



Comment

End of the peer show

The singer Billy Bragg's ingenious formula for the reform of the House of Lords may just satisfy all parties

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You've got to hand it to Billy Bragg. Most of his peers are either playing the Bournemouth Pavilion in an eighties nostalgia night or they're resuscitating flatlined careers eating caterpillars in the Australian outback. But Bragg, the troubadour of the Kinnock years, has his gaze fixed on higher things than a reunion tour with The Human League or a dose of C-list reality TV. He still believes a pop star can change the world - just a little bit.

For years he has been doggedly campaigning for a cause that could not be less glamorous. He has not written a song about it because it is, by his own admission, "dry as a bone". Yet his effort could be about to achieve what all those earlier, more dramatic struggles - for the miners, against the bomb - never did. He could, just for once, be on the winning side.

Bragg's cause is the reform of the House of Lords (you can see why a three-minute pop song has so far proved elusive). Like a lot of people, he has a scheme for what should replace the current mix of bluebloods, cronies and party hacks - all of them unelected. Unlike a lot of people, when he pesters MPs with his ideas, he tends to get his calls returned.

Last week came a breakthrough: an hour-long session with the cabinet minister responsible for constitutional reform, Lord Falconer, followed by meetings with the leader of the House of Commons, Peter Hain, and Labour party chairman, Ian McCartney. Those close to Lord Falconer say he takes Bragg's idea very seriously: "It's not the only game in town, but it is certainly being kicked around." Hain has gone further, publicly floating the Bragg scheme himself. Next week the government will publish a bill for the next stage of Lords' reform, calling for the removal of the remaining hereditary peers and the creation of an independent appointments commission. Expect the surrounding debate to include some warm words about the Bragg plan.

So what is it? It's not much of a slogan and it won't have them lighting candles or waving lighters at the next Bragg concert, but the singer wants the second chamber filled by a secondary mandate. Simply put, seats in the second chamber would be allocated proportionally and in line with the share of the votes cast for the Commons at the general election. No separate election, just the same votes counting twice.

Here's how it would work. If Labour got 43% nationally, it would get roughly 43% of the seats in the new house. The MSCs, members of the second chamber, would be chosen from party lists, much as they are now for PR contests in Scotland and Wales or for the European parliament. It would not be a straightforward national contest, but broken up into the 12 "nations and regions" of Britain, with 25 members for each one. So if the Lib Dems won, say, 50% of the total vote in the south-west, they would get at least 12 of that region's 25 members in the 300-seat second chamber.

Bragg reckons his scheme cracks all the aged chestnuts of a debate that has remained unresolved in British politics for almost a century. Those who insist our constitution rests on the primacy of the Commons will be satisfied, because choosing a government to sit in the Commons would still be the primary purpose of each vote cast in a general election. The second chamber is merely a bonus: buy one, get one free.

At the same time, the scheme would deliver what those who advocate straightforward election have always wanted: democratic legitimacy. The members would be there as a result of votes, not the whim of a prime minister or his chums. That, says Bragg, would reconnect those turning off politics - and refusing to turn out at the polls - with the democratic process. Right now, those in safe seats can feel their vote is futile: "Labour/the

Tories always win here anyway." Under this system, even if the result in the local Commons constituency were a foregone conclusion, the regional PR contest would not be. Every vote would count much more.

It would also bring new blood into Westminster. With just a 4% threshold to clear, the Greens, Scottish Socialists and UK Independence party could all expect to make their debut in the UK parliament. The British National party would probably make it, too. Bragg is not worried. "It would shine a torch into the dirty little corner where the BNP defecate on our democracy, and that would be much more powerful than duffing them up in the street - which I'm also in favour of."

It's not surprising that Labour find the secondary mandate option appealing. They have been stung by Tory charges that their sole interest in Lords' reform is the desire to expel the hereditaries - motivated, say the Conservatives, by the same class hatred as the ban on fox-hunting - and that they have no idea what to do next. There are internal considerations, too. If the government once again presented a proposal for an all-appointed house of Tony's cronies, the Labour backbenches would be in uproar, threatening a tuition fees style revolt. Even Blairite loyalists admit that "most people think that a chamber which doesn't rest on some sort of election is bonkers".

The government knows it needs a credible vision of what the second half of our law-making body looks like. Tony Blair decided as much in the autumn: three times aides asked if he wanted to dump the question about Lords' reform from Labour's much-mocked Big Conversation document and three times he said no. A fortnight ago Lord Falconer laid on a slideshow for the cabinet, including a graph that charted Lords' defeats of governments from 1962 to 2003. "It was like spot the Labour government," says one who saw it: the graph spiked up in 1974-79 and again after 1997. "This is a revising chamber," says the source. "It just doesn't revise Conservative governments. It only revises us." Many ministers left convinced that the second chamber question simply has to be resolved, once and for all.

There are flaws in the Bragg scheme. As a conviction democrat, I would prefer full-blooded, direct election. But others hold opposite views just as strongly and the result has been a century of paralysis. This might be one of those cases where everyone has to give up on perfection and meet in the middle. I could live with the Bragg scheme and so could those who make a fetish of the supremacy of the Commons and have voted for appointment-only as a way to preserve it. It is not poetry, but it is a compromise that could work - which is what practical politics is all about. As the singer himself might put it, it won't change the world, it won't bring us a new England - but it could just make things a little bit better.

. Billy Bragg will be discussing his proposal at A Democratic Lords: the Third Stage? hosted by the Fabian Society, February 25, 7pm-9pm, Grand Committee Room, House of Commons

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