

“The bishops and the rats”

Objections to the expulsion of the last remaining hereditary peers are but a faint echo of the Tory uproar in 1910, writes **Lord Lexden**

Proposals for Lords reform inevitably destroy the calm that normally pervades the Upper House. It seems unlikely, however, that as the government’s bill to remove the 92 remaining hereditaries continues its passage, passions will become as inflamed as they did during the most serious of all constitutional crises involving the Lords in 1910-11.

Foolishly, the Tories used their commanding position in the Upper House to wreck much of the legislation of the great reforming Liberal government, which won a massive majority in 1906. To stop this folly, which culminated in the rejection of David Lloyd George’s ‘People’s Budget’ of 1909, prime minister Herbert Henry Asquith produced a bill to prevent Tory lords killing off measures they did not like. This became the famous Parliament Act.

The Tories’ fury knew no bounds. Their leader, Arthur Balfour, denounced the bill as “the culmination of a long-drawn conspiracy” whose aim was to create as definitely a single chamber constitution as the constitution of Guatemala. The Liberals had become “the party of revolution”.

At Committee Stage in the Lords, the Tories rewrote the bill. Their veto on legislation would remain, but when disputes arose between the two Houses, joint sittings would be held to try to resolve them; if they didn’t, a referendum (a favourite Tory device at this time) would take place.

When Asquith got up in the Commons on 24 July 1911 to move the rejection of the Lords’ amendments en bloc, he was howled down by some 30 Tory back benchers who kept up the pandemonium for half an hour, after which the sitting was suspended.

The furious protesters included James

Remnant, later a peer and great-grandfather of one of the 92 remaining hereditaries. Someone was heard to shout at Asquith, “If I had a revolver I would shoot you”. Balfour remained silent in his seat during these unprecedented scenes.

The Tories behaved much more constructively at one point during this extraordinary crisis. Lord Lansdowne, their leader in the Lords, came forward with a radical scheme for the complete reconstruction of the Upper House.

This remarkable plan would have scrapped the hereditary chamber, replacing it with a new body consisting of 350 members to be known as Lords of Parliament. 100 would be elected by hereditary peers from among their number. Another 100 would be



appointed in proportion to the strength of the parties in the Commons. 120 would be chosen by MPs grouped into electoral colleges on a regional basis. All would serve 12 years. Bishops and law lords would fill the remaining seats.

The main features of this plan would reappear, in one form or another, in subsequent proposals for Lords reform during the years ahead. If any had been implemented, they would have prevented many later difficulties, including the excessive creation of peerages in recent years.

Lord Newton, a leading Tory Lords reformer, prophesied in 1929 that “it

is not impossible that the Lords may reach a membership of over 1,000 before anything serious happens to it”. He slightly underestimated its future growth: before Tony Blair removed most of the hereditaries in 1999, there were over 1,200 peers in the Lords.

In 1911 Lansdowne resisted calls from within his own ranks to make his reform scheme even more radical. Some, he noted, are “in favour of relying entirely, or almost entirely, upon direct election”. The Duke of Bedford wanted to replace the Lords with an elected senate.

Lord Morley, a Liberal cabinet minister in the Lords, regarded Lansdowne’s scheme as “a great advance”, but Asquith would have none of it. Though he spoke of reconstructing the Upper House on a democratic basis, his sole interest was to subordinate the Lords to the Commons.

He compiled a list of 249 Liberal supporters, all highly reputable figures, on whom peerages would be conferred if the Lords refused to let his bill through. Lord Crewe, Liberal leader in the Lords, put it about that “between 300 and 400 peers would be created”. Plans had been made to introduce “six peers an hour”, which would have spun out their arrival over a considerable period.

The threats divided the Tory peers to their opponents’ great glee. “Let differences among the Tories find vent,” Jack Pease, Chancellor of the Duchy, recorded in his diary after a cabinet meeting. Those who wanted to defy Asquith to the bitter end turned on colleagues who felt the time had come to back down, dubbing them “the Judas group”. Lansdowne noted sadly: “There is an extraordinary amount of bitterness about.”

In sweltering heat, the bill passed on 10 August 1911 by 131 to 114, thanks to Tory and episcopal support. Thirteen bishops, along with 37 Tory peers, voted with the government’s 81 Liberals. “We were beaten by the bishops and the rats,” said one intransigent Tory. “Expel the bishops,” said another.

Some faint echo of this bitter drama can perhaps be heard in the gilded chamber today. ■