
City of London (Ward Elections) Bill

Malcolm Matson - speaking to his Petition to the Commons Committee on 12th May 1999 against the above Bill.

"First I would like to express my sincere thanks to the staff of Public Bills Office and in particular, Elizabeth Paine. It has been as much a learning experience for her as it has been for me, but without her caring and efficient help, I would not have been able to cope with these hearings.

I owe it to you Mr Chairman, to introduce myself and to - as it were - present my *bona fides*. I am - in the public eye - at least in the Corporation's eye - no more than a man "not fit and proper to serve on my local authority" to which I was properly elected.

As a result of the Corporation' action - I have become the last man in British History to be blackballed in a public election.

In 1768 - John Wilkes elected MP for Middlesex - denied his seat by Parliament by your predecessors who ordered another election. Wilkes was held in prison for 2 years to the cries in the streets outside of "Wilkes and Liberty".

Wilkes became an Alderman and eventually Lord Mayor and was twice overlooked by the Aldermanic Court despite topping the Livery Poll at Common Hall. Eventually his expulsion from the Commons was expunged from the records and Parliament's customary right to overturn the electors was abolished forever. Wilkes helped secure open publication of Parliamentary debates and paved the way for universal suffrage and proposed that, "the meanest mechanic, the poorest peasant and day labourer" should be given the vote.

This Private Bill would tack on to that, "but the rich banker and the well heeled broker should have even more"

I am a British citizen - Free of this City (in the sense that Mr Simmons explained yesterday). I was educated at a Grammar School supported by the Worshipful Company of Coopers and then at the University of Nottingham and Harvard University, USA. I was proud to be admitted to the Livery of the Coopers' Company as Head Boy of my School in 1967 and subsequently to the Freedom of the City of London. I now sit on the Court of that Livery Company and am deeply engaged in its charitable focus and am Chairman of an Appeal Committee raising funds to finance a project to build housing for the frail and elderly in Tower Hamlets in partnership with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and the Shaftesbury Housing Association.

I live in the City with my wife (who has worked in the financial sector all her professional life) - London and the City matter to us. I even believe I have played my small part to help secure a strong future for the City VIRTUAL. (i.e. the financial sector)

I am an entrepreneur. Ten years ago I began to appreciate the fact that the City PHYSICAL (i.e.the Square Mile), would be replaced by the City VIRTUAL. Information technology would re-write the rules of financial trading and the old real estate maxim of "location, location, location" would take on a new meaning. That is now inevitable and is about to break upon us in a manner which I fear is not fully understood by the Corporation (one of the reasons why I stood for election in Bread Street).

I therefore founded a new company and called it **COLT** (City of London Telecommunications). Supported and encouraged by the Corporation of London, Lloyds of London and several other major corporations, COLT undertook a unique analysis of the City telecom market. I then assembled a business plan to build a new public telecoms network "in the City by the City for the City" to provide higher quality and lower cost access to the market. I personally raised the initial capital from the US - and the first all fibre- telecommunications network in Europe was born. Although I am no longer involved directly with the Company and am engaged in establishing new, equally ground breaking ventures, it gives me great satisfaction to see COLT now capitalised at well over £5bn and in the FTSE 100 ahead of industrial giants like British Steel. Last year, COLT was the top performing stock traded on the London market. COLT is as an important factor as anything in making London one of the most accessible and least cost markets on earth.

So please do not think that I do not have the well being of the City VIRTUAL at heart. Please do not think that I am not in close contact with or do not have any understanding of the business community. I do and I believe I have demonstrated it by my own actions and words.

And more recently, being concerned about the dangers of what I call a "moral meltdown" in the City VIRTUAL (another part of the platform on which I appealed to the Bread Street electorate) I have been instrumental in founding (and am now Chairman of) The Centre for Marketplace Theology - a Christian charity engaging with hundreds of individuals work in the City VIRTUAL - from Chairman of major institutions down to secretaries and helping them to cope with the moral and emotional stresses and strains of working in the this great international market. CMT aims to help resource them to fashion the climate and culture of the market towards remaining an open, honest and reliable place in which to trade - encouraging them to swim against the dangerously prevalent culture that PERFORMANCE is more important than PRINCIPLE in securing the future pre-eminence of the London financial sector as a reliable and trustworthy place in which to hold and trade assets. This is the bedrock upon which a great future for the City VIRTUAL will be built - just as it was for its past. *Meum dictum pactum.*

I stand before you as an independent citizen with - no vested interest - not representing any party or position - not answerable to anyone other than my conscience and Almighty God. I am simply trying to shine a small torch of truth onto what is a very important issue. There is nothing unusual about that - our history is full of ordinary men and women like me who have been "free" enough to stand up and to challenge conventional wisdom. Even (dare I say it) sometimes to remind Parliament that we must build our future on the firm foundation of first principles while, (as Prime Minister Tony Blair said in his Mansion House speech in 1997, while we "make sense of our history" and do not become slaves to it.

