

Ep 22: Bishops in the Lords- Dick Taverne interview

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05ic-n4-lxY&feature=youtu.be>

0:00:05.450,0:00:09.120

(Emma Park - EP) In one way or another Bishop's have been involved in English

0:00:09.120,0:00:14.009

politics for a thousand years.

At the Battle of Hastings in 1066,

0:00:14.009,0:00:18.330

Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, was in the field to support his half-brother, William the

0:00:18.330,0:00:22.500

Conquerer. According to the Bayeux Tapestry, Odo did not actually shed blood,

0:00:22.500,0:00:27.510

but he certainly wore chain mail and wielded a mean-looking club. Since the

0:00:27.510,0:00:31.020

Middle Ages bishops have sat in Parliament as the Lords Spiritual,

0:00:31.020,0:00:35.820

responsible, apparently, for the care of the nation's souls. And since Henry VIII

0:00:35.820,0:00:39.140

the monarch has been the head of both the state and the church.

0:00:39.140,0:00:43.100

Today Anglican bishops are still required to swear an oath of allegiance to the crown.

0:00:43.110,0:00:47.550

The 26 most senior bishops and archbishops form a small contingent in

0:00:47.550,0:00:52.140

the 800 strong miscellany that is the modern House of Lords. But should the

0:00:52.140,0:00:56.560

bishops, or, for that matter, the representatives

of any religion, be allowed to influence

0:00:56.560,0:01:00.960

British lawmaking as of right?

Is their presence in the UK's upper chamber

0:01:00.960,0:01:07.780

a tolerable anachronism or has the time finally come to abolish them?

0:01:07.780,0:01:12.900

(EP) You're listening to the National Secular Society podcast, hosted by Emma Park.

0:01:12.900,0:01:16.950

Today I've travelled to Westminster to interview Dick Taverne,

0:01:16.950,0:01:21.689

Baron Taverne QC. Lord Taverne is a Liberal Democrat peer and honorary

0:01:21.689,0:01:26.340

associate of the NSS. Just before

Christmas he entered a private member's

0:01:26.340,0:01:31.520

bill in the Lord's ballot that would abolish the bishops right to sit in the chamber ex-officio.

0:01:31.520,0:01:36.840

The bill is due to be introduced in the Lord's on Tuesday 28th January 2020.

0:01:36.840,0:01:40.820

Dick Taverne, what are the main proposals that your bill is making?

0:01:40.820,0:01:45.720
(Dick Taverne - DT) It's a very simple one:
stop the bishops being part of the legislature

0:01:45.720,0:01:52.440
and catching up with a somewhat
more modern Constitution.

0:01:52.480,0:01:57.020
(EP) The idea that religion should have no
influence on politics and the complete

0:01:57.020,0:02:01.460
separation of church and state is a
long-standing principle of secularism.

0:02:01.460,0:02:06.520
But is Britain a secular country?
Does it have a secular Constitution?

0:02:06.520,0:02:12.720
(DT) No it doesn't. Now the historic division
between church and state at

0:02:12.730,0:02:16.989
the time the Enlightenment was an
extremely important development, because,

0:02:16.989,0:02:24.849
by restricting the mix of religion and
politics, it promoted a democracy and

0:02:24.849,0:02:29.769
freedom and the individual rights.
And if you look at the theocracies today

0:02:29.769,0:02:36.980
which has survived, they're all examples
of autocracy, and they do deny human rights.

0:02:36.980,0:02:42.060
Now we're in the extraordinary
position that in Britain we haven't

0:02:42.069,0:02:46.390
completed the separation of church and
state, and we're one of only two

0:02:46.390,0:02:53.680
countries in the world which actually
has clerics sitting, by right, in

0:02:53.680,0:02:58.720
part of the legislature. And the other
is not a very happy example, because the

0:02:58.720,0:03:04.540
only other country which has this is Iran,
not the most obvious example of democracy.

