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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Friday 1 December 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House divided: Ayes 0, Noes 169.

Division No. 51]

[9.34 am

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lucy Allan and
Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg

NOES

Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Benn, rh Hilary
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Bone, Mr Peter
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Cartledge, James
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Coyle, Neil
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
David, Wayne

Davies, Mims
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dinenage, Caroline
Donelan, Michelle
Dowd, Peter
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fernandes, Suella
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Kevin
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frazer, Lucy
Freer, Mike
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gibb, rh Nick

Glendon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louise
Hall, Luke
Hamilton, Fabian
Hancock, rh Matt
Hardy, Emma
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Carolyn
Harris, Rebecca
Healey, rh John
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurd, Mr Nick
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Gerard
Kinnock, Stephen
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, rh Brandon
Linden, David
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian

Merriman, Huw
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame
Morton, Wendy
Murray, Ian
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pidcock, Laura
Pincher, Christopher
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Prentis, Victoria
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reeves, Ellie
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Shah, Naz
Skidmore, Chris
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Cat
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Spellar, rh John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Rory
Streeting, Wes
Sunak, Rishi
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Walker, Thelma
Western, Matt
Whitfield, Martin
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Nick Smith and
Mr Alan Campbell

Question accordingly negatived.

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

Second Reading

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): For the benefit of the House, let me say that a point of order was raised yesterday regarding the publication of the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, and I think it might be helpful to make a short statement on the matter.

The Bill was initially made available in hard copy and online on Wednesday 29 November. An error was identified on Thursday morning and was brought to the attention of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), who immediately informed the Public Bill Office. The error identified was not in any way the fault of the hon. Gentleman; it was an error made during the manual inputting of the text into the Bill publishing software. The Public Bill Office is taking steps to improve this process to ensure that such a mistake is not repeated with future Bills.

The corrected version of the Bill was available online within 30 minutes of the error being reported, and hard copies were made available in the Vote Office within one hour, 10 minutes and five seconds. I am satisfied that there was no infringement of the notice requirements for the Bill and, just as importantly, that the error does not affect the debate that will take place on it, so I will not entertain any further points of order on this subject.

9.46 am

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for providing that clarification.

I am new to Parliament, but I have been in politics for decades, and in that time, I have seen trust in our political system erode. Today, only 20% of the UK trusts politicians at least to some degree. The public already see politicians as remote, self-interested and unaccountable, and the current boundary changes would make that worse. The Bill would preserve the MP-constituency link, the power to scrutinise the Executive and the strength of our communities. It would harness engagement in recent elections to reverse, rather than reinforce, the trend towards disillusionment.

This is a debate about our democracy. I stand to gain no advantage from the change I am proposing because, under the current review, my constituency would stay exactly the same. I am here to speak for the good of Parliament, not my own. I will briefly set out the five key arguments for my Bill, as I am keen to allow time for other contributions.

First, the public see politicians as remote. The boundary changes would take MPs even further away from their constituents. I am fortunate in that I can get from one end of Manchester, Gorton to the other in half an hour, but many colleagues come from rural constituencies that are already a challenge to represent. As we reduce the number of MPs, these constituencies will get bigger. Let us take the example of North Lancashire, which would stretch from the edge of the Lake district to the outskirts of Blackpool and Preston, covering more than half the county.

Practically the only argument that the Government used in favour of reducing the number of MPs was that it would save money—apparently about £13 million. That falls apart when we consider that the previous two Prime Ministers appointed 260 life peers between them, at a cost of £34 million a year. Why increase the size of the unelected House of Lords if we are really trying to cut the cost of politics?

There are other ways to save money. Not embarking on five-yearly boundary reviews, which each cost about £10 million, would be a start. Gradually reducing the number of MPs could be another, but a drastic and sudden reduction in the number of MPs causes much more disruption, and costs more than is necessary. Clearly cost was not the real motivation; the change was an attempt to gain a political advantage.

