

## Integrity and Disability

The House of Commons, which Edmund Burke called the highest tribunal of the nation, is a peculiar institution. I have watched its workings for more than half a century and can testify, as many others have done, that it has a character exclusively its own and retains this come what may. Despite themselves, and even against their will, it stamps those privileged to become its members with a unique impress of integrity. We are witnessing this just now over the Government's Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill.

A great point of principle is thought to be at stake with this Bill. Its opponents say that by it the Government is trying to renege on the obligation to honour a nationwide contract, initiated half a century ago by Beveridge and confirmed by Parliament. Put simply, the contract is that if you obediently pay your National Insurance contributions through your working life you will be entitled to your benefits in due course. No one can take that away from you. It is yours by Act of Parliament, that unshakeable guarantee (as it used to be thought). The benefits become payable when you reach retirement age, or earlier become unfit for work. They become payable even though you have through other means (for example a works pension) more than enough to live on.

For some politicians it is irksome to think that under this Beveridge scheme the state becomes obliged to make payments to people who are really quite well off (a few of them very well off). These politicians itch to tinker with Beveridge so as to withdraw the right to receive the payments from such unmeritorious folk. They should be reserved for the deserving poor (or even the undeserving poor). It is obscene that the undeserving rich should get their hands on them.

Skilful politicians know how to go about achieving such ends. You do not start with a frontal assault, withdrawing from rich older people (it is incorrect nowadays to speak of old people) their right to a pension. No, you begin by attacking a smaller target, say the disabled. If they succumb you have gained ground and can later advance on the old (sorry, older) age pensioners. These are the tactics its opponents accuse the Government of deploying with the present Bill.

On November 4 the Times reported that, in a fraught debate in the Commons the previous night, Labour rebels had denounced Tony Blair's welfare reforms as a betrayal of all the party stood for. Trying to stem the onslaught, Mr Sam Galbraith MP (Labour) said: "It is time to stop thinking of National Insurance contributions as inviolate". Weasel words indeed. Try switching them to private insurance policies. "It is time to stop thinking the Prudential should honour their policies and pay up as and when the small print requires".

More weasel words from Mr Blair. "We actually have extended means-testing to other forms of contributory benefit. In the end it comes down to a simple question of how we spend the amount of money we are going to spend on disability." Never mind what the disability contract says. We are justified in rejigging it provided the aggregate we spend on the disabled does not go down. And anyway, we have got away with it before.

The Government made concessions worth £150 million to sweeten the pill, but still many Labour MPs voted against their own Government. That's how Commons integrity affects people. As I write the Times reports (November 5) that if peers do not toe the line when the

bill returns to the Lords the partial reprieve granted by the Government to hereditary peers in the interim arrangements (see last week's column) could be at risk. Might that be called blackmail?

Not all the old traditions are being jettisoned, despite Mr Blair's onslaught on "conservatives" (with a small c) at the recent Labour Party conference. On November 1 the Commons defeated by a majority of 68 a Government move to end the practice of printing two definitive copies of every Act of Parliament on vellum, a fine kind of parchment prepared from the skins of calves, lambs or kids. This would have meant a saving of £30,000 a year, but the House was unmoved by this statistic. Dr Nick Palmer, a Labour member of the Commons Administration Select Committee, which put forward the change, argued that 'Parliament should not be using animal products where it is not necessary'. Voting as usual with their feet (clad in animal products) the MPs rejected his plea.

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