

# Parliamentary reform: The Lords test

- Editorial
- [The Guardian](#), Monday 31 August 2009

Last week, the justice secretary, Jack Straw, told the Guardian that he would produce a draft bill for a reformed second chamber before the election. Yet for nearly 13 years the government has procrastinated on reform, inching along by committee and consensus, as if a revolution could be negotiated. The need for a new upper house has been acknowledged by all the main parties for most of the past century. Deciding what to put in its place, that is the hard part.

Last year, almost despite themselves, Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats agreed an outline of an upper house that would maintain its current relationship with the Commons and its limited power to revise and to delay. The parties [agreed](#) that there would be no overall control, and finally accepted that it would be mainly or entirely elected. But there was no agreement on the final size, on the system of election or even on the process by which existing peers would be retired. David Cameron is said to regard reform as a third-term issue.

Whoever wins, the next election will be a watershed, for there is no provision in the current interim system to accommodate political change in the Commons. A returned Labour government would be faced with heavy demand from retired or unseated MPs looking for a way back to Westminster. An incoming Conservative one would find an upper house where they had fewer, older peers than Labour and a strong case for the immediate appointment of a large group of Tories. In either event, the wholehearted opposition of the existing [House of Lords](#) to an elected second chamber would be reinforced.

But the real challenge to completing reform is that the interim arrangements have resulted in a second chamber that has become reasonably effective at causing the government to pause and reconsider. It would be easier to deal with anomalies in the current system than it would be to reform it. Proposals to abolish the remaining hereditary peers and to strengthen the appointments commission are already planned. Meanwhile, democratisation leads directly into the political minefield of electoral systems, the role of parties and how best to protect independents.

This cautious government has reluctantly instituted a constitutional revolution. Devolution, freedom of information and the new supreme court, which starts business in October, amount to a new basis for politics. But for as long as the unelected still have a place in the legislature, there is a hole in the programme's heart. This government must make the case that the system by which we are governed shapes what governments do. It must lead the fight for an elected second chamber.