

# The Office of the Convenor of the Crossbench Peers

Email: [lordscrossbenchconvenor@parliament.uk](mailto:lordscrossbenchconvenor@parliament.uk)

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## Comparing Upper Chambers Across the World

### Paper Three: Membership

**Author:** Mr Petr Svoren, Senior Researcher to Lord Kinnoull, PhD Candidate at King's College London

### Introduction

*This is the third in a series of papers that explore and compare upper chambers across the world with the British House of Lords. By describing and analysing the variety of experiences that different countries have had with their upper houses, lessons can be learned. This topic has gained increased salience with the election of the Labour government in 2024, which has promised various reforms of the House of Lords in its election manifesto. This series of papers will provide information about upper houses in different countries to inform the debate over future reform of the Lords.*

*This paper will explore the membership of different upper houses, considering issues such as the demographics of members, including age, ethnic background, and occupation as well as rates of participation. Building on the previous papers in this series, Canada, Australia, Germany and the United States will be the main cases for comparison, although other countries will also be considered. Further papers in this series will examine the powers and roles, as well as both successful and unsuccessful reforms to upper chambers across the world.*

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### 1. Membership of Upper Chambers

1.1 Since upper chambers are very diverse in form and function, as discussed in the previous paper in this series, they are resultantly varied in their membership. Some upper chambers tend to have an older membership than their lower counterparts, others have a younger membership. Some upper chambers are ethnically diverse, many are more homogenous. Some upper chambers have members that draw from a wide range of professional backgrounds and life experiences, others may mainly consist of former politicians or lawyers. As upper chambers have no set model, their basis for composition and their methods of selection vary, and this has a direct impact on the nature of their membership. By comparing the membership of different upper houses across the world, it is possible to see what effects various reforms to the House of Lords may have in terms of who sits in the chamber, and how the demographics of the upper house are affected. Through comparison therefore, it should be possible to adjust any reforms to the upper house in order to create the desired balance and mix of members.

### 2. Age

2.1 It is widely acknowledged that members of upper chambers tend to have a higher average age than their counterparts in the lower house.<sup>1</sup> This often arises from factors linked to the method of selection of the second chamber. In countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada, upper houses are appointed and appointments tend to go to individuals who are at the ends of their

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<sup>1</sup> Meg Russell, *Reforming the House of Lords: Lessons From Overseas*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43.

career, thus skewing the age distribution of the chamber. This trend also draws from some of the earliest thinking relating to second chambers, such as the Roman Senate, with the idea being that members should be ‘the wise, the experienced, the distinguished [and] the elderly.’ – the upper chamber is often a more senior role, so it tends to be filled by more senior people.<sup>2</sup>

2.2 In countries with indirectly elected upper chambers such as Germany or France, the upper chamber tends to be older as well, because it can be the case that membership of the upper house is dependent on holding another elected office.<sup>3</sup> In the case of the *Bundesrat* for example, a state’s delegation consists of the Minister-President and members of the state cabinet. This means that in practice members of indirectly elected upper houses are also older since it takes time and experience to climb up the rungs of the political ladder.

2.3 In directly elected chambers, the trend towards an older second chamber is perhaps less pronounced, though it is still present, on the whole. Whilst in Australia for example, the Senate is in fact a younger body than the House of Representatives, other directly elected chambers are older than their lower house counterparts. This is because of the special atmosphere of the second chamber, one that is shared across political cultures.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the powers and role of second chambers contribute to their character, in terms of their bipartisanship and reputation for careful, thoughtful decision-making, demographics also matter. In terms of age, this works both ways. The higher average age of second chambers ensures that they are a place for ‘sober second thought’, but the reputation as a serious place for debate and legislation can in turn draw in older members, thus preserving and reinforcing the chamber’s unique personality.<sup>5</sup>

2.4 In the United States, the Senate is seen as the more prestigious chamber because of its smaller size and longer terms. Indeed, many Senators have made their way up the political ladder, starting out as Members of the House of Representatives, proceeding to the Senate, and then, perhaps to the Presidency. As the Senate is more prestigious, its members may be older and more experienced and are in the middle or towards the end of their political journeys. However, if the upper chamber is seen as less prestigious rather the lower chamber, that can also lead to a higher average age in the chamber. This is because the upper house can be viewed as a chamber for politicians in semi-retirement, who have reached the end of their career. Money can also be an important factor in determining the age of members, especially in the United States; younger candidates simply do not have access to the amounts of money required in order to get elected to the Senate.

