Aristocracy or the people?  
Radical constitutionalism and  
the progressive alliance in  
Edwardian Britain  

ANDREW CHADWICK  

School of Politics, The University of the West of England, Frenchay,  
Bristol BS16 1QY, UK  

ABSTRACT  The view that there existed a ‘progressive alliance’ between radical  
liberalism, labourism and socialism (and between the Liberal and Labour  
parties) during the Edwardian period has become a landmark of modern British  
historiography. However, the reconstruction of the ideas which cemented the  
alliance has focused on how radical liberalism became more concerned with  
social and economic issues during the period, and, in the guise of the ‘new  
liberalism’, shifted towards the core concern of socialists: the positive role of  
the state. Reconstructions of the progressive alliance, though certainly convincing,  
have ignored the importance of an ‘old’ discourse, which I term ‘radical  
constitutionalism’, the main object of which was democratic constitutional  
reform. This article attempts to go some way towards remedying this deficiency.  
The concept of the ‘progressive alliance’ must be broadened, to acknowledge the  
role of ‘radical constitutionalism’ in determining its nature. Focusing on the  
background to the House of Lords’ rejection of the Liberal government’s  
‘People’s Budget’ in 1909, I reinterpret this in the context of a broad,  
‘anti-Lords alliance’, which existed among radicals, labourists and socialists. In  
their public political discourse these groups identified the object of their  
oppression in remarkably similar ways, through constructing a collection of  
shared meanings in the multiple and overlapping public spheres of Edwardian  
oppositional politics.  

Let us be at once wise and generous, and admitting only brotherhood of arms in the great  
conflict before us, confess that it is to the advantage of the common cause that Labour  
should have its full say in the momentous decision that awaits us. Later on paths may  
diverge. We are not pledged to all that Labour wants, nor is Labour limited to Liberal  
doctrine. But today, as we have one aim and one enemy, and the same tremendous stake  
to play in the safeguarding, not only of the people’s food, but of democratic and  
representative government, let us present one invincible line of battle.  

1356-9317/99/030365-26 © 1999 Taylor & Francis Ltd
ANDREW CHADWICK

Introduction

The view among historians and political scientists that there existed a ‘progressive alliance’ between liberalism, labourism and socialism (and between the Liberal and Labour parties) during the Edwardian period has become a landmark of modern British historiography. However, the reconstruction of the ideas which cemented the alliance in the hands of writers such as Peter Clarke, Stefan Collini and Michael Freeden, not to mention the many articles and books which they have influenced,2 have focused, almost exclusively,3 on how radical liberalism became more concerned with social and economic issues during the period. Freeden, for example, discusses Edwardian radicalism, in the guise of the ‘new liberalism’, in terms of its rejuvenation as a discourse with a strong emphasis on state intervention, which, in turn, provided a basis for agreement with moderate socialists. Thus, radical liberalism is said to have survived as a vital force during this period because it was able to redefine its essence, and in its own way shift closer towards the core concern of socialists: the positive role of the state.

It is ironic, however, that reconstructions of the progressive alliance, though certainly convincing, have ignored the importance of the ‘old’ discourse of what can be termed ‘radical constitutionalism’, the main object of which was democratic constitutional reform. This article attempts to go some way towards remedying this deficiency. While radicals undoubtedly turned from an individualist to a collectivist perspective on the role of the state which allowed them to forge links with socialists and labourists, the concept of the ‘progressive alliance’ must be broadened still further, to acknowledge the role of ‘radical constitutionalism’ in determining its nature.

To further this argument, this article focuses on the background to one of the most significant events of the generalised Edwardian crisis: the House of Lords’ rejection of the Liberal government’s ‘People’s Budget’ in 1909. It reinterprets this in the context of a broad, anti-Lords alliance, which, it is argued, existed among radicals, labourists and socialists. It demonstrates that in their public political discourse these groups identified the object of their oppression in remarkably similar ways. They achieved this through constructing a collection of shared meanings in the multiple and overlapping public spheres of Edwardian oppositional politics.

The multiple and overlapping public spheres of Edwardian oppositional politics

The approach adopted here is not that of the high political historian, nor does it focus on electoral politics in the narrow sense. This article is very much a case study in the influence of political ideas. It involves an awareness of the communication infrastructures which parties, groups and movements employ. It is difficult to imagine labour, radical, and socialist movements in isolation from the various newspapers and journals they sought to establish, and from the

366
books, pamphlets and other 'street literature' which they produced in copious quantities. The period from the 1880s to the 1930s was an exceptionally fertile one in British political history. It witnessed the proliferation of many new and different groups, and the dissemination of their ideas was pursued vigorously through channels of public political discourse. We are dealing with the emergence of new political groups, each with its own distinctive infrastructures of communication. To comprehend fully the shared meanings that were negotiated between the different strands of the Edwardian left, we need to utilise a panoramic perspective, one which necessitates sensitivity towards minority groups. Relatively marginal currents must be incorporated into the broader landscape.

Susan Herbst has developed an approach to public expression 'outside the mainstream' by adapting Habermas's metaphor of the public sphere. Concerned primarily with marginalised groups, one of the implications of her work is that in order to develop a multi-layered notion of conflict and consensus it is necessary to explore how groups, movements and parties develop and make use of their own distinctive channels of communication. This can illuminate all forms of political communication in which a party or group seeking to influence public political discourse constructs its own network of supporters. Herbst uses three main concepts, 'linguistic space', 'community-building' and 'communication environments', to describe the communication relationships which groups, movements and parties develop in order to advance their own ideas, and which lead to the emergence of multiple public spheres. A modified version of this framework provides an illuminating perspective on Edwardian oppositional politics.

'Linguistic space' specifies the channels set up by group leaderships in order to communicate to their supporters, for their supporters in turn to communicate back, and for both leaders and supporters to communicate to the wider public. The opening up of linguistic space facilitates the development of shared ideas by providing stable, regular opportunities for communication. While it may refer to the organised output of an established institution such as a political party, linguistic space does not assume that ideas are always formally attached to such institutions. In this view, many different participants contribute to debate: they need not be formal representatives of 'organised' opinion. Herbst's second concept—community-building—specifies the functions of public spheres for providing cohesion between groups and their supporters. It is suggested that processes of communication serve to draw boundaries around the group, constituting insiders and outsiders, thereby defending the group's beliefs from external attack. Finally, Herbst's concept of the 'communication environment' refers to the power groups have to shape the patterns of communication in a particular field. The 'powerful' in this sense have the ability to determine the boundaries of the communication environment, to decide who is able or unable to communicate, and to influence the content of political discourse.

Herbst's second concept, 'community-building', requires some modification because it does not seem to allow for the possibility of cross-fertilisation
between groups and parties. If all groups simply provided their supporters with their own communication networks, there would be little chance of building alliances based on points of consensus with other groups. It is therefore necessary to amend Herbst’s theory by adding the notion of overlapping public spheres, which refers to the process whereby groups seek to build consensus based on common preoccupations and shared meanings.

