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The British Aristocracy in Modern Times and Its Influence on British Policy

W. D. Rubinstein

Great Britain is unique among industrialised nations in retaining, to this day, a titled aristocracy which still survives and to which new titles of nobility (peerages) are added by creation each year. Even more uniquely, the British aristocracy retains a legislative role, and to this day the upper house of the British Parliament, the House of Lords, consists almost exclusively of titled aristocrats, most of whom owe their place in the House of Lords to the hereditary accident of birth.¹ Despite its remarkable and *sui generis* characteristics, however, relatively little research of a searching kind has been conducted on the twentieth-century British aristocracy, and there has, in particular, been virtually no research at all on the social origins or economic and political interests of the contemporary British aristocracy. This paper is an attempt to cast some light on the subject of the twentieth-century British aristocracy.

I

Even apart from the fact that the British aristocracy survives and still retains a legislative role, there are a number of features about it which distinguished Britain's aristocracy from that of continental Europe in the period (pre-1789 or pre-1918) when other European nations also had a titled aristocracy. First, the legal status of a peer existed only for one person, the holder of that title, at one time, and did not extend in any

way to any other member of his family, as it did in the continental nobility.² The British aristocracy thus never became a caste, and its numbers were always remarkably small. In 1789, for instance, it is generally estimated that there were about 250,000 members of the French nobility, but only about 300 members of the British aristocracy! Since only the elder son of a peer normally succeeded to a title, younger sons and daughters—and, still more, their children—were simply commoners, who often had to make their way in the world and intermarried freely with the gentry and the upper middle classes. Moreover, if a peer had no surviving son (or grandson) and no 'special remainder' provision had been attached to his peerage creation, the title simply died out with him.

Secondly, unique to Britain was the custom of 'primogeniture', in which all the land and most of the personal wealth owned by a peer passed intact to the the eldest son, the younger sons and daughters receiving (at best) only an annual income and some very limited share in the property. This custom—which became ubiquitous among all substantial British landowners by the eighteenth century, not merely aristocrats—was deliberately designed to keep the family estate intact and of a substantial size. Upon coming of age or marrying, heirs to peerages normally entered into an elaborate strict settlement agreement with their fathers, agreeing to primogeniture and making it as difficult as possible to sell off any portion of the landed estate, in order to prevent gamblers, spendthrifts, and wastrels among the heirs to peerages from squandering the family estate. As a result, Britain's great landowners were among the largest landowners in Europe, and remained among the very richest men in Britain until the First World War and , in many cases, until today.

Thirdly, since the Middle Ages aristocrats enjoyed no legal privileges whatever, apart from the right to sit and vote in the House of Lords and (until 1948) the right to be tried, if accused of a crime, by

their 'peers', that is, by the whole House of Lords sitting collectively, rather than a jury. In particular, British peers were never exempted from any form of taxation to which other Britons were liable to pay. They never received any money or payment merely for being peers, while, of course, British common people were never liable to provide any form of service or payment in kind to a feudal lord. Some recent historians have, in fact, argued that feudalism never existed in Britain, even during the Middle Ages.³ The British aristocracy, as Marx and Engels pointed out, was, uniquely, a 'cash-nexus' aristocracy, in which money wages and rental incomes in cash were always ubiquitous, while from the eighteenth century on many peers were notably involved in the active exploitation of coal and other minerals on their land, and in the development of urban areas, docks, railways, and the like on their properties. As well British landowning was characterised by what is known as the 'triple division of land tenure', wherein the landowner received a rental income from tenant farmers who rented agricultural holdings on their land, who in turn paid money wages to agricultural labourers to work their farms. There were no peasants in this system, and everyone involved had both a vested interest in and the economies of scale necessary for agricultural improvements, such as crop rotation, modern drainage, the enclosure of commons, and improved livestock breeding, in order to raise their incomes, which were all characteristics of England's 'agricultural revolution' from about 1720 until 1880.

