

Lords DIARY

Lord Lexden considers governments past and future

Wednesday 19 June

Wednesday is the best day of the week because it brings a meeting of the Lords Select Committee on the Constitution. We are concluding a brisk but well-researched sequel to a huge report, *Waging War: Parliament's Role and Responsibility*, produced by our predecessor committee in 2006-7. The Syrian crisis is of course much in our minds. What next? We decide to devote much of the rest of this year to a full inquiry into the constitutional implications of coalition government whose continuance, in one form or another, is a real possibility. It cannot be satisfactory that a coalition should amend the doctrine of collective responsibility simply to suit its own convenience, as this one has.

Thursday 20 June

I speak second in a debate on bullying in schools, introduced powerfully by Sal Brinton whose imaginative initiatives to help combat it are rightly admired. I concentrate on homophobic bullying on which Stonewall recently commissioned independent research. Far too many gay young people are suffering severely. I am glad to see my friend Ray Collins on the opposition front bench; we work together on gay issues, campaigning in particular against the continued criminalisation of homosexuality in the majority of Commonwealth countries.

Friday 21 June

A day of research to prepare for my short debate next Thursday on the extraordinary decision by the Northern Ireland Executive to reject the new Defamation Act which has transformed a widely criticised area of the law making it *inter alia* much cheaper to use, following years of preparatory work by Anthony Lester. The most astonishing feature of the Executive's decision is that no serious effort has been made to justify it. It is difficult to hold the Executive properly to account since the NI Assembly operates without a formal opposition. Parliament has a duty to ensure devolution does not deprive a part of our country of beneficial reforms.

Saturday 22 June

The Times has a piece on what in the 1880s became known

as its "Harcourt interpolation". A four-letter word was inserted by a disaffected compositor into a report of a speech in 1882 by Gladstone's Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt. Gladstone and the rest of the Cabinet enjoyed themselves hugely at the expense of an unpopular colleague. I write to *The Times* about this incident, risking further criticism from some readers of the paper that I send far too many letters.

Sunday 23 June

After sung matins in the Queen's Chapel at St James's Palace, I email *The House* my review of Antonia Fraser's superb new book on the 1832 Reform Bill. (See pp. 54-55)

Monday 24 June

I put down an oral question asking the Government to release the extensive files relating to the Denning Inquiry into the Profumo scandal 50 years ago. Some of the evidence was considered so shocking that short-hand typists were sent out of the room, but we live in a less refined, more resilient age where openness and transparency are universally applauded.

Tuesday 25 June

Incensed by an attack on independent schools by the head of Ofsted, I consult Matthew Burgess who now runs the Independent Schools Council over which I once presided. He tells me of the steady advance of partnership schemes bringing maintained and independent schools together. The latter devote far more to means-tested bursaries than they receive as a result of charitable status. I think of the 230 small, less well known schools with great expertise in special educational needs and other specialist areas which belong to the Independent Schools Association of which I recently became President. Many of them do not have selective admissions procedures. Ofsted should do some homework.

My letter is published in *The Times*. 🏰

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