

Statement of Principle

CAMPAIGN FOR AN EFFECTIVE SECOND CHAMBER

THE WAY AHEAD

We believe that the present second chamber adds value to the political process. It complements the House of Commons. Each House benefits from the work of the other. The political system is enhanced by having two Houses that are qualitatively distinctive. The relationship between them serves to maintain the fundamental accountability at the heart of a representative democracy. Government is responsible to the people through the House of Commons.

Electing the second chamber, wholly or in part, would be value detracting. We know of no alternative that would add value in the way that the present second chamber does. A second layer of elected members would undermine rather than enhance accountability. It would not offer a distinctive capacity for detailed scrutiny. It would be costly, incurring substantial capital costs as well as anything from £50m to £100m annually in additional funding from the public purse. There is no evidence that it would engage popular support in the way that the present House does. An ICM poll in 2005 found that 72% of those questioned thought that the House of Lords did a good job.

To be against having a second elected chamber, though, is not to be against change. We believe that reform is possible that will refine and strengthen the second chamber and, in so doing, bolster trust in our parliamentary system. The changes we support are those on which we believe agreement can be achieved within and between the political parties and within and between both Houses.

The Government announced its intention in the Queen's Speech of 15 November 2006 to seek a consensus on reform of the House of Lords. The Opposition has also said that it wishes to proceed where consensus can be achieved. There is no consensus on the issue of election. Proposals for change, such as a 50/50 split between elected and appointed members, have tended to generate more heat than light and there is little prospect of general support being mobilised for any proposal for an elected or part-elected House.

However, we believe that consensus is achievable, and indeed is apparent, on three issues, the principal one being the means by which members are selected to serve in the second chamber. Change can be brought about that makes the process fair, transparent and capable of further enhancing the quality and diversity of members of the second chamber.

The principal change that we wish to introduce is an independent appointments commission to recommend names for the conferment of life peerages. This will replace the existing non-statutory body operating under

Lord Stevenson of Coddendam. Such a proposal enjoys broad political support and no opposition appears to have been expressed to it. We have devised a framework within which the commission has to operate and formulated certain criteria and goals. These include appointment on the basis of conspicuous merit, ensuring that at least twenty per cent of the members are not affiliated with any political party, and that no one party shall enjoy an absolute majority in the House. These are principles that have been articulated and accepted by the principal parties and are designed to maintain the existing strengths of the House of Lords in terms of ability and independence. Our proposal also requires the commission to have regard to the need to reduce the size of the House; we consider that the aim should be to ensure that it is no larger than the House of Commons.

We also favour closing off the by-election option for bringing hereditary peers into the House of Lords. The practical effect of the change is to render all members of the House of Lords life peers, other than the Bishops and Archbishops who sit as the Lords Spiritual. Though the change does not enjoy universal approbation, we believe it can be introduced on the basis of enjoying wide political support. Hereditary peers excluded under the 1999 House of Lords Act would be eligible for consideration for life peerages on the same basis as others who have contributed significantly to public life.

We also wish to see provision made for permanent leave of absence for those peers who no longer wish to continue to attend the House as well as for the expulsion from membership of the House of Lords of any peer who is sentenced to a prison term of more than one year. (This latter provision is designed to bring the House into line with the House of Commons, where conviction and imprisonment for more than one year is a disqualification for membership.) The provision does not affect the retention of the peerage but is confined to expulsion from membership of the House.

These changes can be achieved through a single Bill and would serve to enhance the parliamentary system. We appreciate that some people will regard them as necessary but not sufficient. We regard them as sufficient, enabling the country to retain and extend the benefits of the second chamber. By agreeing on these changes, we believe progress can be made. Otherwise, there will be a continuing and increasingly sterile debate – largely revolving around the latest pet scheme for partial election – that offers little and enjoys no resonance with the public.

Our proposals can be achieved in a straightforward Bill and we invite the parties, the Government and both Houses to sign up to such a measure. It represents the constructive way forward.

Notes

A fuller statement of the case for an appointed second chamber can be found in our paper, 'Complementing the Commons', circulated to all parliamentarians at the beginning of 2005. A copy can be found on our website:

<http://www.effectivesecondchamber.com>

The case against the latest proposal, advanced by the Leader of the House of Commons, for a House split 50/50 between elected and appointed members can also be found on our website. So too can polling data demonstrating public support for the work of the present House.