



HOUSE OF LORDS

Library Note

House of Lords Reform: Chronology 1900–2010

This Library Note provides a chronology of key developments in the reform of the House of Lords since 1900. It does not provide a comprehensive account of all reform proposals, but briefly summarises the context and outcome of significant proposals for reform of the composition and powers of the House in order to illustrate the shifting debate on the Lords over the last century. More detailed chronologies of recent reform proposals may be found in House of Lords Library Notes *Proposals for Reform of the Composition and Powers of the House of Lords, 1968–1998* (July 1998, [LLN 98/004](#)) and *House of Lords Reform 1997–2010: A Chronology* (June 2010, [LLN 2010/015](#)).

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1. Parliament Act 1911

Background	<p>Powers: Though the Commons had declared that the Lords should not interfere with financial (supply) legislation, they could still in theory reject it outright and the Lords still had power to amend or reject ordinary legislation.</p> <p>Composition: Although the Commons had become more representative through extensions of the franchise, the Lords remained an unrepresentative body. Critics also noted the large proportion of conservative-minded Peers.</p> <p>Issues: In the later 19th century Peers increasingly used their power, particularly against measures proposed by Liberal governments. Most significant was the rejection of the Irish Home Rule Bill in 1893. The Liberal Government elected with a large majority in 1906 suffered several defeats in the Lords on its flagship measures, such as on the Education Bill. In 1909 the Lords rejected the Government's Finance Bill.</p>
Proposal	<p>The Commons had already approved a resolution that the "Commons shall prevail" against the Lords in 1907. The Government proposed a Bill to cut the powers of the Lords with regard to primary legislation. The power to reject would be replaced by a delaying power of up to two years. The Government threatened to create enough Liberal Peers to pass the Bill if the Lords rejected it. The Bill was finally passed following opposition from the Conservative Party and from a large number of Peers in the House of Lords.</p>
Outcome	<p>Parliament Act 1911 The Act's preamble describes it is an interim measure until the "Second Chamber [could be] constituted on a popular instead of hereditary basis".</p>

2. Bryce Commission 1918

Background	<p>Reform Delayed: The First World War prevented any further reform to the House of Lords. Following the conclusion of the war, David Lloyd George established a commission chaired by Viscount Bryce.</p>
Proposal	<p>The Commission failed to agree on composition. The majority favoured 246 Members chosen by the House of Commons from geographical regions and a number of Members (about one quarter of the whole House) chosen by a Joint Committee. Initially these would be holders of hereditary peerages. The reformed House would not be able to amend or reject Money Bills and the Parliament Act would not apply to further measures to reform the powers of the Lords.</p>
Outcome	<p>No action was taken In 1922 Lloyd George's Government introduced resolutions based on the Bryce report. These were debated for four days. The Government later fell so no further action could be taken. The Baldwin Government made similar proposals when the Conservatives returned to power at the end of 1924 but these were neither debated nor voted on in the Commons. The Labour Party, by then the main opposition party, preferred abolition.</p>

3. Parliament Act 1949

Background	<p>Backbench Bills: A number of Private Members' Bills were proposed throughout the 1930s that sought to reform the Lords. The most prominent scheme was proposed by the Marquess of Salisbury whose reforms were based on the lines of the 1922 resolutions. In spite of receiving a second reading in 1934, no further progress was made.</p> <p>Manifesto: The Labour Party had stated that in Government they would not tolerate obstruction of their programme in the Lords.</p> <p>Nationalisation: Following the 1945 election win, the Labour Government expressed concern about getting its nationalisation programme through the Lords in time for a general election in 1949–50, particularly the Iron and Steel Bill.</p>
Proposal	<p>A Bill to amend the Parliament Act to reduce the Lords delaying power from two years to one year. No scheme for wider reform was proposed. Introduced in the 1947–48 session the Bill went through the Commons but was adjourned in the Lords pending an inter-party conference on reform. Nine principles were agreed, including that no party should have overall control in a reformed House, creation of life peerages, allowing women to be Members and the introduction of allowances. The Conference collapsed over disagreement on powers. On reintroduction, the Bill was then rejected at second reading twice in the Lords, having gone through the Commons. It received Royal Assent in 1949 under the terms of the Parliament Act 1911.</p>
Outcome	Parliament Act 1949