0:03:04.540,0:03:08.319
(EP) Why do you think it's taken so
long in Britain for us to move towards

0:03:08.319,0:03:14.310
separation of church and state?
(DT) Oh, because we're very slow at major

0:03:14.310,0:03:22.090
constitutional reform. And it is quite
extraordinary that this is survival from

0:03:22.090,0:03:30.880
the past. It was a usage from the
time when religion played a very

0:03:30.880,0:03:35.230
important part in our politics, and it's
no longer true, because at the moment,

0:03:35.230,0:03:40.690
after all, we're no longer a religious
country. It's a minority, a very

0:03:40.690,0:03:47.349
small minority, who regularly go to
church England. In fact, the Church of

0:03:47.349,0:03:52.030
England has a place in the Constitution,
but is not even representative of most

0:03:52.030,0:03:57.060
religions now in this country. So it is
an extraordinary historical anomaly.

0:03:57.060,0:04:05.240
One can't say that it's unimportant because
the bishops do have a certain influence.

0:04:05.240,0:04:09.100
(EP) How much of a difference

do the bishops make in practice,

0:04:09.100,0:04:13.400
given that they only occupy 26
out of around 800 seats?

0:04:13.400,0:04:16.920
(DT) Well, of course they contribute to
debates
and they have a special right in the Lord's:

0:04:16.920,0:04:20.880
when a bishop gets up they have the right to
speak, and everybody else must wait until

0:04:20.890,0:04:25.520
they finish their speeches.
But it's not just

0:04:25.520,0:04:31.009
the fact that they speak in the Lords, and,
mind you, a lot of the bishops make

0:04:31.009,0:04:35.539
speeches which are quite reasonable - and
as a group they're on the whole rather a
progressive

0:04:35.539,0:04:41.150
group too - but it's the influence behind
the scenes which is so important.

0:04:41.150,0:04:49.340
Why does the government promote faith
schools? - which it does - and, to my mind, the

0:04:49.340,0:04:53.509
experience of Northern Ireland is
certainly one which suggests that they

0:04:53.509,0:05:02.650
promote division and disunity.
The state schools are

0:05:02.650,0:05:08.830
a very important feature. They are
promoted by the government, as I said, and

0:05:08.830,0:05:14.120
they are contrary, not only is it a
question that they tend to be

0:05:14.120,0:05:19.699
divisive, but they're contrary to all
educational principle. I mean, schools

0:05:19.699,0:05:25.129
should teach kids to think for themselves
and it's extraordinary that we should

0:05:25.129,0:05:32.690
divide education into Catholic schools,
and treat children as Catholic children,

0:05:32.690,0:05:39.469
as Protestant children, Muslim children,
Jewish children. Can you imagine a system

0:05:39.469,0:05:43.610
whereby we treat children as
Conservative children, Labour children,

0:05:43.610,0:05:48.250
Liberal Democrat children? It's an absurdity.
(EP) So you're saying that

0:05:48.250,0:05:54.880
separating children by religious ideology is no
better than separating them by political
ideology.

0:05:54.880,0:05:57.420
(DT) I don't see if we do one, why shouldn't we
do the other?

0:05:57.420,0:06:01.380
I mean, it just makes no sense at
all, that anybody would dream

0:06:01.380,0:06:05.740
of doing that as a principle of politics.
(EP) Are you saying that the continued
presence

0:06:05.740,0:06:10.000
of the bishops in the House of Lords has an
influence on the continued existence of faith
school?

0:06:10.160,0:06:12.380
(DT) Oh, very much so, very much so.

0:06:12.380,0:06:15.740

And, of course, it's not just the Church of England schools and Catholic

0:06:15.740,0:06:21.190

schools, which actually are not as dogmatic as some of the newer religions,

0:06:21.190,0:06:27.310

but it's also Muslim schools now, and of course Jewish schools have rather

0:06:27.310,0:06:34.339

declined in number, but it's spreading a divisive influence in

0:06:34.339,0:06:38.889

education.

