

# Tony Blair's 'Cultural Revolution'

## *Breaking with tradition in the old country*

by Brett M. Decker

I believe the British government forms the best model the world ever produced." So said Alexander Hamilton during the debates of the American Federal Convention in 1787. The import of this great founder's statement is that the American experiment specifically, and Western democracy in general, owe their genesis to the democratic tradition in Great Britain. Today, that tradition has been seriously undermined by the Labour government's 2000 House of Lords Bill, which has effectively removed the hereditary principle within the House of Lords.

Prime Minister Tony Blair has set out to remake Britain. No traditional nuance of British culture is too small or insignificant to be guillotined for the sake of progress: the old bright red phone booths are confined to designated conservation areas; tea rooms are being replaced by fast food chains; village shops are being abandoned in favor of shopping malls; quaint police tunics and helmets are gradually being discarded for fatigues and the ceremony of monarchy is being efficiently chipped away. Blair has even engaged a tutor to help him change his middle class accent into a more downmarket monotone.

A country and people full of charm are sprinting to catch up with the dull, uniform world they had heretofore escaped. The soul of a nation is being pawned for a fleeting fashion. But abolishing the 800-year-old sitting and voting rights of hereditary peers in the House of Lords is the most ambitious connivance to date of Blair's

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Cultural Revolution. This is nothing less than a coup to overthrow the establishment from within.

British democracy depends on the Lords' role as a check-and-balance on the House of Commons. As with the similarly unelected U.S. Supreme Court, the House of Lords is a reflective and interpretative body. Although technically a legislative chamber, it neither crafts legislation nor makes laws, but rather weighs them for constitutional validity, suggests revisions and occasionally delays them (incidentally, the role of the U.S. Senate was crafted upon this last function). The lifelong, appointed independence of the American federal judiciary was modeled on the non-partisan, unelected and perpetually impartial nature of the hereditary Lords. In their respective countries, both are designed to inject continuity into the legal system and harness the occasionally haphazard mood of the moment common to popularly elected legislatures.

Unsurprisingly, Labour's initiative to abolish a millennium-old institution was initially patently unconstitutional. The crux of the abolition movement depended on the House of Commons single-handedly voting its brother chamber out of existence. Blair pointed to a dubious Parliament Act of 1949, in which the Commons acted alone, as a precedent, but the constitutional validity of this bill had never been affirmed by the Lords.<sup>1</sup> So until the Lords approved their own dissolution — which, tragically, they did on 11 November 1999 — the Government had no legal basis for the move. Blair, however, was determined to abolish the hereditary peerage whether it was legal or not.

Bad means tend to lead to bad ends. Historically, revolutions do not improve society but merely destroy order. Revolutionaries often have no blueprints for their reformed futures, and Blair is no exception. The Labour government's 1997 manifesto called for a two-part reform of the Lords, but only the first stage was defined. The first stage abolished hereditary rights, but there is still

no fully worked out plan for what is to come afterwards. Dismantling a primary component of government without determining what comes next is surely a recipe for chaos.

The most common proposal for the Lords' replacement is equally fatuous. Genuflecting to egalitarianism, a popularly-elected chamber would replace the peers. This would effectively rid the parliamentary system of its only check by entrusting the entire government to one ruling majority coalition at all levels. The same result would be derived if the chamber were to be appointed totally by the Prime Minister.<sup>2</sup> Recently, the government devised a scheme whereby people could nominate *themselves* to be "People's Peers." At the time of writing (November) 5,000 people have applied for the dozen or so positions on offer.

Whatever happens, it now seems possible that Britain may get a one-party government by rubber-stamp. This means that making radical changes would become easier, which is part of the reason Labour wanted hereditary prerogatives done away with in the first place: peers tend to be cautious, and are far less susceptible to party political pressures and considerations.

The House of Lords has often derailed or hindered major Blair government initiatives, including the planned extradition of General Pinochet to Spain and the plans to outlaw fox-hunting.<sup>3</sup> Even in the wake of Blair's Bill, the House has not been a pushover. Recently, in a big blow to the government, several of whose members are evangelizing homosexuals, the remaining hereditary peers<sup>4</sup> in combination with independent-minded Labour and cross-bench peers managed to prevent Labour from repealing Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act.<sup>5</sup>

Blair's ambition to centralize power dictatorially around himself has been assisted by ridding himself of the irritating nobility. It is because of this very danger that Alexis de Tocqueville — a radical democrat — defended the English aristocracy: their existence protects individual liberty by opposing any tendency toward centralized state power.