4. Life Peerages Act 1958

Background	<p>Old Solution: The creation of life peerages had historical pedigree. Previous Private Members' Bills had proposed similar provisions for life peerages, including a Bill introduced by Earl Russell in 1869, Lord Newton's scheme in 1907 and a number of proposals through the 1930s.</p>
Proposal	<p>In 1957, the Macmillan Government introduced a Bill to enable the creation of peerages bestowed on men/women for life. The Earl of Home told the Lords that the measure was "strictly and severely practical" and underlined that an injection of new Members was needed. He explained that the "House is perilously near a breakdown in its machinery".</p>
Outcome	Life Peerages Act 1958

5. Peerage Act 1963

Background	<p>Women who had inherited peerages were unable to take their seats in the Lords, a situation seen as anomalous following the introduction of women as life Peers.</p> <p>Peerages could not be relinquished once inherited, a problem highlighted by Tony Benn who campaigned against the perceived unfairness that he could not remain as an MP on inheriting his father's peerage.</p>
Proposal	A Bill was introduced to enable individuals to relinquish inherited titles and to allow female hereditary Peers to take their seats in the Lords.
Outcome	Peerage Act 1963

6. Parliament (No 2) Bill (1968)

Background	<p>Manifesto: In 1966 the Labour Party reasserted its promise to safeguard measures approved in the House of Commons from frustration by delay or defeat in the House of Lords.</p> <p>Inter-Party Conference: The Queen's Speech on 31 October 1967 stated that the Government would be willing to enter into inter-party consultations. The Inter-Party Conference on House of Lords reform was set up at the beginning of the 1967–68 session and met for the first time on 8 November 1967. Following rejection by the Lords of the Southern Rhodesia (United Nations Sanctions) Order 1968, the Conference was halted.</p> <p>White Paper: On 1 November 1968 the Government published a white paper on House of Lords Reform (Cmnd 3799). It proposed a 'two-writ' system of voting and non-voting Peers and reduced powers. Primary legislation would be subject to shorter delay. The rejection in the Lords of Statutory Instruments could be overridden in the Commons. The white paper was debated in both Houses and was approved by a majority of 195 in the Lords and 111 in the House of Commons.</p>
Proposal	The Parliament (No 2) Bill containing these proposals was introduced to the House of Commons on 19 December 1968.
Outcome	<p>Bill dropped</p> <p>In April 1969, Harold Wilson told the Commons the Bill was to be dropped "in order to ensure that the necessary Parliamentary time is available for priority Government legislation". Over 80 hours had been spent on the Bill in Committee. Only the Preamble and 5 out of 20 clauses in the Bill had been discussed.</p> <p>A number of Private Members' Bills followed at the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s. These included Robert Sheldon's proposal in 1969 to reduce the Lords' powers and Dennis Skinner's Bill in 1976 to abolish it. Others proposed ending Membership by virtue of inheritance.</p> <p>At the end of the 1970s several articles and reports considered Lords</p>

	reform. A Labour Party National Executive Committee (NEC) statement proposed abolition as the most straightforward and practical course. A Liberal Party Working Group report advocated an elected House constitutional settlement within a federal system of government. A Conservative Committee, chaired by Lord Home, settled in favour of a House composed by a mixture of election and appointment and suggested that the powers of the House of Lords to delay legislation could be restored to a two-year period.
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7. House of Lords Act 1999

