

Bishops come under fire but Lords Reform now looks a distant prospect

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An attempt by the Government to reform the House of Lords looks doomed after 91 Conservative MPs defied their party whip this week and voted against plans for a mainly elected second chamber.

Despite the rebellion (the biggest yet for the coalition) the Government still comfortably won the vote on the principle of its proposed reforms to Parliament with a majority of 338, but it faced defeat on the "programme motion" – which would have set out a timetable for the Lords Reform Bill to get through the Commons. Labour had planned to join Conservative rebels in opposing the motion, saying 10 scheduled days of debate was not enough to give proper scrutiny of the reform.

In order to avoid a humiliating defeat, the Government has now delayed a vote on this motion until the autumn, hoping it can talk the rebels round.

Nick Clegg said the vote for the plans had been a "huge triumph" and then warned the Tories that there would be "consequences" if they failed to back the bill.

During the two day debate there was much criticism of the plans to retain the bench of Church of England bishops – albeit reduced from 26 to 12.

The most outspoken speech came from Nia Griffith, Labour MP for Llanelli, who said the bishops were not representative of all Christians in the UK, never mind those of different faiths or no faith at all.

She said:

"The Church of England is not the established Church of the United Kingdom. The Church in Wales was disestablished in 1920, in Northern Ireland there has not been an established Church since 1871 and the Church of Scotland Act 1921 acknowledged that the Kirk had never been the established Church of Scotland and so could not be disestablished. Many countries specifically separate Church and state, even countries with a clearly dominant religion, such as Italy or Spain.

"Equality legislation in this country outlaws discrimination between men and women, yet for this reformed 21st century second Chamber, the Bill proposes to include bishops from the Church of England, which has fudged on equal rights. After years and years, yet again this week the Church is fudging on women bishops, and we have had nothing but exceptions and excuses, and a ridiculous amendment that would allow parishes that do not accept women bishops to request a male bishop. This would not be allowed in other workplaces and would be a disgrace even within a non-established Church or religion, but it is utterly deplorable that a so-called established Church chooses to flout the spirit of the law of the land. It is totally unacceptable to give 12 places with voting rights in a reformed 21st century second Chamber to bishops in an

organisation that still does not give equal rights to women to allow them to become bishops and which has actually contemplated an amendment that would undermine their authority.

"I oppose reserving the 12 places for bishops of the Church of England in the second Chamber because it is not the established Church of the whole UK, because the appointment of bishops does not conform to the spirit of equality legislation and because it is high time that we separated Church and state. If this is really a reform for the future, it is a good opportunity not to include bishops. I ask the Government seriously to consider that issue."

Chris Bryant, Labour MP for Rhondda said it was "bizarre" to have the bishops of the Church of England in the House of Lords. He added "I would move an amendment to get rid of all the bishops."

Ian Lucas, Labour MP for Wrexham, said having bishops as Members was "wrong". He added: "Giving precedence to Church of England clerics is an extraordinary thing to do, and it is even more inexplicable on this very day, when the Church of England has decided not to appoint women bishops. Is not having such a clause in the Bill a breach of the European convention on human rights?"

Karl Turner, Labour MP for Hull, pointed out that the Deputy Prime Minister had undermined his argument for the need for electoral legitimacy by maintaining an appointed element and failing to use the opportunity to reform the role of bishops.

Thomas Docherty, Labour MP for Dunfermline and West Fife agreed that the issue of Church of England bishops needed to be addressed. He said: "I do not believe that the Church of England should sit in the House of Lords or the senate."

Graeme Morrice, Labour MP for Livingston, said many of his constituents had expressed strong feelings about the place of bishops in the Lords.

He said:

"My constituents have been unanimous in their view that this reform is an opportunity to end the automatic right of bishops to sit in the Lords. I very much hope that whatever form the new second Chamber takes, it will contain a diversity of representatives, but they should be there because the people have put their trust in them at the ballot box, rather than because they hold a particular religious office."

Mark Lazarowicz, Lab/Co-op MP for Edinburgh North and Leith said he agreed with Opposition colleagues who argue against reserved places for Church of England bishops.

"Many bishops who attend the Lords do offer an independent and critical voice, and it has challenged over-mighty Governments of all parties, but such a challenge should come from those whose authority to speak is derived from election, not from appointment. As many Members have pointed out, the additional objection is that, by giving a privileged place to leaders of one faith group, we discriminate against every other faith group, let alone against agnostics and atheists."

Mr William Bain, Labour MP for Glasgow North East also criticised plans for keeping reserved

seats for Church of England clergy. He said: "The UK would remain one of only two legislatures in the world, along with Iran's, to continue such religious representation, even though 60% of the public say that bishops should not sit in Parliament."

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, commented: "It seems there is going to have to be a rethink of this Bill before it has any chance of succeeding, which would give the opportunity for the coalition to rethink the provisions in relation to the bishops. It is clear that there would be little resistance to the abolition of the Lords Spiritual and plenty of applause for it. Mr Clegg and Mr Cameron should be bold and truly modernise the House of Lords."

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