

Research Briefing

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Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill 2024-25



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Summary

The [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\] 2024-25](#) was introduced in the House of Lords on 30 July 2024.

The Bill received its second reading in the Lords on 10 September 2024 and passed its final Lords stage on 22 October. It was then sent to the Commons, where it is due to have its second reading on 14 November.

It is a one-clause bill which will ensure that whenever a vacancy arises among 21 of the bishops who sit in the House of Lords (known as the Lords Spiritual), the position will continue to be filled by a female diocesan bishop if one is available. The aim is to increase female representation on the bishops' benches.

Without this legislation, the position will soon return to the position before 2015 whereby bishops of whatever sex become members of the House of Lords according to their length of service. The relevant provisions of the [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015](#) are due to expire on 17 May 2025.

The text of the [Bill](#) and its [Explanatory Notes](#) are available on the Bill pages on the Parliamentary website.

1 Background

The Lords Spiritual are the archbishops and bishops of the Church of England who have seats in the House of Lords through ancient usage and by statute.¹

Lords Spiritual are not peers but are “ex officio” Members of the House of Lords who only remain in the House while they hold an eligible office of archbishop or bishop. There are 26 Lords Spiritual in the Lords. Five places (out of 26) are “reserved” for – or automatically granted to – the holders of certain offices:

- the Archbishop of Canterbury
- the Archbishop of York
- the Bishop of London
- the Bishop of Durham
- the Bishop of Winchester

The other 21 are filled by bishops from dioceses in England which are eligible to send bishops to the House of Lords according to length of service.

There are 35 dioceses in England from which English diocesan bishops may be appointed to the House of Lords on the basis of seniority. Therefore, when all posts are filled there are 14 English diocesan bishops not sitting in the House potentially eligible for a seat. The bishops from the diocese of Sodor and Man, and the diocese in Europe are ineligible.² Only diocesan bishops are eligible for appointment to the House of Lords. Suffragan bishops – also known as deputy or assistant bishops – are not.

Under [section 1](#) of the Bishops (Retirement) Measure 1986, a bishop may resign their see (a bishopric or diocese) and therefore their seat in the Lords. Under [section 1](#) of the Ecclesiastical Office (Age Limit) Measure 1975, bishops are obliged to retire at 70, at which point any incumbent Lords Spiritual leave the House of Lords. By convention, some are granted life peerages, which allows them to remain under a different category of membership. The Archbishop of Canterbury, for example, is traditionally made a life peer upon retirement.³

¹ [House of Lords: Lords Spiritual](#), House of Lords Library, 4 September 2017.

² Lords Library Note LLN 2015/002, [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Bill \(HL Bill 87 of 2014–15\)](#), p1.

³ There are currently five former Lords Spiritual sitting as life peers: the former bishops of Oxford and London, as well as two former Archbishops of Canterbury and one of York.

The appointment of archbishops and bishops is determined under the [Appointment of Bishops Act 1533](#). Although statute confers absolute discretion on the King, since 1976 the Church of England has been more directly involved via the [Crown Nominations Commission](#) (a body of which a majority are members of the General Synod). Although the Prime Minister continues formally to advise the Sovereign as to appointments, he or she is provided with a single name by the Commission.

As with Lords Temporal (all the peers in the House of Lords who are not Lords Spiritual, nowadays mainly life peers), Lords Spiritual require a writ of summons before they can sit and vote in the House of Lords.

1.1

Historical background

The Lords Spiritual are a vestige of the ancient composition of what was originally the English House of Lords, in which the Church of England occupied a substantial number of places.

During Lords consideration of the Bill, the Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Brinton quoted from John Gurdon's book *Antiquities of Parliament*, that historically, "ladies of birth and quality sat in council with the Saxon Witas" (a pre-parliamentary body in England). She continued:

In Wighfred's great council at Beccofeld in AD 694, abbesses sat and deliberated. Five of them signed decrees of the council, along with the king, bishops and nobles.