Background	<p>Backbench Bills: In the 1990s a number of Private Members' Bills were proposed to provide for elections to the Lords, including those by Graham Allen and Peter Hain.</p> <p>Labour Policy: In 1994 Tony Blair made a speech in which he stated his Party's reform agenda. As a minimum first step the hereditary right to a seat would be abolished by a short Bill, passed under the Parliament Acts procedure if necessary, so that only Peers of first creation would be entitled to attend and participate in House of Lords proceedings.</p>
Proposal	The Labour manifesto in 1997 contained confirmation of its intention to remove hereditary Peers as a first stage. It added that a committee of both Houses of Parliament would be appointed to undertake a wide-ranging review of possible further change. They would then bring forward proposals for reform. The House of Lords Bill was introduced to the House of Commons in January 1999 and, following a compromise amendment ('Weatherill amendment') made in the Lords to allow 92 hereditary Peers to remain, the Bill passed.
Outcome	<p>House of Lords Act 1999</p> <p>The Act removed the right of all but 92 hereditary Peers to sit in the House of Lords.</p>

8. Wakeham Commission (2000)

Background	Royal Commission: The same month as the House of Lords Bill was introduced, the Government published a white paper, <i>Modernising Parliament: Reforming the House of Lords</i> (Cm 4183). The statement announced the setting up of an appointments commission to recommend non-party-political life Peers and the establishment of a Royal Commission.
Proposal	The Royal Commission's report made 132 recommendations. It proposed that a reformed House of Lords would have around 550 Members, with 65, 87 or 195 elected Members. It recommended the creation of a statutory appointments commission to be responsible for all appointments to the Second Chamber. It did not propose any radical change in the balance of power between the two Houses of Parliament.
Outcome	<p>Joint Committee</p> <p>During the Commons debate in June 2000, the Government said that a</p>

	Joint Committee of both Houses would in due course be established to consider the implications of the Royal Commission's work.
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9. Labour's White Paper: Completing the Reform (2001)

Background	Queen's Speech in the 2001–02 session: The Government announced that it would introduce legislation, following consultation, "to implement the second phase of House of Lords reform".
Proposal	In November 2001 the Government published its white paper, <i>The House of Lords: Completing the Reform</i> (Cm 5291), seeking responses by 31 January 2002, with a view to introducing legislation thereafter. The paper stated the Government's view that at least 20 percent of the House should be non-party-political appointments.
Outcome	<p>Debate</p> <p>Two days of debate on constitutional reform were held in the House of Lords and one day in the House of Commons, with the white paper's proposals attracting little support.</p> <p>In January 2002, both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats published their proposals for reform. The Conservative Party proposed the creation of a 300 member assembly, to be called the Senate, with 240 Members elected by a first-past-the-post system for 15-year terms. The Liberal Democrats envisaged a Second Chamber of no more than 300 Members with a minimum of 80 percent of Members elected by proportional representation.</p>

10. Joint Committee on Lords Reform (2002–03)

Background	In May 2002 the Government proposed a Joint Committee to achieve consensus on reform.
Proposal	The Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform published its report, <i>House of Lords Reform: First Report</i> (HL Paper 17 of session 2002–03). It contained seven options for reform, including wholly elected, wholly appointed and five different combinations of elected/appointed.
Outcome	<p>Votes in both Houses</p> <p>The House of Commons rejected all seven options for reform presented by the Joint Committee, while the House of Lords voted by three to one for a fully appointed House and rejected all other options. The option which MPs defeated by the fewest number was for an 80 percent elected chamber. In May 2003, the Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform published its second report, <i>House of Lords Reform: Second Report</i> (HL Paper 97 of session 2002–03). The Joint Committee's report was seen as passing the initiative back to the Government following the outcome of the votes in February. The Government responded in July reiterating its policy on reform.</p>

11. Government Consultation: Next Steps (2003)

Background	In January 2003, Tony Blair argued against the creation of a hybrid House and expressed his support for the House of Lords as a revising Chamber, not a rival Chamber. He favoured an appointed House.
Proposal	In September the Government published a consultation paper, <i>Constitutional Reform: next steps for the House of Lords</i> (CP 14/03). It proposed removing the remaining hereditary Peers and new provisions for appointments to the House.
Outcome	Dropped The proposals were opposed in both Houses. In November 2003, the Queen’s Speech said that legislation would be brought forward to reform the House of Lords, removing hereditary Peers and establishing a statutory appointments commission. In March 2004, Lord Falconer of Thoroton told the BBC that plans to introduce a Bill to reform the House of Lords had been dropped.

