

The House of Lords inspects itself

The scene was the House of Lords, in the Bishops' Bar (yes, there is such a place). The year was 1987. Maurice Peston, Professor of Economics at London University, had just been raised to the peerage. The ex-Prime Minister Lord Home of the Hirsel (Baillie Vass to *Private Eye*) sat down and made himself agreeable. "What do you think of the House?" he asked in his marvellously mellifluous voice. "I love it", said Peston, "the only thing that troubles me is the enormous length of the working day here". The former 14th Earl of Home responded: "Oh yes, dear boy, I fully understand that. When I first came here in 1951 we had difficulty keeping the business going till tea time".

That was when I too first became acquainted (as a novice parliamentary draftsman) with the workings of their Lordships' House. I can confirm that it was indeed so. Lord Peston told the story on May 10 when he opened a debate on his motion to call attention to the case for a review of the workings of the House of Lords in the 21st century. The Leader of the House, Baroness Jay (who mysteriously remains the Lord, rather than the Lady, Privy Seal), thought they should sit in the mornings instead of the evenings so as to accommodate the family life of peers and peeresses. She met her match.

Lord Strathclyde I shall say one thing about "family friendly". I am the father of three small children. They are in bed in the evening and therefore I am free to do my work in this House. But my children revel in playing with me in the mornings.

This riposte by the spokesman for the Conservative Party summed the whole thing up really. What suits one person does not suit another, so you might as well leave things as they are. We should not, Lord Strathclyde told the House, make changes in our procedures for our own personal convenience - still less that of Ministers. Anyway, changes had recently been agreed by the House, such as (it says in Hansard) "sparing the noble and learned Lord the Lord Chancellor from the necessity to wear breaches [*sic*] or to read out the Queen's Speech". Lord Strathclyde disliked Lord Peston's motion because it implied that the workings of the House are somehow outdated and unfit for the 21st century "and that they should therefore, in the cliché of Blairism, be 'modernised' or changed to fit into what Baroness Jay calls 'contemporary life'".

That survivor of the Gang of Four, Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank, thought the recent ejection of most hereditary peers had led to the House becoming more confident, in a way that could not have been foreseen. He went on to say all professional people, certainly in mid-career, have very demanding hours, adding-

"Those hours involve evenings away. I hope that we do not complain too much about the life that we lead. Most of us rather enjoy it. I say that both in relation to Members of this House and Members of another place as well. Let us not complain too much. It is a hard life for many men and women pursuing their careers, whatever those careers may be."

The Bishop of Durham praised the ethos of the House, which he said the Bishops very much appreciate. He said that it was not perhaps professional in the political terms of the House of Commons. "That does not make the House less effective but it does make for a different approach to debate and decision-making . . . we should retain something of that distinctive ethos." However he complained about the Bishops being compelled to wear 17th century dress. "We are quite ready to continue with our dog-collars as a sign of the proper humility

that would be expected of us, but robes simply make for billowing in the corridors and perspiration in the Chamber”.

It was left to the former Conservative Home Secretary and Governor of Bermuda Lord Waddington to sound a sour note. He said that improvements in facilities do not necessarily improve the workings of a place any more than do changes in procedures. More office accommodation and more secretarial assistance had accelerated the decline in attendance in the Chamber of the House of Commons and, consequently, the importance and influence of debates there. He complained that Mr Blair had adopted a policy of bypassing Parliament whenever possible, “which time and time again has attracted adverse comment from Madam Speaker”. The Government have sought, he continued, to take a very firm grip on the Parliamentary Labour Party, threatening with draconian penalties those who step out of line. “When the House of Commons has been weakened”, he concluded, “let us for goodness’ sake be jealous of our own procedures”.

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