More significantly, during the reigns of Henry III and Edward I, four abbesses were summoned to Parliament. They were from Shaftesbury, Barking, Winchester, and Wilton.⁴

It was only after the suppression of the monasteries in the 16th century that the Lords Temporal (at the time, all of these were hereditary peers) formed a majority in the Upper House. This followed the removal of abbots and priors.⁵

In 1550, following King Henry VIII's reforms, the Church of England had 27 dioceses, 22 in England, 4 in Wales and one on the Isle of Man. However, the Bishop of Sodor and Man did not sit in the House of Lords, but in the Tynwald (the Isle of Man legislature), leaving 26 Lords Spiritual.

The Lords Spiritual were excluded from the Parliament of England from 1653 to 1659 during the Protectorate (republic) and did not resume their seats immediately after the Restoration. They were, however, restored in the next parliament, via the [Clergy Act 1661](#).

Thereafter the number of Lords Spiritual (26) remained constant until 1835, when a period of widespread change began. According to a Church of

⁴ [HL Deb 10 September 2024 Vol 839 c1523 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

⁵ [The History of the House of Lords](#), Lords Information Office, 2011.

England report, it was politically unacceptable to increase the number of Lords Spiritual, so any new sees that were created had to be offset by mergers of existing ones to keep the total constant at 26. At the same time, the episcopate was unwilling to have non-parliamentary bishops for fear that this might lead to disestablishment.⁶

Section 2 of the Bishopric of Manchester Act 1847 provided that the creation of the Manchester see did not increase the number of bishops sitting in the House of Lords.⁷ Similar provision was made thereafter for bishoprics created, in part due to population growth.⁸

The 1847 Act also provided a mechanism for determining the membership of the Lords Spiritual. This was superseded by [section 5](#) of the Bishoprics Act 1878, which provides that:

The number of Lords Spiritual sitting and voting as Lords of Parliament shall not be increased by the foundation of a new bishopric [after the year 1846] ; and whenever there is a vacancy among such Lords Spiritual by the avoidance of any of the sees of Canterbury, York, London, Durham, or Winchester, such vacancy shall be supplied by the issue of a writ of summons [...] to that bishop of a see in England who having been longest bishop of a see in England has not previously become entitled to such writ.

The same section provides that if a bishop is “translated” (moved) from one see to another, then he or she shall not lose their right to a writ of summons (their length of service will not be interrupted) if they were at the date of their translation already sitting as “a Lord of Parliament” (a Lord Spiritual). This means that if a bishop who is not a Lord Spiritual changes see, then their length of service is disturbed.

The 1878 Act does not stipulate the number of Lords Spiritual, but the number in 1846 (the year referenced in section 5) was 26.

The four Irish bishops added to the House of Lords at the Union between Great Britain and Ireland in 1801 were withdrawn after 1 January 1871 following the disestablishment of the Irish Church by the [Irish Church Act 1869](#).

On the disestablishment of the Church in Wales on 31 March 1920, bishops of that Church ceased, under [section 2](#) of the Welsh Church Act 1914, to be qualified to sit or vote as Lords of Parliament. The vacancies caused by the withdrawal of the bishops of the Church in Wales who had seats in Parliament

⁶ Commons Library research briefing SN07083, [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Bill 2014-15 \[Bill 143 2014-15\]](#), pp3-4.

⁷ Also known as the [Ecclesiastical Commissioners Act 1847](#).

⁸ Bishopric Acts relating to St Albans, 1875 (38 & 39 Vict, c 34); Truro, 1876 (39 & 40 Vict, c 54); Liverpool, Newcastle, Southwell, and Wakefield, 1878 (41 & 42 Vict, c 68); Bristol, 1884 (47 & 48 Vict, c 66); Southwark and Birmingham, 1904 (4 Edw 7, c 30); Chelmsford, St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, and Sheffield, 1913 (3 and 4 Geo 5, c 36); Bradford and Coventry, 1917 (7 & 8 Geo 5, c 57); Portsmouth and Guildford, 1923 (14 & 15 Geo 5, Measure No 2); Blackburn, 1923 (14 & 15 Geo 5, Measure No 4); Derby, 1923 (14 & 15 Geo 5, Measure No 5); Leicester, 1925 (15 & 16 Geo 5, Measure No 2).

were filled by the issue of writs of summons to bishops not disqualified by the Act who had not previously received writs of summons.⁹

1.2

Background to the 2015 Act

Until 2015, when a vacancy arose for one of the 21 non-reserved Lords Spiritual – for example through death, retirement, or resignation – the next most senior English diocesan bishop filled it. Seniority was determined by length of service and irrespective of gender.

