

Politicians clash over elected House of Lords

The House of Lords contains over half of UK lawmakers. Whether chosen by birth or by the Queen, not one of them is elected by popular vote. But now that may set to change.



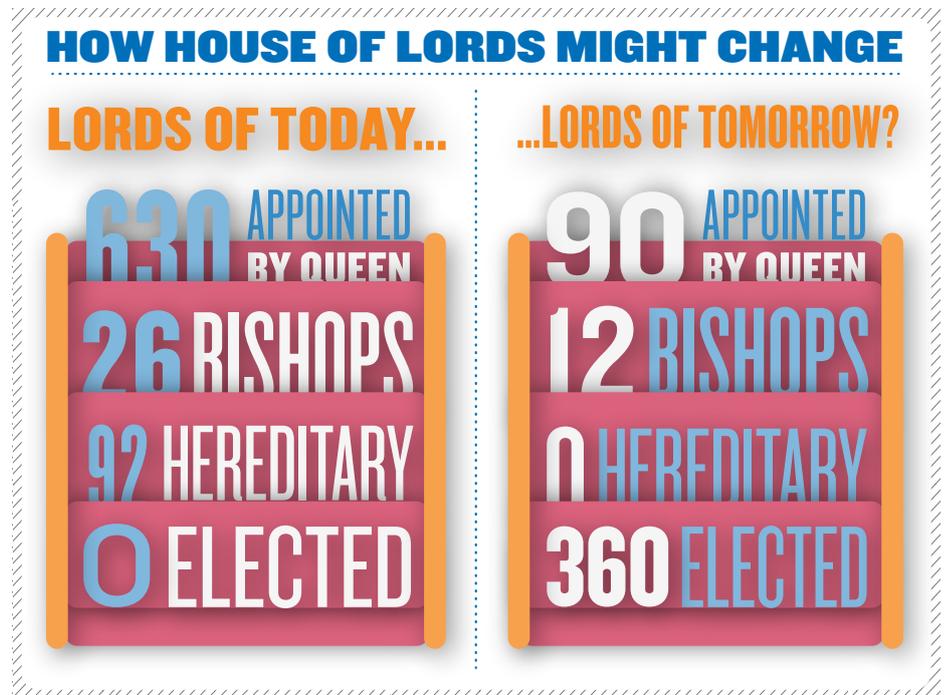
CITIZENSHIP
HISTORY & POLITICS

Displayed in all their finery, the Lords look like some far-fetched fantasy of a distant past: row upon row of flowing ermine cloaks, dotted here and there with a judge's wig or dog collar.

But this is no mere relic: the House of Lords is one half of the UK Parliament. Though not as important as the House of Commons, the 'Upper House' has considerable power. Every time a law is proposed, they consider, debate and amend it. They cannot completely reject proposals (or 'bills'); but they can delay them practically forever. And yet they are totally unelected.

Now, that may be set to change. Yesterday the government published a bill which, if passed, would change the Upper House dramatically. The current Lords would almost all be dismissed. In their places would sit a new group of peers, mostly chosen by the popular vote.

The House of Lords is a remnant of an old form of government, in which the



monarch ruled with the cooperation of her most powerful subjects. Much has changed since then: only a small proportion of the current 'lords' are aristocrats of ancient lineage, with a few top judges and bishops alongside them.

Most are chosen by the Queen on the advice of politicians. They are a sundry assortment: scientists, entrepreneurs, ex-politicians. Women are relatively well-represented, as are ethnic minorities. There is even an Elvis impersonator in the mix.

In fact, the House of Lords is now more diverse than the elected Commons. But the Lords are still removed from the democratic process – and for many, that is reason enough to abolish them forever. It seems simple: if democracy is good, then the House of Lords is bad.

Yet the unelected Lords have many virtues. Unlike those of the bickering Commons, their debates are courteous, intelligent and thorough. Rather than

mechanically following a party line, the opinions they voice are complex and independent.

This is not in spite of the lack of democracy, but because of it. Elected politicians must constantly consider the needs of their party, and the opinion of a public which is quick to judge. The Lords feel none of these pressures.

LORDS UNTO THEMSELVES

Nice and polite though they may be, say reformers, the Lords should step aside. They are nothing but stubborn fossils of an authoritarian past. If Britain ever wants to be a genuine democracy, they say, the Lords must be disbanded.

But we already have a democracy, protest traditionalists: the Commons. It is right that they should answer to the people, but that should not mean the Lords should as well. If these reforms go ahead, they say, a noble institution will die. Its replacement: a replica House of Commons, full of childish slanging matches and career politicians.

Q & A

Q Shouldn't the government be worrying about more pressing matters? Like, say, the economy.

A It's a valid opinion, and one a lot of people share – including politicians.

Q So why now?

A All three main parties theoretically sup-

ported Lords reform in the last election; but the party pushing hardest is the Liberal Democrats, for whom this has long been a key issue. Many see it as unfinished business: the Liberals led the last major reforms in 1911, when the Lords were stripped of their veto.

Q But aren't the Conservatives in power?

A They are the largest party, but they have

formed a coalition with the Lib Dems. One of the conditions of their agreement was action on constitutional reform.



SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'There has never been a problem to which the answer is 500 more politicians.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Politicians clash over elected House of Lords

WORD WATCH

Ermine cloaks – Also known as a stoat, the ermine is a small rodent. Its fur is soft, white and extremely luxurious; so although there is nothing very majestic about it in life, the animal has long been associated with nobility.

Dog collar – In many Christian sects, clergy such as priests and

bishops are required to wear special clothing like robes. Detachable dog collars, the small white bands that many priests wear around their necks, were actually quite a late addition to this dress code: they only became popular in the 19th Century.

Published a bill – Publishing a bill and reading it in Parliament is the first step towards making a law. It is then debated in both

Houses, discussed, changed and put to a vote. If both Houses agree (or if the Commons rejects the Lords' call to reconsider) the Queen is asked to sign the bill into law. It then becomes an Act of Parliament.

Following a party line – Most Lords are in fact aligned with a party. But since they have a position for life, there is nothing except principle to prevent them from voting against their party – which they often do.

YOU DECIDE

1. Should all politicians be democratically elected?
2. Should tradition have any importance in making political decisions?

ACTIVITIES

1. Design your own system of choosing leaders – it can be as democratic or undemocratic as you like, and as unusual!

2. Draw an infographic showing how a bill becomes law by passing between the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

 **BECOME AN EXPERT** Check our website for a selection of useful links to videos and further reading.

 **NOTES**

