

Features

Nevada's Seat in the House of Lords

by J. D. Deming

Britain's "New Left" Prime Minister Tony Blair is moving to strip the hereditary peers in the House of Lords of their ancient voting rights. If he succeeds, he'll also be watering down the Nevada perspective on how Her Majesty's government ought to conduct its affairs. As the Brits say, "What's all this, then?"

Not many realize a boy raised in Nevada's Washoe Valley, south of Reno, is a full-blown hereditary voting member in Britain's upper house. True, Garret Wellesley is no tobacco-spittin' cowboy—he holds a Harvard MBA and has spent decades living abroad—but it is worth noting that a piece of Nevada history is tied up in a contentious political battle in Europe.

Reno-born Garret Wellesley is the "Earl Cowley," an English Lord, with courtesy titles including Baron Cowley of Somerset and Viscount Dangan. He's the inheritor of an old line of noble titles which is related to the Duke of Wellington's line. (You know, the guy who achieved what every red-blooded American has always ached to do; i.e., pummel the French.) The Wellesleys claim descent from King Henry II's standard bearer in England's 12th Century campaigns in Ireland. In the centuries since, the Wellesleys have held positions from Governor General of India to various ambassadorships, and even supposedly once got near a crack at Prime Minister.

So, how'd they get near the sacred banks of the Truckee River?

Garret's father, Christian Arthur Wellesley, the previous Earl Cowley, slogged through the trenches of World War I as a Royal Marine and later became a somewhat notable stage actor in the 1920s in both New York and London, much to his old-crust family's chagrin. (He just barely missed a berth on the *Titanic* during one trans-Atlantic romp.) Then, during the Great Depression, Christian Wellesley steamed from England to Reno to secure something even the mighty British Empire couldn't then provide—a quickie divorce.

The old Earl fell in love with pre-war Northern Nevada, finding the *haute couture* of the Washoe Valley vastly superior in every way to the wastelands of Europe. Well, maybe not in every way, but at least in terms of lots of rabbits and snakes to shoot. Wellesley decided to stay permanently, and built an 18th-Century-style English estate on the edge of Washoe Valley. In English tradition the Wellesley Ranch was completely self-sufficient, with its own blacksmith, carpentry and butchery shops. It

attracted such notable visitors as Eleanor Roosevelt, Earl Warren and Tallulah Bankhead, and was later purchased by the father of future Nevada Governor Bob List.

Lord Cowley, who went by only "Bill Wellesley" in Nevada, also bought the grand home on Crystal Bay, Lake Tahoe of Senator Taskar Oddie.

Throwing himself thoroughly into the Nevada lifestyle, Wellesley even became the director of the Nevada State Museum in Carson City. He remarried—this time to Mary Elsie May from a prominent old Reno family—and they had two children, Garret and a younger brother, Tim.

The boys attended the one-room Franktown School in the Washoe Valley, ensconced amidst the dude ranches. The mix of students at Franktown School was interesting: Half the kids were Nevada locals while the rest were offspring of wealthy East Coast mothers temporarily in Nevada to get divorces. The children of famed Nevada author Walter Van Tilburg Clark (Pulitzer-Prize-winning author of the *Ox-bow Incident*) also attended.

Bill Wellesley died in 1962, and his Earl Cowley title passed back to the son of his first wife in England. But, eventually, through various Acts of God, including the premature deaths of several relatives, Reno's Garret Wellesley found himself inheriting the Family Seat in Britain's House of Lords.

By then—the mid-1970s—Garret was a pension manager with Bank of America in San Francisco. Curious about what it all meant, he not long afterwards packed up his new wife and several younger children to London—to head B of A's investment management operations outside the U. S. and also, not incidentally, to re-establish the Cowley presence in England. Nowadays Garret's mother Elsie—still officially the "Dowager Countess Cowley"—and his brother Tim continue to live in Reno among the unwashed peasantry.