The older British aristocracy was thus economically based primarily in landed rental incomes, especially from agricultural land, but also from mineral deposits and urban rentals. It is important, however, to be clear as to the legal composition of the British aristocracy. Britain's aristocracy consists of five ranks (in descending order): dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons. There were no legal distinctions

among these ranks, but it was generally understood that a duke would be far wealthier and more important than a viscount or baron. In 1830 the House of Lords consisted of 23 dukes, eighteen marquesses, 104 earls, twenty-two viscounts, and 160 barons, plus 28 Irish representative peers and 16 Scottish representative peers.⁴ Knights and baronets (hereditary knights) are not peers and not technically members of the British aristocracy; nor are members of the landed gentry without peerages, although some were very rich and owned landed estates larger than many peers. Virtually all peers were males, although in some very old Scottish peerages, women could succeed to the title and, very occasionally, a prominent woman would be given a peerage in her own right (such as baroness Burdett-Coutts, the famous philanthropist). Women peers were, however, not allowed to sit in the House of Lords until 1958.

Throughout modern history and down to about 1880 there was a general congruence between landed wealth and rank in the peerage. The very largest landowners in Britain almost always (though not invariably) held peerages, and the highest ranks in the peerage, generally speaking, owned more land, and derived more income from their land, than the lower ranks. A landed aristocrat who greatly increased his landed wealth was often advanced in status to match his wealth. Perhaps the clearest case of this is the Grosvenor family who became baron Grosvenor in 1761, Earl Grosvenor in 1784, Marquess of Westminster in 1831, and, finally, Duke of Westminster in 1874. In the interim, their formerly almost worthless land in west London had been developed as Mayfair, Pimlico, and Chelsea, and by 1874 the duke of Westminster had become probably the richest man in Britain, worth an estimated £14 million when he died in 1899 (about £780 million in today's money) when the rate of income tax was 10 percent. At the present time today's Duke of Westminster is still the richest man in Britain, estimated to have been

worth £4.5 billion in the late 1980s based chiefly in his London real estate. He is said to own 100,000 house and business properties in central London (including most of Oxford Street), the real market value of which must be almost incalculable.

Another feature of the British aristocracy prior to around 1830 is also very notable, what was known at the time as 'Old Corruption', the system of lucrative perquisites, sinecures, and dutiless official positions with a large salary attached, which often came to members of the aristocracy, their relatives, and other placemen.⁵ Prior to the late eighteenth century—and, in a diminished form, until the 'Age of Reform'—government ministers and officials, as well as leading peers, were expected to enrich themselves, their relatives, and their minions whenever they held office. Old-fashioned merchants, contractors, and professional men were also a part of this extended system, which was viewed by a later generation as the quintessence of venality and corruption. After around the 1830s, such open self-enrichment became virtually impossible, and the only legitimate incomes recognized by the aristocracy (or others) were derived from the ownership and development of land and other resources (or from business and professional life) rather than from government sinecures.

Down to about 1880, the overwhelming majority of new peerage creations were given to landowners and their close relatives, especially (although not exclusively) those who had served in the House of Commons, particularly as ministers.⁶ The most notable non-landed group to receive peerages were, certainly, the Lord Chancellors, that is, the chief judge and head of the British judicial system. All were, by definition, notable barristers, although many, like Lord Eldon, Mansfield, and Ellenborough, had also acquired large landed estates from their lucrative fees at the bar. Nevertheless, they were also the only significant 'middle