So why have I petitioned against this Bill? I am interested only in - **promoting good government; the welfare of our capital and its citizens and the continued prosperity of what I call the City Virtual.**

I have deliberately not employed Counsel as I do not want to plead my Petition on fine legal points (although I do believe the Corporation's case is substantially flawed in various aspects of law and drafting). I simply want to persuade you four good men - fair and true - to look more closely at the facts than many of your peers have had either the need, the inclination, or indeed, the opportunity to do.

I do not even stand here for motives of self-interest. Nobody would choose to have this time and energy consuming diversion from work or family. Nor (as it has been claimed) - is this a matter of "sour grapes" at not being admitted by the Aldermanic Court. "Grapes of Wrath" maybe, but certainly not sour ones. My wrath stems from the fact that although I have learnt an incredible amount

over the past 4 years since that dark and sinister experience of the secret interrogation in the Aldermanic Court - the fact is that my case to you today is the same one that I put to the electorate of Bread Street. It is that there is a need for substantial reform of the Corporation of London - way beyond that proposed in this BILL. Having been denied the opportunity of promoting that from within the Corporation - little wonder that as a man of conviction, I do *not* slink away into the shadows but rather continue to pursue what I believe to be right and good and fair government for this City - and to do so in whatever way I can.

And now I have been faced with the overwhelming evidence of the likes of Jean Aslanian (who I called yesterday as a witness) and of her neighbours that the situation is much deeper and more serious than even I had first imagined. When the system denies poor and relatively disadvantaged people their basic democratic rights and it leaves them powerless and vulnerable in the community where they live - then someone else must try to help them. *That* is why this is so important to me - because it is important to *them*.

I say again - I am interested only in **promoting good government; the welfare of our capital and its citizens and the continued prosperity of what I call the City Virtual.**

On day One of the Committee (4th May) the transcript reports that Counsel for the Corporation described my position and Petition as "fundamentally attacking the existence of the Corporation"

That is untrue - it is a caricature. Preserving the Corporation and that unique and priceless heritage is essential and high on my list - but that does not mean that we mindlessly take our steer for the future from the past. Every custom was once an innovation and what I want to see is sufficient reform to ensure that we still steer the Corporation ship according to the fixed stars of those principles which were laid down in the original confirming Charter of 1341 from the reign of Edward III

I quote:

"If any custom heretofore obtained in the said City shall be in any part difficult or defective, or any matter anew arising in the same City, for which no remedy hath been before ordained, shall need amendment, the same Mayor and Alderman and their heirs and successors, with the assent of the Commonality of the same City, may appoint and ordain as often as to them shall seem expedient a suitable remedy, consonant with good faith and reason, for the common profit of the Citizens of the City, and other our faithful people resorting to the same. Providing such ordinance shall be profitable to us and to our people....."

This Bill does not meet those clear and extant criteria - it is neither consonant with good faith and reason - nor is it profitable to the people - either of the City PHYSICAL - the Square Mile or the City VIRTUAL - the wider business and financial community.

In short - it is inadequate - it does not deal **adequately** with "difficult or defective" customs still operating within the Corporation of London and which the Government have asked it to reform.

And that is the **context** in which this Bill has arrived here. "Adequate" reform is what we are looking for. I refer you to the transcript of the Second Reading Debate on 24th February 1999 at Column 451:

Mr Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster: "The discussions referred to in the Green Paper have taken place and have been fruitful. The White Paper entitled, "A Mayor and Assembly for London" records in paragraphs 1.25 and 1.26:

"In New Leadership for London we made it clear that we do not propose to abolish the Corporation of London. In reaching this decision we were relying upon the assurances that the Corporation would

continue its work in promoting inward investment and financing studies for the benefit of London as a whole, and had accepted that it must respond to the need to improve its electoral arrangements. The Corporation has produced its own proposals for reform which have been the subject of consultation and discussion with those who live in the City and the variety of bodies which operate there."

