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HOUSE OF COMMONS
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PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Friday 18 November 2016

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

Second Reading

9.34 am

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I speak to the House today not out of personal interest, as much of what I say and propose will not affect my future in this House. I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, and many other Members will know that I have no intention of standing at the next election. [HON. MEMBERS: "Shame!"] I will be standing down, so my motivation today is not personal; rather, I am introducing this Bill because I want what is best for our democracy and believe that what is best for our democracy is best for all the people of this country.

The events of the past few months have shown us more than ever that politics is constantly changing, and in a changing world we need a democratic system that is fit for purpose. Conservative Members, in particular, are fond of quoting Churchill in this House. While I have never done so before, that does not mean that he did not occasionally say something worth listening to. Churchill told us that the democracy we have is not the best, but it is the best we have. There is a lot of sense in that. However, in order to have a democratic system that is suitable for the 21st century, we need to look at ways in which we can preserve the best of what we have while looking to improve engagement wherever we can.

That is why I propose that in agreeing to this Bill, the House will endeavour to keep what is best about our current system—things like the MP-constituency link, which is envied in democracies across the world—while ensuring that we do not lock out 2 million voters who have registered to vote since 2015.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I have been listening very carefully to the hon. Lady's speech and looked at some of the stuff she said before the debate. Given that the House decided, quite clearly, to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600, to what question facing us today in politics does she think the answer is more politicians?

Pat Glass: Clearly the right hon. Gentleman was not listening very carefully to what I said, because I started by saying that the world is changing and politics is changing. What happened in the previous Parliament is not necessarily right for what is happening now. I also point out that the current Government have created 250 additional peers just down the corridor. Is that what he means by fewer politicians?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The hon. Lady is starting a most powerful speech on a very important subject. Does she agree that the answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who was of course at the heart of Government, is that we want more MPs and less government?

Pat Glass: I do not think Shakespeare could have put it better. [HON. MEMBERS: "Or Churchill."] Or Churchill.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a long-standing custom in this Parliament that no Parliament can bind a successor Parliament, so the point made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) is complete nonsense. Just because the coalition voted for and railroaded through some changes a few years ago, there is no need for this Parliament to carry on with that stupid policy.

Mr Harper *rose*—

Pat Glass: I will give way later if the right hon. Gentleman will let me continue a little.

What I am proposing is that we keep what is best in our current system, such as the MP-constituency link, which is envied in democracies across the world, while ensuring that we do not lock out 2 million voters who have registered to vote since 2015. Under the current system, they are not counted, and therefore they effectively have no voice in this place. Surely no sensible Government would deliberately discount 2 million voters simply because they do not suit their political fortunes.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): The Bill's proposition is to increase the number of MPs from 600 to 650. The hon. Lady has twice said that the constituency link is important. Surely, whether we have 650, 600, 500 or 400 MPs, there will still be a constituency link.

Pat Glass: I will talk about that later when I address the size of constituencies and the way in which communities are being split by the current proposals.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I want to cut to the chase. Does the hon. Lady agree that the current proposals are a travesty to many constituencies across the entire United Kingdom, and are an attempt to silence Scotland, destabilise Northern Ireland and keep an over-bloated House of Lords in business? I welcome her debate.

Pat Glass: I thank the hon. Gentleman. One of the really good things about the Bill is the number of people from right across the country who have contacted me. People from all parts of the United Kingdom are getting in touch with me as they begin to realise that their communities are going to be divided.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) has mentioned Scotland and Northern Ireland. The impact of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 will be greatest on Wales, because we will lose a higher percentage—11 seats—of MPs. That is wrong. It also includes three of four island communities, but does not give exemption to the principal island of the United Kingdom, namely the Isle of Anglesey, Ynys Môn.

Pat Glass: I welcome my hon. Friend's very strong point about the island communities.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has made a very strong point about the difference in the registers and under-registration. Is she aware that that will be magnified in places such as Cardiff, which is among the fastest growing cities in the UK? We are already under-registered and we are going to grow very fast. The reality is that, within a year or two, the proposals will be so out of date and people will be so disfranchised. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a double whammy for places such as Cardiff?

Pat Glass: I do, and that situation is reflected right across the country.

Fewer and fewer people are bothering to vote in general and local elections, because they do not see it as relevant to their lives. We live in a time when many of our people see a divide between themselves and the establishment. That means us, by the way—even people like me, and I was born in a council house in a mining community and went to a comprehensive school. They see huge divides between us, the political elite—or the metropolitan elite, as the red tops like to call us—and anyone who seems to have a vested interest in parliamentary democracy, and the people, as the red tops like to call everyone else.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does not the hon. Lady acknowledge that we have periodic boundary reviews to take account of changes in population? Her point about people being missed will be picked up by a future boundary review.

Pat Glass: I do acknowledge that point and I will come on to talk about why it is important that we conduct a review every 10 years rather than every five years. One of the communities from which I have heard most is Cornwall. Lots of people have been in touch with me, saying that they are unhappy that their own MPs are not dealing with the issue.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I may be metropolitan, but I have seldom been described as elite. Does my hon. Friend accept that one of the major problems in our capital city is that whole swathes of central London are now dark, because people do not live in the properties, and that the electoral roll has, therefore, collapsed? We also have constituencies with 19 wards, rather than the usual eight or nine. Does my hon. Friend agree that her Bill exposes far more than the dreadful dichotomy between the other place and this place? In fact, it exposes a dark heart in our democracy.

Pat Glass: Yes, I accept that entirely. One of the really good things about the Bill is that it shines a light on an awful lot of the problems with the current system.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am amazed that Government Members are talking just about population and not ascribing any importance to geography. Islands have been mentioned. My constituency of Ross, Skye and Lochaber includes seven inhabited islands. Many of them will end up in the new seat of Argyll, Bute and Lochaber, which would have more than 30 inhabited islands. How is a Member of Parliament supposed to represent people from so many island communities? It is a disgrace.

Pat Glass: The proposed system does not take account of people and communities. I hope that we will be able to address that through the Bill.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the 2 million people who are being left out equate to at least 25 MPs? To reduce us by 50 MPs seems nonsensical.

Pat Glass: I looked at those figures last night. Effectively, the proposals will reduce this place not by 50, but by 75 MPs.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I am a lot more sympathetic than some of my colleagues to the hon. Lady's Bill. How can she guarantee that the Boundary Commission will be able to implement its changes by October 2018, in time for the next general election? Is that practical?

Pat Glass: Politics is the art of the possible, is it not? If the Government want this to happen, it will happen. It is important that the Bill is in place by 2018, in time for the 2020 general election.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the exclusion of 2 million voters, whom we know to exist, from the electoral register goes against the very principles of representation, and that for a Government to knowingly under-represent citizens who register for elections goes against their interests as well as ours in this House? Does she also agree that those citizens who are late to register are more likely to be transient and poor, and that they are often the most in need of representation?

Pat Glass: The issue of the under-representation of 2 million people goes to the heart of our democracy.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Do the 2 million missing people include overseas voters? What assessment has the hon. Lady made of them?

Pat Glass: The figure does not include overseas voters. They are not part of the Bill. That issue is for a different debate at a later time.

We have seen anti-establishment politics at its worst in the recent US elections, when Donald Trump courted voters by portraying himself as the anti-establishment candidate and by saying the most outrageous things he could think of, irrespective of the offence he caused. We have also seen it here, with the emergence of far-right

parties. Many of us saw and heard it during and following the referendum, both on the doorsteps and on social media. Ugly things were said about refugees, immigrants, migrants and pretty much anyone who is not like us.

Huge swathes of people living in both towns and cities have lost confidence in the parliamentary system. They feel that they have nothing vested in it and nothing to gain or to lose. We hear it all the time on the doorstep: “You’re all the same. You’re all in it for what you can get out of it.” Instead of ensuring that we reach out, engage with and listen to people when they do bother to register to vote, this Government are refusing to count them or to give them a voice, so that they have an excuse to cut the number of MPs, thereby making constituencies bigger and MPs more remote from their constituents. In doing so, they endanger what is best and unique about our parliamentary system. However people talk about MPs in general—however cynical they are—we all know that they view their MP as different.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): On the referendum, the number of peers is going up and the number of MPs will go down, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is the MPs who will have to take on the additional work of MEPs when we leave Europe?

Pat Glass: That is a good point, which I will come on to.

Under the current proposals, my constituency of North West Durham will become West Durham and Teesdale. It is already a large rural constituency, but it will become huge. It will stretch from the banks of the Tyne to the banks of the Tees, taking in all manner of the vastly different communities in between, and there will be one MP—thankfully not me—who will cover all that, provide the unique and valued MP-constituency link, and try to make that link real for all those people in all those communities. That will be replicated throughout the country if the changes go ahead.

My constituency is already huge. It will become unmanageable for the person who takes over from me. If someone from the north of my constituency wanted to see me at a surgery in the south, given that lines of communication go from east to west in that part of the country, it would take them all day on public transport and they would need an overnight stay. That cannot be acceptable.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The point about geography is critical in Cumbria, where my constituency is. Under the proposals, we will end up with the largest constituency in England, Penrith and Solway. I have Solway at the moment, and my constituents are deeply worried, because they think they will lose representation. Cumbria not only is large in square mileage, but has mountains, lakes and difficult weather. A lot of the time, we cannot get from one part of it to another, and people on the Solway would lose their representation.

Pat Glass: I absolutely agree.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Does my hon. Friend agree that, further to the point made by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), in Northern Ireland the proposals will sever political stability?

There is a need for special consideration for Northern Ireland and for proper recognition of social, economic and geographical cohesion, which does not exist in the new proposals.

Pat Glass: Absolutely. The Bill will go some way to making that happen.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: The hon. Lady and I share something similar in our constituencies. My constituency stretches from the banks of the Tamar to the banks of the River Fowey. The difference, however, is that because my constituents would not find it possible to travel from one end of the constituency to another by public transport, I go to them, which I consider to be my job as a Member of Parliament.

Pat Glass: The hon. Lady misses the point completely.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): On size, is the hon. Lady aware that the Boundary Commission for Scotland has proposed the notion that my constituency will be incorporated into a larger constituency called Highland North, covering 13,000 sq km, the same size as Northern Ireland? No one would seriously suggest that Northern Ireland should be covered by one MP, but that is what the proposals for Scotland suggest.

Pat Glass: The hon. Gentleman makes the case clearly.

The proposed system not only seeks to reduce the number of MPs, thereby making them more remote from their electorate, and to cut out 2 million registered voters, thereby giving them no vote, but seeks to create constituencies of equal size, irrespective of what that does to communities, and to include a review of the boundaries every five years, which will ensure that practically every constituency will change every five years. We will weaken MP accountability to our constituency and voters, because every five years the voters will be different people. In a sense, that will strengthen MPs’ accountability to their party, on whom they rely to be reselected, and will weaken their accountability to our constituents.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I am listening with great interest to my hon. Friend’s detailed speech. The Boundary Commission proposals for Stoke-on-Trent will have two effects, certainly as far as my constituency is concerned. First, a number of my constituents who live within the city of Stoke-on-Trent will find themselves represented in the county—in the rural area—which will break their existing link with the city. They will still live in the city and pay rates to city, but they will find themselves represented by an MP out of the city. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, my constituents and others who live in the city are represented by three MPs, who happen to be Labour but could be anyone in future. That will be downgraded to only two. What message does that send to the people of Stoke-on-Trent?

Pat Glass: That exemplifies how nonsensical the system will be. If we move ahead with the proposals, we run the risk of making MPs more accountable to their party, on whom they depend to be reselected, and less accountable to their constituents, who may well not be their constituents

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five years from now. I cannot believe that any of us want that. Like many in the House, I pride myself on serving every person in my constituency, whether they voted for me or not, whether they voted or not, and whether they have lived in the constituency for five minutes or five years.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): As a fellow north-easterner and as someone who worked in Sunderland, my hon. Friend knows Sunderland well. Under the proposals, Sunderland will be split between six constituencies—parts of six, from the current three—and my fabulous constituency will be split into three. As a Member who has served three terms and has had two seats already, if I was by some miracle lucky enough to retain a seat next time around, I would have had three constituencies in four terms, which must be a record.

Pat Glass: That exemplifies what I am saying about the proposals: they will break the MP's link with their constituents.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I hope that my hon. Friend will reconsider standing again for this House, because it deserves Members of her high calibre. Are we not getting to the crux of the debate? It is not really about geography, the electorate, the size of the House or even the cost of politics; it is a continuation of this Conservative Government's gerrymandering of the constitution. They have gagged charities, they have neutered trade unions and now they want to gerrymander boundaries for their own reasons.

Pat Glass: Absolutely.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): As we are getting to the nub of why the Bill has been introduced, is it not the case that we have the Bill because so many Opposition Members are frightened of reselection, because of the threat of Momentum taking their seats?

Pat Glass: That unfortunate intervention was not helpful and exemplifies why people out there get so angry about people in here. This is about something bigger than ourselves.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The anger goes beyond political parties. In my constituency, the nonsense of putting two wards from Sheffield South East in with wards from Rother Valley will create a constituency where we cannot drive from one side of it to the other without going through a second constituency. Indeed, one of the roads goes through a third council area and another region. As a result, 2,500 local people have already signed a petition against the proposal, because they see a constituency being created with no community of interest at all involved in that creation.

Pat Glass: That is what we are hearing in the debate today—cities being split, communities being split, and that is not good for our democracy.

We in Britain pride ourselves on being the home of democracy. However, can we really talk about democracy when we have an antiquated system in which the larger

House in Parliament is made up of people who are unelected? The unelected House is large and growing, and can be enlarged further at the political will of a retiring Prime Minister.

I have huge respect for the other place, where sensible decisions are often made and where many bring their lifelong experience to bear, but we cannot get away from the fact that it is unelected, significantly bigger than the elected House and subject to patronage. Is that what we mean by democracy in the 21st century? If we are the mother of Parliaments, I respectfully suggest that many of the children of this mother of Parliaments have outgrown us and are now showing how it is done.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): On community connections and synergies, does the hon. Lady accept that in the time from when the drafts of the last boundary review proposals were produced to when the final proposal was made by the Boundary Commission for England, two thirds of the seats were changed in response to the concerns that were raised?

Pat Glass: The initial proposals were never implemented, so the constituencies remained the same.

The Government are even trying to sell us the idea that the proposed boundary changes are an attempt to save the taxpayer money. Granted that removing 50 MPs will save some money; the total amount is questionable but reasonably estimated to be in the region of £12 million. At the same time, the Government have massively increased the unelected House at a cost of £46 million. Whatever the Government say, this is not about saving money for the taxpayer or cutting the cost of politics.

We are in the process of leaving the European Union, so each and every one of us will no longer have access to a Member of the European Parliament. In counties such as mine, local government reform has created more and more unitary authorities. The reforms have removed our district councils and replaced them with, in some cases, very large unitary authorities, which can appear remote from people's lives. I and my constituents used to have access to a parish council, district councillors, county councillors, an MP and MEPs. Some may say that that was too many representatives, but in the space of nine years, we have in effect lost two layers of representation. I believe that democracy is not served in this country by further reducing our representation.

It is blindingly obvious that the Government are not intent on reducing the cost of democracy. If the purpose of reducing the number of MPs is to save money, why is the number of unelected Lords constantly being increased at a cost that far outweighs the savings from reducing the number of MPs? Actions speak louder than words, and no matter how much the Government spin their actions, their attempt to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600, while at the same time massively increasing the number and the costs of the House of Lords, should be seen for what it is—a poor attempt at trying to hold on to power for as long as possible at the expense of our democracy.

Andrew Stephenson: I have a great deal of sympathy with the hon. Lady's points about the House of Lords. I am hugely in favour of House of Lords reform, which was in the Conservative party manifesto. During the last Parliament, I voted for House of Lords reform,

unlike many Opposition Members. May I gently point out, however, that the cost of the House of Lords has fallen by 14% since 2010? Its operating costs were £112 million in 2009-10, as opposed to £96 million in 2015-16.

Pat Glass: The Lord Speaker of the House of Lords has described this situation—the Government seeking to reduce the number of MPs, while the size the House of Lords remains the same or grows—as “untenable”. If the House of Lords is saying that something needs to be done about the size of its membership, why are we—or rather, the Government—reluctant to listen?

I believe that the time has come for us to have a proper, inclusive and open review of our system of democracy. The alternative may be that fewer and fewer people vote, as well as the further disengagement of large parts of our country from the democratic purpose, the rise of parties far less interested than we are in democracy and the threat that parts of our communities will see the state as illegitimate.

I want us to go forward, strengthening and reviewing our democratic processes as we go. My Bill seeks to retain 650 MPs, which will continue our unique and much admired link between the MP and the constituency. I want to ensure that we engage more and more of the potential electorate, and the first step is to include the 2 million people who have registered to vote since 2015 but are not counted in the current boundary review. Through the Bill, I want to give those 2 million people a voice.

I agree that MPs should broadly represent an equal number of voters, but my Bill seeks to safeguard communities and to avoid some of the stupidities that a 5% margin throws up. I therefore propose that there should be a margin of 10%. I also propose that we should review constituency boundaries every 10 years, not every five years, which will strengthen the accountability of MPs to their constituency, not weaken it.

The democracy we have is precious. It was hard fought for and hard won over many centuries. Arguably, we have done everything wrong along the way—we have had a civil war and civil unrest; we have seen many injustices and abuses; we even cut off the head of a king—but over the centuries we have inched our way towards the democracy we have now. We need to appreciate that our democracy is both precious and fragile, and we cannot allow one party or one Government to endanger what we have for the purposes of narrow party interest, irrespective of which party it is.

10.4 am

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) on bringing the Bill before the House and on giving us an opportunity to discuss the issue.

Mr Speaker, you may feel, as I do, a slight sense of déjà vu. I declare an interest as the Minister in the coalition Government who, during the last Parliament, took through the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. I very much look forward to the speech of my successor but a few, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office. I will start with a bit of the context, but I will not try your patience by going on for too long with my opening remarks. I listened carefully

to the arguments of the hon. Member for North West Durham, and I will cover most of them and say why I think she is mistaken or going down the wrong path on several of them.

I had not intended to talk about this, but there was an implication in what the hon. Lady and a few other Members said. Before the Great Reform Act of 1832, parliamentary constituencies were thought of by many people as their own property—indeed, they were their property—and they passed the ownership of their constituency down their line. I mention that because the discussion has so far missed an important point. We obviously feel a great sense of pride in our constituencies and we want to represent them and, most importantly, the people who live in them, but they are not ours. Our constituencies do not belong to us. It is the other way around: the people in our constituencies expect us to represent them. When I listened to some MPs talk about the constituencies they currently represent, it sounded as though they owned them. The minute an independent boundary commission proposes to change their constituency, the better to represent the constituents living there, they seem to take that as a personal affront.

Stephen Doughty: That is very much not the point that I and other hon. Members made. One key issue that I raised is that of under-registration, which has particularly affected students, young people, and black and minority ethnic communities across Cardiff and, indeed, many other constituencies across the country. Is it not unacceptable that such people are not allowed to have an MP who properly represents their numbers in the constituencies in which they live?

Mr Harper: I am glad the hon. Gentleman raises that point, because I do not agree with the premise of his question. Interestingly, during the last Parliament, the coalition Government introduced individual electoral registration. It does two things: it makes sure that people are properly represented; and it improves both the accuracy and the integrity of the electoral register. To pick up the point made by the hon. Member for North West Durham about moving into a more modern world, the other thing we of course did was to allow electoral registration online start. I am very proud of having started the process, which has been continued by my successors. It is now incredibly easy to register to vote. People can do it online with their national insurance number, which shows that they are eligible for registration, and it is very quick and very easy. A huge number of people have done so. In fact, I think that I am right in saying that the vast majority of those who now register to vote do so online. We have therefore made registration easier.

What the hon. Gentleman forgot to mention about students is that, just because they may not be registered in the town or city where they attend university, that does not mean they are not registered. Students are often registered in more than one location. When I was a student—tragically for me, that was a very long time ago—I was registered both at my parental home in Swindon and at my university accommodation in Oxford. Obviously, I only voted in one of those places in an election, as is lawful, but I was registered in both of them. If I had been registered in only one of them, that

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would not in any way have meant I was disfranchised. The hon. Gentleman needs to think about that before making such remarks.

Ian Paisley: Will the right hon. Gentleman address the really important point that boundary changes should be gradual and evolutionary, reflecting the gradual and evolutionary change on the ground, and ought not to be radical or explosive? The kindest thing that can be said about the current boundary proposals is that, when mapping these new constituencies, the mapper appears to have sneezed and made a complete mess of the electoral map.

Mr Harper: There are a couple of things I will say in response to the hon. Gentleman. I agree with his central point. Of course I accept the point made by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) that the last Parliament does not bind this one, but the law as currently enacted would reduce the size of the House of Commons. That is the position unless this Parliament chooses to change it by taking forward the Bill.

As I acknowledged at the Dispatch Box, the one-off reduction from 650 to 600 in this boundary change—which would have happened already if it were not for the stitch-up by the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats in the other place that pushed it out for five years—means that there will be a significant amount of change. I will say a little more about this later, but part of the reason why I support boundary changes every five years is that it is better to have more frequent but smaller changes, to take account of changes in electorate, rather than what has happened over time—namely, very infrequent boundary changes that, because there has been significant movement in the electorate, are very significant. More frequent but smaller boundary changes are preferable. That is what the current position will bring into force.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my right hon. Friend agree that over the past 20 to 25 years my own constituency has been a prime illustration of what he is saying? The constituency of South East Cornwall used to be known as Bodmin; it does not even contain the town of Bodmin now. We see a lot of changes. I do not believe that I should have taken ownership of the town of Bodmin when the rest of south-east Cornwall was expanding.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend illustrates the point that changes in the size of electorates have to be reflected in boundary changes. I was thinking of how to put this into context—

Mr Betts *rose*—

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Harper: Let me just make this one point, then I will give way to the fabulous array of choices I have in front of me.