class' group to be given peerages in number prior to about 1880.⁷ For about a century after the beginning of the industrial revolution, the new men of wealth it generated made virtually no impact upon the aristocracy or upon new peerage creations. On average, about 4 or 5 new peerages were created annually in the century after 1780, or perhaps 400-500 in this century, but, apart from the 20 or 25 Lord Chancellors, not more than another 20 went to men engaged in a middle-class form of wealth-making. Occasionally a London banker like Lord Carrington or several members of the Baring family of enormously wealthy and powerful merchant bankers would be rewarded with a peerage after serving in Parliament and acquiring a significant landed estate, but even this was rare. So, too, was the awarding of a peerage to a writer (and Indian official) like Lord Macaulay, the great historian. Even rarer were peerages granted to industrialists or manufacturers. Despite the effects of the industrial revolution, the first manufacturer to be given a peerage was Edward Strutt, a wealthy cotton manufacturer in Derbyshire and Liberal M.P., who was created Baron Belper in 1856. Strutt had himself been educated at Cambridge and married the daughter of a bishop, and was thus no 'self-made man'.⁸ It should also be appreciated that only Anglicans (or Presbyterians in Scotland) were awarded peerages until the mid-1880s. Protestant dissenters (a very large percentage of the northern business class), Roman Catholics, and practicing Jews were never offered peerages until the late nineteenth century. For instance, Queen Victoria declined a recommendation to offer a peerage in the 1860s to Sir Moses Montefiore, the most prominent British Jew of the time, although in 1885 the situation had changed sufficiently for Sir Nathaniel Rothschild, the head of the renowned merchant bank and a long-serving M.P., to be given a peerage as Lord Rothschild.

By the 1880s, however, the situation whereby even the wealthiest

businessmen were excluded from the aristocracy had become untenable, and things changed very rapidly. Both William E. Gladstone during his 1880-85 Premiership and, more significantly, Lord Salisbury during his Conservative governments (1886-92 and 1895-1902) now created many peers drawn from business and professional backgrounds. Queen Victoria and King Edward VII now acted on these recommendations without demurral.⁹ In fact over the next seventy years or so, the British peerage successfully adapted to economic and social change, creating a kind of 'who's who' of the most prominent businessmen and families somewhat similar to that which had previously existed for great landowners.¹⁰ Such wealthy and important business families as Guinness, Bass, Williamson, Gibbs, Harmsworth, Grenfell, Wilson, Wills, Kitson, Montagu, Samuel, Kearley, Pearson, Furness, Mackay, Coats, and Dewar—to name only some of the most prominent—received peerages between 1880 and 1945. Nearly one-half of new peerage creations in this period were awarded to businessmen, the others going to other government ministers and M.P.s, professionals, generals and admirals, colonial administrators, etc.¹¹ Not every significant business family was ennobled during this period, but certainly a great many were. Fifty-two of 236 businessmen given peerages between 1880 and 1945 left estates of £1 million or more, an astronomical sum, representing about one-tenth of all male millionaires deceased in Britain during this period.¹²

II

While the honours system thus successfully adapted to economic change, a number of crucial questions were also raised at this time concerning the nexus between wealth, status, and power. First, many peerages continued to be awarded to leading politicians, increasing

numbers of whom were not rich or even affluent. In what sense were they, or still more their sons and grandsons, 'aristocrats' in any recognizable sense? This question became even more pressing in 1942 with the election of the first Labour Party was a radical and socialist party committed to ending all hereditary privileges, to say nothing of the world's only hereditary legislative body, the House of Lords. What attitude would they take to peerage creations and whom would they ennoble? Ramsay MacDonald gave peerages to four middle-class Labour supporters in 1924 and to 20 more during his 1929-31 Labour government. By MacDonald's second term, it had become apparent that Labour had no intention of abolishing the House of Lords and that its peerage creations would be fairly similar to those of the other parties. It did, however, broaden the basis of ennoblements and in 1931 gave a peerage to the first genuinely poor man ever to receive one, Henry Snell (Lord Snell) a Labour M.P. and Secretary of the London School of Economics who had begun life as an agricultural labourer.

Another important consideration was that brought about by changes within capitalism. The great magnates and tycoons of the industrial and commercial revolutions were wealthy men in their own right who owned the assets of the companies they controlled. Increasingly, however, the chairmen of the large-scale companies were managers who did not own the assets of these companies and were unrelated to the families which did. While they were, of course, well-paid, they were often not rich in the sense in which this is commonly understood. A number of company chairmen received peerages in the inter-war period, and, as with Labour figures, the question arose as to the sense in which they were 'aristocrats' and whether it was appropriate to give a hereditary peerage to such a man.

