

The Lords and their amendments

This week when many of us would have liked more time to debate the cost of living response or to talk to people on doorsteps in the run up to the Council elections MPs have been detained late at Westminster each day to vote down a large number of Lords Amendments to the Borders Bill and a couple of other pieces of legislation. I have no problem with our second chamber wishing to probe, criticise and propose improvements. That is their worthwhile and legitimate constitutional function. There is more to question when they persist in challenging the Commons on matters where there is public will, manifesto commitments and a clear statement of intent by the elected House.

Of course in a free society peers like anyone else are entitled to their views and can use their constitutional rights to the full. They also need to ask themselves if it is wise to constantly disagree with central policies they do not like when they have been put to electors and when they attract large majorities in the Commons. The bishops with a guaranteed 26 unelected seats in Parliament say they intend to oppose the government's policy to reduce people trafficking and illegal migration when the majority of the public and the majority in the Commons is urging the government on to do more to tackle these abuses and dangers. They highlight this issue when there are so many injustices and abuses worldwide at a time of war in eastern Europe, of starvation and civil war in some African states, and serious human rights abuses in a number of autocracies.

There is no likelihood of Lords reform on a grand scale. Tony Blair looked at it when he had a large majority and strong political support countrywide and decided it was too difficult given the likely opposition of the Lords themselves to reform. This present government would be wrong to divert energies to it when there was no Manifesto proposal and so many other matters more relevant to people's lives. Maybe it will be possible over time to evolve a better Lords. The current imbalance in membership means it heavily over represents an establishment view that does not favour an independent UK shaping her own policies, preferring a world of global treaties, so called independent bodies and the rule of the technocrats. It could do with a few more people who are entrepreneurial and freedom loving. Maybe it should move to single ten year terms for peers. Maybe retirement should be accelerated, allowing people to keep the title but lose the vote. The Lords is very large and only works because a good number of peers do not seek to engage day by day in its proceedings. It needs to show a bit more political balance or avoid looking like an establishment stitch up against the popular will.