It is worth standing back for a moment and asking ourselves why we have boundary changes and why we in this country have chosen, unlike other countries, to have an independent process for them. I was thinking about how one could illustrate that in a memorable way. In the spirit of the cross-party unity that we particularly like to display on Fridays, I thought about who could

illustrate this point very well. A few weeks ago at Prime Minister's questions, the Leader of the Opposition referred to consulting great philosophers. He gave that some thought and the only one he could come up with was Baldrick, who had a cunning plan. That is relevant to this subject because you will remember, Mr Speaker—I will dilate on this only very briefly—an excellent episode of “Blackadder” about rotten boroughs and what used to happen before we had regular boundary changes. It featured an incumbent MP, Sir Talbot Buxomly, who was the Member of Parliament for Dunny-on-the-Wold. He died while visiting the Prince Regent, and Blackadder realised that Buxomly represented a rotten borough. It was a tiny plot of land, with

“three rather mangy cows, a dachshund named ‘Colin’, and a small hen in its late forties.”

There was only one voter. Blackadder chose to install Baldrick as the new MP, and bought the property to be the only voter. He amazingly cast all 16,472 of his votes for Baldrick, while also being returning officer and election agent. That was humour, but it illustrated a point: there were parliamentary constituencies very like that before we had boundary changes, rules for the distribution of seats and independent boundary commissions. That is why this subject is very important.

Ian Blackford: Can we come back to reality here? The situation in the highlands of Scotland is that three MPs will represent a land mass of 33,000 sq km—40% of the landmass of Scotland but less than 5% of MPs. How can that possibly offer democracy to the people of the highlands and islands of this country?

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman is getting a little confused—

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Oh!

Mr Harper: Let me finish my point. I have not even started my argument and hon. and learned Lady is intervening. The job of the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is to represent the people who live in his constituency, as I represent those who live in mine, not to represent the spaces in his constituency. It is the people who matter. It is entirely true that his constituency is not as densely populated as some parts of the United Kingdom. That is reflected in the existing legislation—we chose to reflect the fact that there are four islands or groups of islands represented in the House, and the House accepted the argument that they needed special arrangements. Two of those are in Scotland. Another is the Isle of Wight, and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) made a very powerful argument that was taken up at the other end of the building.

Joanna Cherry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Harper: Well, I have not finished my response to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber. When I have, I will of course give way.

We made that provision because there were powerful arguments from the late Charles Kennedy, who represented Ross, Skye and Lochaber before the hon. Gentleman, about the geographical size of constituencies. We therefore

made provision for a maximum geographical size of constituency in the legislation, so that the boundary commissioners would not have constituencies that were too large. That limit in the legislation deals with the hon. Gentleman's point.

Joanna Cherry: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that constituencies in the north-west of Scotland such as Ross, Skye and Lochaber have people living in the spaces and that those populations are really quite spread out as a result of something that happened in history called the clearances, whereby many people were cleared off their land—some to the coast, some furth of Scotland—and small pockets were left on the land? To represent his constituents properly, my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has to cover those spaces, which are very wide and disparate, have sea in between them and quite often suffer, unfortunately, from inclement weather. Has the right hon. Gentleman taken that into account?

Mr Harper: I have. But things have moved on. There are modern communication mechanisms. Members of Parliament for constituencies that are spread out and require Members to travel more than would be required in urban seats can claim more money for that travel through the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority; that is why, unsurprisingly, we see MPs with more rural and far-flung constituencies claiming more money. It is perfectly reasonable for them to do so, and that budget is unlimited, to reflect the fact that those MPs will have greater travel challenges in representing their constituents than MPs in more compact constituencies.

The fact is that we represent the people who live in constituencies. If we followed the hon. and learned Lady's argument to its logical conclusion, we would end up with massive disparities in constituencies, as we have today; the votes of some electors in very urban constituencies are worth far less than those of electors in other parts of the United Kingdom. I do not think that that is fair or reasonable to those voters.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Harper: I will allow the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber to come back, and then make some progress.

Ian Blackford: The issue of democratic representation is crucial. My constituency office is in Dingwall. It is 130 miles away from where I live. On average, seven electors come into that office per day. They all come from the area around Dingwall. How on earth are the people in Ross, Skye and Lochaber to get effective representation when they live too far away from their constituency office? It is not right.

Mr Harper: I come back to the point that we have to focus on—the central argument, which I do not think the hon. Member for North West Durham focused on—is that the votes of our constituents should carry equal weight in this House. If we do not have seats of broadly equal size, some constituents are, in effect, being disfranchised and do not have the same voice in this House.

Wendy Morton: On the democratic deficit, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Bill risks us fighting the next election on the old boundaries, so seats such as mine, which has an electorate of just 60,000, would remain small and the democratic deficit would still not be properly addressed?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is spot on. If we do not implement in time for the next election the boundary changes currently in train, the next election will be fought on constituency boundaries set according to an electoral register that is 20 years out of date. I will come to the point—on the face of it, it is a perfectly sensible one—that the hon. Member for North West Durham made about the new registrations for the referendum, but if hon. Members think that there is problem with people who have registered in the past year, I would simply point out that nearly 20 years' worth of electors are currently missing from the registers used for parliamentary constituencies.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Harper: I will make a little more progress, because I think Mr Speaker would want me to do so.

The first big change in the redistribution of seats was the Redistribution of Seats Act 1885. Mr Speaker, you will be pleased to know that I will mention it only tangentially, and for one reason. The Minister who steered the Act through this House was the then President of the Local Government Board, the hon. Member for Chelsea, Sir Charles Dilke. You might not be aware, Mr Speaker, but Sir Charles Dilke had some personal issues—to put it delicately—and then ceased to be the Member for Chelsea. He then had the enormous good fortune to become the Member for the Forest of Dean, my constituency.

Sir Charles was, in some senses, more successful than me. First, in those days, constituencies apparently wrote to prospective Members inviting them to become Members of Parliament without some tough selection battle against others competing for the seat. You might remember, Mr Speaker, from my maiden speech, that Sir Charles Dilke, after getting elected and then re-elected, was fortunate, the third time he sought election, in being elected unopposed. I said in my maiden speech that that was a record worthy of emulation. I am afraid that I completely failed to be elected unopposed at the 2015 general election, but fortunately for me, despite my being opposed, I was indeed elected.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to advise the right hon. Gentleman that I do not have a verbatim recall of his maiden speech. It might greatly sadden him, but it has the advantage of being true. I gently say to him that I agreed to call him early in the debate because I was advised that he was suffering from a heavy cold and sore throat and was keen to speak sooner rather than later. From that, I deduced that he would not wish to exacerbate his malady by speaking at inordinate length. I feel confident both because of that and because at least 14 other Members wish to catch the eye of the Chair that before very long he might approach his peroration.

Mr Harper: That is very thoughtful of you, Mr Speaker, although I am surprised, knowing of your enormous powers of recall, that you do not have a verbatim

[Mr Harper]

account of my maiden speech in your head, but then, sadly, we were not blessed in 2005 with having you in the Chair; otherwise, I am sure that you would remember it.

As I said, I only wanted to spend a short time on the preamble to my speech, although I was probably a little indulgent in taking interventions. I will deal specifically now with the points that the hon. Member for North West Durham made in her speech. First, she talked about gerrymandering, which the Leader of the Opposition has also talked about and which comes from the United States of America. Of course, there is a massive difference between us and the US. In most states of the US, boundaries are not drawn by independent boundary commissions, as they are here; they are drawn by the elected representatives, who are obviously partisan. Here, we are fortunate to have boundary commissions, all four of which, Mr Speaker, you chair in an ex officio capacity, although you do not take part in their deliberations. The four deputy chairs, effectively the operational heads, are judges, so they are, of course, beyond question in their political independence. In the United States, however, gerrymandering is a problem.

Taking your advice, Mr Speaker, I will not go on at length, but, for those who are interested and want to follow this issue at length, I refer to an interesting article in the *Washington Post* on 15 May 2014. Obviously, in the House we are not allowed to introduce written material or pictures, but the article referred to three districts, and the descriptions of them gave a sense of the interesting boundaries in America. Maryland's 3rd is called the "Praying Mantis"; Pennsylvania's 7th is called "Goofy kicking Donald Duck"; and Texas's 35th is called the "UpsideDown Elephant". The point is that we do not have gerrymandering in this country; we have independent boundary commissions following clear rules set out by Parliament, and they are specifically not allowed to take into account the partisan or party political effect of their decisions. I wanted to knock that argument on its head straightaway.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has mentioned the United States, because the kernel of this idea of the Cameron Government came from an organisation called the American Legislative Exchange Council, which has talked about making it harder for voters in the US to register to vote and been at the forefront of things such as re-districting. It does not take a genius to see that a lot of the things that the Cameron Government proposed came right from its playbook.

Mr Harper: As the Minister who took the legislation through the House, I completely reject that suggestion. The proposals brought forward by the previous Government were drawn up by Ministers with support from their officials.

Mr Kevan Jones: No, they weren't.

Mr Harper: I was the Minister who drew up the proposals and brought them before the House, and I do not recognise the provenance that the hon. Gentleman maintains.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Mr Harper: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman once more, but I am keen to make some progress.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am not sure what role the right hon. Gentleman played in drawing up the 2010 Conservative manifesto, but the boundaries legislation, as well as the attacks on trade unions and some of the other right-wing policies that came forward, such as stopping charities lobbying, came right from that playbook. I am sure he was not involved in that; he was just the poor Minister who had to implement it.

Mr Harper: I certainly was not "the poor Minister". I hugely enjoyed my role as Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform. I got to spend an enormous amount of time in the Chamber, with Mr Speaker frequently in the Chair, although I am not sure he enjoyed listening to the debates as much as I enjoyed speaking in them. I do not, however, recognise the origins that the hon. Gentleman mentions.

The hon. Member for North West Durham made a serious point about the accusations made about people who registered ahead of the EU referendum. A thorough piece of work has been done by a gentleman called Matt Singh, who works for an organisation called Number Cruncher Politics, an independent organisation that has looked at this issue very carefully. For this to be an issue, the 2 million extra voters would have to be unevenly distributed across the UK. If in some areas there had been a much bigger rise in the number of electors than in others, that would of course affect the distribution of the 600 seats set out in the legislation.

Interestingly, Mr Singh, in his very thorough analysis of the 2 million increase, wrote:

"The data does not support the suggestion that using the later version of the register",

as the hon. Lady proposes doing,

"would materially alter the distribution of seats. Instead it points to a very even distribution of the 2 million newly-registered voters between"

currently held Labour and Conservative seats. If we added all the 2 million, of course we would increase the size of the register, but because the extra voters are evenly distributed across the country, we would not significantly change the distribution of constituencies. So I think that is a bit of a red herring.

As I draw towards the conclusion of my remarks, as you wanted me to, Mr Speaker, let me deal with the Bill.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Harper: I shall first give way to the hon. Gentleman. He and I had a lot of fun when we debated the previous legislation, particularly when we spoke about Wales. I want to give him the opportunity to intervene.

Wayne David: When it comes to missing voters resulting from the European referendum, the right hon. Gentleman's analysis has been challenged by many people. I want to make that point first. My second point is about gerrymandering. The previous Government passed a piece of legislation and this Government have brought forward the date of individual electoral registration. The result, against the advice of the Electoral Commission, is to exclude 1.8 million people from the electoral register. If that is not gerrymandering, what is?

Mr Harper: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's contention. The fact is, of course, that individual electoral registration did two things: it made sure that the registers were more complete; and it made them more accurate. Many of the names that the hon. Gentleman talks about who are no longer on the electoral register were not, of course, real people or people then registered at those addresses. My understanding—the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—is that before anybody was removed from the register, they would have been written to on a large number of occasions, and there would have been visits and canvassing going on at the individual properties. People were removed from the register either because they no longer lived at those addresses or because they had been registered more than once. The register is more accurate. What the hon. Gentleman is really arguing for is having an extra 1.8 million false entries on the electoral registers, which would make the system less fair rather than fairer.

Andrew Stephenson: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Harper: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, let me start to deal with the Bill, as I said I would. I shall deal specifically with the proposals set out by the hon. Member for North West Durham, and I want to make a bit of progress before giving way to my hon. Friend.

The first point raised by the hon. Member for North West Durham was about the number of MPs, and I think she completely failed to answer my question, which was to what question was the answer 50 more Members of Parliament. She did not tackle the cost of her proposals. The current law says that the number of MPs will fall from 650 to 600. Increasing that number by 50 would come at an estimated cost—I think she alluded to this in her remarks—of about £10 million to £12 million a year. That means about £60 million across the Parliament. I heard no proposals from the hon. Lady about how that was to be paid for or any reason why the proposal was a good one at all.

Mr Bone: I wonder how my right hon. Friend came up with that figure. If we as Members of Parliament will have more work to do and more areas to cover, we will presumably have more expenses. Could it be that the figure produced by my right hon. Friend is fictitious?

Mr Harper: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. The figure is based on how much MPs claim at the moment and how much we are paid in salary. What my hon. Friend needs to remember is that there is currently a massive disparity between MPs in Welsh constituencies, for example, who have fewer than 50,000 electors, and others. Those Welsh Members are already in a part of the United Kingdom where a huge amount of domestic policy areas are dealt with not by them at all, but by Members of the Welsh Assembly. They get the same level of support as my hon. Friend, yet he has to serve a much larger constituency in terms of electors—and he serves them very diligently indeed. In England, there is not a devolved Administration, so English MPs have to cover the full range of domestic policy areas. I think it would be perfectly possible to deal with the fewer number of MPs without seeing a significant increase in the expenses budget for each of us. Those MPs who

currently have very small constituencies will have to deal with no more constituents than many of us already have to deal with.

Christina Rees *rose*—

Mr Harper: Let me first deal with the seemingly reasonable points about the House of Lords made by the hon. Member for North West Durham. She made a couple of points. First—big tick here—I was, of course, the Minister responsible in the last Parliament for securing a much smaller, democratically elected and less costly House of Lords. I received a great deal of support, but not from Labour Members. If Labour Members had given their support to the programme motion that we would have brought forward, we would have been able to reform the House of Lords and have a democratically elected Chamber. That did not take place.

Mr Bone: No.

Mr Harper: I know that not all Conservative Members were enormously enthusiastic about it, but the fact is that we were not able to make that proposal.

Mr Bone: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Harper: Go on.

Mr Bone: We cannot allow this myth to carry on. The Second Reading of the House of Lords Reform Bill got the biggest majority of that Parliament. The fact is that the Government did not move the programme motion, so we do not know what would have happened. It should absolutely not have been programmed, as it was a constitutional Bill that should have been gone through line by line. Any parliamentarian such as my great right hon. Friend should have supported that.

Mr Harper: I will answer my hon. Friend's question, but not at length, as I do not want to try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend is right that Second Reading was well supported, but we had clear indications that the programme motion would not have been supported by Opposition Members, so the Government—quite rightly, in view of all the other challenges we faced—were not prepared to risk other legislation not getting through Parliament as a result. We were not able to make progress.

What the hon. Member for North West Durham needs to recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) said, is that the cost of the House of Lords has reduced since 2010—it has fallen, not increased. Since last year's general election, there has been a net change in the size of the House of Lords of only 14 peers. What the hon. Lady forgets is that Members of the House of Lords are now able to retire and that a disproportionate number of those retiring are Conservative peers. It is true that there was a significant increase in the 2010 Parliament, but that was, of course, under a coalition Government, and a significant number of the new peers were Liberal Democrats.

Christina Rees: This has never been about costs. The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office confirmed at the last Cabinet Office questions that the overall cost of the Government payroll will remain unchanged, so this is not about costs.

Mr Harper: It is about costs. I can remember standing at the Dispatch Box and setting out how much money we would save by reducing the number of MPs. If the hon. Lady remembers, this was part of reducing the cost of politics more generally. That is why, for example, in the last Parliament, Ministers had a pay freeze and Members in this place had their pay frozen for a significant period of time. It was during those difficult years when the economy and public finances were challenged. Reducing the cost of politics was not the only reason, however, because the primary reason for the boundary changes and for using a more up-to-date register was to have more equal votes and more equal-sized constituencies so that our constituents could be more fairly represented in this House.

Andrew Stephenson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there would be a more immediate cost if the Bill were passed of abandoning the process at the point at which it has currently reached? We have already had 500 hours of public hearings, with the involvement of 20 members of staff, 21 assistant commissioners and 14 videographers. There have been 36 public hearings across England, the last of which are taking place today. The cost of scrapping all that and redrawing the boundaries on the basis of this completely new proposal would, even if it could get through in time, surely run into many millions of pounds.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, which is perhaps the mirror of the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) in his very perceptive question. I may be being unfair to the hon. Member for North West Durham—if I am, I am sure she will put me straight—but I do not think she answered my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch. Under clause 2(4), legislation would be changed, so that instead of using the registers published on 1 December 2015, the boundary commissioners, while still reporting on the same target date of 1 October 2018, would have to use

“registers...published in or after 2017.”

I assume that the hon. Lady has in mind the register that would be published on 1 December 2017, but that does not give the boundary commissions much time to carry out a boundary review.

Ian Blackford: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We were informed by Mr Speaker earlier that the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) was called early because he apparently had a cold. May I suggest that if he is suffering—I am sure that he has the good will of the House if that is the case—it might benefit the rest of us if he went away and took his medication? If he does not genuinely have a cold, has he brought this House into disrepute by duping Mr Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): That was obviously not a point of order, but I, too, heard Mr Speaker say to the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) that he hoped the right hon. Gentleman would come to the end of his speech quite rapidly. A great many other Members wish to speak. I appreciate how learned the right hon. Gentleman is and how personally involved in this issue he was, but I think that everyone would be very grateful if he brought his remarks to a conclusion.

Mr Kevan Jones: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Mr Speaker made very clear that the right hon. Gentleman had asked to be called early because, as we have just heard from the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), he was suffering from a bad cold. Either that was not the case, or the right hon. Gentleman has discovered some miracle cure. If he has, could he share it with us?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, that was not a point of order, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said.

Mr Harper: I had moved on to dealing with the specific points in the Bill, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me just tackle the last couple of points made by the hon. Member for North West Durham before I conclude my remarks.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Harper: I will, but I shall make this the last intervention so that I can follow your injunction, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Sir Greg Knight: Before my right hon. Friend reaches the end of his introductory remarks, may I ask whether he agrees that it would help us to assess the weight of Members' contributions if, at the outset, they informed the House of the current size of their electorates and whether or not they were facing a boundary change?

Mr Harper: That is a good point. There are dramatic differences among the numbers of constituents we all represent, with the same level of resources—and, as I said earlier, a further factor that was not reflected in the Act is that Ministers and Members of the House of Commons are not really responsible for much of the domestic legislation in parts of the United Kingdom where government has been devolved, because that is taken care of by the devolved Administrations.

Let me finally deal with the central point made by the hon. Lady. She said—and I have no reason to doubt her integrity in this regard—that she wanted to enable the boundary commissioners to conduct the review and to hit the target date of 2018 so that we could have new constituencies, according to her rules, before the 2020 election. Let us assume that the commissioners will use the December 2017 registers, and let us accept the argument—advanced very clearly by the hon. Lady and a number of other Members—that the issue is of interest to our constituents, and that the public hearings and public consultation for which the existing legislation provides will therefore take place, given that the hon. Lady does not wish to alter those provisions. That process will take 24 weeks. Effectively, the hon. Lady is giving the boundary commissioners 17 weeks in which to draw up initial proposals from the 2017 registers, engage in the consultation, listen to all the responses, come up with revised proposals, run another set of consultations, listen to any proposals for change in those, and then present final proposals in a matter of a few weeks. I do not think that that is credible. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has had any discussions with the four boundary commissions about whether it is in any way doable, but I do not think it is.

I served as the Minister responsible for these matters. I looked into the resourcing of boundary commissions, and had conversations with their secretariats about the work that was involved. I think that what is really at work here is a set of changes that would, in practice—my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch put his finger on it—make a boundary review before the next general election impossible. This is a repetition of what the Labour party, along with the Liberal Democrats, did in the last Parliament. The aim is to push things out so that we can have a general election in 2020 based on boundaries that are 20 years out of date, on the basis of registers that do not effectively include people over the last two decades. I think that that would be an outrage.

I hope that the Bill is not given a Second Reading, but if it is, we shall want to amend many parts of this wide-ranging legislation in Committee to ensure that it does not make progress in its current form. If it were to do so, we would be ensuring that voters were not equally represented and their voices were not equally heard. I think that this is a very retrograde and bad Bill.

10.44 am

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) on introducing the Bill. She referred to this place as the mother of Parliaments. In the past that would be said with pride, but we can no longer claim to other countries, particularly those with newly minted democracies, that we are the example to be followed. Now, sadly, the mother of Parliaments is a dissolute, degraded hag. There are major weaknesses in our arrangements, and the public are losing confidence in them. The number of constituencies is a matter of some importance, but it has nothing to do with the main doubts, the main injustices, and the main unfairnesses in our system.

We see in America a sense of outrage that the person who won the largest number of votes lost the election because of the distortions of the electoral college, but we have an extraordinary system here. When the ambition should be to make every vote count and be of equal value, elections are decided by a tiny number of people, namely the swing voters in marginal constituencies. How people vote in Blaenau Gwent or Eastbourne does not matter; what matter are the votes in the constituencies where changes take place.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Flynn: I want to be brief, and I want to make this point, because it has not been made so far.

The Government's proposal will make things worse. According to an analysis by the Electoral Reform Society, reducing the number of MPs will reduce the number of marginal constituencies, and will make the House less representative than it is now.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that what is really going on here is that the Executive are reducing the House's ability to hold them to account, while at the same time creating extra peers so that they can get their own way? That cannot be right.

Paul Flynn: My hon. Friend refers to the crisis of scrutiny in this place. That is another major scandal, although one glorious exception is the meeting of one Committee of the House which is going to be made into a musical.

We should also remember that the Government's proposal is a pre-Brexit proposal. There will be a huge amount of extra work to be done here. How can it make any sense to reduce the number of Members of Parliament in those circumstances? The Government's proposal will make Parliament less representative, and it will no longer be a model for those in other countries. The Brexit proposal will impose a huge burden of legislation on the House.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): When the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, the electorate will have 73 fewer elected parliamentarians to represent their interests, and if the number of Members here is reduced as well, a shocking 57% of our lawmakers will be unelected peers. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that reform needs to happen next door before any further changes are made in this place?

Paul Flynn: A range of reforms must be made. We are losing the Members of the European Parliament, and we have a crisis in Wales. The Welsh Assembly has only 60 members and their work has trebled, but it is impossible to argue in isolation for more Assembly Members, although virtually every member of the ruling party is a Minister, a deputy Minister, or the Chair of a Committee. The problems that exist in many areas can be dealt with only by a comprehensive and balanced Bill that takes account of the need for more Members of the Welsh Assembly and the need for fewer peers, and that will require a constitutional convention involving give and take and balanced decision-making. But at the moment we have the extraordinary situation of the Executive becoming immensely more powerful. That is bad government as far as scrutiny is concerned.