Mr John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) "I sit with the right hon. Gentleman on the Committee that is considering the Greater London Authority Bill, and am now the secretary of his fan club because of his articulateness in that Committee.

On the statement by the Labour party before the election, does the right hon. Gentleman consider that the commitment not to abolish the City Corporation was conditional on adequate reform proposals being brought forward as a result of the Bill, and that if adequate proposals are not brought forward during this Parliament or this Government's term of office, abolition may well proceed? The reforms must therefore be genuine, proper and democratic.

Mr Brooke: Perhaps I made the mistake of not completing the quotation before I gave way to the hon. Gentleman, as I did in the case of my hon. Friend. However, I shall respond to the hon. Gentleman. I am not, of course, privy to what went on in the Labour Party in the run-up to the election. I detect, however, that the City Corporation got the message that was being communicated by the City (Government in waiting?) about the need to reform its electoral arrangements. The Corporation has presented the proposals to the Government in order to verify that the Government were seeking that degree of electoral reform.

It may be helpful if I quote the paragraph in the White Paper, which states:

"These proposals involve both reforming the existing franchise in order to prevent abuse and the extension of the electoral system to give a wider variety of bodies and organisations voting rights within the Square Mile. We shall continue to maintain an interest in the Corporation's proposals for reforming its franchise as they develop".

In that sense, the hon. Gentleman is quite right - we are in real-time business."

We are indeed engaged in "real time business". The Government has required the Corporation to make proposals and we now have them in the form of this BILL and whether or not they deliver **adequate** reform is the litmus test of their **expediency** which the Corporation claims in the preamble to the BILL.

I want to thank you Mr Chairman for the courteous and tolerant way in which you have permitted me throughout this hearing seemingly to digress from the precise focus of the Bill. But that has been essential if Parliament is to have a full and thorough understanding of what would be left in place if this Bill were to be enacted - as of what would be changed by this Bill. I believe that had I not been able to do this - then you and your colleagues would have been denied a full opportunity of assessing whether the Preamble is proven in the context in which it has been presented.

I claim it has not - on both counts. In terms of what it proposes and in terms of what it leaves behind, this Bill fails to achieve the objectives set for it by Government in the White Paper "A Mayor and Assembly for London" (CM 3897) Para 1.25 namely, **"reforming the existing franchise in order to prevent abuse"**. Not *this* abuse or *that* abuse - but **any** abuse.

I believe that it may be possible to "reform the franchise" to achieve that end - indeed I set out one option in my Pamphlet, "The Last Rotten Borough" published by the Fabian Society, but this Bill will not prevent **all abuse** - it should be rejected here and now.

At this point Mr Chairman, maybe it is appropriate to circulate copies of the letters written to the Deputy Prime Minister from many residents who live in the City and which were copied to me. You will recall that you asked yesterday for them. These all say more or much the same thing -namely that in the writer's opinion - this Bill should be rejected. Many of them also say that it will do nothing to prevent future abuse. I also had many phone calls (which I did not record) expressing similar sentiments and telling me that they too had written to the Deputy Prime Minister expressing *their* opposition to the BILL. So I think you can see why we have that extraordinary statistic of nearly 13% of all responses to the GLA and elected Mayor Green Paper from across the entire Capital coming from this little undemocratic island of the Square Mile.

Maybe Mr Prescott didn't see these letters personally and they were simply dealt with by officials - they were, after all, sent to him at the London Debate Office and not here. I wonder whether I could ask you Mr Chairman or maybe Mr Thomas or Mr Sawford to see whether Mr Prescott has actually read these letters and if not, to draw them to his personal attention.

I return to my point that this Bill will not prevent abuse.

I believe the 1341 confirming Charter itself requires the Corporation to be pro-active in initiating reform that is both *sufficient* and *necessary* to keep the Corporation on a true course of "good faith and reason" towards the single goal of "serving Our People" and which avoids **abuse**. In the rest of the land we have come to discover that plain vanilla universal suffrage - one person one vote - is not perfect - but is as good a way as any of achieving that.

