

Fishes

PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL

27th May, 1980

Thank you so much for your letter of 22nd May.

I have reported to the Prime Minister the very considerable interest and anxiety within the Parliamentary Party about the future of the House of Lords, and also the response which there was to Quintin's speech and replies to questions when he addressed the 1922 Committee on 15th May.

For your private information, I wrote to Bill Benyon, the Secretary of our Constitutional Committee, in the following terms, on 19th May:-

"Following the meeting of the Constitutional Committee last week, I asked Charlie whether I might be present at the next meeting of the Officers, when this subject" (i.e. Reform of the House of Lords) "is to be discussed. He very kindly said that, subject to the agreement of his colleagues, I might be present.

I realise that there is a strong body of opinion within the Parliamentary Party about the desirability of constitutional reform, and that that opinion may have been strengthened, as a result of Quintin's visit to the 1922 Committee last Thursday".

Charlie has since said that the other Officers are quite agreeable to me attending such a meeting, at which Nicholas Lyell would also be present.

I think that the arguments which you present, very fairly, in the third paragraph of your letter are finely balanced.

Of one thing I am quite certain. The Conservative Party must take every measure open to it to prevent single chamber Government in this country.

I know your views about P.R., and you know that I find myself in respectful disagreement with them!

Quintin does, of course, wish to see a Second Chamber with greater powers than those now enjoyed by the Lords.

Please forgive me for not signing this letter myself, but I am just about to leave for Spain. May we please have a word next week?

Yours ever,  
Dictated by Ian Gow and signed  
in his absence by:

Secretary

Sir Nigel Fisher, M.C., M.P.  
House of Commons,  
Westminster, London SW1

b.c.c. The Right Honourable Michael Jopling, M.P.

SIR NIGEL FISHER M.C. M.P.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

22nd May, 1980

*Dear Ian.*

I don't want to bother the Prime Minister with a letter which she might, with her usual courtesy, feel obliged to answer—but if and when a convenient opportunity arises, perhaps you could mention to her the growing interest and anxiety here in the future of the House of Lords.

Like many of our colleagues in both Houses of Parliament, I am greatly concerned about the Socialist threat of abolition. Some of my Labour friends tell me privately that a public commitment to do so is probable—and if this is made, it will be difficult (on any logical or democratic basis) to defend the House of Lords as at present constituted, however well it works in practice.

I well appreciate the arguments for inaction — the difficulty of getting agreement in the Party on the composition of the House of Lords; the difficulty of getting a Bill through the House of Commons in the face of determined opposition by Enoch Powell and his friends; and the amount of Parliamentary time which would be needed to do so. But I believe the difficulties of reform are outweighed by the dangers of single Chamber Government should a left-wing Socialist administration come to power on a minority national vote.

Do you remember the words of Disraeli:

"The House of Commons by itself could never preserve liberty. Alone it might easily become a weapon of despotism and one against which there would be no appeal .... I will allow for the freedom of the press; I will allow for the spirit of the age— I will allow for the march of the intellect. But I cannot force from my mind the conviction that a House of Commons, concentrating in itself the whole power of the State, might establish in this country a despotism of the most formidable and dangerous character."

Ian Gow, Esq., M.P.

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22nd May, 1980

The danger now is far greater than when these words were spoken 100 years ago.

We hope but we cannot assume that we shall win the next Election - so the Government would surely be wise to introduce a Lords Reform Bill during the life of this Parliament - perhaps in the 1981/82 session.

My personal view is that the House could be composed of an hereditary element, chosen by the hereditary peers to represent them (to ~~promote~~<sup>provide</sup> some young men to do the chores); a nominated element of life peers to serve for a specified period - and an elected element, which would have the majority of seats in the House - perhaps based on the European constituencies and elected by P.R. This personal suggestion is, however, unimportant. If the Government brought forward its own preferred composition, I believe the Parliamentary Party could and would accept the Government's proposals rather than face the prospect of abolition.

If it was thought necessary to hold a referendum on the principle before introducing a Bill, presumably that could be done, as (much as I dislike referenda) there are precedents for them on constitutional issues.

There would be no need to increase the powers of the House of Lords, which are probably adequate provided their use is no longer inhibited.

Of course, no answer to this letter; but the views it contains do, I think, reflect a substantial anxiety in the Parliamentary Party and among our own supporters in the country.

*Ian Gow*

Ian Gow, Esq., M.P.

Fisher

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27th May 1982

Thank you so much for your letter of 26th May.

As Francis has made clear, a possible solution is the one which you mention in the first paragraph of your letter.

There is no prospect, whatever, of an early Election. This Parliament was elected for 5 years.

Thank you for your message of staunch support for the Prime Minister; I have shown your letter to her.

Boy

IAN GOW

Sir Nigel Fisher MC MP