The influences of the church is

0:06:38.889,0:06:42.729

really quite interesting. There was one time in the House of Lords, some years

0:06:42.729,0:06:48.370

ago, when we debated the future of Thought for the Day. Not all of us

0:06:48.370,0:06:53.169

think Thought for the Day is a very good interruption. And one of the speakers

0:06:53.169,0:06:58.569

was a former director-general, John Birt, who said that one of his first

0:06:58.569,0:07:03.189

priorities when he became director-general of the BBC, was to abolish Thought for

0:07:03.189,0:07:09.250

the Day, because here was this splendid, most popular current affairs program in

0:07:09.250,0:07:13.900

the mornings, at peak times, very large listening audience, generally

0:07:13.900,0:07:17.979

admired as a very good program, and it's interrupted for five minutes by

0:07:17.979,0:07:23.080

something which not always promotes great sense of logic. And he was taken

0:07:23.080,0:07:28.659

aside and somebody said to him "Look, if you want to achieve any reforms in the

0:07:28.659,0:07:35.169

BBC, do not take on the Church of England". Behind the scenes, the Church of

0:07:35.169,0:07:39.810

England still has a lot - and when I introduce my bill there be outcries of

0:07:39.810,0:07:45.789

horror almost in the Lord's because the Lord's don't like interference with the

0:07:45.789,0:07:50.589

traditional rights of bishops to sit there. (EP) You've said that that the bishops

0:07:50.589,0:07:56.259

on the whole may vote progressively, do they in general vote to protect their

0:07:56.259,0:08:03.969

own interests, as well, would you say? (DT) Yes, certainly. If religious issues

0:08:03.969,0:08:09.849

come up they speak, and they speak for themselves, but I think that that is

0:08:09.849,0:08:15.189

less important than the influence they have on education and on our

0:08:15.189,0:08:22.060

Constitution, because I don't think our Constitution gains by being the only one,

0:08:22.060,0:08:30.490

like Iran, which has an automatic place for clerics. If this bill were to go

0:08:30.490,0:08:34.990

through, the chances perhaps are not

great, but if this bill were to go
0:08:34.990,0:08:40.510
through, then it would serve several purposes:
Firstly, it will reduce the Church of
0:08:40.510,0:08:44.210
England's influence at the heart of
government, as it were,
0:08:44.210,0:08:49.040
not a great influence, but a very important
influence.
It would also be a more
0:08:49.040,0:08:53.870
democratic, to remove one of the
undemocratic features of the Lords,
0:08:53.870,0:08:59.090
which is very badly in need of reform.
And it can also reduce a number of
0:08:59.090,0:09:02.510
people in the Lords, because one of the
troubles about the Lords is it's much
0:09:02.510,0:09:06.980
too big, and so many debates,
where you always have a right to speak
0:09:06.980,0:09:10.640
if you put your name down,
certainly the debates on enormously
0:09:10.640,0:09:15.980
important subjects, where you have a
rule or a very strong recommendation not
0:09:15.980,0:09:19.730
to speak for more than four or five minutes.
(EP) Let's think about what the
0:09:19.730,0:09:24.230
British people might think about the
abolition of the bishops. According to a
0:09:24.230,0:09:28.360
YouGov survey in 2017, which was
conducted for The Times,

0:09:28.360,0:09:33.420
62% of British people think that
no religious clerics should have
0:09:33.420,0:09:39.640
"an automatic rights to seats" in the
House of Lords. if that's broadly accurate.
0:09:39.640,0:09:44.080
is that enough support for constitutional
change,
62% of the British people?
0:09:44.080,0:09:46.730
(DT) I think that's certainly a good reason for
constitutional [change].
0:09:46.730,0:09:52.070
I think it's only about 8% who are
positively in favour of the continuation
0:09:52.070,0:09:58.460
of the bishops rights to sit in the Lords.
But the Lords, I think, does play
0:09:58.460,0:10:03.980
quite a useful role at present, as a
revising chamber. But the fact that
0:10:03.980,0:10:09.310
there's no democratic justification for
it, reduces public respect for the Lords.
0:10:09.310,0:10:15.320
They would like to see a more democratic
constitution, so it would certainly be a
0:10:15.320,0:10:22.070
step forward in reform of the House of
Lords, only one step forward because it
0:10:22.070,0:10:26.720
needs absolutely radical reform, in my view.
But there's always this talk about
0:10:26.720,0:10:32.810
'can we have an elected second chamber?'
Well, yes. I think we should have an
0:10:32.810,0:10:36.320
elected second chamber, but not as a

rival to the House of Commons. It should
0:10:36.320,0:10:43.010
be part of a much larger constitutional change.
(EP) That's very interesting, Dick.

