

House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill (2024) - Second Reading

15 October 2024

We welcome the introduction of the House of Lords (Hereditary Peers) Bill. It has been 25 years since the House of Lords Act 1999 removed the right of the majority of hereditary peers to sit in the second chamber. This bill takes an important step in completing those initial reforms but much more needs to be done to bring our Parliament into the 21st Century and restore trust in our political institutions.

Public trust in government, and confidence in our systems of government, have reached new lows this year - 79% of people believe the present system of governing Britain could be improved 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal'.¹ **Just two percent of people say they have 'a lot of confidence' in the House of Lords.**² **Renewing our political institutions is a critical step in trying to restore trust.**

An elected Lords is the most popular option for reform with half of the public (47%) saying that they should have the power to choose the members of the House of Lords via elections. **Only 15% think the Prime Minister should choose.**³ Globally, only the UK and Lesotho mix appointment and hereditary seats without any elected element.

Size

With around 800 members the House of Lords is currently the largest second chamber in the world, second only in size to the Chinese National People's Congress.

On average, second chambers have around 90 members. The nearest in size to the House of Lords is the French Senate with 348 members – half the size of the Lords. It is more common for second chambers to be smaller in size than the primary chamber and it is highly unusual for a parliament to have more unelected than elected politicians.

Removing the remaining hereditary peers will help to reduce the size in the short term but more needs to be done to create a stable size in future years. **Unless we stop the tap of unrestricted prime ministerial patronage, the House of Lords is likely to grow ever larger in future.**

Representation

Male primogeniture rules prevent women from inheriting most titles which means reserving hereditary positions in the House of Lords effectively reserves 92 seats in our parliament for men.

There are currently no women amongst the hereditary peers group and only two women on the list of over 200 hereditary peers wishing to stand in by-elections.

1 British Social Attitudes 41, Damaged Politics? National Centre for Social Research
<https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/british-social-attitudes-41-damaged-politics>

2 YouGov, Political Tracker, August 2023
https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/5ghrljr05a/P_Main_Political_Tracker_Survey_Rotation9_sr_22.pdf

3 ERS polling by Savanta. 2,283 UK adults aged 18+ between the 24th and 27th November 2023. Data were weighted to be representative of the UK by age, gender, region and social grade.

4 Inter-Parliamentary Union | Parline: the IPU's Open Data Platform (as at October 2023) https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date_month=10&date_year=2023

5 51 of 92 have declared a main residence

6 The IPU categorizes fifty-five second chambers as predominantly chosen by either direct or indirect election (28 and 27 respectively) and only 22 chambers predominantly by appointment.

Despite the power to appoint, the House of Lords membership overall is comprised of only 29% women, placing the chamber 37th in global rankings (behind directly elected chambers such as Australia and Mexico which both have achieved parity).⁴

The House of Lords is also currently skewed towards London and the South East with 23 percent of peers (of those who have declared) registered as living in London and 21 percent in the South East. **Amongst the hereditary peer group⁵ 35 percent live in London and the South East.** There are no members of the group registered as living in the North East, Wales or the West Midlands.

Similarly to the rest of the chamber the hereditary group of peers is dominated by those from banking and financial professions, as well as business and commerce.

Many elected and indirectly elected chambers manage to ensure political balance and diversity without appointment whilst at the same time maintaining a chamber of a stable size.

Completing reform of the hereditary element of the House of Lords is an important first step towards creating a second chamber fit for a 21st Century parliament. Reforms to move towards an elected chamber that fully represents the regions and nations of the UK must follow to help restore trust.

The majority of second chambers around the globe choose their members by election, whether direct or indirect.⁶ This is sometimes combined with an element of appointment (for instance for ex-officio members). There are many options to reform the House of Lords to create a modern chamber, stable in size and with a clear and important role in our democracy.

For more information on reform options see <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/unfinished-business-routes-to-an-elected-second-chamber/>

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