Rebalancing the Lords: The Numbers

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The Constitution Unit

School of Public Policy
Brook House, 2- 16 Torrington Place London WC 1E 7HN
Tel: 017 1 209 6669 Fax: 017 1 209 6594 Email: constitution@ucl.ac.uk

REFORMING THE LORDS: THE NUMBERS

As the first stage of Lords reform, the Labour government will bring forward legislation to end the voting and sitting rights of hereditary peers. Stage two involves reviewing the system of appointing life peers, with the aim of ensuring that "over time party appointees as life peers more accurately reflect the proportion of votes cast at the previous general election" (Labour's election manifesto). The report of the Joint Consultative Committee with the Liberal Democrats (March 1997) suggested that this adjustment should be achieved "over the course of the next parliament". Labour has also committed itself to retaining the cross-bench peers.

This note considers the arithmetic involved in fulfilling these policy pledges, in the form of various 'options'. The options assume rebalancing of peers to achieve full proportionality between the parties, although the government has not yet made clear whether it intends to make the Lords fully proportional, or just more proportional. The current membership of the Lords is set out in Table 1.

Table 1 - Composition of the House of Lords in December 1997

Hereditary peers 750
Life peers 465
Law Lords 26
Archbishops, bishops 26
Hereditary peers offirst
creation 9
Total 1,274

Source: House of Lords Information Office, as of 9 December 1997.
(All the figures used in the paper are the Constitution Unit's calculations, based on this initial data)

The size of the Lords, once hereditary peers cease to sit, is set out in Table 2. It assumes that only hereditary peers of first creation would be given life peerages. In practice, the numbers will be higher, since each party will wish to offer life peerages to a number of their hereditary peers deemed to make a particularly valuable contribution to the Lords (eg front bench spokesmen, chairmen of committees etc).

Table 2 - Minimum composition of the House of Lords after stage one

Life ueers Hereditarv ueers Total
of first creation

Conservative 1 75 4 179
Labour 142 1 143
Liberal Democrat 44 0 44
Non-party I I 0 I1
Cross bencW 93 4
Law Lords 26 123

Total 491 9 500
Bishops 26 26
Total 517 526

Option 1 - Straight increase in peers, by 2002

To achieve the proportionate adjustment, the number of Conservative peers would need to remain

Redistribution of natural wastage rates alone would not achieve a proportionate result. There would still need to be an increase in the total number of peers (from 490 to 590) to achieve complete proportionality (Table 5).

Table 5 - Redistribution by natural wastage by 2002, with increase in total size

Redistribution by natural Complete Additional peers
wastage alone in 2002, by: prouortionality required by 2002
seats percentage
(Table 4)

Conservative 148 30.2% 148 0
Labour 153 31.2% 210 57
Lib Democrat 53 10.8% 81 28
Minor parties 13 2.7% 33 20
Cross-bench 123 25.1 % 118 -5

Total 490 100% 590 100

Option 3 - Partial redistribution of peers by natural wastage, by 2007

A scheme whereby the Conservatives do not replenish the natural wastage rate among their life peers is unlikely to command political and public support. It would also leave the Conservatives with an ageing group of life peers. An option for the government would be to allow the Conservatives to replace each year about one half of their peers (ie 3-4 peers) lost through natural wastage - redistributing the rest to the other parties
- and look to achieve a representative second chamber over a longer time period (say by the latest date for the next election, 2007).

Even over a longer timescale, however,

peers and bishops). With a wholly nominated second chamber, this number is likely steadily to increase.

We have developed a computer model to calculate the impact of different election results over the next twenty years2. Two scenarios have been used: one for election results with relatively minor fluctuations between the parties, and the other (based on the actual election results between October 1974 and 1987, showing the effect of more significant fluctuations.

The first scenario - with minor fluctuations - involves the creation of fewer new peers than the second scenario. But if natural wastage is not used it would still see the second chamber increase from