By the 1950s this question had become pressing. Not

surprisingly, there was always a very large majority of Conservatives in the House of Lords, which still retained (and retains) the right to delay non-financial legislation for one year. If the Lords was not regarded simply as an appendage of the Tory party (even when Labour was in power), more Labour peerages had to be created, but many trade union and Labour figures refused to accept hereditary peerages, either on grounds of principle or because they regarded their own claims to become part of the hereditary aristocracy as ludicrous. In response, in 1958, the Macmillan government introduced the most far-reaching change in the British aristocracy in recent times by initiating the creation of life peerages for both men and women.

There had, since 1876, been some life peerages in Britain, given to what are known as Lords of Appeal in Ordinary, that is, to senior judges of the Court of Appeals. Under Macmillan's act, the Queen was authorised to create an unlimited number of life peer, who all held the rank of baron (or baroness). (Theoretically, the Queen can create a life peerage of a higher rank, but none has ever been created, even for retiring Prime Ministers). In all respects, life peerages are identical to hereditary peerages, except that they cease with the death of their holder and are not inherited by the peer's eldest son.¹³ Almost immediately, the Labour Party agreed to the creation of a good many life peerages, and Labour's strength in the Lords has greatly increased as a result. An even more extraordinary change brought about by the 1958 Act was that life peerages could be given to women, who were enabled to take their seats in the House of Lords for the first time. In 1963, by another Act, all Scottish representative peers (though not Irish peers) and the few women holding hereditary peerages in their own right were allowed to take their seats in the Lords, while persons inheriting peerages were allowed to 'disclaim' them for life if they wished and to be legally recognized as commoners. (The best-known

case of someone taking advantage of this provision is Anthony Wedgwood Benn (Tony Benn), the leader of the far left of the Labour Party during the 1970s and 1980s, who inherited the title of Viscount Stansgate from his father.)

For the first six years after the 1958 Act, while the Conservative party was in power, about equal numbers of hereditary and life peerages were created. One of the changes stemming from the coming to power of Harold Wilson and the Labour Party in 1964, however, was that no new hereditary peerages were created by Labour. Surprisingly, none were created by Edward Heath's Tory government of 1970-74. Margaret Thatcher broke this pattern by creating four new hereditary peerages in the mid-1980s (along with many life peerages), although none has been created by John Major.¹⁴ In contrast, however, the number of new life peerages have escalated dramatically, especially under Wilson, as Table 1 of the creation of new peerages in this century, by Prime Minister, shows: (from D. Butler and G. Butler, ed., *British Political Facts, 1900-1985*) .

Since 1984, it is not possible to find any discernible difference in the level of new life peerage creations. Although John Major has made considerable play about 'reforming the honours system' to make it more democratic, his peerage creations have been identical to those of any of his predecessors. In 1992-93, for instance, 45 new life peerages were created, a very high number. About 30-40 new life peerages are currently being created every year, historically much higher than the twentieth-century average for peerage creations. One major reason for this is that there are a number of separate, unrelated occasions at which new peers are created. While the New Years and Queen's Birthday Honours Lists are the best known, every year or so there is a further creation of 10-20 'working peers', nominated by each of the parties to augment the number of its members in the Lords who actively take part in proceedings there. Many

Table 1 • Cration of peerages

Administration*		New Hreditary Creations ^a	Life Peers Law Other	Advanced in Rank	Total	Duration of Ministry (Yrs)	Average Annual Creations ^b
Salisbury	1895-02	42	2	n.a.	44	7	6
Balfour	1902-05	17	1	5	23	3 - 1 / 2	5
Campbell- Bannerman	1905-08	20	1		21	2 - 1 / 3	9
Asquith	1908-15	61	6	13	80	7	9
Asquith	1915-16	17	..	2	19	1 - 1 / 2	11
Lloyd George	1916-22	90	1	25	116	5 - 3 / 4	16
Bonar Law	1922-23	3	3	1 / 2	6
Baldwin	1923-24	7	1	1	9	2 / 3	10
MacDonald	1924	4	..	1	5	3 / 4	5
Baldwin	1924-29	37	5	10	52	4 - 1 / 2	18
MacDonald	1929-31	18	2	..	20	2 - 1 / 4	8
MacDonald	1931-35	43	1	6	50	3 - 3 / 4	12
Baldwin	1935-37	27	2	5	34	2	14
Chamberlain	1937-40	18	2	4	24	3	6
Churchill	1940-45	60	2	9	71	5 - 1 / 4	11
Attlee	1945-51	75	11	8	94	6 - 1 / 4	10
Churchill	1951-55	31	2	6	39	3 - 1 / 2	9
Eden	1955-57	19	3	22	1 - 3 / 4	11
Macmillan	1957-63	42	9 47	6	104	6	7
Duglas-Hume	1963-64	14	1 16	1	32	1	30
Wilson	1964-70	6	2 152	1	161	5 - 3 / 4	29
Heath	1970-74		4 30		34	3 - 1 / 2	9
Wilson	1974-76		3 81		84	2	40
Callaghan	1976-79	..	2 58		60	3	20
Thatcher	1979-84	3	6 107		116	(5 - 1 / 2) ^c	(21) ^c
only							