In the 1920s, 10% of the governing party was on the Government payroll vote. Under the Government's current proposals to reduce the number of MPs, the Electoral Reform Society says that up to 43% of Government Members will have their mouths bandaged by the discipline of their party, through which they are inhibited from taking a full part in the scrutiny of matters considered by the House. That is a retrograde step.

I urge the House to look at the problems before us. Wales will be particularly hard hit by this. My constituency—my city—offers an excellent example of what will happen and the damage that will be done. There are two marginal seats now; one was won by a Conservative in the past. Those two seats will be merged into one and it will become not a marginal seat, but a rock-solid safe Labour seat, which will be to the advantage of the successor MPs.

The effect is similar throughout the country; this is a diminution in the value of our democracy. People are unhappy that they are not being represented, and the only way we can make sure votes count is with a proportional representation element. Otherwise, politics will be distorted, as always, by the system we have inherited.

If the Government are serious about reforming democracy, they should of course take the boundaries into consideration. The boundaries are an element of

[Paul Flynn]

the reforms that are needed, but only a relatively small one. In the last Parliament we had a Committee on constitutional reform that produced a long document urging overall reform. At the moment the public are right to be cynical, but the only reform the Government are interested in is the one that will give them maximum political advantage. This is a party political stunt by them, ignoring the problems of the House and the ludicrous situation in the House of Lords where it is still possible to buy a place in our legislature by giving a big enough contribution to a major party. They are ignoring that scandal. Some 261 peers were added by David Cameron, which is outrageous. What has that done to the cost of democracy? The other place does great work in scrutinising this House, but it is hopelessly illogical that its membership is larger than that of this House, which has the role of creating legislation and scrutinising it. Nothing has been done about that; nothing has come from the Government, but that is essential.

We need a constitutional convention; we need root-and-branch reform. We are losing public confidence in our democracy, and rightly so. We have institutions here for discipline, which are very permissive. We also have an Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which is totally futile and has no powers. It is not a watchdog; it is a pussycat without teeth or claws.

There is rising resentment and cynicism among the public about the level of our democracy. That ends up in an obscenity like Trump taking over. We must defend our democracy and the quality of our democracy. That is crucial, and we do not do it by a tiny move by one party to gain political advantage for itself. We ought to come together as representatives and seize the opportunity for a major, massive, overhaul reform.

10.54 am

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great honour and a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn); I spent 13 years living in his constituency trying to get rid of him with absolutely no success whatsoever. While we hardly agree on anything, he is undoubtedly a leading parliamentarian, and I am pleased, in the best possible sense, that he is now back on the Back Benches and not constrained by being on the Labour Front Bench.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) on choosing this most important subject to be debated on one of the 13 private Member's Bill days we have in this House, and congratulate all the Members who have made the effort to attend today. I hope that we will get a Division on this Bill and the House will decide one way or the other.

I also congratulate the hon. Lady on the tone in which she introduced the Bill. I thought it was the right tone. There are party political issues, as the hon. Member for Newport West said, and I will touch on them, but the hon. Lady got to the heart of the matter: this is about Parliament and scrutiny. I did spend a brief moment in her constituency during the EU referendum campaign, and it was a really pleasant constituency. I met people from many different parties, and it is a great shame from her constituency point of view that she has decided not to stand again.

I am also following another parliamentarian of great skill, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who I thought when he first came to this House was definitely destined to become a great parliamentarian, which he is. He has, unfortunately, been contaminated by becoming a Government Minister, but now he is back, although he has not quite lost that contamination. In a couple of years, he will be back supporting Parliament and not worrying about the Executive.

I thought I would look back to how this all started. This was part of a backroom deal done when the coalition came to power. The Liberal Democrats wanted a vote on changing the parliamentary system, and the Conservative party wanted to equalise the seats, not because it really believed that was fair—although it is fair and the right thing to do—but because it was thought it would give the Conservatives more seats. That is the truth of the matter. To put the other side of the coin, I should say that there are many sitting on the Opposition Benches who are interested in this for reasons of self-interest, too. But I bet most of the Members in the House today are here for the fundamental issue of Parliament versus Government.

Sadly, I cannot see a single Liberal Democrat in the House today, including the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg), who—I am sorry to have to correct my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean—was the Minister who introduced the Second Reading of the Bill that started all this. I thought it would be interesting to see how the hon. Member for North West Durham voted on Second Reading of that Bill, which took place on 6 September 2010. She voted against the proposals. I then thought I would check who else voted against the proposals. There was the then Member for Northampton South and my hon. Friends the Members for Stone (Sir William Cash), for Christchurch (Mr Chope), for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) and for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner). So the Division was not entirely along party lines. There were people who were prepared to vote against, including, to their great credit, many from the Democratic Unionist party.

This issue goes back, therefore, to something the hon. Member for Newport West touched upon: the balance between the Executive and Parliament. Since what we might loosely call the expenses scandal, Parliament has been getting more powers back. We have had a Speaker who has put Parliament first and championed it, we have had Select Committees, and we have had other movements in that direction, including the establishment of the Backbench Business Committee. All the moves have been to take power away from the Executive and give it to Parliament. This move, however, completely reverses that trend.

I am all in favour of broadly equal-sized seats. That is fair, within a threshold, and I would be happy for the Committee scrutinising this Bill to look at that issue. The hon. Member for Newport West made the point that there were exceptions for certain geographical areas. The previous proposals referred to the Isle of Wight and to what I call the Western Isles, which had two constituencies. I think that that makes sense, and we should consider whether that could be expanded for certain constituencies—but I want to get back to the Executive.

The Electoral Reform Society has said that if there were a general election under the proposed new arrangements and the same proportion of MPs were to be elected as there are now, 43% of Conservative MPs would be on the payroll. That cannot possibly be right. We should not all be here to be in government. There are two equal roles for an MP, one of which is to scrutinise Bills that go through this House. Ever since the Blair years, the Bills that have come to this House have been programmed. Sometimes we do not even debate certain clauses of a Bill, and it is actually the other place that does the proper scrutiny. The elected Members here should have the time to carry out that scrutiny.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend has reminded us of that previous debate. Does he agree that one of the reasons that some of us could not support the Government on that occasion was that they would not answer the straight question as to whether there would be a pro rata reduction in the size of the Executive if there were a reduction in the number of MPs. The Government would not answer that, saying that it was premature to ask the question.

Mr Bone: I remember my hon. Friend making that point, with which I entirely agreed.

Things have got worse. We now have more Government Departments, and rightly so, given that we are coming out of the European Union, but I guess that we are also going to have 60% more laws to look at. The argument for reducing the number of MPs seems to be false, especially as we are getting rid of 70-odd MEPs. Also, the Government cannot possibly claim that they are doing this on the basis of cost. We have only to look at how much more money is being spent on Spads. Even during the Blair years it was only a few million, but it is something like £9 million now.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that this is also a matter of fairness and fair representation for all our constituents?

Mr Bone: I absolutely agree that as a matter of fairness we should try to equalise the seats, but it is absolutely wrong to reduce the number of MPs and to say that it is being done on the basis of cost. Democracy cannot have a cost put on it. We could of course have a dictator—that would be very cheap! But that is not how it works. In fact, the Government have tended to go a little way towards being a dictatorship. We have had sofa decisions that were not made in Cabinet, and at times it has been really difficult for us in this House to vote on certain issues because of these wretched programme motions. My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) and I spent a lot of our time during the coalition Government voting against programme motions on every occasion, because we had said in our manifesto that that was what we were going to do.

The former Prime Minister made a great speech on Parliamentary sovereignty, and if those proposals had been enforced, MPs would have been encouraged to have a free vote in Committees—although the Government would have been able to change things on Report—and we would have had more open debates without programme motions. That all fell by the wayside, however, because the Government do not really want that to happen; and,

to be honest, the shadow Government do not want it either. That is why we have never made progress on that. Hon. Members will remember that the timetable for this House was going to be run by a parliamentary business Committee within two years of us coming into power. I remember talking to the then Chief Whip, who said that that would happen over his dead body, and of course it never did happen. So please do not talk to me about manifesto commitments.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): May I take the hon. Gentleman back to his point about the number of Members of Parliament who are on the payroll? Any Government—those whom I support and those whom I oppose—will have not only Members who are on the payroll but Members who want to be on the payroll. Reducing the number of MPs to 600 will inevitably mean fewer independent-minded MPs. Those on both our Front Benches would probably welcome that, but we should not do so. It will be a retrograde step, to say the least, if that happens, but it seems inevitable that it will.

Mr Bone: The independent Member is entirely right. Of course, I have to be really careful about what I say today because this could ruin my chances of getting on to the Front Bench. This is a serious and important matter, however. I say gently that there has been a tendency for some Members to come to this House not because they want to be Members of Parliament but because they want to be Ministers. They are not interested in the role of scrutiny. We cannot scrutinise the Government properly if nearly half those on our side are on the payroll. Equally, there will be Opposition Members who are on the “payroll”, even though they do not get paid, unless they are Whips. I have never understood why Whips get paid. We should do away with that, but that is another issue.

The role of scrutiny is really important. I have seen in a recent email that about six Select Committees have vacancies for Conservative Members. If we are having problems filling Select Committees now, what will it be like when there are 50 fewer MPs? Those 50 MPs will not, by their nature, have been in the Executive. As my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) said, there are absolutely no proposals to reduce the size of the Executive in parallel with the reduction in the number of MPs, although there should be.

I want to deal with the question of timing. In my view, it is more than likely that we will have a general election in May, if not before. Such an election would of course be fought on the current boundaries. The argument that we have to get all these boundary changes in place before 2020 is therefore nonsense. Also, it is not good for a Conservative to say that something is out of date just because it is 20 years old. It might be time to start looking at it if it is 120 years out of date, but not after just 20 years.

I want to speak briefly about something that I feel passionately about, which is the other side of our role. We spend a lot of our time here in Parliament from Monday to Thursday—or Monday to Friday if it is one of the 13 weeks in which the House sits on a Friday—doing exactly what we are doing today. The rest of the time, we are looking after our constituents. I have been looking back, and I can tell the House that in the last 100 years,

[Mr Bone]

we have never had fewer than 615 Members of Parliament. Way back then, however, they did not have the constituency workload that we have now. I am not complaining about this; constituency work is a very important part of our role. For example, my Listening to Wellingborough and Rushden campaign generates an enormous amount of work. Most Members hold a surgery every week, and my estimate is that I receive at least 1,000 emails, letters and phone calls a week. We have a limited number of staff to help us with that. That workload is going to increase because we are getting rid of MEPs, and it will also increase if we reduce the number of MPs and make the constituencies larger.

I also want to look at how busy Members of Parliament are and what we have to put up with. I am going to touch on an area that does not get a lot of coverage because we do not like to talk about it, for very sensible reasons—namely, the question of security. I doubt that there is a Member in this House who has not been threatened in the last few years. We have seen the terrible death of a colleague. Other colleagues have been attacked. Only recently, I had death threats. My wife has had death threats. The police have intervened. In my first 11 years in this House, I had to dial 999 once from my constituency office because we were worried. Since the referendum, I have had to call 999 three times. I had someone outside chained to the gates of Parliament who had threatened me. I have had two bullet holes—admittedly from air pellets—put in the windows of my office. I have had my house attacked. I have had the office windows smashed. The vile stuff that we get on Twitter is unbelievable. One of the worst things that happened is that some months ago, there was a picture of my youngest son being executed by Isis. They had actually taken another child's photo and mocked it up, but the police rang me up to say, "Where is your son?" I said, "Well, I think he's at school", and they said, "Well, you'd better check."

We have to put up with all that. We have to have contact with our constituents, and I would not change any of that. Some of us will be getting enhanced security, and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is doing its best to help with that. We have to deal with that sort of stuff. We have to deal with constituents' problems. Some of them are just run of the mill things where we can help out. A lot of the stuff we deal with relates to local government. A lot of it is social care issues, which this House really needs to look at from a bipartisan point of view.

Some of the stuff we deal with, however, is exceptionally serious. I can remember at least two occasions where we campaigned on such matters in this House. As a result of one of those, thanks to Gordon Brown, the NHS position on some treatment changed, and a little boy who would have died got a few years extra life out of it. That sort of thing is worth while, but it is time-consuming. The fact is that if we are going to put more work on ourselves because of leaving the EU while at the same time reducing the number of MPs, we will not do the scrutiny properly, and I am afraid that our service to our constituents will go down. I feel passionately about that, and that is why we should not reduce the number of MPs.

I will tell the House about the effect that the current reforms will have in Northamptonshire. Under the scheme, we are entitled to 6.5 MPs. It is proposed that the seat of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) goes all the way up to the borders of Leicester. There is no logic in that and no consistency. My seat will be divided between the constituencies of four different MPs, who will all be representing one council. It does not make any sense. The Boundary Commission proposals move people around willy-nilly. I would have 6,000 coming in from the Corby constituency, 3,000 going into Kettering, another 3,000 going into Northampton South and the northern villages going into the new Daventry seat, which will go up into Leicestershire. If we had the same number of MPs, Northamptonshire would be entitled to seven MPs and we would not have those problems.

I know that there are party political issues about numbers. I urge all Members to put that to one side and to think about Parliament, the Executive and why we are here. I urge everyone to support the Bill. There obviously will be issues that will need to be looked at in Committee. If the hon. Member for North West Durham would like me to, I volunteer to serve on the Committee.

11.14 am

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). He made a thoughtful and powerful contribution on the issue. Our politics might not be the same, but he is undoubtedly a champion for parliamentary democracy, and his contribution shone through in that respect.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) for introducing this important Bill. She has done a lot of work on it, and she makes a powerful point that she is not doing so for her own political advantage because, as she told the House, she is not standing at the next election. I place on record that that will be a great loss to the House. She has been a great Member of Parliament for the people of North West Durham in the time that she has been here, particularly with her expertise on education, and she will be missed. If the last act that she performs is to ensure that the House of Commons can hold the Government to account in the future, she will have done a fine job. Opposition Front Benchers fully support her Bill.

The Labour party agrees with the principle of equal-sized seats, which has long been written into law and is the main purpose of the boundary commissions' work. Before we hear messages to the contrary, we have to remind the House that when Labour was in office, we enacted the fifth boundary review in 2006—it was politically detrimental to the Labour party in terms of seats lost—because we believed then, as we do now, that we have to have boundaries in place that fully reflect the general populous. However, the proposals to redraw our boundaries are unfair. They run the risk of being undemocratic. In many parts of the United Kingdom, they are unacceptable to the local populations.

To see evidence of that, one only needs to consider what the Government have done while espousing the need to cut the costs of an elected Chamber. The nub of the Bill, as the hon. Member for Wellingborough said, goes beyond how many MPs there should be or who represents where. It is about how democracy in the

United Kingdom functions. I remind the Minister that, in opposition, the Conservatives promised to curb the costs of government and limit the number of special advisers, but the number of those advisers has increased by more than 20%, from 79 before the May 2015 election—the most recent election—to 97 in December 2015. That is the highest recorded number for a majority Government ever. In total, this Administration have spent £45 million on wages and severance pay for special advisers during their time in office. It is curious that Government estimates show a saving of £12 million from the cutting of 50 Members of Parliament. That is roughly the same cost to the public purse as the severance packages that the previous Prime Minister handed out to those who left office at the same time as he did.

When the new occupant of 10 Downing Street came into office in July, space had to be found for those special advisers and close friends who had been so callously thrown on to the scrapheap. They might not be experts, but they surely need a chance, too. In September, the bloated Benches of the other place swelled even further when a raft of them were ennobled by the former Prime Minister, taking its membership to more than 800—far greater than the size of this House. That act debased the other place's responsibility to check and challenge the Government, turning it into little more than an opportunity to honour former party donors and friends.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Is the hon. Gentleman implying that Baroness Chakrabarti was a Conservative appointment?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Lady knows that the custom and practice is that when the Government increase the number of lords, other parties also have that opportunity. However—this relates to my next point—the noble lady that the hon. Lady references is an active Member of the House of Lords and of the Labour Front-Bench team. Many Members of the other place do not make an active contribution to the work of that Chamber and that needs to be looked at.

Only yesterday, the Government announced their intention to drop proposals aimed at changing the powers of the Lords, citing that the world has changed. Well, yes, it has, and if Brexit is the reason for stepping back from curtailing the powers of the other place, it is also a sound and justifiable reason to think again about the changes proposed to this elected Chamber. Although Lords reform is not directly linked to the Bill, it is an important part of how a fully functioning democracy works. It is worth recognising that over two thirds of the public have consistently supported real reform of the other place, yet cynicism and power are all that the Government seem concerned with when overloading the other place with former spin doctors and party workers.

I am heartened, however, by the fact that other people share my concern and that we may actually have support from the most unlikely of sources. When recently asked about his responsibilities in the Lords, Baron Lloyd-Webber of Sydmonton responded:

“I was put in as an honour, not as a working peer. Not as lobby fodder. I'm fed up with the fact that I keep being asked now to go in and vote for things about which I don't have knowledge.”

The other place is so bloated that it is second only to China's National People's Congress—the largest legislature in the world—which is odd considering that China has

1.2 billion more citizens than the UK. For a more learned and respected opinion, I ask right hon. and hon. Members to heed the warning of the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), who rightly stated:

“It seems perverse to reduce the number of elected representatives in this place while the Lords continues to gorge itself on new arrivals.”—[*Official Report*, 8 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 502.]

Wayne David: Does my hon. Friend agree that the figure of 600 to which this place will be reduced is entirely arbitrary? There is no logic or common sense behind it whatsoever.

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. I can remember my hon. Friend making that point when the legislation was going through. Why 600? Why not 500 or 400? Why not 700 or 800? Nobody has actually set out a reason for 600. That is why it is right to retain the 650 Members of Parliament that we have today and have had in previous Parliaments.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman really believe that anyone other than politicians believes that there are too few of us?

Andrew Gwynne: The facts are in front of us. At a time of global uncertainty and change, we need to reconsider the proposals because it is more than likely that we will have 73 fewer politicians in the coming years because no one will be elected to the European Parliament. Their workload will come to this place—not only the scrutiny of laws that are currently scrutinised in Brussels and Strasbourg, but all the extra work that goes with that. I am sure that all the lobbyists will find a track to Westminster. They will be cancelling their tickets to Brussels and will be wanting to speak about legislation to Members of Parliament here.

Although I am sure that Members on both sides will not shirk their duties, where is the sense in cutting the number of elected Members here when we have a massive job to do of unpicking 40 years of legislation regarding our relationship with the European Union and our partners within it and of scrutinising new trading arrangements with the rest of the world? Where is the sense in cutting the number of Members when the job of holding the Government to account is absolutely vital? With larger constituencies, we will inevitably have larger caseloads from our own constituents, too.

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Gentleman is making an eloquent case for the Bill, but we had about 650 MPs before Brexit and before we went into the Common Market. We now have the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly, police and crime commissioners, and elected mayors. We are just about to get a huge devolution of power in Greater Manchester, which he knows about and has spoken eloquently about. I would therefore suggest that this House can be reduced probably even further than the modest reduction proposed in the 2011 legislation. I would go for 400 MPs. I would happily see this place reduced much further.

Andrew Gwynne: I just do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. There is no case for reducing the size of the House of Commons when we have in front of us the big task of making a success of the Government's negotiations

[Andrew Gwynne]

with our European and global partners. If we cannot hold the Government to account on that, this House will be failing in its duty.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Another argument for retaining the current number of Members of Parliament is that we have reports, including from the former head of the civil service in no less than *The House* magazine, that the number of civil servants will have to be increased quite dramatically. So the civil service will increase, but the number of people overseeing and directing the civil service and making laws will be reduced. By the way, the number of Assembly Members in Northern Ireland is going to decrease.

Andrew Gwynne: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point, because we are talking about the costs of government here, not just those of Parliament. The two cannot be disentangled.

Moving on to the review itself, its unfairness and unequal nature are compounded by the fact that many individual voters have been omitted from the calculations used by the boundary commissions. I wonder how the Government can defend their position on equalising the number of voters in each constituency, which each and every Member would support, while using information based on an electoral register with close to two million voters not counted. As Government Members will be aware, the spike of newly registered voters enthused by June's referendum and the increased sign up from May's local election mean that around 4% of the electoral register has not been counted in the review. That serious omission risks producing a distorted picture of our nation and alienating hundreds upon thousands of younger first-time voters under-30. How dare we tell the 700,000 young people who signed up in a few short months in the run-up to the referendum that we want them to engage, but that their voice is irrelevant in deciding the political map of our communities? Put plainly, the omission of close to 2 million voters has completely distorted the boundary review process, so the aim of equalising our constituency boundaries will not be possible.

Mr Harper: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was listening when I made my remarks about the independent analysis that has been done on the 2 million figure. If these 2 million voters are equally spread across the UK, they make no difference to the distribution of seats. Either what I said, quoting an independent source, is true or it is not. If he does not think it is true and he has a different analysis produced by some independent people, perhaps he could share it with the House; otherwise, this makes no difference to the distribution of seats and is a false argument.

Andrew Gwynne: What the right hon. Gentleman says is on the premise that this is equally spread, but of course it is not. There were increases in the number of people on the electoral register in every constituency, but in parts of the country where there has historically been under-registration, the spikes were larger than in other areas.

Wayne David: The Library has produced facts that contradict what the right hon. Gentleman has said. They show that if extra electors brought in for the purpose of the referendum were taken into account, London would have two extra constituencies, whereas the south-west and Northern Ireland would each have one fewer, so there would be a material difference.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. friend is absolutely right about that and he brings me to my next point.

Let us consider the example of London, a global city with a growing population that is expected to rise by more than 1.5 million in the next decade. Strangely, the same city is expected to lose a dozen MPs from its contingent of 73 if the current proposals go through unchecked. As my hon. Friend has said, to compound that, research from the House of Commons shows that over the six-month period from December 2015 to June 2016 the London electorate grew by 6%. That did not occur in isolation; during the same period, the south-west saw a rise of 4.7%, Yorkshire and the Humber's rise was 4.2%, Wales's rise was 4.1% and the increase in the west midlands was 3.2%. Those citizens are eager to play their part in the process, but for this purpose they are citizens whose voice no longer counts.