Secondly, we cannot reduce the number of MPs without reducing the size of the Executive. With the same proportion of MPs as we have now, 48% of Conservative Members would be on the payroll. The job of Back Benchers in all parties is to scrutinise legislation and hold the Government to account. Reducing the number of MPs would tip the balance of power towards the Executive. The charge that politicians are unaccountable would only become stronger and louder. What we would lose in independent-minded dissenters cannot be justified by modest savings.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I was the Minister who tried to bring in a Bill to ensure that the House of Lords was elected, and of course it was because the Labour party would not support the programme motion that we were not able to make any progress. On the hon. Gentleman's point about cost, it is true that more Members have been appointed to the House of Lords but, since 2010, the cost of running the other place has actually fallen each year—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The right hon. Gentleman is hoping to catch my eye early in the debate, so I suggest that he saves his speech. As he should know, we need short interventions—we have a long day.

Afzal Khan: I understand what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but the bottom line is that if we are trying to reduce cost, why are the Government putting more and more unelected people into the House of Lords, and appointing more and more special advisers? It does not make sense. I would prefer to have more elected people.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept what the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee said in 2015: if the Government of the day got their way—this Government are trying again—it would break all locational links and completely undermine the representational basis of this House? That would be a very sad day.

Afzal Khan: I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

Brexit legislation is passing through Parliament and we are undergoing one of the most significant constitutional changes in decades. We have already seen from our debates on Henry VIII provisions that Ministers will always attempt to extend their powers. At this point, we must fight to preserve our power of scrutiny.

MPs are taking on more and more work. We are about to lose 73 MEPs. MPs will have to absorb that workload and will be able to deliver less for our constituents. A reduction in the number of MPs is a threat to the power of Back Benchers, and to the accountability of Government. A healthy democracy requires us to fight for it over and over again. That is why my Bill would retain the number of MPs at 650.

Thirdly, accountability is an issue not just for the Government but for individual MPs. Holding boundary reviews every five years would make us less accountable to our constituents, as they may change at every election. The MP-constituency link is one of the best things about our democracy, and MPs have the chance to build a relationship with our communities that can span decades. We get to understand issues particular to our area, and we walk side by side with our communities as they change. How can constituents hold us to account if we are here today, gone tomorrow? My Bill would address that by retaining the tradition of holding boundary reviews every 10 years. That is regular enough to keep up with population changes, but not so regular that MPs become unaccountable to the people who elect us.

Fourthly, the starting point for constituencies should, as far as possible, be continuity and communities. Clearly we need to strike a balance. On the one hand, there should be the same number of voters in each constituency so that every vote counts the same but, on the other, constituency boundaries should be based around communities. The strict quota in the current review has produced some bizarre results. The coherence of a community, continuity with previous constituencies and respect for natural boundaries were given a lower priority than strict adherence to numbers.

That is clearly illustrated when we consider Crawley, a constituency that has remained unchanged for 20 years. It is now only 453 voters below the quota, so the new boundaries would include a ward from the other side of the motorway, in a different authority. Relaxing the quota to 7.5% would mean that the majority of constituencies would not change at each election. That would strike the right balance and mean that each boundary review was less disruptive. The Boundary Commission has supported that. Indeed, its submission to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's inquiry said that that would be the main change it asked for in any future review. The commission is keen to be given powers to balance the principles of continuity, organic nature and equality.

Finally, there will always be special cases when the rules for the rest of the country cannot reasonably be applied. The law already includes provision for the Isle of Wight and some Scottish islands. As part of the Good Friday agreement, Northern Ireland has a special status in our law. I believe that that should extend to fixing its number of constituencies. My Bill would maintain the status quo by fixing the number of Northern Ireland MPs at 18 and maintaining the current representation there. Brexit has already put Northern Ireland in an uncertain position. Without clarity on the future of the border or a host of other issues, such a measure would at least be one way to prevent further uncertainty. We must do all that we can to maintain the fragile stability in Northern Ireland, which is threatened already by Brexit.

Trust in politics is eroding, but right now we have a choice. The big opportunity I see to counter the erosion of trust is in the 2 million people who registered to vote in the EU referendum and the general election. I hope that that marks a turning point, but that will happen only if we empower new voters and encourage participation. The current boundary review ignores them entirely—what a slap in the face! My Bill would include those 2 million voters in the boundary calculations and ensure that their voices were equally represented.