#### *Age Requirements*

2.5 Another reason why upper houses skew older is because of age requirements. Some upper houses have a minimum age requirement for members. The idea behind this is to ensure that the upper house maintains its character and reputation as a cross-partisan, thoughtful place, with its members having more career experience and wisdom. In Canada, for example, the Senate has a minimum age of 30 years old, whilst for the British House of Lords it is 21.<sup>6</sup> This age requirement is

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Shell, “The History of Bicameralism,” *Journal of Legislative Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 6.

<sup>3</sup> Russell, *Reforming the House of Lords*, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Russell, *Reforming the House of Lords*, 43.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Brown, *Canadian Senate Reform: Recent Developments*, House of Lords Library Note, LLN 2016/046, (London: House of Lords Library, 2016), 1, accessed February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/LLN-2016-0046/LLN-2016-0046.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Parliament of Canada, “Senators,” *Parl.ca*, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, accessed April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://decouvrez.parl.ca/understanding-comprendre/en/people-in-parliament/senators/>; House of Lords, *Standing Orders of the House of Lords Relating to Public Business*, 2010, accessed April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld/ldestords/116/11602.htm>.

also in place for the United States Senate, specified in Article I, Section 3 of the Constitution.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the Canadian House of Commons has a minimum age of 18 (the same as the voting age), and the United States House of Representatives has a minimum age requirement of 25, showing that there is a lesser emphasis placed on ensuring the maturity of the lower house. Some countries have an even higher age requirement, set at 35, or even, like the Italian or the Czech Senate, 40 years old.<sup>8</sup> Whilst age requirements do play a role in altering the membership of the upper chamber, there can be some tension with democratic norms. Especially if the upper house is elected, it may seem arbitrary to place a limit on the age of the candidate that voters can select to fill the seat, as age is an imprecise proxy for some of the qualities desired in a member of the upper house.

2.6 Age requirements can also take the form of a maximum age or mandatory retirement age. These are often in place in order to avoid members from serving for too long, especially in appointed upper houses, and to avoid the age distribution of the chamber from becoming too elderly. Canadian Senators, for example, have a mandatory retirement age of 75 that was introduced in 1965 and replaced appointment for life. However, in general, mandatory retirement ages are rather rare. One reason for this is that they also clash with democratic expectations, even more so than a minimum age, as in directly elected chambers it should be up to the voters to decide whether a member is capable of doing their job and thus deserves to be re-elected. Moreover, the right cut-off can be difficult to decide. With medical advances and greater life spans, as well as substantial variation from individual to individual, any age limit may be arbitrary. Why should an active 75-year-old or even 85-year-old be forced into retirement when they still have much to offer?

2.7 The United States Senate has featured many examples of extremely old politicians such as Strom Thurmond, who was the only Senator to reach 100 years old whilst still in office. A more recent example was the case of Dianne Feinstein who faced questions about her mental acuity when she served as a Senator at the age of 90. Despite the fact that these Senators were elected, even at their advanced age, this does not always represent a direct democratic endorsement given the fact many of these long-serving Senators come from states where they are unlikely to face a challenge in the general election or primary. This means that there is certainly a case to be made for age limits of some sort, even in an elected system.

#### *Retirement Provisions*

2.8 Aside from a mandatory retirement age, some upper chambers offer other, looser sets of retirement provisions. In the case of the House of Lords, there were no retirement provisions available until the House of Lords Reform Act 2014.<sup>9</sup> This allowed peers to retire or otherwise resign by giving notice in writing to the Clerk of Parliaments. This notice must give a specific date of resignation and be signed by a witness. It has allowed peers to retire if they feel that they do not have the capacity to effectively carry out their duties, or if they wish to resign for other reasons. Since 2014 over 200 members of the House of Lords have retired, although this figure includes bishops who may no longer hold the ecclesiastical role that is required for Lords membership.<sup>10</sup> Looking back to Paper 2 in this series, the retirement provisions created in this act have helped to

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<sup>7</sup> United States Senate, "Constitution of the United States," *Senate.gov*, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, accessed April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/senate-and-constitution/constitution.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Russell, *Reforming the House of Lords*, 33; Hruška, Jan, and Stanislav Balík. "Control body, representative of regions, or elitist chamber of wisdom? The perceived roles of upper chambers and the case of the Czech Senate." *The Journal of Legislative Studies* (2024): 7.