This approach suggests that there are reciprocal relationships between elites and supporters, and it points to the ways in which groups and parties, large and small, seek to disseminate their ideas. In pointing to the infrastructures of communication set in place by parties, groups and movements, the concept of multiple, overlapping public spheres is useful for making sense of the consensus built up between different groups over specific issues. It encourages us to look beyond narrow institution-based approaches, towards a recognition that groups and movements seek to forge alliances and constituencies of support. It aids in encapsulating shared meanings that are intertextually constructed.8

The origins and context of the Edwardian constitutional crisis

In terms of political context, the most significant event for understanding the origins of the Edwardian constitutional crisis occurred in the arena of ‘high politics’ during 1868–69, the period which saw the introduction of the so-called ‘doctrine of the mandate’. Disraeli had formulated the idea of the ‘specific mandate’ in reaction to Liberal plans for disestablishment of the Church in Ireland in 1868, arguing that such constitutional changes were illegitimate on the grounds that they had been brought before Parliament without first having been presented to the electorate. The House of Lords rejected the Bill but was foiled by Liberal victory at the general election, which secured the necessary ‘mandate’. As a consequence, the Lords accepted Irish disestablishment on the grounds that authority had been granted by the electorate, thereby bestowing a new constitutional role upon the second chamber: it was to act as the representative of the whole ‘nation’ in the face of the perceived tyranny of one-party government.9

The ‘doctrine of the mandate’ was modified and strengthened during the 1893 home rule controversy, which saw the introduction of the ‘predominant partner’ idea. This held that in controversial pieces of legislation the Lords should act as the final representative of public opinion. Salisbury argued that the Liberal government’s proposals lacked legitimacy because they could only be passed with the help of ‘Irish votes’; therefore the ‘predominant partner’—the British electorate—should be asked their opinion in a general election. The peers rejected the Home Rule Bill by a huge majority, forcing an election, which the Conservatives won comfortably.10 Of course, Conservative dominance of the House of Lords made the ‘predominant partner’ idea a bitter pill for Liberals to swallow. Between 1895 and 1905, the Lords offered little resistance to the Conservative Governments.
The Liberal Party won the 1906 general election with a landslide majority, but soon met with resistance to its legislative programme from the House of Lords.\textsuperscript{11} In June 1907, the government decided to devise a strategy for attacking the Lords when Parliament debated a government resolution for removing their right to ‘veto’ legislation. Complete abolition of the second chamber was left unmentioned, but it was assumed by radicals and socialists that abolition might be an achievable goal in the near future. The constitutional crisis of 1909–1911, set in train by the House of Lords’ rejection of the government’s Budget, marked the culmination of a struggle much anticipated by these groups. The famous ‘Newcastle Programme’, adopted by the radical National Liberal Federation (NLF) in 1891, had called for the ‘Ending or mending of the House of Lords’,\textsuperscript{12} while the major socialist groups, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the Independent Labour Party (ILP), and the Fabian Society, had all adopted the policy of abolition during their foundation periods in the 1880s and early 1890s. These platforms served as a basic foundation for future consensus. On their own, however, they were insufficient. A more elaborate framework of understanding was required. It is to the construction of this that I now turn.

Constructing the enemy

It is possible to discern several distinct, though inter-related, elements of the framework constructed by radical, socialist and labour groups drawing upon the resources of the overarching discourse of radical constitutionalism. The first of these can be termed ‘an appeal to history’.

The appeal to history

The first step hitherto in every English reform or revolution has always been to study the past. We move—the phrase is inevitable—‘from precedent to precedent’... Great statesmen have trod this path before, and left us lessons in device and daring. Should we not, before deciding on our plan, walk for a brief space in their footsteps?\textsuperscript{13}

We cannot and do not wish to get beyond our precedents. It is the Peers and their apologists that are the dangerous innovators. We Revolutionists stand by the most ancient polity of the English People.\textsuperscript{14}

As these two quotations aptly illustrate, the attack on the peers was based upon an appeal to historical tradition. The House of Lords was portrayed as a reactionary and conservative force in the British polity, but crucially, this portrayal was grounded in historical narratives. It was argued that the peers had been responsible for a whole range of obstructions of the popular will. Incredibly long lists of ‘vetoed’ legislation were produced and reproduced continuously. Knowledge of Parliamentary history among radicals was staggering. A preferred genre, exhibited most forcefully in the writings of W. T. Stead, was to construct detailed histories of the events which led to the peers’ obstruction of popular
measures.\textsuperscript{15} Such genres coexisted with the broad brush romanticism of leader columns, and reinforced the process of demonisation.

The ‘Norman Yoke’ idea acted as a popular means of expressing contempt for a privileged ruling elite. The radical journalist ‘Gracchus’ questioned the legitimacy of the peers by revealing their origin. Some, he argued, were descended from ‘Normandy’, while others owed their title to the sexual impiety of Charles II: a ruler who was said to have revived the House of Lords to conceal his ‘bastard children … [the] offspring of the King’s adultery.’\textsuperscript{16} Books, such as those written by the Radical and Irish Nationalist MP for South Donegal, J. G. Swift Macneill, used lurid detail in describing the dubious origins of peerages, often casting doubt over their professed ‘ancient’ lineage. Macneill, a one-time ‘Professor of Criminal and Constitutional Law’ (a peculiarly apt specialism), and adviser on obstruction tactics and Parliamentary procedure to the Nationalists in the Commons during the 1880s–1890s, published a collection of short articles that had first appeared in the press: these rapidly became a much-cited source.\textsuperscript{17}

W. M. Thompson, editor of the radical Sunday paper, \textit{Reynolds’s Newspaper}, from 1894 until his premature death in 1907, echoed this perspective, idealising Saxon England as a democratic nation ‘enslaved’ by William the Conqueror:

Before the Saxons were conquered by the Normans, the people themselves, in free and open assembly, debated and decided upon the laws by which they were to be governed. William the Norman enslaved the Saxons, and made his foreign chiefmen the feudal nobility.\textsuperscript{18}

The ‘English yeoman’ had been wiped out by the Normans and this had allowed the ‘House of Landlords’ to protect their wealth through history.\textsuperscript{19} Radicals did not see this language style as anachronistic. The narration of a particular history was more important than the historical accuracy of the accounts. Since its foundation in the mid-nineteenth century, \textit{Reynolds’s Newspaper} had been the most active and persistent campaigner for abolition of the Lords.

To the ‘Norman yoke’ idea writers added the English Civil War as an example of a patriotic uprising against ‘hereditary privilege’. The result was a heady brew of romantic historical appropriation, no less powerful for the fact that public discussion of Cromwell had increased markedly since the tercentenary celebrations of his birth in 1899.\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Reynolds’s Newspaper} argued that ‘President Cromwell’ had possessed the courage to fight feudal privilege.\textsuperscript{21} William H. Dawson, pamphleteer (as ‘Demos’) for the radical National Reform Union (NRU), clearly exhibited this strategy, when he constructed a tradition of patriotic citizenship thwarted: ‘This hereditary principle’, he argued, ‘is altogether incompatible with the freedom which distinguishes English institutions, and the rights and the power which attach to English citizenship.’\textsuperscript{22} Thus, constitutional narratives could provide both negative portrayals of the enemy and positive sustenance for current grievances through the invocation of historical examples of virtuous dissent.
The writings of J. Morrison Davidson were unsurpassed in their use of such civil war 'heroism'. Davidson, who trained as a Scottish barrister, is a good example of a figure whose views are so difficult to categorise that he has most often been left out of accounts of early labour history, even though he stood (unsuccessfully) as a candidate for Greenock in 1885. Davidon, along with other radicals, had been responsible in the 1880s for the creation of The People's League For the Abolition of the Hereditary Legislative Chamber, a small, single-issue pressure group which met with little success outside of raising general awareness. His writings exhibited an extraordinary polemical energy derived from a fusion of radical libertarianism, anarchism inspired by the experience of the Paris Commune in 1870, and democratic assaults on political inequality and 'privilege'. Despite his eschewal of involvement in the new party structures of socialism, not to mention his extreme contempt for 'official' Liberalism, Davidson wrote regularly for a weekly column in Reynolds's Newspaper and the lesser-known radical Sunday paper, the Weekly Times and Echo. Socialists and radicals paid attention to these strident columns, seen as rare examples of expression outside of the usual 'party organs'. Davidson’s books were written in the same aggressive style, and covered the same radical themes. 1885 saw the first edition of The Book of Lords, a vicious indictment of the historical betrayal of the 'English People' by the 'Norman' peers. Due to popular demand, the book was republished in 1907. Davidson paid his respects to an important element of radical constitutionalism through his invocation of 1649, suggesting that this provided a model example of how to deal with the 'chamber of vetoists'. Did the Restoration, he asked, 'extinguish, for good, all that is noble, chivalrous, and patriotic in the bosoms of Englishmen'?

