

# Peer pressure

*Will the coalition government's reforms to the House of Lords achieve a better understanding of the institution?*

**PARLIAMENT HAS BEEN** discussing reform of the House of Lords for 100 years. But how has the second chamber changed since its last major reform in 1999, which saw the end of most hereditary peers? It's got a lot bigger for a start. Membership now stands at 792, or 831 if you include those temporarily excluded. Yet the Lords is still one of only two wholly unelected second chambers in a major democracy. As such it remains a source of considerable controversy, as well as one of great interest. It is frequently regarded as medieval or mature – or both.

A study by Dr Meg Russell, Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit at University College London, has been getting under the skin of an institution whose role is at once admired and attacked. The study looked, in part, at the strength and confidence of the Lords, perceptions of its legitimacy, and the impact it has had on policy by defeating the government. It threw up some fascinating findings, including the fact that the public – surveyed in 2007 by Ipsos Mori, well before the MPs' expenses scandal – held the Lords in higher esteem than the Commons. The public also thought that issues such as careful legislative scrutiny

and listening to public opinion were more important than the Lords having more elected members. Peers, polled as part of the same survey, believed the 1999 reform gave the House of Lords greater confidence because the removal of hereditary peers made members feel more legitimate.

Dr Russell said an important effect on both legitimacy and confidence came from the change in party balance that accompanied the 1999 reform, with the House of Lords

becoming a chamber of no overall control. "Under the Labour government, this gave the Liberal Democrats the swing vote, which meant that the chamber had the capacity to defeat the government more often, but also had the confidence to do so because its membership more closely reflected the balance of votes at general elections than did the

House of Commons," she said.

In addition, she commented that "the impact of House of Lords defeats – of which there were hundreds under Labour – are shown by my research to be far more important than people had previously assumed. A careful tracking of hundreds of defeats showed that around 40 per cent of

the policy changes demanded by the Lords were met by the government." These were not just on small technical matters, she said, but often on substantial matters, one of the most obvious being repeated blocking of the government's attempts to limit trial by jury.

Dr Russell added: "Many groups outside the Lords see it as a very effective place to lobby in order to get things done. Interestingly some people who you might expect to be in favour of introducing elections to the House of Lords, in fact oppose this as they fear that the chamber may become less expert and less willing to take up such unpopular causes."

Her research is topical as Lords reform is back on the Westminster agenda. The coalition has outlined plans for a legislature with 300 members, 80 per cent of which could be elected. Reaction has been mixed. Labour described the plans as a 'dog's dinner' lacking detail, and a number of backbench MPs said any proposals should be put to the people in a referendum. Tory MPs barracked Mr Clegg, saying it would threaten the supremacy of the Commons.

So it remains to be seen what the coalition government will achieve, and how popular a 'new-look' Lords will be with the public, compared to the existing model.

But research has an important role to play. As Dr Russell said: "Fundamentally it would not seem right to be having a debate about reforming an institution without properly understanding it. The primary purpose of my research has been to improve understanding about the existing House of Lords." ■

[www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/parliament/house-of-lords](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/parliament/house-of-lords)

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The coalition government wants to see big changes in the House of Lords