<sup>9</sup> United Kingdom, Parliament, *House of Lords Reform Act 2014*, 2014 c. 24, accessed May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/24>.

<sup>10</sup> UK Parliament, "Find Members of the House of Lords – Recently Retired", *UK Parliament*, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, accessed May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://members.parliament.uk/members/Lords?membershipstatus=6&showadvanced=true&page=1>.

reduce the numbers in the Lords, and have also reduced the average age since older members are more likely to make use of the provisions. Aside from retirement provisions, the Lords also has the ability to suspend or even expel as outlined in the House of Lords (Expulsion and Suspension) Act 2015.<sup>11</sup>

2.9 Other upper chambers around the world tend not to have official retirement provisions, apart from the aforementioned mandatory retirement ages such as in the Canadian Senate. This is because there is little need for them. Most upper houses are elected, so elections are their own set of retirement provisions, with members deciding against seeking another term in office. Moreover, most members of upper houses are not appointed for life, which means that resignations in the middle of their terms are more of a norm, as there is less of a cultural duty to continue in office until the end. The U.S. Senate and Australian Senate for example, both have provisions for resignation, which can act as a de facto retirement provision.

2.10 Overall, it can be seen that upper chambers tend to have a higher average age rather their lower counterparts. Table 2.11 and Table 2.12 below show the average ages of members of both upper and lower chambers from democracies roughly comparable to the United Kingdom’s own and confirm this fact. Upper chambers can have minimum age requirements which push the average age up, but they also may have mandatory retirement ages or other provisions that reduce the average age. Whilst these measures do have an impact on the age of membership, the unique personality of upper chambers, as the more considered, less democratic counterpart to lower chamber, is a crucial, if incalculable factor, in determining the age makeup of upper houses around the world.

### 2.11 Table of Age of Members of Upper Chambers<sup>12</sup>

Country	Name of Upper House	Average Age	% 30 or under	% 40 or under	% 45 or under
<b>Australia</b>	Senate	52	2.03	14.19	25.00
<b>Canada</b>	Senate	66	0	0	1.09
<b>France</b>	Senate	60	0.57	4.60	9.48
<b>Germany</b>	Bundesrat	55	0	5.80	14.49
<b>Ireland</b>	Seanad	48	3.33	28.33	41.67
<b>Italy</b>	Senate	56	0	0	8.74
<b>Japan</b>	House of Councillors	57	0	3.69	10.25
<b>Spain</b>	Senate	53	1.93	10.04	18.92
<b>United Kingdom</b>	House of Lords	70	0.12	0.87	2.11
<b>United States of America</b>	Senate	64	0	2.00	7.00

<sup>11</sup> United Kingdom, Parliament, *House of Lords (Expulsion and Suspension) Act 2015*, 2015 c. 14, accessed May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/14>.

<sup>12</sup> This table shows information related to the age of members of upper chambers of ten democracies that are comparable to the United Kingdom. Data taken from IPU Parline in April 2025: IPU Parline, “Data on age: By country,” *Inter-Parliamentary Union*, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, accessed April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://data.ipu.org/age-brackets/>.

## 2.12 Table of Age of Members of Lower Chambers<sup>13</sup>

Country	Name of Lower House	Average Age	% 30 or under	% 40 or under	% 45 or under
<b>Australia</b>	House of Representatives	53	2.90	14.49	21.74
<b>Canada</b>	House of Commons	52	2.60	16.88	30.19
<b>France</b>	National Assembly	49	5.37	27.90	38.99
<b>Germany</b>	Bundestag	47	8.83	28.94	41.98
<b>Italy</b>	Chamber of Deputies	50	1.25	16.25	35.00
<b>Ireland</b>	Dáil	N/A <sup>14</sup>	3.59	15.57	29.94
<b>Japan</b>	House of Representatives	55	0.86	7.74	18.71
<b>Spain</b>	Congress of Deputies	52	2.00	15.43	27.71
<b>United Kingdom</b>	House of Commons	49	3.82	27.34	42.64
<b>United States of America</b>	House of Representatives	58	0.23	8.29	18.43

### 3. Representation

3.1 Ethnic diversity is one factor that affects the representativeness of a chamber of parliament. Other factors to consider are also gender representation, LGBT representation and regional representation as well. Whilst there are different models of democratic representation in a legislative body, and these can often be in conflict with one another, members of an elected body of representatives should in some ways reflect the different groups in society in similar proportions to those that exist in the country as a whole. By comparing demographic representation of the Lords with other upper chambers we can compare how diverse the Lords is, and whether diversity is something that future reform of the chamber should focus on.

