**The pros and cons of the House of Lords**

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All eyes are on the House of Lords this week, as peers debate the bill that will enable the government to trigger Article 50 and begin the process of leaving the EU.

The European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) bill passed unamended in the Commons, but in accordance with British parliamentary procedure, it must now win the approval of the upper chamber.

Although peers have no power to overturn the bill, they can slow down the process by adding their own amendments, which would send the draft legislation back to the House of Commons for reconsideration.

There have been rumblings from the pro-Leave press that unelected peers have "no right to thwart the will of the House of Commons or the referendum result", says [The Guardian's Meg Russell](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/23/dont-abolish-house-of-lords-history-reformed-second-chamber-change).

Conservative MP and former Brexit minister Oliver Letwin said that "should the other place seek to delay beyond the end of March" – when Theresa May plans to trigger Article 50 – MPs should discuss "either the abolition or full-scale reform" of the House of Lords.

Reform of the unelected upper chamber of the Houses of Parliament has been mooted but ultimately shelved many times in the past, most recently in 2015.

At the time, the [BBC's Laura Kuenssberg](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-38010944) said that then-prime minister David Cameron wanted to "rebuild a more traditional relationship with the Lords, dial down the confrontations and work more constructively together".

The Brexit debate has put the House of Lords back in the public spotlight. So what is it and does it have a place in a modern democracy?

**Who sits in the House of Lords?**

The chamber [currently has 689 eligible life peers](http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/lords/composition-of-the-lords/), appointed by the Queen on the advice of the prime minister. It also has 90 hereditary peers and 26 bishops.

The Conservatives have the highest number of peers (252), although no majority, followed by Labour (202) and the Lib Dems (102) and a handful from minor parties, as well as 178 crossbenchers who are not affiliated with any party. High-profile appointments in the past few years have included Alan Sugar, star of The Apprentice, and Doreen Lawrence, mother of murdered teenager Stephen Lawrence.

Members meet in Westminster and are expected to scrutinise bills approved by the House of Commons. While they cannot normally prevent laws from being passed, they can delay bills and add on amendments that are then sent back for consideration in the House of Commons.

**How much are peers paid?**

Peers are not paid a salary but can claim a flat daily allowance of £150 or £300 if they attend a sitting.

The fresh scrutiny brought about by Brexit has also resurrected interest in the peers' allowance. One notorious anecdote reported this week tells of a peer who "left the taxi running" outside the chamber while he dashed in to claim his £300, according to the [Daily Telegraph](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/21/peer-kept-taxi-running-claiming-300-house-lords-allowance/).

Lady D'Souza, who recently stepped down as speaker of the upper chamber, told the BBC's new documentary Meet the Lords that many of her colleagues did nothing to justify their stipend.

"There is a core of peers who work incredibly hard, who do that work, and there are, sad to say, many, many, many peers who contribute absolutely nothing but who claim the full allowance."

**What's wrong with the current system?**

With more than 800 peers, the House of Lords is the world's second largest decision-making body after China's National People's Congress. Campaigners such as the [Electoral Reform Society](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/reforming-the-house-of-lords) argue that it is undemocratic that unelected peers should have such sway in British politics.

A recent ICM poll for the pro-Brexit group Change Britain found that "43 per cent of respondents would be more likely to back abolition or reform of the second chamber" if the House of Lords attempts to obstruct Brexit, reports [The Scotsman](http://www.scotsman.com/news/uk/lords-ready-to-fight-brexit-peter-mandelson-warns-1-4370951), "compared to 12 per cent who are less likely".

Former Labour leader Ed Miliband has also argued that the House of Lords as it stands "fails to represent large parts of the UK". For example, the north-west of England has nearly the same population as London but the capital has five times more members in the House of Lords.

**What's right about the House of Lords?**

In 2014, the [Daily Telegraph's](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ukip/11205797/Ed-Milibands-plan-for-an-elected-House-of-Lords-would-mean-an-upper-house-dominated-by-Ukip.html) Peter Oborne argued that the House of Lords continues to work remarkably well, throwing out what he calls "populist measures introduced by governments determined to bolster their right-wing credentials".

An elected House of Lords would never have the will or the courage to stand out against public opinion, he argues, and would deprive the public of the judgement of "very valuable" peers, such as retired generals, trade union leaders, academics and judges.

"These are people with immense expertise, an important counterbalance to the Commons," he says.

**What are the alternatives?**

All the main parties have pledged to cut the number of peers, and many politicians agree that hereditary peers should be phased out.

Ed Miliband has proposed a wholly elected senate, with roughly proportionate numbers from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions, instead of MP-style constituencies.

Three years ago, the Lib Dems put forward a proposal to halve the total number of members and ensure that at least 80 per cent of peers were elected, but the plans were abandoned after an agreement with Tory opponents failed to be reached.