Others began from a different use of constitutional precedent, which, it was claimed, denied the Lords the right to interfere with financial legislation. Again, historical tradition could be invoked as a means of throwing the weight of 'the constitution' against the 'revolutionary' peers: 'Ever since 1407', wrote A. W.' in the radical New Age, 'when the House of Commons wrested from Henry IV "the power of the purse", the Lords have had no right to interfere in regard to matters of finance'. Harold Spender placed his faith in the notion of a 'general constitutional law', that the Commons was elected by 'the people', and that it should be allowed to carry out their will unhindered by the second chamber.

Finally, for nonconformists, the attacks provided an opportunity to condemn the Bishops in the Lords as the symbolic representation of the 'Establishment' (in its original sense). Appeals to nonconformism were frequently made through the portrayal of the Bishops as enemies of the people’s political and religious freedoms. Joe Clayton offered his readers a damning account of the voting record of the Bishops since the early nineteenth century, the obligatory lists of 'mutilated' legislation included. This appeal served to sharpen the existing conflict between traditionally radical nonconformists and the Established Church.
The peers as a caste

The second element of radical constitutionalism consisted of a cultural analysis constructed around the perceived difference between the characteristics of the aristocracy and those of ‘the people’. Reynolds’s Newspaper labelled it a ‘Battle of Caste against Country’.29 The use of the word ‘caste’ here is important, signifying as it did the sense of cultural division. A contending term—‘class’—did not have the same connotations. Although this was widespread, it was not as definite and as narrow as ‘caste’, which encouraged the opponents of the Lords to point at a select elite, with cultural characteristics defining them as a group apart. It also referred to the hereditary nature of the peers’ powers: while class characteristics might be passed on from generation to generation, caste characteristics were always passed on.

‘The people’ were portrayed as intelligent and industrious; the peers as debauched, idle, and inept. As W. M. Thompson wrote, ‘Most of the Peers are ignorant of politics, though great judges of horseflesh, wine and women’.30 It was a favoured strategy to depict them as bloated, drunken, half-wits, clad in ermine and wearing coronets in unlikely places, such as the street. They were seen as the representatives of a section of society whose personal habits and leisureed lifestyles differed from those of the mass.31 ‘Slavery, priestcraft, aggression, extravagance, and drink’ were seen as the defining characteristics—all the more damning for the New Age, a paper which, before its shift to socialism in 1907, advocated temperance, hard work and thrift in the radical tradition.32 Such views resonated with the appeals on behalf of the ‘common man’ made by populist socialists such as Robert Blatchford, editor of the weekly ‘unattached’ socialist paper the Clarion, based as they were on the perception of an unbridgeable gap between plebian and elite cultures.

The cultural characteristics of the peers could be used to define them as a separate and distinct elite at the heart of the constitution, but this could also be used to attack what radicals, labourists and socialists saw as the incompetence of aristocratic government. H. W. Massingham, editor of the Daily News and, from 1907, the new radical weekly, the Nation, was a major figure here. Massingham linked the peers’ inability to provide expert input into the legislative process with their unrepresentative social origins. The modern state, he argued, demanded that legislators be representative of those for whom they legislated. The peers possessed none of the requisite skills of the ‘modern legislator’.33 Rule by hereditary legislators was therefore rule by the incompetent: noble blood did not guarantee ruling intelligence. Even those constitutional discussions which took place in the House of Lords itself were criticised on the grounds that the peers were ill-educated for the task. ‘The people’ knew more about the British constitution; a questionable, yet appealing, assertion. ‘Their speeches’, wrote Gracchus, ‘are not the utterances of thoughtful men who have studied public affairs. They are simply a collection of the social prejudices of a class which confounds its own selfish interests with the welfare of the whole country’.34 Harold Spender drew attention to the lack of constitutional awareness
of the defenders of the peers’ right to reject Bills, referring to them as ‘babes who babble in public places without knowledge of public affairs’, even going so far as to accuse them of having failed to understand the most rudimentary constitutional textbooks. This was a defence of informed, rational, politics against the detached, ignorant politics of the privileged few.

‘Parasitic landlordism’

The third element of radical constitutionalism consisted of portraying the peers as ‘parasitic landlords’. There are obvious linkages between this and the previous two elements. The basis of the House of Lords’ illegitimate power was land. As a caste, the ‘land monopolists’ were seen as having usurped the economic power of the people through expropriation of the land for their personal, private purposes. As a piece of economic analysis this was grossly simplistic, but as a part of radical constitutionalist discourse it was repeated week after week in Reynolds’s Newspaper, without dissent from contributors to its lively correspondence columns. The fusion of economic and political power manifested itself in the Tory majority in the House of Lords. Together they prevented legislation which would serve ‘the needs of the million’. Yet, although the possession of landed wealth was the primary sense in which the economic power of the peers was portrayed, this existed in tension with other views, one of which saw their power as derived from ‘property’ more loosely defined. Divisions between radicals and socialists did emerge over the perceived enemy. These merit further discussion.

Fred Jowett, at this stage Labour and ILP MP for Bradford West, and journalist for both the Clarion and the Labour Leader, offered an analysis which differed substantially from most others on the left. Rather than portray the peers as either symbolic, or direct agents of, landed wealth, Jowett argued that the radical analysis required updating. The House of Lords could no longer be censured simply for bolstering a system of landed privilege; ‘Capitalism’ was now the real force in the political system, and the Lords had not escaped infiltration. It was this fusion of landlordism and capitalism that represented the main evil:

What we are inclined to overlook in these days in regard to the House of Lords is that whilst Landlordism is strongly represented there—more strongly than the House of Commons—it has also become vastlv interested in Capitalism too... the two interests of Landlordism and Capitalism [are] one in that assembly.

But Jowett believed that the ‘old’ radical discourse should undergo augmentation, not replacement. It required an additional argument grounded upon the ‘capitalist’ nature of the second chamber. His strategy was to make the constitutional issue more appealing to those who were left feeling cold by the ‘old’ anti-aristocratic analysis. He was attempting to develop the radical analysis by presenting the Lords in terms similar to those in which he wanted the ordinary worker to see his or her employer; as part of the necessary logic of an
economic system not wholly comprehensible in terms of the ownership of land, or the direct result of the actions of the political class. While this argument clearly expanded upon many of the rhetorical pillars of radicalism, it was not without support from outside the Labour and socialist ranks. The new liberal, L. T. Hobhouse, for example, put forward the same 'mixed' analysis in December 1909, when he spoke of the Lords as representative of 'that union of the propertied classes which has held good and has on the whole dominated our public life since 1886'. And yet the crucial point here is that the old radical discourse was not superseded.

In similar terms, the SDF attempted to extend radical discourse when they argued that the most pressing problem for socialists was not the 'aristocratic' House of Lords but the 'plutocratic' House of Commons. Although 'abolition of the House of Lords' was included in the SDF's programme the issue was another example of the fact that such demands, however concrete they may appear to have been, were still very much open to conflicting approaches which require careful consideration. The distinction between the 'plutocracy' and the 'aristocracy' was of particular importance here. For while the aristocracy were characterised, for good or ill, by their ancient, hereditary, land-owning position, the 'plutocracy' was defined as a relatively new phenomenon, encompassing wealthy capitalist manufacturers. This distinction between aristocracy and the new 'plutocracy' could lead to conclusions which strayed a long way from radical constitutionalism. For example, writing of the 'Basis of Socialist Politics', the SDF's John Tamlyn sought to establish a general criticism of the 'old' analysis of politics and to replace it with the 'new' economic analysis:

The political world is the reflex or expression of the economic world ... What have the abolition of the Lords, Disestablishment of the Church, and such-like nostrums to do with us? Have they not had miles of this kind of thing in free, democratic America, and have they not had miles of political rights and political liberties? But has it brought for them any economic freedom? Not much! It is pretty clear to the American proletariat now that it has been playing somebody else's game. Isn't it nearly clear to us?

