



UNLOCK
DEMOCRACY

THE STATE OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS

**Report 1: Falling Backwards on
Gender Diversity**

www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk

Background

There are many ways in which, despite being the world's 2nd largest legislative chamber (nearly 800 members), the House of Lords remains highly unrepresentative of the population of the United Kingdom.

This report (the first of three on representation in the House of Lords) focuses on perhaps the most glaring of diversity failures - the gender imbalance of the House of Lords.

This matters because we are not drawing on the full pool of talent for membership of Lords. It matters because it means that important perspectives are absent from decision making. It matters because a group of largely old white men shouldn't have a stranglehold on decision making in a democratic Parliament.

For nearly 40 years after the first woman MP was elected in 1919, the House of Lords remained an all-male chamber. In 1958, the Life Peerages Act was passed and for the first time, women were allowed to sit in the House as Life Peers. Five years after that, the Peerage Act of 1963 finally allowed for women to sit in the house as hereditary peers. However other rules meant that this was very unlikely to happen.

Baroness Swansborough became the first female peer to take up her seat on the 21st October 1958.

Progress on gender balance since 1958

In the nearly 66 years since the Life Peerages act passed, 1584 life peerages have been handed out. Of those 1236 have gone to men, 348 have gone to women - a ratio of nearly 4 male peers for every single female peer.

If every single woman who has ever been a peer was alive and in the House of Lords today, there still would be a significant male majority in the house!

Here's how the gender balance of the House of Lords has changed from decade to decade and the current figures -

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020	2024
Men	99.4%	96.2%	95%	93.8%	84.1%	80%	72%	71%
Women	0.6%	3.8%	5%	6.2%	15.9%	20%	28%	29%

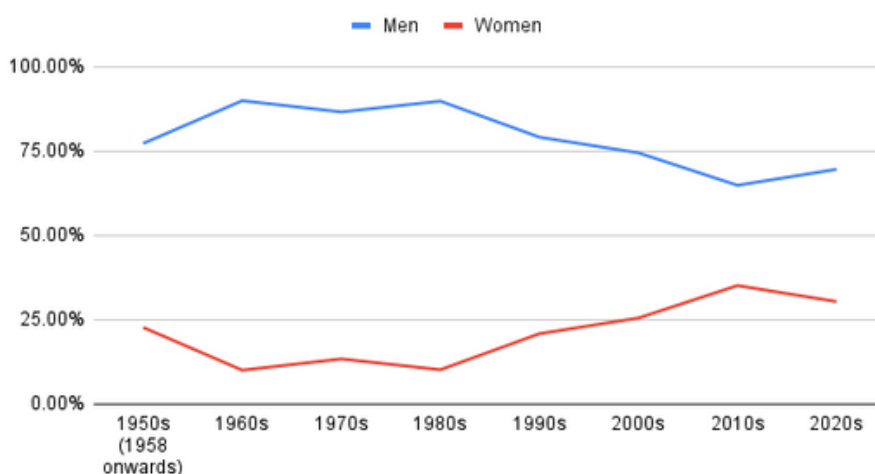
In terms of the overall female membership of the House of Lords, there was minimal progress between the 1960s and the 1990s. 41 years after women were allowed to become peers, they made up less than 10% of Lords' members.

The House of Lords Act of 1999 delivered a dramatic change, not by appointing more female peers, but removing all but 92 hereditary peers. By removing over 600 almost exclusively male hereditary peers, the percentage of women in the House of Lords rose overnight from less than 10% to over 15% - the biggest jump ever. Originally the intention was to remove all hereditary peers, but a deal was done to allow 92 hereditary peers to stay in place for an 'interim period'. That 'interim period' is 25 years old this year.

Since then the percentage of women has continued to rise, partly down to an increase in the numbers of women being appointed and partly because more male peers retired or passed away. However there is a noticeable slowdown of progress in the 2020s - with the number of female peers rising just 1% since 2020.

