

Bishops in the House of Lords: FAQ

What is the Bishops' Bench?

The Bishops' Bench refers to the two archbishops and 24 bishops of the Church of England who sit alongside peers in the House of Lords. They are also known as the Lords Spiritual. None are elected, and none are from dioceses in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

Why is this undemocratic?

The bishops have the right to vote and debate, and have a privileged position from which to exert inappropriate influence on our national way of life. They have acquired this right solely by virtue of their position in the hierarchy of one particular Church which is ever-decreasing in formal membership.

They are unaccountable to the public, their only qualification being not personal merit, but that the Church appointed them. On the strength of this, they are able to argue strongly and vote for the Church's self-interest both through privileged access to Ministers and civil servants, and speaking in the Lords where they can also put down legislative amendments. In other walks of life, those who have a conflict of interest generally abstain from voting on such matters in the exercise of impartiality and fairness.

Furthermore, the presence of religious leaders amounts in many cases to double representation of religious interests as many temporal peers already identify themselves as being religiously motivated.

In an increasingly secular society the role of religious representatives in our legislature has become increasingly irrelevant. The Bishops' Bench continues to this day to block progressive legislation and reform, not least in the realm of equality law where the Church has used its privileged position to secure exemptions and concessions as well as obstructing equality outside its own constituency, for example in its opposition to civil partnerships and same-sex marriage. It even attempted to exempt itself from the Human Rights Act.

What does the public think?

Opinion polls consistently reveal the Bishops' Bench to be distinctly unpopular:

- The public's least favoured candidates for appointment to the House of Lords are religious representatives.
[\(YouGov, 2003\)](#)
- 62% of British people think that no religious clerics should have an automatic right to seats in the House of Lords. Only 8% of people said the bishops should retain their seats.
[\(YouGov/The Times 2017\)](#)
- Three-quarters of the public and 70% of Christians believe it is wrong for Bishops to have reserved places in the House of Lords
[\(ICM Research 2010\)](#)

- Panelbase asked an online sample of 2,016 adult Britons in 2018 whether clerics, priests, and clergy should make laws. The overwhelming majority of respondents (78%) disagreed that they should be so involved, peaking at 85% of Conservative voters and 89% of over-55s, while only 10% agreed, with 13% uncertain.

[\(Panelbase 2018\)](#)

How representative are the bishops?

According to Religious Trends, a comprehensive statistical analysis of religious practice and observance in the UK published by Christian Research, the projected total church attendance in Britain by 2050 will have declined to 899,000, of which Anglicans would comprise less than 100,000.

No measures of attendance or observance give a figure of sufficient value that would present the Church of England as anything other than a small minority interest.

The bishops do not necessarily represent even their own congregation. Within the Church of England, the wide gap between leadership and followers was spectacularly revealed in the reaction of the wider Anglican congregation in 2012 to their bishops' response to the government's consultation on same sex marriage, and to their actions regarding the appointment of women bishops. Both led to a widely supported protest movement led by the Inclusive Church group, called [Not In My Name](#). Through this, those in the pews expressed their disgust at their Church and accused it of being 'intolerant', and acting "as an increasingly clumsy, backward looking "Magisterium" in matters of the utmost human sensitivity and seriousness."

Many clergy and indeed some bishops also expressed their opposition to their Church's official view in a [letter](#) to The Times entitled "Church should rejoice over same-sex marriage."

The Archbishop of York, the second most senior cleric in the Church of England, made an even greater affront to the democratic process when he [asserted](#) that the government did not have the right to "redefine" marriage. So anxious was the CofE Archbishops' Council to dissuade the government from continuing with its plans, it made a submission to the Government claiming that there was no distinction between civil and religious marriage and that in redefining civil marriage (all that was proposed) this could lead to the Church being forced to conduct same sex civil marriages – a claim [challenged](#) by the National Secular Society as baseless.

Do the bishops have 'special insight?'

It is commonly argued that the bishops bring a unique 'ethical and spiritual insight' to the affairs of Parliament and so speak for all believers, not just Christians, and unbelievers too. This is not borne out by evidence and even the bishops' claims to represent the views of their own ordinary church members are highly suspect.

We reject the implication that the bishops somehow provide special moral insights denied to other members of the House. The idea that Bishops or any other religious leaders have any monopoly on issues of morality is offensive to many UK citizens. This is made more so by continuing revelations over the role of the Church's hierarchy in appearing to cover up [child abuse](#) and their continuing institutional homophobia.

While members of the Bishops' Bench occasionally take popular positions, there are no credible examples of genuinely moral or popular issues which would not be raised without their presence. Indeed the ability of the Bishops to 'claim credit' for issues worked on by peers of many parties and

none, show their degree of political organisation and public relations experience.

Don't the bishops represent our traditions as a 'Christian country?'

Arguments that Britain is a 'Christian country' (in itself highly disputed) or that the Bishops' Bench is a 'time-honoured tradition' do not justify the practice continuing at the expense of democracy.

None of the arguments for retaining religious representation in the House of Lords are based on anything other than attempts to further embed religious privilege in the government of multi-cultural, multi-faith and increasingly 'no faith' Britain.

Shouldn't we just have more religious representatives in the House of Lords?

There are serious proposals to augment existing Anglican representatives with religious leaders from other faiths in the name of 'fairness'. This is totally the wrong approach and would in fact introduce further unfairness.

The majority of the country, by far, are not practising Christians. There are countless religious minorities, some very large, some very small. At what threshold should a religion be entitled to a representative in the House of Lords? How many followers should it have?

Any selection process for religious representatives would be deeply divisive. How many Sunni, Shia or Sufi representatives should there be?

We believe it is now time for the bishops to be completely removed from the House of Lords. It is also vitally important that the reformed Second Chamber should not have any specific religious representation whether ex-officio or appointed, whether of Christian denominations or any other faiths.