The question for us now is: do we capture the energy of the recent elections, include new voters, and keep the constituency link, the powers of Back Benchers and the importance of communities, or do we plough ahead with the current boundary proposals, unpopular and unrepresentative as they are? Constituency boundaries are the physical building blocks of our democracy. They should be born from the organic growth of communities, not the cold calculation of politicians.

9.59 am

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this very important debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on being the promoter of a Bill on such an important issue, and on his excellent and passionate speech setting out some of the arguments that need a light shone upon them. There is much to be commended in the Bill, which highlights some of the weaknesses in the process being undertaken by the Boundary Commission. I believe that process is flawed.

All hon. Members are clear that this is about communities, people and, in essence, democracy. I suspect we all agree on the democratic principle of equal representation and that every vote should be worth the same. I care very much about this principle; it is why I am here today. The objective should be for all constituencies to be an equal size. The second objective from both the Government and the Boundary Commission is to cut costs. Understandably, people would like to see fewer Members and far fewer Members of the other place. Parliament can be seen as an inefficient bureaucracy. The machinery can be hugely impenetrable. Not including MPs and our staff, some 2,000 people are employed by the House of Commons. It sometimes looks like a very expensive way to do democracy.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): We have a responsibility to reduce the cost of politics. If it is not in our powers to control the costs of the other place, we should still seek to reduce the cost of this place.

Lucy Allan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think we all agree that the cost of politics should be reduced, and there are ways in which we can do that, but as Members of this place democracy is the first principle we are duty-bound to uphold.

The proposals do not achieve the objectives that both the Government and the Boundary Commission intended to achieve through the original legislation. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton made a very interesting point about Crawley and I would like to speak to the Bill from the perspective of representing a new town with a rapidly growing population. What is happening in my constituency shows up the flaws in the proposals. Populations across the country will grow and shrink at

[Lucy Allan]

very different rates, and we have to take into account of demographics and geography. Telford is an ex-mining town with a rural hinterland. Set in the heart of rural Shropshire, it is an excellent example of a new town. Its rapid growth is very easily predicted, because we are building new homes and people are moving to Telford all the time.

One key point that I know other Members will be raising is voter exclusion. In addition to people coming to new towns with a growing population, there have been two very significant events in our recent electoral history: the EU referendum in 2016 and, although I regret to say it, young people going wild for the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) in 2017. Young people signed up to vote for the first time and people in my constituency, who had never voted and never been registered before, signed up to vote for Brexit in 2016. We cannot ignore those new voters.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making an incredibly important point. The population of Edinburgh is exploding, but the number of constituencies is going down. That surely means that the boundary changes are making this place less representative, rather than more.

Lucy Allan: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point.

Many Members represent constituencies with a high level of unregistered voters, but the Boundary Commission is not prepared to take them into consideration. Very often, those in most need of representation are not registered to vote. I normally have my constituency surgeries on a Friday—I feel passionately that I should be here today to represent my constituents' interests—and my time in surgery will, very often, be devoted to those who are not registered to vote. No one is suggesting that we, as elected representatives, should ignore their voice. No one is suggesting that we should not allow them to come to our surgeries. It is a fundamental principle that they are included in the whole process. These people count, we represent them, and we have an absolute duty to make sure they are considered.

For all the consultation, no changes have been made in my constituency—or in many others—to reflect the points that have been raised. There needs to be more flexibility and discretion if the reforms are to achieve their objective. I would support the Government if their objectives were to be achieved through this process. We need a process that has integrity and can be relied on to achieve what we all hope for in terms of democracy.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady not agree that it is better to represent a large constituency in a single unitary authority area, rather than trying to represent a smaller constituency, as set out in the Boundary Commission proposals, that straddles two borough areas with double the number of borough chief executives, clinical commissioning groups, police and—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I just suggest that, with a lot of Members wishing to speak in the debate, we have short interventions.

Lucy Allan: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. That is just one of the flaws with the current process that needs to be addressed.

