

AGRICULTURE

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THE SECOND CHAMBER: SUPPORT FOR HOUSE OF LORDS REFORM WITHIN THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY, 1919-1922

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Abstract

The paper examines the issue of House of Lords reform in the first three years after the First World War, as it was seen by both the leaders and the rank and file of the Conservative Party. It draws on minutes of the Conservative Party's Annual Conferences and Central Council meetings during this short period to look at the specific arguments in favour of reform and views of what specific provisions it might entail that emerged in the discussion of this topic within the Party itself. The paper also makes an attempt to determine the place that this issue held within the broader Conservative agenda for postwar Britain and tries to provide a partial answer to the question of why, in spite of the discussion, the reform never took place.

Keywords: Anti-socialism, bicameralism, British history, constitutionalism, coalition, interwar period.

The House of Lords has historically been closely associated with the Conservative Party. As of the early 20th century, the Second Chamber of the United Kingdom's Parliament was made up almost exclusively out of hereditary peers, with the rest being state appointees: judges and Anglican clergy. The overwhelming majority of its members were therefore naturally inclined towards

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conservatism and affiliation to the Conservative Party [1]. At the same time, the Conservative Party had always supported the House of Lords as a matter of both ideology and practicality. Ideologically, the Conservatives never stopped being seen as – and seeing themselves as – the party of tradition, aristocracy and the Establishment, despite the emergence of other, newer trends in their party's identity and self-presentation [2]. Practically, the Conservative-dominated House of Lords, with its right of veto, acted as an indispensable and reliable tool in blocking those Liberal proposals that the Conservatives disapproved of, such as Home Rule for Ireland and land tax. Their active use of this tool, however, made a confrontation between the two major parties of the prewar era inevitable [3].

The Parliament Act 1911 was the result of the Liberal Party's victory in this confrontation. The House of Lords was effectively deprived of the right of veto over bills passed by the House of Commons, though it retained the right to delay those public bills that did not have to do with the budget for up to three parliamentary sessions or two calendar years. Its official authority was thereby crippled, tilting the balance of power even further towards the House of Commons and compromising, though not removing, the ability of the Conservatives to use the House of Lords as an effective instrument of political influence[4].

Many at the time did not regard the 1911 reform as final. Among the Liberals, many were inclined to view it as a temporary measure that would later pave the way for a more thorough reform, transforming the House of Lords into a democratic Second Chamber[5]. At the same time and for reasons outlined above, the Conservatives could not accept the loss of its power, but were also reluctant to accede to the Liberal idea of democratisation. A serious impulse for further reform of the House of Lords did not come until 1917 when a Conference of 15 members of each House, chaired by Viscount Bryce, was appointed to consider the possibilities of reform. The Bryce Report, made in 1918, attempted to strike a compromise, recommending restoring full powers over non-financial legislation, but also modifying the chamber's composition by making the majority of its members subject to election by regional groups of MPs and the rest appointed by a joint committee of both Houses, mostly from among hereditary peers and bishops. It advocated an advanced form of bicameralism, with closer interaction

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between the two Houses, perhaps even to the point of holding joint sessions (though this was one of the more contentious suggestions even among the members of the Bryce Group itself) and a special conference including members of both Houses that would help arbitrate between them in matters of jurisdiction over different bills.

Bryce's proposals were not followed up on, both because of the then-ongoing war and the objections that they drew from both sides of the barricades [6]. Nevertheless they have reignited an interest in House of Lords reform among Britain's political class. One sign of this interest was in the King's Speeches of 1920, 1921 and 1922, which all mentioned the Reform of the Second Chamber as one of the important issues that the Parliament had to address [7]. A Cabinet Committee appointed to consider the question in 1921 rejected the Bryce Report as too radical to be accepted by the Commons or the country, but could not agree on one alternate proposal by the time of their 1922 report [8]. The government's own proposal in 1922, retaining most of the limitations on powers included in the Parliament Act but making the reconstituted Second Chamber's membership subject to elections (partly from outside sources and partly by and from among hereditary peers) was criticised by the House of Lords as too vague and unsatisfactory in July of that year[9]. Afterwards the question once again slipped from the Parliament's agenda until 1925, when a Conservative government was securely in power.

Despite the Liberal influence apparent in both of these reform proposals, Conservative ministers in David Lloyd George's Coalition government played a major role in the Cabinet Committee. For instance, the Chairman of the Committee was Lord Curzon; Lord Birkenhead and Austen Chamberlain were also prominently involved in its work. Their wish to strengthen the House of Lords in at least some ways was made more urgent by their (exaggerated) fear of rising Labour influence and the threat it posed to Conservative interests. The Second Chamber was thus seen as a defense against a possible future socialist government. If Labour were to succeed in taking control of the House of Commons and forming a radical left wing government, a strong, rejuvenated, more legitimate House of Lords would be better able to limit the damage that it could do to the nation and interests of the social groups represented by the Conservatives [10].

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This sentiment was by no means exclusive to the Conservative ministers. If anything, it was even more pervasive and more radical among the rest of the party leadership and the rank and file. When the Party's Central Council met in Westminster in March 1919, the Executive Committee's report to the Council mentioned, in a prominent place, that Arthur Bonar Law said in the House of Commons that although the matter of Second Chamber reform could not be dealt with during the present session, the government recognised the urgency and importance of such a reform [11]. Later during the same meeting, a unanimous resolution was adopted stating that reform of the Second Chamber is a matter of extreme importance and urging the government to turn its attention towards it at the earliest possible moment [12].

