

What is the House of Lords? Jump Starts

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Narrator: Hey, the House of Lords isn't some giant house party for rich old men, but who are the Lords and why do we have them? The Lords started off as a kind of advisory council to the king, who was much more powerful back then. They met up at Westminster every now and then to discuss matters of state, but in 1215 King John, of Robin Hood fame, was forced to sign the Magna Carta sharing power with the nobility. Trade became more and more important, leading to the rise of a new merchant class. By the 14th century, Edward III had two groups of advisors divided into chambers, the Lords and the Commons, made up of lesser knights and merchants. This is why we have two houses in parliament. As time passed, the Commons became increasingly dominant and the King became less powerful. In 1649 King Charles was even executed by the Commons. The balance of power between the houses swung firmly towards the Commons. From that day on, inheriting seats made the people feel like the Lords were only for the privileged.

As society moved on and cultures changed, the questions arose, how had these people earned their place? How can they represent the public? In 1958 the life peerages act introduced women into the house and radically changed who was in the Lords. From then on, any man or woman could come into the house based on what they had achieved in their career. The Lords act of 1999 reduced the number of hereditary peers in the house and stopped Lords passing their seat to their own family. A panel was made to help the Prime Minister decide who was brought into the house, so that now the house is made up of people from all walks of life, political peers, cross-bench peers, as well as hereditary peers and bishops. They all use their experience from inside and outside of parliament to check and challenge government. So what does the House of Lords do on a daily basis?

The house has three main functions. To question and challenge the work of the government, to work with the commons to shape laws and to investigate issues through committees and debates, to help improve the way the country is governed. The House of Lords is currently the second busiest legislative chamber in the world, right after the Commons. Each chamber is laid out in the same way as the Commons, the government party on the one side, the opposition on the other. Peers who don't belong to any political party are known as cross-benchers, as they sit on the cross benches opposite the wool sack. The wool sack is the Lord Speaker's seat. Back when wool used to be our main trade, this seat was supposed to remind the Lords to protect our trade. It was and still is stuffed with the wool from hundreds of sheep from around the commonwealth. Strange seats aside, the Lords is different to the Commons because there's no majority for any political party. The party in power does not necessarily have the most seats.

As the Lords are not elected, they're less caught up in party politics and can concentrate on their three main functions. So most people have some preconceived idea of what the Lords are, but the reality is quite different, what do you think?

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