As the chair of the all-party group on new towns, I want to talk about rapidly growing towns. Indeed, the process needs to recognise the changing demographics right across the country. Telford is surrounded by a band of leafy and affluent rural Conservative constituencies in rural Shropshire where the population is shrinking. They have an elderly population and young people go away to the big cities to work. We can see that those constituencies will shrink in size, whereas my constituency is growing rapidly. The Boundary Commission proposes that Telford should receive an extra 20,000 constituents of voting age, even though we are already, if we count all the voting-age population, right in the middle of the thresholds imposed by the current process. That makes a real mockery of it.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Local boundary commissions are allowed to take into account predictions of population growth and census data. Does the hon. Lady agree that it would be important to allow that for parliamentary boundary commissions?

Lucy Allan: The hon. Gentleman is right. There needs to be some discretion and flexibility to take account of local anomalies and issues, in particular those he raises.

I have a great deal of sympathy for Opposition Members, because I serve a population with pockets of significant deprivation. People come to see me when they have nowhere else to go. My weekly surgeries are full, despite best efforts to resolve problems over the phone, of people dealing with issues relating to benefits, debt and eviction. They have complex lives, tussles with the council and problems with their housing. Most are not registered to vote. The Boundary Commission, however, is not much interested in any of that—the fact that they are not registered does not count. I know that the Government and the Boundary Commission would not suggest that these people should be excluded by their representatives, so they should be included in this process.

The Boundary Commission wants to add another 20,000 people of voting age to my Telford constituency. That would make it a super-sized constituency that significantly exceeded the parameters, when all along the objective has been to create constituencies of equal size. If we will not achieve that, why is the process going ahead? Fewer people will get to see their MP. We could, perhaps, employ extra trained case workers, but that would be no different from going to the citizens advice bureau. It is not the same. The people we represent want to have a connection with us and I want to be able to deliver that form of representation.

In 1992, it was necessary to divide Milton Keynes into two constituencies. That will need to happen in Telford in the not too distant future. Instead of recognising that, however, we are adding to the number of Telford's voters because, as of December 2015, we did not have the sufficient number of registered voters. That was an arbitrary date and a long time ago. Indeed, in electoral and political history, 2015 was a very long time ago. We have to stop and have a little look at this, so we can make a success of ensuring that all constituencies are properly represented.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the rapid growth of new towns makes it logical to have more regular reviews, every five years rather than every 10 years?

Lucy Allan: That is an interesting point. We are not taking into account the number of people who are coming to new towns such as my constituency, or, indeed, the number of people who will move into the houses that are being built and have almost been completed.

In my view, the so-called public consultation has been no such thing. The Boundary Commission is simply taking submissions from political parties that have gathered a great deal of local support and, in some cases, not so local support. They are lobbying for an outcome that supports the political objectives that benefit them. My constituency is a case in point. The situation is farcical: all the people who are sending submissions are politically connected, and they all want the constituency to grow significantly when it could stay as it is and be within the threshold. I cannot believe that any genuine members of the public would want to share their MP with a larger number of people.

Given that there will not be another general election until 2022, the Government have an opportunity to consider carefully whether to take this proposal off the table, go back to the drawing board and get it right for the future. Why wait until October 2018, find that the House does not want the proposals to go ahead, and then start thinking about how to correct the process? We need to update the position and redraw boundaries at some point, but we must get it right, and I think that, for all sorts of reasons, we have an opportunity to do that now.

I commend the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, and also the former Member of Parliament for North West Durham, who presented the same Bill for the same reasons last year. There is a lack of flexibility and a failure to recognise that MPs must care for all constituents, registered or not. We must give a voice to all our constituents, be they in affluent Tory shires or urban areas.

10.11 am

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for presenting a Bill that deals with a very important issue. I also commend the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) for the points that she made: it is a privilege to follow her.

I stand here as the Member of Parliament for Birmingham Perry Barr. I want to iterate that because my constituency is being torn asunder by those who deem the boundary changes to be right. The constituency was created in 1950, and its first Member of Parliament was Cecil Poole, a member of the Labour party. Since then it has had only two Conservative MPs, for a maximum of six years. My immediate predecessor was Lord Rooker, who had served for 27 years, and who is now in another place not too far from here.