As we have heard, many of the proposed constituencies make very little geographical sense, homogenising vast swathes of rural Britain and tearing up historic counties. For example, dramatically cutting the number of Welsh MPs will do little to address the democratic deficit felt by some within rural Wales. Any constitutional changes, including in the very make-up of the constituencies we stand here to represent, should be done fairly, and everyone's voice should be heard.

The truth about the plan to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600 is that no real reason has been given for it. As my hon. Friend said, when the original Bill was being discussed, no Minister could give a real reason for picking the 600 figure. New boundaries, a smaller House of Commons and the shift to individual electoral registration all tilt the electoral battlefield further not just towards the Conservative party, but towards the Executive. There are no plans to cut the size of the ministerial payroll, and having fewer MPs to hold Ministers to account is not good for democracy. It cannot be democratic, fair or even competent to advance this review at the same time as we are stuffing the other place with unelected and often unprepared peers. Put all this together and we face a boundary review being conducted on the basis of a completely lopsided electoral register. If we proceed as planned, we will see a huge transfer of parliamentary representation from areas that are growing to areas that have not seen the same growth.

The Opposition are confident that this Bill will significantly improve the process of drawing up new parliamentary seats on a fair and equal basis. We believe that 650 is the right number of MPs to hold the Government to account. We give our full support to this Bill in the hope that the Government pause—

Mr Chope *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I am coming to the end of my speech. We give our full support in the hope that the Government pause, look again and proceed with changes that are agreed consensually with Members in all parts of this House and with all nations of the UK.

11.35 am

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I should begin by saying that, like the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass), who introduced the Bill, I have no personal interest in this, because I, too, will be standing down at the next election.

I should say to my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) that doubtless I am much contaminated by six years in government and 18 years on the Front Bench, but I nevertheless believe it makes sense for us to consider these issues as though we had a population that needs to be served by a system of government that works in the interests of that population. We should not be thinking about this simply in terms of the House of Commons, which is a matter of more concern to many people in this place than it is to many of our citizens, who want to be well governed but who do not know much about and do not much like the workings of the House of Commons. The House of Commons certainly should not think of itself as a model to the world, because, as the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) rightly said, there is currently much scepticism about the organs of our democracy.

Mr Bone: My right hon. Friend will doubtless make a powerful and interesting speech, but does he come to this debate with the belief that there should be a separation of powers, with an Executive outside this House? That may colour his views in this debate.

Sir Oliver Letwin: As my hon. Friend knows from previous conversations, I do take that view and have done so, uniquely in the Conservative party, I believe, for about the past 40 years. I shall briefly touch on that at a much later stage in my remarks, but for now I simply wish to observe that it is important that we think about this issue as grown-ups who are trying to look after the interests of our fellow citizens, not as people who happen to be sitting on these green Benches trying to look after the interests of the House of Commons, which is an artefact of no value whatsoever unless it is part of the good governance of our country in the interests of its citizens.

This is the first time I have attended a debate on a Friday for very many years, and I was surprised to discover that I was quite interested in the nature of the debate. It seems that, from time to time, there have actually been some arguments made—that is a rare thing to hear in the House of Commons. In principle, three kinds of arguments have been going on. The first is whether equalisation is the aim of the current Act governing the Boundary Commission activity or whether it is about gerrymandering. The second is about whether 600 is a better number of MPs than 650. The third is the question raised by the hon. Member for Newport West: is it right to make incremental change in pursuit of incremental improvements when large questions about the constitution as a whole also need to be addressed? I want to discuss each of those points in turn.

First, I turn to the question of whether the motive for and effect of the current Act of Parliament governing the Boundary Commission's activities is equalisation or gerrymandering. As I would have expected, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) dealt very effectively with the fact that the current Boundary Commission review does not include reference

to the people who registered at the last moment. I was the Minister who brought to the House arrangements to ensure that people who registered at the very last moment were able to vote in the referendum, and it is certainly right that they should have been registered. My right hon. Friend dealt very well with whether the fact that they registered after the Boundary Commission figures were produced affects the outcome of the review to any significant extent.

However, we do not need to rely on my right hon. Friend's view on that because the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who interjected from the Labour Benches, blew the whole argument out of the water when he quoted, quite sensibly, the Library figures. They showed that the total effect, even on an analysis less favourable to the argument I am making than that which was provided by the independent source for my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean—the House of Commons Library analysis—the total net difference is two extra in London and one fewer in the south-west and in Northern Ireland. There is no significant distributional impact.

Wayne David: The right hon. Gentleman does not mention the knock-on effect: a number of other boundaries are affected as a consequence of that change.

Sir Oliver Letwin: As a matter of fact, very few are. Even if there were a few, the net distributional impact is very slight. That has to be put in context to be understood. This was another point that my right hon. Friend made very clearly. I will come in a moment to the point that the Bill very clearly has the purpose and the effect of ensuring that we will not proceed with redistribution before 2020. If we do not proceed with it, the disequilibrium—the lack of equivalence that Labour's spokesman, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), said his party favours—would be far, far greater than the discrepancy would be, even on the House of Commons Library figures, if the distributional impacts from the new registration were not taken into account. So either equalisation matters or it does not matter.

Mr Harper: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Oliver Letwin: In a moment.

It appears that we have cross-party consent, at least on the face of it, to equalisation. Equalisation will be achieved to a far greater degree by proceeding with the current arrangements than by not proceeding with them. The only further question we have to ask is whether it was the hon. Member for North West Durham, who introduced the Bill, or my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) who were right when the discussion went on about whether it was possible to proceed with the hon. Lady's Bill and for it to become an Act, and to proceed with the Boundary Commission proposals in time for 2020.

As it happens, I spent quite a lot of the past few years talking to the boundary commissions about these issues. I am prepared to say in Parliament, and I think it is not improper for me to say in Parliament, that I am absolutely certain from what they told me that there is not the ghost of a chance—and I think the spokesman for the

[*Sir Oliver Letwin*]

Opposition, who appears to be a clever person, is perfectly aware that there is not a ghost of a chance—that we could have a redistribution before 2020 if we were to proceed with the hon. Lady's Bill and it became an Act. That is, I think, the very purpose of the Bill.

Mr Harper: I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend finished that powerful point before he gave way to me, as it highlights what the Bill is really about. On the so-called missing voters, the point that he was just developing is that if we are not able to proceed with the boundary changes that the commissions are currently working on, we will fight the next election on seats that are drawn on electoral registers dating from 2000, so not only would we not be including the 2 million people who registered for the referendum and the 700,000 people who registered subsequently, but we would be missing the millions and millions of people who have registered to vote since 2000, and, by the way, we would be including all the people who were on the register in 2000 but who, sadly, are no longer with us.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My right hon. Friend is clearly right about that. It is a matter of fact, not of opinion. There would be less approximation to an equal distribution of population per seat and of registered voters per seat if we do not proceed with the current proposals than if we do. The Bill would therefore diminish the chances of there being an election based on roughly equivalent numbers of electors in each seat.

Mr Chope: On the question of whether the Bill is implementable in the timescale set out by its proponents, does my right hon. Friend recall that the Boundary Commission gave evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in the previous Parliament to the effect that it would not be possible to make the changes unless the commission started, as it did this time, in February 2016. That was the latest point at which it could start if it was to produce changes in time for October 2018.

Sir Oliver Letwin: Yes, my hon. Friend right. That is the evidence that the Boundary Commission gave, but I was always, as I know he was when he was a Minister, suspicious of claims by agencies of the state that things could not be done on certain timescales, so I went to the trouble for some while to interrogate that set of propositions and to look specifically at all the things that could be done to diminish the elapsed time by doing things in parallel rather than in series, by constricting various forms of consultation, and by accelerating the responses to the consultations. I am satisfied that the Boundary Commission genuinely in this case could do not this with any semblance of propriety. It is not a matter of being able to overcome those problems by giving it more money or more resources. It simply could not do the job. I think the spokesman for the Opposition is perfectly aware of these facts and that it is his intention to ensure that we do not proceed with equalisation.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): If we are in the business of practicality, with the right hon. Gentleman's long experience of contamination in Government, what makes him think that hugely controversial proposals

that lack any consensus, that have united the Opposition parties across the House against them and that are opposed by independent-minded Conservatives have any chance whatsoever of getting an affirmative vote and an Order in Council some time in 2018? All this upset and nonsense is for nothing unless the Government start to listen to other voices.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman. My guess is that the proposals will get consent. Time will tell. We will also see whether they get assent in the other place, which is much the greater question. Clearly, we have seen in the past few days the Government withdraw from measures intended to make it easier to ensure that if this place consents, the other place can be made to consent. Nevertheless, my own guess is that both places will consent. We will see.

In this debate we are not talking about whether or not the other place will consent. We are talking about whether we should adopt legislation that would prevent any chance of our having the opportunity even to assent. My point is that if we do not have that opportunity, we can be sure that we will not have a more equalised set of seats. Of course, the right hon. Gentleman, who is one of the canniest politicians in the United Kingdom over a very long period, very well knows that that is the case and he has a very great interest.

I want to address our party interests for a moment. It is as clear as day, although many Members who have spoken have been coy about being explicit about it, that there are party interests on both sides of the Chamber. It is perfectly true that equalisation would remove a bias in the electoral system that has existed against the Conservative party for a little while. It used to be the other way round at one stage; these things happen over time. The fact is—it is quite an important fact—that it is not in the interests of a political party to have the boundaries redrawn for 2020. As things currently stand in the polling, the Conservative party will have a massive majority in the House of Commons after the 2020 election and—[*Interruption.*] No, indeed, not in Scotland.

If things go terribly wrong between now and 2020, I do not believe that these changes will protect the Conservative majority under those circumstances. My whole experience of politics, which I suspect is shared by the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), whose experience is longer and deeper than mine, is that when the mood of the country shifts, it does not make too much difference what the system is—it shifts pretty decisively one way or the other. So, although there are party interests here, they are not nearly as important as either side may believe, and we should be trying to do a sensible and right thing, rather than something that is in the interests of one party or the other.

Alex Salmond: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman is totally disinterested, but I am also sure he is aware that the Scottish proposals, which would be of great interest to me, would mean that, on the same votes as at the last election, the SNP would have all the seats bar one in Scotland. Does he not understand, in a disinterested way, that I am trying to save the last Conservative MP in Scotland?

Sir Oliver Letwin: Actually, no. With his typical brilliance, the right hon. Gentleman is alluringly enticing us to avoid noticing that there would be a reduced number of

Scottish Members altogether in this House. As his party currently controls almost all the Scottish seats, it is to his advantage to maintain the number of Scottish Members and, indeed, a system in which Scottish electors are typically over-represented by the number of their Members of Parliament, almost all of whom are from the SNP.

As I say, I do not actually believe that that is the material question. The material question is whether having the current set of proposals being operated by the Boundary Commission would equalise better than not having them, the answer to which is clearly yes. Is it right to equalise more rather than less? The Opposition and the Government appear to agree that that is right, and even my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough agrees that it is right. Are we going to equalise more or less if we proceed with this Bill rather than the current arrangements? The answer is clearly that we are more likely to equalise better if we proceed with the current arrangements rather than the Bill.

I want to turn now to the second question, about the number of Members of Parliament. There was a very interesting contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough, and the Opposition spokesman made some echoing remarks about it. Both of them were really trying to argue that 650 is a better number—incidentally, I do not suggest that either of them suggested that there was a perfection about 650—than 600 for the purposes of doing what they each described as holding the Government to account. That is obviously a serious argument, in the sense that in a House of Commons in which 99.9% of its Members were on the payroll, the 0.1% of its Members who were not on the payroll would have some difficulty holding the 99.9% to account.

I do not personally believe that the difference between 650 and 600—or, while we are at it, 600 and 550, or 600 and 500—makes terribly much difference to the effectiveness with which this House is able to hold the Government to account. My experience is that one good MP, one effective Select Committee or one Opposition spokesman who knows what they are doing can hold a Government to account very powerfully, and a very large number of incompetent and inadequate people sitting on these Benches can wholly fail to hold Governments to account. I do not believe there is any clear relationship, still less any systemic relationship, between the number of people entitled to sit on these green Benches—most of whom, mostly, are not here—and the amount of actual, effective scrutiny of Government. It is quality, not quantity, that affects the scrutiny of Government.

It seems to me that we should address a different question in looking at whether 650 is a better number than 600 or vice versa—of course I accept that neither is a perfect number, and there is no absolute standard in terms of the right numbers. I think there is a certain myopia on this. We have to open our eyes and ask ourselves just how we look to the world. People have mentioned the other place, which, incidentally, I think is ludicrously structured altogether and is definitely in need of reform. Indeed, I tried very hard to get it reformed into a proper elected Chamber, and I shall go on arguing that case, because it is the only thing that will save that part of our democracy and actually create some checks and balances in our system. People have observed that the other place is now the largest legislature other than that in China, which obviously has more than 1 billion people in it. That may be true, but there is

another legislature in this country that is almost as large—it is here. We have 650 Members of Parliament seeking to be the primary source of legislation, if I can put it that way, for 60 million people. In the United States, there are 100 Senators, who are counterpoised against, roughly speaking, the same number of representatives as we have in this House. If we add the two numbers in the United States together, the total is not that much greater than our 650, but those people are looking after the interests of 300 million people, instead of 60 million people.

Mr Bone: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Oliver Letwin: I will, but let me just anticipate what I think my hon. Friend might be about to say. It used to be said that the reason that is appropriate is that the states in the United States have so much power. It is no longer the case—this is very much the point raised by various of my hon. Friends—that we live in a wholly centralised system; we live in something that is getting very much closer to being a federal system, in which vast amounts of the power that used to reside in this place have been devolved in one way or another to Administrations elsewhere, and more of that is going on all the time.

We are vastly overweight; there are many more of us MPs per head of population than in most other serious democracies. I am not aware of any Member of Parliament who could not handle some more constituents. Now, I accept that it is more difficult for those who live in and represent seats that are much larger. My own seat is middling, in the sense that it is 400 square miles. I do not have the advantage that urban MPs have of representing a very small patch, but I am not, of course, challenged in the way that some of our Scottish colleagues, for example, are with their vast seats, and I do accept, therefore, the reason for some exceptions. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean said, that issue was debated when we moved from 650 to 600, and a balanced judgment was struck about creating enough exceptions to try to deal with those who face particular geographical problems.

Mr Bone: My right hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech, which appears to be plausible, until we listen to the substance. He is talking about the United States of America, where there is a wholly different system. There is the split of powers, and, of course, the states have their rights. The comparison is completely unfair, and my right hon. Friend might want to look at look at the point again.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I think that is the nearest thing to a compliment I have ever received from my hon. Friend, and it is probably the nearest I am ever going to get, so I shall celebrate it quietly. I do not accept the second part of his argument—the first part I have already dealt with. He asserts that, in the absence of a separation of powers, which, as I have said, I would actually prefer to see, the danger from the numbers of MPs on the payroll, or the crypto-payroll of the Opposition, is that nobody is really holding anybody to account. Actually, the dynamic of this House of Commons—one can see it sitting here or standing here right now—is a dynamic of dialectic. The principal form of the holding to account

[*Sir Oliver Letwin*]

of the Government of the day resides on the Opposition Front Bench, not, I regret to say this, with my Back-Bench colleagues, among whom I now number myself. It is the quality of the Front-Bench arguments from the Opposition that principally challenges the Government of the day. This House is designed to reflect that, and that is the reason we do not sit in a circle, but opposite one another. That is behind the whole structure of debate in this House. Indeed, the timetable of this House is organised on that principle. If my hon. Friend's charmingly nostalgic, although never-existing picture of a House of Commons that was holding Governments to account from the Back Benches were accurate, we would not recently have introduced a bit of Backbench Business; we would have substituted Opposition days, of which there are many, with Back-Bench days.

Mr Bone: Absolutely. Good idea.

Sir Oliver Letwin: My hon. Friend would be very much in favour of that, but that is not how this place works or has ever worked. This place works in terms of the dialectic between Opposition and Government. It is a very powerful dialectic. It reaches certain crucial moments each week at question times. It reaches its most crucial moment at Prime Minister's questions, and that is the jousting match—often, alas, not terribly illuminating, but nevertheless—that causes the Government to be on their toes most, and that forces Prime Ministers to find out what is going on in their own Governments and to defend them across the Dispatch Box. That is much more powerful as a form of holding people to account than anything that can be done from the Back Benches, and it is nothing to do with the numbers. So I reject the argument that the numbers have any significant impact on the ability of this House to hold the Government to account.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that much of the change in Government policy in recent months has come as a result of Conservative Back Benchers scrutinising and challenging the Government when they think they have got it wrong rather than challenges from Opposition Members?

Sir Oliver Letwin: I agree that at a time when, regrettably, there is a rather weak Opposition, and when there are, as it happens, many very enterprising Government Back Benchers, not all of whom are willing to go along with everything, we will get cases in which the Government Back Benchers do perform a very important role in holding the Government to account. However, that is due to the quality and not the quantity of the contributions that are made by my hon. Friends on the Back Benches. We could have hundreds of lemons sitting here and not having the slightest effect on the Government of the day, or we could have five, or three, very effective Back Benchers who could cause very considerable trouble for the Government of the day. It is about quality, not quantity.

I want finally to address the interesting point made by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), whose argument was different in kind from that of the hon. Member for North West Durham and the other

speakers. I hope he would agree that I am not doing his argument any injustice if I say that he was arguing, first, that there are many large constitutional deficiencies in Britain today—a proposition with which I abundantly agree—and secondly, that it makes no sense to try to change one particular element of the whole picture, though he admitted that it was an element that probably did require change, in the absence of an overall and thoroughgoing change of the whole system.

That is a very serious argument, but it is also very seriously wrong. I think it is wrong for two reasons: first, practically, and secondly, theoretically. Of course, in the end, the practical argument matters more than the theoretical one. The practical truth is that we are not going to get the kind of constitutional change that I think he, and certainly I, want any time in the near future. I personally was partly responsible for the total failure to secure the reform of the House of Lords. The House of Lords, in its current structure, is a wholly indefensible object. No rational human being could possibly argue that it is a good idea to have a legislature constituted in the way that the House of Lords is constituted. Indeed, I never heard anybody, in the whole of that debate, make an argument in favour of the House of Lords as currently constituted, except that they thought it was the lesser evil. What they meant by that varied. Some of the people I failed to convince said that what is better about the House of Lords is that it is totally useless, so it cannot do anything, and so the House of Commons reigns supreme. Some said that what is better about it is that it is not another House of Commons. Some said that what is better about it is that it cannot intervene in such a way as to prevent the Government of the day having their will, or create the kinds of checks and balances that I suspect that the hon. Gentleman wants, and certainly I want, to see in our constitution.

There were many reasons why people defended the House of Lords, all of which were of the character that things as they are indefensible, but less bad than they would be if we had a properly elected Chamber at the other end of the building. They were a rainbow coalition of people with different points of view on just that one point about the reform of the House of Lords, which made it quite impossible. There was a fascinating interchange between my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean and Opposition Members, and indeed my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough, about whether we had to withdraw the proposal. By golly, we had to withdraw it, because we had done the sums and we knew perfectly well that we were going to get nowhere near being able to carry it through. This was something that had been in the manifestos of both the two largest parties, and was the primary goal, once AV—the alternative vote—had bitten the dust, of the minor party in the coalition. All three parties had it in their manifestos, and one of them really cared about it, yet we could not even get that through.

Therefore, the chances of getting through major constitutional reform to create a system of checks and balances based on the separation of powers in a written constitution, which are things this country certainly needs, are very dim indeed. In fact, my guess is that some decades—possibly some centuries—from now, people will still be standing in this place talking about those issues. If we were to wait for that before making incremental

change, we would have registers that are 50, 100 or 200 years out of date. That would not, practically speaking, be a sensible way to proceed.

Mr Bone: The point that I hope my right hon. Friend and I can agree on is that the Government decided not to proceed with the Bill on the Floor of the House without a programme motion. It is not that they would not have got it through, but that they refused to give up the time to allow it to be debated without a programme motion.

Sir Oliver Letwin: We ought to have a historical seminar about this. My hon. Friend is only partly right. It is perfectly true, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean said, that if we had tried to proceed without a programme motion, the main sacrifice is that we would have been unable to do almost anything else that was in our programme for government and that the Government needed to do.

Mr Bone: It was a choice.

Sir Oliver Letwin: It was indeed a choice. What my hon. Friend does not recognise, though, is that it was perfectly clear, having done the sums, that we were not, at the end of it all, going to get anything through, so we would have achieved the miracle of sacrificing almost the entire rest of our programme for the sake of achieving nothing whatsoever. That was not an attractive prospect, and that is why we withdrew the proposal, even though the corollary of doing so—this is the supreme irony of discussing the matter today—was that the Liberal Democrats in the coalition refused to support the implementation of the very changes that we are now discussing.

Paul Flynn: I am grateful for the serious attention that the right hon. Gentleman is giving to the points raised. Does he think that given the current situation of intense public cynicism, it is unwise to put forward a piecemeal measure that advantages only one party and intensifies the problems of scrutiny and representation that we have in this country when we are nowhere near to making sure that every vote counts?

Sir Oliver Letwin: No, because, as I have tried to argue in the first two parts of my speech, first, I do not think that the changes going forward at the moment are simply gerrymandering, but that they are fairer. Secondly, I do not believe that reducing the numbers reduces the quality of accountability. I therefore reject the hon. Gentleman's argument. I accept that if it were a bad thing to do, it would be a bad thing to do piecemeal, but if it is a good thing to do, it is a good thing to do piecemeal, even though it would be better if we could—unfortunately we cannot—achieve major constitutional reform alongside it.

Wayne David: Surely the lesson of our discussion about Lords reform, and of the debate about boundary changes, is that the only way to bring about major constitutional change of this kind is on the basis of political consensus between all the parties.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am afraid that I was receiving instructions to be brief while the hon. Gentleman was speaking, so I did not really gather the purport of his remarks, which I shall have to read in *Hansard*—I do apologise.

