

Why do the bishops have the right to thwart democratically agreed legislation?

Posted: Tue, 24th Jan 2012 by [Terry Sanderson](#)

It was the Rt Rev John Packer, Bishop of Ripon and Leeds, who introduced the successful House of Lords amendment this week that defeated the Government's plan to cap benefits at £26,000 per family.

Whatever you think about the issue (and I know that the Government's stand on this is a popular one) the question has to be: is it right that religious leaders should be able to interfere in the democratic process of a properly-elected Government in this way?

Of course they needed support from others in the House of Lords to get the amendment through and, indeed, one of our honorary associates, Lord Avebury, was on the *Today* programme saying that he would support it.

But again, this is not about the issue itself, it is about the ability of the Church of England, through its parliamentary representatives, to successfully delay Government legislation.

No-one is arguing that the bishops or the Cardinals or the rabbis or the mullahs should not be able to join the debate on this issue. After all, their religion enjoins them to defend the disadvantaged and poverty-stricken. But they should join the debate on the same terms as everyone else who is not elected to our parliament: through lobbying, campaigning and argument in the media.

Instead, we have the scandal of bishops of one particular denomination (a very small and shrinking one at that) who can directly interfere with law making.

They may be representing your opinions on this issue, but on others they may not. They were, for instance, extremely influential in scuppering attempts to legalise assisted suicide for the terminally ill. They have tried to get themselves exempted from equality and human rights legislation (to a degree successfully). They often use their position in a self-serving way to ensure that none of their privileges can be challenged or overturned.

When the recent Education Bill was being discussed in the House of Lords, all attempts to end discrimination in so-called "faith schools" were blocked after noisy complaints from the Bishops' Bench.

There can be no possible democratic justification for the bishops to remain, and hopefully this is the final flickering of the theocracy that has plagued British history. The bishops are an anachronism that must be dealt with in the forthcoming debate about reform of the House of Lords. The latest events may prompt Mr Cameron to reassess his opinion that the bishops – even in a reduced number – should remain.

Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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