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New House of Lords should not be chosen like a jury

The suggestion by Demos that members of our second House of Parliament should be chosen like a jury from ordinary citizens is naive. We need more knowledgeable legislators than that.

Anthony Barnett (article, 3 June 1998) says these ordinary citizens could check and complement the House of Commons through scrutiny of legislation, ensuring that it is written in clear and comprehensible English. With respect, this is tommy rot and moonshine.

Having spent half a century in the legislative field, I can say that effective scrutiny of bills requires great skill and experience. So does turning them into plain English.

The Inland Revenue's skilled tax law rewrite team, set up in 1996, already aim to put our tax law into plain English. In their Plans for 1998/99, just published, they admit to finding it heavy going. 'Our first full year of rewrite work saw less progress than we had hoped . . . As the work progressed it quickly became clear that our original targets were unattainable . . . our task is even more complex, difficult and time-consuming than we first thought it would be . . . almost every line of the existing legislation throws up awkward questions.'

Scarcely a task for ordinary citizens.¹

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¹ *The Times*, 9 June 1998.