

Is Britain drifting towards an authoritarian pseudo parliamentary illiberal democracy?

By Wolfgang Geissler



*Protests in London against Boris Johnson's decision to suspend Parliament.
Photograph: Wiktor Szymanowicz/Rex (The Guardian)*

As prophesied by **Lord Hailsham** in 1976, **Elective Dictatorship** is much closer to the truth in today's United Kingdom than most would believe. At least as an observer and with a son still living in the UK, one may be inclined to assume that a fully fledged authoritarian pseudo parliamentary illiberal democracy isn't far off.

The phrase “elective dictatorship” (also called executive dominance in political science) describes the state in which Parliament is dominated by the government of the day. It refers to the fact that the government determines the legislative programme of Parliament, and government bills virtually always pass the House of Commons because of the nature of the majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system, which almost always produces strong government, in combination with the imposition of party discipline on the governing party's majority, which almost always ensures loyalty. In the absence of a codified constitution, this tendency toward executive dominance is compounded by the Parliament Acts and Salisbury Convention¹, which circumscribe the House of Lords and their ability to block government initiatives.

The phrase was popularised by the former Lord Chancellor of the United Kingdom, Lord Hailsham, in a Richard Dimbleby Lecture at the BBC in 1976. The term was found a century earlier in describing Giuseppe Garibaldi's doctrines and was used by Hailsham (then known as Quintin Hogg) in lectures in 1968 and 1969.

I look forward to the appropriate comments from our learned friends.

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The opinions expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the views of the ABS or the UKCA.

¹ The Salisbury Doctrine, or "Convention" as it is sometimes called, emerged from the working arrangements reached during the Labour Government of 1945-51, when the fifth Marquess of Salisbury was the Leader of the Conservative Opposition in the Lords. The Convention ensures that major Government Bills can get through the Lords when the Government of the day has no majority in the Lords. In practice, it means that the Lords does not try to vote down at second or third reading, a Government Bill mentioned in an election manifesto.