a These figures can be misleading as dissolution honours created by an outgoing ministry fall, in fact, into the following ministry, E.g., of H. Wilson's newcreations 6 were those of Sir A. Douglas-Hume.

b Excluding the creation of Law Lords and advancements in rank.

c To end of 1984.

of those nominated, especially on the Labour side, have tended to be academics, local government experts, representatives of community and other groups with specialist knowledge of particular subjects. Additionally, following the dissolution of a Parliament and again after a General Election, many former ministers and other politicians receive peerages in the 'Resignation Honours List' and other lists. In June 1992, following the 1992 General Election, twenty former senior ministers and others (among them Mrs Thatcher, Nigel Lawson, Sir Geoffrey Howe, Norman Tebbit, and Cecil Parkinson) received life peerages. As well, there are further creations for new Lords of Appeal in Ordinary (three in 1991-2) and other *ad hoc* creations from time to time.

III

Since 1958 over 700 new life peerages have been created, a fact which has greatly widened the social basis of peerage creations. I have studied the social origins of all life peers created between 1958 and 1989 in some detail, and there can be little doubt that, to a surprising degree, most are not drawn from either the traditional elite (however defined) or from wealthy backgrounds.¹⁵

There are several recognized ways of determining the original status of a group of individuals. Let us examine the life peers according to several of these determinants. Perhaps the method most commonly employed by sociologists and social historians is that of examining the childhood education of the persons in question, with attendance at an elite public school taken as evidence of at least upper-middle-class background in childhood, and often of something far higher. Often even as a shorthand method of ascertaining social status this method can be exaggerated: except probably at Eton and Harrow, attendance at a public

school indicates nothing more than parental membership in the very broad middle class. Women peers in general had no opportunity to attend such schools (though at least three attended St Paul's Girls' School), nor did peers born or educated abroad. The definition of a 'public school' used here has omitted selective municipal grammar schools like Manchester Grammar; their inclusion would of course swell the public school numbers. The information provided in this book on the occupations and social status of the fathers of all life peers and the fathers' wealth at death allows us to look at social origins in two further ways: the number of fathers who belonged to the 'Establishment' or the elite, and the number who were wealthy. Neither method is without considerable and obvious limitations. Any definition of the 'Establishment' must be arbitrary, especially at its lower edges, while a father's peak position may be very different (as, say, with a Labour Cabinet minister) from the one he occupied a decade or two earlier. Here, we have included among the 'Establishment' all fathers who were titled, ever sat in Parliament, held a senior professional (bishops, judges, senior physicians, professors) or managerial position (managing directors of significant companies or very successful entrepreneurs, and the like). A 'wealthy' father has been defined as one who left £50,000 or more up to 1939, and £100,000 or more thereafter—again, an arbitrary and debatable definition, with a very large margin of error because of widespread estate duty avoidance, while many peers may have benefitted from salient connections with other wealthy relatives. Nor does this definition of 'wealthy' take any account of inflation—£110,000 left in 1980 was much less than £55,000 left in 1930. Probably 300 or 400 persons dying each year in the 1920s or 1930s (out of all the tens of thousands of adults dying in Britain) left £50,000; several thousand persons leave £100,000 or more each year in recent decades when, most recently, £100,000 has ceased to be a great deal of money. In

any case, even £50,000 prior to the Second World War is hardly a sum associated with the Rockefeller family or the Nizam of Hyderabad; these are very minimal definitions of 'wealth'. Admitting all of these caveats, dividing the life peers (including Lords of Appeal in Ordinary) by date of creation, this is what we find:

