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[p. 2f]

‘How to Preserve the House of Lords.’

At a time when many Radicals are seriously considering the problem of how best to abolish the Upper Chamber, Mr Alfred R. Wallace comes forward with an appeal to their Lordships for a reform of their own House which shall bring it into concord with the popular will, and thus preserve it. Wallace is Radical—he calls himself an extreme Radical—and has little to urge in favour of a Second Chamber at all. His acquiescence in such an institution appears to be based rather upon an estimate of popular opinion, which is probably very wide of the mark, and upon the admitted difficulties which stand in the way of the absolute “ending” of the hereditary House. There is, however, we fear, just as little probability of their Lordships passing such a measure of reform as Mr Wallace indicates as there is of them committing, as he puts it, political suicide; and the consideration raises the question whether it would not in the end be preferable to aim at ending rather than mending their Lordships. The time is not yet ripe for deciding upon the means by which the Lords are to be dealt with. Oliver Cromwell solved the problem without bloodshed, or even much trouble; and though that occasion will scarcely stand for a precedent we need not despair of discovering the means when the occasion arises. Meanwhile it will be interesting to note the reception accorded by the Peers to Mr Wallace’s scheme, which certainly embodies the minimum of reform that would be acceptable to the great body of the electorate. Briefly, his proposals are that a Second Chamber should be elected from the present peerage, baronetage, and knightage. The new House would consist of about two hundred members—two members for each county, irrespective of population, and two representatives of each self-governing colony. The English electorate should embrace members of Town and County Councils with the new Parish and District Councils. No one should be eligible for a seat in the reformed House who was under the age of forty, and no person should have any hereditary claim upon a seat, although Mr Wallace has no objection, nor we imagine with anyone else to the continuance of the merely titular privileges of peerage. New peerages, however, should be merely life baronies and should be bestowed only for distinguished services. Henceforward Mr Wallace would rescue their Lordships from the periodical importation of party bores and political brewers which, it must be confessed, is a very real grievance of our old nobility, and to secure for them that their new associates shall be at least distinguished men in some sphere of human activity. It is not necessary here to criticise the scheme in detail. Mr Wallace does not, we presume, put it forward either as an inflexible proposal or as a complete solution of the difficulty. It is interesting mainly as an illustration of the smallest measure of reform which could by any possibility be regarded as satisfactory to the progressive party, yet which, as we have said, the Lords are as little likely to adopt as they are introduce a measure abolishing their own privileges. If we are to have a Second Chamber at all it is difficult to understand why the choice of its members should be restricted to the present peerage, baronetage, and knightage. The two latter bodies are eligible for seats in the lower House, and probably all of them who are both capable and desirous of figuring as legislators are able to secure seats there. They will scarcely care to be transferred to the seclusion of an Upper Chamber, even though it be a reformed one. The peerage itself forms far too restricted a field for the choice of such a chamber. We have desire to rob it of an atom of the credit which is its due, but it would be merely foolish to regard it as possessing any special legislative ability. The great politicians of the peerage could be counted almost upon the fingers. It is a fact of considerable

significance, and one which we imagine is not sufficiently recognised throughout the country, that the business of the House of Lords is carried on by the merest handful of men. During the current session there have been sittings when three, four, and frequently five members only were present. It is only when some important democratic reform is to be rejected or whittled away that their Lordships muster in any force. In fact, a measure which, following the precedent of our Town Councils should deprive of his seat every Peer who did not make a certain proportion of attendances—the proportion need not be very high, a fourth or an eighth of the total number of sittings would probably suffice—would reduce the House to vanishing point within the life of one Administration. It is clear, therefore, that if we are to have a Second Chamber at all we must look beyond the peerage for its members. We should imagine, also, that the proposal to restrict the membership to men above forty is open to serious objection and would certainly not tend to bring the new Chamber into touch with the younger element, which is almost invariably the progressive element in the democracy. The proposed electorate also provides fair matter for discussion, when such discussion may be profitable, but in the meantime, the only question of immediate interest is what have their Lordships to say to Mr Wallace's proposals?

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2017.