On 17 November 2014 the General Synod of the Church of England enacted legislation necessary to allow women to become bishops. The [Bishops and Priests \(Consecration and Ordination of Women\) Measure 2014](#) allowed for their consecration and ordination. [Section 2](#) of that Measure amended the [Equality Act 2010](#) to the effect that the offices of diocesan and suffragan bishop were not to be considered public offices.

However, due to the arrangements under the Bishops Act 1878, it would have taken more than seven years before a newly appointed female diocesan bishop would have become sufficiently senior to take a place in the House of Lords (unless she were appointed to one of the five ex officio sees).¹⁰ Consequently, the Archbishop of Canterbury, after consultation with the Lords Spiritual and others, said the Church:

Supported exploring with political parties the possibility of amending existing arrangements for the selection of lords spiritual in order that the first women diocesan bishops will be able to become members of the bishops' bench in the House of Lords more quickly than would otherwise be the case under current arrangements.¹¹

In December 2014, the then Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government announced in a written statement in the House of Commons the introduction of the Lords Spiritual (Women) Bill.¹² The Explanatory Notes to that Bill stated that:

the Archbishop of Canterbury, after consultation with the lords spiritual and others, has requested on behalf of the Church of England that amendments be made to the arrangements under the Bishops Act 1878 to enable the accelerated entry of female bishops to the House of Lords. The government has welcomed the decision by the Church of England to enable women to become bishops and wishes to see female bishops represented in the House of Lords as soon as possible.¹³

⁹ Welsh Church Act 1914, [section 2\(3\)](#).

¹⁰ Over the next 10 years (from 2014), 12 of the seats to be filled by long-service were due to be vacated by retirement, but there were already 10 male bishops in line.

¹¹ [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Bill \(HL Bill 87 of 2014–15\)](#), House of Lords Library, 3 February 2015, pp1–2.

¹² [HC Deb 18 December 2014 Vol 589 cc121–2WS](#). See also [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 – Parliamentary Bills](#), UK Parliament website, last updated 27 March 2015.

¹³ [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\)](#), Explanatory Notes, p3.

At the Bill's second reading, the Archbishop of Canterbury said that the 2010 Parliament would be the last "where any Bench of either House is occupied solely by men".¹⁴

1.3

Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015

The [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015](#) was granted Royal Assent on 26 March 2015, and it came into force on 18 May 2015.¹⁵

Under [section 1](#) of the 2015 Act, until 2025 any vacancy was to be filled by a female English diocesan bishop, ahead of any male.

Under section 1(2):

If at the time the vacancy arises there is only one eligible bishop who is a woman, the vacancy is to be filled by the issue of writs of summons to her.

And under section 1(3):

If at the time the vacancy arises there are two or more eligible bishops who are women, the vacancy is to be filled by the issue of writs of summons to the one whose election as a bishop of a diocese in England was confirmed first.

Section 1(1) also contained a ten-year sunset clause which meant the Act would expire on 17 May 2025.

The first woman to become a bishop in the Church of England was Libby Lane, who was consecrated as suffragan Bishop of Stockport on 26 January 2015. As a suffragan bishop (a bishop appointed to help a diocesan bishop), the Bishop of Stockport was not eligible for appointment as a Lord Spiritual.¹⁶

The first female diocesan bishop to become a Lord Spiritual under the 2015 Act was Rachel Treweek, the Bishop of Gloucester. She was appointed in June 2015 and was introduced to the House of Lords by Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Richard Chartres, the then Bishop of London, on 26 October 2015.¹⁷ Treweek sent back the first version of her writ of summons because it referred to her as a "Right Reverend Father in God".¹⁸

Since the passage of the 2015 Act, six female bishops have entered the House of Lords more quickly than otherwise would have been the case. Sarah

¹⁴ [HL Deb 12 February 2015 Vol 759 c1366 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Bill\]](#)

¹⁵ [Section 2](#) provided that the Act was to come "into force on the day Parliament first meets following the first parliamentary general election after this Act is passed".

