

Speech by Paddy Ashdown in the House of Lords arguing for the need for reform 21st June 2011 from Hansard

Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon: I think it was Oscar Wilde who said that in a democracy the minority is always right. That thought has given me much comfort over the years as a Liberal, and it appears that it will have to give me comfort in this debate as well. I spent an engaging hour and a half yesterday in the House of Lords Library, looking through opposition speeches made in December 1831 to the Great Reform Act 1832 and to the Reform Act 1867. Five arguments were put forward. The first was: there is no public call for such reform beyond those mad radicals of Manchester. The second was: we should not be wasting our time and money on these matters; there are more important things to discuss such as the Schleswig-Holstein problem, the repeal of the corn laws or the crisis in the City that caused Anthony Trollope to write his wonderful novel.

A noble Lord: Not in 1832.

Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon: No, but in 1867.

The third argument, which was put so powerfully—indeed, in bloodcurdling terms—by the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, was that if we were to embark on this constitutional terra incognita, the delicate balance of the constitution would collapse around us; mere anarchy would rule upon the world.

The fourth argument put forward in those debates was, “No, no, let us not disturb the quiet groves of wisdom within which we decide the future of the nation by letting in the rude representatives of an even ruder republic. God knows what damage we shall do if such a thing should happen”. The last and fifth argument was the argument actually used by the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd, just a moment ago: “if it ain’t broke, don’t mend it”.

Those are the arguments that were put forward against the 1832 Act, the 1867 Act, the 1911 Act—every single reform that we have ever had—and they are the arguments that are being put forward now. They were wrong then and they are wrong now. Perhaps I might explain before I come to the substance of the argument.

The first argument is that there is no public interest in this matter. Of course there is not; it is our business, not the public’s. The public have made it very clear that they do not trust our electoral system in its present form. Is there anyone in this Chamber who does not realise that the dangerous and growing gap between government and governed that is undermining the confidence in our democracy must be bridged? It must be bridged by the reform and modernisation of our democratic institutions, and we have a part to play in that too. This is not about what the public want, it is about us putting our House in order.

The second issue is that there are more important things to discuss. I do not think so. Frankly, we have been very fortunate to have lived through the period of the politics of contentment. The fragility of our democratic system has not been challenged because the business of government and democracy has been to redistribute increasing wealth. If we now come to the point at which we must redistribute retrenchment, difficult decisions, hard choices, I suspect it will come to something rather different, as we see on the streets of Greece today and as we saw on the streets of London not very long ago. This is very important.

The third is that we are embarking on a constitutional journey into terra incognita. Of course we are. We do not have a written constitution in this country. I wish we did, but we are told that the genius of our constitution is that it is unwritten, that it responds to events, that it develops, that it takes its challenges and moves forward. Oliver Cromwell did not have to say, “We will delay the Civil War until we have worked out the proper constitutional relationship between Parliament and the King”. In 1832 they did not say, “Let us hold this up until we have decided what proper constitutional balances would be achieved”. If you believe in the miracle of the unwritten constitution, you must believe that our constitution will adapt. You cannot argue that that is a good thing and then say that we cannot move forward unless we know precisely and in exact detail what will happen next. Of course this will change the balance between us and the other Chamber. It will not challenge the primacy of the other Chamber, but it will challenge the absolute supremacy of the other Chamber—that is called check and balance.

The fourth argument is that this will disturb the gentle climate of wisdom in this place. I have no doubt that there is unique wisdom here, although I have to say that I do not believe it is necessarily evenly distributed—maybe in some places it is, but not everywhere. However, I am not persuaded that there is less wisdom in the 61 second chambers that are elected, that there is less wisdom in the Senate of the United States, or the Sénat in France or the Bundesrat in Germany. I do not believe that the business of election will produce less wisdom than we have here now—rather the contrary. It is not wisdom that we lack; it is legitimacy. My old friend, Lord Conrad Russell—much missed—used to say, “I would happily exchange wisdom for legitimacy”, and I will tell your Lordships why.

This is where we come to the final point—the point made by the noble Baroness, Lady Boothroyd: “If it ain’t broke, let’s not fix it”. It is broke; it is broke in two fashions. First, our democracy now and our institutions of democracy in this country do not enjoy the confidence of our people in the way they did. That confidence is declining. We have to be part of the reform that reconnects politics with people in this country. If we do not, our democratic institutions will fall into atrophy and may suffer further in the decline of the confidence of the people of this country. If noble Lords do not realise that, they do not realise just how difficult the current situation is in Britain.

We in this Chamber cannot leave this to others to do. We must be part of that reform, modernisation, reconnection and democracy. It is said that this House does its job as a revising Chamber well. So it does. It is allowed to revise, change, amend legislation, but is it allowed to deal with the really big things? It does the small things well, but is it constructed in a way that would prevent a Government with an overwhelming majority in the other place taking this country to an unwise and, as we now know, probably illegal war? No, it would not because it did not. I cannot imagine that the decision to introduce the poll tax and the decision to take this country to war would have got through a Chamber elected on a different mandate and in a different period, or if there had been a different set of political weights in this Chamber from the one down the other end.

The truth of the matter is that we perform the function of a revising Chamber well, but that is not our only function. We are also part of the checks and balances in this country. The fact that we do not have democratic legitimacy undermines our capacity to act as a check and balance on the excessive power of the Executive backed by an excessive majority in the House of Commons. That is where we are deficient and what must be mended.

The case is very simple to argue. In a democracy, power should derive from the ballot box and nowhere else. Our democracy is diminished because this place does not derive its power from democracy and the ballot box but from political patronage—the patronage of the powerful. Is it acceptable in a democracy that

the membership of this place depends on the patronage of the powerful at the time? We are diminished in two ways. We are diminished because we do not perform the function that we need to perform of acting as a check and a balance on the Government, and we do not do so because we are a creature of the Government's patronage. I cannot believe that noble Lords find that acceptable in this Chamber .

A noble Lord: Time.

Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon: Perhaps noble Lords will forgive me, I will finish now. I have already strained my time but I ask for patience. The Leader of the House is right. We have spent 100 years addressing reform in this House. It is time to understand why that is necessary—both to make our place in modern democracy and to fulfil our proper function to provide a check and balance on an Executive who may get too powerful. We turned our hand to this 100 years ago; it is time to finish it now.