The Economist

Electing the Lords

A house divided

Reform of the unelected second chamber is the issue most likely to rend the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition

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THE last time a government featuring Liberals tried to reform the House of Lords, the saga paralysed the nation. The monarch refused to co-operate and voters punished the party in a general election that was called over the issue. Only after these agonies did the Parliament Act of 1911, which subjugated the Lords to the Commons and began the erosion of the hereditary principle, become law.

A century later, the heirs to the old Liberal Party face scarcely less daunting hurdles as they try to finish the job of Lords reform. Nick

Clegg, the Liberal Democrat deputy prime minister, assured a parliamentary committee on February 27th that the government was committed to exposing the unelected chamber—a Western anomaly—to democracy. There would be a reduced body of 300 Lords, down from over 800 now. At least 240 would be elected for one-off, 15-year terms under proportional representation, starting in 2015. The remainder would resemble the current chamber: independent-minded experts in various fields, with a smattering of Anglican bishops. The bill could make it into the Queen's Speech (the government's next programme of legislation) in the spring.

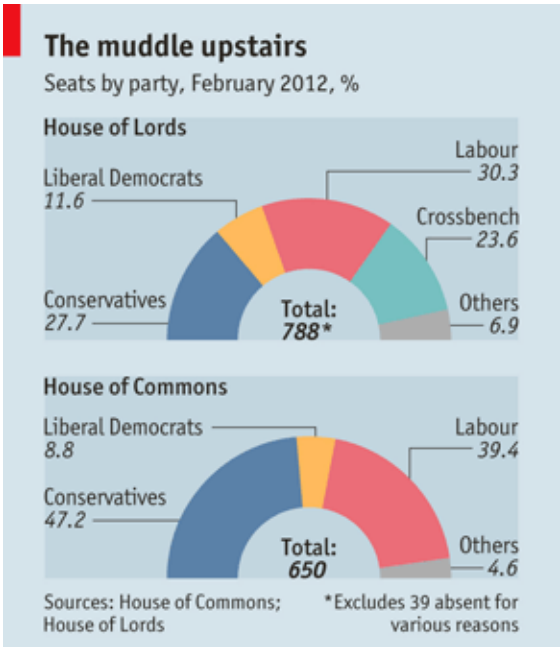
All three major parties pledged before the last general election to democratise the House of Lords. David Cameron, the prime minister, and his fellow Tory ministers are going along with Mr Clegg's plan. But the forces massing against the idea are fearsome. Many MPs, especially Tories, worry that a second chamber with an electoral mandate would challenge the primacy of the Commons and substitute Britain's tradition of strong government for American-style legislative gridlock. Labour officially supports a wholly-elected Lords, but a good number of its MPs disagree.

Many Lords, including some Lib Dems, are opposed for the same reason turkeys seldom cast ballots for Christmas—though they are decent enough to go through the ritual of arguing that their wisdom and non-partisanship improve the British polity. Then there is public opinion, which is largely indifferent to constitutional tinkering. Lords reform might strike voters as an unforgivably esoteric pursuit at a time of economic misery.

Of all the fault lines over the issue—between Tories and Lib Dems, MPs and peers, politicians and the public—the first is the most perilous for the government. Some Conservatives point out that the coalition agreement between the two parties only commits the government to establishing "a committee to bring forward proposals" for an elected Lords, not to enacting them. Some Lib Dems hint their party will not support the ongoing review of Commons constituency boundaries, which should give the Conservatives a greater share of seats, if they do not get their way.

Mr Cameron is under intense pressure from his own backbenchers, and many Tory grandees in the Lords, to block his deputy's plan. They question the bargaining power of a party which, while stuck at around 10% in the opinion polls, has nothing to gain by bringing down the government and provoking an election. But the prime minister wants to keep the Lib Dems happy in case he needs them again to form a government at the next election, due in 2015. He calculates that Mr Clegg needs to have a major constitutional achievement to show for five years of coalition.

Indeed, self-interest plays a large part in the Lib Dems' zeal for reform. Many Tory and Labour MPs fear that in Lords elections the Lib Dems will secure a level of support closer to the 20% they were used to before joining the coalition. That would often give them the casting vote in a more powerful second chamber. As is the case now, no party would have an overall majority (see chart).



Despite the obstacles, Mr Clegg still has a reasonable chance of prevailing. Younger Tory MPs are less opposed to Lords reform than their more grizzled colleagues. The public may not give much priority to the issue, but polls suggest their views are in line with Mr Clegg's. And the Lords' usual defence against reform—that they are merely a revising, scrutinising chamber—jars with reality. For much of this year, the unelected body persistently blocked a welfare-reform bill that is probably the government's most popular policy.

Yet the journey could prove bloody. The coalition harbours increasingly public differences on tax policy, and there are deep divisions over Mr Cameron's plan to reform health care. But it is Lords reform, a footling concern to the electorate, that is likeliest to poison relations between Tories and Lib Dems. The issue was a thorn in the side of the previous Labour government, which abolished most of the hereditary peers and flirted with electing the second chamber. It is a genuinely existential

matter for this administration.

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