¹⁶ In February 2019, however, Lane became Bishop of Derby. She was installed at Derby Cathedral on 25 May 2019 and introduced as a Lord Spiritual at the House of Lords by the Archbishop of Canterbury (Justin Welby) and the former Archbishop of York (John Sentamu) on 2 July 2019.

¹⁷ [HL Deb 26 October 2015 Vol 765 c965 \[Introduction: The Lord Bishop of Gloucester\]](#)

¹⁸ ['God is not a he or a she', says first female bishop to sit in House of Lords](#), Guardian, 24 October 2015. Bishops' writs now omit the words "Father in God" for male or female Lords Spiritual.

Mullally became Bishop of London in March 2018 and took her seat in the House of Lords in April 2018, outside of the provisions of the 2015 Act.¹⁹

1.4

Government statements on the current bill

The Government announced its intention to introduce the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill in the briefing notes which accompanied the King's Speech on 17 July 2024.²⁰

The notes stated that since the 2015 Act there had been “welcome progress” in increasing the number of women bishops in the House of Lords but added that:

Without this legislation, the position would return to the status quo ante whereby bishops become members of the House of Lords according to their time in office; this would result in it taking longer for more female bishops to enter the House of Lords.²¹

A Cabinet Office press release stated that the Bill was introduced at the “request” of the Church of England.²²

Nick Thomas-Symonds MP, Minister for the Constitution and EU Relations, said:

This Government is working to ensure our Parliament represents the country that it serves – taking steps to address gender inequality is a vital part of that work. As a result, it's important that steps like this are taken to ensure more female bishops are able to bring a greater range of experience to the House of Lords.²³

Baroness Smith of Basildon, Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords, said:

We are pleased to support the Church of England in this matter. Lords Spiritual play a key role in the House of Lords and I have no doubt that any new female bishops will have an important role in parliamentary business in the months to come.²⁴

¹⁹ [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\)](#), Explanatory Notes, para 8. As the Bishop of London is among the “reserved” places.

²⁰ [King's Speech 2024 background briefing](#), Prime Minister's Office, 17 July 2024, p98.

²¹ [King's Speech 2024 background briefing](#), Prime Minister's Office, 17 July 2024, p98.

²² [New legislation will increase representation of female bishops in the House of Lords](#), Cabinet Office and Office of the Leader of the House of Lords, 30 July 2024.

²³ [King's Speech 2024 background briefing](#), Prime Minister's Office, 17 July 2024, p98.

²⁴ [King's Speech 2024 background briefing](#), Prime Minister's Office, 17 July 2024, p98.

The Rt Reverend Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester, said:

I welcome the decision to extend the measure aimed at increasing the number of women who serve as Lords Spiritual. We have made progress on this in recent years but there is still more work to be done.

Bishops in the House of Lords seek to speak to the hopes and needs of all people across the communities they serve. By better reflecting those communities we can carry out that service more effectively.²⁵

²⁵ [King's Speech 2024 background briefing](#), Prime Minister's Office, 17 July 2024, p98.

2

The Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill

The Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill has one substantive clause.

Clause 1 would amend section 1 of the 2015 Act to extend its sunset provision by five years. It would do this by inserting a new end date of “18 May 2030”. According to the Explanatory Notes:

This will mean that a vacancy within the 21 Lords Spiritual who do not hold an ex officio see will be filled by the most senior eligible female diocesan bishop in England, who is not already entitled to sit in the House of Lords, for a further five years, if one is available. The vacancy will be filled by the issue of a writ of summons to that bishop. She will be entitled to a writ in subsequent Parliaments until she ceases to be a diocesan bishop or is appointed to one of the five ex officio sees.²⁶

Clause 2 would make provision for the Bill to extend to England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland,²⁷ and for it to enter into force on the day on which it receives Royal Assent.²⁸

The Explanatory Notes state that as the Bill relates to the reserved or excepted matter of the Parliament of the United Kingdom under the devolution statutes,²⁹ the [Sewel Convention](#) is not engaged and Legislative Consent Motions in the Scottish Parliament, Senedd and Northern Ireland Assembly are not required.

2.1

Compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights

The Government considers that the current Bill is compatible with the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) (ECHR). Accordingly, it has made a statement on the face of the Bill to that effect under [section 19\(1\)\(a\)](#) of the Human Rights Act 1998.

