

Gravy train for political parties?

The Blair Government's determination to plough on regardless, and force through a huge wedge of constitutional legislation while they still have the chance, has led to the House of Lords being recalled a month earlier than the Commons. Important Bills are introduced first in the Commons, so their later stages have to be carried through in the Lords. Towards the end of a Session business piles up in the Lords, so its members lose a large slice of their summer vacation. This is a great pity. Busy people should continue to have a tranche of sunny summer and harvest time to recharge their batteries. The fools, particularly in the education field, who think that workwise the year should now be divided into five equal orderly segments know nothing of history, the seasons or human needs. During the year's round, a sizeable spell of oblivion is obligatory at some point, which is one reason why this column has been in relapse for the past three months. I warmly greet you all on my return, and hope you have enjoyed as opulent a summer as I have.

Back in the chills of January I wrote about a Bill, which is still dragging its weary way, designed to regulate still further how our political process works. The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill was one among many reasons why their Lordships were called upon to assemble untimely in mellow autumn and talk away in face of a darkened, vacant Commons chamber. The committee stage came up on October 12 and I shall tell you a little of what happened.

For political parties, especially small ones, this might be called the Gravy Train Bill. There is taxpayers' loot on offer. Ecstasy on this point is tempered by the fact that much of the said loot will be needed to pay the costs of new hurdles to democracy erected by the Bill itself. Margaret McDonagh, General Secretary of the Labour Party, thinks it might require them to hire ten more clerks just to deal with the accountancy procedures required to verify that donors do not overstep the mark. Oh Ecclestone, what tribulations shall we suffer in thy name! (Those who prefer may substitute, Sainsbury, Robinson, or other munificent ones at will.)

The Bill provides for the taxpayer to meet start-up costs initially incurred by small political parties. Lord Beaumont of Whitley (Eton and Christ Church) moved to delete "initially". He thought there would be a need, "not only for a one-off start-up grant, but for continuing grants that should run for at least a while afterwards". No doubt there will be such a need. We would all very much like taxpayers' money to help us go on with what we have started. But is this Liberal Democrat peer justified in demanding it? The Government spokesman Lord Bassam of Brighton did not think so.

This Lord Bassam of Brighton, whom we have met before in these columns, intrigues me. He is not to be confused with the late Alfred Bossom MP, a property man who managed to get himself made a baronet in 1953 and a peer in 1960. He was of old Anglo-Saxon stock, proudly named after King Alfred the Great like his father before him (if Lord Parekh of Runnymede will allow me to mention such a thing).

For the Conservatives Lord Mackay of Ardbrecknish accused Lord Bassam of admitting that the Bill is "cumbersome and bureaucratic". He added that as a result of it the three main political parties will each incur additional annual costs running into at least six figures. Yet, said Lord Mackay, "the last thing we would want to see as a result of the Bill is the stifling or

even bankrupting of political parties, in particular the smaller ones which are not represented here”.

Viscount Cranborne implored Lord Bassam to cast his mind back into the dim recesses of history and think about how the Labour Party was brought into being. He said it came to be transmogrified from a small sectarian group of people into the principal opposition party to the Conservatives because of the extremely ill defined rules governing party regulation. He added that one of the great difficulties in the constitutional arrangements of our country is that there is an ill defined relationship between political parties (which are an essential part of our system) and the more carefully defined constitutional elements. “One of the effects of the Bill is that . . . the flexibility which allowed the Labour Party to come into being . . . will become a thing of the past. In a curious way, the Labour Party, having taken advantage of that flexibility, is pulling the ladder up behind it”.

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