Table 2 • Public School Attendance by Life Peers

Date of Creation	1958-64	1965-69	1970-74	1975-79	1980-84	1985-89
Total number	93	97	120	113	86	79
Eton	5	9	15	5	5	5
Harrow	1	0	3	0	1	2
Winchester	1	2	1	2	4	2
Westminster	1	0	1	2	0	3
Rugby	3	1	0	1	3	0
Marlborough	4	3	1	0	2	0
Charterhouse	2	1	2	2	0	5
St. Paul's	0	5	2	0	2	1
Stowe	1	1	2	1	3	3
Other major Public schools	16	12	18	19	16	17
Total	34	35	45	32	36	38
Percentage	36.5	35.1	37.5	28.3	41.9	48.1

Table 3 • Life Peer's fathers who held 'Elite' positions

	1958-64	1965-69	1970-74	1975-79	1980-84	1985-89
Life peers						
total number	93	97	120	113	86	79
'Elite' fathers	28	23	32	13	23	17
'Elite' percentage	30.1	23.7	26.7	11.5	26.7	21.5

Table 4 • Wealthy fathers of Life Peers

(leaving £50,000 or more before 1939; £100,000 or more since 1939)

	1958-64	1965-69	1970-74	1975-79	1980-84	1985-89
Life peers						
total number	93	97	120	113	86	79
Wealthy fathers	9	8	13	7	11	7
Wealthy percentage	9.7	8.2	10.8	6.2	7.3	8.9
	1958-64	1965-69	1970-74	1975-79	1980-84	1985-89
Total number	93	97	120	113	75	79
Working class fathers	15	20	28	18	15	14
Percentage of total	16.1	20.6	23.3	15.9	17.4	17.7

Even a cursory glance at these tables will present striking evidence that the addition of life peers to the old hereditary peerage did not simply add one privileged group to another: only a minority of life peers attended any public school and only a surprisingly tiny minority went to Eton or Harrow; only about one-fifth of life peers had fathers who themselves reached the status of an 'elite' group member, defined very widely; most clearly of all, fewer than 10 percent of all life peers had fathers who were wealthy, even by a very minimal definition of wealth.

On the contrary, the life peerage has created—and was in part intended to create—a means of bringing many more leading Labour and trade unionist figures into the House of Lords than previously. The number of life peers with a *bona fide* working-class background can also be determined from the occupational data on the fathers of each peer, supplemented by information on the peers' education, earliest employment, and the like. Since those at the bottom of the social scale are generally more difficult to trace than those at the top, there is a margin of error here, but it would appear that the number of working-class fathers is as given below. These figures refer to fathers who remained within the

workin class throughout their livers; they exclude fathers who were trade union officials, just as they exclude fathers in the lowest part of the lower-middle class—clerks, small shopkeepers, commercial travellers, and the like—who might well have been just as poor as those who were manual workers. Probably, then, even more life peers than is indicated here knew poverty, or something close to it, in their childhood years.

It would thus seem that the number of life peers drawn from the working class has far exceeded those drawn from a background of considerable wealth; even admitting a significant margin of error, the number here is clearly very substantial. Although most life peers from working-class backgrounds achieved prominence as Labour M.P.s, or trades union officials, a good many entered the middle classes, some as business tycoons, others, as professional men and women, including one Lord Chancellor.

