

## The compromiser's dilemma: House of Lords reform

**Mark Pack** argues that the compromises made by Clegg and Cameron concerning House of Lords reform have actually done a fair amount to weaken enthusiasm for an initiative that enjoys support amongst all parties and the populace.



You propose something. Someone objects to it, giving many reasons. You offer to make some changes to meet some of the objections. A deal is made and progress is achieved. A perfectly normal sequence of events, both inside and outside politics and whether the matter is as mundane as what to eat for dinner tomorrow or as public as the wording of Parliamentary legislation.

One big risk, however, is that you offer compromises which are too small to win over extra support yet also too big to keep the enthusiasm of the idea's original supporters. The AV referendum is a classic of the kind. For years many pro-electoral reform campaigners, in Labour, in the Liberal Democrats, in the Electoral Reform Society and elsewhere, insisted that pushing for STV was unrealistic and instead pushed AV. STV, they said, was too idealistic; it would not get the Labour Party's support but compromise on AV and that support could be garnered.

When it came to it, offering up AV did not do much in the way of winning support from Labour and others, and did a fair amount to weaken enthusiasm from the keenest supporters of electoral reform.

Reform of the House of Lords now presents exactly the same dilemma. It is rarely remarked on, but the proposals put forward by Nick Clegg and David Cameron already contain many significant offers of compromise. The widely attacked 15 year term of office is an idea, for example, taken from the 2000 Wakenham Report into Lords reform. A Royal Commission drawing on both Labour and Conservative members, with a third of its members from the Upper House and even a Bishop thrown in too, proposed the 15 year idea.

Yet how has the 15 year idea been received this time round? Has it been welcomed by people as a good compromise, sensibly picking up on the consensus reached by a previous cross-party group and reflecting the concerns of its members from the Lords? Hardly.

Re-presenting this previous compromise idea has both attracted snipping from keen Lords reformers and almost no flicker of welcome from those hostile to Lords reform. As with the choice of AV as the voting system to present in a referendum, far from being a good compromise it has turned out to be the worst of all worlds.

Hence the dilemma: if opponents so readily and acerbically reject the previous suggested compromise, is offering further compromises really going to win them over?

That is why there is a particular appeal to [the argument Guy Lodge and Michael Kenny](#) have made to up the ante in the arguments for reform:

*The case for Lords reform needs ... to be rooted in an account of how power should be most effectively and sustainably exercised in a 21st century democracy. This debate is happening at a time when sections of the public who have become deeply disillusioned by how elites controlling the core institutions of our economic and political systems have misused the power entrusted to them. What links the crises that have recently engulfed the banks, parliament and the media is that they have ultimately been triggered by concentrations of unaccountable power.*

*The reforms we most need are those that begin to challenge and open up these forms of power 'hoarding'. Electing the House of Lords is a small, but actually quite important, and hugely symbolic, step in this direction. Of course it is not a panacea for the problems of irresponsible bankers and over-mighty media moguls.*

*But by creating a stronger, and more legitimate, second chamber, we would have a better chance of holding the power concentrated in our 'core executive' to account. We might also have a wing of the legislature that would be sufficiently powerful to stand aside from, and question, the orthodoxies that led, for instance, to light-touch regulation of our banks and the mountain of household indebtedness that fuelled the political economy of the previous era.*

It is an appealing argument, even if one not without drawbacks. In particular, an attack on the unaccountable hoarding of power will sound to many Lords like an attack on themselves. Even some (anti-reform) Liberal Democrat peers have taken to complain in public about how much they dislike reformers criticising them.

The big risk is that such attacks therefore drive away some who might otherwise be won over to reform and that it makes the passage of legislation through Parliament harder, rather than easier. However, sometimes taking a risk is what it takes to succeed.

**This article was first published on Mark Pack's website and the original can be accessed [here](#).**

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### **About the author**

**Dr Mark Pack** is Head of Digital at [MHP Communications](#) and author of [101 Ways To Win An Election](#). He regularly [blogs about political campaign techniques](#).

### **You may also be interested in the following posts (automatically generated):**

1. [The Australian experience shows how an elected House of Lords may present a democratic dilemma \(43.4\)](#)
2. [An independent Scrutiny Commission could take over the constitutionally valuable roles that the House of Lords presently performs, and at lower cost – whether we move to create an elected second chamber; or reform the unacceptable features of the current House of Lords; or just scrap a second chamber altogether \(41.5\)](#)
3. [Nick Clegg's proposals for reform of the House of Lords just don't work \(38.8\)](#)
4. [House of Lords reform, a new theme for British Politics and Policy at LSE \(36.8\)](#)