But, the mere fact that the Corporation has such a long and illustrious history - predating Parliament and that it enjoys the unique privilege and power to manage its own Constitution - does **not** place it beyond the law of the land in 1999.

Having averted its gaze for centuries, it is now time for Parliament to take another look and to see if the Corporation of London is managing its constitution within the law and whether or not the Corporation is claiming rights or assuming powers in the name of "custom" which it does not possess due to the evolution of the law or due to less than millennium perfect memories in the Guildhall.

My successful challenge of the Corporation in 1995 on just one very small point of its behaviour, in which it claimed it had a right based on custom, proved beyond any shadow of a doubt that this risk of abuse is a real one.

That action was costly to me and my family in terms of time, energy and, given the Corporation's subsequent murmurings, in reputation. It surely cannot be left to the odd individual - the Wilkes and Matsons of this world - every hundred years or so to dare to challenge some aspect of the Corporation's behaviour. Jean Aslanian and her neighbours deserve better than that from the heartland of the mother of Democracy.

I make this point because when the Government asked the Corporation to come forward with its own proposals for reform, it unwittingly did a very unusual and indeed, I believe dangerous and naïve thing.

This Bill deals exclusively with proposed changes to the franchise *of the Court of Common Council*. But the Court of Common Council is only one of the 3 Assemblies which constitute the Corporation of London. Not being as well acquainted with the facts, as you gentleman now are, and simply swallowing what he had been told by the Corporation, the Minister and maybe even the Prime Minister and their advisors, have allowed the physician to heal only those parts of himself which **he** chooses.

It is beyond the remit of this Committee to address them now and I do not intend to. So let me simply illustrate how this Bill fails "to reform the existing franchise in order to prevent abuse" by its restricted scope.

There are 3 assemblies which make up the Corporation of London - the Court of Common Council, the Court of Alderman and Common Hall. They each have quite separate franchises.

As far as the Court of Alderman is concerned - in the Second Reading Debate, the Hon Member for the Cities of London and Westminster was asked the following question by Mr Edward Leigh, the Member for Gainsborough.

Mr Leigh: My right hon. Friend mentioned aldermanic elections. A friend of mine, Mr Malcolm Matson, was elected in an entirely proper way by his ward to the aldermanic bench. Then, for no good reason that I can divine, he was prevented from taking his place on the aldermanic bench. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that if the Bill goes through, that unfortunate state of affairs cannot arise again?

Mr Brooke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I too, know Mr Matson, and have known him for a long time. My hon Friend describes accurately the circumstances of that episode. It is the case - arising not out of the Bill, but out of rules of the City corporation - that such an event will not occur again. I can confirm that to my hon Friend."

But I believe that if you were to look closely enough and to consider what is being proposed by the Court of Alderman in the context of the Access to Justice Bill (in particular Clause 50 -(1)) I believe that in reality they may have done no such thing.

We have heard how the Court of Alderman is reducing the term of office for Aldermen to 6 years. By what authority does it do this? Just because they say so? An alderman is elected "for life", not by custom but by virtue of an Act of this Parliament in 1393 under the reign of Richard II (17 Richard II c. 11-13).

What about the third assembly of the Corporation of London - Common Hall. This is a wonderful ancient event held twice a year which I have attended on many occasions in order to elect the two sheriffs and the Lord Mayor but it is not a meaningless and irrelevant bit of pageantry. It is this Assembly and this alone which has the franchise to elect the head of my local authority - the Lord Mayor - the person Mr Simmons referred to as being so crucial to promoting the business and financial interests of the city VIRTUAL around the world.

But no City business which this BILL proposes to enfranchise will have one jot of influence over who that spokesperson is. A refreshed and more representative Court of Common Council which this BILL claims it will deliver has no say whatsoever in choosing its head - and this Bill does nothing to change that. So if the Government's intention in encouraging and now supporting this Bill is that the Corporation is bringing before Parliament proposals to (in the words of the Green Paper) ***"improve its franchise so that it represents more accurately the various interests in the Square Mile "*** in this particular franchise it is doing nothing to deliver this much needed reform.

I am not the only person who thinks that the franchise for electing the person who is now assuming such a high-profile and influential role as a leader of the City VIRTUAL (forget the poor 5000 residents for a moment) needs reforming in order to prevent abuse. Here is a letter to me from Mr Neil Young - the Alderman who was ousted from the Bread Street Ward thereby causing the vacancy which the electorate chose me to fill. I refer to Paragraph 3:

"I think the most important point to stress is that the Lord mayor of the City of London is de facto head of the Corporation of London and yet Common Councilmen, who form the majority of the membership by far, have virtually no say as to whether they find forthcoming Aldermanic candidates suitable for this office.