The economic explanation of politics led to the argument that 'capitalist' economic power was the main evil and that the House of Commons, rather than the Lords, was the expression of this force. Some SDF writers attempted to marry the 'old' and the 'new'. In the group's journal, Social-Democrat, J. G. Newlove discussed the issue within a peculiar mixture of 'old radical' and Marxist discourse. The radical aspect was based on the peers' position throughout history as the usurpers of native Saxon freedoms, the placemen of corrupt monarchs, and the defenders of political inequality in the face of popular pressure. History was enlisted on the side of 'the people', as the Peasant's Revolt, the Civil War, and the franchise struggles of 1832 and 1867 were portrayed as examples of aristocratic disregard for the rights and freedoms of the dispossessed. Yet the other, 'Marxist' side of Newlove's analysis is notable for its conception of the aristocracy as part of a wider 'possessing class'. The Lords was the mouthpiece of the aristocratic section of a broader capitalist system,
whose dominance was assured through the ownership of private property of all kinds.

*Imagining a ‘progressive’ future*

The final element of radical constitutionalism concerned the enemy’s future role. If, on the one hand, socialism was to become more politically powerful in the form of the Labour Party, or, on the other, if radicalism was to extend itself even more into the area of social and industrial reform under the aegis of the new liberalism’s influence in the Liberal Party, an intransigent House of Lords would continuously jeopardise the passage of ‘progressive’ legislation: the doctrine of the mandate might be used to great effect in obstructing a future Labour and/or Radical government. L. T. Hobhouse argued that legislation should quickly reflect ‘new needs’ in society, and the Lords were jeopardising this process. Arthur Symonds of the NRU referred to mandate ideas as belonging to the realm of the ‘imaginary functions’ of the Lords: ‘The people’, he proceeded, ‘ask for no such rectification, will brook no such delay. Their mandate is given directly to their elected representatives’. The peers came to be seen by both as an obstacle, not only in the present, but also in a future environment; one that would be characterised by increased state intervention in economic and social life in order to redistribute wealth. In this narrative, as the ‘progressive forces’ increased in size and intensity, the House of Lords would emerge as a bulwark against radical social measures designed as incursions on the property rights of the wealthy. The Liberals’ 1906 election victory had simply brought this progression to a head. Armed with such a huge Commons majority, the government might have been expected to achieve radical reforms. But the obstruction tactics of the peers had, to a certain extent, knocked it off course.

Having identified how the aristocratic enemy in the House of Lords was constructed in the years leading up to the constitutional crisis of 1909–1911, I turn now to discussion of the implications of a campaign for constitutional change for the relations between radical, labour and socialist groups during this period.

*Radicalism, labourism and socialism*

Between 1895 and 1906, these groups shared a common grievance: all had suffered from the existence of Conservative governments and a moderate Liberal leadership. The mouthpiece of popular radicalism, Reynolds’s *Newspaper*, had long based its existence as a campaigning paper on the view that the grassroots members of the Liberal party were much more radical than a party elite perceived as overburdened by an ‘old Whig’ landowning faction. Its discussion of constitutional reform during the period before 1906 was designed to ‘radicalise’ the policy of the Liberal leaders through the mobilisation of a groundswell of grassroots opinion in favour of constitutional change that would in future force party elites into adopting a stronger line. Thereafter, it would
allow a Liberal or possible ‘progressive’ Lib-Lab coalition government to draw upon such popular support in any struggle with the Lords. Strategies were suggested, which gained favour among both radicals and socialists, that would force the Lords to challenge the authority of the House of Commons. W. M. Thompson demanded that a future Liberal government expose the Lords as being opposed to the interests of the ‘whole people’ through the introduction of extreme (by Liberal standards) social measures, thus challenging the House to reject them. This would then be followed by a general election, after which, it was hoped, a Liberal majority in the Commons could be used as a battering ram to force through change. In 1909 this strategy was indeed adopted by Lloyd George, but before then it had seemed like a distant dream.44

Radicals sought to demonstrate that they, the Labour Party and socialist groups shared a common perspective on the constitution. In the long term both groups wanted to see social and economic reforms that would have great difficulty passing the House of Lords in its current, unreformed state.45 It was thus a case of uniting in order to advance constitutional reform in the short term and social and economic reform in the future. Radicals, labourists and most socialists spoke a shared language which made this sort of alliance likely.

Intellectual radicalism, as represented by the weekly journal, the Nation, was more restrained than the populism-tinged variety offered by the likes of Reynolds’s Newspaper, although the identification of the object of disapproval was very similar, as were the proposed methods of dealing with it. The Nation argued that the campaign be carried out in a manner familiar to ‘the people’. This essentially required that the issue be framed as an historic battle of the ‘good’ against the privileges of an ‘evil’ second chamber. More fundamentally, it was portrayed as a struggle between the enlightening forces of ‘progressive’ liberalism and the shady practices of “Toryism”. If liberalism were to shy away from confrontation this time, then there would be little point in discussing its future. It is astonishing how much weight was placed on this issue by its editorials. Nation radicals exhibited an obsession with the House of Lords which, if not a match for the rhetorical intensity of Reynolds’s, certainly equalled it in terms of column inches. It was as if the whole future of liberalism was at stake: ‘they will either kill Liberalism, or . . . Liberalism must kill them’. But it was not only Liberalism which had much to lose. Just as Reynolds’s Newspaper had put its faith in a broad alliance, so the Nation saw the issue as one which could unite the disparate elements of the Edwardian left:

It is the special, the only, issue for Liberalism, but it is also a uniting issue for the whole body of progressive voters in the four nations, Nonconformists, Radicals, Nationalists, Labour men, the temperance party, the women’s suffragists, all of whom have either suffered some wound at the hands of the Lords, or have reason to fear it. When that question is settled, and not before, can we talk of democracy.46

L. T. Hobhouse argued in similar terms that dealing with the Lords was the only way to ensure the natural progression of liberal ideas. He clearly saw the constitutional issue as important. He espoused a complex amalgam of ‘old’ and
‘new’ radical liberalism, combining the old assault on aristocratic privilege with the new emphasis on state intervention; the point being that they were inextricable.\(^47\)

In 1907, the New Age, a previously radical weekly, came under new ownership, and its editorial line became more favourable towards socialism.\(^48\) Its standpoint—of wishing to assert the distinctiveness of socialism while retaining a radical constitutionalist emphasis on democratic reform—throws into stark relief many of the complexities in the relations between radicalism, labourism and socialism during this era. The paper’s new editor-owners, Holbrook Jackson and A. R. Orage, shifted towards an anti-Liberal policy very similar to that being expressed in leader columns of Robert Blatchford’s Clarion. The change of ownership at the New Age signalled a shift; it became less concerned with constitutional issues, and began to articulate criticisms of Liberalism for its obsession with the House of Lords. Jackson and Orage expressed concern about the lack of ‘independence’ of Labour in Parliament and their flirtation with ‘official’ Liberalism.\(^49\) Trade union campaigns supporting the government’s policy were disliked on the same grounds; that they smacked of ‘complicity with Liberal humbug’.\(^50\)

But there was a certain ambivalence in the view of the constitution expressed in the New Age. Consider the following leader comments, both published during the summer of 1907. On the one hand, joining forces with the radicals over the Lords was anathema to socialists who demanded that the ‘real’ reforms were meant to be social and economic:

> The Socialist has a clear issue before him. Will the reformed House have any substantial increase in the Socialist vote? Will there be any addition to the ILP or SDF members of the peerage? Will the new body be more likely to pass Socialist Bills than the present peerage?\(^51\)

Yet on the other hand, there was a basic recognition, almost a bedrock assumption, that the Lords must be reformed:

> That the House of Lords, as present constituted, ‘is a hindrance to national progress and ought to be abolished’ is a proposition to which we do not think that any Socialist will take exception.\(^52\)

It was this core ambivalence which would lead, as we shall see, to the New Age socialists swinging behind the bulk of the Edwardian left once the constitutional crisis got underway.

