

Reviews

The Peers and the People

John Wells:

The House of Lords: An Anecdotal History
(Hodder & Stoughton, 1998)

Reviewed by Tony Little

The history of the Lords can be traced back beyond that of the Commons into Saxon times but, even in the medieval period, it was thought worthwhile to gain the participation of the Commons in the setting of taxes. As is well known, effective management of taxation and government expenditure eluded the Stuarts and the assertion of rights by Parliament or, more especially, the Commons, resulted in the abolition of the monarchy for a short period. It is less well known that the Cromwellian revolutionaries also eliminated the Lords. Both were restored in 1660 and the upper house has clung tenaciously to life since. How will Tony Blair and Lord Irvine carry out their aim of a fundamental reform of the composition of the peerage? What work do they see the Lords performing?

Before becoming one of Britain's great satirists, John Wells was a schoolteacher and this perfectly serious book draws more on his skills as a pedant than a comic. It breaks up the chronology with a series of anecdotes, drawn mostly from the present day, designed to show that the Lords functions despite a series of eccentricities unlikely to be found anywhere else and unlikely to be tolerated in any rational system. But it would be wrong to underestimate how much strength the Lords draws from its irrationality.

The shining ladder

Wells argues that throughout its history there have been two visions of the British political environment – the shining ladder and the bright horizon. The early views of the Lords

were dominated by the Shining Ladder. Each and every one of us has his rung, with the knights above the peasants but looking up to the peers who in their turn are responsible to the king. At the beginning, the king in turn was subordinate to the pope who was at the top of the ladder leading to god in heaven. The very terminology of an upper house recognises this sense of hierarchy. The Eurosceptics of the sixteenth century displaced the pope to leave the king at the top as god's representative on earth. But even the monarch most inclined to assert the divine right of kings, Charles I, recognised that the peers played an important part in the realm, not just as major landowners with a vested interest in the preservation of order and property rights, but also as 'an excellent screen between the Prince and people, to as-

sist each against any encroachment of the other, and by just judgements to preserve the law.'

Over the bright horizon

The seventeenth century saw the defeat of the divine right, but the functions of the Lords remain as Charles defined them. In the eighteenth century and for the early part of the nineteenth, the aristocracy circumvented the supremacy of the Commons by exploiting the unreformed electoral system, packing the lower house with relatives, friends and dependants. However a vision, described by Wells as the Bright Horizon, gradually took over – a democratic paradise, waiting just over the skyline. The Horizonists have won the battle to establish a fully democratic Commons, though Liberal Democrats will not see the voting system as adequate. In the struggle with the Lords over Lloyd George's budget, a major blow was struck against the Lords. The 1911 Parliament Act removed the power of veto exercised by the upper house, leaving only a power of delay which has been progressively whittled away. It was intended that further reforms of the Lords would follow. Yet nearly a century later, we are still debating what such reforms will look like.

There are good reasons for this and bad. The most significant is that with no power of veto and a reluctance to use its ability to delay legislation, the Lords is a dragon with its fire damped down, a harmless if awkward pet. The problem for the Horizonists is that beyond abolishing hereditary peerages, they have not generated any consensus on what a reformed Lords would look like or what its functions would be – as Wells makes clear in his analysis of both Conservative and left wing proposals. The outcome of the last serious attempt was to unite Enoch Powell and Michael Foot in a common cause to frustrate Lords reform, the one because he was satisfied with the status quo and the other because the

reforms were not advanced enough.

One of the joys of the British constitution is its adaptability and flexibility, but the pace of reform is often imperceptible. Palmerston would have been happy with life peerages – how long did that take? Lloyd George would not find anything surprising in today's debate. So far the Labour Government has not proposed an alternative franchise for a democratic second chamber and has not given any very clear indication of the functions the Lords should fulfil. They only seem to know what they do not like. Would we be right to trust Tony Blair or any other premier with exclusive

rights of nomination in a House of Lords without the ballast of the hereditaries – the world's most prestigious quango? Liberal Democrats see the various parts of constitutional reform in a context of renewing British society; Labour are not equipped with this vision. Unless they are prepared to learn from us or from history they are likely to find that their reform of the Lords impales itself on the same barbed wire as previous frustrated efforts.

Anyone reading Wells' book will be better placed to enter the debate, to understand its complexities and to see how little progress we have made since the time of Lloyd George.

incumbent MP, Sir Leicester Harmsworth, a disaffected Lloyd George follower re-emerging after a long absence, as the epitome of 'landlordism, feudalism and reaction.' Sinclair was indeed the last great Liberal landlord, compassionate, paternal and radical rather than feudal and reactionary. Successful at his first attempt, Sinclair was returned at five general elections, unopposed or in straight fights with a Conservative. Despite the hostility of the local press, farmers and landlords, he built up a personal following through service to his constituency which enabled him to survive while the Liberal Party disintegrated.

Sinclair never spelt out his political philosophy in any extended writing of his own, though he contributed freely to policy studies such as *Land and the Nation*. His beliefs, founded upon classical Liberal principles of individual freedom and free trade, steadily became unfashionable as the decades passed, while his position as a radical laird in an essentially conservative constituency grew increasingly anomalous. The temptation to leave the Liberals must have been great in the early 1930s. He showed his abilities on his appointment as Chief Whip in 1930–31, striving valiantly to hold the party together during a particularly trying period. His twelve months at the Scottish Office, in 1931–32, as a minister in MacDonald's National Government, underlined his talent for administration and commitment to Scotland. After the 1935 general election, with the Liberals reduced to just twenty-one MPs, Sinclair was elected Leader to replace Sir Herbert Samuel who had lost his seat, Lloyd George apparently having shown no interest in the succession.

