
Sailing beyond Duck Island

IT IS OFTEN SAID that every political career ends in failure. I heartily agree, and as one who ended his days as a political activist and campaigner in the Revolutionary Communist Party, I should know. This is why, despite very different party allegiances, I can sympathise with Sir Peter Viggers MP who is leaving Parliament, feeling 'humiliated' by the discovery that he had claimed for the cost of a floating duck island from Parliament's Fees Office. Personally, I thought it was a rather handsome edifice, and with two anchor blocks thrown in, a snip at £1,600. However, Sir Peter has had to go, his political career in ruins, just like that of Sir Anthony Steen, whose Parliamentary position disintegrated on the news that voters were paying for the care and maintenance of the two hundred trees on his Devon estate.

These men have, like so many good men and women before them, come to grief on the rocks of jealousy and malign resentment; brought down by the politics of envy, there are evidently many more to come. This insight has led the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams to call for a moratorium on the daily drip, drip, drip, of revelations concerning MP's expenses. Although, it has to be said, the spectacle of the leader of an institution as dysfunctional as the Church of England, coming to the defence of the House of Commons, has not inspired much confidence.

The practice in which MPs save up all their receipts like so many Boots coupons and then periodically tip them all up onto the counter of the Fees Office in order to claim for whatever they can get has landed them in hot water. Half of them, more than 300, will have trouble facing their constituents and scores will evidently not survive the next election. If their parties

don't deselect them, the electorate will do it for them. This purge will be an exercise in popular democracy in which the bums will be thrown out. This will be good, but I doubt that it will be enough, because the 'political class' extends well beyond Westminster and Whitehall. Of course, we need to clear out the House of Commons, and get an elected second chamber, but we need to reform the way the country is run well beyond the milieu of political parties and government circles.

As far as I'm concerned the political class is made up of all those people in society who carry a lot of weight or 'pull'; I include all those bearing significant responsibility for directing the affairs of society within my definition of the 'political class'. Consequently, university vice-chancellors, newspaper editors, big capitalists, top trade union officials, leading civil servants, local authority executives, chief constables, senior officers in the armed forces, BBC executives, the controllers of commercial television and radio, the directors of quangoes and those in leading positions in their professions, all these people constitute the political class.

This political class is a heterogeneous mass of people, tens of thousands strong that cannot be purged or 'sorted out' quite as easily as the House of Commons. Identifiable only by the exercise of senior managerial power, and by executive decision-making, this political class is not united by political affiliation or prejudice, or by institutional membership of any kind. It cannot be reformed by purge, by waves of popular indignation, or by the application of new rules or disciplinary measures. Yet, a glance at one institution after another, will reveal practices and procedures designed for other problems and other times which despite having been subject over the years to numerous piecemeal changes have not kept pace with the rapid transformation of our society and of our popular culture. Consequently, we have one institution after another that is not fit for purpose. The inability of MPs to hold the government to account or fill in their

expense forms is merely a symptom of a much wider malaise.

As Britain has declined in power and influence in the world her people have become better educated, better fed, better clothed and better housed. The democratic impulse and expectations of our people has become stronger at about the same pace as the House of Commons has become weaker, and the Government and the European Commission has become more arbitrary and less democratic.

People in wheelchairs expect to be able to get on buses, homosexuals expect to be able marry, parents expect to be able to choose their kids' school, women expect equal pay, black people expect equal treatment, new comers expect to be given a fair chance, the poor expect double glazing, claimants expect social security officers to be helpful and polite, we all expect the police to be law abiding, patients expect clean hospitals and what's more, they expect doctors and surgeons to hold discussions with them concerning their treatment, students expect to be able to challenge their teachers, and children expect to be able to question their elders. These extraordinary phenomena are often lumped together by members of the political class into something called "the decline of deference". I prefer to think of it as a deepening of democracy, a deepening of the idea that everyone counts, everyone is of equal value, and nobody should be awarded respect or authority by virtue of their job titles, their honours or their position.

This deepening of democracy has been achieved by numerous changes in our popular culture and in our deep political instincts as we have mercifully cast off the racism and arrogance of our colonial past, and the memory of the grandeur of our imperial power has faded. Our racism is much more variegated and unsure of itself, most of our people hold their racial and religious prejudices in secure tension with their belief in fairness and the necessity of equal treatment. This is why the United Kingdom Independence Party and the British National Party and their allusions to the

never-never-land of the past will be no more than a passing fad for those who want to conjure up ideal notions of England as a land of sturdy white people, jealous of their independence, free of foreign taint and servitude.

Most of us are only too aware that life in the nineteen thirties, forties, and fifties was nothing like the fantasy cooked up by UKIP and the BNP. We want less deference and more democracy. Consequently, we need a political class that is responsive to these changes, a political class capable of designing, shaping and running institutions that can both guarantee and promote our popular democracy. As we inevitably decline in relative power and weight in the world as China, India, Indonesia, Brazil and others grow larger and stronger, we need to reposition our country, and our education system, our welfare services, and our economy, to develop and emphasize the creativity, the initiative, the independence, and the openness of our people to diversity and change. We need a more articulate relationship with the rest of the world, one which goes well beyond defensive alliances with America or Europe.

To do this we need a reformed political class, one capable of developing our education system, our economy, and much else in ways that reflect the deepening democratic aspirations of the people rather than the short-term interests of politicians or the sectional, inward-looking or narrow priorities of long-established institutions and organisations. The instincts of self-preservation which give us slum-like prisons, dysfunctional universities, inadequate child-protection services, dump estates, chaotic further education colleges, disorderly schools, outmoded factories, poor public transport and inefficient government, need to be challenged at every turn. The political class must be made to shape up through the development of a positive process. Reform by scandal and purge is fun, but it won't take us where we need to go.