



33 of 624 DOCUMENTS

Copyright 2009 The Washington Times LLC
All Rights Reserved
The Washington Times

May 29, 2009 Friday

SECTION: COMMENTARY; A19

LENGTH: 916 words

HEADLINE: Britain's new revolution;
Expected to clean out House of Commons

BYLINE: By Richard W. Rahn, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

DATELINE: LONDON

BODY:

Imagine reading a news report that "U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi resigned this morning, and it is expected that more than half of the members of Congress will either resign, choose not to run again or be defeated in next year's election."

This statement might seem to be a fantasy or a dream come true, but it is equivalent to the headlines the British public was treated to this past week. Effective June 21, Michael Martin will become the first speaker of the British House of Commons to resign since 1695 (a mere 314 years ago). The Times of London reports the expected "departure of 325 [out of 646] members of Parliament as a result of forced resignations, retirement, and defeat at the polls would represent the biggest clear-out of Parliament since 1945."

The trigger to wholesale slaughter of the British political class was a series of revelations by the London Daily Telegraph about the abuse of expense accounts by more than 170 members of Parliament (MPs). One wealthy member charged the taxpayers for cleaning a moat around his country estate. Another charged more than \$50,000 for his extensive gardens, which included \$3,000 for a floating "duck island." Yet another charged more than \$120,000 for his second home, including tree work. And it goes on and on.

The Telegraph "has established that many MPs - more than 200 in total - who employ relatives have been able to claim extra expenses as a result of the arrangement."

At a time when Britain is in an even deeper recession than is the United States (gross domestic product dropped at an annual rate of 7.4 percent last quarter), citizens are outraged by their high-living politicians and civil servants. Until recently, members of the British Parliament were paid very modestly by U.S. and European Union standards and had small allowances for staff and expenses.

However, since the Labor Party took control 12 years ago, many MPs have begun to look at their job as an

Britain's new revolution; Expected to clean out House of Commons The Washington Times May 29, 2009 Friday

entitlement (as do many in the civil service) rather than an honor and a duty. The just-disposed speaker, a former union leader, is famously quoted as saying, "I only took what I was entitled to" (ah, but by his definition).

Unfortunately for British Conservatives, the scandal has not involved just members of the Labor Party, but also some prominent Conservative MPs. A friend who was a conservative MP during the years of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher related to me how appalled and angry - like the British public - he was about the rise in double standards by the political class over the past couple of decades. Unfortunately, this is true on both sides of the Atlantic.

The following quote comes from a Brit (Robert Colvile), but could not the same comments be made about what is happening in the United States? "It is the general feeling that there are people who are using our money to fund lifestyles far beyond the average voter's - and using their position to exempt themselves from the rules. Ordinary citizens are fined for sorting their rubbish incorrectly, or making an error on their tax return. MPs reconfigure the tax system to their own advantage. ... We are hemmed in by laws and regulations they are free to ignore"

The revolution taking place in the United Kingdom has occurred because people have the Internet and a new Freedom of Information Act that give them the ability both to acquire information about how the politicians spend their money and to spread that information to others. The British press also seems to have been a lot more aggressive than much of the mainstream media in the United States in ferreting out information about official wrongdoing and abuse.

Should not U.S. taxpayers have the right to know the details of the spending by each member of Congress, including each's office allowance, expense account and nonchargeable use of government aircraft, limos, etc.?

Congress has just voted to require that we ordinary citizens use smaller and less safe cars in the name of combating global warming, but do you really think the leaders in Washington will give up their large limos? Mrs. Pelosi claims she needs a private jet to go back and forth to her district in California because of "national security." Have you noticed that the blanket national-security claim is often nothing more than a cover to provide privileges and lack of transparency for the political elite?

Have you wondered why the average federal employee in the United States makes about 50 percent more per year (\$75,000 versus \$50,000) than the average private-sector worker yet has almost zero chance of getting fired and has a very rich pension and medical insurance program?

It is unlikely that Americans would enjoy the freedoms they have today if the British had not led the way with the Magna Carta (1215) and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The day the British forced their speaker to resign was the same day (May 19) that the voters of California said no (by a 2-1 margin) to proposed propositions that would have led to more government spending and increased taxes but yes (by a 3-1 margin) to a proposition that prohibits elected officials from getting a pay raise when the government was running a deficit. (Is there any doubt that U.S. voters, if given a chance, would vote for the same pay freeze for Congress?)

Will a new American revolution follow the British one in dethroning much of the political class?

Richard W. Rahn is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and chairman of the Institute for Global Economic Growth.

GRAPHIC: Speaker of the House of Commons Michael Martin. [Photo by Getty Images]

LOAD-DATE: May 29, 2009