#### *Gender Representation*

3.2 The meaning of the word ‘Senate’, the most popular name for an upper chamber, derived from the Roman political body, is ‘council of old men’ and comes from the Latin term *senex* – the root of words like ‘senior’ and ‘senile’.<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps to unfair to say that upper chambers live up to their name – indeed they have evolved substantially over time – however, on the whole, upper houses remain older, and more male, than their lower house counterparts. As explained above, there are a variety of factors that can make upper houses skew older; some of these factors also contribute to the disproportionately male nature of upper chambers as well. In upper chambers that are composed via indirect election, new norms around gender equality may take longer to feed through the system. Since holding previous political office can be a requirement for upper house membership, members are typically older and were therefore first elected at a time with fewer female politicians, so the upper chamber can be playing ‘catch up’ with the lower chamber in this regard, as lower chamber parliamentarians might be younger, and in an earlier phase of their career. Another factor behind the lower ratio of female members may be the character of upper chambers, which are often seen as more traditional, conservative or old-fashioned. This may prove to be a barrier in attracting woman members.

<sup>13</sup> This table shows information related to the age of members of lower chambers of ten democracies that are comparable to the United Kingdom. Data taken from IPU Parline in April 2025: IPU Parline, “Data on age: By country,” *Inter-Parliamentary Union*, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, accessed April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://data.ipu.org/age-brackets/>.

<sup>14</sup> Data unavailable on IPU Parline.

<sup>15</sup> Russell, *Reforming the House of Lords*, 100.

### 3.3 Table of Proportion of Women in Lower and Upper Houses<sup>16</sup>

Country	Proportion of Women in Lower House (%)	Proportion of Women in Upper House (%)
Australia	39.1	56.6
Canada	30.9	53.5
France	36.2	37.1
Germany	32.4	34.8
Italy	32.8	36.3
Ireland	25.3	45.0
Japan	15.7	25.5
Spain	44.3	42.5
United Kingdom	40.5	30.0
United States of America	28.9	26.0

3.4 As illustrated by Table 3.3, the British House of Lords has a lower percentage of female members than many comparable upper chambers, reaching around 30% – the only countries with a lower percentage of women in the upper chamber are the United States and Japan. In contrast, the House of Commons has a much higher percentage of women, with more women than ever being elected at the last general election, meaning that according to IPU Parline, the United Kingdom ranks at 27 in its women in national parliaments rankings.<sup>17</sup>

3.5 The Canadian and Australian Senates both have a high percentage of women in the upper house, although for different reasons, since the Australian Senate is directly elected whilst the Canadian Senate is appointed. The system of appointments may be responsible for the high percentage of women because if appointments are made with the intention to increase female representation, then female representation will increase. In contrast, Australia may have such high female representation because its Senate is elected in a proportional manner. Parties may find it embarrassing to present the electorate with candidate lists that skew heavily male, so women are better represented.<sup>18</sup> The United States Senate, on the other hand, is elected using First Past the Post, which may be less favourable to women with there being only 26 female Senators.

3.6 There are a variety of reasons for why the Lords has a relatively low percentage of female members. One reason is the historical background of the Lords. Women arrived in the Lords relatively late.<sup>19</sup> Before 1958, the Lords was exclusively male with the Life Peerages Act 1958, allowing women to sit as peers. Further changes have followed since, such as allowing female hereditary peers to take their seats or allowing female bishops to sit in the Lords. In recent years the number of female peers has increased, as has the percentage of women appointed, with Theresa May's appointments consisting of a record 39% women. The IPU has suggested that the fact that there are fewer women than men in the House of Commons means that fewer women are given

<sup>16</sup> This table shows information related to the percentage of female members of upper chambers of ten democracies that are comparable to the United Kingdom. Data taken from IPU Parline in April 2025: IPU Parline, "Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments," *Inter-Parliamentary Union*, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, accessed April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, [https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date\\_year=2025&date\\_month=03](https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date_year=2025&date_month=03).

