

Gazette COMMENT

Heed the cries of small business

COLCHESTER'S independent shopping streets set it apart from the clone towns and identikit high streets saturated by chain stores.

Crouch Street is a prime example. Gunton's Deli, Wright and Son's butchers and Dilly's florists are just a few places shoppers know and love for their personal touch and quality goods.

The long-standing businesses have survived the competition posed by a Tesco Express since it opened five years ago. No mean feat with so many independent businesses going to the wall.

And that's why they get upset when local authorities interfere.

Businesses in Crouch Street have faced a range of changes and challenges. They fought off attempts to introduce parking fees. Then they battled in vain against a cycle path outside their shops.

They are still campaigning for the derelict Odeon cinema to be redeveloped.

The latest problem is too narrow parking bays. This might seem a small detail, but traders could do without customers being given another reason not to shop there in the midst of recession.

Despite this, businesses in Crouch Street continue to add colour to Colchester. It is vital for the town Crouch Street is cherished. Local authorities must listen to the traders. They have thrived because they know Colchester – and particularly their little corner of the town – better than anyone.

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Peering into future of House of Lords

Huge changes to how we are governed are in the pipeline

By WENDY BRADING
wendy.brading@nqe.com

THE public perception of the occupants of the House of Lords is of a gaggle of elderly, privileged peers who are out of touch with everyday life.

It is universally agreed the upper chamber of Parliament needs reform.

The Government – driven principally by the junior partners in the coalition, the Liberal Democrats – has set out its stall for reform.

It suggests having 300 peers, down from more than 800, who would serve a 15-year term.

Of these, 80 per cent would be elected, rather than appointed, and they would get an annual salary of £50,000 instead of the existing attendance allowance.

But is this change for the better, or change for change's sake.

Lord Lexden has his doubts. As a British historian, author and politician, who sits as a Conservative life peer, he knows more than most about the subject.

The son of a Colchester doctor, he was appointed to the Lords

It is contrary to the British tradition of evolution, it would be tearing everything up

last year. He said: "The idea of a collection of rather lazy, elderly people is no longer true.

"The Lords consists of people with great expertise in a range of disciplines – medicine, academia, the Armed Forces, the arts – impressive people of real stature."

The list of peers really is the stuff of Who's Who. Former prime ministers mingle with the leaders of industry, actors, campaigners and judges.

Baroness Jenkin, a Conservative stalwart who has championed the cause of having more women MPs, sits in an office with Baron Fellowes of West Stafford, better known as actor, novelist and Downton Abbey creator Julian Fellowes, and Baron McColl, an eminent surgeon.



■ Baroness Jenkin – favours reform of the retirement age



■ Lord Lexden – believes convicted peers should go

Supporters of the House of Lords argue its expertise is invaluable in scrutinising proposed legislation sent up from the House of Commons.

Lord Lexden, for his part, believes there should be some reform.

He said: "Most peers don't think things will remain as they are, but there are alternatives to the current suggestions.

"For example, there could be an age limit imposed.

"The process by which peers are appointed, such as through the Prime Minister's patronage,

would be reduced and moved to an independent body.

"At present, peers who have been convicted of a crime can just return to the Lords when they get out of jail. That is an absurd state of affairs.

"However, the discussion now is to replace what we have completely.

"It is contrary to the British tradition of evolution, it would be tearing everything up and starting again."

Lady Jenkin, wife of Harwich and North Essex MP Bernard Jenkin, also accepts changes are

Reform is one thing, but what is proposed is like throwing the baby out with the bath water

overdue. She said: "There are some fuddy duddy people who are a bit eccentric or institutionalised, but there are also a vast range of experts who really contribute.

"They are also independent and can ask the Government to think again."

So it was with the Health and Social Care Bill on reform of the NHS, which underwent more scrutiny than any piece of legislation in living memory, with more than 1,000 amendments in the two chambers.

"The House of Lords is a revising chamber," said Lady Jenkin. "I am not against reform. We do need to sort out a retirement age, for example.

"But this should be done by experts, and maybe in the next Parliament after the current crisis is out of way.

"Reform is one thing, but what is being proposed is abolition and that is like throwing the baby out with the bath water."

The stone thrown into the political pond by constitutional reform would create major ripples.

Both Lord Lexden and Lady Jenkin share concerns about how two elected houses would co-exist.

The Lords' role is now one of scrutinising Bills. It cannot overrule the will of the elected house.

Lord Lexden said: "If you have two elected bodies, it is unclear if the Commons would remain the most important house.

"It would be also infinitely more difficult for the minority of peers who are not elected to debate on an even footing with those who are elected."

WHO WANTS WHAT IN THE REFORM DEBATE

THE Parliament Act of 1911 removed the Lords' ability to veto money Bills.

With any other Bills, the House of Commons was given powers to over-rule the Lords' veto.

● There are 825 members of the House of Lords. Of these, 700 are life peers. Others include 26 archbishops and bishops and 92 hereditary peers.

● Most are affiliated to a political party. However, independent crossbenchers are appointed principally because of their

experience outside the House
● A majority of voters – 69 per cent – favour reform of the Lords, with 33 per cent backing a fully-elected upper house, the official position of the Lib Dems and Labour in their 2010 election manifestos

● Only five per cent favour retaining the status quo of a fully appointed second chamber

● A fifth of voters support a chamber with equal numbers of appointed and elected members. A slightly smaller number of

voters – 16 per cent – favour a mostly-elected chamber with a small number of appointed members, the position adopted by the Tories in their 2010 election manifesto

● The progress of the reform Bill through Parliament is yet to begin. Proposals include having 300 members of the House of Lords, of which 240 are elected and 60 are appointed as independent members. Up to 12 Church of England bishops may sit in the house as ex-officio Lords Spiritual.