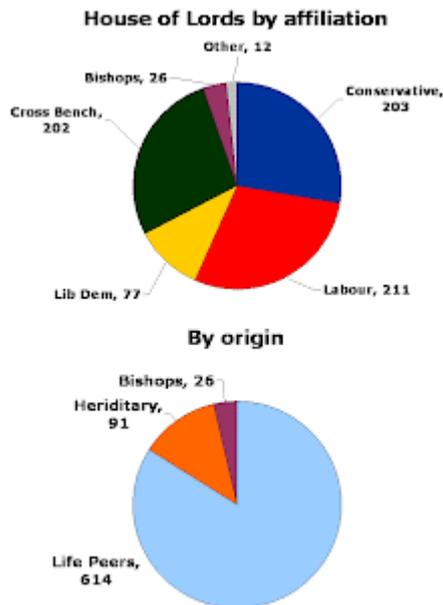


Democracy or wisdom?

written by Clive Bates | 8 March 2007



Our elected chamber, the House of Commons, has just turned in an 'indicative' (ie. non-binding) vote in favour of a 100% elected second chamber - currently the House of Lords, which is currently formed by appointments, hereditary rights and bishops (see chart / [full data](#)). MPs were asked to vote for various combinations of elected and appointed membership - from fully appointed to fully elected. And they voted for voting ([BBC report](#) / [Guardian](#)).

To my own surprise, I have serious misgivings about this outbreak of democratic sentiment. The problem is that it will increase political monoculture and weaken the system for decision-making that is parliament. Let's look in more detail...

To be elected almost always involves several characteristics: a willingness to enter an election; a personality that offers mass appeal; participation in a party machine and that entails; subordination to party 'discipline' and whipping in securing a good election result and passing legislation; and probably a certain measure of ambition and maniacal drive. These characteristics act to filter who enters the contest - leaving a quite peculiar subset of people up for the contest.

Though now long gone, my own vague ambitions to enter politics were finished off by reading Jeremy Paxman's book: [The Political Animal: an anatomy](#). The Amazon synopsis gives a flavour:

It can be an unforgiving business for MPs - caricatured as either power-hungry hypocrites or hopeless idealists - years of effort can lead only to defeat, disgrace or obscurity. What sort of person likes having his or her business or family affairs all over the news, or mistakes trumpeted and triumphs belittled? What drives people to go into it - and what do they get from it all?

But why does the 'willingness-to-be-elected' filter matter? Perhaps this selection process provides us with legislators fit for purpose? Let me draw on the ideas of James Surowiecki, from his [Wisdom of Crowds](#)... "Wisdom" is an emergent property of a decision-making system, and he suggests [four design principles](#) for a wisdom producing decision system. A fully elected second chamber works against at least three of them:

1. **Diversity** - many types of personality, experience and ability will simply not wish to pass through the filter described above. A relative monoculture will follow - and, dangerously, this will resemble the elected chamber because the same filters and constraints will apply.
2. **Independence** - once elections are involved, party discipline will inevitably take hold. Some control will be exercised over who can stand and what they are required to do be given the best jobs and safest seats. "Loyalty" will be at a premium.
3. **Decentralisation** - (people can draw on specialisation or local knowledge). But political parties tend to promote orthodoxy, have manifestos and a particular reading of facts.
4. **Aggregation** - well it's possible that a new system will be less effective at aggregating such diverse, independent and decentralised opinions that survive the willingness-to-be-elected filter because two elected chambers would have each have claims to supremacy. At present, the Lords has a clearly subordinated 'revising' and advisory role, with an a means to override its opposition ([The Parliament Acts](#))

My proposal - the House of Public Life

Having said all that, the current system with its rampant patronage, residual hereditary peers, privileges for church grandees and other anachronisms is hardly satisfactory either. What about a completely different approach? I suggest a system which relies on representing 'civil society'. Instead of appointing individuals, political parties would nominate perhaps 400 organisations (current membership is 731) that covered the spectrum of public life - alternatively the task of selection could be given to an independent appointments commission (guided by principles of securing wide coverage, a degree of balance and good organisational integrity), with parties making recommendations. Those organisations would then be required to select a representative to sit in the second chamber for a fixed term by democratic and transparent means.

What would it look like...?

Organisations might include the medical Royal Colleges, scientific societies like the Royal Society, health charities like Cancer Research UK, professional institutions like the Institute of Mechanical Engineers, trades guilds like the Worshipful Company of Plumbers, housing charities like Shelter, the Local Government Association, poverty campaigners, children's organisations like Banardo's, trade unions, business organisations like the CBI, green groups like Friends of the Earth, regeneration charities like Groundwork, consumer bodies like the Consumers Association, think tanks like Chatham House, development groups like Oxfam, British Legion, the AA, pensioners groups like Help the Aged... and so on. Each organisation would be responsible for the integrity of its appointee and for conducting an open and honest selection process - it could choose to collaborate with others in its field that are not selected. But 400 organisations should give a good spread.

Safeguards

Those selected would swear an oath to serve parliament (just as British officials going to the European Union are required to act in the interests of the Union, not their original member state) and some limits may be placed on rights to intervene (eg. make amendments to legislation) where there are competing interests. Perhaps cynically, it would become known as the 'House of Interests', but I think its diversity, independence and decentralisation would be its strength - and those characteristics would be self-balancing against domination by particular interests. Each three years or so, there would be a 'relegation' and 'promotion' round to secure some movement - relegation may be done through a lottery, on recommendations or by voting appearances.

It would also bring a vast wealth of experience into parliament directly and it would provide a valuable hybrid between elections and appointments.

Is this mad?