Even from a theoretical point of view, it is not proper for us to think that we should not make incremental changes that are to the benefit of the constitution simply because they do not achieve everything that could be achieved through full constitutional change. The reason that I do not think that that is true theoretically is that it is not how British history has proceeded. The whole of our history has been a process of incremental change of our constitution. There has not been a thoroughgoing review of our constitution since 1688, and even that was pretty ramshackle. Certainly, 1216 was extraordinarily ramshackle. If Members actually read Magna Carta, as opposed to the propaganda about it, they will see that it did very little other than enforce that the actions of the king be done through his court rather than by sole fiat. Some significant changes were made in 1688, but an awful lot was left undone. We then went through a whole series of incremental changes to create the universal franchise, which took a very long time indeed. On the arguments of the hon. Member for Newport West, we never would have had any of those changes, because we would have been waiting the whole time for a proper Bill that would have moved us immediately to a full universal franchise, which was obviously the right thing to do from the beginning.

The fact is that our constitution has evolved by slow, incremental change. I do not welcome that fact. I think that the United States is blessed in having had a constitution that was more or less fully formed from the beginning. By creating the Basic Law all in one go, I think that we did a better job in Germany after the war than we have done in Britain, but alas, that ain't how things are done in the UK. It is in the spirit of our constitutional tradition to make incremental changes that make things fairer and enable us to proceed. That is what the current proposals do. The Bill would prevent us from doing that, so I support the Government's rejection of it.

12.9 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). It is obvious from his appearance here on a Friday morning that the Government's loss is the gain of Friday Back-Bench business. I sensed the lemons bristling a little when he referred unkindly to some of his fellow Back Benches. I am sure that they will respond to him in kind.

We overwhelmingly support the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass), and we will do what we can to ensure that it progresses through Parliament and becomes legislation. In fact, we debated the issue a few weeks ago, when we invited the Government to reconsider their plans to reduce the number of MPs, and encouraged them to have a look at what is actually going on in our democracy and Parliament.

We profoundly believe that there is no case whatsoever for increasing the number of unelected Lords in that absurd institution down the corridor while cutting the number of parliamentarians elected by the people. It is simply absurd that, in this mother of Parliaments, more parliamentarians are appointed by a Prime Minister than are directly elected by the people. That is the cornerstone of our objection to what the Government are doing with the boundaries.

Of course, we do not want any Members from Scotland to have to come down to this Parliament. We have a slight hankering that the Scottish people are probably

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better placed than the Westminster Tories to run the nation of Scotland, and that the people of England could just about muddle along without us coming down every week to involve ourselves in their affairs. That is our starting point, but, as long as we are part of a UK unitary Parliament, and as long as this House exercises significant and real powers over our nation, it is right and proper that we have the correct number of parliamentarians from Scotland to look after the vital interests of our nation and our institutions.

Wayne David: I agree with much of the hon. Gentleman's criticism of the House of Lords, but does he want the second Chamber to be abolished or reformed?

Pete Wishart: It needs to be abolished. It is unreformable. It is an absurd circus. I am not a unicameralist: I believe that a nation as complex as the United Kingdom requires a scrutinising Chamber. Some of my hon. Friends take a different view, but my personal view is that we need a scrutinising Chamber that is properly elected.

What an embarrassing humbling the Government received yesterday when they had to withdraw the Strathclyde review. You cannot take on the boys in ermine and get done like that! The Government will have to reflect on their overwhelming and embarrassing defeat at the hands of the House of Lords. They took on the aristocrats. Those guys won battles in the medieval ages to exercise their right to rule over us. The Government sent the bumptious Lord Strathclyde to try to tame them and that is the result.

I hope that the Government reconsider their approach to the Lords. All they are going to do is increase the number of peers. We now face the prospect over the next few days of having the dark lord Farage. The bad Baron Boot-Them-out-of-Here is going to be a feature of our democracy. Someone who has been beaten eight times in Westminster contests might find himself a parliamentarian through the back door.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend think that the system of appointments to the Lords by the Prime Minister is an example of the royal prerogative being abused and used irresponsibly?

Pete Wishart: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Yes, it is. As we are into a debate about the exercise of the royal prerogative, we should consider that, because he makes an interesting point.

The bad baron Farage will be joining 800 or so of the weirdest parliamentarians to be found anywhere in the world, in the second largest Chamber in the world. He will be joining not just the cronies, the donors and the party placemen, but the Church of England bishops, the aristocrats and, even worse, the Liberal Democrats—the Chamber of unelected horrors.

In the next Parliament, if the House of Lords continues to increase in the way that it has, we face the real prospect of something approaching 1,000 unelected Lords to scrutinise the work of 600 Members of Parliament. We will almost have two unelected parliamentarians for every elected one, yet we have the gall to lecture the developing world about the quality of their democracy.

The main case made by the Government to do this was to reduce the cost and the size of politics, but they are clearly not doing that. The cost of politics is increasing exponentially, not year on year, but month by month. We have heard about the armies of civil servants that will have to be created to staff the new Departments dealing with this Government's chaotic Brexit plans; the number of Spads has increased by about 20% in the past few years; and the Government have put 250 donors, cronies and placemen into the House of Lords. What are the savings? The Minister claimed £66 million, but I believe that is over five years. The figure—I think the hon. Member for North West Durham said it—is closer to £12 million. When it comes to making savings that will not even pay for the paint on a Trident missile.

Joanna Cherry: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. I am fortunate enough to sit on the Exiting the European Union Committee. Is he aware that we heard evidence earlier this week that the cost of Brexit will increase civil service and bureaucratic costs across the United Kingdom?

Pete Wishart: Yes, we know that. Again and again we have heard from all sorts of Ministers about the need for new civil servants, who are being hastily recruited. The cost of politics is going up, although the Government claim to be cutting it. The only part of politics and Parliament that they are cutting is the elected part. That is the only one that seems to be featuring.

Andrew Stephenson: I share the hon. Gentleman's view that the House of Lords should be abolished—I have always believed that. I have tried for reform and I will continue to push for reform and abolition, but does he not accept that the cost of running the House of Lords in 2010 was £112 million and that last year it fell to £96 million? That is a 14% reduction. I am not defending the House of Lords, because I think it should be abolished, but this Government have overseen a reduction in the cost of the House of Lords.

Pete Wishart: Here is a solution for the hon. Gentleman, given he is halfway towards my position on this: how about saving £100 million per year? Get rid of the circus! Then we are all happy. There are savings here and there, yes, and that is fine, but let us make substantial and significant savings by just getting rid of the monstrous place down the corridor.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that in recent weeks a key issue was highlighted by Andrew Lloyd Webber, the peer who was not aware that he would have to be a working peer, and has been complaining about it? It is not right that peers are put in the House of Lords, but do not work, and that the number of working parliamentarians is being reduced by this Government.

Pete Wishart: I can feel my hon. Friend's hearts bleeding at the news about poor, overworked Andrew Lloyd Webber. This is where we are. We know what we do in this House, the value we give our constituents and how hard we work. I was listening carefully to, I think, the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), who talked eloquently about the new tasks and functions that we have as Members of Parliament. That is right:

we have new things to do. We know how hard we work, and it is almost disgraceful to observe what happens in the House of Lords, with people refusing to turn up and even complaining about having to turn up to go about their work.

I want to talk a little about what I think was first mentioned by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn): the findings of the Electoral Reform Society. That is very powerful information, and there could be a crisis of scrutiny. If the boundary proposals go through, 23% of all MPs could have ministerial jobs. There will therefore be fewer Back Benchers to scrutinise the work of Government. There will be an impact on our Select Committees.

Someone mentioned the Scottish Parliament, where Members have to double up on several Committees. That is one of our features; it has never been a feature of this House, but that reality might confront us in future. Members of Parliament will be expected to serve not only on one or even two Committees, but perhaps on three Committees in order for the Government to be scrutinised. We could end up with 34% of all Conservative Members on the Government payroll. That is just not good for democracy, and it is appalling for scrutiny. It might be very good for some Conservative Back Benchers who are looking at their career prospects, but it is not good for this nation or for what we are doing in this House.

As a couple of Members have mentioned, this is being done at exactly the wrong time. Seventy-three Members of the European Parliament will no longer carry out very important functions in Brussels and Strasbourg. The powers they exercise and the responsibilities they hold will be returned to an ever smaller pool of Members of Parliament. That will mean more and more work, including on Select Committees and in scrutinising—I do not know how Conservative Back Benchers will find time to do all that—which will be a real issue.

This plan was dreamed up pre-Brexit. The new Government have been very good at binning all the Cameroonian nonsense. They have their own clear agenda and view about how the Government should proceed. Here is an invitation to them: bin this one—put it on the bonfire of the nonsensical Cameroonian legislation—and make their own decision. The plan was concocted pre-Brexit, and it is no longer fit for purpose in the new real world we now live in.

We support the idea about the equalisation of constituencies. I do not think any of us have any real concerns about that, but it must take geography into account.

Ian Blackford *rose*—

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) *rose*—

Pete Wishart: Oh, here we go. My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) caught my eye first.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. On geography, the fact is that three MPs in the Highlands will represent 33,000 sq km—40% of the landmass of Scotland, with less than 5% of

the MPs. It will be about 180 miles, or four and a half hours' drive, across each of the three constituencies. How on earth are people supposed to be properly represented when it will be so difficult for any elected Member of Parliament to get around their constituency? Argyll, Bute and Lochaber will have more than 30 islands. Why are we not including the islands off the west coast of Scotland among the constituencies to be protected?

Pete Wishart: I think we should hear from the other part of the highlands.

Drew Hendry: We have heard that the ludicrous proposals include the meaninglessly named Highland North constituency, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) pointed out, will be as big as Northern Ireland. Is my hon. Friend aware that the other proposed constituency, Inverness and Skye, would be the size of the country of Cyprus? We do not need Aristotle to point out that that is bad philosophy, but Thales would surely point out that it is very bad geographically.

Pete Wishart: That was eloquently put by my hon. Friend. All I can say is that I have a very modest 80 miles from east to west in my constituency, which feels decidedly small compared with the challenges and issues faced by both my hon. Friends. I am grateful to them for making that point, because it emphasises that when we equalise constituencies, we must take our geography into account, particularly the very challenging geography in the Scottish highlands.

Hannah Bardell: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is also about identity? My constituency of Livingston, which is in the county of West Lothian, prides itself on its uniqueness, as it lies between the two great cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. Changing the constituency to Edinburgh Pentland and Livingston makes it sound as though it is just an extension of Edinburgh, which it absolutely is not.

Pete Wishart: We have heard that point again and again during this debate, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right.

What is fantastic and one of the key things that we have got right—I talk about things when they go right in this House—is the constituency link. It is a wonderful and marvellous thing to have the privilege to represent constituencies in defined areas, where we can build up a relationship with our constituents over the years. I have had the pleasure of being a Member of Parliament in this House for 15 years, and I have got to know my constituents. I know exactly the type of issues they will bring to me. From having represented them, I have a sense of the type of things that interest them. I believe that it is negative and bad to toy with this very valuable feature and to erode the constituency link.

When I was first elected, there were 72 Scottish Members of Parliament. If this goes through, there will be 53, so we will have lost almost a quarter of Scottish Members of Parliament within 10 years. I accept that some of that has been necessary—it was right and proper—because, with the Scottish Parliament, it was thought that the number of Members of Parliament

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should be reduced. However, to have 53 MPs to represent an area the size of Scotland will be very demanding and challenging for many of my hon. Friends.

In the last debate on this matter I mentioned that if the changes go through we will have more Members of the House of Lords from Scotland than we will MPs; I had detected 61 Lords with registered Scottish addresses. Since then I have done a little more research, and have found that I have five—this one solitary Member for Perth and North Perthshire has the benefit of five Members of the House of Lords. So, just to be equitable, how about we equalise the House of Lords along with the House of Commons? I would quite happily gift some of my Lords to urban constituencies, so that they could have the benefit of one of them serving them. Perhaps we should start to think about how to do that. People often ask us what we will do with the Scottish Lords when we become independent. I will put the House's mind at rest: as a parting gift and gesture of our largesse we are quite happy to donate the Scottish Lords to the rest of the United Kingdom. You cannot get more generous than that.

I will finish by saying a little about what I think the boundary changes are really about. I do not believe they are about reducing the cost of Parliament, because the amount is peanuts in terms of budgets—it does not amount to much at all. This is all to do with trying to stymie the Labour party. That is what is behind all this. I have spoken privately to Conservative Members who have come to me and told me that that is what it is about—to ensure that the Labour party never gets back into government again. They want to do it now, while they have a majority. But the Labour party really does not need any assistance in becoming an electoral liability. It is doing it perfectly well on its own. It does not need Conservative assistance—let it get on with making itself unelectable. It is doing a fantastic job.

In trying to stymie the Labour party, however, the Conservatives are starting to erode the quality of our democracy. That is a dangerous thing given all the other knockabout stuff going on. Mucking about with something that seems to be working quite well and is one of the defining features of this House and the way we do business here will undermine and pick away at what makes this place good. Doing that while leaving that monstrosity down the corridor in its current condition, when it should be a national embarrassment and embarrass every single Member of this House, is an absolute and utter disgrace. There are things that we need to do to improve our democracy and our public life, but they do not include unpicking the great things that happen because we are a representative democracy. There is absolutely everything to do in dealing with that absurdity down the corridor.

12.27 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) on her success in securing this private Member's Bill. Although I do not agree with all the objectives she has proposed in the Bill, private Members' Bills are an essential parliamentary device that enable Back Benchers to address issues that concern us and our constituents and, in some cases, to secure good, sustainable changes

in public policy and legislation. I have successfully piloted two private Member's Bills on to the statute book, the Marine Navigation Act 2013 and the Deep Sea Mining Act 2014, and I am very proud to have done so.

I do not agree with the provisions in the Bill that reverse the decision to reduce the number of Members of this House from 650 to 600. I stood on a manifesto in 2015 that said that we would

“reduce the number of MPs to 600 to cut the cost of politics” and I stand by that pledge.

Mr Kevan Jones: Is the hon. Lady not an example of that very rare thing, a turkey voting for Christmas? When these changes were first mooted in 2010, the main losers in Cornwall would have been the Liberal Democrats. If the changes go forward, some of her Tory colleagues will surely lose their seats. Why would she want to support that?

Mrs Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his view, but I happen to disagree. I am hopeful that, at the next election, Cornwall will still be represented by Conservative MPs, and I stand by that election pledge. My constituents voted me to this place to represent them, knowing that that was my pledge.

I have a lot of respect for the hon. Member for North West Durham, but I have to tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I was going to raise a point of order during her speech this morning. In the interest of the smooth transition of the debate, however, and having asked to make a speech, I have chosen instead to raise the matter now. The hon. Lady said that she had received more representations on her Bill from Cornish people than from anyone else. I am sure she respects the unwritten protocol in this House that if representations are made to us from another MP's constituents, we inform the MP and usually pass on the representations. I am quite happy to take an intervention, so that she can confirm that none of those representations came from South East Cornwall because nothing has been passed on to me.

Pat Glass: I do not know where they came from. They said they were from Cornwall. They contacted me by email and on Twitter. The hon. Lady can look on Twitter and see.

Mrs Murray: I just felt that I ought to put it on the record that I, a Member for a Cornish constituency, have not been informed of any emails sent to another MP. I am quite disappointed about that.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am not quite sure what the hon. Lady's point is. From what she is saying, she would not change her mind anyway, so it would be a complete waste of time her constituents lobbying her on the Bill.

Mrs Murray: It is a case of treating other Members, no matter what their political affiliation, with some respect.

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is making an eloquent point. *The Guardian* today cites people saying they are against Cornwall being split in half. Any Member they contact should be telling them that there is a

12-week consultation. We are well into it now, but people can still submit representations through the Boundary Commission website. They can still lobby and they can still change things. More than 40,000 representations were made by members of the public during the 2013 abandoned review. Surely, as Members of Parliament, we should be encouraging people to engage with the process, not trying to scrap or abort it, so that we have a general election based on electoral figures that are 20 years out of date.

Mrs Murray: I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

I would like to quote the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg). I know that he has already been quoted today and it is not something that I do often in this place, but he outlined well how we compare around the world. He said:

“Reducing the number of MPs allows us to bring our oversized House of Commons into line with legislatures across the world. The House of Commons is the largest directly elected chamber in the European Union, and it’s half as big again as the US House of Representatives.”

My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) mentioned that last point earlier. The Government have estimated that the reduction in the number of MPs will save £66 million over the course of the Parliament. I am quite disappointed with Opposition Members who seem to have made light of that figure. That money could be focused on looking after and benefiting our constituents.

Mr Kevan Jones: The hon. Lady, using the larger figure spun by Cameron, talks about £66 million, but the figure is £12 million a year. She was part of a Government who spent £9 million on a leaflet arguing their case for the EU. Where is her perspective?

Mrs Murray: If the hon. Gentleman refers back, he will see that I did not agree with that.

I am sure that these savings would be welcomed by taxpayers across the country. We often have to take difficult decisions to try and balance the country’s books, so should this place not do what it can to contribute? Should we not have to face a fair share of any cuts? We are always being criticised for cutting expenditure on education, putting pressure on teachers, putting pressure on NHS workers and putting pressure on our armed forces. Should we not share some of that burden and try to make some savings ourselves?

Mr Kevan Jones: If the proposals go through, the hon. Lady’s seat disappears and she is not one of the successful Tory candidates, would she then refuse a peerage?

Mrs Murray: To refuse something, one has to be offered it. I think that the hon. Gentleman should pay attention to the Prime Minister’s response to a question from an Scottish National party Member on Wednesday: things like that are not normally discussed in this place.

Why are Opposition Members supporting the Bill? Is it to change the number of seats? That will lead to the redrawing of a map and the need for sitting Labour Members to be selected for new areas. Are those who did not champion the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) as Leader of the Opposition

now nervous of the membership that gave him its support? Some 80% of Labour Members gave a vote of no confidence in their leader less than six months ago. Are they now nervous?

I cannot say that the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 is perfect. In 2010, I put forward my own amendment to the Bill as it passed through this place to recognise Cornwall as a distinct area, and it stipulated that no constituency should cross over to Devon. As far as I remember, that was supported by my Cornwall colleagues at the time. Unfortunately, we lost that argument, and the legislation was enacted, with priority given to providing each elector with an equal say in who runs the country. Our Cornwall population is not currently such that a cross-over seat with Devon was avoidable—no matter how undesirable it was.

Last month, I upset councillors when I made a comment about Cornwall Council. Since then, rather than focus on local government matters, the council has been spending money on a Queen’s counsel and has convened a full council meeting to discuss the very subject that we are debating today—parliamentary boundaries. I will not call the council what I called it in this place last month but leave my constituents to make up their own minds on whether that is good use of resources.

I am similarly concerned about the cost of the Bill. This provision would be an unnecessary disruption to the boundary commissions’ well advanced reviews and undoubtedly mean more unnecessary costs, but the Government want to make an estimated £66 million saving. Although the hon. Member for North West Durham is no longer in her place, I ask her where she would find this money if not from legislation—would it come from further cuts to our NHS, our schools or our armed forces? I say no.

Mr Kevan Jones *rose*—

Mrs Murray: I am just coming to my conclusion.

Let us kick this expensive piece of legislation into the long grass where it belongs. Let us save some money, so that we can invest in our NHS, our schools and our armed forces, as a Conservative Government would, instead of spending money on politicians, which Labour seems to want to do.

12.39 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Members of my party are in favour of equalisation in terms of constituencies, but we are resolutely opposed to the Government’s proposals for a reduction in the number of MPs, and we will therefore support the Bill.

The general arguments applying to the whole United Kingdom have already been well rehearsed today, so I shall not go through them all. I will say, however, that I agree with what has been said about increasing the power of the Executive at the expense of parliamentary scrutiny, and I agree that it is wrong for us to deal with the number of Members of the House of Commons without addressing the issue of the House of Lords. I agree that although we shall have 73 fewer Members of the European Parliament, the workload of this Parliament will increase enormously, and, given that it has more Departments, many more civil servants are apparently to be employed. What about the cost of that, and what

[Mr Nigel Dodds]

about the cost of the extra special advisers? It has not been mentioned. Meanwhile, the number of legislators sent here by the people is to decrease.

Those general arguments apply, but I want to deal specifically with the impact of the Government's proposals on Northern Ireland. The parties in Northern Ireland are taking steps—voluntarily, under the fresh start agreement; not under the direction of the Government here—to reduce the number of Members of the Legislative Assembly by more than 16% by the time of the next election. We are losing our three Members of the European Parliament, all of whom do a great job—although I must declare an interest, as one of them is a close relative of mine.

Reducing the number of seats in Northern Ireland from 18 to 17 may seem a small matter. However, the boundary proposals, as well as being a dog's breakfast, have managed to achieve a consensus that used to be very rare in Northern Ireland, although, thankfully, it is now increasingly common: they have attracted cross-party, cross-community opposition. One party seems to be in favour of the proposals, but all the others are against them. If they are passed unamended, the majority of the Northern Ireland seats in the House of Commons will be represented—or rather, sadly, not represented—by abstainers and abstentionists. That is an unconscionable position.

Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the boundaries in Northern Ireland also dictate the Assembly elections. The number of Members per constituency, elected under the system of proportional representation, will be reduced from six to five. If the balance of the Assembly is at stake, through ill-considered, badly devised boundaries dictated by the necessity of reducing numbers and equalising on that basis, we face a real prospect that the stability of devolution in Northern Ireland itself could be at risk.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that not just the stability of Northern Ireland but the overall democratic principles of the way in which we all work together are at threat? Does he agree that the proposed changes are so major that it will be very hard to tweak any of them and that the best thing we can do is to try to prevent them from happening altogether?

Mr Dodds: I entirely agree. The hon. Gentleman is not a member of my party, but his party, along with the Social Democratic and Labour party and others—

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP) *rose*—

Mr Dodds: I give way to the SDLP representative.

Dr McDonnell: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the boundaries that we were offered in Northern Ireland under the original proposals are devastating? They cut across all communities and all borders. Most of our towns and cities have been carved up in a way that fractures communities and makes it very difficult for them to function and represent themselves.

Mr Dodds: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

I think that, in the light of all the arguments that have been advanced today, the Government must reconsider. These are serious matters. Major changes of this kind should result from a desire for party-political advantage. The knock-on effects of such a major constitutional change—not just for the House of Commons but for the Northern Ireland Assembly, especially when it comes to the peace process—need to be carefully weighed. I urge the Government to think again, and I wish the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) every success with her Bill.

12.44 pm

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to make a small contribution to this debate.

