

BHA BRIEFING 2011: Bishops in the Lords House of Lords Reform Draft Bill and White Paper



Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA): *Government proposals on the place of Bishops in a reformed House of Lords*¹

The government has published its proposals for House of Lords reform in a Draft Bill and White Paper.

The House of Lords Reform Draft Bill and White Paper proposes to retain the right of Bishops to sit in Parliament but with a reduced number of 12 Bishops (from 26). In a smaller chamber of 300 Peers, that would represent a **proportional increase from 3% to 4%**.

It also proposes that the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Bishops of London, Durham and Winchester will continue to be members of the House of Lords, and it **gives the Church new powers** to decide which of the remaining 7 of the 12 Bishops will sit in the chamber.

Although they would have the same speaking and voting rights as other members of the reformed House of Lords, the Bishops would continue to sit in Parliament on a **different basis** from other members. Following transition periods, in a fully reformed chamber, the government proposes that²:

- Bishops would not be entitled to a salary or pension in the reformed House of Lords;
- Bishops would be exempt from the tax deeming provision;
- Bishops would be entitled to claim allowances under the scheme administered by the IPSA for members of the reformed House of Lords;
- They would be subject to the disqualification provision;
- They would not be subject to the serious offence provision and those on expulsion and suspension as it is anticipated that such members would be subject to the disciplinary procedures established by the Church of England.

We believe that, in effect, these proposals in effect create a new largely independent, and largely unaccountable, bloc for the Church of England in Parliament.

Through maintaining a special status for Bishops in a reformed chamber where they will not receive a wage (although they would be entitled to other benefits), they will not be accountable to Parliament in the same way as other members.

More important, arguably, is their exemption from the serious offence provision and those on expulsion and suspension. These provisions ensure that on the most serious matters, Bishops in the House of Lords will be accountable to the Church of England and not to Parliament.

What can be done?

The Draft Bill and White Paper are to be scrutinised by a Joint Committee, with the possibility of new proposals being made, and opportunities to amend the draft Bill to abolish the right of Bishops to sit in the House of Lords.

For more information, contact Naomi Phillips, BHA Head of Public Affairs, naomi@humanism.org.uk

¹ This briefing is a supplementary briefing on specific proposals on the place of Bishops in the *House of Lords Draft Bill and White Paper*. For a comprehensive briefing, see BHA Briefing *Religious Representatives in the House of Lords*, June 2011

² *House of Lords Reform Draft Bill and White Paper*, May 2011

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/house-of-lords-reform-draft-bill.pdf>