I say all this because the Boundary Commission has paid no attention whatsoever to the issues raised by the hon. Member for Telford and my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton about communities and the people who live in them. As the hon. Member

for Telford said, it has not taken into account the number of people who are not on the electoral register. As a result of the electoral registration process initiated by the Government, I have effectively lost more than 10% of my constituency. The senior member of the household used to be responsible for registering all the other members, but that is no longer the case. What that does, quite maliciously, is take the vote away from young people who are not necessarily living at home, and who may be in education or trying to get on to the work ladder. The Government know that young people tend not to want to stuff letters into the post to register their vote. This has been done deliberately. We have organised a number of drives in an attempt to return those young people to the register, because it is very important for that to happen.

If these boundary changes are to take place in the period that we are discussing, what we need is not a census but a proper system of registration that makes people responsible for registering properly. The Government—not just on this occasion, but on consecutive occasions whenever they have been in office—have engaged in a deliberate ploy to cut the franchise and prevent people from electing the MPs they want. The Bill would raise the ceiling from 5% to 10%, which would prevent those changes from happening.

Most of the bottom half of my constituency—mainly in the Lozells and East Handsworth and Handsworth Wood wards—contains some of the most deprived communities, and in some areas more than 40% of people are not registered to vote. New and younger residents do not understand the registration system in the same way as the older ones. Not only are those people blocked from voting, but, more importantly, they cannot secure finance, or anything else of that sort. Non-registration has a huge effect on those communities.

I said at the start of my speech that the Boundary Commission had torn my constituency asunder. In Birmingham we have huge wards—or had huge wards; the commission will change that in February. So far, the wards have contained 20,000 people. The commission has torn the constituency apart. It has aligned the top half, which consists of Oscott ward, with the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), who is not here at the moment.

It is necessary to understand Oscott and the circumstances of the people who live there. The main dual carriageway crosses Walsall South into Oscott, and those people do not cross the carriageway. There is a combined community, which is served by Birmingham City Council rather than by Walsall Council. It will be difficult enough for an MP to represent two district councils, let alone how difficult people will find it to understand where they should go to receive the service that they used to receive. The commission is ignoring the needs of the community by carelessly trying to lump it in with another district.

The Perry Barr ward—the constituency is named after it—is partly in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). The ward is long rather than compact, which means that it will belong to my hon. Friend. Most of the inhabitants live near the end furthest from Erdington; the small community at the other end is cut off, because

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

there is no direct bus route connecting the two. The representation of a huge number of people is being imperilled by the fact that a community in the middle of my constituency is being attached to another part of Birmingham.

The Handsworth Wood ward has a mixed community. It is linked to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), which, again, presents a barrier to the community and prevents the necessary synergy. Both Handsworth Wood and Lozells East and Handsworth have experienced problems with knife crime, drugs and shootings. These two wards have been held together by the work we have done to unite them. We have managed to cut the crime rate because we have been able to work together as a unit.

James Cartlidge: Is the hon. Gentleman seriously suggesting that the crime rate relates in some way to how we allocate constituency boundaries?

Mr Mahmood: Yes, it does. [Interruption.] Conservative Members might find this funny, but it is not funny for those who live in the communities. We have been able to work together and the crime rates in that area of Birmingham have fallen. When I was elected in 2001 there was huge concern about that area, particularly in relation to gun crime. We lost two young women, Charlene and Letisha, in a gun fight over the Christmas and new year period. Since then we have managed to put together community policing, but the Conservatives have cut that so we cannot now have such policing in that area.

James Cartlidge *rose*—

Mr Mahmood: I have taken the hon. Gentleman's intervention; he must now sit down.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Mahmood: I am not going to take any more silly interventions from Conservative Members. They must realise what this means to my communities. This is about protecting those communities and building on the unity and bonds that have been formed. Conservative Members do not understand that, and neither does the Boundary Commission. I am passionate about keeping this unity, because of the work we have done over the last 16 and a half years, with the police, the community and many different sorts of organisations, to pull that together. [Interruption.] Conservative Members find this funny, but it is not funny for those people who have had huge numbers of issues to deal with. Thankfully, over the last 16 years, working with these organisations and the police, we have managed to address them. We want to continue to hold the constituency together, and support those people.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): There was no hilarity in terms of the point about crime on this side of the House; it was to do with the fact that the hon. Gentleman was trying to connect the boundary review with the rise in crime. What is the connection between the two? Nobody can understand the hon. Gentleman's point.