12. Labour’s White Paper: The House of Lords (2007)

Background	<p>Manifestos: The Labour Party, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats all included statements on House of Lords reform in their 2005 General Election manifestos.</p> <p>Queen’s Speech: In the Queen’s Speech for the 2005–06 session, the Government announced that it would “bring forward proposals to continue the reform of the House of Lords”.</p> <p>Conventions: In November 2006, the Joint Committee on Conventions published its report, <i>Conventions of the UK Parliament</i> (HL Paper 265 of session 2005–06). It concluded that conventions by their nature could not be codified and “are flexible and unenforceable”. It noted that its conclusions only applied to the present circumstances of the House and would need to be revisited were the composition of the House to change. In its reply, the Government accepted the Joint Committee’s conclusions.</p>
Proposal	In February 2007 the Government published its white paper, <i>The House of Lords: Reform</i> (Cm 7027). It proposed a hybrid House with at least 20 percent non-party-political appointments; direct elections through a partially open list system; the primacy of the Commons; and reduced in size to 540 Members.
Outcome	<p>Votes MPs supported the principle of a bicameral legislature and two options—an 80 percent elected House and a 100 percent elected House. They also supported a motion stating that the remaining retained places for Peers whose membership is based on the hereditary principle should be removed.</p> <p>Peers voted in favour of a fully appointed House and rejected all other options.</p>

13. Labour's Green Paper: An Elected Second Chamber (2008)

Background	Green Paper: In July 2007, the Government's <i>The Governance of Britain</i> (Cm 7170) stated that it was committed to enacting the will of the House of Commons as expressed in the recent votes, and that cross-party discussions would continue to such ends.
Proposal	The green paper contained a number of options on composition, electoral systems and statements of general principles.
Outcome	<p>The House of Commons Public Administration Committee reported on the green paper in January 2009. It concentrated on the mechanisms by which individuals are appointed to the House of Lords. The Committee also recommended amending the powers of the House of Lords Appointments Commission.</p> <p>In July 2009, the Constitutional Renewal and Governance Bill (CRG Bill) was introduced to the House of Commons. The Bill proposed the ending of by-elections to replace hereditary Peers who had died and to disqualify Members of the House of Lords found guilty of a serious crime or who were subject to a bankruptcy order. The Bill also provided measures for the House of Lords to suspend or expel Members and to allow Peers to resign from the House of Lords and disclaim a peerage.</p> <p>In February 2010, Jack Straw stated his intention "to publish key parts of a draft Bill for reform of the House of Lords in the next few weeks". Following the announcement of the General Election, in April 2010 the Government agreed to drop a number of provisions from the CRG Bill in order for it to pass, including all the provisions that would apply to the House of Lords apart from those relating to the tax status of Members.</p>

14. Further Reading

Andrew Adonis, *Making Aristocracy Work : The Peerage and the Political System in Britain 1884–1914* (1993)

P A Bromhead, *The House of Lords and Contemporary Politics 1911–1957* (1958)

Emma Crewe, *Lords of Parliament: Manners, Rituals and Politics* (2005)

House of Lords Library Note, *House of Lords Reform 1997–2010: A Chronology* (28 June 2010, [LLN 2010/015](#))

House of Lords Library Note, *The Life Peerages Act 1958* (21 April 2008, [LLN 2008/011](#))

House of Lords Library Note, *Proposals for Reform of the Composition and Powers of the House of Lords, 1968–1998* (14 July 1998, [LLN 98/004](#))

Roy Jenkins, *Mr Balfour's Poodle: An Account of the Struggle Between the House of Lords and the Government of Mr Asquith* (1968)

Janet P Morgan, *The House of Lords and the Labour Government 1964–1970* (1975)

Gregory Phillips, *The Diehards* (1979)

Donald Shell, *The House of Lords* (2007)

