

Hailsham's 'elective dictatorship' again

by Francis Bennion

You report today (5 April 1977) a speech by Lord Hailsham in which he again uses the phrase 'elective dictatorship' to describe the House of Commons. In a letter you published on 21 October 1976, I ventured to criticise Lord Hailsham's use of this description (coined so far as I know by himself). It is both untrue and mischievous. The enemies of parliamentary democracy are dangerous enough without Lord Hailsham adding the weight of his prestige to their arguments. The phrase 'elective dictatorship' is a piece of political cant. It has an appearance of validity which on examination is at once seen to be spurious, for it is a contradiction in terms. A dictatorship is an autocratic political system of which the essence is that there is no effective constitutional machinery for ever getting rid of the dictator. An elective system is one where at reasonable intervals the electorate have the opportunity to choose their representatives. It is logically impossible for one system to have both these attributes. There cannot be an elective dictatorship. The term is empty rhetoric, and it is time Lord Hailsham stopped using it.

In denying the right of the Liberals to join with Labour Lord Hailsham denies a fundamental principle of our modern constitution: that a government which commands the confidence of a majority of the House of Commons is entitled to continue in office until the statutory date for dissolution. In no way can this justly be called dictatorial. Careful political judgment is required of the Prime Minister, for the electorate is watching and has the means to punish politicians who cling to power unwisely. That is the essence of parliamentary democracy, and we should value it. The system Lord Hailsham pretends to want, under which a general election would be called whenever opinion polls put the Opposition in the ascendancy, would not be parliamentary democracy at all, but rule by plebiscite.¹

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The Times, 9 April 1977

Any footnotes are shown at the bottom of each page

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References:

None

¹ *The Times*, 9 April 1977