Mr Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman cannot have been listening to me: my point is about the connection between the communities that we have, and we want to keep them together. [Interruption.] They will not be together under the boundary changes, because they will be divided between two different local authorities.

Michelle Donelan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Mahmood: No, I am sorry, but I must conclude.

What I am asking for is an understanding of what my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton wants to do. It is important to keep such communities together. The Boundary Commission had a duty to do that—to look after communities and people. We are here discussing this matter because the Government have not provided proper registrations for such communities. If they had done so, we would not be looking at boundary changes. I commend my hon. Friend for introducing this Bill.

10.22 am

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): First, I should declare an interest—although it is not strictly an interest—as the Minister who took through the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. I feel some obligation to defend the very sensible proposals and arrangements that Parliament legislated for in that Act, as they are under attack from what are, I must say, some of the most ridiculous arguments I have ever heard—and I will come on to that last one.

I do, however, thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for the opportunity to debate these issues again. I am afraid that one or two of my hon. Friends in this House are also slightly anorakish on this subject. [Interruption.] One or two of them are waving at me. I, too, always enjoy the opportunity to talk about these important constitutional matters.

First, I will deal head-on with some of the arguments the hon. Gentleman made, and there are a couple of other things I want to say before I turn to the Bill before us. The hon. Gentleman talked about trust in politics. That is indeed very important, but I should share with the House a point that arose when we first discussed and legislated for these proposals. I hope colleagues do not find this too devastating, but when we announced to the public that one of our key proposals was to reduce the number of Members of Parliament from 650 to 600, although I know we would all like to think that the people of the UK were distraught that there were going to be 50 fewer of us, for quite a time it was the single most popular coalition Government policy.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I hate to rain on my right hon. Friend's parade, but if we had a proposal to abolish Parliament entirely, that would also be particularly popular, would it not?

Mr Harper: I would not go quite as far as that, as there is a serious point about representation, but the public were certainly not devastated by the idea of a modest reduction in the size of the House. The other place is, I think, the second largest legislative Chamber in the world after the Chinese National People's Congress, and this lower House of Parliament is one of the largest

lower Houses, and I thought that our modest proposal to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600 was a perfectly sensible step forward.

The explanatory notes to the Bill were prepared by the Public Bill Office on behalf of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, so I do not know whether the following point was put in by that office or by him. We have made the case that reducing the number of MPs from 650 to 600 saves some £13 million per year, which is £66 million over the course of a Parliament. That might be modest in terms of our overall spending, but I think the general public would think that saving £60 million that we could then spend on important public priorities like the national health service was quite important. Interestingly, the explanatory notes talk about the broader context and suggest that there will be a reduction in the cost of politics—the hon. Gentleman alluded to this—associated with the 73 MEPs who will disappear when we leave the European Union. In our debates in this House on Brexit—I promise colleagues I will digress on this only briefly, as we have plenty more days to come over the coming weeks—when we make assertions about what we thought the referendum result meant, colleagues often say, “Well, that wasn’t on the ballot paper.” I am sorry that we did not think about this at the time, but if we had said to voters that when we leave the EU we will not have the 73 MEPs and said at the same time that we were going to use that as a cunning plan to reinstate the 50 MPs going in the law as legislated for, many voters might have thought twice. I am only sorry that I did not think of making that argument in the referendum campaign, given that I was on the remain side of the argument, as we might have had a little more success. I do not think that is a sensible argument, however.

I say to the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton—I may have misheard, but I think the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) agreed with him on this—that just because there are no MEPs in place it does not mean that suddenly a lot of extra work will come to this House. There are quite a lot of things that the EU does, and that MEPs spend all their time addressing, that actually would be better just not done at all. We can make sensible judgments in this House about what we want the Government and Parliament to focus on, and picking up every single thing that MEPs do is not very sensible.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): On the point of reducing the cost of democracy, is it not the case that the Conservatives have stacked the other place with 260 new appointees, increasing the cost of democracy by some £34 million?

