

The Viscount Malgré Lui

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LONDON
IT NOW LOOKS as if the British peerage may finally meet its doom, not because of the unfair privileges its members enjoy but because of the unfair disadvantages under which they suffer. Its feudal walls are threatened today not by the common masses seeking to get in but by a noble few struggling desperately to get out. So long as the House of Lords merely kept the people down, that was tolerable. The complaint today, however, is quite different—that it is preventing ambitious noblemen from climbing up. This is clearly a much more serious matter. For a nation that is at one and the same time deeply snobbish and passionately against injustice, no rallying cry could carry farther or unite more sections of the population than that of “Unfair to noblemen!” This, of course, is why the second Viscount Stansgate, better known as Mr. Anthony Wedgwood Benn, has managed in the last few weeks to shake the hereditary peerage far more severely than all the egalitarian, radical assaults of the past.

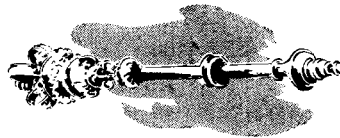
Until his father, the first Viscount Stansgate, died a few months ago, young Anthony was a prominent Labour M.P. who greatly enjoyed the rough-and-tumble of party warfare in the Lower Chamber and could look forward to rapid promotion if a Labour government was ever returned to power. The last thing he wanted was to have to leave the Commons as a result of inheriting a peerage.

Cynics assume that his disinclination springs from arrogant ambition to become prime minister or chancellor of the exchequer, which now is virtually out of the question for a peer. Lord Stansgate himself rebuts the charge, pointing out quite rightly that apart from these two top offices, all cabinet posts are open to members of the House of Lords, as is confirmed by the Earl of Home’s appointment as foreign secretary. Indeed, the prospects of office are probably higher for a Labour peer than for a Labour

M.P., since there are relatively few peers to choose from. The fact remains, however, that in the Labour Party at any rate, a peer does suffer profound disadvantages sufficient to deter an ambitious politician. While his prospects of office may improve, his chance of exercising influence in the party is substantially diminished.

Room at the Bottom?

There have, of course, been other M.P. sons of noble fathers, like the present Lord Hailsham, who have also sought to retain their right to sit in the House of Commons after succeeding to their father’s title. (Incidentally, Sir Winston Churchill’s refusal to be ennobled springs from a desire to avoid putting Mr. Ran-



dolph Churchill in this predicament—a rather fanciful scruple seeing that the younger Churchill’s political future has been blocked by self-created obstacles.) But no one before has been prepared to carry his struggle as far as Lord Stansgate, who has not only pleaded with the Commons—as did Lord Hailsham—to alter its rules barring peers from membership, but also summoned the people to his aid by putting himself forward as the candidate in the by-election that followed his involuntary ennoblement.

What is more, he won the by-election with a massive majority. So the question facing the country now is not simply whether an ambitious M.P. should be sent to the Lords against his will; it is the far more burning issue of whether the electors should be denied the representative of their choice simply because he happens to have had a peer as a father.

There can, I think, be very little doubt that an overwhelming majority of the country feels that Lord Stansgate, and the electors who voted for him, are in the right and that the government, in refusing to give way,

is wrong. Yet if the government were to give way and were to allow Lord Stansgate to renounce his title and retain his seat, it is difficult to see how the hereditary principle could long survive. For the essence of an hereditary system is that it imposes duties as well as privileges, removing them altogether from the sphere of personal choice. If a coronet can be put on and taken off at will, it loses precisely those special qualities without which it is no different from any ordinary headgear. Put it another way: if one hereditary peer is free to divest himself at will of his nobility, how can this avoid making other hereditary peers who wish to keep their titles look rather foolish?

REASONS of party advantage would certainly prompt the government to sacrifice the hereditary principle, since the arguments by which it can be defended make little appeal to a modern electorate. The two merits usually claimed for a hereditary aristocracy in politics are disinterestedness and mediocrity. A class whose position in society is fixed and which is therefore immune to the corrupting force of ambition is, so its apologists tell us, particularly suited to take a long and honorable view of the nation’s interest. To Edmund Burke, an even stronger argument for the hereditary principle was that it contributed to the governing class that essential element of ordinariness, of similarity to the common man, which is absent from meritocracy. G. K. Chesterton made the same point when he contended that the House of Lords was a far more democratic institution than the House of Commons, because to be an M.P. you had in practice to be a successful businessman, trade unionist, or lawyer, which are all achievements, whereas to be a lord you had only to be born, which is a universal experience.