What of the formal position of the Labour Party? Its early years were characterised by a general unwillingness to formulate legislative programmes that might divide the different socialist groups—the ILP, the Fabians, and, until they departed in 1902, the SDF—and trade unions contained within the federation. Firm policy was downplayed and replaced by general declarations of principle through the medium of the annual President’s Address. In 1902, W. J. Davis, a member of the TUC’s Parliamentary Committee and Birmingham Brassworkers’ leader, argued that the Lords was a ‘safety valve, lest legislation

\(^{377}\)
should proceed on a too-democratic line'. It was always ready 'to veto any
measure which would aid the masses'.53 Lords and Commons formed a nexus of
'overwhelming wealthy representation',54 and were therefore another factor
which necessitated the policy of independent labour representation. Yet, cru-
cially, the Commons was not completely constrained by such pernicious eco-
nomic forces; if it passed laws favourable to the people it would meet with the
Lords as the more extreme representative of wealth and privilege. In countering
the Lords with the democratic potential of a future House of Commons, Davis
was thus working within the established radical framework, involving as it did
the view that direct labour representation would improve the way in which the
political system served the interests of the working classes—a perspective which
clashed with the more overtly 'socialist' analysis of the 'plutocratic' House of
Commons espoused by the SDF.

Davis’s views were widely shared among the Labour Party leadership. Labour
MPs were in favour of complete abolition; a demand that was soon to be
sloganised as 'single chamber government'. Keir Hardie stated that if 'their
lordships are spoiling for a fight with the Democracy we shall not say them nay,
and once entered upon, the fight will go on to the finish'. Philip Snowden urged
that in the long run they would have to 'settle the Lords'. Ramsay MacDonald
framed the issue as an historic conflict between the 'Democratic Commons' and
the 'Aristocratic Lords', while Walter Hudson, the railway workers' MP for
Newcastle, stressed popular sovereignty when he condemned the 'non-
representative assembly, which rejects unquestioned the direct will of the
people's representatives'. The rhetoric of Arthur Henderson was notable for its
romantic radicalism:

There are unmistakeable indications that the Democracy of this country is determined
to take the management of its affairs into its own hands. An irresponsible and non-
representative Chamber so long tolerated when the people slumbered will be swept aside
by the onrushing tide that is carrying us forward to the triumph of complete democracy.55

What is remarkable about these modes of expression is how much they owed to
radicalism, with their use of formulations such as 'the Democracy' and 'the
people'. In this instance, the 'working class' was nowhere to be seen. The
capitalised 'D' in 'the Democracy', used by both Hardie and Henderson, should
not be overlooked, nor should the fact that Henderson was using the word in two
different ways in consecutive sentences. On the one hand, its significance lies in
the linguistic construction of the people, as 'the Democracy' (line 1), as the
living embodiment of democratic values. On the other hand, 'complete democ-

378

Copyright © 1999. All rights reserved.
favour among Labour and Radical MPs, who continued to press for outright abolition. For David Shackleton, Labour MP for Clitheroe and President of the Amalgamated Weaver’s Association, in eschewing abolition the government was not being ‘radical’ enough. Recalling the franchise campaign of 1884, he expressed hopes that the government meant ‘serious business’. Charles Duncan, Labour MP for Barrow-in-Furness, and representative of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), believed there to be a force outside Parliament in favour of abolition—one which could be mobilised. Arthur Henderson referred to single chamber government as ‘definite, understandable, and Radical’, ending his speech in Parliament with a long quotation from the ‘Radical Joe’ Chamberlain of the 1880s. The House of Lords, he stated, ‘had never contributed one iota to public liberty or public freedom, or done anything to advance the common weal’.56

But before the crisis not all socialists were as enthusiastic. Some argued that it would distract attention from the state of the House of Commons. A democratised Commons, created by an extension of the franchise, would produce a majority of representatives ‘afame with a desire to pass legislation for remedying the wrongs of the nation’.57 By this stage, Fred Jowett had started to argue that the most pressing constitutional reforms were those designed to deal with the growing power of the executive over backbench MPs, and he had suggested a system of legislative committees of MPs to replace the role of individual ministers. They were missing the ‘real’ issue: ‘the absurdities of the House of Commons itself as a legislative machine’.58 Jowett railed against the forcing-through of legislation by the use of the guillotine, the prominence of the cabinet and the concurrent decline of backbench influence. If Radicals and Labour were uniting behind the government they were ignoring the fact that ‘The people need not only to be free of the dead hand of the House of Lords … it is time they were given some power over their own executive’.59 Similarly, when H. Russell Smart, a member of both the ILP and the SDF, wrote of the ‘constitutional dimension’ of socialism in 1907 he was more concerned with reform of the Commons along the lines advocated by Jowett than he was with abolition of the Lords, arguing that ‘Even were the House of Lords completely abolished, the people would still be deprived of control while Government and the Cabinet system existed’.60 The Commons had been seized by the ‘plutocracy’ and party ‘wire-pullers’ and was therefore far more problematic than the ‘effete Upper House’.61 The problem, of course, was that broader enthusiasm for proposals such as those of Jowett and Smart was not as widespread as it was for dealing with the Lords. In any case, all this amounted, as we shall see, to only a brief period of doubt within the ILP over the relevance of the House of Lords question.

Criticisms of official Liberalism were extremely common among the SDF, and in ways similar to the ILP activists, the Liberal elite was condemned for its timidity.62 Leading SDF figures simply did not believe that the Liberal leadership were serious. While speeches might be peppered with radical rhetoric, they did not think this would be followed up by action once the Liberals had gained
ANDREW CHADWICK

power. Time would be taken up with ‘sham fights’ with the Lords, while social and economic problems would be left unsolved. Scepticism continued through to 1909, spurred on by the moderate nature of the Campbell-Bannerman promise of 1907. The SDF supported the Labour members for their ‘abolition’ proposals but the lack of government support seemed to prove them the hollow promises of radicalism.

The final significant socialist grouping, the Fabians, were curiously quiet on this issue. Lip-service was paid in brief references to the abolition of the Lords, but elaboration of why this stance was adopted was not forthcoming. In the key work of early Fabianism, Bernard Shaw and Hubert Bland had seen the Lord’s as the legacy of ‘old’ radicalism from which they were trying to escape. However this did not prevent Shaw from seeing it as necessary to complete the foundation of the democratic State. Sidney Webb had early misgivings about attempting to explain economic inequality by blaming the aristocracy, but similarly, this did not prevent the issue becoming part of their accepted programme.

