From the archives - Profiles of Constitutional Theorists

Two contrasting figures: F. A. Hayek (ideological guru to Margaret Thatcher) and Tony Benn (ideological guru to Jeremy Corbyn)

FRIEDRICH HAYEK (1899-1992)
Robert Blackburn on Tony Benn’s plans for constitutional reform

TONE BEN (1925-2014)

Lord Of The Ran

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PERSPECTIVE 15

Tony Benn: "jor was an incorpoaral heredity"

The Peerage Act 1963. Act that
reform in May this yee. He is at yee not to personalise the issue, and in propor"ing a new genealogical sym" of government he stresses that it is the Prime Minister’s role to preside over the Commons, and the Queen’s, which lies at the heart of his disenchantment with the existing Westminster system. The Queen would "be privatised" (as would the Church of England through disestablishment), but he would remain at Buckingham Palace if she wished, with "a private capacity as someone being liable to ordinary taxation.

Interestingly, Benn notes that he has always been a republican, but one who looks in vain through his speeches and other writings for any such declaration. In the 1970s and 1980s there was always a small but vociferous group of MPs who argued for abolition (the invention of the word "abolitionism" by James Mans- well during the otherwise solemn Commons debate on the abolition crisis in 1978 are especially mention- able). But there have been no serious efforts since, and the cause of republicans in recent times, with the possible exception of William Hamilton who retired from politics in 1992 (and who did remonstrate his attacks on the Royal family). Labour Party policy even in going through its more radical phases, such as in the early 1990s when unaccompanied abortion of the House of Lords was advocated, has never espoused abolition of the Crown. On a personal level it is important knowledge that the queen’s role is derived from the Crown’s role in the Commonwealth, and that the Queen is the symbol of the modern Commonwealth’s role in the maintenance of constitutional law.

What are the chances of Tony’s ideas being adopted? He says he will lobby through the 1990s to ensure that the climate is right for serious discussion of his proposals.

The key issue is the role of the House of Lords in decisions affecting the country. The Lords is in a unique position; it has no elections, no legislative power, no executive power, and its influence is determined by its ability to delay and obstruct legislation. The House of Lords is not a symbolic or ceremonial institution, but it is a real political force that can have a significant impact on the direction of the country.

The first step is to abolish the House of Lords and replace it with a new body that is elected by the people. This would ensure that the government is held accountable to the people and that the interests of the majority are represented.

The second step is to reform the House of Commons. This would involve reducing the size of the Commons and making it more representative of the people. It would also involve giving the Commons a stronger role in the legislative process.

The third step is to reform the constitution. This would involve weakening the powers of the monarchy and strengthening the role of Parliament.

In summary, Tony Benn’s proposals for constitutional reform are based on the idea that the government should be held accountable to the people and that the interests of the majority should be represented.

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