In England's parliamentary system, Britain's House of Lords—made up of hundreds of lords of all shapes, sizes, and political hues—acts as a *de facto* Senate and Supreme Court against the more powerful lower House of Commons. (C-SPAN junkies watch the latter each week in the U.S. for all the vitriolic squabbling). Some of the lords are given their titles as lifetime-only political favors, such as ex-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, now "Baroness Thatcher." But other lines are passed down from father to son or daughter for centuries, as remnants of kingly favors reaching back into the Middle Ages.

Garret Wellesley, the new Earl Cowley, became very active within the House of Lords in the late 1980s and was even offered the position of Conservative Party whip

by the Thatcher government, though he declined due to time constraints. Garret says he was surprised that there seemed to be no problem among the noble peers that he was an American—although one doddering old lord did sniff a bit about why a "cowboy from Nevada" should be able to vote on legislation concerning Britain.

Nowadays their lordships don't just putter around in ermine coats and rub their goutish legs. They also deal with some very important legislation, and act as a constitutional check on the raging populist waves pouring out of the Commons. Most recently the lords were in the news over the Pinochet extradition affair—deciding whether the old dictator who prevented Chile from becoming another Cuba should be extradited to Spain from England because of all the Marxist guerillas and college professors he shot. (Though Spain perhaps understands the expediency of putting pinko professors against the wall, it won't forgive crushing the Che-wannabes.)

The House of Lords, and especially its hereditary members, tend to be a conservative lot, and have recently been frustrating efforts by Tony Blair's Labour party to pass legislation. So Blair is attempting what FDR tried to pull in the 1930s with his notorious Supreme Court-packing scheme: If I can't get my lefty agenda through the old codgers, then I'll simply change the rules. If I don't have enough chess pieces on the board to win, I'll simply add more pieces.

Having hereditary legislators, of course, looks bad in the papers of democracy. Yet the whole creaky, jerry-rigged British system tends to work. There's no real written constitution as in the U.S., but the British through centuries of political evolution have developed some decent checks and balances.

The problem with Blair's scheme of ending the voting rights of hereditary peers is that he doesn't have anything to replace them with, an absence which can have dangerous consequences. Blair not only intends to prevent conservative hereditary lords from voting against him, he's announced he will appoint new left-wing life-peers to vote with him. Imagine if Clinton had the power to replace Republicans in the Senate with FOBs. Wellesley calls Prime Minister Blair a "control freak," and warns that the House of Lords is the only real check on Blair's power.

Garret's California-born son Graham, now in his thirties, runs a successful brokerage business in London, and holds the official title "Viscount Dangan"—pronounced VI-count, though some friends rag him as "Discount" Dangan. Eventually, Graham will inherit the Earl Cowley title, and then later, Graham's own English-born toddler son, Henry, will be Earl after him—perhaps during the future reign of Di's son, King William the Blond. Of course, no sagebrush has blown through little Henry's nostrils, and no crisp Nevada sunlight has darkened his pale complexion—the circle has

closed. The newest Cowleys are all English again as they were for centuries, though their line has been fortified perhaps immeasurably by the wild Comstock gene pool.

So, as the Left in Britain continues the process of hacking away everything that separates the British from the Belgians, as they move unceasingly towards being just another quaint hamlet in Euroweenie Land, as they prepare to give up the mighty Pound Sterling for the Peseta-ish Euro, as they surrender the freedom of Hong Kong to the commies in Beijing, as they move to ban fox hunting and gun ownership and dwarf tossing, and build Napoleon's dream of tunnels to Calais, they are also soon to kill off the ancient voting rights of hereditary nobles, a crucial cog in the constitutional machine. Thus, soon, for the first time in over 60 years, not only will Washoe County folk lose their wee say on what happens in the British Parliament, but venerable old England will also lose yet another rich piece of itself.

Home means Nevada. God save the Queen! NJ

J. D. Deming, a Reno native, is a nephew of Wellesley's wife, the Countess Cowley. He holds a master's degree from Cambridge in England, and has never successfully shot a rabbit or a Frenchman.