

## **A seat in the House of Lords isn't God-given. It's time parliament ejected all the bishops**

Scrapping automatic places for a minority religion is as good a place as any to start with reform of the upper house

Sandi Toksvig, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 5 July, 2023

On Thursday, MPs will debate the automatic right of 26 Church of England bishops to sit in the House of Lords—26 bishops who can sit, speak and vote in our parliament on every law that is passed. My views are well known: given the bishops' steadfast opposition to same-sex marriages, I am calling for their removal. It's time for parliament to reflect and represent our diverse and modern  
5 society.

There are only two countries in the world where representatives of the state religion automatically get a seat in the legislature: the UK and Iran. Obviously, there are fundamental differences between the two countries and in the religious representatives' views, but it is symbolic all the same. How can it be that our democratic system draws parallels with an Islamic theocracy?

10 Why is it, too, that we have a system that favours one denomination of one religion above all others when we live in a society that purports to champion freedom of religion or belief—even hosting an international conference on this universal human right last year? This anachronism becomes even more glaring when considering just 12% of the population is Anglican, and more than half the population is non-religious, according to the British Social Attitudes survey. Then  
15 there is the fact that, as the name suggests, just one of the four home nations is represented by the Church of England. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are excluded.

The bishops' automatic right to vote in our parliament has very practical implications upon people's everyday lives too. Nine of them turned up to vote in 2013 on the act that introduced same-sex marriage—all voting against. In 2010, the bishops successfully blocked an Equality Act  
20 measure that would have applied to the church, and in 2016, successfully voted for more control over fully state-funded Church of England schools. Since the Conservatives gained power in 2010, they have tended to vote against the Conservatives, but while Labour was in power before that, tended to vote against Labour.

There are, of course, those who defend the bishops' presence in the Lords by saying that they use  
25 their undemocratic privilege in ways that benefit others. Some bishops do good work on social issues. But does this really justify such an undemocratic privilege? Does any good outweigh the harm they do—as proved by the actions mentioned—especially when added to the structural inequality their simple presence by right represents? Of course, everyone in the archbishop of Canterbury's residence, Lambeth Palace, is entirely free to think as they please. What they should  
30 not be allowed to do is to automatically hold sway in the Houses of Parliament.

I know many people want wider reform of the House of Lords. Removing bishops won't preclude that. Scrapping the automatic places for one particular branch of one particular religion is a good place to start. More than 60% of the public want the bishops gone.

For far too long, deeply religious laws have been imposed on an increasingly non-religious  
35 country. This isn't a game of chess: automatic places for bishops represent outdated laws in need of change. It's time that our democratic systems better reflect our society and the values we hold dear.