In the last Parliament, I was a member of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee. As the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) said, the Committee produced a report towards the end of the Parliament drawing attention to many of the issues reflected in the Bill before us today. Unfortunately, one aspect of the recommendations has not been incorporated: that a Bill or any proposals to this effect should be brought forward at the beginning of this Parliament because it is going to take time to implement them if they are to be brought into effect by the time of the next general election in 2020. The Bill of the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) comes, I fear, too late to enable those changes, many of which I support, to be implemented in time.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Which is more important to the hon. Gentleman: a time limit that has been set for us, or the fact that 2 million people are missing off the register?

Mr Chope: The hon. Gentleman should address that question to his hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham, because her Bill proposes that all these proposals must be brought forward by the four boundary commissions before October 2018, which is a very tall order. We took evidence from the boundary commissions in our inquiry and it was clear they would not be able to make major changes in the light of changes to the terms of reference unless they had a sufficient lead-in period. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) made that point earlier, and it has not been contradicted. When he challenged the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, saying, “You don't really have it in your heart to ensure we get these changes through by the time of the next general election in 2020,” the Opposition spokesman did not seem to demur from that.

The most important thing is to establish equality of constituencies. In paragraph 31 of our report, the Committee said,

“We believe that, all other things being equal, constituency electorates should be broadly equal.”

What is the position at the moment? It was in the year 2000 that we had the basis for the current boundaries, and if this situation continues beyond 2020 we will still be using that basis. Office for National Statistics figures show that in 2010 only 254 out of 650 constituencies in the UK were within the 5% limit either side of the norm, and 187 were even outside the 10% parameters,

which is what the hon. Lady proposes in her Bill. The evidence brought forward by the Boundary Commission for England is that in 2010 some 200 out of the 533 seats were within the 5% limit, but a large number were outside that. The latest figures, for 2013, are that 188 constituencies in England are more than 10% either side of the norm. That is thoroughly unreasonable and inequitable, and it needs to be rectified.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): We can see this as a mathematical exercise, but the fact of the matter is that under the terms of this boundary review a line would be cut right through the heart of Port Talbot in the centre of my constituency, smashing communities apart that have existed for many years. What we need at this time is unified political representation for our communities. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that democracy is more important than mathematics? Do we really want to turn this place into an elective dictatorship?

Mr Chope: I am trying to address that point. If we are to have proper democracy rather than mathematics, we need a reasonable period within which the boundary commissions in Wales and England can look at the evidence and work out where it will be best for the boundaries to be situated. They could then consult and hold public inquiries on that basis. We have already heard, however, that if the Bill were to be put on to the statute book with a requirement for the new arrangements to be implemented no later than October 2018, it would not be possible for the boundary commissions—certainly those in England—to do the necessary spadework to ensure an equitable outcome, rather than one that would be subject to judicial review as a result of having been rushed and not taking into account the representations that had been made.

Mr Bone: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I want to get it clear in my mind what he is saying. Is he suggesting that we should equalise the seats and keep the same number of Members of Parliament, for reasons of democracy and scrutinising the Government, but that this cannot be achieved in the proposed timescale? Should we not simply allow the Bill to have its Second Reading and then amend it in Committee?

Mr Chope: I take my hon. Friend's point. I am trying to plead with the hon. Member for North West Durham to come up with a proposal that would enable the boundary commissioners to come forward with their proposals before October 2018 and therefore enable her Bill to be implemented in time for the next general election. I am willing her to try to find a way of achieving that. From what we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset, however, that could be very difficult. Some rough and ready exercises might have to be carried out, possibly involving a reduction in the time for consultations. I challenge the hon. Lady to come forward with proposals that would enable someone looking at this Bill to decide that it was practical to require the boundary commissions to have their proposals in place by October 2018. I hope that she will be able to address that point when she responds to the debate. If she cannot do so today, and if the Bill gets its Second Reading, we will obviously be able to deal with this in Committee.

In its evidence to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in September 2014, the Boundary Commission for England said that the approach that it had taken to the previous review had been well received, but that

“if the Commission is to continue that policy for the next Review, it does mean there is very little flexibility within the timetable outlined above.”

That timetable suggested that the commission was

“working towards a formal launch for that Review around the end of February 2016”,

and that it

“anticipates submitting its final report of the next Review in September 2018.”

The commission stated clearly that

“if changes are made to the governing legislation in the interim, that may have a consequential impact on the timetable for the next Review.”

I have not heard anything from the hon. Member for North West Durham about her conversations with the Boundary Commission on its evidence to the Committee, or about whether she thinks that that evidence could be modified in the light of the needs that she has expressed on behalf not only of Opposition Members but of many Conservative Members who have concerns about this.

It is of paramount importance that, by 2020, we have new boundaries that reflect more accurately the need for equality of electorates in each constituency. At the moment, the disparities are so great and are getting greater, so we cannot wait beyond 2020. If the hon. Lady is saying with the Bill, “I agree with that point, we must do something before 2020”, it is incumbent on her to explain—if not today, in Committee—how it can be achieved and how she has been able to work with the relevant boundary commissions to bring that about. It is only if she can demonstrate the practicality of the Bill that she will ultimately be able to get the House's support. It is a paramount requirement that we equalise the constituencies before 2020.

I gave evidence earlier this week to the Boundary Commission inquiry into constituency changes in the south-west. I was surprised by how few people came along to give evidence. There were probably half a dozen people. It was a two-day hearing. I finished giving my evidence before lunch—my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr Syms) gave evidence, too—and only one other person was due to give evidence between then and 8 o'clock in the evening. That was the first day of the inquiry; I do not know what happened on the second day.

There may well be means by which the prolonged procedure for examining these proposals can be foreshortened, but that is the kernel of the matter that the hon. Lady, in bringing forward this Bill, has to address if it is to progress and get on to the statute book.

This issue is very important. I am disappointed that the Government have not been prepared to say, “If we reduce the number of MPs to 600, we will have a pro rata reduction in the size of the Executive.” They could have done that. It would have been the right approach, but they have ducked it up to now. Perhaps the Minister will be able to assure us that there will indeed be that pro rata reduction. In a sense, that would mitigate some of the problems we have been discussing today.

[Mr Chope]

I expect that the Bill will receive a Second Reading, because, unlike a lot of private Members' legislation, it seems to have generated a lot of interest. It is great to see so many Members in the Chamber on a Friday. If the Bill does get a Second Reading, we need to look at its practicalities in Committee.

12.57 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): My comments will be brief. I begin with a fundamental point: the number of people on the electoral register is central to our discussion today. Some 1.75 million people who registered just before the European referendum are not included in the calculations for the new boundaries, which is profoundly wrong. Importantly, it is not only morally wrong; it has a practical effect, too.

The House of Commons Library has stated clearly that the largest increase in the electorate was in London, where there was a 6% increase. If that figure was taken forward under the legislation providing for 600 seats, there would be an extra two constituencies in London and an extra seat in the south-west. Other parts of the UK would lose out. That is important in itself, but we must realise that it would have a knock-on effect on those regions. The parliamentary boundaries would be very different from those being suggested.

The Government, against the explicit advice of the Electoral Commission, brought forward the date for full implementation of individual electoral registration by one year from December 2016 to December 2015, and the register is only 85% complete. In other words, 1.8 million people have been deliberately excluded from the electoral register, preventing them from voting and taking them out of the calculations of the new boundaries. If that is not gerrymandering, I do not know what is. It is a quite deliberate political act by this Conservative Government. Most of those who are not on the register—those who have been excluded—are young people, many of whom live in private rented accommodation, which has a political implication that many of us know only too well.

It is important to recognise that the legislation on the statute book is politically motivated. It was dreamt up by Conservative party central office, enacted in large part by the coalition Government and refined to the detriment of the Labour party by this Administration. This Bill can be put into effect. It may need tweaking in Committee and the Boundary Commission may require extra resources to implement it, but it is entirely practicable in principle. If the Bill is passed and reaches the statute book, it would help to restore fairness and the idea that communities are central to our parliamentary democracy. That is why I support it.

1 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I want to start by saying that I will be supporting the Bill and concur with the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) about why he supports it. However, I will mainly talk about the impact that the proposed boundary changes will have on Cornwall. I want to explain why people in Cornwall, my constituents in particular, feel so strongly about this issue and have urged me to speak up today.

Many hon. Members will be aware that the restrictions in the current legislation mean that Cornwall will have to share an MP with Devon. There will have to be a seat that crosses the border between north-east Cornwall and north-west Devon.

Mrs Murray: Will my hon. Friend explain to me what part of his constituency may cross the border with Devon?

Steve Double: My constituency is clearly in central mid-Cornwall and no part of it will cross the border, but the people of Cornwall feel strongly about this whether they are directly impacted by the cross-border seat or not. The Minister will know that the matter has provoked strong feelings for many in Cornwall. I acknowledge that that reaction may seem strange and make little sense for people outside Cornwall—many simply view Cornwall as another English county—but the Cornish pride themselves on being different, un-English, and unique in many ways. It is therefore unsurprising that people who do not share that sense of pride and passion in being Cornish do not appreciate how the Cornish people feel. The truth is that this is an emotional reaction to the proposals.

I will admit that I have looked at many of reasons for objecting to the cross-border seat in the current legislation, and there are no reasonable legal arguments to stop it going forward.

Mrs Murray *rose*—

Steve Double: I will make a little progress before I take another intervention.

Cornwall's democratic representation will not be somehow diluted by sharing an MP with part of Devon. I do not believe that an MP will be unable to represent two different counties in one constituency. Many hon. Members represent diverse constituencies with people from all sorts of ethnic and cultural backgrounds very effectively. This is about a purely emotional response from the Cornish. We have seen over the past six months that voters have become much more emotional in how they react to Government and our democracy—politics is now much more emotional.

Like many, I had hoped that the granting of minority status to the Cornish people would provide a basis for a legal challenge. There was great joy in Cornwall in 2014 when the Cornish were recognised under the Council of Europe's framework convention for the protection of national minorities. We were told that it would give us the same recognition as other Celtic people in the UK, but it appears that this does not apply when it comes to parliamentary boundaries. Although the Boundary Commission has recognised and maintained the borders of Scotland and Wales when drawing up the constituencies, the same respect has not been shown to the Cornish border. Sadly, legal advice obtained by Cornwall Council has stated that our Cornish minority status is not something that can be used to argue against a cross-border seat, so despite all the rhetoric, it seems that the legal arguments against this boundary are very weak.

Mrs Murray: There has been a petition on this and some of my constituents wrote to me about it. I looked at the petition website and saw that 400 of my

constituents—out of 72,000—had signed it. Does my hon. Friend know how many of his constituents signed it? He said he was speaking on behalf of the Cornish, but let me put on the record the fact that I am a Cornish girl and he was not speaking for me.

Steve Double: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I do not know how many people from my constituency signed the petition, but I have been out in my constituency, on the doorsteps, in the pub and at my surgeries, and what I do know is how many people have come directly to me to raise their strong feelings about this issue. That is what I have taken notice of. Leaving aside how many constituents have raised this issue with me, it is one that I, as a Cornishman, feel strongly about.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman inform the House as to when he felt strongly about this, because surely in 2015 he stood on a manifesto that contained these proposals? At that time, it would possibly have been Liberal Democrat seats going, rather than Tory seats. Was that the thing that has changed his mind?

Steve Double: I will address that point directly at the end of my speech. As I said, despite a lot of the rhetoric on Cornwall, there are no reasonable legal arguments against these proposals within the current legislation. I have grappled with this issue for some time, asking myself the question: why do I, like so many other people in my constituency, feel so strongly about it? As I said, this is a deeply emotional response, and there are many reasons for that. The Cornish geography has shaped our attitude for centuries. We are surrounded on three sides by the sea, and on our only land border a river cuts us off for all but a few miles. In many ways, the Cornish have an island mentality. We see ourselves as detached and separate from the rest of England. History has also shaped the way we think. For centuries, there has been a sense of detachment between this place and Cornwall. Indeed, about 520 years ago thousands of Cornishmen marched on this place to protest about the imposition of a tax on the Cornish to fund a fight with the Scottish—some of us feel that we have been paying for Scotland ever since, but there was a sense of injustice.

This Government have started to do a great deal to rebuild that bridge. We have seen this Government on the side of Cornwall more than any other Government have been for many years. We have seen greater investments in our roads, with the A30 through Cornwall being dualled, and in our railways, where we are getting new rolling stock, having had the same rolling stock for 40 years. Support and investment has also been given to our airport and for tourism. We have seen this Government grant a devolution deal for Cornwall—it is the first and, so far, only rural devolution deal in the country. That is a great sign of this Government's support for and confidence in Cornwall. Indeed, the Prime Minister recently said that the Government recognised the unique challenges that Cornwall is facing. So I am proud to be part of this Government, who, in so many ways, are supporting Cornwall, the Cornish economy and the Cornish people far more than has ever been done before. Even so, this issue has provoked a very strong reaction in so many people in my constituency.

It is no surprise that people who do not share the way we feel find it difficult to comprehend how strongly we feel. The issue somehow stabs at the very core of the way we feel about our county. We feel that it is challenging our identity. That in-built deep sense of Cornish independence is provoked by the thought of our border being crossed. Even though it is only a line on a map that represents an area that an MP will represent, it symbolises something far deeper in the Cornish psyche.

Cornwall is unique, so how can we expect others to understand? We accept that others will not understand and will not agree with us, but we cannot accept our views not being respected. Sadly, under the current legislation I see no way to draw the boundaries that does not produce a cross-border seat with Devon. No matter how forcefully we make representations to the Boundary Commission, its hands are tied by the legislation.

Alex Salmond: The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech, apart from that passing reference to Scotland, which we will overlook, but does he understand that, because of the nature and the criteria of the boundary commissions, nonsense such as the one that he is so ably describing will be replicated across the four nations of the United Kingdom, as well as the nation of Cornwall?

Steve Double: I recognise the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes. My primary concern is with the people of my constituency, Cornwall and the impact of the proposals.

The number of representations made to the Boundary Commission on the issue is irrelevant because the commission's hands are tied by the legislation. There is no flexibility in the legislation to allow for boundaries to be drawn wholly within Cornwall, so the only way to change that is to support the Bill and seek to change the legislation. That is the difficult conclusion that I have come to. When the Bill goes to Committee, will the hon. Lady who introduced it seriously consider putting in an amendment that would make a special case for Cornwall under the terms of the minority status that we now enjoy, to ensure that the boundaries can be honoured and kept wholly within Cornwall and the line does not have to be crossed?

I know that many of my hon. Friends will be disappointed and perhaps even angry with me, but I feel that I should support the Bill, partly because I do not believe that this is the right time to cull 50 MPs, and because it is the only way I can see to address the issue of the Cornish border and maintain Cornish MPs in Cornwall.

1.12 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I shall be brief as I know that others wish to speak. The issue has been well aired on both sides of the House, but I shall make two points in support of the Bill. My first point is on the geographical size of constituencies and how that has to be taken into account when we talk about boundaries. One need only look at the map on the briefing paper to see the size of some of the Scottish constituencies.

Drew Hendry: Does my hon. Friend agree that a constituency the size of a country such as Cyprus is unworkable for an MP?

Steven Paterson: Indeed. It takes an hour and a half to drive across my constituency. That is manageable for me as a constituency MP, but in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), if the southern end of his constituency were where I am standing now, the northern end would be beyond Nottingham. We have to be realistic. It is not the BBC weather map but an actual map that we need to look at if we are to understand how big some constituencies are. If they are to have proper representation, it is essential that their geographical size is taken into account. We should also bear in mind the distance of some constituencies from the seat of power here in London.

If we are to do a proper job of representing our constituents, as we are determined to do, we have to consider the size of the constituencies, as well as their population. That is why I welcome the figure of 10% as an indication of the quota. That is a reasonable suggestion that we can look at in detail, but flexibility must be built in to make it work.

The second point has been covered to some extent—I am referring to the circus that is the House of Lords. It is obscene that we continue to see that revising Chamber stuffed with yet more unelected lords and ladies with no mandate and not answerable to the people of this country. At the same time, we are entertaining a conversation about reducing the size of this elected Chamber. We really need to have a look at this. David Cameron, the former Prime Minister, put 261 new lords and ladies in the circus down the corridor, and we are exercising ourselves about reducing our numbers by 50, with all the complications and all the unpleasant and unnecessary things that that entails for democracy.

Patrick Grady: My hon. Friend talks about the complications that will arise from changing boundaries. The changes are supposed to be about saving the taxpayer money, but one effect will be that, irrespective of who the Members of Parliament are, a lot of constituency offices will have to move. In Glasgow, several offices, which are currently in different constituencies, will be brought within the boundaries of one or two constituencies, so there will be a massive logistical cost to implementing all of this.

Steven Paterson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. There are all kinds of unforeseen, untold costs that will come with these changes; they will not save the money their proponents say they will. Therefore, we should be looking at bloated undemocratic institutions such as the House of Lords along the corridor and we should start sorting that out. If we do not want to abolish the Lords all in one step—although I would—we can certainly look at time limits and limits on the numbers. We should certainly look at putting it in statute that the Lords is proportional to the size of this Chamber. We should reduce the size of that unelected Chamber along the corridor so that we never get back to the position we are in now.

I support the Bill, and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to express my views.

1.16 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) in this important debate. I too would like to

congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) on introducing the Bill. Having brought forward my own private Member's Bill as a new Member last year, I understand the work that goes on behind the scenes to get something ready even to bring to the Chamber at this stage.

It was interesting to listen to some excellent contributions from right hon., hon. and, indeed, very learned Members, who often enlightened us—certainly me—on constitutional history.

I am rather saddened for democracy's sake that the Bill would shelve the sixth periodic review that is now entrusted with the Boundary Commission. The current review aims to redress the widening democratic deficit now evident in this place. The Boundary Commission is an independent body, acting on a remit agreed by the previous Parliament to create constituencies with comparable electorates within a 5% tolerance of 74,769 electors per constituency.

Now to my little bit of history. One hundred years ago, the report of the Speaker's Conference of 1917 stated that

“each vote shall, as far as possible, command an equal share of representation in the House of Commons”.

That is a really important point for us to remember in this place. Obviously, there have been many changes to the franchise throughout the last century, and the tenet of equality of representation has, I fear, been lost.

Electoral register figures from December 2015 show there were 58,359 electors in my constituency. The largest constituency electorate is the Isle of Wight, with over 100,000 electors, and the smallest is the unprotected constituency of Arfon, I believe, with an electorate of under 40,000. There is clearly a need for the current review to continue without change to its terms of reference. It should surely be the aim of all democratically minded people to work towards equality in representation, rather than to widen the disparity, as this Bill would.

The Bill could introduce a potential disparity. Reading the clauses, it seems to me that allowing for plus or minus 10% on either side could add up to 20% in some cases. If we take the stated ideal of 74,769, that would lead, based on figures from 2015 registers, to potential high and low electorates ranging from 67,293 to 82,245.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady believe that for the sake of satisfying an equation it is worth while creating constituencies the size of Cyprus or devastating the boundaries in Northern Ireland?

Wendy Morton: My constituency is a good example of the democratic deficit that the Boundary Commission review is seeking to address.

Mr Harper: I refute the hon. Gentleman's suggestion that this about an equation. It is not a fiction about maths; it is about making sure that our constituents' votes are of equal weight in electing us to this Parliament. That is a fundamental democratic principle that the Chartists believed in and we should try to deliver, and my hon. Friend is setting it out very well.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is absolutely right.

In the 2017 registration figures, the disparity will be even greater. The proposals in this Bill are regressive, not reforming. In the eyes of the hon. Member for North West Durham, all electors are equal, but a growing number will be more equal than others.

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is making an eloquent argument. Rather than changing all the rules halfway through this process—or almost towards the end of it—and trying to get this done again from scratch, would not hon. Members be better off encouraging their constituents to engage with the process? In the time between the initial proposals in the 2013 review to the concluding proposals, 60% of all the recommendations were changed. It is therefore perfectly easy, within the parameters of the 2011 Act, to come up with constituencies that reflect local communities and demographics in every area across the UK.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that, because I was about to talk about my constituency and pick up on some of those points.

Aldridge-Brownhills forms part of the borough of Walsall, along with Walsall North and Walsall South. As I said, its electorate currently stands at about 60,000, which is 7,000 fewer than that of either of my Walsall neighbours. I do not feel this is right, and I accept that changes need to be made to bring my constituency more in line with others across the country. The position is similar in constituencies in Birmingham. Edgbaston, with just under 63,000 electors, borders Hall Green, which has 74,000 electors—a disparity of about 11,000. The situation is repeated in relation to Hall Green and Hodge Hill, and there are other examples across the country. I therefore question what valid democratic reason there is for this Bill to perpetuate these disparities.

Mr Bone: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wendy Morton: I am going to make some progress because there are still Members who want to speak.

Along with colleagues on the Conservative Benches, I was elected on a manifesto pledge to reduce the number of Members of Parliament, and the Government have a clear mandate from the people to do this.

Mr Bone: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Wendy Morton: I will.

Mr Bone: When that manifesto was drawn up, I am absolutely sure that the people who did so did not think that we would be leaving the European Union and having all the work from the European Union imposed on a reduced number of MPs.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point, but I still maintain that I was elected on a manifesto pledge to reduce the number of MPs. I recall the same point being made when I was knocking on doors in the 2010 election.

The hon. Member for North West Durham spoke of emails of support from members of the public, but I would question what consultation has been done in preparing to bring the Bill before the House. Perhaps that will be clarified at a later stage.

The House of Commons is the largest lower Chamber of any western democracy. The American House of Representatives, with 435 members, serves a population of 318 million. In Japan, the House of Representatives has 475 members representing 127 million people. It has long been argued that a small legislature is better at holding the Executive to account and at scrutinising legislation. That is why I am happy to support the Conservative manifesto pledge to reduce the number of elected Members. Much has been said this morning about the other place, but I think that we need to take the lead and put our own House in order before we seek to reform elsewhere.

As I have said, I accept that my own constituency of Aldridge-Brownhills must change. I and others in the constituency welcome the boundary commissioners' decision to keep it intact and to expand it so that Bloxwich East and West are encompassed by the Walsall borough. Streetly is integral to that, and the boundary proposals will bring together the communities of Pelsall and Brownhills, which were previously separated by local government reorganisations.

This House should accept that a boundary review is under way and that the public are being consulted for the second time in five years. It would be wrong to ignore their views. To halt the process again would be unforgivable. If the Bill is passed, the public could be forgiven for thinking that Members of Parliament were putting their own self-interest before democratic equality and democratic accountability.