<sup>17</sup> Grahame Allen "2024 General Election: How Many Women Were Elected?," *UK Parliament*, August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024, accessed May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/2024-general-election-how-many-women-were-elected/>; IPU Parline, "Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments,"

<sup>18</sup> Russell, *Reforming the House of Lords*, 100.

<sup>19</sup> Emily Haves, "Representation of Women in the House of Lords," *UK Parliament*, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021, accessed May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/representation-of-women-in-the-house-of-lords/>.

peerages, suggesting it takes time for greater representation to feed through the system.<sup>20</sup> Other reasons why there are fewer female peers are harder to measure but they concern the culture of parliament, party structures, working conditions and an unwelcoming environment. On the other hand, the House of Lords may provide a more congenial environment for women than the Commons as it has less of an adversarial male culture. The Lords also has many women in senior positions, including as Leader of the House.

3.7 Reforms to the way the House of Lords is run on a daily basis, could increase the attractiveness of the chamber for women, but broader changes may increase representation as well. The examples of Canada and Australia show that more female representation is possible regardless of whether the chamber is elected or appointed.

### *Ethnic Representation*

3.8 Ethnic diversity is another factor to consider when looking at the membership of upper chambers, although statistics regarding ethnic minority representation in parliaments are more difficult to find. Some countries do not keep statistics and ethnic minority status can be ambiguous. Estimates about the House of Lords suggest that around 6% of members come from an ethnic minority background in 2018, up from 3% in 2000.<sup>21</sup> Data on religious representation is unavailable, but peers belong to a wide range of religious affiliations, with the Lords Spiritual consisting of 26 Church of England Bishops. The House of Commons, which has 14% ethnic minority members, compared to 17% of ethnic minorities of the British population as a whole, is ahead of the Lords in terms of minority representation.

3.9 Around the world, ethnic minority representation in upper chambers varies greatly, and is closely tied to each nation's culture and history. In Australia, indigenous representation is particularly important, with the Senate having a greater level of representation. The House of Representatives has three Indigenous Members, but the Senate has eight – given that the Senate is a smaller body, its proportion of ethnic minorities is even greater.<sup>22</sup> In Canada, the Senate has about 10% Indigenous representation, along with about 15% of so-called 'visible minority' members.<sup>23</sup> In the case of the United States, diversity in the upper chamber has been growing, but still there are only twelve non-white Senators – if the Senate was to reflect the country as a whole, 41 Senators would be ethnic minorities – meaning that the Senate is less representative than the House of Lords.<sup>24</sup>

3.10 Whilst there may be cultural and social factors that have led to a relatively low level of minority representation in the Lords, the main factor is the system of appointments. Peerages are for typically for life (with the option for retirement only being introduced in 2014), meaning that change to the diversity of the Lords is slow – as with female representation, the Commons is ahead, with changes in the Commons eventually being reflected in the Lords. Ultimately, since appointments are in the

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<sup>20</sup> Haves, "Representation of Women in the House of Lords."

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Purvis, "How Ethnically and Religiously Diverse is the House of Lords," *UK Parliament*, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, accessed May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/how-ethnically-and-religiously-diverse-is-the-house-of-lords/#fn-1>.

<sup>22</sup> Parliament of Australia, "Indigenous Representation in the Senate," *Aph.gov.au*, November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025, accessed May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Senate/Whats\\_On/Senate\\_matters/2022/July/Indigenous\\_Representation\\_in\\_the\\_Senate](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Senate/Whats_On/Senate_matters/2022/July/Indigenous_Representation_in_the_Senate).

<sup>23</sup> Pierre J. Dalphond, "New Senate Appointments System Should Stay: Senator Dalphond," *Senate of Canada*, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2025, accessed May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/opinion/new-senate-appointments-process-should-stay-senator-dalphond/>.

<sup>24</sup> Katherine Schaeffer, "118<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress Continues to Grow in Racial, Ethnic Diversity," *Pew Research Centre*, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023, accessed May 12<sup>th</sup> 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/01/09/u-s-congress-continues-to-grow-in-racial-ethnic-diversity/>.

control of the Prime Minister, they are chiefly responsible for the diversity in the Lords (or lack thereof).

3.11 As with gender representation, cultural and social changes can be made to ensure that the Lords is of greater attraction to minority groups. Larger reforms would have more of an effect, but as Australia and Canada show, both proportional election and a system of appointment can lead to substantially diverse upper chamber members. The case of the United States, however, shows that election via First Past the Post may not be the most attractive option for increasing diversity.