0:10:43.010,0:10:47.510
Thinking about the House of Lords as a
body which represents perhaps different

0:10:47.510,0:10:51.980
aspects of British society, another
alternative which is often mooted to

0:10:51.980,0:10:56.350
getting rid of the bishops,
is instead to increase the number of

0:10:56.350,0:11:00.910
clerics in the Lords but to broaden
their criteria so that representatives

0:11:00.910,0:11:06.430
of all different religions and Church of England
denominations within the UK are represented.

0:11:06.430,0:11:11.470
Isn't this proposal worth considering?
(DT) No. It would be even worse

0:11:11.470,0:11:16.840
than the present system we've got we
want to stop this mix of religion and

0:11:16.840,0:11:23.530
politics, where it's inexorably mixed.
Look at Suni and Shias which have torn

0:11:23.530,0:11:27.480
apart the Middle East.
Look what's happening in Turkey.

0:11:27.480,0:11:33.760
At the moment there's an unfortunate
trend in the world for those countries

0:11:33.760,0:11:38.780
which did not have a theocratic
constitution to move that way.

0:11:38.780,0:11:42.280

Malaysia is a good example
of a country which was Muslim

0:11:42.280,0:11:47.140
but moving more and more towards
democracy. Now it's rather reversing its

0:11:47.140,0:11:51.820
trend because of the greater pressure
towards having a theocratic state.

0:11:51.820,0:11:56.950
Indonesia is going the same way the
largest Muslim country in the world.

0:11:56.950,0:12:02.180
The last thing you want is to have
more religion in mixed with politics.

0:12:02.180,0:12:06.940
We should get it right out of politics.
(EP) Some people have said

0:12:06.940,0:12:11.680
on that point, that you could also
have a group of representatives of

0:12:11.680,0:12:17.080
non-religious people, maybe the Humanists, or
the
atheist representatives. What would you say
that?

0:12:17.080,0:12:23.640
(DT) Again, do you really want to
have all these different attitudes

0:12:23.640,0:12:28.360
represent as of right? If that's
what people want to elect, fair enough.

0:12:28.360,0:12:33.280
If people do want to, if there are some
bishops who make a major

0:12:33.280,0:12:37.410
contribution, I could think of one, for
example the former bishop of Oxford,

0:12:37.410,0:12:43.090
Richard Harries, makes very useful

contributions. He sits the Lords now as an

0:12:43.090,0:12:47.920
individual, appointed for his
contribution to society. You could, if

0:12:47.920,0:12:53.830
people wanted of course, we could
have an appointed House of Lords, and I

0:12:53.830,0:12:58.480
think that we should move to the big
constitutional change towards an elected

0:12:58.480,0:13:04.090
representative House of Lords.
(EP) So how might that work, to
have such constitutional change, of

0:13:04.090,0:13:08.230
course it so it would be a huge, dramatic...
(DT) Well it would be so dramatic that it's

0:13:08.230,0:13:13.269
not going to happen, certainly in my
lifetime. But we now have an increasingly

0:13:13.269,0:13:18.129
assertive Scottish Parliament move
towards a complete break up of the United

0:13:18.129,0:13:25.589
Kingdom. We have a Northern Irish
parliament, Stormont. We have a Welsh
Parliament.

0:13:25.589,0:13:32.290
We have a certain amount of quite
influential mayors now, like the mayor

0:13:32.290,0:13:38.470
for example for Birmingham and the
wider area. We have got an opportunity at

0:13:38.470,0:13:42.459
this moment, when there's so much talk
about for a more federal Britain. We're

0:13:42.459,0:13:47.560
far too centralized as a nation. It's a
great disadvantage,

0:13:47.560,0:13:51.580
this concentration on London.
(EP) Why is it a disadvantage?

0:13:51.580,0:13:57.560
(DT) Well, it's because you get all the powers
concentrate in London and neglect of

0:13:57.569,0:14:02.079
certain areas of the country which
feel neglected.