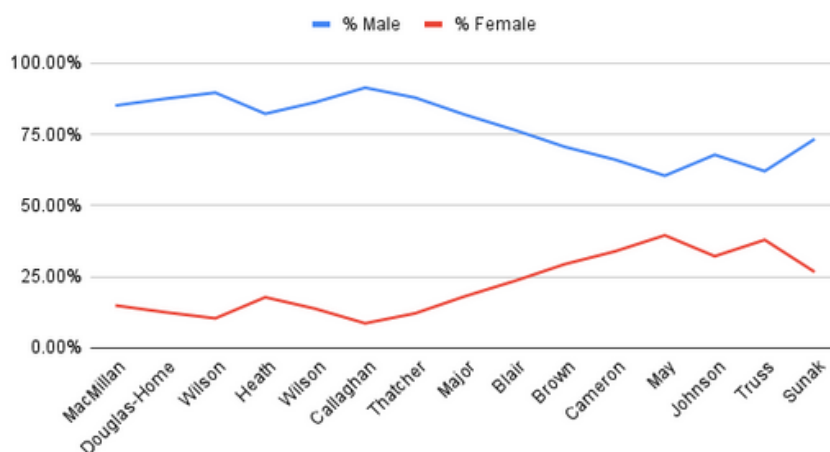
But why are things going this slowly? When we look at appointments for life peerages, some clear trends are revealed.

Peers appointed by decade



As the chart shows, even in the best decade for female appointments, nearly twice as many men were being appointed each year.

Life peers appointed by PM



The creation of life peerages can only be granted if an individual is approved by the Prime Minister. When we look at the way each individual Prime Minister has used her or his power of patronage, we see a steady improvement of more women being appointed starting from the low point of James Callaghan in the 1970s and peaking with Theresa May (39.5% of her nominations were for women).

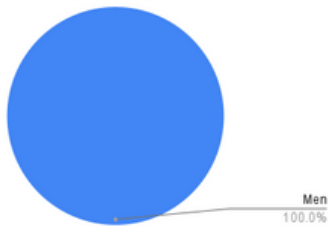
However things have gone backwards since then. The current Prime Minister has now appointed 30 peers, 22 of whom are men. When we look exclusively at the 23 Conservative peers nominated by the current Prime Minister, 19 are men and just 4 are women.

Not a single Prime Minister has nominated more women than men for peerages.

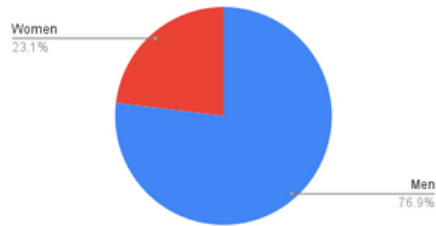
Where we stand today on gender balance

The latest Parliamentary figures show that male life peers still outnumber women by more than 2 to 1. All hereditary peers are men and over three quarters of the Bishops are male.

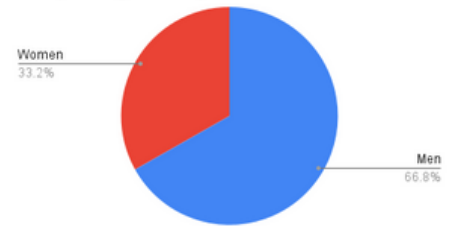
Hereditary peers gender split (91 total)



