



HOUSE OF LORDS

Briefing

# Role and Work

Making better legislation  
Checking and challenging the government  
Experience and knowledge



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## Role of the House of Lords

The House of Lords is the second chamber of the UK Parliament. It plays a vital role in making and shaping laws and checking and challenging the government; it shares this role with the House of Commons. The Lords has a reputation for thorough and detailed scrutiny. Members come from many walks of life and bring experience and knowledge from a wide range of occupations. Many Members remain active in their fields and have successful careers in business, culture, science, sports, academia, health, politics and public service. They bring this wealth of knowledge and experience to their role of examining matters of public interest that affect all UK citizens – from pensions policy and TV advertising regulation to ID cards and nanotechnology.

Members also represent the House of Lords and UK Parliament at home and abroad. Through a range of formal and informal outreach activities, Members explain the work of the House of Lords and encourage people to engage with Parliament.

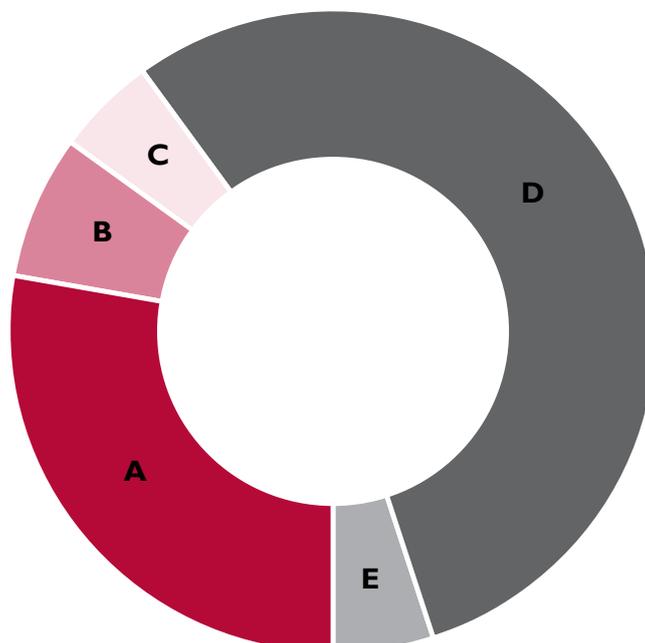


## How the House spends its time in the chamber

### Scrutiny 40%

Of which:

- A. Debates 28%**
- B. Questions 7%**
- C. Statements 5%**



### Legislation 60%

Of which:

- D. Bills 55%**
- E. Statutory Instruments 5%**

(secondary or delegated legislation)

## Work of the House of Lords

The chamber of the House of Lords is where much of its legislative work and scrutiny of government takes place and where any Member can be involved.



## Making better legislation

The House of Lords shares responsibility for making laws with the House of Commons.

Bills (draft laws) have to go through various stages in both Houses before they receive Royal Assent to become law. The House of Lords spends most of its time in the chamber (60%) on legislation. It examines and revises bills from the Commons, carefully checking government proposals and making changes through debate on amendments. Unlike the Commons, there is no selection of amendments, all can be considered, and debate on amendments is not time limited. Because the House can take the time to deliberate and consider potential problems, it helps to make better, more effective laws.

The House of Lords also initiates bills (usually non-controversial ones). Increasingly, a larger share of government bills start in the Lords to spread the legislative load more evenly between the two Houses.

Current House	Bill title	Last updated
A	Academies Bill [HL]	02.11.2010
C	Adults' Contracts (Young Person's Sublet) (Amendment) Bill	22.10.2010
HL	Athletics Training Church Bill [HL]	12.10.2010
C	Anonymity (Ancestral Persons) Bill	20.07.2010
C	Apprehension of Burglars Bill	20.10.2010
C	Apprenticeship and Skills (Private Procurement Contracts) Bill	21.10.2010
C	Armed Forces (Leave) Bill	22.10.2010
C	Armed Forces Charter Bill	10.11.2010
B	Broadcasting (Public Service Content) Bill	20.07.2010
C	Broadcasting (Television Licence Fee Addition) Bill	26.10.2010

(For further detail, see the briefing Bills and How They Become Law).

Follow the progress of bills on the Parliament website at <http://services.parliament.uk/bills>.



## **Powers of the House of Lords**

The House of Lords has important law-making and scrutiny functions but its powers are limited by a combination of law and convention.

### **The Parliament Acts 1911 and 1949**

These define the powers of the Lords in relation to Public Bills as follows.

- Money bills start in the Commons and may receive Royal Assent a month after being introduced in the Lords, even if the Lords has not passed them.
- Most other Commons bills can be held up by the Lords for about a year but ultimately the elected House of Commons can reintroduce legislation in the following session and pass it without the consent of the Lords.