But practical and historical defenses of the institution fail to take into account the ideological battle-lines underlying the controversy. The principal motivation for abolishing the hereditary principle in the Lords was the modern mania of egalitarianism. Not even Blair has ever suggested that the House was inefficient or incompetent — merely inappropriate. The modern world

of political correctness simply leaves no room for the hereditary principle or any other notion of inherited privilege. Increased property taxes, inheritance taxes and

### Too Much Diversity?

*This is an excerpt from a speech given by Professor Paul Ehrlich to the Australian Population Association's 10<sup>th</sup> biennial conference, November 29-December 1, 2000, in Melbourne. Denis McCormack, Australian correspondent for The Social Contract, attended. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Science Unit audio-taped Professor Ehrlich and has advised that edited highlights will be broadcast sometime in 2001.*

"I like diversity of cultures. On the other hand, in the United States, I think we may have gone too far, because the cultures are tending to stay together and are fighting with each other at horrendous levels and I don't like to see that at all. So, I'm not sure whether we need any more diversity in the United States and whether it's wise to encourage any more diversity in the United States. At any rate, I think the basic problem in the United States, which is a very serious one, is what you do to control immigration because, of course, we have two very large, undefended land borders and very long coastlines. Whatever the policy is, as I say, people have to decide on the policy themselves; whatever this policy is, it's going to be extremely difficult to bring about in a world where you have such enormous differences in income. People and goods flow up, flow from poor areas to rich areas, and so the answer to U.S. immigration, as far as I'm concerned, isn't walls, borders, or rules; it's working as hard as we can to get to the solution.

"When the rich-poor gap is closed then you can make your decisions about immigration on entirely different bases, and I think most of the conflict will simply disappear. The problem is that as long as we allow huge areas of poverty in the world, then the people in the rich islands are going to have 'immigration problems.' So, what we ought to be doing is not worrying so much about the immigration as worrying about closing that rich-poor gap."

progressive taxation of all kinds (not to mention affirmative action) are now utilized worldwide in an attempt to ensure total equality in the future.

This egalitarian ideology flatly contradicts common sense. One need only look at any two or three people randomly assembled together and the intrinsic inequality among all men is obvious. Inherently, some men are more intelligent, more courageous, better looking, more athletic, more popular, richer, more healthy and even more

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virtuous than their contemporaries. From our first breath until our last, we are born with these inequalities — most of which are inherited from our forebears. Regardless of the intentions of the Declaration of Independence, few statements in history have been as patently preposterous as the notion that “all men are created equal.” Socialists and social engineers, however, are attempting constantly to drag us all down to the same debased level.

There can be little doubt that since the hereditary peers have been abandoned the monarchy has become much more vulnerable. There can be no coherent defense for the continued existence of a hereditary monarch in a system stripped of its hereditary aristocratic classes. The clock seems to be ticking against the Queen. One day, when the London fog clears, Olde England may simply have ceased to exist.

Fidel Castro stated nearly 40 years ago that “revolution is a struggle to the death between the future and the past.” These words could easily come from the mouth of Tony Blair today. But despite Blair, England cannot be separated from its great past — nor can the United States. True progress builds upon history rather than erasing it. At her founding, the innocence of America was the by-product of 1,000 years of experience in England. Not only does abdication of English tradition entail a loss for American democratic history, but structural turmoil in Westminster also poses

a potential security threat by rendering unstable Washington’s most dependable ally. Discarding tradition (especially constitutional tradition) does have practical and often unforeseen consequences.

In a disposable world where nothing is held sacred, tradition has an indispensable role. Whether it be sexual mores, the family, religion, nation-states or even the House of Lords, the building blocks of our great modern society rest on the foundation of Western tradition. Persistently remove stones from this foundation and eventually the whole house will come down. Abolishing the hereditary principle in the House of Lords is one more attack against the roots of British (and American) democratic order and another step forward for radical egalitarianism. •

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Acting unilaterally and therefore illegally, in 1949 the Commons nationalized the steel industry — giving credence to their Lordships’ 2000 argument that Blair’s precedent was bogus.

<sup>2</sup> This latter idea seems now to have been dropped, following fierce media criticism.

<sup>3</sup> Contrary to Labour propaganda, hereditary peers are by no means all slavish Conservatives. During the years 1989 to 1997, the House of Lords also hindered or prevented hundreds of Tory government initiatives.

<sup>4</sup> Ninety-two hereditary peers obtained a temporary reprieve after Viscount Cranborne, then Tory leader in the House of Lords, worked out a secret deal with Labour without the knowledge of Conservative leader William Hague.

<sup>5</sup> Section 28 forbids local authorities from using public money to promote homosexuality. If Labour wins the next election, it will have the opportunity of creating more peers for the following parliamentary session, who will help the government to force through Section 28’s repeal.