The discussion so far shows the extent to which the assault on the House of Lords depended upon a shared discourse containing a number of important themes: the appeal to history, the peers as a caste, the emphasis on landlordism, and the peers as obstacles to future ‘progressive’ reform. It also shows the complexities of the relationship between the three dominant discourses of left politics (radicalism, labourism and socialism), and the tensions created by the perceived source of oppression (capitalism or landlordism?). Populist radicals had attempted to radicalise official Liberalism and grassroots opinion, while simultaneously trying to appeal to Labour and the socialists on the need for a broad alliance against the House of Lords. Intellectual radicals, too, hoped for the forging of a ‘progressive alliance’ against the peers. The Labour Party elite was not averse to this kind of appeal because it shared the radical analysis of the Lords, and although the party was in favour of abolition, it was more than likely that it would be prepared to swing behind the government’s more moderate proposals should it become necessary. Meanwhile, the change of emphasis from radicalism to socialism at the New Age provides a good example of the position of socialists who wished to assert the distinctive power of socialism while retaining the radical emphasis on the aristocratic and therefore undemocratic features of the constitution. For other socialists, such as the more left-wing members of the ILP, while constitutional reforms were not dismissed, it was the case that the most pressing reforms were not those which dealt with the second chamber, rather it was those, such as the reforms put forward by Jowett, that were designed to diminish executive control over the House of Commons. The relatively marginal socialists in the SDF, who, though they were divided according to whether they should attempt to break out of the radical analysis of landed wealth and fuse it with a more Marxist socialism, showed a deep scepticism of the Liberals’ sincerity, and therefore used the issue as a rod to beat the Liberal back. The Fabians were notable by their absence from these public debates, although their formal position was in favour of abolition.
ARISTOCRACY OR THE PEOPLE?

What would be the effect of the ‘People’s Budget’ on this peculiar pattern of political relationships? The argument developed here is that it was crucial in reinforcing the diverse range of ‘anti-Lords’ elements in Edwardian oppositional politics. The next section analyses this process, along with the shifts and tensions created by the constitutional issue.

The crisis and the anti-Lords alliance

The Lords may decree a revolution, but the people will direct it. If they begin, issues will be raised that they little dream of ... [T]he question will be asked whether five hundred men, ordinary men chosen accidentally from among the unemployed, should override the judgement—the deliberate judgement of millions of people who are engaged in the industry which makes the wealth of the country ... The answers are charged with peril for the order of things the Peers represent; but they are fraught with rare and refreshing fruit for the parched lips of the multitude.67

It has been described how radicals had argued for the introduction of a significant measure of social or economic reform as a way to expose the peers, thereby forcing a general election and, it was hoped, a popular mandate for a newly elected Liberal government. Lloyd George’s ‘People’s Budget’ of April 1909 provided the perfect opportunity. While it is doubtful whether the Liberal Chancellor specifically calculated that the Budget would be rejected by the Lords, it was certainly a blatant attempt to rally working-class electoral support for the government. Radicals celebrated the delicious combination of constitutional and social arguments, while most labourists and socialists found little to complain about—they shared the positive view of the constitutional argument, and the Budget paved the way for a range of new welfare proposals, including wider scope for old age pensions, and health and unemployment insurance.68

While the Budget appeared to be useful for achieving broader party unity, the Liberal leadership’s plans on the constitutional issue were not clearly defined. The cabinet was divided over reform plans, and in the end decided to adopt the policy, suggested by Winston Churchill, that wholesale constitutional innovation should be avoided in favour of a unifying ‘smash the veto’ theme. While figures such as Robert Haldane did speak in favour of second chamber reform, Asquith, now Prime Minister following Campbell-Bannerman’s death, stepped gingerly around the issue.69 Giving some of the most spectacular orations of his career, Lloyd George led the Radical campaign around the country, his venomous onslaught galvanising the relations between radicalism, labourism and socialism at the grass roots, while Asquith secretly attempted to gain ‘guarantees’ from the King that he would agree to create the necessary new peerages required for the Liberals to ‘swamp’ the Lords should it choose to reject the Budget.70 On 22 November 1909, the Liberal Unionist Peer, Lansdowne, ‘invoking the doctrine of the mandate’, moved a simple motion in the Lords asking that the Budget be put to ‘the judgement of the country’. A week later, following intense debate, the motion was passed by an overwhelming majority, sparking off what was

381
effectively an eight-week election campaign and a two-year constitutional crisis that was eventually resolved by the Parliament Act of 1911.

By the summer of 1909 radicals, building upon appeals made before the crisis, began explicitly to call for an anti-Lords alliance based substantially upon the upholding of ‘constitutional democracy’. Yet due to the government’s ‘smash the veto’ policy, this call was still dependent on Labour’s watering-down of its proposals for ‘single chamber government’. Rallying to the government’s cause would have to involve various groups dropping their differences in the interests of the immediate campaign. This is, on the whole, precisely what occurred.

For populist radicals the rejection of the Budget provided a longed-for opportunity. The peers were accused of being ‘anarchists’, their actions ‘unconstitutional’.71 The Nation quickly established its position that radicals, allied with ‘the people’, were the defenders of the constitution, while the peers were conducting a ‘DISORDERLY, UNCONSTITUTIONAL and REVOLUTIONARY’ usurpation of Britain’s democratic traditions.72 ‘Authorities’ such as Walter Bagehot and Erskine May were upheld as the respectable advocates of the unlimited right of the House of Commons in ‘matters of finance’.73 Radicals were attempting to uphold constitutional ‘rules’, and ‘fairness’ in politics. As Harold Spender argued, ‘it is a condition of all sound political strife to observe the rules of the game. Wherever those rules are not observed, political liberty is soon in jeopardy’.74 They upheld the traditions of ‘English representative government’ against ‘foreign’ mandate arguments.75 The peers were destroying the ‘balance’ of the constitution.76

It has been described how, before the crisis, the ILP had been divided over how much priority should be given to the issue. By the time the general election of 1910 had been called the sceptical voices had been all but silenced. The ILP’s paper, Labour Leader, campaigned on grounds virtually indistinguishable from the radicals: the forthcoming general election was to be a struggle of ‘rank and privilege and wealth versus democracy’, of the people against ‘ducal privilege’ and ‘landlord exaction.’77 In influential ILP pamphlets, National Administrative Council (NAC) member William C. Anderson argued that to defeat the Lords would be to ‘flash one more gleam across the skies of our English liberties’. The ILP campaign was marked by Anderson’s emphasis on the Budget and the issue of land reform, as they sought to defeat Lloyd George’s proposals. The ‘land monopoly’, identified as the cause of working-class poverty, was perceived as a pernicious system of exploitation in which the poor had been cheated out of their rights to a share of a common ‘English’ inheritance.78 This became the dominant framework of understanding for the ILP during the crisis.

Speaking at the Party’s Annual Conference of 1909, Philip Snowden stated that it was up to every Labour and Socialist member to try to shift the Liberals towards a policy of outright abolition.79 But even if this were to fail, the ILP leadership made it clear that they would support the government’s aim to remove the ‘veto’: ‘Labour would not withhold support from any sincere remedy to at once lessen the power of the Lords, but only the termination of that power can full meet the needs of the nation’.80
Fred Jowett also shifted his stance to a more favourable view of the anti-Lords position. But Jowett’s change of argument in the Clarion had to confront the fact that it acted as a shop window for the more uncompromising forms of socialism, beliefs that were much less amenable to alliance with the Liberals over a constitutional issue. In November 1909 it became obvious that some socialists were turning against the ILP and Labour elite’s policy of compromise. For example, the Clarion’s R. B. Suthers argued that it would be plain ‘madness’ to fight the election on the anti-Lords terrain staked out by the ‘capitalist’ radicals, because socialists and Labour supporters would merely encourage votes for Liberalism. Arguing that the only real strategy for the abolition of the Lords lay in the long-term aim of gaining a socialist majority in the Commons, Suthers criticised Jowett and the other ILP leaders for their timidity. At the same time, Victor Grayson, who had been elected as a independent socialist MP for Colne Valley in 1907, criticised the ILP and Labour elite. Snowden, Jowett, Hardie, and Arthur Henderson were all singled out for having ‘urged the electors of Great Britain to return the Liberal party to power’. Grayson believed the Liberals to be saving their skin in the face of Labour and socialist advance. Using tempestuous rhetoric, he suggested that the leaders had been duped, and that the Lords issue reeked of ‘old’ radicalism: ‘an ancient and fish-like smell’.