During the annual conference of the National Unionist Association in June 1920 in Birmingham, the Earl of Selborne, William Palmer, a Conservative member of the House of Lords and one of the most vocal supporters of the reform, called for precedence to be given by the government to the question of "reconstitution of the Second Chamber". His speech in support of this motion was focused entirely on the threat posed by the Labour party and particularly its "revolutionary wing", which he accused of being "avowedly out for the destruction of our political and social system, and for the substitution of something on the Soviet model". The only way to stop it if Labour got into power – which he considered alarmingly likely – would be to restore the power of the House of Lords, which alone could "give the people an opportunity of a final decision after time for reflection". The speech was greeted with support from the rank and file, one of whom said the House of Lords could "apply the brake to the coach of State and prevent it being driven into the morass of Bolshevism". Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, MP, former Chairman of the Conservative Party and former junior minister in Lloyd George's government, pointed out that the House of Commons could, conceivably, be sometimes constituted in such a way that it would not represent the true convictions of the country. Reform of the Second Chamber was the true remedy to this defect of the system [13]. The October meeting of the Central Council in Westminster had restated the necessity and importance of reform and mentioned that Bonar Law has promised that it would be considered in the next session of the Parliament [14]. The reform never left its prominent spot in the party's official agenda in this period.

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In the report of the Central Council to the Annual Conference at Liverpool in November 1921, the question of the Second Chamber was brought up with yet more urgency. The Executive Committee found the Reform of the Second Chamber to be the most important matter to have engaged its attention in that year, reporting that it has sent a deputation to the government to request that a reform bill be passed as quickly as possible, and that the Prime Minister has promised to do so, saying that passing the bill would be the principal measure of next session [15]. In the report on the political situation in the country, Lloyd George's pledge was praised, and reassurances were given as to the Party's willingness to cooperate in establishing "a strong representative Second Chamber based upon direct contact with the people, and endowed with adequate powers". This was followed immediately by the assertion that this reformed Second Chamber was necessary to "delay the passage into law, until the real will of the electorate can be ascertained, of wild schemes of Socialistic confiscation" that may be forced on a Labour government by the party's extreme elements[16].

The Earl of Selborne made another speech at that conference, noting the government's decision with satisfaction and noting that the 1911 reform had practically destroyed the British Constitution, the public only being sheltered from its consequences by the comparative irrelevance of the Parliament Act in time of war and coalition government. "If another power came into power, they would very soon find out that their Constitution was destroyed by Mr. Asquith and his friends". At the same time, he agreed that in order to perform its functions properly, the new Second Chamber would require a drastic reconstruction of the composition of the House of Lords. Thus, he showed his willingness to embrace a radical change of how the Second Chamber would work, so long as it made it stronger and more up to the task of shoring up the Constitution and defending against rash decisions made by Labour. Though no mention was made of bringing back the veto, the power of delay and the power of revision were named as important requirements. Speaking in support of Selborne, MP Gershom Stewart said that the House of Lords has been mutilated by Radicals in 1912 and had to be replaced by a new, more representative and more efficient Second Chamber; he also expressed the hope that new Second Chamber might also have in it the seed of an Imperial

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Parliament, perhaps one day including appointed representatives from India, the Colonies and the Dominions [17].

By the time of the December 1922 Conference in London, with the government proposal having failed to make an impact and the Lloyd George Coalition having collapsed after the Carlton Club meeting of 19 October, the enthusiasm for imminent Second Chamber reform has inevitably abated. However, even though it was pushed from the fore of the Conservative Party's attention, it remained on the agenda. With a fully Unionist (Conservative) government in charge, the Earl of Selborne restated the need to carry out the reform, and said that he regretted that the new Conservative Prime Minister Andrew Bonar Law told him that it would be impossible to do in the earlier sessions of the Parliament. He once again received some support from the rank and file, his resolution having passed unanimously [18].

In conclusion, it could be said that the idea of Second Chamber reform became much more urgent for the Conservative Party immediately after the First World War, as fear of the rapid rise and radicalisation of Labour was added to the preexisting concerns about the integrity of the British Constitution and safety of Conservative and middle class interests in the wake of the Parliament Act 1911 and resentment at having been partly deprived of a powerful instrument of influence (to put it another way, the reaction to a perceived shift towards unicameralism that would inevitably favour the majority party and also undermine the necessary checks and balances of true democratic government). It was seen as necessary to keep a prospective majority Labour government from pushing through reckless, harmful socialist reforms, or at least to delay their implementation long enough for the tide of popular and parliamentary opinion to turn against them. To create this "brake to the coach of State", the Conservatives were willing to accept drastic changes in the composition of the House of Lords, making it more democratic and representative, especially as it would have granted it more legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In exchange, they wished for an at least partial revision of the Parliament Act 1911, granting the Second Chamber more power to delay and revise public bills. However, just like the contemporaneous idea of fusion between Coalition Liberals and Conservatives [19], the idea of Second Chamber reform seems to have lost a good part of its urgency, if not ultimate appeal, for the Conservatives as it became apparent that

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they had overestimated the power of Labour and underestimated their own appeal to the new mass electorate [20]. Without the Conservatives' active support, the Liberal impulse for House of Lords reform could not hope to achieve success.

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