1.26 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Under the terms of the boundary review, Port Talbot, the town at the heart of my Aberavon constituency, would be cut in two, quite literally down the high street, and the steelworks would be cut off from the housing estate that was built for its workers. The clear and unified voice of Port Talbot and its people is being threatened by a Government who are determined to smash it apart.

Port Talbot and Aberavon have had a difficult 50 years, given the challenges faced by the steel industry, but we are starting to see the benefits of investment in our area. If we are to build on that and overcome the current uncertainty about the future of our steel economy, we must work to remain as one community and retain our unified political representation. That is why the Boundary Commission's proposal is completely unacceptable. As much as iron needs oxygen to be transformed into steel, so our area needs unity if we are to build a future of security and opportunity.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Does my hon. Friend think that it is fair that some votes will not be counted because the Government have excluded nearly 2 million people from the register that was used in the referendum?

Stephen Kinnock: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This is a barefaced gerrymander on so many levels, one of which is the missing 2 million registered electors.

By running a dividing line through the heart of Port Talbot, the Boundary Commission's proposal threatens to shatter the unified political representation that our communities so desperately need. Instead of pressing

[Stephen Kinnock]

forward with this act of constitutional vandalism that will disfranchise and fracture communities, strip this House of its independent voice and compromise our ability to serve our constituents, let us stand up for the power of Parliament, fight for our communities and support this Bill.

1.28 pm

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): It has been interesting to listen to the views of colleagues from across the House about the Boundary Commission's review. I am in favour of what I campaigned for in 2015 and am happy with things as they stand. Although I do not fully agree with the commission's proposals for my constituency, I think that it is sensible to equalise the constituencies around me.

The difference in the number of electors in my neighbouring constituency of Gillingham and Rainham is 7,000. It is absolutely right that two major constituencies representing what is now quite an urban area should be equalised. I therefore completely support what the Boundary Commission is trying to do.

Much has been said about community ties, and ensuring that they are preserved and that our constituents still understand who is representing them and why certain areas are joined together. I am really lucky: I am absolutely rooted in my constituency, I have lived there forever, and so has my family, and I know the place very well. However, at a very local level—although this is a little contrary to the Bill that the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) is promoting—the Labour party has proposed something that seemed to involve chucking three constituencies in the air and waiting to see how they landed. Labour has focused on breaking up places with established ties and even changing names, losing names such as Rochester, which is of significant historical interest and was once a city, and yet neither Rochester nor Chatham would feature in the proposed constituency names. I represent a part of the country where people are fiercely proud of the towns they come from, and I am lucky to represent three of the five Medway towns. It is important to keep the names so that everyone can clearly identify where they come from.

The other point I want to make is about geography. At the moment I represent a constituency that I can get to easily and I know it well, but the Labour party has also made proposals to change the constituency so that the MP would have to represent a part of Kent that has no relationship with the Medway towns—in fact, those constituents would not believe that they were part of the Medway towns.

I have immense respect for the hon. Lady, who has introduced the Bill to be helpful, but at a regional level, for seats such as mine, it will not help the situation. Sadly, therefore, I find that I will not be able to support her in her endeavour to introduce the Bill. I have been interested to hear some of the deeper debate about constitutional issues and, listening to the history, about how we got here. However, I still very much stand for what I campaigned for in 2015. I hope that the Boundary Commission proposals and this House continue to move forward in the endeavour to reduce the number of

Members of Parliament to ensure that our representation is tight and works hard, with constituencies in line with each other.

1.33 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) *claimed to move the closure* (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

The House divided: Ayes 257, Noes 35.

Division No. 85]

[1.33 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Coyle, Neil
Abrahams, Debbie	Creasy, Stella
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Cruddas, Jon
Alexander, Heidi	Cryer, John
Ali, Rushanara	Cummins, Judith
Allen, Mr Graham	Cunningham, Alex
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Anderson, Mr David	Dakin, Nic
Arkless, Richard	Danczuk, Simon
Ashworth, Jonathan	David, Wayne
Austin, Ian	Davies, Geraint
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Day, Martyn
Bardell, Hannah	De Piero, Gloria
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Beckett, rh Margaret	Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Benn, rh Hilary	Double, Steve
Berger, Luciana	Doughty, Stephen
Betts, Mr Clive	Dromey, Jack
Black, Mhairi	Eagle, Ms Angela
Blackford, Ian	Eagle, Maria
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Efford, Clive
Blenkinsop, Tom	Elliott, Julie
Blomfield, Paul	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Bone, Mr Peter	Elmore, Chris
Brabin, Tracy	Esterson, Bill
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Evans, Chris
Brake, rh Tom	Farrelly, Paul
Brennan, Kevin	Ferrier, Margaret
Brown, Alan	Field, rh Frank
Brown, Lyn	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Fleelo, Robert
Bryant, Chris	Fletcher, Colleen
Buck, Ms Karen	Flint, rh Caroline
Burgon, Richard	Flynn, Paul
Burnham, rh Andy	Fovargue, Yvonne
Butler, Dawn	Furniss, Gill
Byrne, rh Liam	Gapes, Mike
Cadbury, Ruth	Gardiner, Barry
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Gibson, Patricia
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Glass, Pat
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Glindon, Mary
Champion, Sarah	Godsiff, Mr Roger
Chapman, Jenny	Goodman, Helen
Cherry, Joanna	Grady, Patrick
Chope, Mr Christopher	Grant, Peter
Clegg, rh Mr Nick	Green, Kate
Clwyd, rh Ann	Greenwood, Margaret
Coaker, Vernon	Griffith, Nia
Cooper, Julie	Gwynne, Andrew
Cooper, Rosie	Haigh, Louise
Cooper, rh Yvette	Hamilton, Fabian
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hanson, rh Mr David
Cowan, Ronnie	Harris, Carolyn

Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Hunt, Tristram
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Alan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kerevan, George
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGarry, Natalie
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McMahan, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Dr Paul
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.

Mullin, Roger
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Paterson, Steven
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Salmond, rh Alex
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri

Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John

Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Vicky Foxcroft and
 Thangam Debbonaire

NOES

Argar, Edward
 Bebb, Guto
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Chalk, Alex
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellison, Jane
 Evennett, rh David
 Garnier, Mark
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Menzies, Mark

Morton, Wendy
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Percy, Andrew
 Pincher, Christopher
 Pursglove, Tom
 Sharma, Alok
 Skidmore, Chris
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stewart, Rory
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wilson, Mr Rob

Tellers for the Noes:
 Chris Heaton-Harris and
 Mark Spencer

Question accordingly agreed to.

*Question put accordingly, That the Bill be now read a
 Second time.*

The House divided: Ayes 253, Noes 37.

Division No. 86]

[1.46 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
 Alexander, Heidi
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allen, Mr Graham
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Mr David
 Arkless, Richard
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Austin, Ian
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, Ian
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blenkinsop, Tom
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burgon, Richard

Burnham, rh Andy
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Jenny
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clegg, rh Mr Nick
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coaker, Vernon
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 Danczuk, Simon
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 De Piero, Gloria
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Donaldson, Stuart Blair
 Double, Steve

Doughty, Stephen
 Dromey, Jack
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Ffello, Robert
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Furniss, Gill
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gibson, Patricia
 Glass, Pat
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh Mr David
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Hunt, Tristram
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Alan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike

Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kerevan, George
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGarry, Natalie
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McMahan, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Dr Paul
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Mullin, Roger
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Paterson, Steven
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin

Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Salmond, rh Alex
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo

Argar, Edward
 Bebb, Guto
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carswell, Mr Douglas
 Chalk, Alex
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellison, Jane
 Evennett, rh David
 Garnier, Mark
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver

Streeting, Wes
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 Weir, Mike
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri
 Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Vicky Foxcroft and
Thangam Debbonaire

NOES

Menzies, Mark
 Morton, Wendy
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Percy, Andrew
 Pincher, Christopher
 Pursglove, Tom
 Sharma, Alok
 Skidmore, Chris
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stewart, Rory
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wilson, Mr Rob

Tellers for the Noes:
Chris Heaton-Harris and
Mark Spencer

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Disability Equality Training (Taxi and Private Hire Vehicle Drivers) Bill

Second Reading

1.59 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I rise to delay the hon. Gentleman for a few seconds in order that the rowdy Members celebrating a victory can leave with discretion and politeness to their colleague.

Andrew Gwynne: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I want to place on the record my thanks to Guide Dogs UK for its assistance to me in putting this Bill together and those Members across the House who have indicated their support for its measures.

As a Member with, like all Members, disabled constituents specifically affected by discrimination from a minority of taxi hire vehicles, it gives me immense pride to present to the House a Bill designed to settle this issue and ensure all our constituents receive the service the law demands. For too long, this issue has flown under the radar and continues to specifically discriminate against the visually impaired, those with mobility and physical impairments and the more vulnerable in our society.

A minority of taxi and private hire vehicle licence holders frequently discriminate against assistance dog owners and other disabled people by refusing to pick them up. As I am sure Members present are aware, disabled people, including those with assistance dogs, are legally protected under section 29 of the Equality Act 2010. It is unlawful to discriminate against a person because of a protected characteristic or victimise someone when providing a service. This applies to taxis and private hire vehicles as much as any other service. Added to this, numerous disability groups, including Disability Rights UK and Muscular Dystrophy UK, report that their members are being charged higher rates, at times double the standard fare, to accommodate their wheelchairs. This is unethical and cruel.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I interrupt the hon. Gentleman simply because we are short of time and a number of Members may want to contribute and I want to get this on the record. He has done a service to the House in introducing this Bill; there is no doubt about that. He is right about the legality, and he is also right about the ethics, and I want to assure him that I share his view. We should do more and we will do more.

Andrew Gwynne: I am grateful to the Minister for that assurance from the Government Front Bench and I am sure the people we all represent will be comforted to hear that, because it is perfectly right that disabled people want to live independent lives and do not want to be a nuisance to anyone, but often constant refusals and abuse are leaving many of them with little hope.

Catherine, a guide dog owner from Birmingham, reported:

“It makes me think if it’s worth getting a taxi at all. I rather struggle to go somewhere because I don’t want grief about my guide dog.”

Although these provisions are in place, it is undeniable that disabled people continue to suffer from severe restrictions in the use of taxis and private hire vehicles. The Law Commission confirmed this in its 2013 review of taxis and private hire vehicles. The reality, however, is worse: in-depth research from Guide Dogs UK shows that three in four assistance dog owners reported that they have been refused entry to private hire vehicles and taxis because of their guide dogs.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I previously contacted my local authority on this matter to establish whether it was aware of the issues the hon. Gentleman will be highlighting here today. It advised that, owing to my letter, it had contacted Guide Dogs UK for further information so it could incorporate that into its training for drivers. Will he join me in calling for other Members to do likewise and encourage the voluntary uptake of training measures from the relevant bodies?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely, and I commend the hon. Lady for the work that she has done on this in her own constituency. I encourage other Members to do precisely the same in theirs.

We need this law change in England and Wales—the situation is different in Scotland—to introduce training, so that every taxi licence holder is aware of their legal obligations under the Equalities Act 2010. There can be no excuse for refusing someone with disabilities access to a taxi. That is the law, and if taxi drivers currently do not know that it is the law, that is a training issue. That is why I think that my Bill has very many merits.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important for each and every one of us in the House to raise this issue with our local authority and through columns in our local newspapers, to ensure that no one can use ignorance as a defence for refusing services to blind and disabled people?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Gentleman for sponsoring my Bill; his support is greatly appreciated. He is absolutely right to suggest that there is a lot more on the enforcement side that local authorities could and should be doing. At the moment, taxi licence holders who are brought before the licensing panel can plead ignorance and say that they did not appreciate that this was the law. However, if they have to have training as part of their licence requirements in the first place, or as part of their renewal requirements, they will no longer have that excuse.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, welcome though it is that local authorities are taking more seriously their responsibilities for training and enforcement, the only way to guarantee that people get the respect they deserve and that taxi drivers abide by the law is to put this requirement on to a statutory footing?

Andrew Gwynne: I absolutely agree. Best practice is in place in many areas across the country, but unless there is a statutory requirement for training as part of the licensing regime, we will never be able to weed out any bad practice that still exists.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing his private Member's Bill and leading the debate today. He mentioned that the law would apply in England and Wales. We already have guidance on this in Wales, and Guide Dogs Campaigns is working with the Welsh Government on it. Will he work with the Welsh Government to ensure that a similar Bill can be enacted in Wales?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. I discovered as a result of the discussions I had when preparing my Bill that not all the relevant functions have yet been devolved to Ministers in the Welsh Government and that some of the duties therefore still rest with the Secretary of State for Transport here in Whitehall. That is why some of the provisions in the Bill relate to Wales. But my hon. Friend is absolutely right: we need to get these provisions in place across the whole United Kingdom. There are parts of the UK that have advanced further down this track than England and Wales have done, and my Bill is trying to put that right.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What response has my hon. Friend had from taxi drivers' associations?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention them.

Returning to the measures in the Bill, the Local Government Association is fully on board with my proposals, but we must ensure that local councils have the necessary tools at their disposal, so that they can properly administer the training scheme and ensure that the measures are being adhered to. Out of 297 visually impaired respondents to a Guide Dogs survey, 68% reported that they had not informed the authorities when an individual had refused them service. The most common reason they gave was that they did not believe anything would come of it. A freedom of information request and parliamentary questions that I have asked have made it clear that, since the practice of refusal became illegal in 2010, there were no convictions in 2011, there was one in 2012, one in 2013 and one in 2014. Yet we know that 42% of assistance dog users in any one year are refused a taxi service. There is a big problem here, and ignorance of the law is no justification. That is why training is absolutely crucial.

Let me be clear: those taxi and minicab drivers who are refusing to serve visually impaired and wheelchair passengers are breaking the law. The only exception for refusing someone with an assistance dog is on medical grounds, and for that they have to have a certified medical certificate permanently on display in the taxi. They cannot just turn up at a kerbside and decide that they will not take a dog because of some spurious allergy that they have just decided they have.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I had not intended to speak on the Bill given the time, but I heard the Minister and I want to give my hon. Friend's Bill good wind. Does he agree that training, which is covered by his Bill, is absolutely essential? Even when people want to assist and they know what their duties are under the law, they can still fall foul of it. For instance, there was a report of a dog that had to travel in the sealed boot of a car. That cannot be right; training is necessary.

Andrew Gwynne: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. That is precisely why training is necessary. My Bill would put that right on a national setting, rather than basing it on the good will of local authorities in different parts of the country. That is why the Local Government Association and other organisations are calling for precisely this law.

I want to end with a quote from Keri Doyle.

Mr Hayes: Before the hon. Gentleman ends, may I say something that might surprise him and the House? I hope that it is a welcome surprise. I do not rule out mandatory training as part of some future package. We need to put a package of measures together to support disabled people's access to these vehicles. He is absolutely right to highlight the state of the application of existing law. Clearly, more needs to be done. I assure him that the debate matters to me and my Department. As I said earlier, it will be done.

Andrew Gwynne: I am grateful to the Minister. My only concern is that we have been waiting for the Government's response to the Law Commission for some time. Notwithstanding the desire of officials and Ministers in the Department for Transport to want to do something, Government legislation and programming time is a matter for others in government. There are some incredibly pressing measures coming before this House in due course, not least on how we renegotiate our terms and conditions and our relationships with our European colleagues as we leave the European Union.

Notwithstanding the Minister's desire to do something, I am certain that there may not be appropriate time in the near future to change the law. Disabled people need the law to change today. I say to the Minister: let us get the Bill through to the next stages, so that we can discuss how we make that help happen. Disabled people need it today. This matter cannot be something that sits in the long grass of good intentions for the future.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Having attended the event earlier this week with Guide Dogs in Parliament, does my hon. Friend share my surprise at learning that two thirds of guide dog owners have experienced problems taking their guide dogs somewhere, whether in a taxi or into a shop?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The best thing about being promoted to the shadow Cabinet—I thank the Whips for allowing me to speak from the Back Benches on this one occasion—is that I will not for the foreseeable future have to enter the private Members' Bills ballot. Some Members come to this House and put in every year and never get drawn. I have been here for 11 years and this is my third. When an MP gets drawn in the ballot, they get inundated with every good cause and by every charity under the sun, urging them to take on their case. I was already receptive to Guide Dogs UK and had already promised to do this piece of legislation for them if I was drawn. However, it was not until the Bill's First Reading that I appreciated just how widespread the issue is. I was inundated with correspondence from guide dog and assistance dog

owners who have been refused access. It is only when we listen to their stories that we realise just how widespread the problem is.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I have had some dealings with visually impaired people—friends and constituents—and can only reiterate everything that my hon. Friend has said. They tell me that taxis are essential to disabled people’s independence because many are unable to drive or use public transport. The emotional impact of facing discrimination and confrontation when trying to carry out everyday activities takes a significant toll on disabled people, leading to a loss of confidence and independence anyway.

Andrew Gwynne: I absolutely agree. That is precisely why I am so pleased that Members stayed on after the previous private Member’s Bill to support this one. It is a worthy cause.

I want to give the last word to my constituent Keri Doyle, who lives in Reddish. She told me:

“I’ve been refused access to taxis because of my guide dog. It’s not my choice to have sight loss and my guide dog is essential for me being able to get around. It’s inconvenient, I’ve been late for appointments and it makes me angry that it’s still happening.”

Out there today, a minority of people in our society are looking to this place to support their rights and enforce the law. It is time to make them proud.

2.17 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). He is a doughty campaigner in this place, and I wish him all the best in his new role on the shadow Front Bench.

I pay tribute to Guide Dogs UK for its remarkable and fantastic campaign work on behalf of people affected by sight loss and other serious issues. There is much worthy sentiment behind today’s Bill.

I was horrified by the stories recounted by the hon. Gentleman—individual testimonies from people who have been treated appallingly. I was concerned when I read the “Access All Areas” survey results and found it striking that 42% of assistance dog owners have been turned away and that 38% have been asked to pay extra for their dogs to be carried in taxis. That is completely unacceptable, but the law is clear. The Equality Act 2010 states that people must not charge extra to carry a wheelchair and that it is a criminal offence to refuse to carry an assistance dog or to charge for doing so. My experience of taxi drivers has always been positive, and taxi drivers in Corby and east Northamptonshire will be troubled by what we have heard today. They are proud of their work and proud to provide an excellent service, so they will share our horror at some of the stories and at how individuals have been treated.

It is right that fines are levied when the law has been breached. I understand that the standard fine is £1,000, and I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether the level of the fine is kept under constant review to ensure that as time moves it continues to be appropriate on and meets the scale of what happened in any particular circumstance.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware of North West Leicestershire District Council’s approach, whereby it is a condition of

a driver’s licence that all drivers undergo disability awareness training during the first year of their licence and a failure to do so results in the renewal of their badge being refused? Does he agree that that might be one thing we could consider introducing?

Tom Pursglove: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, as I was not aware of that example. I want to return later in my remarks to trying to spread best practice, wherever it is found, to ensure that we see improvements throughout the country. Where we see good examples of this work being done, we should not be afraid to embrace and promote them. They ought to be rolled out across the country to other local authorities.

Mr Hayes: My hon. Friend is right about that, as was the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). On the practical application of my good intentions—I am pleased at least that the hon. Gentleman thinks they are good—I therefore want to be clear that we need an accessibility action plan, to take account of what he said today and other measures such as those my hon. Friend and other Members have raised. We need to do this quickly. We need to consult quickly, as these consultations must not go on forever, and we then need to act quickly. We will do all those things.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister, who, once again, has been clear about the direction of travel he wants on this issue. This is a short Bill. I have studied it in detail, and it has raised a few questions in my mind. I am sure that if it were to go into Committee or be part of any consultation process the Government were looking to undertake, these particular questions would be addressed.

Lyn Brown: May I say something gently to the hon. Gentleman? Is he aware that if he sits down quickly and the Minister then gets up and does the same, we can get this Bill through today? We now have nine minutes left and I just want to bring that to the House’s attention. If we support the Bill, our contributions need to be short.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. I am very conscious of what she says, but it is important that when we have votes in this House we have had proper scrutiny of the measures put before us, and I wish to draw out some important points before sitting down.

I note what has been said about consultation, and it is important that that is done correctly. I would be interested to know what consultation there has been, not only with local authorities but with taxi operators and the professional bodies that represent them. I would also be keen to understand a little more about who would be expected to deliver this training. Does sufficient capacity already exist?

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)
rose—

Tom Pursglove: I am conscious of wanting to get through this, but I will give way.

Barbara Keeley: The hon. Gentleman talks about consulting, but has he consulted disabled people in his constituency? That is what all the Labour Members here are concerned about. Time is short, but we have a

[Barbara Keeley]

chance to get this Bill through. There is time for all the scrutiny measures that he is talking about later, so will he bear in mind the time and let the Minister speak?

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful for the intervention and I am going to wrap up my remarks, but I have a final few points that I want to ask about.

I appreciate what the Minister said about best practice, so I am content with that. I am interested to know how the Bill's provisions would apply to other providers, such as Uber. That is an important point. Black taxis would fall within the scope of the Bill, as drafted, but how does the Bill apply to Uber?

When the Minister responds, I would be keen for him to say a little about the Department's thinking on taking the Bill's provisions forward in any particular guise. It raises incredibly important issues. I am very impressed by the tenacity of the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish in introducing it, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, because wherever discrimination occurs it must be stamped out—it is completely unacceptable. The law is very clear about this discrimination, and anything we can do to help spread best practice to try to improve awareness and enforcement can only be a good thing.

2.24 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) on his success in securing this private Member's Bill. I will not dwell on the two Bills that I took through this place in the previous Parliament. I strongly agree with the noble intentions behind this Bill, but I have a few genuine queries about it that I hope the Minister and the hon. Gentleman will pay attention to. The hon. Gentleman and I have not agreed across the Chamber in the past, and we have been opponents in an animal competition in which our cats had a little spat a while back.

I note that in the Bill a lot of emphasis is placed on the fact that not all local authorities have been able to impose inspections. I have a few suggestions for the Minister about how he might work with local authorities and the measures that he might introduce. I mentioned the policy of North West Leicestershire District Council. Its website explains:

"Taxis are an invaluable means of door to door transport. For many people, including the elderly and disabled people, taxis are literally a lifeline to the community."

