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Manifesto to include final Lords reform

Tom Happold
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The constitutional affairs secretary, Lord Falconer, will promise to press ahead with the reform of the House of Lords early in Labour's third term when he addresses the party's conference tomorrow.

Ministers are set to include plans to expel the remaining 92 hereditary peers and replace them with a majority of "indirectly elected" members in Labour's election manifesto.

Under the government's "secondary mandate" proposals, around four-fifths of the upper house will be appointed in direct proportion to the number of votes cast for each party in the general election.

These members will be selected from closed lists - drawn up by the political parties - while the remaining fifth of the second chamber's members will continue to be appointed. Ministers have yet to decide how they will be selected.

After seven years of legislative ping-pong with Conservative peers over their constitutional reform programme, ministers are convinced they have to introduce a bill early so they can push it through the Lords before the end of the parliament.

They also hope that spelling out their plans before the election will oblige the Lords to stick to the "Salisbury convention" - not to block measures contained in a governing party's manifesto.

The government's proposals represent a triumph for Billy Bragg, the musician and activist who first proposed the scheme to Lord Wakeham's ill-fated commission on Lords reform.

Speaking at a conference fringe meeting today, Mr Bragg said that his proposals would give the second chamber greater legitimacy but not a mandate to challenge the primacy of the House of Commons.

He told Labour delegates that his plan had another "unique selling point" in that it would encourage people who supported parties unlikely to secure election in safe parliament seats to participate in the general election, as they could elect someone to the upper chamber with their vote.

Robin Cook, the former leader of the House of Lords, however, opposed Mr Bragg's plans at the meeting - organised by the New Politics Network - and promised to seek to amend them should they, or something similar, be tabled in parliament.

He insisted that such a "secondary mandate" system would represent a "more refined form of parliamentary patronage" whereby the party leaders would decide who sat in the House of Lords by choosing who got on the party lists.

Mr Cook said, however, that he would "welcome it if the government would put forward these proposals" as he could then amend them to provide for a wholly elected second chamber.

And he warned Labour MPs with marginal seats that the government's proposals would not be favourable to them as it would end the current situation whereby Liberal Democrat supporters in Labour-Conservative marginal seats cast tactical votes for Labour in order to keep out the Tories.

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