And then in paragraph seven:

"This in effect means that a group of only 8 people can decide the fate of a potential Lord Mayor of London and require him to resign from his elected position maybe against the wishes of the majority of Common Council."

Is this franchise for the election of the Lord Mayor not open to abuse? Does it not need reform in order to pass the test of **adequacy** let alone the Government's objectives of seeing that the Corporation reforms the franchise so that it, "represents more accurately the various interests in the Square Mile" (Green Paper CM 3724 at Para 1.11)?

Even some elements in the Financial Community itself really think that the City VIRTUAL suffers from improper representation or that further reform is required. Here are 3 press cuttings. I particularly draw your attention to the second one entitled "City's Lead under threat from splits and overlapping" from the Evening Standard of 15th February 1999 in which an independent Think Tank, "The Centre for the Study of Financial Innovation" (which of course receives some support from the Corporation) is bold enough to pronounce that, "*Division and old fashioned thinking among the City's ruling elite is threatening the position of London as Europe's financial capital*" and makes reference to the Corporation. Needless to say, the Corporation is quoted as disagreeing with this independent conclusion.

But to the extent that this Bill *does* propose changes to the Corporation's franchise - it is not some minor local issue. It proposes fundamental constitutional changes. If enacted, this Bill will be, as I have frequently said recently, the first step backwards from universal suffrage since Magna Carta. This fact was not lost upon those Members who attended the Second Reading. There was one speech, made by Mr Bill Etherington, the hon. Member for Sunderland North, which expresses this with particular eloquence:

"I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate, but I am far from pleased that it is necessary. I start from the premise that as a democratically elected MP, it is my responsibility to try to ensure that the best democratic standards are upheld at all times. The Bill not only negates that principle, but would perniciously amend existing legislation.

Since the great Reform Act of 1832, there has been constant progress through universal suffrage and general improvements in voting procedures which has led to our position today. We can all be proud of that, except for the situation in one small part of Britain.

I apologise to the many London Members present who may not be called to speak because I have had my few minutes. I apologise because I realise that they must feel as angry as I do about the fact that the Bill is before the House. What is worse, I am almost 300 miles away from the City. We are not speaking of the democratic deficit; we are speaking about a system that is fundamentally undemocratic and anti-democratic, and the Bill will make matters worse.

I have heard many good things said tonight. The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) struck a chord with me when he spoke about democracy. I am speaking about democracy and nothing else. I have no interest in speaking for or against the corporation or the City of London. They

exist, they do a job, and I have no strong feelings one way or the other. However, I feel that they should have no part in the democratic process in the place in which they are situated.

I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) on the Front Bench. I should like my Government to introduce a Bill to bring the corporation and City of London into the same democratic procedures as we have everywhere else in this land. I invite my hon. Friend to do so.

It is not unusual for me to be mildly critical of my Government when I speak in the House. That is part of the democratic process. I would much rather the time of the House tonight had been spent dealing with a Bill such as the Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill, or some other matter of real importance to the people of Britain.

I feel both angry and sad--sad that we have to debate the issue, and angry because of what it stands for. I do not imagine that many of my constituents are aware of the circumstances of the corporation and City of London and the totally undemocratic process by which they are governed. I shall try to make sure that they get to know a little more, as it is as important to them and to people in every other constituency as it is to the people of London, although I accept that it is more annoying to London Members. From what I have heard tonight, it is clear that they are much more knowledgeable on the subject than I am, but their feelings about democracy are no stronger.

Several hon. Members have said that there is nothing comparable in other democratic countries. I believe that that is correct. I have heard a special case being pleaded, and I am always wary when I hear about a special case, because it is usually a matter of vested interests and attempts to take people's minds off the main issue. The main issue in this case has nothing to do with the wealth-creating abilities or otherwise of the corporation or the City of London, and everything to do with democracy and what people in this country expect.

