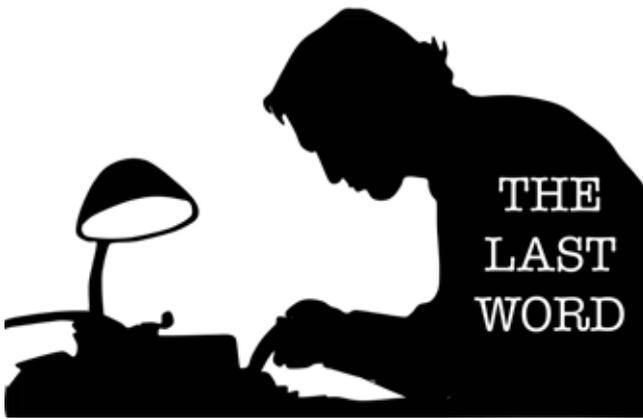


Socialists and Constitutional Change

Mike Stanton



There is a theory on the left that Britain never finished its transition from a feudal economy to capitalist economy and this is reflected in various constitutional hangovers like a hereditary monarchy instead of an elected head of state, and an unelected House of Lords.

The argument goes that we still have to finish the ‘bourgeois’ revolution, end the power of the aristocracy and institute a democratic republic before we can proceed to the next stage on the road to socialism. It is a pseudo-Marxist version of “Now is not the time.”

And Now will Never be the Time while republicans remain a minority. The monarchy is seen as a neutral figurehead, there to stop ambitious politicians extending their power. In truth the monarchy encourages deference to a class society in which we are all supposed to know our place and act accordingly. It is a bastion of conservative values.

House of Lords

The House of Lords is another matter. Gordon Brown has authored a report for Keir Starmer on Broken Britain and one of his fixes is to abolish the House of Lords and replace it with some kind of elected chamber. Starmer has endorsed the report. Does that mean he really is a leftie showing his democratic credentials?

Hardly. Blair with an unassailable majority in the Commons and a mandate to abolish the Lords could only manage a botch-up. One quirk of Blair’s attempt to modernise the Lords is that the only peers to be elected are the hereditary peers! There are 91 of them, elected by the rest of the hereditary peers when they voted themselves out of existence. There are 25 bishops and 670 life peers who are appointed on the recommendation of the prime minister.

Brown said much the same in 2007 when he was Prime Minister as he is saying now, but nothing changed. Starmer will, at best, set up a royal commission which will



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probably report in time for the next Tory government to ignore them.

Left wing support for constitutional reform, whether it is abolition of the House of Lords, proportional representation or greater regionalisation, is based on two contradictory ideas. One, that capitalism needs a more democratic politics to function properly, and, two, that once we have achieved that alignment we can use the same capitalist state machinery to overturn capitalism!

Economic democracy and political democracy

Capitalism already rules the world. It does not need to complete the bourgeois revolution here or anywhere else. It can operate under parliamentary democracy or fascist dictatorship. It does not care who runs the state so long as nobody challenges its untrammelled power in the workplace. Socialist support for more democracy has to be predicated upon the demand to extend democracy into the economic sphere as well as the political.