

September 2022

Commission on Political Power- House of Lords Reform: **NSS input**

This response is made on behalf of the National Secular Society.

The NSS is a not-for-profit, non-governmental organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We advocate for separation of religion and state and promote secularism as the best means of creating a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. We seek a diverse society where all are free to practise their faith, change it, or to have no faith at all. We uphold the universality of individual human rights, which should never be overridden on the grounds of religion, tradition or culture.

More information about our organisation can be found here:

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/about.html>

END RESERVED PLACES FOR CHURCH OF ENGLAND BISHOPS

1. We urge the Commission to support ending the arrangement whereby religious representatives are given automatic seats as of right.
2. The presence of an *ex officio* bishops' bench, comprising of two Archbishops and 24 bishops of the Church of England, is archaic, unfair and undemocratic. It is a privilege which sits uneasily in a modern democracy and is contrary to aspirations for a smaller House of Lords and a more representative and equitable Parliament.
3. The presence of *ex officio* unelected bishops in the House of Lords is representative of institutional favouritism for one religion and is unjustifiable. This right of a selection of bishops to legislate as part of the House of Lords entrenches a privileged position for one denomination of one faith, and is both divisive and unrepresentative.
4. As the Baptist Union of Great Britain argued in its response to the Wakeham Commission's inquiry about reforming the House of Lords, "the fundamental concerns ... for religious liberty and a non-sectarian understanding of the state determine that no faith group should be given a privileged position."
5. The United Kingdom is made up of four countries; England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Church of *England* is established in only one of those countries: England. It is therefore unacceptable that bishops from one nation's established church are granted seats in the legislature that makes laws for all four.
6. The United Kingdom is the only democratic country to have religious representation in its legislature by right. The vast majority of Western democracies have abandoned all formal links between Church and State, with no discernible adverse consequences. The only other country in the world to appoint clerics to the legislature *ex officio* is Iran.¹
7. We believe our proposal is a practical and politically viable option. A 2021 YouGov survey found that only 16% of British people believe bishops should be entitled to a seat in the House of Lords.² An earlier ICM poll commissioned in 2010 by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, found

¹ <http://www.us-iran.org/resources/2017/7/26/media-guide-irans-government-structure>

² <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/survey-results/daily/2021/03/22/e0986/3>

that 74% of the population – including 70% of Christians – believe it is wrong that some Church of England bishops are given an automatic seat in the House of Lords.³

8. Naturally, those in receipt of tangible benefits from religious establishment, including Church of England bishops, will defend the status quo energetically. Outside of these vested interests, we believe removal of the bishops' bench could command broad consensus.
9. In considering this proposal, we urge the Commission to recognise the unsustainability of the bishops' bench. The landscape of religion or belief in Britain is rapidly changing. Polling and academic research consistently show that a majority of Britons do not belong to any religion. Fewer than 1% of the population of England now attend Anglican services on a typical Sunday. As the majority drift away from Christianity, minority faiths and particularly Islam have seen significant growth.
10. According to Religious Trends, a comprehensive statistical analysis of religious practice and observance in the UK, published by Christian Research⁴, the projected total church attendance in Britain by 2050 will have declined to 899,000, of which Anglicans would comprise less than 100,005. Meanwhile, the active Hindu population, currently at some 400,000, will have more than doubled to 855,000. There are currently 2.6m active Muslims in Britain, though the actual number now may be much higher.
11. We urgently need a long-term, sustainable settlement on the relationship between religion and the state. This should be based on the principles of secularism.
12. Automatic places reserved only for Church of England bishops is an indefensible privilege that should be removed. The view expressed by the government that "Bishops see their role as speaking for those of all faiths"⁶ is patronising to other faiths and, in any case, fails to explain why religious perspectives should be afforded special status in our legislature. Furthermore, on issues such as marriage equality and assisted dying it has become evident that Anglican bishops don't even represent the people in their pews, let alone those of other faiths.

³ http://www.eklesia.co.uk/content/survey_on_bishops_icm.pdf

⁴ <http://www.christian-research.org/religious-trends.html>

⁵ Religious Trends 7, 2007/2008 published by Christian Research Table 12.6.2

⁶ https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/111021w0001.htm#wa_st_36

13. The continued existence of the bench of bishops clearly fails to respect those who do not subscribe to the Christian faith. We reject any suggestion that their presence is necessary to reflect a higher ‘moral’ perspective unavailable to non-Christians. Indeed, far from acting as the moral compass of this country, the Church prioritised its own reputation over the “physical, emotional and spiritual well-being” of children sexually abused at the hands of its members, according to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.⁷
14. Retention of the bishops’ bench will also make future calls to extend religious representation harder to resist.
15. Naturally, any proposals to extend religious representation in the Lords to other religions, such as made by the Woolf Commission in 2016⁸, must be resisted. Such a move would be both unworkable and unpopular and run the risk of creating sectarian tensions. It would further erode the franchise of the increasing numbers of non-religious people, and indeed of the many liberal religious people whose leaders, those most likely to be gifted a seat in the House of Lords, tend to hold considerably more orthodox and conservative views shared by very few in the country.⁹
16. It must also be noted that in addition to the bishops there are many other faith leaders who have been appointed to the House of Lords. Together, they amount to double representation of religious interests, as many temporal peers already identify themselves as being religiously motivated, a much higher proportion than in the country, partly because of their greater average age. They frequently seek 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, and to oppose civil partnerships and same-sex marriage. The views of the bishops on social issues (such as same sex marriage and the right to die) are often opposed to those of the majority of the country and indeed members of their own church. Indeed, the Lambeth Conference just last month re-affirmed gay sex as sin and gay marriage as illegitimate.¹⁰ This was explicitly endorsed by the archbishop of Canterbury, who sits as a Lord Spiritual.¹¹

⁷ <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/investigation/anglican-church/executive-summary>

⁸ <https://corablivingwithdifference.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/living-with-difference-online.pdf>

⁹ In 2016, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby told meeting of the Anglican Communion that the Church's Bishops in the House of Lords are the "most orthodox since WW2".

¹⁰ <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1998/section-i-called-to-full-humanity/section-i10-human-sexuality>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/aug/02/justin-welby-affirms-validity-of-1998-declaration-that-gay-sex-is-a-sin>

CONCLUSION

17. There is no reasonable justification for allowing Church of England bishops to act as ex-officio legislators. The bench of bishops is an anomaly in a modern, liberal democracy. If any reform of the House of Lords is to be initiated, the bishops' bench is an obvious place to start. The Church itself recognises that House of Lords reform is "inevitable" and will involve "a reduction in number of Lords Spiritual"¹². It must, it says, be "prepared to accepted radical change."¹³

However our upper chamber is constituted in the future, and on whatever basis its members are appointed or elected, there should be no seats given to religious representatives as of right.

With a view to creating a more equitable and democratic chamber, we ask the Commission to recommend that the system of reserved seats for Church of England Bishops is removed from the House of Lords. The House of Lords (Removal of Bishops) Bill serves as model legislation by which this could be achieved.¹⁴

¹² <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/18-february/news/uk/bishops-and-their-ministry-full-document>

¹³ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/18-february/news/uk/bishops-and-their-ministry-full-document>

¹⁴ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/bills/lbill/58-01/068/5801068.pdf>