0:14:02.079,0:14:08.050
But if you had a federal Britain and you
had not only a Scottish and a Welsh and

0:14:08.050,0:14:14.560
Northern Irish parliament, but you had
one for the Northeast and the northwest

0:14:14.560,0:14:19.899
and the Southwest and London and the
South East. You could have a constitution

0:14:19.899,0:14:24.339
which is really rather like the German
constitution, which works extremely well,

0:14:24.339,0:14:29.019
where they have the bundesrat, of the
different länder, which first of all have

0:14:29.019,0:14:33.040
considerable amount of powers, which had
devolved from the centre, and then they

0:14:33.040,0:14:40.089
are represented in the upper house, the
bundesrat, and their elected

0:14:40.089,0:14:45.130
representatives from the elected länder,
in this case it would be from the different

0:14:45.130,0:14:50.170
regions, or countries, or whatever you
like to call it. The elected

0:14:50.170,0:14:54.220
representatives would then be there in

the House of Lords elected by the
0:14:54.220,0:14:57.819
different regions then we'd have a
constitution which people could accept
0:14:57.819,0:15:01.870
because it was democratic, and it would
also have a state which should function
0:15:01.870,0:15:06.220
much better because it was more
decentralized.
(EP) What about the monarch's
0:15:06.220,0:15:08.910
role as the head of the Church of
England? Wouldn't it be necessary for
0:15:08.910,0:15:12.800
constitutional reform for the Church of
England to be disestablished?
0:15:12.800,0:15:19.819
(DT) Oh, I think so. Certainly. Oh yes.
It's a nonsense to have this historic role
0:15:19.819,0:15:24.499
for the head of the Church of England
heading back to the great times when it
0:15:24.499,0:15:28.119
was Catholic or Protestant,
0:15:28.119,0:15:33.529
democratic or non democratic.
At least we've got away from that.
0:15:33.529,0:15:41.179
This division between church and state is not
0:15:41.179,0:15:48.019
complete, but it isn't as if the
presence of the bishops in the
0:15:48.019,0:15:54.470
House of Lords has made us an autocracy.
But their influence, on
0:15:54.470,0:15:59.180
the whole, is not something which would

make us a more effective democracy.
0:15:59.180,0:16:03.860
(EP) And a final question: judging by the mood
in
Parliament at the moment, and you've already
0:16:03.860,0:16:08.680
touched on this, would it be fair to say that
the odds of getting this bill passed are against
you?
0:16:08.680,0:16:12.340
(DT) Oh, the odds are very much against,
I'm sorry to say.
0:16:12.349,0:16:19.329
But we are very bad, as I said at the
beginning, at constitutional reform.
0:16:19.329,0:16:24.199
Time after time people have tried to
have some slightly half-baked attempts
0:16:24.199,0:16:31.069
at reforming the House of Lords.
They've all failed. What we really need is a
0:16:31.069,0:16:35.089
constitutional commission to look at the
way in which Britain can be a more
0:16:35.089,0:16:39.949
effective, decentralized federal state.
(EP) I suppose that the last time we really
0:16:39.949,0:16:44.520
tried to have a constitutional revolution
in this country was in the 1640's...
0:16:44.520,0:16:52.320
or maybe 1689 perhaps.
(DT) Quite. The Glorious Revolution of
0:16:52.329,0:16:58.909
1688, wasn't it, was one case of reform.
Yes, there have been a number of very
0:16:58.909,0:17:03.529
important steps of reform. The Victorian age
was quite a step, The Great Reform bill,

0:17:03.529,0:17:08.539

and then the later extensions of the franchise. But very slow, we were

0:17:08.539,0:17:12.259

very backwards in some ways, compared with other countries. Development in

0:17:12.260,0:17:22.720

the United States, for example.

(EP) Dick Taverne, thank you very much and good luck.

0:17:23.700,0:17:29.480

That was episode 22 of the National Secular Society podcast hosted by Emma Park.

0:17:29.480,0:17:33.720

If you would like to help us challenge unfair religious privilege and support

0:17:33.720,0:17:38.400

freedom of and from religion in Britain today, why not become a member of the NSS?

0:17:38.400,0:17:44.260

Full details are on our website at secularism.org.uk/podcast

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0:17:48.520,0:17:52.360

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