



Clown?

Lords reform

Worth Bragging about

Leader

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"If no one seems to understand," Billy Bragg used to sing, "start your own revolution." It seems the pop star/political activist has done exactly that. As Labour's party conference broke up yesterday, Lord Falconer, the secretary of state for constitutional affairs, promised delegates there would be a manifesto commitment to completing Lords reform. It is Bragg's idea of a secondary mandate, where votes cast in a general election would be used to determine a regionally based membership of an upper house, that looks like providing a route through the wreckage of earlier attempts to achieve a democratic second chamber.

Ten years ago, it would have seemed ridiculous that reform would not be completed by a third Labour term. But it would have seemed equally daft to speculate about a third Labour term. Tony Blair was right: there aren't a lot of votes in the constitution. Nonetheless, nervousness about a head-on confrontation with the existing members of the upper house has left the government looking more interested in obstructing than facilitating reform. Yesterday, all that changed. Lord Falconer was vague about the detail, but sure about the approach. Reform will be a priority for the new government. It will extend to some reshaping of the powers of the upper house (probably the introduction of timetabling, to prevent the kind of procrastination that has stymied some of the government's plans in the past four years) and looks set to embrace indirect elections for the great majority of members. By making it a manifesto pledge, further delay in the Lords becomes constitutionally unacceptable.

An indirectly elected upper house is not perfect. Members are likely to be chosen from a closed list, as in the Euro elections. That gives the parties an uncomfortable degree of control, although less so if it were decided to adopt Bragg's proposals for ordering candidates on the list by primary elections. There will also be arguments over the introduction of timetabling. Control of the hours spent in debate is a powerful weapon, as great parliamentarians like Michael Foot always knew, and at times when a government has an unassailable majority in the Commons, the second chamber's criticisms may be right even if at the moment they lack legitimacy. But it is reasonable to balance the increased authority bestowed by a degree of democracy with some diminution of the upper chamber's powers. This is a welcome advance from the absurdity of the current chamber. And once the principle of election is established, they can't take it away.

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