Bills not subject to the Parliament Acts are:

- bills prolonging the length of a Parliament beyond five years
- private bills
- bills sent up to the Lords less than a month before the end of a session
- bills which start in the Lords.

Although rarely invoked, the Parliament Acts provide a framework and a means of solving disagreement between the Commons and Lords.

### **Commons' privilege**

The Commons has claimed a general privilege in relation to the raising and spending of taxpayers' money since the 17th century. Bills to raise taxes or authorise expenditure always start in the Commons and cannot be amended by the Lords.

### **Government bills in election manifestoes**

Convention ensures that major government bills can get through the Lords when the government has no majority in the Lords: it means that the Lords doesn't try to vote down (at second or third reading) a government bill mentioned in an election manifesto. The Salisbury Convention – or 'Salisbury doctrine' as the convention is sometimes called – emerged from the working arrangements reached during the Labour government of 1945-51 (when the Marquess of Salisbury was Leader of the Conservative Opposition in the Lords).

A joint committee report, Conventions of the UK Parliament (November 2006), confirmed the nature of the Salisbury Convention. Both Houses debated and endorsed the report in January 2007.



## Checking and challenging the government

Another important function of the House of Lords is to act as a check on government by questioning its activities and challenging its decisions. The House does this by questioning the government in the chamber or by submitting written questions, responding to government statements and debating topical policy issues.

### Questioning ministers

Questions enable Members to seek information and raise issues of concern about government policy and activities. Question time takes place in the chamber at the start of business (Monday to Thursday) and lasts for 30 minutes. It allows Members to question the government as a whole when the House is at its fullest. A maximum of four questions are asked. Ministers can be asked further questions about their answer. The House also submits about 6,000 written questions to the government annually.

### Debates

Debates are an opportunity to discuss important public policy issues and draw the government's attention to concerns. More than 100 debates take place over the parliamentary year on a huge range of subjects. Members have a correspondingly wide range of experience and knowledge to underpin the arguments they deploy in debate.

There are three main types.

- General debates (on Thursday), normally for a maximum of five hours. Sometimes there is one long debate, or there may be two shorter ones. Usually the subjects are chosen by the parties or the Crossbenchers, but once a month two 2½ hour debates are chosen by ballot from topics suggested by backbench or Crossbench Members.
- Short debates, lasting 60 or 90 minutes, usually at dinner time or sometimes at the end of business.
- Debates on committee reports, which are not normally time limited.

Most debates have a list of speakers; Members do not have to 'catch the Speaker's eye' as MPs do in the Commons.

### Ministerial statements

Government ministers make statements in the Lords chamber, announcing important policy initiatives, reports on national and international issues and government actions. There is a limited time for immediate questioning of the minister, allowing Members another opportunity to raise concerns and seek further information on government decisions.

## Experience and knowledge

Members carry out important investigative work outside the chamber.



## Select committees

Committees are an important resource for the House of Lords and conduct wide-ranging inquiries into policy issues and government decisions. During inquiries, members hear evidence from ministers, experts and relevant organisations.

The **European Union Committee** scrutinises and reports on proposed European legislation. It has seven sub-committees and focuses on a range of policy areas, conducting inquiries into European Commission policies and regulations. For example, the EU committee investigated the role the EU can play in helping the UK and other member states to detect and prevent cyber-attacks and called for better cooperation between the EU and NATO. The committee's membership includes former ministers, EU commissioners, members of the European Parliament and ambassadors.

The **Science and Technology Committee** operates normally through two sub-committees enabling it to carry out two inquiries at a time. Many of its members are distinguished scientists with experience of high office in science policy-making, university and industrial research, clinical medicine and so on. It has published reports on the scientific aspects of aging, avian flu and water management. It recently examined the role of nanotechnologies in food production and packaging.

The **Constitution Committee** examines public bills that raise significant constitutional issues. It constantly reviews the operation of the UK constitution and keeps a check on any broader government policy that might affect the constitution. The committee members include senior lawyers, former ministers and academic experts on the constitution. They have examined issues such as the workings of devolution, the government's war-making powers and the Identity Cards Bill.

The **Economic Affairs Committee** considers economic affairs and reviews aspects of the Finance Bill and the work of the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee. Its members are experts on economic issues and have included former Chancellors of the Exchequer, senior Treasury officials and high-profile business leaders.

The **Communications Committee** looks at a broad range of broadcasting and communications issues, including those affecting new media and creative industries. It has conducted inquiries into public service broadcasting and the ownership of the news and media, called for enhanced tax breaks for low-budget films made in the UK, and for new tax incentives to encourage video games producers to stay in the UK.

**One-off committees** are set up from time to time to examine issues or bills outside the remits of the main investigative committees – such as intergovernmental organisations and animals in scientific procedures.