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On the tenth day of Christmas... [1]

Written by **Dr Eamonn Butler** [2] | Thursday 3 January 2008

My true love sent to me: ten lords a-leaping. This probably refers to the Ten Commandments, but lords today aren't exactly leaping to do anything, particularly to reform the House of Lords.

The subject has been talked about for decades. Everyone has agreed that reform is needed, but nobody has ever been able to decide exactly what. The trouble is that the House of Lords has actually worked quite well. It has checked the House of Commons, but not been able to override it. The hereditary peers might have been overwhelmingly old, white, posh, bumbling prats, but in fact the system brought in lots of people you never see among the serried ranks of lawyers and political careerists in the Commons - more young people, more women (until recently), more people of all classes (Lord Nelson was a policeman, I recall), more communists, more libertarians...

Tony Blair took a major step in abolishing the heredities - or most of them: these peers are pretty nifty politicians, having had the gene in their families since Tudor times. But that leaves us with a House of Lords that is appointed. This can be good - non-politicians like the medical pioneer Lord Winston bring enormous depth to the House's discussions. And even ex-politicians can bring a lot of experience. But a House full of the Prime Minister's chums is not a delectable prospect.

Nor is an elected House - it will just fill up with the same political lawyers we have in the Commons. If we're going for elections, it needs to be a completely different system, with different constituencies, and radically different rules. Personally, I'd prefer the first 500 people out of the phone book. Or almost anyone, provided they didn't want to do the job.

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