A modern Tory could go even further and turn the tables on the Marxist critique of aristocracy. In the old days it was probably true to say that the argument of disinterestedness fell to the ground, since a landowning aristocracy was itself, *par excellence*, a highly organized special interest. Insofar as the aristocracy today has any economic

basis, it comes from the ownership of shares in industry which are controlled not by the shareholders but by up-and-coming salaried technocrats. In other words, it is now possible for the hereditary aristocrats to be disinterested in a way that they could never be before. For the first time they can really practice *noblesse oblige*—and the administration of the social services provides infinite opportunities for this—since they have ceased to be a class or an interest in competition with other classes or interests.

NONE of these arguments, however, would be likely to convince the public that Lord Stansgate should be sacrificed on the altar of the hereditary principle. They are both too elusive and too abstract to lend themselves to platform exposition. Therefore, what the government is much more likely to do is to meet Lord Stansgate's agitation by putting forward its own reform program for the House of Lords, not only to solve the problem of peers' renouncing their titles and retaining their seats in the Commons but also to make other more radical changes.

This, however, is far from what the Labour Party actually wants. Although it is theoretically opposed to the hereditary principle, it is even more opposed in practice to the idea of breathing really effective new life into the Upper Chamber. The Socialists well realize that if the House of Lords were to be composed largely of life peers chosen on the grounds of individual merit, rather than largely of hereditary noblemen chosen by birth, this would immensely strengthen its influence. A body that contained the elite of industry, trade unionism, the professions, and the arts would be able to compete with the Commons on far more favorable terms than the present feudal institution.

Why should the Labour Party be frightened of such a development? The short answer is that an Upper Chamber reformed on nonhereditary lines would probably be just as conservative as the present body; but whereas in its present form it is easy enough to dismiss its views with impunity, in a reformed state it would have to be taken far more

seriously. In short, by modernizing the House of Lords and stripping off its feudal encrustations, the Tories might well prop it up as an instrument of conservative power for yet a few more centuries. Basically, therefore, the Labour Party is as fearful of the consequences of Lord Stansgate's campaign as is the Tory Party.

Further reform of the House of Lords, like so much else in British history, may come about more by accident than by design, not because of some deep surge of opinion about some major question of principle but because of what almost amounts to a personal accident. For the first Lord Stansgate, who was himself a staunch Socialist, accepted a peerage only with the greatest reluctance and against his better judgment. It was during the Second World War, and the coalition government felt that in the interest of national unity, Labour Party representation in the Lords needed strengthening. At that time young Anthony's political ambitions seemed scarcely relevant, since his elder brother, who was subsequently killed in the war, was still alive. But if the first Lord Stansgate had not felt it his patriotic duty to accept Churchill's request, it is unlikely that there would have had to be a Parliamentary inquiry into reform of the Lords in 1961.

For there can be little doubt that the momentum the Wedgwood Benn case has gathered is personal rather than ideological. It is for Benn rather than against the aristocracy; for "common sense," which

argues that the nobility of this particular father should not be visited on the head of this particular son, rather than against the idea of inherited titles altogether.

THAT, at any rate, is how the problem presented itself initially. But in the course of the ensuing debate the argument has spread from the particular to the general, since the only way the government has been able to refuse Lord Stansgate's personal request has been on grounds of general principle. And once the Tories fell back on their basic belief in hereditary aristocracy—which few of their younger members really believe in—the Socialists in turn were forced to riposte by attacking that principle root and branch, which again few of them are really eager to do. So against the will of both parties, the question of House of Lords reform has been thrust into the center of the political stage, and the government has been compelled to set up a Parliamentary inquiry that nobody wants.

The outcome is all the more absurd since in recent years the House of Lords has been giving general satisfaction. Indeed, in their pragmatic way, the Tories have been reforming the Lords in practice without changing its principles, largely through the innovation of life peerages, surely one of Mr. Macmillan's most constructive contributions to British politics. Every year the government recommends that the Queen elevate a limited number of public figures, both men and women, to the House of Lords—but only for the span of their own lifetime. The title ends with their death. Sociologists, headmasters, economists, industrialists have all been honored in this way. Barbara Wootton, for example, is now to be heard lecturing their Lordships on the causes of sexual crime and other matters. As a result, the debates are certainly very often a good deal more expert and even more lively than they are in the Commons.

