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### **Billy Bragg's 'dangerous and mad' Lords plans**

By

Singer Billy Bragg's plans for reform of the House of Lords were today criticised as "dangerous and mad" by a senior Labour MP.

Tony Wright, (Cannock Chase) hit out at the scheme reportedly backed by Lord Chancellor Lord Falconer, and Leader of the Commons Peter Hain, which would involve up to 80% of the Lords being chosen by a form of indirect election.

Mr Wright, who is a member of an all-party group of MPs pledged to press the Government to complete its agenda for Lords' reform, said it was "shocking" that more had not been done since 1911 to make the Upper House more democratic.

He told a Westminster news conference: "I think it is pretty shocking that a major piece of our political system stands there in a basically unreformed condition all that time."

Mr Wright, who chaired a Commons committee on Lords reform in 2002 which unanimously agreed a 60%-70% elected house, said that despite all the work that had been done on the subject "to show that it could be done in a reasonably sensible and cross-party way, the fact is now that the Government doesn't know what to do.

"It knows it's got to do something, but it doesn't know what that something should be. It's got to get a form of words together for the election and it doesn't quite know what that form of words will be.

"It has started flirting with some dangerous and mad schemes, one of which is associated with Mr Bragg.

"I think now it knows that those are silly schemes. But it has to come forward with a scheme that will genuinely produce a reformed second chamber.

"We think we can show it how to do it and which will convert into a bill shortly."

The all-party group includes Conservative former Chancellor of the Exchequer Kenneth Clarke, Liberal Democrat Paul Tyler, Labour former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and Conservative Sir George Young.

They plan to publish a Bill in the New Year setting out proposals for a largely-elected second chamber, but smaller than the current one with about 70% of members elected.

Labour ejected more than 600 hereditary peers in November 1999 allowing 92 elected hereditaries to stay on temporarily along with law lords, bishops and appointed life peers.

The MPs' plans call for a statutory appointments commission to choose independent members who will bring additional expertise to the chamber.

They also want a reduction in the number of Church of England bishops from 26 to 16.

But the Prime Minister should continue to have the right to appoint a small number of members specifically to serve as ministers.

Elected and appointed members should both serve roughly 12-year terms with one third renewed every four years to ensure continuity.

Directly elected members would be chosen on General Election day, on a regional basis using "open" party lists or the single transferable vote.

Transitional arrangements would require existing peers to leave the chamber in three tranches when new members come in, with a retirement package for those departing. Existing members could also stand for election or appointment.

The chamber's powers and functions would remain largely unchanged in law, but with a new system established to help resolve disputes with the House of Commons.

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