

Lord's Reform – the Lords Spiritual

Of all the outward manifestations of religious privilege embedded in the United Kingdom's civic life, the presence of an unelected Bishops' Bench in the House of Lords, comprising two Archbishops and 24 Bishops of the Church of England, is one of the most archaic, unfair and undemocratic. It is a privilege which sits uneasily in the 21st century and is contrary to the aspiration for a more representative and equitable Parliament. It may even be deemed an affront to democracy.

Background

Anglican Bishops - almost all male, middle class, middle aged and white - sit alongside Peers in the House of Lords. None are from dioceses in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. They 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.

Further, 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. It 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.

Wider Public Opinion

The latest and failed attempt at House of Lords reform collapsed in acrimony within the Conservative / Lib-Dem coalition Government in August 2012. Mark Harper, the Parliamentary Secretary for Political and Constitutional Reform, reported that the Government had received more than two thousand representations since the publication of its White Paper and draft House of Lords Reform Bill in May 2011. A detailed breakdown of the correspondence had not been undertaken but, he reported, the majority were concerned with the question of reserved places for Church of England Bishops in a reformed House of Lords.¹

The tenor of these responses may be deduced from other research. In January 2003, YouGov revealed that the public's least favoured candidates for appointment to the House of Lords were religious representatives.² In March 2010, a survey conducted by ICM Research showed that three-quarters of the public and 70% of Christians believe it is wrong for Bishops to have reserved places in the House of Lords³. A January 2012 YouGov survey for *The Sun* found 60% of people opposed to the Bishops, with only 26% in favour⁴.

According to Religious Trends, a comprehensive statistical analysis of religious practice and observance in the UK, published by Christian Research⁵, the projected total church attendance in Britain by 2050 will have declined to 899,000, of which Anglicans would comprise less than 100,000⁶. Meanwhile, the active Hindu population currently at some 400,000, will have more than doubled to 855,000 and there will be 2.6m active Muslims in Britain.

While we accept that there are alternative measures of attendance or observance, none give a figure of sufficient value such as would present the Church of England as anything other than a small minority interest.

Arguments for and against

Arguments for supporting the retention of the Bishops' Bench can be categorised as self-serving and mythical.

First, 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. 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.

¹ <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2012-05-23a.108400.h&s=speaker%3A11588#g108400.r0>

² http://cdn.yougov.com/today_uk_import/YG-Archives-pol-charter88-HouseLords-030122.pdf

³ <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2012/lords-spiritual/>

⁴ <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2012/lords-spiritual/>

⁵ <http://www.christian-research.org/religious-trends.html>

⁶ Source: *Religious Trends 7, 2007/2008* publ by Christian Research Table 12.6.2

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.

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*.⁷ 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."⁸

Within all religions, there is a whole spectrum of belief and practice. For example, opinion polls conducted during the Pope's visit to the UK in 2010 showed that Catholic bishops seek to exert the greatest public influence on the very issues at which they are at the greatest variance from Catholics in the pews. Only 4-11% of Catholics polled agreed with the bishops' position on contraception, homosexuality and abortion⁹. Similar arguments would equally apply to minority faiths' leaders. Treating such groups as homogenous can be particularly detrimental for women and sexual minorities.

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" marriage¹⁰. So anxious was the (CofE) Archbishops' Council to dissuade the Government from continuing with its plans, it made a submission to the Government¹¹ 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 baseless¹².

After over a century of decline in religious attendance in Britain the claim that Bishops speak for any significant constituency is clearly far off the mark. Less than 2% of the British population now attend Anglican services on the average Sunday. By 2050 this figure is forecast to drop to just 0.3% of the population.¹³ Since the trend towards rejection of organised religion is predicted to continue, the role in Parliament of any religious representatives will become increasingly irrelevant.

Another line of argument states that Britain is a Christian country, itself a highly disputed view¹⁴, so there should be Christian leaders in Parliament as of right, while another asserts that the Bishops' Bench is a time-honoured 'tradition', neither of which is of itself justification for the practice continuing. Perhaps the most contentious argument is that the removal of the Bishops would lead to the disestablishment of the

⁷ See <http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/005549.html>

⁸ <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/letters/article3390723.ece>

⁹ http://cdn.yougov.com/today_uk_import/YG-Archives-Pol-YouGov/TV-PapalVisit-020910.pdf

¹⁰ <http://www.christian.org.uk/news/govt-has-no-right-to-redefine-marriage-warns-sentamu/>

¹¹ <http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1475149/s-s%20marriage.pdf>

¹² <http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/formal-critique-of-cofe-equal-marriage-submission.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.christian-research.org/religious-trends.html>

¹⁴ An Ipsos Mori poll in 2006 found only 17% thought the UK was a Christian country.

Church of England and an unavoidable and complex morass of necessary and wider constitutional reform. Yet there are many Christians who support the idea of disestablishment, seeing it as an opportunity to free the Church from the vestiges of State control, and who do not consider any constitutional complexity arising from the removal of the Bishops' Bench ought to be deployed as a valid argument against. In effect, it is only the hierarchy of the Church of England that continues to argue for its retention, anxious not to lose the perceived degree of influence it conveys.

None of the arguments for retaining, and even occasionally for widening 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.

Call for Reform

We take no formal position on the reform of the House of Lords per se, but it is clear that only a 100% elected chamber will remove seats for the Bishops as of right.

Any serious proposals to reform the Lords must address this unjustified privilege of the Bishops' Bench. The NSS recommends that the Bench of Bishops should be completely removed from the House of Lords and that any new Second Chamber should have no religious representation whether ex-officio or appointed, whether of Christian denominations or any other faiths.

The United Kingdom is the only democratic country to have religious representation in its legislature as of right. The vast majority of Western democracies have abandoned all links between Church and State, with no discernible adverse consequences for either.

We particularly resist any proposals to extend religious representation in the Lords to other religions, a position currently supported by the Church of England, rather than remove the Bishops' bench. We think this is completely the wrong answer. Such a move would not only be unworkable and unpopular, but it would also carry a high risk of creating resentment in minority communities that are already sensitive to discrimination. Aside from the likely sectarian tensions it would create, 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.

The NSS further believes that neither prayers nor religious oaths should form any part of the proceedings in a reformed House of Lords. All oaths should be replaced by non-religious affirmation and public prayers should be abolished from the chamber.

What next?

Lords reform will not go away. We will continue to argue against the presence of Bishops in Parliament. Between January and July 2016 a petition will aim to force a Parliamentary debate on removing the Bishops. You can help by signing the petition and more importantly writing to your MP urging them to support the debate and ensure no seats are reserved in Parliament for Bishops of the Church of England, or indeed for any faith community leaders.

www.secularism.org.uk/lords-reform