

THE MIX COMMENT



MAKING A MEAL OF DEMOCRACY

Brendan O'Neill

Exactly what century are we living in? Like you, I thought it was the 21st, all zappy and hi-tech and interconnected, where we look with wide-eyed wonder at the strange behaviour and stiffness of those *Downton Abbey* characters. Yet it seems I am wrong. It seems Britain has quietly been thrust back to the 16th century. Last week a bishop – loved by God, sure, but elected by nobody – marshalled other bishops and some lords and ladies to strike down proposals put forward by elected government officials.

Having an unelected man of the cloth boss about politicians who were voted in by us, the people, doesn't strike me as a very suitable thing in the 21st century. In his capacity as a peer in the unelected House of Lords, the Rt Rev John Packer, Bishop of Ripon and Leeds, was rebelling against the Lib-Con government's proposed welfare reforms, specifically its plan to introduce a benefit cap of £26,000 per household. Now, it doesn't matter a fig what you think about those reforms – I know good people who are in favour of the cap and I know good people who are against it. Whichever side of the divide you find yourself on, though, you should be more than a little freaked out that, in 2012, it is still possible for holy men and wealthy men to block proposals put forward by the democratic representatives of commoners.

The bishop clearly sees himself as representing some higher, mystical authority than us mere plebs. So despite the fact the government's proposed reforms were a) put forward by elected officials and b) have the support of 76 per cent of the public, according to a YouGov poll, still the bishop and his equally unelected mates sought to flamethrower them. Packer said his amendment to the government's reforms was about standing up for those who have "no voice" – specifically children, whom he claims will be hit hard by the government's proposals.

buddies in the Lords arrogantly elbowed aside the millions of adults who voted for the Tories or the LibDems and whose cross in a box should carry far more political weight than one man who happens to wear a cross around his neck. Yet alarmingly, the bishop has been heartily cheered by many liberal columnists who normally balk at the idea of religious men meddling in political affairs and who aren't usually fans of the unelected second chamber.

Kath Viner, deputy editor of the *Guardian*, tweeted that the bishop made her "proud to be from Ripon!". Other left-leaning commentators, exasperated by the Lib-Cons and clearly disillusioned with the masses too, are increasingly calling on the Lords to shoot down bills they don't like. One describes the snoring inhabitants of the Lords as "the only decent politicians left". Another describes them as "a blessing".

Radical campaign groups such as 38 Degrees – which describes itself as democratic – calls on its supporters to "Email a peer" to try to convince him or her to vote against government measures on welfare, the NHS or whatever. This is a very dangerous game.

In calling on the Lords to fight on our behalf, the anti Lib-Con side of the cultural elite is empowering the least democratic section of the British political class.

Indeed, today, people like the Bishop of Ripon and Leeds do not derive their moral authority over the moronic masses from God – rather they get it from the likes of Polly Toynbee, from increasingly desperate members of the liberal classes who are so keen to get one over on the Lib-Cons they will sidle up to unelected peers and plead with them to use their aristocratic clout to put MPs in the Commons (and by extension commoners) in their place. We shouldn't flatter the second chamber in this way. We should abolish it. It is more than 200 years since Thomas Paine, that great British radical, described the House of Lords as "the remains of aristocratical tyranny".

If you are opposed to government proposals, say so in free and open debate rather than trying to coax these descendants of tyranny to ride roughshod over the democratic realm. ●

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