

Britain's hereditary peers vote to abolish their constitutional role

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28 October 1999

Britain's hereditary peers voted in favour of ending their 700-year-old right to sit and vote in the House of Lords on Tuesday evening. The third reading of the Blair government's House of Lords Bill was passed by 221 votes to 81 and will now become law.

The bill abolishes 600 hereditary peers, in the first stage of reform to Britain's unelected second chamber. The vote was secured after the government had earlier agreed to 92 hereditaries remaining in the Lords until long-term reform is completed. Peers began voting on Wednesday to select those hereditaries who will remain in the second chamber, alongside Bishops and life peers appointed by the prime minister. In December a Royal Commission on Lords reform will publish its proposals, which are expected to consist of recommendations for a part-nominated and part-elected chamber.

Opposition to the reform from peers has been a muted affair. Lord Goodhart, the Liberal Democrat life peer, said, paraphrasing T.S. Eliot, "This is the way the world ends—not with a bang, but a giggle."

In the week leading up to the vote, some Conservative peers attempted challenges to the bill. One argued that it breached the 1707 Treaty of Union between England and Scotland, by annulling the right of 16 Scottish peers to sit in the House of Lords. Another claimed that the abolition of hereditary peers raised human rights issues, as peers are denied the right to vote in general elections and this was not being reversed simultaneously with the removal of their seats. Both challenges failed, as did another seeking to delay the reform.

In order to safeguard the privileges of the 92 hereditaries, the Conservative Party faction of the Lords agreed to abstain on the vote. Lord Burford, a direct descendant of one of Charles II's illegitimate sons, made the only visible protest on the day. Jumping the

bar at the front of the throne, Burford shouted that the bill was "treason", aimed at "the abolition of Britain", (a reference to a recently published book of the same title, by right-wing journalist Peter Hitchens) before being ejected from the chamber.

Lord Strathclyde, leader of the opposition in the Lords, told Conservative peers, "The prime minister has taken a knife and scored a giant gash across the face of history. But the past is no longer the point. The point is the future. The real question is what sort of upper chamber the government intends to replace it with."

The amendment to the bill that secured the co-operation of the Lords was drafted in order to prevent any discussion on precisely this question. Labour had committed itself to Lords reform in its 1997 election manifesto, but refused to countenance outright abolition of Britain's second chamber. Blair's plan throughout has been to create a second chamber dominated by his appointees. This allowed the Labour Party to present itself as a radical alternative to the Conservatives by chiming in with widespread disaffection with government institutions, while at the same time meeting the demands of a privileged layer of the middle class for greater political influence. The Conservative peers were thus able to utilise well-founded allegations that the new chamber will consist of "Tony's crony's" to extract concessions from the government.



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