Bishops and the House of Lords

Quick Facts

1. All the sitting bishops are known as 'Lords Spiritual'.
2. They are independent members and sit by virtue of the office they hold. They do not have any political affiliation.
3. There are 26 places in the House of Lords reserved for bishops. This represents less than 4% of those eligible to sit in the House.
4. Selection is based on seniority. However, since the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015, female bishops can 'leapfrog' the most senior male bishop. This 'rule' is in place until 2030.
5. Bishops sit in the House of Lords until they are obliged to retire aged 70.
6. Their role in the House is the same as for any other member including tabling and asking questions to the government, leading or speaking in debates, scrutinising legislation, voting and serving on committees or all-party parliamentary groups.
7. Each bishop takes turns in leading the prayer at the start of each sitting day in the House. The official proceedings of the House cannot begin until prayers have been read.
8. Bishops can select subjects on which they wish to develop a particular expertise but are free to speak on all topics.
9. *"Bishops provide an important independent voice and spiritual insight to the work of the House and, while they make no claims to direct representation, they seek to be a voice for all people of faith, not just Christians."*[1]

Some History:

- Bishops have a long history of playing a role in the running of the country
- From the 7th to 11th century, they served on Witans (meaning 'wise men') alongside high-ranking noblemen. These Anglo-Saxon councils could only be convened by the King, discussed important matters of the day and offered advice. However, the monarch had absolute power so could heed the advice or not!
- In 1066 following the Norman conquest, the body advising the monarch became known as Curia Regis (the Royal Council) with bishops sitting on this alongside abbots, earls, and feudal barons. The Curia Regis evolved over time and gradually two distinct and separate bodies emerged with these being formalised in the 14th century into two Houses, the Lords Temporal (noblemen) and Lords Spiritual (bishops) sitting in one House and commoners sitting in the other. Thus, Parliament as we know it today came into being.

[1] https://churchinparliament.org/about-the-lords-spiritual/. Accessed 21/10/2026

- By the end of the Elizabeth I's reign in the early 17h century, the Lords Spiritual had been reduced to 26 bishops and were outnumbered by the Lords Temporal; abbots had ceased to exist.



Source: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/683019. Queen Elizabeth in Parliament, Engraver Anonymous, 17th century, After Renold Elstrack , 1682

The image above "depicts Queen Elizabeth I enthroned at a state opening of Parliament, surrounded by bishops, lay peers, and parliamentary officials. The composition portrays a cramped, dense layout that effectively communicates the crowded atmosphere of a 16th-century legislative assembly." The event is taking place in the House of Lords. The bishops are seated on the left.

- In 1642, bishops were excluded from Parliament when The Clergy Act 1640 was enacted.
    - *Whereas Bishops … ought not to be intangled with secular jurisdiction the Office of the Ministerie being of such great importance that it will take up the whole man And for that it is found by long experience that theire intermedling with secular jurisdictions hath occasioned great mischeifs and scandall both to church and state His Majestie out of his religious care of the church and souls of his people is gratiously pleased that it be enacted And by authoritie of this present Parliament Be it enacted that no Archbishop or Bishop or other person … in Holy Orders shall at any time … have any Seat or place suffrage or Voice or use or execute any power or authority in the Parliaments of this Realm … .*
      (The Clergy Act 1640)

  They had angered the Parliamentarians by:
    a) Acting together to consistently block Parliament's attempts to limit King Charles I's power.
    b) Playing a major role in bankrupting the country by influencing Charles I through their religious policies to wage an unsuccessful war (known as the Bishops' Wars) against the Scots; the bishops wanted to force Anglican practices on Presbyterian Scotland.
    c) Being seen to meddle in state matters when they should only concern themselves with spiritual matters
    d) Seemingly wanting to introduce more catholic practices into protestant England (this had caused widespread anger and concern amongst the general public).
    e) And finally, getting above themselves. In the winter of 1641–1642, amid aggressive anti-bishop protests outside Westminster, 12 bishops declared that any laws passed in their absence were invalid. Parliament viewed this declaration as treason, imprisoned the 12 bishops in the Tower of London, and used their absence to pass the Clergy Act.

- The House of Lords was abolished during the Commonwealth period and only reinstated on the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. The bishops were allowed to take their seats again in 1661.
- Bishopric of Manchester Act in 1847 - limited the number of Bishops able to take their seats in the House of Lords to 26. Retired bishops could no longer sit or vote in the House. Parliament wanted to ensure that bishops were not over represented in the House, giving them too much ecclesiastical and political power.

Bishops of Bath and Wells

Bishop Michael is the latest of a long list of bishops who have sat in the House of Lords. Prior to Bishop Michael, Bishop Peter (Price) sat in the House from 2008 to 2013.

This extract from an article in The Spectator(May 2014) includes an amusing reference to Peter Price on his first visit to the House of Lords. *"The bishopric of Bath and Wells comes with more bear-traps than most. For one thing, there's the baby-eating. Ever since Blackadder told Baldrick he was being chased for a debt by the 'baby–eating Bishop of Bath and Wells', the image has stuck. When the last incumbent, Peter Price, made his first visit to the House of Lords, accompanied by his five-week-old granddaughter, the Bishop of Southwark remarked: 'I see the bishop has brought his own lunch.'"*

This link from the Diocesan website gives more info on how Bishop Michael sees his role. https://bathandwells.org.uk/bishop-michael-called-to-serve-in-the-house-of-lords/

Sources:

1. Parliament UK
2. Church in Parliament.org
3. Britannica.com