Responding to these criticisms, Jowett, now Chairman of the ILP, retorted that the real evil was the attempt by the peers to remove the powers of taxation from elected representatives. Previously, he argued, socialists could have contented themselves with the knowledge that control over finance by ‘the people’ would allow them to carry out their desired reforms. But now this power was in jeopardy, and swift and decisive action was required. This necessitated swinging behind the rest of the ‘progressive forces’ and attacking the Lords. All hopes for socialist legislation might be dashed ‘for a generation’ if the opportunity was not taken to abolish the Lords. But this was not enough for Grayson and his supporters among the Clarion socialists, whose bitter criticism of the Labour leadership continued to focus on the ‘un-socialist’ preoccupation with the Lords. Grayson attempted to distance the socialist cause from radicalism, arguing that it was the ‘cant and hypocrisy’ of radical policy which had originally necessitated the development of independent labour representation. Refusing to acknowledge the links between future socialist success and a reformed Lords, some Clarion writers shifted further from Parliamentary Labour, while Jowett left the staff and began to write a regular column for the Labour Leader.

Criticism of the Labour leadership’s move towards friendlier relations with Liberalism, similar to that expressed by some of the Clarion figures, sparked off controversy within the SDF (which, by now had changed its name to the Social Democratic Party). Ben Tillett, who had joined their ranks in 1908, shortly after his attack on the Labour MPs in Is the Parliamentary Labour Party a Failure? (the so-called ‘Green Manifesto’), drew attention to what he termed ‘The Red-Herring Brigade of Labour’; a whole range of causes which the Labour leaders were espousing in alliance with Parliamentary Radicals. Tillett argued
that the relations between the Lords and the Commons were of little consequence for socialists because the same class forces ruled in both chambers, a view he also aired, with much criticism from the leadership, at Labour’s 1909 Conference. The SDP’s leaders, H. M. Hyndman and Harry Quelch, did not share Tillett’s complete rejection of the constitutional issue, even if they viewed the Liberals with deep suspicion. It was not until it became obvious that the peers were not going to strike a bargain with the government that the SDF started to campaign seriously for a policy of abolition. But once they did, they used much of the established radical discourse. Writing at the start of the election campaign, Fred Knee proclaimed: ‘Down with the House of Lords! Up with the people! Up with a House really to represent the commons—the Common People. Let us have real democracy’.

The New Age group of socialists had also been sceptical of an anti-Lords alliance before the crisis. But they too changed their analysis. Once the rejection of the Budget became likely, the editorial policy shifted towards support for the official Labour party policy of single chamber government, or an end to the veto should the former prove unattainable: ‘At the threat of this Socialists will drop for a while their immediate concern and join any party that attacks the Lords’, commented a New Age leader in October 1909. The main reason for this movement into the radical–labour–socialist alliance was a principled argument about aristocratic privilege that was well within the realm of radical discourse: ‘... we democrats have nothing to lose by the struggle. On the contrary we have everything to gain by a renewed attack upon hereditary privilege. Our first object as democrats is to abolish all hereditary privileges that are not due to worth, native or acquired’.

The Fabian Society agreed with the anti-Lords alliance position, arguing that the House of Lords could put British democratic institutions back to their ‘before 1832’ status. Its election manifesto did not specifically mention abolition, thus conforming to the line that getting rid of the veto might prove sufficient. It requested that all socialists vote for Labour candidates where they were standing, or for the Liberal in two-cornered fights.

Ben Tillett’s criticisms having been rejected, the Labour Party entered the first election of 1910 with a formal manifesto granting prominence to the abolition of the House of Lords. True to radical constitutionalism, in it the peers were painted as selfish landowners who were using their power in the state to refuse the people their right to tax their ‘unearned increment’. The manifesto did contain references to measures such as old age pensions, housing, and unemployment, but these took second place.

Finally, with the government about to call what was to be the first general election of 1910, a meeting of over 20,000 gathered in Trafalgar Square. Speaking on the platform as a ‘Progressive and Liberal’ MP for Central Finsbury, the Secretary of the TUC Parliamentary Committee, W. C. Steadman, was challenged by an anonymous member of the crowd who wanted to know how many of the existing peers the Liberal party had created. Steadman replied that he was not there to represent any particular party but ‘only the people, to
whom I belong’, thus contributing to the inclusive sense of the crusade against aristocratic privilege already symbolised by the existence on the same platform of radicals, labourists and socialists.

Conclusion

Public discourse constructing the enemy had been established well before the 1910 general elections. Radicals, labourists and socialists had, with some minor exceptions, attacked the House of Lords using broadly similar rhetorical strategies and appeals. These were part of a broader discourse of radical constitutionalism. This discourse defined a distinctive political identity, which revolved around the relationship between citizens and ‘the constitution’. It was concerned with those reforms which would alter qualitatively the nature of the relationship between government and the governed; between the way political power was arranged and those over whom it was to be exercised. This identity proved to be influential in a way that has previously been ignored. It should certainly be seen as one of a number of components which went towards a definition of what it was to be on ‘the left’ during this period.

The ‘progressive alliance’, long acknowledged to have been based upon a consensus on social and economic ideas, was also built upon a similar consensus on constitutional reform. Those who were members of socialist, radical and labour groups could, at certain points, draw upon the resources of a common discourse. Radical constitutionalism worked to soften other differences: where one came from often did not matter as much as where one wanted to go—in the direction of reform. It proved possible to build alliances based upon shared meanings, which, in turn, made it easier to voice demands, to influence wider public discourse, and to influence government.

While the discourse of radical constitutionalism was important in structuring relations on the left, it was never confined to particular institutional locations, but was constructed in the multiple and overlapping public spheres of Edwardian oppositional politics. Alliances were often temporary, and ideas subject to modification by shifting political contexts. Constitutional ideas during this period are not comprehensible if divorced from such contexts. Situated in the early twentieth century, radical constitutionalism offered themes still highly relevant: a strong and influential analysis of the aristocratic and undemocratic features of the British system, which drew upon long-established genres. However, it is undoubtedly the case that it led ultimately to an accommodation with the British constitution. Radicalism itself had always been predicated on a belief in the essential principles of British parliamentary democracy, and had always been articulated through Whiggish narratives of constitutional ‘progress’. In the name of ‘the people’, many radicals wanted to unfetter what they believed, historically, to be the inherently democratic features of the British constitution being compromised, either by the problem of how the constitution formally operated, or the kinds of social groups (in this case the aristocracy) who tended to occupy its key fortresses.
This ambivalence at the core of radical constitutionalism, was, for example, exhibited in the writings of Ramsay MacDonald. For, although MacDonald was a key figure in defining the attack on the Lords, and supported women’s suffrage, he was relatively conservative when it came to the other main constitutional reform proposals of the Edwardian era; the referendum, proportional representation and devolution. MacDonald was fully in favour of abolishing the Lords and establishing ‘single chamber government’. He participated in Rainbow Circle discussions of the issue during 1910 and 1911. The various discussion papers, which varied from the polemical to the academic in tone, were published in book form in 1911, the first time that the Circle had done this since its foundation in 1893. MacDonald put forward the standard view of single chamber government as providing for unfettered democracy:

The frame of mind which is always looking about for modifications and checks and safeguards, is precisely that frame of mind which misses the only check and safeguard which can act in a democracy, namely, that of complete and responsible self-government.\(^9^3\)

For MacDonald, the most important strand of radical constitutionalism did not entertain checks on popular sovereignty exercised by the people through their representatives and a strong executive. This could not be said with as much certainty of the other main reform proposals of the time.

