

Peer proposes bill to abolish bishops' bench in House of Lords

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The National Secular Society is backing a private member's bill which would end the automatic right of Church of England bishops to sit in the House of Lords.

Liberal Democrat peer Dick Taverne, an NSS honorary associate, has presented a bill which would end C of E bishops' automatic right to sit as legislators. The bill was drafted with NSS assistance.

Currently 26 C of E bishops are entitled to sit in the Lords owing to their positions in the established church, as the 'lords spiritual', under an arrangement dating back to the 14th century.

The Taverne bill was entered in the Lords ballot for private members' bills to be heard in the new parliament on Friday. It is [due to be introduced](#) on Tuesday 28 January.

In response NSS chief executive Stephen Evans said: "The need to reduce the size of and reform the upper chamber is well recognised, and removing the bishops' bench is an obvious place to start.

"Ending the arrangement whereby representatives of one religious denomination are given seats as of right would make for a more equitable and democratic House of Lords.

"Giving clerics the automatic right to sit in parliament is an affront to democracy and a medieval practice unfit for a modern legislature."

The NSS [campaigns](#) for the scrapping of the bishops' bench as part of its work to separate religion and state.

Dick Taverne commented: "One of the great achievements of the enlightenment was the separation of church and state. Theocracies in which religion is still part of the state – hardly shining examples of democracy and the protection human rights – show how important this achievement was.

"Although the bishops are liberal minded by comparison, the influence of the Church of England, despite the steep and ongoing decline in the number of Anglicans, should not be underestimated.

"And the separation of church and state is far from complete in the UK. The continued presence of bishops in the Lords is an anachronism that should be addressed."

Notes

- In response to a YouGov poll for [The Times](#), published in 2017, 62% of people said no religious clerics should have "an automatic right to seats" in the legislature. Only 8% said the bishops should retain their seats.
- Iran is the only legislature in the world other than the UK which gives unelected clerics automatic representation in its legislature.

- The 26 bishops who sit in the Lords include the Church of England's two archbishops and 24 of its other diocesan bishops.

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