

Lords committee proposals would hand bishops more power

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Newly-published proposals to reform the House of Lords would see Church of England bishops given more power.

On Tuesday the Lord Speaker's committee on the size of the House of Lords [recommended](#) the House be reduced to 600 members, and its size capped at that number. A 'two-out, one-in' programme of departures would reduce the House's size until it reached the target of 600.

The committee, which was chaired by Lord Burns and had members from all parties and the crossbenches, only recommended changes which would not require legislation. It did not consider recommending reducing the number of Bishops in the Lords, as the measure was outside its remit.

The UK is unique among Western democracies in giving representatives of religious groups automatic seats in its legislature: 26 Church of England bishops sit in the Lords as of right. The National Secular Society has long called for the removal of this right.

If the bishops retain their role while the number of other Lords is reduced, their votes will carry more weight. Over 800 Lords currently sit in the House.

In a written [submission to the Lord Speaker's committee](#) earlier this year, the NSS recommended the removal of the Bishops' Bench, calling it an "anomaly" in a modern, liberal democracy.

NSS campaigns director Stephen Evans said he was "alarmed" by the implications of the proposed changes.

"There may be perfectly reasonable arguments for a general reduction in the size of the Lords. But any proposals for Lords reform must consider the full impact of the measures being suggested. That means the justification – or lack of it – behind everyone's place in the House must be examined.

"Inertia and a refusal to legislate are not good enough reasons to give the bishops even more political power than they currently have.

"Ultimately the bishops' place in the UK parliament should be ended, not extended. Challenging the Church of England's unjust and unjustifiable religious privilege cannot stay in the 'too difficult' department forever."

The NSS has also criticised the bishops' regressive stance on issues such as the ordination of female Bishops, same-sex marriage and the decriminalisation of assisted suicide. Last year the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, [said](#) longer-standing members considered the Bishops' Bench "the most orthodox since WWII".

Lord Fowler, the Lord Speaker who set up the committee, welcomed the proposals. "This is the House of Lords reforming itself," he said. "It is being done without the benefit of legislation and relies on the agreement of members of the House."

Lord Burns said the committee had "proposed a radical yet achievable solution to the excessive size of the House of Lords".

The proposals could be delivered with the agreement of the House of Lords and the Prime Minister, provided major parties are willing to cooperate to reduce their members.

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