
BRIEFING:

House of Lords (Removal of Bishops) Bill

March 2021

Introduction

"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...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." **Lord Taverne QC**

At present, two archbishops and 24 bishops of the Church of England have an automatic right to sit alongside peers in the House of Lords. They are also known as the **'Bishops Bench' or 'Lords Spiritual'**.

In January 2020, Lord Taverne QC introduced a bill, **The House of Lords (Removal of Bishops) Bill**, to end the automatic right of the bishops to sit in the House of Lords.

The bill would not prevent anyone who is a bishop from becoming a member of the House of Lords through other routes.

The aim of the bill is to make the House of Lords more democratic and more representative of the population of the United Kingdom in the 21st century.

How does the Bishops' Bench undermine democracy?

None of the Lords Spiritual are elected. And none are from dioceses in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. The archbishops of Canterbury and York and the bishops of Durham, London and Winchester all automatically get seats in the House of Lords. The next 21 are given to the longest-serving bishops, regardless of their skillset.

The system of giving automatic seats to the bishops dates back to medieval social elitism. **Only two other countries involve religious clerics in law-making: Vatican City, and Iran.**

Despite being unelected, 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 – **a church which is ever-decreasing in formal membership.**

The bishops are unaccountable to the public. Their only qualification is that the Church appointed them, rather than personal merit. On the strength of this, they are able to argue 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.

The automatic appointment 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. The Church has used its privileged position to secure exemptions and concessions from equality law, 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.

The House of Lords is considering reducing its numbers, but its plan does not include the bishops. This means the bishops are set to make up an **even larger proportion** of the Lords, further eroding democracy.

How representative are the bishops?

The UK is becoming increasingly irreligious and religiously diverse. The number of British people who identify as Church of England has halved since 2002. In 2002, 31% of Brits said they belong to the Church of England. **In 2019, just 12% of Britons were affiliated to the Church of England.** Only 1% of 18-24 year olds said they belong to the Church of England. (*NatCen 2019*)

Less than 2% of the population regularly attends Church of England church services. (*Church of England Statistics for Mission 2018*)

The bishops do not necessarily represent even their own congregation. Within the Church of England, the wide gap between leadership and followers was 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. Many clergy also expressed their opposition to their Church's official view on same-sex marriage.

What does the public think of the Bishops' Bench?

53% of Brits say the House of Lords should not continue to have places for Church of England bishops. Just 16% said it should. (*YouGov 2021*)

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 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*)

When asked whether clerics, priests, and clergy should make laws, **the overwhelming majority of respondents (78%)** disagreed that they should be so involved. (*Panelbase 2018*)

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.

The idea that bishops or any other religious leaders have any 'special insight' issues of morality denied to other members of the House 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.

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

There are proposals to augment existing Anglican representatives with religious leaders from other faiths in the name of 'fairness'. **This is the wrong approach and would in fact introduce further unfairness.** It is vitally important that any reforms made to the House of Lords should not include any specific religious representation whether ex-officio or

appointed, whether of Christian denominations or any other faiths.

The majority of the country, by far, are not practising Christians. There are countless religious minorities, some very large, some very small. Any selection process for religious representatives would be deeply divisive.

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

Arguments that the UK 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 an increasingly diverse society of many faiths and none.

For more information on our campaign, please visit www.secularism.org.uk/scrap-bishops-bench

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