

# Democratic round-up: the House of Lords

 [democraticaudit.com/2013/08/06/democratic-round-up-the-house-of-lords/](http://democraticaudit.com/2013/08/06/democratic-round-up-the-house-of-lords/)

By Democratic Audit UK

2013-8-6

*The House of Lords has been in the news again. Here, **Sean Kippin** takes a look at some of the more interesting articles, blogs, and pieces of research from the last week on Parliament's upper chamber.*



*Credit: US Department of Defense*

Last week, the Government announced their latest nominations for membership of the House of Lords, with the governing Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties making up the bulk of the 30 new members. Amongst those ennobled were a number of party donors, which prompted complaints from [Lord Oakeshott](#), the Liberal Democrat Peer, that the nominations “polluted parliament and the political parties that collude in this corruption”

The polling firm YouGov asked the public [whether](#) they agreed with Oakeshott and found that those polled showed an overwhelming preference for banning party donors from taking up membership, with 77% of respondents saying the practice was wrong, and 60% saying it should be banned.

The new additions will see the membership of the House of Lords [swell to 785](#), making it the largest legislature in the democratic world. This growth in size has led to calls for the introduction of retirement for Peers, most notably by [Lord Steel](#), the former leader of the Liberal Party, who has previously introduced legislation which would have introduced [retirement](#) provisions.

Ian Birrell, a former speech writer for David Cameron, [is unsure](#) that elections for the House of Lords would improve matters, and argues that we should instead look for ways to increase the representation of experts and mavericks, rather than rewarding what he sees as party apparatchiks, lobbyists, and donors.

The controversy over the size and composition of the House of Lords follows on from June's Electoral Reform Society paper, '[the Supersized Second Chamber](#)', which shows that the Government's Coalition Agreement pledge to ensure that the composition of the House of Lords better reflects vote shares at General Elections could see it eventually swell to over 2,000 members, owing to the need to correct for the results of future elections.

Here at the [DA](#) blog, we have carried an article by the Constitution Unit's Dr [Meg Russell](#), the author of a [new book](#) about the contemporary House of Lords, which argues that the chamber has become an effective and modern legislature, but one which still needs reform to complete its transition to the modern world. Interestingly, [Dr Russell argues](#) that prospects for large-scale reform are sufficiently poor that reformers should instead focus on gradual, piecemeal change, a view seemingly vindicated by her wider findings about the effectiveness of the Lords since the previous Labour government's 1999 reforms.

We have also published an [extract](#) of our [2012 audit](#) which looks at the size and effectiveness of the Lords, and highlights a perverse phenomenon which has developed in recent years, that sees the Lords being relied upon to resist legislation emanating from the House of Commons which might undermine democratic principles, yet in so doing it sees an unelected chamber frustrating the will of an elected one.

Although this paradox is a relatively recent one, it isn't the first time that the House of Lords has shown itself to be a progressive minded guardian of freedom. As well as recently voting overwhelmingly to [permit same-sex marriage](#), it voted *not* to ban lesbianism as early as 1912. Although as this [debate transcript shows](#), it was because of a pervasive fear that heightening the profile of the issue might actually encourage it.

**Sean Kippin** is Managing Editor of Democratic Audit, and is one of two people responsible for DA's day-to-day management, website, blog and wider output. He has a BA from the University of Northumbria and an MSc from the LSE. From 2008 to 2012 he worked for Nick Brown MP in Newcastle and in the House of Commons. He has also worked for Alex Cunningham MP, and the Smith Institute. He has been at Democratic Audit since June 2013, and can be found on twitter at [@se\\_kip](#).