The majority of life peers, however, appear to have been drawn from neither the rich nor the poor, but from a broad range of middle-class households, ranging upward from small tradesmen and minor clerks through physicians, civil servants, professors, company directors below the very wealthiest and others in the upper middle class. The range here is very wide indeed, as is the span in other social characteristics: for instance, although perhaps a plurality of life peers came from London and the Home Counties, most came from other parts of Britain or abroad, and, indeed—unlike other components of the 'Establishment'—London and the Home Counties do not seem to have produced grossly disproportionate numbers of life peers, many being ennobled deliberately as representatives of Britain's regions and provincial centres. It also seems clear that, among the life peers are significant numbers of Roman Catholics, Jews and persons of foreign background, as well as several peers of non-European descent.

Because of the 1958 Act, too, virtually all former Labour Cabinet ministers have accepted life peerages upon their retirement, and the percentage of former Labour Cabinet Ministers who receive life peerages is identical to that of former Tory ministers. Life peerages, too, have enormously broadened the type of person to receive a peerage. About 10-15 percent of all life peers have been business tycoons and magnates, often multi-millionaires, although the percentage of Britain's wealthiest men and women who have received life peerages has certainly declined since before 1939. Among some business dynasties, too, a curious form of quasi-hereditary creation has developed, in which a father and son both receive life peerages. Examples of this include Lords Sieff and Sieff of Brimpton (Marks and Spencers) and Lords McAlpine of Moffat and McAlpine of West Green (construction), indicating that pseudo-hereditary creations can still be made in another way.

The plurality of life peerages have gone to former M.P.s and ministers from all parties, as well as to other leaders and representatives of a wide variety of fields, including trade unionists, academics, economists, local government officials, legal experts, and notable achievers. Some British Nobel Prize winners have received life peerages, as have eminent persons like Benjamin Britten (Lord Britten), the composer and Sir Laurence Olivier (Lord Olivier), the actor. Life peerages have recently come to such persons as Sir Philip Knights (Lord Knights), the Chief Constable of the West Midlands 1975-85, the first representative of the police to receive a peerage, Sir Henry Plumb (Lord Plumb), the President of the National Farmers Union, and Sir Immanuel Jakobovitis (Lord Jakobovitis), the first British Chief Rabbi to be ennobled. Historians have done especially well from the emergence of life peerages, with such notable academic and popular historians as Hugh Trevor-Roper, Alan Bullock, Max Beloff, Noel Annan, Robert Skidelsky, Hugh Thomas,

and Asa Briggs now being members of the House of Lords. On the other hand, the three most famous of post-war British historians, A.J.P. Taylor, E.J.Hobsbawm, and E.P.Thompson, received no honours, presumably because each was strongly associated with the extreme left (each had been a member of the Communist Party at one time). There are today also over sixty life peeresses, and women play a major role in the running of the House of Lords. This broadening of the basis of representation in the Lords has accompanied the formation, in the late 1970s, of an organisation of 'Cross-bench' (i.e., non-party) peers, unattached to either the Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat Parties. While adherents of the Conservative Party are still by far the largest single bloc in the Lords, conservative peers are now actually outnumbered by Labour, Liberal Democrat, and Cross-bench peers, and the Lords defeated legislation proposed by the Thatcher government on at least twenty occasions during the 1980s.

IV

What all this says about the nature of the contemporary British aristocracy is more problematical. The hereditary aristocracy still of course exists and, from about 1960 until about 1990, land values in Britain rose to such an astronomical extent that those who still owned land were richer than ever. The big corporations and banks still exist, and each year newspapers publish 'wealth lists' of Britain's richest men and families. How the contemporary peerage, especially the life peerage, fits into this picture is not easy to say. In a sense, Britain has evolved what might be termed a 'post-modern' aristocracy, whose members are drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds and ennobled for many reasons. Undoubtedly, however, it certainly differs from the British aristocracy of the past.

The future of the House of Lords remains very problematical. Since 1977 the Labour Party has been officially committed in its platform to abolishing it, although whether it will do so if it comes to power is difficult to say. Over the past century, the great difficulty in reforming the Lords has been that any replacement for it would be a stronger legislative body than the House of Lords—for instance, an elected Senate—which could easily have a different party majority from the Commons, and if popularly elected, could stymie Commons legislation with much greater authority than the hereditary Lords could ever do. By default, then, this extraordinary institution might well be a feature of British politics into the twenty-first century—150 years or so after most rational observers would have expected it to disappear. Of all the ‘peculiarities of the English’, the British aristocracy is one of the most peculiar.

