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No place for life peers in new 'second chamber'

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THE House of Lords would change its name to the "second chamber" and up to four fifths of its members would be elected under a new reform plan produced by Labour.

Newly created life peers would lose the right to sit in the second chamber, which would be cut from 731 lords, ladies and bishops to between 300 and 400 members serving six-year terms, the document proposes.

Existing life peers would have the option of retiring but would not be forced to quit, because of fears that they would have to be paid compensation.

Labour proposes that 20 per cent of the second chamber be elected at first, to be followed by 40 per cent, 60 per cent and a maximum of 80 per cent — but only after reviews to ensure that the chamber was not becoming too powerful.

The plans, issued to activists on Labour's national policy forum, were drawn up by a committee chaired by Charles Clarke, the Home Secretary, and Lord Falconer of Thoroton, the Lord Chancellor.

They represent Labour's latest effort to finalise the half-completed Lords reform project that the party promised in its manifesto to resolve before the next election.

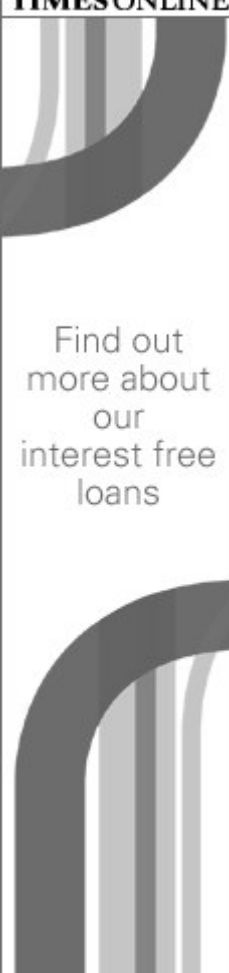
Most of the hereditary peers were removed in 1999 but the most recent attempt to finish the shake-up ended in failure in 2003, when all seven options put to MPs were rejected.

But the breakthrough that enabled the fresh plans to be drawn up came when Tony Blair dropped his insistence on a fully appointed chamber. The plans emerged as ministers prepared to name members of a parliamentary committee to draw up legislation likely to be in the next Queen's Speech.


Under Labour's plans, the remaining 92 hereditaries, the law lords and the 25 bishops would immediately lose their places in the second chamber.

But major faith groups would be able to nominate new members along with "other broadly representative groups in society, such as the TUC and the CBI, professional bodies of doctors, lawyers and the like, and community groups in the charitable and voluntary sectors".

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An independent appointments commission would have a "remit to ensure that the reformed second chamber better reflected the balance of society in terms of gender, race, religion, disability etc". At least a fifth of the final membership would be appointed in this way.

Labour's secret plans, seen by *The Times*, state: "To avoid undermining the primacy of the House of Commons, we recommend a gradualist approach to phasing in an increasingly democratic element in the second chamber.

A Labour spokesman said last night that the document was "not the formal position of the Government or the Labour Party but a discussion paper".

A majority elected element would be the goal, but at each step the impact on Commons supremacy could be reviewed and the next step would not be automatic." The "undesirable" consequences are made clear in an annexe that states that the Lords opposed Tory legislation an average of 13 times per session from 1979 to 1997 but in 1997-2001 defeated Labour 88 times. Labour rejects a wholly elected second chamber and the "secondary mandate" proposed by Billy Bragg, the singer, using the proportion of votes at a general election.

PEER GROUP

- The House of Lords began to sit separately from the Commons in the 14th century
- There are 731 peers; 92 are hereditary. There is no upper limit on members
- Acts as a check on government by questioning ministers, scrutinising legislation and debating policy. It is the final court of appeal for civil cases in the UK and for criminal cases in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- The average age of peers is 68. The oldest, Lord Renton, was born in 1908 and the youngest, Lord Freyberg, in 1970

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