The elastic nature of radical constitutionalism, its ability to integrate a range of potentially disparate groups, with their own, pre-existing ideological resources, means that it did, at certain points, conflict with newly emergent, powerful conceptions of democratic progress that were slowly but surely being established by socialists and the Labour Party. Although Labour did, as I have argued, owe much to the radical constitutionalist tradition, its key intellectuals were modifying it and developing some of their own visions of progress. Central to this process were the Fabians, who were certainly the most contemptuous in their attitudes to the ‘old’ discourse’s chief preoccupations. While the progress of ‘liberal’ democracy was coming to an end, their vision of the reforms to the British state—involving the installation of ‘ruling intelligence’ by an enlightened regulatory elite, had little in common with the tradition I have discussed in this paper. It is arguable that the lack of attention to constitutional reform in the Labour movement during most of the twentieth century owes something to the gathering influence of Fabian ideas after 1918.

At the same time, of course, while radical constitutionalism’s ‘natural’ location could be seen as an offshoot of mainstream liberalism, again, it needs to be borne in mind that although British liberals constantly expressed pride in themselves for having inspired democratic constitutional progress, and, as I have argued, ‘new’ intellectuals saw radical constitutionalism as an important component of their ideas, this needs to be set alongside the major re-definition of liberalism which writers like Hobson and Hobhouse were undertaking. Although in its post-1924 trajectory it has always retained an emphasis on constitutional reform, by the late 1920s this had been put firmly in its place by the arrival of Keynesianism and the ‘Yellow Book’ proposals.
ARISTOCRACY OR THE PEOPLE?

In effect, in discussing the discursive features of the Edwardian period we are dealing with a unique point of transition in the British political tradition. This was a period when what I have defined as radical constitutionalism was both created by, and in turn nourished, the oppositional discourses of the time. By the late 1920s, the transition had been completed. Set in the context of Labour’s emergence, radical constitutionalism was the most politically-effective framework within which democratic reforms could be voiced at the time. The unique character of this period is brought home if we consider that ninety years after the constitutional crisis, the dominant discourse of reform as it relates to the House of Lords under New Labour’s proposals owes virtually nothing to its early twentieth century predecessor, and virtually everything to a quasi-Fabian desire to ‘modernise’ government.

Notes and references

I would like to thank the Centre for Social and Economic Research at the University of the West of England for the financial assistance which made the research upon which this article is based possible. I would also like to thank participants in the University of the West of England’s History Research Seminar for their helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this article. Any errors or shortcomings are, of course, my own.

5. Ibid., ibid., p. 2.
6. Ibid., ibid., pp. 22–3.
10. Smith, ibid., p. 168.
11. Between 1906 and 1908, the government’s Land Valuation, Education, Licensing and Plural Voting Bills were “mutilated” by the House of Lords.
15. W. T. Stead, Peers or People? An Appeal to History (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907). As a writer who began on the staff of the radical Northern Echo, Stead’s public career had taken in a wide range of radical...
causes, including campaigns for religious freedom for nonconformists, votes for women, anti-war campaigns and home rule.


19. ‘Shall privilege rule?’, front page, Reynolds’s Newspaper, 30 September 1906.

20. It led to reverential articles in the liberal Daily News describing Cromwell as one of the ‘greatest ever Englishmen’. Praised for his recognition of the need for a ‘free Church in a free State’, Cromwell was portrayed as a great statesman, who protected the constitution from despotism on the one hand, and anarchy on the other. The celebrations were led by various nonconformist church leaders. See Daily News, 26 April 1899. Most other radical and socialist papers agreed.


23. Davidson appears to have stood as an ‘independent Radical’. His 1885 election address demonstrates something of his beliefs, containing as it did the following demands: adult suffrage; equal constituencies, each to elect three MPs, one retiring annually in rotation; the cabinet to be chosen directly by the Commons; monarchy to be abolished, or reduced in size; single chamber government; federal home rule (‘A United States of Britain’); war to be declared only with the consent of two-thirds of MPs; land ownership to be vested in ‘Democratic Councils’; free public transport; second ballot to prevent party caucuses, and the referendum for all local government decisions. See Reynolds’s Newspaper, 12 December 1909.

24. ‘Address of the People’s League to Abolish the Peers’, and ‘Constitution of the People’s League’, Appendices in Davidson, op. cit., Ref. 15.

25. J. M. Davidson, Fighting the peers: alternative tactics, Reynolds’s Newspaper, 10 February 1907; ‘Useless and dangerous, ought to be abolished’, Reynolds’s Newspaper, 30 June 1907.

26. ‘A. W.’, ‘The Liberal Party and the Lords’, New Age, 24 August 1905. Before its conversion to socialism in 1907, the New Age espoused a moderate radicalism, although the multiple and overlapping public spheres of discourse during this period meant that it had long acted as an arena for radicals and socialists.


29. ‘People or peers? The overshadowing question’, front page, Reynolds’s Newspaper, 13 October 1907.


35. Spender, op. cit., Ref. 28.

36. ‘The political situation’, front page, Reynolds’s Newspaper, 16 June 1907.


40. Justice, 29 April 1899.


ARISTOCRACY OR THE PEOPLE?

44. For such pessimism, see 'The House of Lords', leader, *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 12 February 1899.
45. 'The fight against privilege', front page, *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 27 October 1907.
46. 'The reform of the constitution', leader, *Nation*, 12 December 1908.
48. It did not, however, begin to advo cate guild socialism until a later date.
49. 'Peers and people', leader, *New Age*, 16 May 1907.
58. F. Jowett, 'Obstruction in the Commons', *Clarion*, 21 June 1907.
64. 'Where are the Radicals?', *Social-Democrat* (July 1907), p. 385. Further irony was provided when John Morley, the famous Radical, was given a peerage in 1908, a move widely detested among SDF socialists. See leader, *Social-Democrat* (April 1908), p. 174.
66. Webb wrote that 'We want to drop the old political cant of pretending that the tyranny that keeps the London tram slave away from his home for seventeen hours a day seven days in the week is the tyranny of Priest or King, or House of Lords, or anything but what it really is—viz., the tyranny of the Board of Directors, elected by the votes of private shareholders': *The Workers' Political Programme* [Fabian Tract 11] (London: Fabian Society, 1890), quoted in J. Lawrence, 'Popular radicalism and the socialist revival in Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), p. 164.
69. For reasons of space, this article does not discuss the debates over the various reform schemes. For a full account, see A. Chadwick, *Augmenting Democracy: Political Movements and Constitutional Reform during the Rise of Labour* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming, 1999).
70. Blewett, op. cit., Ref. 68.
75. Hobhouse, op. cit., Ref. 39, p. 646.
76. 'The position of the King', leader, *Nation*, 2 October 1909.
77. 'Let the struggle come'. *Labour Leader*, 19 November 1909.
81. R. B. Sathers, 'Down with the House of Lords: the Labour and socialist policy', *Clarion*, 10 December 1909; V. Grayson, 'Socialism or liberalism: which is the issue?', *Clarion*, 17 December 1909.
ANDREW CHADWICK

85. 'Dishing the democracy', *Justice*, 2 October 1909; 'The House of Commons and the country', *Justice*, 6 November 1909; 'Social Democracy and political reform', *Justice*, 13 November 1909.
86. F. Knee 'Socialism in the House of Lords', *Justice*, 4 December 1909.
89. 'Manifesto by the Fabian Executive', *Labour Leader*, 7 January 1910.
91. The figure of 15,000 is used by Blewett, *op. cit.*, Ref. 68, pp. 68–71. See also Reynolds's *Newspaper*, 4 December 1909, which used 30,000.