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End Notes

- 1 Apart from members of the nobility, the two Church of England archbishops and the twenty-six most senior bishops are also members of the House of Lords.
- 2 Although the eldest sons of dukes, marquesses, and earls (the three highest ranks in the peerage) bear a ‘courtesy title’ which confers no legal status whatever. For instance, the eldest son of the duke of Devonshire is known as the ‘Marquess of Hartington’. The younger sons and daughters of dukes are known as ‘Lord’ (or ‘Lady’), e.g., Lord John Russell was the younger son of the sixth duke of Bedford. Again, this confers no legal privileges whatever.
- 3 Alan Macfarlane, *The origins of English Individualism* (Oxford,

1978).

4 Peerages created before the eighteenth century (and, occasionally, afterwards) were, in some cases, Scottish or Irish titles rather than English or United Kingdom titles. Holders of Scottish or Irish peers were not automatically entitled to sit in the House of Lords. From 1707 until 1963 holders of Scottish titles elected sixteen 'Scottish representative peers' from their ranks at the beginning of each Parliament, who were entitled to sit in the Lords. From 1801 until 1922, holders of Irish peerages elected twenty-eight 'Irish representative peers', who served for life (and were replaced when they died.) No elections of Irish peers have been made since 1922 and there are, today, about fifty holders of Irish peerages who are not entitled to sit in the House of Lords. In 1963, Scottish peers, in contrast, were given the right to sit in the Lords.

5 See my 'The End of "Old Corruption" in Britain, 1760-1860', in: W.D.Rubinstein, *Elites and the Wealthy in Modern British History* (Brighton, 1987).

6 The evolution of the social background of newly created peers is treated in more detail by me in 'The Evolution of the British Honours System Since the Mid-Nineteenth Century', in: *Ibid.*

7 Lord Chancellors are given a peerage upon the formation of a new government (or when the previous holder is replaced). Lord Chancellors are *ex officio* Cabinet ministers and are also the presiding officer of the House of Lords while in office (seated on the 'woolsack'), thus combining key executive, legislative, and judicial roles in one person and confounding Montesquieu.

8 Although peerages were effectively closed to manufacturers, many baronetcies (hereditary knighthoods) were awarded to men in trade, such as Sir Robert Peel, first baronet, the father of the Prime Minister, who was a 'self-made man' and the earliest British cotton millionaire.

- 9 New peers (and recipients of other honours) are officially nominated by the Sovereign, although normally on the recommendation of the Prime Minister of the day. While some Prime Ministers have taken a keen interest in the 'honours lists', others have shown almost no interest at all, leaving the choices to advisers.
- 10 The classical examination of this evolution is R.A.Pumphrey, 'The Introduction of Industrialists into the British Peerage: A Study in the Adaptation of a Social Institution', *American Historical Review*, LXV (1959-60). See also F.M.L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1963), pp.60-1,292 ff.
- 11 See my 'Evolution of the British Honours System...', *op. cit.*, pp. 232-245, and pp. 253-261, which contains a complete list of business creations.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 238. Another 20 percent or so received Knighthoods or baronetcies, and another 10-15 percent had inherited titles, meaning that about one-half of all millionaires were titled.
- 13 It is important, however, to realize that *many* hereditary peerages were in effect life peerages since the peer in question had no surviving son and the peerage patent did not include any provision for a 'special remainder', that is, the inheritance of the peerage by a distant relative.
- 14 On the other hand one of Major's first acts as Prime Minister on coming to office in 1990 was to confer a baronetcy (a hereditary knighthood) upon Denis Thatcher, the Prime Minister's husband. No baronetcy had been created since 1965, and the award of one to the spouse of the Prime Minister for no ostensible reason is genuinely extraordinary, strongly reminiscent of 'Old Corruption'.
- 15 See my *Harvester Biographical Dictionary of Life Peers*, (Brighton, 1991), pp.375-379.