Mr Harper: I am glad the hon. Gentleman raised that point. It is certainly the case that there are more Members of the House of Lords, because at present, although they can retire, funnily enough when it is suggested to someone who has a life appointment with a considerable income attached to it that they should retire, very few choose to do so—although, to be fair, more of them have been retiring recently than previously. To repeat what I said in my admittedly slightly too long intervention, although there are more Members of the House of Lords, we made an attempt to reform the other place, but Parliament was not completely sold on the idea;

and the fact is that the cost of running the House of Lords has fallen since 2010, not increased. It is true that there are more Members of the House of Lords, but the running costs have fallen because of the savings made.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Is the right hon. Gentleman therefore saying that the cost of politics and the number of Members are not linked? His argument that the simple way to cut costs in this place is to reduce the number of MPs is undermined by his own evidence.

Mr Harper: Not at all. I have made the point that the other place has managed to reduce its costs, but importantly, its Members do not have any constituents to represent. It has made some savings. I have suggested that we could save costs by reducing the size of this House quite modestly. We would still remain a very large lower House of Parliament compared with many others.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): To extend my right hon. Friend’s argument, we could achieve even greater cost-cutting by cutting the number of Lords who do not take their daily allowance of £300.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is right, but I do not want to dilate too much on the other place as I am still pursuing the first argument that the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton made in favour of his Bill.

The second part of the hon. Gentleman’s first argument, which dealt with trust in politics, was about the size of constituencies. He was talking about their geographical size. We obviously represent physical parts of the country, but it is the people in those constituencies that we represent, not the spaces. My hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) agreed with his proposition that we should have seats of broadly equal numbers of constituents, because it is only then that the weight of those constituents’ views can be broadly the same across the country. That proposition was espoused by the Chartists many years ago.

We obviously do not want exact electoral equality between constituencies, because we have to take into account other important factors, which I will say more about in a moment, but we need to have broad equality. When we brought forward the original legislation, we set a range of +/-5%, which means that the number of constituents could vary by 10%. I want to give the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton some credit here. The former Member Pat Glass brought forward a similar Bill almost a year ago—this is a sort of anniversary of Labour’s attempt to go backwards in terms of sensible boundaries—and she set a range of +/-10%, which would have given a 20% variance. I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman thought that that was too big and has reduced the range to +/-7.5%, giving a 15% variance. That is of course welcome; when someone moves in your direction, it would be churlish not to give him credit for doing so.

We need to stick fairly rigidly to broad equality, but boundary commissions can take into account a number of other factors. My constituency neighbour across the water, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), seemed to suggest that boundary commissions could not take into account any of those considerations. He talked about those things being swept away completely. It is

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worth going back to the legislation, which makes it clear that they have to stick to the rule about broad equality but can take into account special geographical considerations, local government boundaries, boundaries of existing constituencies, any local ties and any inconveniences attached to them. They can take all those factors into account.

Obviously, we are not talking today about the specific proposals brought forward by the boundary commissions, but I have taken a cursory look at the changes that they have made. It is clear from the evidence they have taken, and the changes they made between their initial proposals and their subsequent proposals, that many local people made clear representations about the factors I have just set out. The boundary commissioners listened to those concerns and made significant changes as a result.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Notwithstanding what the right hon. Gentleman has just said, does he acknowledge that the boundary commission is still proposing a “Devonwall” seat, which ignores the strong identities of Devon and Cornwall and matches them together, and which would be truly unpopular?

