

BHA BRIEFING 2012: *House of Lords Reform Bill:*
Second Reading, House of Commons
Monday 9 July 2012 and Tuesday 10 July 2012



Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA):
Government proposals on the place of bishops in a reformed House of Lords¹

The British Humanist Association is strongly opposed to the Government's intention of retaining reserved seats for Church of England Bishops in the reformed House of Lords.

As this briefing will establish, **the proposals are unjust, unfair and unpopular, and we strongly urge Members to speak against these proposals at the second reading.**

The BHA and Lords Reform

The British Humanist Association has no position with respect to the wider debate of Lords Reform. We respect there will be a considerable range of views regarding the need for reform, and the role and composition of any reformed chamber. However, **irrespective of the form a reformed House of Lords takes, a privileged position for one particular branch of one particular religion is utterly unjustifiable.**

We do not oppose Bishops or any other religious leaders from sitting in the House of Lords or its successor chamber as long as they are elected or appointed by the same means as any other voting member.

Entrenching Privilege – the proposals in detail

- The right of Church of England bishops to **sit with full voting and speaking rights** in Parliament has been retained in the House of Lords Reform Bill as presented. In the reformed House, the number of bishops would be reduced from their current level of 26 to 12 over the course of three electoral periods.
- Anglican bishops would compose 2.6% of the fully reformed membership. This is roughly in line with their current proportion of the House.
- Of the 12 Lords Spiritual seats, five will be reserved specifically for the office holders of the 'Great Sees': the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, and the Bishops of London, Durham and Winchester. **The Church will be granted new powers** to decide which of its other bishops will fill the remaining seven seats.

Public opposition to retaining the bishops

In addition to being antithetical to the principles of democracy and equality, the decision to retain the reserved seats in Parliament for Bishops is also **deeply unpopular with people of all faiths and none, and across the political spectrum.**

- **74% of Britons oppose** bishops sitting in Parliament.²

¹ This briefing is supplementary to the BHA's briefing on *Religious Representatives in the House of Lords*, June 2011: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/uploads/documents/1bha-briefing-bishops-in-the-lords-2011-final.pdf>.

House of Lords Reform Bill 2012-13: <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2012-13/houseoflordsreform.html>

² ICM, March 2010, http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/survey_on_bishops_icm.pdf

- **70% of Scottish people, 58% of people in the north of England, 54% people in the south of England, 53% of people in the Midlands & Wales, and 49% of people in London oppose** the presence of Bishops in Parliament.³
- **A majority of the supporters of the three main parties** (62% of Liberal Democrat voters, 53% of Labour voters, and 52% of Conservative voters) **oppose** bishops sitting in Parliament.⁴
- **70% of British Christians oppose** bishops sitting in Parliament.⁵
- **Representatives from the Church of England and religious groups are the least favoured for appointment to the Lords** (other categories included judges, business leaders, trade union leaders, writers, composers, academics).⁶

Debunking myths: Countering arguments to retain the bishops

'Britain is a Christian country'

Not in a religious sense. According to the latest report of the British Social Attitudes Survey, 51% of people define themselves as non-religious. Only 20% state they are Church of England/Anglican. Of those who identify as Anglican, 48% never attend services and only 8% attend services on a weekly basis⁷. The Church of England's own statistics attest to the decline in religiosity, with average weekly church attendance in 2010 of around 1.1 million, with attendance of under a million on Sundays.⁸

'The bishops should remain to protect Christian values, regardless of their current popularity'

On the contrary, the views of the hierarchy of the Church of England on a broad array of issues have been consistently out-of-step with those of the believers they purport to represent. On issues from abortion and stem cell research to same-sex relationships and assisted dying, those who identify as Christian have been markedly more progressive than their religious leaders.⁹

'The removal of the bishops would mean the disestablishment of the Church of England'

Incorrect. The 1999 Cabinet Office report *Modernising Parliament: Reforming the House of Lords*:

'In more modern times, the presence of the Bishops became increasingly associated with the establishment of the Church of England, although in law the two are quite separate. The establishment of the Church of England rests upon Parliament's powers over its legislation and the requirement for the Sovereign as its Supreme Governor to be in communion with it. The Bishops and Archbishops now sit by virtue of the Bishops Act of 1878, which provides for the two Archbishops, the Bishops of London, Winchester and Durham, and the next 21 most senior diocesan Bishops to have a seat in the House of Lords.' (p.15)

³ YouGov, June 2012, http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/s9zuj152zl/YG-Archives-YouGov-LordsReform-270612.pdf

⁴ YouGov, June 2012, http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/s9zuj152zl/YG-Archives-YouGov-LordsReform-270612.pdf

⁵ ICM, March 2010, http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/survey_on_bishops_icm.pdf

⁶ YouGov, Jan 2003, <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/LLN-2012-028>

⁷ British Social Attitudes Survey 28th Report

Lee L. (2012), 'Religion: Losing Faith?', in British Social Attitudes: the 28th Report, London: Sage

⁸ Church of England Statistics 2010/2011

http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1477827/2010_11churchstatistics.pdf

⁹ Ipsos MORI, February 2012, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/ipsos-mori-religious-and-social-attitudes-topline-2012.pdf>

Removal of Bishops from the Lords would not affect other features of establishment – the role of the state in ecclesiastical appointments, the relationship between the church and the head of state, the power of the ecclesiastical courts, the existence of an ecclesiastical committee in Parliament, the jurisdiction of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council over ecclesiastical appeals; all these and the many other features of establishment would continue untouched.

Furthermore, other countries and jurisdictions have established churches – including Scotland—where faith representatives do not sit in the legislature.

‘Religious representation in Parliament is a good thing and should be widened to all religious and non-religious beliefs’

The BHA is opposed to any individual holding a seat in parliament by right instead of an electoral mandate or appointment on merit, and we would be equally opposed to members selected on the basis that they were a humanist. A legislature that is representative of the society it serves is far more likely to provide an accurate reflection of the different religions and beliefs in that society than any chamber with an artificial and unfair assisted-places scheme.

MPs and other Peers bring their own personal beliefs and perspectives to their work, and many are very open with their views. There is simply no need for a reserved Bishops bench to represent faith-based values.

Beyond issue of need or desirability, it is also extremely doubtful whether a representative array of beliefs could be artificially constructed. Many of the Christian denominations and other religions active in the United Kingdom have relatively loose structures where individual congregations or gatherings possess a significant degree of independence.

These proposals preserve and entrench a privileged place at the heart of our political system for people of one religion, one denomination and one gender.

About the BHA

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. It is the largest organisation in the UK campaigning for an end to religious privilege and to discrimination based on religion or belief, and for a secular state.

For more details, information and evidence, contact the British Humanist Association:

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