From what I have heard said by Opposition Members, it seems that if people work somewhere, they should be entitled to a vote there, because they should have a say in the place where they work. When I worked at the colliery, I did not expect to have a vote where the colliery was. I had one where I resided. That should be the cornerstone of all democracy. A vote should be based on where one resides. Are we saying that people who have a caravan should have a vote in the place where their caravan is sited? That is the analogy with the City of London.

I hope that every Labour Member will vote against the Bill, because the democratic situation will be worsened if the Bill goes through. Others will use it as an example.

People will say, "Why can we in the north-east not have two votes? Can I not have a vote where I have my little corner shop? Can I not have a vote where I work?" The cornerstone of democracy is one person, one vote, in one place. That is paramount.

I am employed in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who introduced the Bill. I would not expect to have a vote in his constituency. I do not expect to have a vote in Sunderland, where I also have an office. I expect one vote, and one vote only. If I were offered more, I would turn down the offer, because that would be fundamentally wrong. That is what the Bill is about-- giving a certain number of people extra voting power. Once we go down the line of giving one person one vote and others more than one vote, we shall start seriously to undermine this country's democratic processes.

The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster must be proud that he has this palace within his constituency. However, it is ironic that the mother of Parliaments--we should all be proud of the fact that this place stands for everything that is best as far as democracy is concerned--is within shouting distance of a place where attempts are being made by Opposition Members to negate the democratic process. That is the issue at stake.

I warn all hon. Members that if the Bill is passed, it will be the start of a slippery slope, because it will be noticed and others will want the same rights. It is not anti-business to say that it is wrong for business people to have more than one vote. I remember the problems caused in Northern Ireland by the property vote. Some hon. Members know more about that than me because they were here when it existed. I have talked to people who believe in property votes, but that is because they want an advantage.

There is no reason to apologise for saying that it is totally wrong for people to expect to have a voting influence because of where they work. There may be exceptions, for example someone who owns a public house and also lives in it, so it is their business and home. Voting rights should be based on residence and nothing else--one person, one vote, where the person resides. Those who seek to move away from that do everyone a great disservice.

I am surprised at the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster. He is almost a doyen to me in terms of democracy and courtesy. I cannot understand why such a thoroughly decent person would put his name to such a pernicious, insidious and invidious Bill. I say once again to my hon. Friend the Minister, let us see a little bit of democracy and some modernisation. Let us have the democratic powers of the corporation of London taken away from it, so that it gets on with what it does best--the business of creating and distributing money. It is not always distributed how I would like, but I recognise that that is what it does, and that is all it should do. Businesses have plenty of influence within local authorities and this House. That should not be added to by allowing them to have additional votes.

I have brought with me just three pieces of correspondence. The first is from the parliamentary agents of the Bill, a good organisation that I had a lot to do with on the Channel Tunnel Bill. It does that organisation no good to be introducing this Bill. The second correspondence is from the London Labour party, which all my hon. Friends should support. It deals with this problem day in, day out--it must be terrible to have to live with it.

The third piece of correspondence is from Malcolm J. Matson, of London EC2Y, whom I thank for drawing this matter to my attention. Although I remember reading about it years ago, so I was vaguely aware of it, I must admit ignorance. I did not know how dreadful the democratic position was in that part of London and I am pleased that I have learned about it. I hope that the Bill will be defeated tonight.

BUT the Corporation will cry "The City is unique and needs to be treated in a unique way with a unique government", as indeed Mr Simmons did at the very beginning of his evidence.

I agree that the City was the mother of all local governments and has a rich history, but that does not isolate it from the requirement to act in accordance with "good faith and reason for the benefit of the People" in the way that is interpreted at the end of the second Millennium.

The Corporation has managed to isolate itself from reform down the centuries by pleading to successive governments that it should be an exception to this or that act of Parliament. Never being high on any modern day prime ministers' agenda and not guaranteed to be a massive vote winner or loser - the City has in recent years found it easier and easier to shelter itself from the refreshing wind of reform, unqualified democracy - and dare I say it modernisation.

Again, I quote from the 2nd Reading Debate and from the words of a man for whom I have immense respect - considerably more than I do for some of his policies, Mr Tony Benn, the Hon Member for Chesterfield:

Mr Tony Benn: "The right hon. Gentleman will know as well as any of us that there has never been any change in our electoral system without a Speaker's Conference. It has always been understood that Boundary commission and electoral reform of all kinds have developed in this way. Can he explain to the House what it is about the City that allows it to change its own electoral system, without considering the impact that that would have on the rest of the country, or the interests of the parties involved? What gives the City the right to draft its own constitution? Is it a city state? Is it an offshore island? What is the status of the City that allows it even to contemplate such a change?"

