

A threat to democracy

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Michael Howard's decision to sack Howard Flight will no doubt be welcomed by many of his parliamentary colleagues who believe that unity offers the best chance of victory when polling day comes.

The position of deputy chairman of the Conservative party may well, under their constitution, be within the gift of the party leader, but Mr Flight's position as a recently reselected MP belongs to his local party. He can well claim that those who voted for him in the last election did so in the full knowledge of his political views.

No party leader should decide who should stand for parliament regardless of the views of those who chose him or her. The use of organisational methods to suppress dissent in politics is deeply undemocratic and could initiate a pro-

cedure that might - if carried to its logical conclusion - allow a party leaders to nominate members of the House of Commons.

The Labour party has a great deal of experience of doing just that. In the 30s it expelled Stafford Cripps for supporting the popular front against fascism, though he was later readmitted and became a pillar of the postwar government.

In the 80s Tommy Sheridan was expelled because of his association with Militant and Ken Livingstone was skilfully prevented from being the Labour candidate in the first election for the mayor of London - though he was readmitted later because he was so popular. More recently, George Galloway was expelled because of the force of his opposition to the Iraq war.

The prime minister has now adopted the Tory system of appointing the party chairman -

a position which had always been elected by the National Executive Committee (NEC) - thus weakening the influence of the party, and has begun to transform the process for selecting parliamentary candidates. In the past, this was seen as the responsibility of the constituency Labour parties, whereas today the NEC increasingly picks the short list to be sure that no one held to be unsuitable can be chosen.

This power fits in very neatly with the system of nominating all the members of the reformed House of Lords. If, at this late stage, an MP were to contemplate standing down, a peerage might become available, allowing the prime minister to parachute a candidate of his own into the vacancy.

The reformed House of Lords has now reverted to the

system that existed when it was set up in the 14th century. There were no hereditary peers and the king appointed life peers in the way the prime minister does today, the Fount of Honour having been diverted from Buckingham Palace to Downing Street.

This desire for absolute political control from the top is therefore not new but is steadily growing as power becomes centralised in the hands of the leaders in both main parties, which inevitably suppresses dissent and requires total obedience for those who want to enter and remain in the House of Commons. The justification is that differences of opinion weaken the party at the polls.

We would do well to remember the positive role of dissent in the past, as when Churchill fought against the

appeasement policy of the then Conservative prime minister Neville Chamberlain, or when Nye Bevan resigned over the rearmament programme and NHS cuts in 1951, which led to Labour's defeat that autumn.

Harold Wilson made a point of including both wings of the party in his governments and even allowed cabinet colleagues to campaign on opposite sides in the 1975 referendum, while Jim Callaghan encouraged long and searching debates in his cabinet in 1976 when the IMF was demanding the cuts that cost us the 1979 election.

A vibrant democracy requires free debate in all parties. Far from weakening them, it makes them more representative of the diversity of opinion that exists in the nation than if all candidates are seen as uniformed soldiers in a disciplined army commanded by a general

who gives all the orders.

Whatever Michael Howard says, I presume that there are many Tory MPs who would like to see deeper cuts in public expenditure than he thinks it wise to announce and many Labour MPs were against the Iraq war, tuition fees and the Terrorism Act. The stand these dissenters have taken will actually help their parties to win votes. It is for the electors, and not the party leaders, to decide who can serve in the House of Commons.

And it is for the same reason that proportional representation on a list system, where the list is drawn up by the party leaders, would be so dangerous. MPs should be loyal to their own beliefs, their constituencies and their parties and not be worrying all the time about whether their party leader might take them off the list for being independent.