#### *LGBT and Regional Representation*

3.12 In terms of other forms of representation, this can be tricky to ascertain. LGBT representation in politics can be difficult to measure given that it is a private matter and not a visible trait. The Lords has several high-profile LGBT members and has done substantial work on LGBT issues. Whilst Australia and Canada both have several gay members, currently there is only one American Senator, Tammy Baldwin, that is openly LGBT.

3.13 Regarding regional representation, the House of Lords has a large skew in favour of London and the South-East, compared to the country as a whole.<sup>25</sup> 13.1% of the population resides in London, and 13.7 in the South-East, compared with 24.2% and 20.8% of peers respectively.<sup>26</sup> Much of this can be explained by Parliament's London location and the lack of the constituency and democratic link that peers have. In comparison, chambers like the United States Senate have very high rates of regional representation given that they have a regional basis for composition. If anything, the U.S. Senate overrepresents areas with a smaller population, deliberately so.

### **4. Professional Background**

4.1 Beyond demographic characteristics like age, sex and ethnic background, another important factor to look at when considering the membership of upper houses is their occupation and professional background. When it comes to the House of Lords, this is especially important given the chamber's reputation as a place of wide-ranging, diverse expertise and experience.

4.2 When comparing the Lords to other upper houses, the range of professional backgrounds and depth of knowledge is almost unparalleled. As with many other upper houses, the House of Lords has many members with a political background. Just over a fifth of members are former MPs. Some have served in devolved assemblies and other legislatures, whilst others had cabinet-level experience, such as chancellor of the exchequer, foreign secretary.<sup>27</sup> There are even two former Prime Ministers and Deputy Prime Ministers. Other upper chambers have similar levels of political expertise, since they are often a place for politicians at the end of their careers. Upper chambers may even have special provisions for former Presidents and Prime Ministers to take part in proceedings, or seats that are often reserved for senior politicians such as the Italian Senate's Senators for Life. The United States Senate is illustrative of the fact that most upper chambers have members with a political background. 44 Senators have had previous service in the House, whilst 13

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<sup>25</sup> UK Parliament, "House of Lords Data Dashboard: Regional Representation in the House of Lords," *UK Parliament*, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023, accessed May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/regional-representation-in-the-house-of-lords/>.

<sup>26</sup> Electoral Reform Society, "New Figures Reveal Dire Levels of Regional Representation the Unelected House of Lords," *Electoral Reform Society*, August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020, accessed May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://electoral-reform.org.uk/new-figures-reveal-just-dire-levels-of-regional-representation-the-unelected-house-of-lords/>.

<sup>27</sup> Eve Collyer Merritt, "Who is in the House of Lords? Members with Backgrounds and Professional Experience in Public Life," *UK Parliament*, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, accessed May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/house-of-lords-backgrounds-in-public-life/>.

Senators were former state governors with experience in the executive branch.<sup>28</sup> Yet even here, the Lords does better since it has more senior executive branch and cabinet experience; the appointment system means that former senior politicians do not have to face the electorate and are instead selected for their experience.

4.3 Where the House of Lords has an advantage is in professions that are related to politics, but not quite political. The Lords has substantial civil service experience, which is not something that is replicated to the same extent across other upper chambers. Five former heads of the Civil Service sit in the Lords, as well as three former directors-general of MI5.<sup>29</sup> The Lords also has four former heads of the Supreme Court as peers, as well as several former EU commissioners and one former secretary-general of NATO.<sup>30</sup> Such wealth of experience is extremely uncommon in comparable upper chambers, especially if they are composed by election, because the election process can discourage more expert, and less partisan people from seeking office. Canada's Senate does have members with experience in sectors such as law, but the fact that appointments have become more non-partisan has meant that they are perhaps lacking in partisan political figures who nonetheless have valuable insights or experiences.