²⁶ [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\)](#), Explanatory Notes, para 12.

²⁷ In that the House of Lords is the Upper House of the UK Parliament.

²⁸ Given that the 2015 Act – if left unamended – would have effect until 17 May 2025, the provisions of this Bill will only have substantive effect from 18 May 2025.

²⁹ Scotland Act 1998, [Schedule 5](#), Government of Wales Act 2006, [Schedule 7A](#), Northern Ireland Act 1998, [Schedule 2](#).

The Explanatory Notes state that the principal human rights issue raised by the Bill is whether a “male bishop who would have otherwise become a member of the House of Lords has any convention rights in respect of the loss of that entitlement to a female bishop” appointed under the provisions of the bill. The Notes state that:

Membership of Parliament, including as a member of the House of Lords, is a public law right, which has been held by both domestic courts and the European Court of Human Rights as being outside the scope of the relevant ECHR articles.³⁰

In respect of article 6 (the right to a fair trial) of the ECHR, the Explanatory Notes state that the European Court of Human Rights has affirmed in [*XV United Kingdom \(app no 8208/78\)*](#) that:

The right to participate in the work of the House of Lords cannot be regarded as a ‘civil right’ within the meaning of article 6. It is of the opinion that such a right, connected as it is to the composition of part of the legislature, falls into the sphere of public law rights outside the scope of article 6.³¹

ECHR article 14 (the prohibition on discrimination) only arises where other convention rights are in question. The Explanatory Notes state it therefore follows that “there can be no breach of article 14 on discrimination”.³²

The Explanatory Notes also note that the current Bill merely extends the provisions of the 2015 Act. The earlier Act was also considered compatible with the ECHR and that position “has not subsequently been challenged”.³³

³⁰ [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\)](#), Explanatory notes, para 18.

³¹ [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\)](#), Explanatory notes, para 19.

³² [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\)](#), Explanatory notes, para 21.

³³ [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\)](#), Explanatory notes, para 22.

3 House of Lords consideration

The Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill was introduced and read for the first time on 30 July 2014.³⁴

On 5 September the House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee observed that the bill “contains no delegations of legislative power”.³⁵

3.1 Second reading

The Bill received its second reading in the Lords on 10 September 2024.³⁶

The Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the Lords, Baroness Smith of Basildon, described it as “a rather straightforward Bill that does not seek to make any fundamental changes or reforms to the composition of your Lordships’ House”. She added that its “only effect” was “to extend by five years the arrangements in place for the appointment of Lords spiritual” contained in the 2015 Act.³⁷

Baroness Neville-Rolfe (Conservative) asked why “a five-year extension has been chosen rather than 10”. She added:

Does this presage work taking place on some alternative pattern of reform and, if so, what is envisaged? I feel we should be told. Certainly, it would be wrong to find ourselves being asked for another extension in just five years’ time.³⁸

Baroness Brinton, a Liberal Democrat peer, observed that:

In the next five years there are 14 retirements due, and the replacements—bar the Bishop of Peterborough, who will replace the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Worcester—would be men.³⁹

The Lord Bishop of St Albans addressed Baroness Neville-Rolfe’s question about the length of the extension period. She began by confessing that the Church of England had made “slower progress” than hoped in achieving

³⁴ [HL Deb 30 July 2014 Vol 839 c877 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

³⁵ House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, [First Report](#), HL Paper 6, 5 September 2024.

³⁶ [HL Deb 10 September 2024 Vol 839 cc1520-38 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

³⁷ [HL Deb 10 September 2024 Vol 839 c1520 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

³⁸ [HL Deb 10 September 2024 Vol 839 c1523 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#).

³⁹ [HL Deb 10 September 2024 Vol 839 c1524 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

“proportionate representation of female bishops on these Benches, or in our diocesan bishops”. However, she added:

the pipeline is crucial. If you look at the statistics, the number of women incumbents in our parishes has been steadily increasing. The numbers of women archdeacons, cathedral deans and suffragan bishops are increasing. Like many professions, we have the problem of getting the pipeline right when making these changes. If the pipeline was going in a different direction, I would be very concerned. It is, at the moment, going in the right direction.

