

The amateur shamateurs

BRITAIN FACES the prospect of a period of constitutional change under a Labour government led by Tony Blair. Whether these changes are meaningful for ordinary folk, or mere cosmetic exercises, will depend on the perceptiveness of the Labour government. Public debate is confused by hypocritical language, and a Blair government, if it really wants to make a difference, will have to begin by distrusting the very meanings of the words that will be used in opposition against it.

Take the case of the House of Lords. Labour says it wants to eliminate hereditary peerages. Already a representative of this privileged class of citizen has threatened Labour with rearguard action to prevent reform. Labour has now responded by threatening to swamp the House of Lords with life peers in order to secure a voting majority. The last time such a threat was issued was in 1910 when Lloyd George raised this prospect as a way to overcome the opposition by landowners to the Liberal government's proposal to raise revenue from the rent of land. The biggest landowners in the nation, of course, occupied seats in the Lords; and they were not going to allow commoners to take some of 'their' rental income.

Today, one of their spokesmen is Lord Cranbourne, heir to the 400-year-old Salisbury titles. He has launched a defiant defence of inherited political power. And he is seeking to intimidate democratically elected members of the House of Commons by questioning their motives. He says, for example, that, as amateurs, the peers who inherit their seats in parliament were "less interested in climbing the greasy pole" than elected MPs.

That word *amateur* is loaded. It seeks to separate the aristocracy from the commoners by suggesting that their motives in the service of the community are loftier than those of elected Members of Parliament. But what Lord Cranbourne does not say is that his kind are not amateurs (meaning: unpaid) at all. These hereditary peers don't have to climb greasy poles because they are carried on the backs of the people who pay them the publicly created rental value of land and natural resources. For centuries the Peers of the Realm have not had to work for their living, because their income came to them *gratis*, courtesy of the people who worked. *Ergo*, these gentlemen have had the free time to enjoy the pursuit of politics. But that does not make them amateurs: they were paid with the sweat of the people who generated the rents which were then privately appropriated by the

ancestors of Lord Cranbourne.

Tony Blair, if he is installed in Downing Street at the election on May 1, will need to be armed with a healthy disrespect for conventional wisdom. Otherwise, the old guard in Westminster and their Old School Tie companions in Whitehall will find many soothing words with which to try and obstruct attempts at reforms that would improve the condition of society.

THE FUTURE of the Welfare State will be more of a challenge for the next administration than all the proposals for constitutional change put together. Altering the voting system and adopting a Freedom of Information Act are important, but they are secondary to the adoption of a new vision of how to restructure the economy to make it fit for people in the 21st Century.

The Conservative government of John Major is in the last throes of privatising what little is left of public sector assets. If re-elected, a Tory government will have to shift to reducing the financial obligations of the State by dismantling social services. Privatising the pension scheme is one of Mr. Major's goals. So is the private financing of nursing care for old folk. These measures are being developed outside the framework of a coherent philosophy. If implemented on the basis of conventional wisdom we will be recreating a 19th Century society based on private charity.

Margaret Thatcher's place in history is now well established: the yawning gap between the rich and poor which existed in 1979 when she came to power grew by leaps and bounds over the past 18 years. Unfortunately there is no evidence in the manifestos of the Labour and Liberal Parties which encourages us to believe that the gap will be eliminated over the next 18 years.

Mr. Blair's Chancellor designate, Mr. Gordon Brown, is putting most of his eggs in the windfall tax basket. He plans to raise a one-off £5bn by taxing the utilities that were privatised over the last couple of years. The money is supposed to be invested in activities for educating young people back into the jobs market. Nothing about this proposal suggests that new jobs will actually be available for these young people, who are today resigning themselves to the prospect of living on welfare handouts. A Bill of Rights that does not transform the economy into a dynamic system capable of returning to full employment will not be worth the paper it's written on.

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