4.4 Diversity of professional background in the Lords is greatly aided by its large size and part-time nature. The fact that peers are not required to attend full-time means that even those members who did not seek to pursue a political career can weigh in on debates and share their expert knowledge. The Lords has many members who come from an academic background, or one in the arts, and thus were unlikely to enter politics any other way than via appointment to the Lords. A peerage gives them the opportunity for public service.<sup>31</sup> Whilst the Canadian Senate also has figures with impressive professional backgrounds, such as Olympians and university presidents, the smaller size of the Canadian Senate (105 members), necessarily means that the pool of expertise is smaller, and it is unlikely that there will be an expert in every field. Although there is still room to bring in more expertise from other fields, diversity of occupation is something that the Lords excels at, perhaps in contrast to its record regarding other types of diversity,

## 5. Participation

5.1 Another fact about members of upper chambers that can be measured is their rates of participation. The House of Lords is rare, in that it is an appointed, part-time house, in contrast to many other chambers which are elected, meet regularly with a greater proportion of members actively participating. Average attendance during the 2019-2024 session in the Lords was 46%, though this is not a full measure of participation which can also include the number of votes a peer participates in or how often a peer speaks in the chamber.<sup>32</sup>

5.2 Some upper chambers have participation requirements to ensure that members are adequately taking part in the business of the chamber. The House of Lords Reform Act 2014 introduced provisions for the permanent disqualification of members from the House. This can occur due to non-attendance for an entire session (subject to certain conditions) or upon conviction of a serious offence.<sup>33</sup> The Canadian Senate also has some participation requirements: Under sections 31 and 33

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<sup>28</sup> Jennifer E. Manning, *Membership of the 118th Congress: A Profile*, CRS Report R47470 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2024)

<sup>29</sup> Eve Collyer Merritt, "Who is in the House of Lords?"

<sup>30</sup> Eve Collyer Merritt, "Who is in the House of Lords?"

<sup>31</sup> Eve Collyer Merritt, "Who is in the House of Lords?"

<sup>32</sup> Henry Bolshaw, "Lords Reform: Membership, Attendance, Voting and Participation Data (2019-2024 Parliament)," *UK Parliament*, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024, accessed February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/lords-reform-membership-attendance-voting-and-participation-data-2019-2024-parliament/>.

<sup>33</sup> United Kingdom, Parliament, *House of Lords Reform Act 2014*.

of the Constitution Act 1867, should any Senator fail to attend the Senate for two consecutive parliamentary sessions, the Clerk of the Senate shall report this to the Senate. The senate must then determine as soon as possible whether the Senator's seat should be declared vacant due to non-attendance.<sup>34</sup>

5.3 Many other chambers tend to have a high attendance and participation rate, usually above 90%, reflecting their nature as full-time legislative bodies. This means that they do not require formal participation requirements. The counterexample to this is the French Senate, where average attendance in the previous session was 84%, though it was as low as 73% in 2021-2022.<sup>35</sup> Other upper houses have high attendance and participation but few formal rules for enforcing this. According to the rules of the Italian Senate for example, Senators are required to attend sittings in the Senate – but there are no formal requirements beyond that.<sup>36</sup> The Seanad Eireann has no formal requirements for attendance, and neither does the German Bundesrat, in fact, it is not compulsory for members to be present at plenary sittings or committee meetings. Other upper chambers, like the United States Senate, have sanctions that can be placed on members such as letters of admonition or censure, yet these punishments are rarely used, especially for something that is less serious, like periods of non-attendance.

5.4 Although participation requirements are not the norm when it comes to upper chambers, other nations do have them, and they can increase the quality and quantity of contributions of members in the house. They are also a relatively small but effective reform to make and can have a big impact on members of the upper house.

## **6. Further Papers**

6.1 This paper and the previous paper in this series has considered membership and composition of upper chambers around the world. Looking ahead to further papers in this series, they will focus on the differing roles and powers of upper houses. The final paper in the series will focus on successful and unsuccessful instances of upper chamber reform.

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<sup>34</sup> Government of Canada, "Constitution Act 1867," *Justice Laws Website*, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025, accessed May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025, <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-1.html#h-5>.

<sup>35</sup> Marion Jolivet, "The Plenary Session and Activity of the Senate," *Senát France*, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2025, accessed May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025, [https://www.senat.fr/fileadmin/Seance/Statistiques/Rapport\\_annuel/2023-2024/Tome\\_1\\_2324.pdf](https://www.senat.fr/fileadmin/Seance/Statistiques/Rapport_annuel/2023-2024/Tome_1_2324.pdf), 170.

<sup>36</sup> Senato della Repubblica, *Rules of the Senate*, (Rome: Parliamentary Information, Archives and Publications Office of the Senate Service for Official Reports and Communications, 2025), 5.

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