The view of the Church is that we intend this [extension] to be a one-off and do not anticipate needing a further extension to the Act, although of course we are at the service of this House. Personally, I strongly hope to see in five years a proportionate number of our female colleagues in post as diocesan bishops and in the pipeline for vacancies in this House, and the usual rules of the 1878 Act to resume.⁴⁰

In their contributions, Lord Birt (a cross bencher) and Lord Scriven (Liberal Democrat), moved beyond the provisions of the Bill and criticised the continuing presence of bishops in the House of Lords. Lord Birt observed that:

The reality is that we are now an incredibly diverse society—a society comprising people embracing many faiths and none. We should not embark on a long-overdue radical reform of this House without recognising that fact, and that embedding the Church of England in our legislature is an indefensible, undemocratic anomaly.⁴¹

And Lord Scriven said that:

In a democracy, no religion or its leaders should have a privileged role in the legislature. If the Government are serious about reforms to this House, then the Bench that dare not speak its name in such reform—the Bishops’ Bench—has to be part of that reform.⁴²

Lord Scriven cited a letter in *The Times* from the Reverend Canon Ian Gomersall. This argued that:

The anomaly of having Church of England bishops in the House of Lords is compounded by the fact that the clerics in the Lords are from only one church of only one of the four nations of the United Kingdom. On top of this, the Church of England is not the largest worshipping community in the UK. Having bishops in the Lords is indeed anachronistic, and removing them would be not only an act of fairness and justice but also a step towards developing democracy in parliament. Their removal from the Lords would also give the bishops more time to focus on their diocesan duties at this time when the Church of England is in significant decline.⁴³

⁴⁰ [HL Deb 10 September 2024 Vol 839 cc1525-26 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

⁴¹ [HL Deb 10 September 2024 Vol 839 cc1526-27 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

⁴² [HL Deb 10 September 2024 Vol 839 c1529 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

⁴³ [Times letters](#), *The Times* (£), 9 September 2024.

Lord Murphy of Torfaen, a Labour peer, said he “could not agree less” with Lord Scriven and Lord Birt. He said:

In the first instance, the contributions made to our House by our Bishops are first-class. No, they do not have a monopoly on morality—no one has that—but they talk on issues that are important and they bring a perspective that is different. Women Bishops in particular give a certain perspective that we ought to listen to. Our debates on whole areas, including international affairs and national affairs, are excellent when it comes to the contributions made by our colleague Bishops.⁴⁴

The Lord Bishop of Derby (Libby Lane) declared “an interest” as the only speaker in the debate who had benefited from the provisions of the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015. She said it was “for Parliament to decide whether and in what capacity we continue to serve here” and added that there were:

mixed views on the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act among my colleagues, the women and men on these Benches, and across the wider College of Bishops [...] In the decade since the General Synod and Parliament passing the legislation to enable women to become bishops, many remarkable women have followed in my footsteps, but the overall number remains too low [...]

Attention is being given to how the Crown Nominations Commission deliberates and selects candidates to senior posts, given the rate of appointment of women to such roles and our intent on greater diversity overall [...]

Despite these concerns, she concluded that the:

Bill to extend the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act for a limited period is welcome for the effect it will have of continuing to improve gender diversity on these Benches, which will be to the wider benefit of this House and a small correction to a long-standing inequality [...] I dare to hope it might mean that the time comes more quickly when women sometimes are in the majority on these Benches.⁴⁵

3.2 Committee stage

Committee stage, a chance to examine the bill in detail and make changes, took place on Wednesday 16 October.⁴⁶ As no amendments were proposed ahead of committee stage, the [order of commitment](#) was discharged and the Bill proceeded directly to third reading.

⁴⁴ [HL Deb 10 September 2024 Vol 839 c1530 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

⁴⁵ [HL Deb 10 September 2024 Vol 839 cc1534-35 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

⁴⁶ [HL Deb 16 October 2024 Vol 840 c202 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

3.3

Third reading

The Bill's third reading took place on Tuesday 22 October.

The Lord Privy Seal, Baroness Smith of Basildon, began by stating that she had it:

in command from His Majesty the King to acquaint the House that His Majesty, having been informed of the purport of the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015 (Extension) Bill, has consented to place his prerogative, so far as it is affected by the Bill, at the disposal of Parliament for the purposes of the Bill.