Mr Brooke: "I take the spirit of the right hon. Gentleman's question. I have had the pleasure of listening to many of his speeches down the years. The fact that the City was so early into democratic principles - much earlier, I fear, than even Parliament - means that much of what we are discussing is hallowed"

Hallowed ? Are the House of Lords and the Monarchy any less hallowed? Are they to be preserved in aspic like some latter-day Damian Hurst sculpture?

The word **expedient** in the Preamble to this Bill is crucial. I hope I have argued and presented evidence and a witness to demonstrate that this Bill is not expedient for the residents. I hope I have raised a question mark over whether or not it is really expedient for the business population.

Indeed, even *if* I were to concede that this Bill *is* expedient for the business interests in the City PHYSICAL (i.e. the Square Mile) - which most definitely I do *not* - then I would argue that it is *not* expedient for the City VIRTUAL (i.e. the entire London financial sector) that such benefits should stop abruptly at the Corporation's gates (or ring of steel as it is now called), such that those members of the City VIRTUAL who have chosen to locate their businesses outside the Square Mile - in Tower Hamlets, Westminster or Islington - will not enjoy this "vital" access to the ballot box which the Corporation is seeking to establish. If changing the voting system to enfranchise business is *good* for the City - it is good for Barnet, Bristol, Birmingham and Bradford.

Then for whom *is* this BILL expedient?

I believe Mr Simmons gave us the answer on 5th May (Page 29 of the transcript of that day at para 5) when he responded to Mr SYMS that:

"If this [Bill] does not go through the Corporation will eventually be abolished....."

Mr Chairman, in this one brief statement I believe we have a succinct but complete explanation of the expediency which the Corporation argues is the basis why this Private Bill should be passed into law.

I do not share Mr Simmons gloom - I want and believe that the Corporation should and can survive. What is doomed, is the "old guard" that currently controls the Corporation as a self-perpetuating club. But the Corporation is bigger than them!

The Corporation that I want to see surviving is indeed Dick Wittington's Corporation but refreshed with a new charter and *raison d'etre* - equipped to ensure that London and London alone can exploit this unique and stunning history which it is impossible for any other place to replicate.

But mere self preservation of the Corporation in largely its current form serves nobody and surely, it is not a sufficient demonstration of *expediency* or *adequacy* such that this Private Bill should become law - at the hand of Parliament - albeit with a little help and support from the Government - certainly not such a reforming Government as this one. History will not treat such an incident kindly.

I do not entirely blame the Corporation for this but rather it was a naïve move on the part of ministers to think that in asking any institution to reform itself **anything** other than self preservation would be high on the agenda. Mr Simmonds confirmed this when he told you why he could not get through Common Council any measure to reduce the number of Wards.

Let me read an amusing but very telling piece written by one of your former colleagues in the Commons - Mr Jerry Hayes - himself a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Fletchers.

"The Corporation of London has been bred to impress, flatter and ease juicy contracts from foreigners with a mixture of grandeur, flattery and mind-blowing pageantry. It rarely fails.

Whether you are the President of the United States or the self-made emperor of an African state, the lure of a lunch at the Mansion House or a banquet at the Guildhall, all in your honour, is delightfully seductive. The City of London has all the skills of an upmarket lady of the night massaging the male ego.

If you think that a Mansion House lunch is rather upmarket - with its glittering gold, sparkling marble statues, endless champagne and vintage wines - it pales into insignificance when compared with the Guildhall. A reception here, with traditions dating back 1,000 years, is not something to be turned down. You are individually received by all members of the Common Council, who stand robed, white-tied and white gloved, applauding the guests being announced by the Master of Ceremonies. A string quartet plays in the background as you await the guest of honour who is eventually clapped in, preceded by the Swordbearer, the Macebearer and the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs, each with more diamonds than Elizabeth Taylor.

Then, from the two great balconies at each end of the magnificent hall adorned with the statues of the two mythical giants, Gog and Magog, the liveried State Trumpeters give a rousing fanfare. The tables grown with gold and silver and the impressive array of wine glasses is never allowed to stand empty. The finest champagnes, wines, brandies and ports are served in quantities that would make Oliver Read blush. For the toasts, the respective national anthems are played by the string quartet that has been so discreetly in the background while the deals are quietly made. And that is the reason that everybody is there.

