their interests. Blair reoriented Labour towards securing a new social base in sections of the middle class who had suffered in the latter part of Conservative rule, and won the elections as a result of capturing the marginal seats in so-called 'Middle England'. He denounced the class struggle as an anachronism and proclaimed the introduction of a new 'meritocracy' and a society based on 'rights and responsibilities'. In place of both old-style reformism and Thatcher's monetarist model, 'New Labour' would champion a 'third way' in which the market would function with the benefit of a social conscience.

Leading business figures have been brought directly into government, including those with aristocratic title such as Lord Simon at the Ministry of Trade, Lord Gilbert at the Ministry of Defence and Lord Irvine as the Lord Chancellor, Britain's most senior Law Officer. Blair has also continued the tradition of ennobling leading figures in the corporate world. David Sainsbury, owner of the supermarket chain of the same name, has been given the title of Lord Sainsbury of Turville. He is Britain's richest man, with a personal wealth estimated at £3,300 million, and was a generous donor to Labour's election campaign fund.

Labour's programme for government was drawn up with the intention of wooing corporate heads and the City of London. As well as pledging to place Britain at the 'heart of Europe' and to continue the assault on welfare provisions, Blair drafted a series of constitutional measures that would facilitate greater competitiveness in the new global market place.

The most fundamental of these is devolution of certain powers to Scotland, Wales and the English regions. This is designed to encourage inter-regional competition for overseas investment while slashing central government spending on public services. It enables the representatives of the transnational corporations to choose the area able to offer the lowest labour costs and biggest tax breaks.

The death of Princess Diana became a focus for demands that the institutions of central government should also be overhauled. Reform of the monarchy and even its abolition was mooted. Now, along with 'New Labour', 'New Britain', and even a 'New Monarchy', Blair proposes a 'New House of Lords'. When reform is complete in two years' time, the government hopes to establish an upper house consisting of one-third directly elected representatives, one-third indirectly elected (based on a party list) and one-third appointed Life Peers who will be drawn largely from business.

Labour's big business agenda is incompatible with any genuine extension of democracy. In order to implement swingeing attacks on jobs and social conditions, all political avenues that could possibly give expression to opposition from working people must be closed.

Since the general election, a compliant and cynical media have built him up as a presidential figure and hailed his every shift in policy as a stroke of genius. The reality is somewhat different. The Labour leadership comprises a privileged layer of the upper middle class. Bereft of any real political insight, they believe government consists of a series of parliamentary manoeuvres and pragmatic adaptations.

Yet Labour's constitutional changes are systematically undermining institutions that have formed the basis of bourgeois rule for centuries. Most of those described as 'hereditary peers' are representatives of the bourgeoisie who bought their titles from the monarch. The maintenance of both the monarchy and the Lords enabled the bourgeoisie to shroud itself in the pomp and ceremony of a previous era, in order to portray its rule as an unalterable and natural continuum.

Speaking at a lecture on constitutional issues back in October, the former Conservative Prime Minister John Major conceded that hereditary peerages were an 'anachronism, although one day we may look back and reflect--that they worked and they were independent, even if they were intellectually difficult to defend.' He continued, 'The most inexperienced government of modern times is tearing up the constitution at a terrifying rate.'

Major is correct in his insistence that Labour has no coherent constitutional strategy. The fact that so much has been invested in such an insubstantial figure as Blair, however, indicates a crisis of perspective within the bourgeoisie as a whole. Rather than a 'grand plan', Blair tries to accommodate the conflicting demands of different sections of the ruling class. This is a source of political instability. Only last month, Labour's European policy was thrown into disarray by its attempts to placate News International CEO Rupert Murdoch's opposition to EMU, while meeting the demands of Britain's largest corporations for entry.

The more Blair tinkers with the constitution, the greater the problems he creates. Devolution, for example, was supposed to prevent the break-up of the United Kingdom. But elections to the new Scottish Parliament next year look set to give a majority to the pro-independence Scottish National Party. The Queen's speech opening Parliament in November and setting out the UK's legislative agenda barely mentioned either Scotland or Wales.

Blair is seemingly oblivious to the broader social implications of his policies. The celebration of hereditary privilege has long been used to justify inherited wealth in all its forms. Bringing this into question could easily backfire on the government. Politics in Britain has always been cast in explicitly class terms. Political parties are identified as the defenders of definite class interests. In the 1980s Thatcher declared that a new era of 'popular capitalism' had rendered class distinctions irrelevant. In 1992 her successor John Major proclaimed he was building a 'classless society'. Yet the more frantic the attempts to deny the significance of class, the more obvious class distinctions have become.

Claims to be establishing a new meritocracy are no more capable of concealing the growing gap between rich and poor than the efforts of Labour's Tory predecessors. Despite government propaganda to the contrary, more British people than at any time in history--almost 60 percent of the population--now define themselves as working class and believe that Britain is rife with class antagonisms. These social divisions cannot be swept under the carpet with a few carefully chosen phrases.

The inability of the Labour government to draw up genuine proposals for Lords reform--its long overdue abolition--does more than expose its role as the political defenders of a privileged elite. It testifies to the decay of bourgeois democracy itself. The struggle against all forms of privilege is dependent on the development of an independent political movement of the working class and the creation of a society based on social equality.

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