

are well rehearsed. The second lesson is that reform ideas – in part as a consequence – tend to be on the table for a long time before being adopted. Life peerages were proposed in the 19th century, but not introduced until 1958. In the 1940s there were vigorous debates about cutting the number of hereditary peers, but this was only achieved in 1999. And so on. The third and perhaps most important lesson is that small, simple, and relatively unambitious reforms can sometimes succeed, but wholesale packages of reform – while often discussed – have so far always failed. Cross-party talks in the 1940s considered options for compositional reform, but the government settled instead for “a minimalist approach, a simple reform which all Labour MPs could endorse”: i.e. a further reduction in the chamber’s powers in the 1949 Parliament Act. In the 1950s the whole package was discussed again, but only the Life Peerages Act was implemented. This pattern was repeated in 1963, and again in 1999. Meanwhile the only attempt to legislate for a major package of reforms was that pressed on Harold Wilson by Richard Crossman, in 1968-69: this spectacularly failed, due to MPs’ inability to agree, and was withdrawn after 88 hours in Commons committee. Wilson too had declared himself in favour of “a short sharp bill” on one issue only, and must have regretted giving in to the more ambitious Crossman.

In their conclusion the authors note that the Lords’ gradual and piecemeal reform over 100 years leaves it a very different institution: largely shorn of hereditaries, more expert and, particularly recently, more confident to use its powers. But they could have done more to draw from the repeated patterns seen in earlier chapters