Baroness Smith also observed that the House of Lords was “about to see the benefits” of the 2015 Act again:

Following the retirement of the Bishop of Worcester, the Bishop of Peterborough will replace him in the House of Lords in due course under this legislation. I thank the right reverend Prelate the Bishop of Worcester for his 12 years of dedicated service in this place, and I very much look forward to welcoming another female Bishop to the Bishops' Benches.⁴⁷

Baroness Neville-Rolfe (Conservative) reiterated opposition support for the Bill:

We are pleased to work with the Government in cases such as this where our objectives are aligned. I am proud of our record supporting women in this House, and our women Bishops have made many valuable contributions to Parliament since they first became Members of your Lordships' House. As a frequent member of church congregations, I can confirm that this reflects the sterling work of female clergy right across the country.⁴⁸

Finally, the Lord Bishop of Leeds thanked the Government for:

taking this on and thank those who contributed to the debate at different stages. This is a mechanism to allow us to make the progress which we need to make more quickly.⁴⁹

The unamended Bill was passed by the Lords and sent to the Commons.

⁴⁷ [HL Deb 22 October 2024 Vol 840 cc526-27 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

⁴⁸ [HL Deb 22 October 2024 Vol 840 c527 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

⁴⁹ [HL Deb 22 October 2024 Vol 840 c527 \[Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]\]](#)

4 Statistics: Women bishops in the House of Lords

As at 31 October there were 26 Lords Spiritual, six of whom (24%) are women. The office of Bishop of Durham is currently vacant. Five of the six women bishops were appointed under the provisions of the 2015 Act. In addition to the five current women bishops, Christine Hardman, the former Bishop of Newcastle, entered the House in 2015. She retired in 2021.⁵⁰ The sixth current woman bishop, the Bishop of London, has a reserved seat outwith the provisions of the 2015 Act.

Table 1 (compiled by the House of Lords Library) shows the 21 current non-reserved bishops in the House of Lords, including their gender, age, and how many years until they reach the compulsory retirement age of 70. Eleven of the bishops are due to retire in the next five years, of which one is a woman (the Bishop of Bristol).

Table 1 Age profile of the 21 non-reserved bishops, as at 14 August 2024

Bishop	Gender	Age	Years until compulsory retirement age of 70
Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich	M	70	0
Bishop of Bristol	F	69	1
Bishop of Worcester	M	69	1
Bishop of Southwark	M	68	2
Bishop of Manchester	M	67	3
Bishop of Oxford	M	67	3
Bishop of St Albans	M	67	3
Bishop of Leeds	M	66	4
Bishop of Lichfield	M	66	4
Bishop of Lincoln	M	66	4
Bishop of Chichester	M	65	5
Bishop of Guildford	M	63	7
Bishop of Hereford	M	63	7

⁵⁰ [Parliamentary career for The Lord Bishop of Newcastle](#), UK Parliament website.

Bishop of Sheffield	M	62	8
Bishop of Gloucester	F	61	9
Bishop of Chelmsford	F	58	12
Bishop of Derby	F	57	13
Bishop of Leicester	M	56	14
Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham	M	56	14
Bishop of Norwich	M	53	17
Bishop of Newcastle	F	51	19

Source: House of Lords Library, [Lords Spiritual \(Women\) Act 2015 \(Extension\) Bill \[HL\]: HL Bill 10 of 2024-25](#).

Background briefing notes to the 2024 King's Speech observe that:

At present, there is one female bishop who will be eligible to enter the Lords on retirement of an existing bishop [the current Bishop of Peterborough, Deborah Sellin], and this will happen before the 2015 Act provisions expire in May 2025. There is a further retirement in February 2025 (the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich), which again would be covered by the 2015 Act if a woman bishop was appointed to an eligible diocese before that retirement.

Looking ahead, there are currently four vacancies amongst the eligible diocesan bishoprics and there is a possibility of female bishops being appointed to those posts. There are a further nine Lords Spiritual who will reach the retirement age in the next five years.⁵¹

⁵¹ [King's Speech 2024 background briefing](#), pp99-100.

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