

Government praises “spiritual insight” of bishops in response to petition calling for their removal from the Lords

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The Government has said that changes to the Lords are "important" but that the position of the bishops in the Upper House is not a "priority", in response to a petition calling for the removal of 26 bishops from the House of Lords.

After the censure of the US Episcopalian Church by the Anglican Communion over same-sex marriage, a petition was launched calling on the Government to reform the House of Lords by removing Anglican bishops from the Upper House.

The petition read: "With the publication of the Church of England's intention to sanction the US Episcopal Church over the latter's sympathetic stance towards equal marriage, the C of E is quite out of step with UK Law and indeed common humanity. Thus we feel strongly these bishops have no place in our government."

It quickly achieved over 10,000 signatures, prompting a [Government response](#) that called for "constitutional changes" while defending the role bishops currently play in the House of Lords, citing their "important independent voice and spiritual insight".

"Changes to the composition of the House of Lords, including Church of England Bishops, are important but, given the very full programme of other constitutional changes, are not a priority at present," a statement from the Cabinet Office said.

Despite touting their constitutional reform agenda, the Government stated that it has "no plans to remove the Church of England Bishops from the House of Lords."

The response argued that the establishment of the Church of England and the "relationship between the Church and the State" is an "important part of the constitutional framework" of the UK.

"As senior members of the established Church of England, 26 bishops are appointed to the House of Lords. Bishops provide an important independent voice and spiritual insight into the work of the Upper House and while they make no claims to direct representation, they seek to be a voice for all people of faiths. The House of Lords also contains a number of other senior faith representatives."

National Secular Society campaigns manager, Stephen Evans, said that the Government was ["out-of-touch"](#) to defend the current role of the established church.

"Most people in the UK [do not look to religious figures for moral leadership](#). On issues such as marriage equality and assisted dying Anglican bishops don't even represent the people in their pews, let alone 'all people of faiths'. Rather than seeking to influence society from a uniquely privileged position, the Church should pursue its political ambitions in the same way any other special interest group is expected to. The 'spiritual insight' of Anglican bishops is simply not needed in policy-making and the bench of bishops is an anomaly in a modern, liberal democracy.

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby recently told the Primates' Meeting of the Lords Spirituals' influence, praising them as the most "orthodox" bench of bishops since the Second World War.

"We are still a major part of the glue that holds society together. A recent attempt to introduce assisted suicide was crushingly defeated in Parliament. We are exempted from the same sex marriage act, showing that our voice is still heard against the prevailing wind of our society, and at much cost to ourselves, by the way."

In 2013 nine bishops [voted](#) for a "wrecking amendment" to block same-sex marriage. Five abstained. None supported it.

The petition can be signed [here](#). If it reaches 100,000 signatures it will be considered for debate in Parliament.

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