Lord Stansgate has interrupted this gradual, illogical, pragmatic adaptation of the Lords to modern conditions by raising an issue about his personal future that cannot be solved except by a clear-cut decision of basic principle here and now.



The Lost Decades In Italian History

CLAIRE STERLING

ON APRIL 25, Italy commemorated the sixteenth anniversary of its liberation from Fascist rule. The celebration, if somewhat matter-of-fact, wasn't yet the perfunctory affair it may become a few generations hence: while not all Italians had opposed Fascism by any means, those who did aren't likely to forget it. But how about those who have come after them? What do Italians born in the 1930's and 1940's know about Mussolini beyond the fact that he drained the Pontine Marshes? What do they know of his *squadrists* and castor-oil treatments and Pact of Steel with Hitler, of the Nazi occupation in Italy and the partisan Resistance?

The powerful obliterating force of time has been at work. There are, of course, some young men and women who feel strongly about Fascism, one way or the other. But even these tend to see the era just preceding theirs through the lens of folklore, and an unnerving number of others seem as incurious and disengaged about it as they might be about the Boxer Rebellion.

Clearly, time alone cannot be blamed for this state of affairs: sixteen years aren't all that long. But time has been helped, in this case, by the disinclination of older Italians to talk about such painful memories, and still more by the fact that a whole generation has grown to manhood without learning a word on the subject in its schools.

It was only eight months ago that the government decided to permit the teaching of history from 1922—Year One of the Fascist Era—onward. Until then, all history had stopped, from primary school through the university, at the First World War; and many scholars felt that this was just as it should be. For a country shrouded in classic academic traditions, the idea of injecting shrill political controversy into the class-

room was highly unorthodox. Moreover, to teach about Fascism fully and fairly, with all its ignoble features—political oppression at home, predatory raids abroad, defeat and disgrace in war, fratricidal bloodshed—requires an exacting kind of patriotism as well as objectivity. No scholastic formulation, however guarded, could have failed to add



one more scabrous issue to all the others in domestic politics; and no government since the Liberation had felt strong enough to face that.

Certified Chronicles

The present government of Amintore Fanfani, which has finally done so, isn't much stronger than the others. But it has evidently decided that the immediate risk is small compared to the risk of having a second generation reach voting age in political innocence. "With the time that has elapsed and the objective evaluation that scholars have made," said the Minister of Education in his proclamation, "these events [since 1922] have by now entered under the arch of history. They can no longer be ignored in official teaching, lest our youth

should have an incomplete and insufficient knowledge of the new democratic order of the republic."

Admirable as the minister's intentions might have been, however, the results so far are discouraging. Actually, Italian scholars have done very little toward making an objective evaluation of Mussolini and his works. The fault is not entirely theirs, since all official documents on that period are locked up in the state archives, where probably they will stay for quite a while. Nevertheless, the fact remains that not many historians here have contributed so much as a reasonably impartial essay on those years, and not one has yet produced a full textbook. Hence, though contemporary history has been part of the official curriculum since last November, it still isn't included in school examinations; only three professors are giving courses on it in the universities; in the high schools a number of teachers skip the subject altogether, and the others rely on hastily prepared supplements to old textbooks.

MANY TEXTBOOKS suffer from a crippling reticence or deliberate deformation, or both. One of the most widely circulated high-school history texts, for example, describes Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia by saying: "Ethiopia came into conflict with Italy because of a violation of frontiers by the Ethiopians"; it adds that Mussolini attacked Greece because "Greece refused to join the tripartite Rome-Berlin-Tokyo alliance"; it goes on to explain that Mussolini sent his army to help Franco in Spain because, though Franco was rebelling against a legally elected government, that government was "*an anti-clerical democratic republic* [author's italics] heading swiftly toward Bolshevism, and imposed by a minority on a traditionally Catholic and monarchist nation"; and it clarifies Hitler's rise to power by saying: "In the uneasy period after the First World War, Germany suffered more than any other belligerent state; but, formed by a people with great moral resources and national pride, it did not take long to rise again." The same author devotes one line to anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany by referring to