

Reports

Reforming the Lords

Evening meeting, 19 January,
with Vernon Bogdanor and Lord Carrington
Report by Malcolm Baines

House of Lords reform proved a stimulating topic for a crowded meeting at the National Liberal Club in January. The speakers were Professor Vernon Bogdanor of Brasenose College, Oxford, and Lord Carrington, former Conservative Foreign Secretary and one-time leader of the Conservatives in the House of Lords.

Professor Bogdanor began by looking at the background to the 1911 Parliament Act, which introduced the two-year suspending power of the Lords (as opposed to the absolute veto they had had before) and removed their ability to delay so-called Money Bills. He argued that the Act was significant in that it confirmed the supremacy of the Commons and of representational democracy; the alternative of referring a disputed bill to a referendum had been firmly ruled out by the Liberal Government. Despite a Preamble to the Act, inserted by Sir Edward Grey, no moves were made to change the composition of the Lords; the result of the reforms had been to achieve a unicameral system of government with two chambers, a set-up which had probably served the UK rather well despite its intrinsic untidiness.

Lord Carrington then discussed the role of the Lords since he took his seat in 1945. The considerable disparity in numbers and views in the post-war period between Labour and Conservative in the Lords had led to the evolution of the Salisbury Convention under which the Lords undertook not to oppose proposals included in a victorious govern-

ment's manifesto. In 1949, the Lords' delaying power was further reduced to one year. In the 1950s, life peers were introduced and these had originally worked well but more latterly there had been a decline in quality, leading to long-winded and rather dull debates. Harold Wilson had attempted to reform the Lords composition. An all-party group, including Frank Byers for the Liberals, had

met and half-heartedly agreed to a proposal whereby whilst all peers would remain members, there would be a specific voting section and the independent peers would have a decisive influence. The delaying powers would be reduced to six months. This had been talked out in the Commons by an unholy alliance of Michael Foot and Enoch Powell.

Carrington went on to look at the Lords today. The Lords currently suffered from a lack of credibility which made using what powers it has impossible. Whilst it was effective as a revising chamber, it could not act as a check on the Commons (and through it the executive) because it had no credible basis of membership. However, electing a second chamber would give rise to different problems, depending on the extent of the second chamber's powers. If it had considerable powers, it would inevitably challenge the Commons on policy, leading to paralysis of government; if too little, then no quality candidates would apply. There was also the issue of when it should be elected. At a different time from the Commons would lead to a house potentially dominated by the government's opponents elected on mid-term protest; election at the same time to a

Vernon Bogdanor, Andrew Adonis (chair) and Lord Carrington
(photo: Jen Tankard).



house which rubber-stamped the Commons. Carrington's conclusion was that the new second chamber should have the same powers except on constitutional issues where it could refer matters to a mandatory referendum of the electorate. A nominated house would be the worst possible outcome, but all too likely if the Blair government abolished the hereditary peers and then did not go on to reform the composition of the Lords.

A lively discussion followed with Bogdanor arguing strongly that the Lords should not be reformed at all for the time being until it was clearer whether Britain was moving towards a federal system and a Commons elected by PR. Bogdanor had a higher opinion of the Lords' intrinsic expertise than Carrington, who thought it was much overrated.

Carrington returned again and again to his central argument that the current Lords was not credible and therefore had to be reformed and that to be credible it had to be elected, with all the difficulties that entailed. The audience – including three Lib Dem life peers – contributed various ideas for reform, including equal succession rights for male and female heirs, an independent commission to select peers and constituencies based on criteria other than geography. However all of these were found wanting and the meeting concluded that fundamental Lords reform was necessary, albeit without agreeing either on the timing or on the nature. Both speakers were united in expressing grave reservations that Labour would introduce a wholly nominated second chamber.

to turn their statements and previously held convictions into action. The problem was that they did not believe there was a strong public mood in favour of votes for women; indeed the question had not really been debated in the general election campaign. There was also a genuine fear of giving the vote to a section of the population which had a tendency to support temperance, which was, as our speaker, Dr Alberti, put it, 'always a tricky issue for Liberals!'

The Liberal leadership made it clear: politically active women were not supposed to fight for other women and their rights. They were supposed to help men get elected by working for the party and be patient. Once everything else had been sorted out – Ireland, the Budget, reform of the House of Lords and numerous other problems that got in the way – then the men might think about the 'girls'. They might consider the question of levelling a little the playing field (which still sounds rather familiar).

Inevitably, the arrival of war changed the political agenda. The Liberal Government accepted during the 1914–18 war that working men needed to be enfranchised. It was on the back of this reform that the question of women's suffrage was addressed (to a limited degree). As we know, there was a delay of 12 years before women were given equal voting rights as men. The suffragettes had themselves acquiesced to this slow pace of change

The most intriguing revelation Alberti made was about the Liberal Party's structures. The Women's Liberal Federation was designed to be Gladstone's poodle. The idea was to 'divert the suffrage movement within the Liberal Party into a controlled party organ'. This helps explain to any baffled outsider how a 'liberal' party in the latter stages of the 20th century could be so anti-feminist. The tone was set at the end of the last century, by the leadership of the party in an unambiguous attempt to control politically active women.

Baroness Williams followed Dr Alberti. As is Shirley's way, she spoke

The Struggle for Women's Rights

Fringe meeting, March 1998,
with Shirley Williams and Johanna Alberti
Report by Justine McGuinness

When I walked into the room (early) in Southport, for the History Group fringe, it was already full; by the time Shirley Williams arrived to speak, the room was busting at the seams and buzzing, itching to talk political history. You just knew it was going to be Class A fringe.

The first speaker was Dr Johanna Alberti, a lecturer at the Open University. Focusing on the latter part of the nineteenth century, Alberti highlighted the long fight for women to have the right to stand for elected positions and the struggle to clarify female property owners' rights to vote. Despite being enfranchised in 1869, when the Municipal Franchise Act was amended, it was as late as 1894 – some 25 years later – that married women in the

UK qualified as voting property owners (but not in respect of the same property as their husbands). In 1888, women tried to stand for county councils, though a legal question mark hung over this for nearly 20 years, until 1907.

In 1906 there was a landslide Liberal victory. As candidates, the majority of the newly elected Liberal MPs had stated their support for women's suffrage, giving suffragettes cause for optimism. However, the MPs failed