

Volume 22, Number 4, April 2013

Extension

House of Lords reform: the international perspective

Caroline Gill

You can use this extension piece alongside the article, 'The House of Lords: why is it so difficult to reform?', by Paul Fairclough on p.18 of this issue of the magazine. Here, Caroline Gill examines how the latest plans for House of Lords reform compare with second chambers around the world.

The House of Lords Reform Bill

In July 2012, Jesse Norman MP led a rebellion of 91 MPs against the House of Lords Reform Bill. An advocate of an all-appointed second chamber, Norman explained his reasons for rejecting this particular bill in the *Guardian* newspaper a few days before the debate:

'Like cowboys, parliamentary bills fall into three categories: the good, the bad and the ugly. But every so often you come across a bill that is not good, bad or ugly, but just a hopeless mess'.

Reforming our second chamber is going to be an ongoing political battle which will most probably continue for many years. While the legislative structure and membership reflect the uniqueness of each nation, it is a worthwhile exercise to consider the international perspective.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) database contains information on the structure and working methods of the national legislatures in 190 countries. Of these, 40% have a bicameral system which includes the majority of federal states. In these countries, the second chamber is often used to provide representation to the regions — well known examples of this include the US Senate with two members directly elected to represent each of the 50 states, and the German Federal Council which has appointed representatives from each of the 16 *Länders*. The Reform Bill for the UK contained proposals to use the Party Regional List system (currently used for the EU elections, except in Northern Ireland), which would mean a significant change to the current system where peers have no official mandate to represent a geographical area of the UK.

The House of Lords Reform Bill tried to address the three main areas which separate the House of Lords from upper chambers in other countries. These are membership, size and terms of office.

Membership

Despite the Labour government's promise that the 1999 House of Lords Act was only the first phase of reform to the membership, 92 hereditary peers still remain alongside the appointed Lords. Only four other countries in the world contain a hereditary element — Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Tonga and lastly Belgium, where the King's children over the age of 18 are ex officio members of the Senate. The Reform Bill proposed to change the membership to 80% elected and 20% appointed, and to completely abolish all hereditary peers.

Size

With over 750 members, the current House of Lords is substantially larger than any other second chamber and the Reform Bill proposed to reduce this to 450 senators. Half of all upper chambers contain between 50 and 200 members, with the nearest in size to the House of Lords being France (348 senators) and Italy (321 senators). The smaller size of the second chambers is often cited as a beneficial factor, as it enables debates and committees to be more manageable than those in the first chamber. This means that members of the chamber tend to work together more closely thus creating a more constructive and less adversarial atmosphere.

Terms of office

Appointed peers in the House of Lords retain their title for the duration of their life. While advocates of this system argue that continuity and expertise are established, it does contribute to the ever enlarging size of the chamber, as new appointments are made on an annual basis. The government's proposals were that 80% of the senators would be elected for a 15-year period, no doubt aiming to strike a balance between maintaining expertise but also ensuring that peers are regularly held accountable to the electorate. The House of Lords' lifelong terms of office are extremely unusual with the closest example being the Canadian Senate, which appoints members until retirement. In upper chambers, terms of office for members are frequently held for longer periods than the lower chamber, although in over 60% of countries, this is still only for 5 or 6 years. In such cases, provision is sometimes made for a partial renewal during the term of the house, for example in the USA where a senator holds a 6-year term with a one-third renewal every 2 years.

Activities

(1) Internet research — individual or group work

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) website's 'At a glance' section (www.ipu.org/parline-e/ParliamentsAtAGlance.asp), contains seven areas of top-level analysis. Choose an area to investigate and use the search facilities to find out more detailed results about each country's legislatures. Create a short presentation outlining some interesting facts for your classmates.

(2) Class debate

'We believe that Jesse Norman MP was right when he claimed that the House of Lords Reform Bill would be a catastrophe'. Discuss.

You can use the following weblink as a resource:

www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jul/01/lords-reform-bill-catastrophe

(3) Essay

What do you think are the most compelling arguments for reforming the current House of Lords?

Caroline Gill teaches politics at St Paul's, London