

Farnham Humanists debate Lords Reform



Although the Government may have recently abandoned their attempt to radically reform the House of Lords, this didn't deter Farnham Humanists from holding their planned, free, public debate on the subject. Two Lords, a Bishop and an Electoral Reform expert crossed swords on the motion "We support a wholly elected House of Lords", encouraged by stimulating contributions from the audience at South Farnham School on 20 November.

The proposer was Baroness Thornton an active member of the House of Lords as Shadow Equalities Minister; she was formerly notable for her work for the Co-operative Movement and the Fabian Society. Her seconder was Nick Tyrone from the Electoral Reform Society, who stressed his allegiance to democracy. Opposing the motion was Lord Norton a Professor of Government and Director of the Centre for Legislative Studies at the University of Hull. He was seconded by the recently retired Bishop of Chichester, a member of the House of Lords for four years.

Baroness Thornton (who yearned for the abolition of titles) said she would attempt to beguile the audience into sympathy for the idea and practice of democracy. Although many of the members of the House of Lords were undoubtedly diligent and expert, Britain was a laughing stock in a world with many elected bi-cameral forms of government. Attempts to bring change only led to further debate and no successful moves for democracy.

Democracy should mean that reason would play a greater part in the formation of a second House. Individual elected people would bring more to a second chamber – round the world automatic inclusion of clerics was seen as very odd – except in Iran, which was not a good model. Change should come from a referendum. There needed to be discussion across the parties.

Lord Norton brought his scholarly knowledge of the constitution to the debate. The purpose of the second chamber is essentially as a scrutinising body. Without close examination of laws which started in the Commons, there would be much more bad law. There was already a situation where more laws move up to the Lords than there was time to deal with. (During the discussion it was commented that Local Councils might benefit from scrutiny of their work.)

The Lords, Norton said, would not be effective without accountability, which would not happen in an elected chamber, which needed a great diversity of membership, with wide background. There was a danger that election for the Lords would produce identity kit MPs. The ideal would be for there to be no party majority but a range of different experts.

Nick Tyrone suggested three myths about the House of Lords. Firstly, that there was no Party Whip, whereas the Whip was used vigorously. Secondly, that an elected House of Lords would have no

accountability. Thirdly, the House of Lords has worked well, whereas the current situation was unsustainable.

Obstacles to the change were that we live in an antidemocratic age, secondly that the Liberal Democrats had failed and there would be no chance for democracy for a long time. (Several speakers referred to the very low vote for the recent election of Police Commissioners.) Change needed a Prime Minister dedicated to an elected House of Lords, and much greater public support.

Bishop Hind started by asking what change – as opposed to democracy -- would mean. He considered it would mean greater public choice and public trust. He noted that the Prime Minister was not voted for by the public and the government was not voted in by a majority of the population. He was in favour of reform of the Lords, rather than democratic election. It was too large, the domination of the Whips stifled exchange of ideas. In answering questions about the Bishops in the Lords, he said they had been there by tradition since the beginning of Parliament in the Middle Ages. Minorities and non-politicians would add to the value of the Lords.

During the audience questions and comments, the election of a head of state was raised, the danger of filling the Lords with celebrities was put forward, and the supreme role as lawmaker of the elected Commons was emphasised

The concluding vote brought a 3/5 majority against the motion of a wholly elected House of Lords. Following a suggestion from the audience, a second vote was held on the proposal that the House of Lords should be left unchanged. Strikingly not a single person voted for the Lords to stay as it is.

