



Hansard Society Briefing Note: New research on public attitudes to House of Lords reform

Hansard Society/YouGov research finds that a majority of the public:

- Believes that it is important to have a second chamber;
- Would like the House of Lords to include elected members;
- Regards holding the government to account as the most important function of the second chamber;
- Would prefer members of the House of Lords to be more independent of party politics than the House of Commons.

1. **Introduction:** This Briefing Note provides an overview of public attitudes to the House of Lords based on a recent survey carried out for the Hansard Society by the polling organisation YouGov. Nearly two thousand adults from across the United Kingdom were asked about their knowledge of the House of Lords and their views on its importance, composition, functions, powers and important qualities.¹ The Hansard Society, an independent, non-partisan body that promotes effective parliamentary democracy, believes that the views of the public should be included in the debate on House of Lords reform.

2. Main findings:

- i. *Knowledge of how the House of Lords works:* **A majority of people do not feel they understand how the House of Lords works (56 per cent).**

Thirty-eight per cent of people report that they understand 'very' or 'fairly' well how the House of Lords works. This compares to the 56 per cent of respondents who claim to understand how the House of Commons works. People are more likely to report they know how the House of Lords works if they are a Conservative Party supporter (49 per cent), over the age of 50 (48 per cent) or male (46 per cent).

- ii. *Importance of the House of Lords:* **A clear majority of the public supports the existence of a second chamber (67 per cent), with 37 per cent of people saying that it is 'on balance a good idea' and 30 per cent believing that it is 'vital.'**

¹ 1,980 adults from across England, Scotland and Wales were surveyed by YouGov between 17 and 19 October 2006.

Among people who report knowing how the House of Lords works (see above), this number rises to 88 per cent, with a majority saying that the existence of a second chamber is 'vital' (53 per cent). Only 13 per cent of people do not support a second chamber, with 4 per cent believing that it is 'not a good idea' and 9 per cent viewing it as 'completely unnecessary.' However, one in five people are undecided about the importance of a second chamber, with young people aged 18 to 29 disproportionately represented in this category (37 per cent).

- iii. *Composition of the House of Lords: There is very little public support for a fully appointed House of Lords (6 per cent). An overwhelming majority of people believe that at least some members of the Lords should be elected (82 per cent).*

Forty-two per cent of the public would prefer a fully elected House of Lords and 40 per cent would like a mixture of elected and appointed members. Among people who claim to know how the House of Lords works, the number wanting an elected element rises to 92 per cent, with almost half preferring a mixture (49 per cent) and 43 per cent favouring a wholly elected second chamber.

- iv. *Powers of the House of Lords: There is less of a consensus amongst members of the public on what powers a reformed House of Lords should hold. People are more inclined to believe that the House of Lords should be able to block laws proposed by the House of Commons if it is wholly rather than partially elected (33 per cent to 21 per cent).*

If the reformed second chamber contains a mixture of elected and appointed members, 29 per cent of people believe it should only be able to advise on or discuss laws proposed by the House of Commons and 26 per cent believe it should be able to delay laws proposed by the Commons for a fixed period. If it consists entirely of elected members, a third of the public thinks it should be able to block laws and a quarter believes it should be able to delay laws. In addition, 23 per cent of people (including 36 per cent of those aged 18 to 29) do not know what powers a reformed House of Lords should have.

- v. *Functions of the House of Lords: Holding the government to account for its policies and expenditure and revising legislation are regarded by the public as the House of Lords' two most important functions (65 per cent and 44 per cent, respectively). In contrast, there is very little public support for a ceremonial role for the House of Lords (3 per cent).*

Members of the public were asked to consider the two most important functions of the Lords, choosing between: holding the government to account for its policies and expenditure (65 per cent); revising legislation (44 per cent); holding debates on key issues and areas of public concern (37 per cent); undertaking expert inquiries (22 per cent); and its ceremonial role (3 per cent). Eleven per

cent of people did not have an opinion on the most important functions of the House of Lords.

- vi. *Important Qualities for Future Peers: A majority of the public thinks that members of a reformed House of Lords should be more independent of party politics than the House of Commons (57 per cent).*

People were asked to identify the two most important qualities for members of a reformed House of the Lords to have. The desire for members of the Lords to be more independent of party politics topped the list (57 per cent), followed by bringing expertise and experience, for example from science, business, law, etc. (54 per cent); representing the different regions and nations of the UK (26 per cent), and being diverse and reflecting UK society, for example gender, ethnicity, age, etc. (24 per cent). Twelve per cent of people do not know which qualities members of the House of Lords should have.

Very few people feel that it is important for members of a reformed House of Lords to represent a single constituency (5 per cent).

3. Conclusions: It is clear from our research that:

- The future of the House of Lords is important to the public, with a majority of people asserting the need for a second chamber;
- There is very little public support for a fully appointed second chamber; an overwhelming majority of people would like to see at least some elected members in the House of Lords;
- The public regards holding the government to account as the most important function of the House of Lords;
- A majority of people would like members of a reformed House of Lords to be more independent of party politics than the Commons and to bring expertise and experience from outside the world of politics to the role;
- The public does not consider it very important for members of the House of Lords to represent single constituencies;
- The House of Lords is less understood than the House of Commons.

4. Background: Reform developments since 1997: In 1997, the newly elected Labour Government promised reform of the Lords' composition and powers. This led to some significant early change: the House of Lords Act 1999 removed all but 92 Hereditary Peers and ended all future hereditary peerages. Since then, further reform has been stalled.

In January 2000, a Royal Commission recommended that a reformed House of Lords should contain a small, regionally representative proportion of elected members and that non-elected Peers be chosen by an independent appointments commission.² The Government published a White Paper in November 2001 which recommended that 20 per cent of Peers should be elected.³ Subsequently a Joint Committee of MPs and Peers was tasked with proposing a list of options - from all-elected to all-appointed - to be subject to a free vote in both Houses. The Committee's first report⁴ contained seven reform options; these and an eighth option were put to a vote in both Houses on 4 February 2003. All eight reform options were defeated in the Commons, and the majority of Peers voted for a wholly appointed second chamber. The end result was to preserve the status quo.

Four years on, no significant change has taken place. In its 2005 general election manifesto, the Labour Party committed itself to completing the reform of the House of Lords 'so that it is a modern and effective revising Chamber'.⁵ The next stages of reform include the publication of a White Paper and a vote in Parliament.

- 5. For further information:** If you would like further information on this Briefing Note, please contact Susanna Kalitowski, Researcher, Parliament and Government Programme (s.e.kalitowski@hansard.lse.ac.uk or 0207 438 1226), or Alex Brazier, Director, Parliament and Government Programme (a.g.brazier@hansard.lse.ac.uk or 0207 438 1211).

**Hansard Society
February 2007**

² Royal Commission on the Reform of the House of Lords (2000), *A House for the Future*, Cm 4534/2000.

³ Lord Chancellor's Department (2001/02), *The House of Lords: Completing the Reform*, Cm 5291/2002.

⁴ Joint Committee on House of Lords Reform (2002), *House of Lords Reform: First Report*, HC 171.

⁵ Labour Party (2005), *Britain forward not back: The Labour Party manifesto 2005*, p 103.