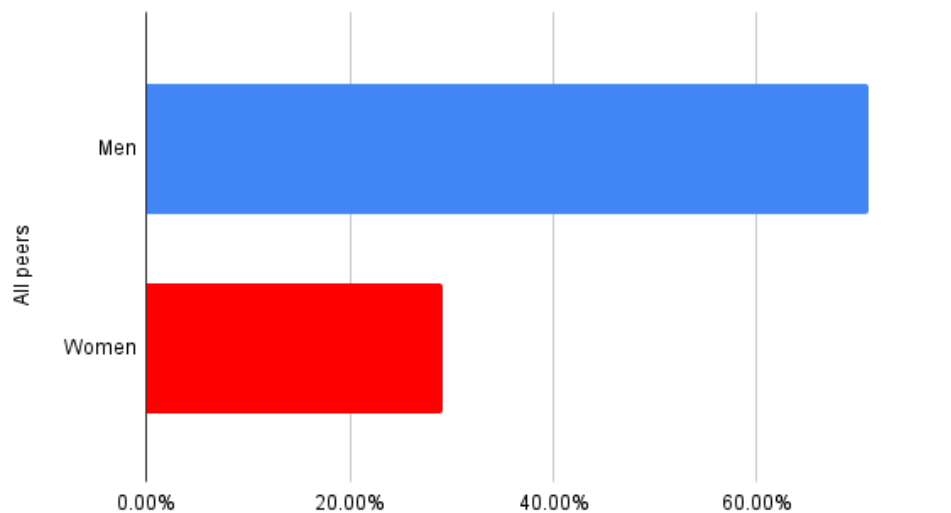
Bishops gender split



Life peers gender split



All peers as of February 2024



Conclusions and proposals

Nearly 7 decades have passed since women were allowed into the Lords and we are still short of 30% of peers being women. Progress has slowed significantly in this decade.

The only significant House of Lords Reform (House of Lords Act 1999) since women peers were first allowed, brought about the biggest change to the gender split in the Lords.

Without intervention, we will never see gender equality in the second chamber. Not one single Prime Minister has ever appointed more women than men to the House of Lords.

The vast majority of people would agree that a more representative second chamber would be better at doing its job. Few people would argue that there are not enough women capable of taking a role in the House of Lords.

Three possible courses of action are laid out in the table below: major reform, medium reform, and no reform.

Unlock Democracy's preferred solution is major reform - an elected or part elected 2nd chamber. Our recent research found that 62% of UK citizens would like to see the House of Lords replaced by this option. Only 13% believe the Lords should be kept as it is now.

A further option could be to set up a Citizen's Assembly to investigate options and make recommendations on an urgent basis.

In all these options, care must be taken to ensure that no party uses them for political advantage. We need a representative second chamber, not a stacked one.

No reform required	Medium reform	Major reform
<p>The Prime Minister resolves to appoint ALL or mostly women peers until the House reaches 50/50.</p>	<p>Substantially reduce the size of the Lords:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remove all hereditary peers and bishops (117 - all by 6 are men) Remove peers who rarely show up to the House. <p>Once the above very significant reductions are made, then appoint enough women to balance the House. The process can also be used to improve other diversity and representation issues in the Lords.</p>	<p>Replace the House of Lords with an elected or part-elected second chamber. Ensure that the new chamber is representative of the country as a whole.</p>
<p>Positive: Work towards this can start immediately.</p> <p>It would speed up the progress towards gender equality that has stalled.</p>	<p>Positive: Potentially less opposition to this than the major reform option.</p> <p>It would be a significantly smaller and gender balanced House of Lords</p>	<p>Positive: Clearly the most popular option with voters and can be design to solve the representation issues with the current House of Lords.</p> <p>A genuinely democratic solution</p>
<p>Negative: It will take over 300 women to be appointed to balance the chamber, and the House of Lords is already far too large.</p> <p>House of Lords remains undemocratic, albeit more representative.</p>	<p>Negative: Still likely to be opposition from existing peers, hereditary peers, Conserviative Party, and the wider establishment.</p> <p>House of Lords remains undemocratic, albeit more representative.</p>	<p>Negative: Will be strong opposition from existing members of the House of Lords, the Conservative Party, and the wider establishment.</p>

Sources and suggested additional reading

All data in this report is publicly available from the House of Lords Library and the UK Parliament website.

Current members of the House of Lords:

<https://members.parliament.uk/members/Lords>

Women and the House of Lords:

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/womenthelords/>

Reforms to the House of Lords since 1920:

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/houseoflords/house-of-lords-reform/from-the-collections/from-the-parliamentary-collections-lords-reform/>

Sixty-five years of women in the House of Lords:

<https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/women-in-the-house-of-lords-65-years-on/>

Progress towards gender equality in UK politics:

<https://sdgdata.gov.uk/5-5-1/>

House of Lords attendance figures:

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/faqs/house-of-lords-faqs/lords-sittings/>

Peerage creations

<https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/house-of-lords-data-dashboard-peerage-creations/>