In my own constituency that is very true. We have so many villages where many elderly and disabled people rely on taxis to go to the doctor's, the shops or even the post office. Taxis are the only means of transport and the most flexible mode of transport available. Sometimes in some of my villages people have a doctor's appointment at, say, 11 am and there is only bus a day that leaves at 8.30 am, so they need a taxi to transport them instead. The attitude of drivers and their understanding of disabled people is vital.

The local authority that I mentioned says that it is likely that mystery shoppers will be employed to monitor industry performance. That is a good way of checking to make sure—

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): With reference to monitoring, will my hon. Friend take into account the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) about Uber? There must be some degree of equalisation between licensed taxi drivers and others who are not.

Mrs Murray: Indeed. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend and with my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). Employing mystery shoppers would be one way of ensuring that checks are carried out. Suspending the licences of drivers who have not undergone the mandatory training, as North West Leicestershire District Council has, is a good idea.

Mr Hayes: Given the time, I will have to say this now as I have no other means of doing so: whatever happens today, this cause will not die. I will make sure that it does not die. I invite the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) to come and see me next week to take it further. This discrimination cannot be allowed to continue. I am sorry to intervene on my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), but that is the only way I can make that point.

Mrs Murray *rose*—

Hon. Members: Stop now!

Mrs Murray: It was a pleasure to receive that assurance from my right hon. Friend the Minister. I am grateful to him for giving the House that reassurance. [HON. MEMBERS: "Disgraceful."] From my own personal knowledge, he is extremely concerned to make sure that people are treated equally. I hope the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish, who introduced the Bill, listened carefully to that reassurance. [HON. MEMBERS: "Shameful."] I strongly agree with, and have no doubt about, the intentions behind the Bill, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing it forward.

I would also like to take the opportunity to congratulate—

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 25 November.

Business without Debate

KEW GARDEN (LEASES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

UNSOLICITED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS (COMPANY DIRECTORS) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 3 February 2017

REGISTRATION OF MARRIAGE BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November.

STALKING (SENTENCING) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January 2017

Fireworks: Licensing of Premises

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Andrew Griffiths.*)

2.32 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Just over two years ago, an explosion and fire at a business—SP Plastics—in Stafford resulted in the tragic deaths of two people, injuries to others, the destruction of buildings and the loss of businesses. I would like to offer my heartfelt sympathy to all those who suffered as a result. I would also like to thank Staffordshire fire and rescue service, the national health service and Staffordshire police, as well as local volunteer groups that assisted them. The investigations into this tragedy have not yet concluded, so I will not comment on the causes. However, there is no doubt that the scale and nature of the fire was due to the presence of large quantities of fireworks on the premises.

I am most grateful to Stephanie Horton of River Canal Rescue for much of the information that follows. Her business premises were destroyed, and she and her 30 staff had to rebuild from scratch, all the time providing a vital service to river and canal users across the country. I pay tribute to her and her staff, and to the other business owners and staff who had to cope with the consequences of the fire.

My purpose today is to ask the Minister to look at improving the way in which the storage and sale of fireworks are regulated. I will also make some points about the way in which businesses that have suffered catastrophic events such as this are supported by public bodies.

It may help if I summarise the current regulations for the licensing of premises for the storage of fireworks. Someone who wishes to run wholesale or retail premises that store or sell fireworks, up to a total of 2 tonnes, must be licensed with the fire service, if they are based in some of the metropolitan areas, or with the trading standards department of the local council, if they are based elsewhere. Someone who intends to store or sell more than 2 tonnes, or the most powerful category 4 fireworks, which are designed for professional displays and large open spaces, will need a licence from the Health and Safety Executive.

In principle, the regulations seem reasonable. However, they depend on the training of the inspectors from trading standards or the fire and rescue services, and on proper disclosure from the owner of the business.

My first request of the Minister is that when the conclusive report into this tragic fire is released, she will consider whether the regulations are sufficient. There is a great deal of difference between a shop storing perhaps a few category 2 fireworks and a warehouse containing up to 2 tonnes of category 2 or 3 fireworks, yet the same application procedure applies to both. Should there be an intermediate category covering substantial sellers who fall below the threshold for licensing by the Health and Safety Executive, and should such larger traders perhaps be licensed by the fire service rather than the local council? After all, the storage of large quantities of fireworks—to me, 2 tonnes is a large quantity—is a fire risk. In the case of small retailers, risks are more

[Jeremy Lefroy]

likely to concern consumer safety and the age of those purchasing fireworks—work for which trading standards is eminently suited.

My second suggestion arises from the experience of those at River Canal Rescue, who found themselves without sufficient insurance cover because they were unaware of what was stored in the nearby warehouse. This suggestion, which could be implemented immediately, is that all applications for licences require that the trader be properly insured for the storage and sale of fireworks, and that this should include insurance cover liability to third parties. Nowhere have I seen this on application forms. If someone wishes to obtain a licence for a motor vehicle, they have to show that it is properly insured in respect of third parties. Fireworks are potentially as dangerous as motor vehicles, so it makes sense for the same rule to apply. It should also be a requirement that the insurance policy be displayed and that neighbouring businesses be informed of the fact that fireworks are stored so that they can, in turn, let their insurers know in case it is of significance.

Ms Horton of River Canal Rescue makes another reasonable suggestion, which is that those who are responsible for licensing—trading standards or the fire service—should conduct unannounced checks on premises, and that they should receive more specific training in fireworks where they do not have it. No system is perfect, but we must learn the lessons from whatever failures are shown to have occurred that resulted in the fire in Stafford. I believe that the proposal to make production of a valid insurance policy a precondition of receiving a licence is simple and capable of swift implementation.

I turn now to the aftermath of the fire and, in particular, the consequences for the businesses that were so badly affected. Ms Horton of River Canal Rescue says:

“There was no support, help of concessions given to us by government bodies. We had to rebuild from scratch. We lost everything, including all of our accounts. It took nearly 6 months to reinstate these alone. Penalties, letters and a general disregard for our situation from HMRC gave us extra stress in a very stressful situation, especially when you take into account that there were 30 employees whose jobs relied on us to keep the plates spinning.”

Despite this, the company has been named medium employer of the year at the north-west national apprenticeship awards. That is an outstanding achievement given the circumstances. I suggest that there is more that Government and local government, can do, in co-operation with the business community, to ensure that businesses are fully supported after a calamity such as a fire that has affected them through no fault of their own. The local council—which, after all, collects business rates—could offer an officer, perhaps in co-operation with the chamber of commerce, who would liaise with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, banks and others to assist the business through that difficult time. In that way, jobs will be saved.

I have three suggestions to put to the Government: first, a licence system that is more appropriate to the level of risk involved; secondly, a requirement that proper insurance held by the applicant be a requirement of obtaining a licence; and thirdly, a straightforward

system of support for businesses affected by fires, floods or other major disruptions. All this could, I believe, be put in place with little or no cost. At the same time, it should reduce the risk of such tragedies as happened in Stafford occurring and, even if they did, assist with recovery from them.

2.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): First, I extend my heartfelt sympathy to the families of Simon Hillier and Stewart Staples, whose lives were taken in the terrible incident at SP Plastics in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) on 30 October 2014. He will acknowledge that, as there is an ongoing police-led investigation, I will not be able to comment further on it in my response today. However, Health and Safety Executive officials would welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend once the coroner’s inquest has concluded. That would provide an opportunity to consider the findings in full and whether any further work is needed to help reduce the risk of similar incidents happening again.

The prevention of accidents with the potential to cause extensive harm to workers, members of the public and the environment remains a key Government priority. In the past 10 years, there have tragically been three significant incidents involving firework-licensed sites where people have died. Although that is a relatively low number, the consequences can clearly be catastrophic and, as in the case of the incident in my hon. Friend’s constituency, devastating to the families involved. There is, therefore, no room for complacency.

I reassure my hon. Friend that the Government are committed to making sure that the health and safety requirements in this area are robust, to enable businesses to effectively control their risks. Businesses in Great Britain must have a licence to manufacture or store quantities or types of fireworks that are considered to be of higher hazard. That is in line with their potential for harm. As my hon. Friend has said, in Great Britain the responsibility for issuing licences to business that wish to store fireworks or, indeed, other explosives is split between the local licensing authorities, which can issue storage licences for 2 tonnes or less, and HSE, which issues storage licences for more than 2 tonnes as well as licences to manufacture.

I shall talk first about the role of local licensing authorities. If any business wishes to store 2 tonnes or less of fireworks, or of other explosives, it must apply for a licence from the appropriate local licensing authority. The authorities require applicants to be “fit people”, and for them to supply accurate details of the types of activities being carried out; the types of fireworks or other explosives being manufactured or stored; and plans of the site. That helps to ensure that the authorities have a clear picture of what businesses are requesting the licences for and whether there are any issues that need further consideration.

Local authorities can grant licences only where predetermined legal separation distances between explosives and people are met, making sure that potentially higher-hazard licensing requests are referred to the explosive specialists at HSE. The licensing authority can revoke a licence if there is a change in circumstances that means

that the person holding the licence is no longer considered fit, or if the site is no longer suitable. In addition, to acquire, or acquire and keep, certain types of explosives, the licence holder must have an explosives certificate from the police.

My hon. Friend has asked whether it would be more appropriate for the fire service to issue licences for larger traders. Licences to store smaller quantities of fireworks are issued by local licensing authorities, which include local council trading standards, fire authorities and the police. Local authorities are best placed to make decisions about licensing, as they understand, and are able to reflect, local concerns and requirements. HSE offers guidance to local authorities to support them in their assessments, and works closely with partner licensing authorities to ensure that the licensing framework is applied appropriately.

In Great Britain, if any business wishes to manufacture explosives or to store more than 2 tonnes of fireworks or other explosives, it must apply for a licence from HSE, which requires details of the types of activities being carried out; the fireworks or explosives being manufactured or stored; plans of the site; and the proposed distances between the fireworks or other explosives and people. HSE's explosives inspectorate considers the suitability of the applicant and of the site and whether the application can be progressed. HSE-issued licences must have the agreement of local authorities. That enables local communities to highlight local factors and make sure that specific information regarding location and proximities is considered.

My hon. Friend raises an interesting point about whether the levels of scrutiny are appropriate for the risks, and queries whether the 2-tonne threshold for HSE-issued licensing is correct. I am reminded, given the time of year, that the amount of explosive to be used in the gunpowder plot was 2.5 tonnes.

The thresholds for licensing come from a long-standing historical approach first introduced under the Explosives Act 1875. The thresholds were reviewed in 2002 and were considered still to be valid. I have extended to my hon. Friend the offer to meet the Health and Safety Executive to discuss such concerns, and I encourage him to do so. That will provide him with the opportunity to raise the issue of the 2-tonne threshold directly with the HSE.

My hon. Friend expressed concerns that business insurance policies for companies storing or manufacturing fireworks are not sufficient. Specifically, he suggested a requirement to protect third-party businesses from damages caused by any firework-related incident. Over the years, Parliament has legislated to require compulsory insurance for specific categories of risk, such as liabilities incurred by those using a motor vehicle on a road or in a public space. Businesses that employ staff are legally required to have employer liability compulsory insurance to provide redress for employees against bodily injury, illness or disease sustained in the course of employment. In addition to those requirements, businesses such as a firework display operator must have valid liability insurance.

The explosives and fireworks licensing framework focuses on the health, safety and security of the licensed premises and the impact on the surrounding community. Consequently, that health and safety legislation does not extend to cover business insurance requirements for licensed premises. However, I have already made the

commitment that HSE officials would welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend once the coroner's inquest into the SP Fireworks incident has concluded to consider the findings in full.

My hon. Friend suggested that we should introduce a requirement for licensed businesses to inform neighbouring businesses of, and display, the fact that fireworks are stored on their premises. The HSE licence approval process requires businesses to notify local communities that they are applying for a licence. Applicants must publish a notice in a local paper stating: they are applying for a licence; they are inviting any representations on the application; and how the application may be inspected. Applicants should also write to or leaflet those affected. That helps to inform neighbouring businesses, communities and residential properties.

I note carefully the specific impacts that my hon. Friend described on companies in his constituency, including River Canal Rescue. He made some cogent arguments about what can go wrong when there is a lack of adequate information or separation from other businesses. I congratulate River Canal Rescue on its success in continuing to employ apprentices, which is such an important part of ensuring that our young people can go on to fulfilling careers. However, I have noted carefully what he said about the difficulties it has faced, which indeed many companies can face in emergency situations.

The Government strategy for regulators is set out in the regulators' code, which requires regulators to ensure that they take proportionate approaches to regulation in line with the level of risk. The principles of the regulators' code are applied by HSE's explosives licensing team, with sites undergoing targeted interventions, including inspection. HSE has an effective enforcement policy statement and has developed an enforcement management model that aligns to the Government's better regulation principles. Similarly, local licensing authorities also adopt a risk-based approach to targeting health and safety interventions. This principle-based framework is set out in the published local authority national code.

My hon. Friend has suggested that bodies responsible for licensing should conduct unannounced checks on premises and receive specific training in fireworks. As I have mentioned, the HSE works closely with local authorities and the industry to ensure that the licensing framework is applied appropriately. Licensing authorities use a number of intervention approaches to regulate and influence businesses, including the provision of advice and guidance, and both proactive and reactive inspection.

The Government fully recognise the importance of ensuring suitable licensing requirements for fireworks and other explosives. The Health and Safety Executive works extensively with explosives and fireworks industries to support compliance with the law. The HSE regularly engages with industry stakeholders and has developed guidance with the industry. The existing licensing framework aims to make sure that, where businesses comply with the licence conditions, the risks of an uncontrolled explosion occurring are greatly reduced. Where businesses fail to meet these requirements or harm occurs, regulatory action is swift.

As I have already mentioned, the Health and Safety Executive is undertaking a review of explosives licensing as part its ongoing commitment to continual business

[*Caroline Nokes*]

improvement, and to ensure that the framework is fit for purpose. The review will look at how the HSE's licensing approach can be improved and whether any possible burdens on business can be reduced while maintaining standards of safety. It will involve input from industry, other Departments and other regulators, including local authorities, which will provide my hon. Friend and other hon. Members with an opportunity to feed into the process.

We have heard my hon. Friend's specific areas of concern, but there may well be others. The review is certainly a chance to scrutinise the current system. The concerns he has raised include those about the 2-tonne limit on local authority, as opposed to HSE, licensing and about the categories of fireworks, which is very important. However, there may also be other areas,

such as the secondary manufacture or fusing of fireworks, which often takes place in companies seeking to put on professional displays.

My hon. Friend raised the concern that licensing should be required for any business in Great Britain manufacturing or storing hazardous quantities or types of fireworks. I hope he is reassured by my response that this is already the case. I thank him for bringing these important issues to our attention. Again, I would like to extend my sincerest condolences to the families of Simon Hillier and Stewart Staples. My officials would welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the coroner's findings once the inquest has been concluded, and to consider any areas of further work.

Question put and agreed to.

2.51 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 18 November 2016

DEFENCE

Equitable Life Payment Scheme

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): The Equitable Life Payment Scheme (“the scheme”) started to make payments in 2011 and was due to close in 2014. The then Chancellor extended the scheme in 2014 to maximise the number of payments that could be made. He subsequently announced in the summer Budget 2015 that the scheme would close to new claims on 31 December 2015. From the beginning of 2016, the scheme began the process of winding down and completing all remaining claims. As the majority of these claims have now been paid, the scheme has today published its final progress report, which can be found at: www.gov.uk/equitable-life-payment-scheme.

The report gives an outline of the history of the scheme, details the significant efforts that have been made to trace and pay as many policyholders as possible, and provides a distributional analysis of the payments that the scheme has made over its four years of operation.

The report gives the final figures compiled by the scheme, which show that, as at 31 August 2016, the scheme has issued payments of over £1.12 billion to 932,805 policyholders. This means the scheme has now issued payments to 90% of eligible policyholders. All the payments issued by the scheme have been free of tax.

It should be noted that the closure of the scheme to new claims will not affect the yearly payments made by the scheme to with-profits annuitants, which will continue for the duration of those annuities. The scheme has written individually to all with-profits annuitants to make them aware of this.

In the summer Budget 2015, the then Chancellor also announced that, as part of scheme closure, payments to non-with profit annuitant policyholders who were in receipt of pension credit would be doubled in early 2016. In fact the scheme succeeded in making the majority of these additional tax-free payments in December 2015, and all were completed by March 2016, providing additional help to this vulnerable group of policyholders.

[HCWS269]

UK Operations in Afghanistan: Reserves Call-Out Order

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning): With the expiry of the call-out order made on 1 November 2015^[1], a new order has been made under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to enable reservists to be called into permanent service in support of United Kingdom operations in Afghanistan.

Under the call-out order made on 1 November 2015, 146 reservists have been called out for operations. We anticipate a continued requirement for reservists, with the right skills and experience, over the period the new order will be in force. This is fully in line with our policy of having more capable, usable, integrated and relevant reserve forces.

The order took effect from the beginning of 9 November 2016 and ceases to have effect at the end of 8 November 2017.

^[1] Call-out order authorising the call out of reserve forces for operations in Afghanistan, signed 1 November 2015.

[HCWS268]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): I attended the General Affairs Council on 15 November. The meeting was chaired by the Slovak presidency and held in Brussels.

The General Affairs Council discussed: the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework; rule of law; legislative programming—the Commission Work programme 2017 and joint declaration; follow up of the October European Council; preparation of the December European Council on 15/16 December and the European semester.

A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2016/11/15-16>.

Multiannual financial framework

The presidency presented its proposed compromise text for the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework. The presidency’s proposal allowed for some additional budget flexibility over the remaining years of the seven-year period, while respecting the principles of the original 2013 deal. Most member states agreed with the proposal and it was agreed that it would be used as the basis for a Council common position for discussions with the European Parliament. However, Italy expressed concerns on the level of support for migration and youth employment and placed a reserve on the agreement. The UK abstained.

Rule of law

This was the first evaluation of the rule of law at the General Affairs Council. The presidency presented conclusions which called for a more structured preparation of the discussions and more focused topics to ensure a coherent exchange of views. Most member states agreed with these conclusions. The presidency also suggested a further review in 2019 to consider turning the rule of law dialogue into an annual peer review process—this proposal divided member states and will require further discussion.

Legislative programming—Commission Work programme and joint declaration

First Vice-President of the Commission Frans Timmermans presented the Commission Work programme for 2017. A joint declaration of the EU institutions will outline the priorities and objectives for the year ahead for the EU based on the Commission Work programme. Themes for the joint declaration would be: jobs and growth, migration, energy and the digital single market. The presidency will now discuss the draft joint declaration with the Commission and European Parliament.

Follow-up to the European Council of 20 and 21 October 2016

The presidency said it would aim to make progress on migration and trade between now and the December European Council. The presidency stated they had been

working to advance visa liberalisation (Georgia, Ukraine, Kosovo and Turkey), with a trilogue taking place on 16 November.

Preparation of the European Council of 15 and 16 December 2016

The draft agenda for the December European Council is migration, security, economic and social development and external relations. The Commission highlighted that they would like the agenda to cover external migration, with progress on reform of the common European asylum system, as well as strengthening external co-operation on security and defence.

European semester 2017

The European semester 2017 road map was presented and the annual growth survey was published on 16 November.

AOB

Italy presented its plans to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome in March 2017.

[HCWS270]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Defence)

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 14 November. He and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence attended the joint session of the Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) on 14 November. The UK Ambassador to the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC), Angus Lapsley represented my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence at the Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) on 15 November. The Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) were chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meetings were held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2016/10/18>.

Turkey

The Council discussed Turkey in the light of recent developments in the country. The Council recalled the declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU of 8 November and agreed on the need to keep communications open with Turkey. No conclusions were adopted.

Eastern Partnership

Ministers exchanged views on recent developments in the six Eastern Partnership States (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine) and looked forward to the next EU-Eastern Partnership summit, to be held in November 2017 in Brussels. Conclusions were agreed. At the end of the discussion the Foreign Secretary debriefed Ministers on his recent visit to the Western Balkans noting that the EU and member states needed to be more visible and engaged in the region.

Syria

Ministers discussed the southern neighbourhood over lunch, focusing on Syria. Ms Mogherini informed the Council of her recent outreach efforts with key actors in the region, in line with the European Council mandate and in full support of the efforts of the UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. The Council expressed its concern over the escalation of tensions in the region, and called for an end to the violence in Syria and support for the resumption of a political process. A further 18 Syria sanctions designations were agreed as a procedural point by the Council, bring the total to 28 since the October Foreign Affairs Council.

Libya

Foreign Ministers discussed Libya, and considered how to support the Government of National Accord and implementation of the Libyan political agreement. Ministers underlined that building a safe, secure and prosperous Libya that is able to tackle with confidence the challenges in the region is in our collective interest.

Security and Defence Implementation Plan (SDIP)

Member states agreed conclusions on the security and defence implementation plan (SDIP), which will increase the effectiveness of common security and defence policy. The Foreign and Defence Secretaries restated the UK's guiding principle that nothing should undermine NATO as the cornerstone of European defence, and this was reflected in the conclusions. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg joined the EU Ministers for a discussion on EU-NATO co-operation, which the conclusions will help strengthen. The Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) also agreed on the need to keep the European defence industry open and competitive.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

Council conclusions on Iran.

Council conclusions on security sector reform (SSR).

Council conclusions on the upcoming fifth review conference of the convention on prohibitions on restrictions on the use of certain conventional weapons which may be deemed to be excessively injurious or to have indiscriminate effects (CCW).

The Council authorised the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to open negotiations on a comprehensive agreement between the European Union and Azerbaijan.

The Council agreed in principle on the enhanced partnership and co-operation agreement between the EU and Kazakhstan and requested the consent of the European Parliament.

Foreign Affairs Council (Defence)

Commissioner Bienkowska spoke about the European defence action plan (EDAP), which is due to be adopted by the College of Commissioners at the end of the month. The EDAP will focus on: funding defence research; fostering support for defence supply chains; joint financing of defence capabilities; and an internal market with a defence industry that is fit for purpose.

Member states agreed an increase to the European Defence Agency (EDA)'s budget in line with inflation, the first increase in six years. The UK agreed to maintain the level of the EDA budget in real terms because the EDA had made some progress on reform and performance, and, importantly, in recognition of the EDA's future role in taking forward SDIP and EDAP issues that could benefit UK security and UK industry.

[HCWS271]

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