A City banquet is a masterpiece of sophisticated pre-planned networking, and nobody is seated by accident. After the speeches, the exchange of gifts, the loving cup and eventually the stirrup-cup (more booze), everyone staggers out into the night with a rosy glow. City banquets manage to create what most other political bodies find so elusive - goodwill.

There is huge difference in the understanding and insight one gains of the *real* operation and abuses attending the Corporation of London, from sitting in the Guildhall or Mansion House and sitting in Committee Room 5 of the Palace of Westminster. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister, his Ministers and advisors are frequent guests at the former and therefore lack the insights which you now have. The same is true of the Conservative leadership.

I appreciate that as party members, this puts you between a rock and a hard place. I just pray that you will think of Jean Aslanian and her neighbours when you wrestle - as wrestle you must - with whether you do as you are undoubtedly expected to do, or you do as, in your heart, I believe you know you should do.

I want to see the Corporation and its magnificent history and wealth used as a massive competitive advantage for London over any other country in the world. I am not as despairing as Mr Simmonds if you throw out this Bill. I share his gloom only if you do not.

Nor will it do to take a deep breath and say "well - it's a step in the right direction" - a little reform is better than none. That would be a step in the wrong direction. It is as if those who opposed the abolition of slavery, were able to convince Wilberforce to compromise with legislation which simply outlawed under-age slavery. You know as well as I do - that had that reform been taken step-by-step, then the scourge of slavery would have persisted many more years than it did.

If you pass this BILL and opt for a "little bit of reform" then I believe it will be "no change"

I read from a recent publication, "Voting for a World Class City" published and circulated by the Corporation in large quantities and evidenced by them in this hearing as a major leg of their consultation process. On Page 10 it says:

"In order to encourage the adoption of best practice by qualifying bodies, both when appointing their voters and, if they choose to do so, recommending them on how to vote, the Corporation proposes to issue guidance which will be circulated to all businesses in the City"

Whoever heard of an elected body in a modern open democracy, "advising" the electorate on **who** to vote for and once elected **how** they should vote?

If this Bill is passed, the Corporation will continue to use its massive private resources to fund, in the words of Michael Cassidy, the former Chairman of Policy & Resources Committee, a "*charm offensive*" against the rest of the world to try and keep a marked separation between appearance and reality.

The same Mr Cassidy is, after all, the person who said on behalf of the Corporation on BBC 1 television on 22nd March 1995:

"All I can say is that the City of London works very effectively internationally; that there are no fundamental problems that arise out of the franchise, that we are generating huge wealth for this country and if it's working - leave it alone"

The Corporation have come here with a Bill admitting that one tiny bit aint working. This Bill will neither fix that nor the deeper underlying problems.

Finally, Mr Chairman, the Bill you have before you is, as we have been told many times throughout this Committee **not** the Bill which the Corporation wishes to see enacted - there have been countless amendments conceded and promised for when it appears in the Lords.

I believe it would be a dereliction of duty on the part of the House of Commons to leave it to the House of Lords to incorporate any amendments. We all know that unless there is at least one amendment to the Bill at this Committee stage, then there will be no Report Stage on the floor of the House. I believe that the Corporation may contemptuously be relying on this device to deprive Members of the House the opportunity to make their own amendments and in particular to deprive them in good time of the opportunity to consider the Corporation's amendments.

It may be that the Bill before this Committee combined with the Corporation's promises and "ideas" of amendments have the semblance of being acceptable to you (of course I hope they are not), but the actual Bill when amended may be very different and prove unacceptable. My experience of the

Corporation leads me to believe that would not be impossible. If that turns out to be the case, then while Parliament will be able to debate those amendments, they will not be able to alter the general scheme of the Bill.

Therefore, any commitment to amend the Bill made to this Committee should be fulfilled, in Committee, before the 3rd Reading

I therefore urge the Committee to report to the House that the Promoters intend to amend the Bill and that the 3rd Reading should not take place until the Commons has had a chance to consider the Corporation's amendments. That is to say, recommit the Bill to the Committee to consider those amendments and in order that this Petitioner at least, has an opportunity to consider them.

I BEG TO PETITION AGAINST THIS BILL