De Groot's best chapters cover the ensuing period of Sinclair's career, commencing with his courageous efforts in the final four years of peace to uphold the authority of the League of Nations. By attacking appeasement, he sought to stiffen the resolve of Baldwin and Chamberlain against Hitler and Mussolini. More consistent than his mentor, Church-

The Last Liberal Landlord

Gerard J. De Groot:

Liberal Crusader: The Life of Sir Archibald Sinclair (Hurst & Co., 1993)

Reviewed by Lionel King

An American lecturing at the University of St Andrews, De Groot began work knowing 'absolutely nothing about Archibald Sinclair and shockingly little about British politics'. Readers will still find gaps in his knowledge, though he provides much biographical information which fleshes out a man who has been a 'non-person' to historians and a shadowy figure to Liberals, despite a ten-year term as Party Leader.

Of Scottish-American parentage, orphaned at five, young Archie became the ward of his eccentric grandfather, a gloomy uncle who was a canon of St Pauls, and a worldly aunt who introduced him into society. Inheriting vast estates in Caithness and his mother's fortune, Sinclair went to Sandhurst after Eton, entering Liberal circles during the Asquith premiership and meeting Winston Churchill, who shared his passion for flying. Their friendship deepened during World War One. Though a cavalry officer, he served in the trenches for twenty

months, part of the time as Churchill's adjutant, developing a loathing of the futility of war, an esteem for the common soldier and contempt for the military establishment. In 1916 he married Marigold Forbes, a volunteer in a field canteen, after a whirlwind courtship.

After the Armistice, he held posts on the staff of his influential friend who encouraged him to look for a seat in Parliament. Standing for Caithness & Sutherland as a National (Lloyd George) Liberal in the confused politics of the 1922 general election, Sinclair was attacked by the

ill, and more willing to risk offending public opinion than more prominent anti-appeasers, he outshone the unremarkable Attlee, leader of the Opposition.

A tall, attractive figure, of immaculate, formal dress, his oratory was hailed in the press as second only to that of Churchill. Eden's rival as the rising star of the House, he might have become the pivotal figure in an often muted 'popular front.' He was unwilling, however, to commit the Liberals to further potentially damaging electoral alliances. He was convinced that a Liberal revival was inevitable. In the prevailing mood of public opinion he made few friends and acquired powerful foes for his opposition to the Munich Agreement. Even within Liberal ranks, notables, including Samuel and Crewe in the Lords, considered his stance unpatriotic.

On the outbreak of hostilities, Sinclair advocated a more vigorous prosecution of the war. The vindictive Chamberlain declared Caithness a prohibited zone and had Sinclair's phone tapped. In the Commons debate that toppled Chamberlain in May 1940, Sinclair's measured contribution, which he hoped might help spark off a minor cabinet reshuffle, was arguably more significant in persuading wavering Tories into the opposition lobby than the hyperbole of Amery and Lloyd George. In his coalition government, Churchill appointed Sinclair Secretary of State for Air, though without a seat in the War Cabinet. He was destined to be the only minister to occupy the same office throughout the administration.

De Groot chronicles Sinclair's five years at the Ministry, where the work was an administrative grind. He was no puppet of Churchill and withstood his constant bullying better than most. Within weeks of his assuming office, the Battle of Britain opened. Sinclair did not empathise with Air Chief Marshal Dowding – few did – though he gave him unstinting support. Initially much of Sinclair's energy was dissipated countering mischief perpetrated by the megalomaniac Beaverbrook, Minister of Aircraft

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Production, who was determined to bring air warfare totally under his control.

When air strategy moved towards a bomber offensive on industrial targets, Sinclair diligently stuck to his task. On the entry of the US into the war, Sinclair oversaw the development of an Anglo-American strategy for the joint air assault on the Reich. Unlike Churchill, he made no attempt to evade responsibility for tactics culminating in the destruction of Dresden in February 1945. Sinclair was by this time obsessive in his ministerial duties, the strain of office making him short-tempered and impatient. There was little time for Liberal Party affairs, save an annual address to the Assembly. Nor was he able to visit his constituency, the most northerly on the mainland of Great Britain. His beloved Marigold, who bore him four children, bravely attempted to cope with constituency duties. VE Day found Sinclair utterly exhausted, though for the moment he favoured the idea of maintaining the coalition government. When it finally broke up, a general election followed only six weeks later.

The Liberal Party did well to field 307 candidates, double the number in 1935. The result was a disaster, 'liberal' opinion swinging decisively over to Labour. Sinclair, who campaigned gallantly nationwide, lost Caithness by sixty-one votes, finishing third behind Labour.

De Groot attributes his defeat to long absences from the constituency, not campaigning on domestic issues such as the promised welfare state and his oddball Conservative opponent's emphasis upon Churchill's war record. More important factors, surely, were the novelty of a Labour candidate and the anachronistic figure of Sinclair himself.

Sinclair made a determined effort to regain his seat, failing by just 269 votes to defeat Sir David Robertson, the new Conservative candidate, in 1950. In 1952 he was raised to the peerage as Viscount Thurso. A promising career in the Lords, where he was expected to succeed Samuel as Liberal leader, was ended by a series of strokes which left him bed-ridden after 1960. He died in 1970, a forgotten figure in another year of Liberal disaster.

This is the only biography of Sinclair to date, published nearly twenty-five years after his death. The family made private papers available, assisting, encouraging and providing some funding, though making no attempt to influence the author. The result is a highly readable Sinclair primer, written in a lucid, unadorned style. The definitive biography of a great Liberal, who maintained his party as a separate entity during the most troubled decade in modern history, while at the same time, making a contribution surpassed by few ministers in the wartime government, has still to be written.