



PRESS NOTICE

10 June 2009: for immediate release

Lords Reform: Today's incremental reforms welcome

While many have attacked the government's proposals today on Lords reform for not going far enough, they have been welcomed by the Constitution Unit, the leading research centre on the Lords and its reform based at University College London. The reforms, in the Constitutional Renewal Bill, will make small changes to the Lords, in advance of possible wholesale reform after a general election.

The proposals include:

- allowing life peers to retire from the chamber
- ending the 'by-elections' which replace the remaining 92 hereditary peers as they die, effectively turning them into life peers
- enabling members to be barred from the chamber for gross misconduct or if they commit a serious criminal offence.

The interim package would be strengthened if it also included:

- reducing the Prime Minister's power of patronage over political appointments, giving more power to the House of Lords Appointments Commission
- putting the Commission on a statutory basis
- a ban on peers retiring from the House standing for election as an MP for at least five years, to avoid 'chamber hopping' which could undermine the integrity of the Lords.

Dr Meg Russell, Reader in Politics and an expert on the Lords said: "The government is sensible to act now to make these small changes, as most agree they are needed. They will end some anomalies and enhance the reputation of the House, while not doing anything to threaten bigger reforms in the future. There is no time now for big changes like elections to the Lords to be implemented before a general election, but these proposals can be made now, and should be."

But, Dr Russell said, even short-term reforms could go further: "Ideally the bill should also cut prime ministerial patronage by giving the House of Lords Appointments Commission control over the number of peers appointed from each party, and greater control over who those peers are. This would ensure appointments were fair, and the membership of the House properly balanced. A clause to ensure that peers retiring cannot stand for the House of Commons for at least five years would stop the Lords being weakened by becoming a jumping off point for ambitious politicians. Such a clause has been widely backed over the years by bodies making proposals on Lords reform. Both these changes, if they are not in the bill already, may be moved by MPs and peers as it passes through Parliament."

Notes to editors:

- Dr Meg Russell is the author of *Reforming the House of Lords: Lessons from Overseas* (Oxford University Press, 2000) and numerous reports and papers about the Lords. She was also special adviser to Robin Cook when he sought to reform the Lords 2001-03. She can be contacted on 0207 679 4998, e-mail meg.russell@ucl.ac.uk.

- Brian Walker is the Constitution Unit's Press Officer and can be contacted on 07802 176347 or brian@actona.demon.co.uk. Victoria Spence is the Unit Administrator, v.spence@ucl.ac.uk or 0207 679 4977.
- The Constitution Unit has recently published *An Elected Second Chamber: A Conservative View* by Andrew Tyrie MP, Rt Hon Sir George Young Bt MP and Roger Gough (editor). An electronic version is available on the website at: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/publications/unit-publications/146.htm>
- The Constitution Unit is an independent and non-partisan research centre based at University College London.