Britain's Conservative Party split over House of Lords reform

By Julie Hyland
4 December 1998

The Conservative Party has effectively split amidst bitter wrangling over the attitude it should take towards the Labour government's proposed reform of the House of Lords, the second chamber of Parliament.

On Wednesday evening, Conservative Party leader William Hague sacked Lord Robert Cranborne, Tory leader in the Lords, sparking a front bench revolt by other peers. Cranborne was removed after he brokered a deal with the government, without Hague's backing, which would allow 91 hereditary peers to remain with full voting and speaking rights during the first phase of the Lords' reform. The remaining hereditaries--there are currently 759--would lose these rights but retain their seats until after a Royal Commission is held regarding the next stage of reform.

Under the proposed deal, 42 Tories, 2 Labourites and 3 Liberal Democrats would be retained based on present proportions in the Lords. They would be elected by their own party peers and would be joined by a further 28 cross-bench hereditary peers--those taking no party whip. Another 16 Lords would be allowed to remain as officials to run the House. That would leave the Lords with 214 Tory peers, 161 Labour members, 48 Liberal Democrats and 148 cross-benchers. Blair would then appoint a sufficient number of life peers to bring the Labour benches into line with the Tories.

Secretive cross-party talks on changes to the upper chamber have been taking place since last summer, with Hague initially agreeing to Tory participation. But when Cranborne put the proposed deal to a small section of the shadow cabinet last week, it was rejected overwhelmingly. Cranborne has since stated, "William Hague assumed, I think, that that would be an end of it. It wasn't."

Viscount Cranborne, the great-great grandson of Lord Salisbury, a former prime minister, is one of Britain's leading aristocrats and has campaigned for the retention of the hereditary element in the Lords. The "great families" should continue to form "part of the collective memory of the nation", according to Cranborne. However, he was prepared to see some hereditary peers sacrificed if it meant those same families retained a say in the final make-up of a reformed chamber.

To this end, Cranborne held secret talks with Blair over the last two weeks. He informed Blair that whilst he was unable to promise the support of the Shadow Cabinet, he would fight for backing amongst Tory peers. By lunchtime Wednesday, Cranborne had won the support of his front-bench colleagues in the Lords and was preparing to put the deal to a full meeting of back-bench Tory peers in the afternoon. At approximately the same time cross-bench convenor Lord Weatherhill was to announce the agreement and the government's backing for it, at a press conference.

Having only discovered the arrangements earlier that same day, Hague decided to try and scupper the agreement by giving details of the proposal during Prime Minister's Question Time, held every Wednesday. By revealing the substance of the agreement--most MP's were also unaware that talks had been taking place--Hague hoped to both expose Blair's lack of principles and show that the government had no clear strategy for reforming the Lords.

Hague had argued that Labour's plans to replace hereditary peers with an appointed second chamber would create a "giant quango". He described such life peers as "Tony's cronies". He said that no decision should be made on the first stage of Lords' reform without a clear plan for a fully reformed second chamber.

Labour promised to abolish the parliamentary rights of hereditary peers in its 1997 election manifesto. This

proposal was outlined in the Queen's Speech at the end of November. The pace was forced when the Lords rejected, on an unprecedented five occasions, government plans to establish a system of closed-list proportional representation for next year's European election. Over the last weeks, Blair and other senior Labour leaders have railed against the Lords as a bastion of "privilege" and a relic of "feudal domination".

Hague hoped that his tactics would force the Tory party to toe his line. Instead, it has exposed the deep divisions that exist. Just after Hague's surprise statement in Parliament on Wednesday, Cranborne met with back-bench Tory peers to outline the deal and received their overwhelming support. Later, following a two-hour meeting between Hague and the back-benchers, the peers reiterated their support for Cranborne. At 6 p.m., following a meeting with the Shadow Cabinet, Hague announced that he had sacked Cranborne. The measure was necessary to restore "discipline" in the party, Hague stated.

Whilst acknowledging that he had been "sacked for running in like an ill-trained spaniel", Cranborne said that he would be prepared to do it again. The deal was "extraordinarily good", he said, and would have "made the prime minister eat his words". He added, "In any conflict between loyalty to the party and loyalty to this House, my judgement must be about what I think is best for the future of this House."

In Parliament Blair taunted Hague, saying, "Your party in the House of Lords is now agreed [to the deal]. What is very clear from this exchange is that you no longer speak for the Conservative Party in the House of Lords." Others concurred. By Wednesday evening Hague faced a full-scale revolt of front-bench peers who offered to resign en masse in protest at their colleague's dismissal.

Hague refused the offer. However, he was only able to secure a new Tory leader in the Lords, Lord Strathclyde, after agreeing that Tory peers would not be required to vote against the reform proposal and could even vote in favour. This means that the measure--which is to be tabled as an amendment to the main bill on hereditaries in the New Year--will go through. Hague was left attempting to justify his actions, whilst stating that he, too, supported Labour's "concession".

This was not enough to stem the crisis. By Thursday morning, Lord Fraser, the deputy leader of the Tory Lords, had also resigned in protest at the "completely unacceptable" decision to remove Cranborne. He was quickly followed by the rest of his front-bench colleagues. Earl Onslow, a senior hereditary peer, said, "Mr. Hague can talk about discipline, as far as I'm concerned, as long as he likes."

Hague's position as Tory leader is now being openly questioned. The Tory broadsheet the *Times* described his actions as "high politics, high drama but not a wise strategy". The *Financial Times* went further. Hague, it said, "has yet to show any serious strategic vision. His party is as unpopular now as it was at the time of the election and there is scarcely disguised unrest among his MPs."

This mouthpiece of big business concluded, "Mr. Blair will face further troubles in coming weeks and months. But the country will not turn instead to an opposition that defines itself as the guardian of inherited privilege. Mr. Hague has put himself on trial."

See Also:

Queen's speech announces plan to end voting rights for hereditary peers

[27 November 1998]