Mr Harper: I am familiar with that issue. The hon. Gentleman might not be aware that when we were originally taking the legislation through, that issue was raised with me by colleagues from both Devon and Cornwall. Indeed, I think this was the issue that prompted my right hon. Friend the former Member of Parliament for Witney and Prime Minister to make his unfortunate comment about the width of the River Tamar, which got him into a bit of hot water with colleagues from both Devon and Cornwall and which I think he may have come to regret. We had a debate about the issue, and I recognise that my views were not entirely popular, but it was about ensuring that areas were properly represented. One solution put forward by the then Members in Cornwall constituencies was to have less representation in this House. As the Minister responsible, I did not think that that was very sensible. I think that people should be represented properly.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr and others have spoken about local government boundaries. It is worth remembering that we are not proposing to move constituents anywhere. If there are changes to parliamentary boundaries, the constituents do not move. The councils that they get their local services from do not move. The only inconvenience in this process is that, heaven forbid, Members of Parliament might have to talk to an extra local government chief executive. Most of my constituency is coterminous with the Forest of Dean District Council, and I liaise with the officers and elected councillors of that council, but one of my wards is in the borough of Tewkesbury, which I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson). That one ward contains just under 4,000 constituents, who are important to me, as are all my constituents. It means that I have to spend time dealing with another set of councillors and local government officers, but I do not find that to be enormously troublesome, and it causes my constituents no inconvenience at all. I suspect that they spend absolutely no moments in the day thinking about it.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: One of the problems with the boundary review is that in many areas, including mine, local government boundary changes have meant that the proposed areas do not even cover coterminous wards, and some wards would be cut in half. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that allowing some flexibility would solve that problem?

Mr Harper: I recognise that there are complexities due to local government boundaries, but I have to say that Members of Parliament are probably the only people who, when driving around the country, see boundaries in front of us as we cross them. I do not know whether other Members have a similar experience, but as I drive past the various signs on the M4, I think of myself passing through the constituencies of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland). But let us be frank, that is something that only those of us involved in politics do. Normal people—the constituents we represent—do not see the country as a succession of ward and local government boundaries. Perhaps I am doing them a disservice, but I suspect that if I asked my constituents where the local government boundaries were, most of them would be unable to tell me. And, funnily enough, I do not think that that makes their lives any less exciting and fulfilled.

Gareth Snell: I agree that we are the only people who go around the country getting excited about boundaries, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that people identify with small towns, villages and other communities, and that a 5% threshold would make alignment very difficult in some places? There are examples in constituencies represented by Members on both sides of the House of small towns, villages and clusters of communities, all of which identify as a community, now being split because of that very tight threshold.

Mr Harper: I accept that, but we have to balance these things, which is what the boundary commissions do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Harper: I am conscious that I have dealt with only the first argument that the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton set out, and I want to make some progress before I take any more interventions.

The hon. Gentleman’s second point, which related to MEPs, was about workload. I have dealt with costs, but I want to take the workload issue head on, because there is a flipside relating to devolution, so he should be careful about going down this road. When we brought forward the initial proposals in the 2011 Act, we had to think through how the country was to be represented. At the moment, certain parts of the United Kingdom are perhaps over-represented in this House relative to their population. Wales, for example, has considerably more Members of Parliament than it would be entitled to on the basis of its population, which is why both sets of proposals would reduce the number of Members of Parliament to which Wales was entitled.

Representations were made to me that the parts of the UK with devolved government—those covered by the Scottish Parliament, and the Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland—should have less representation in this House because the casework aspect of our job is shared with the representatives in those bodies. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where health is a devolved matter, one could argue that cases about the health service—when I take up such cases as an English Member of Parliament, I raise them with the Secretary of State for Health, who is responsible for the health service in England—would be properly dealt with in the devolved Assemblies. I rejected that argument at the time, because I felt that we needed to ensure that all voters who elect people to this House were treated evenly, but if we follow the hon. Gentleman's argument that the abolition of MEPs means that more work will fall on us, meaning that there should be more of us, the logic is that those parts of the United Kingdom with devolved government should have less representation in this House, because their MPs' workload will be shared with Members of the devolved legislatures. The hon. Gentleman should be cautious before pursuing that line of argument, because it might lead him somewhere he would not want to go.

Let me now deal with the frequency of reviews. The hon. Gentleman's Bill would move from us having a boundary review every Parliament, which was what we suggested, to having one every 10 years. I had to smile to myself when he talked about the tradition of having boundary reviews about every 10 years, because we have not had a full boundary review for almost 20 years. If we do not manage to get a boundary review before the next general election, the registers on which the next election will be fought will be 22 years old, meaning that some people who will be voting at the next general election would not even have been born when the registers were compiled.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My right hon. Friend inadvertently says that the registers would be 22 years old, but he meant to say that the boundaries will be based on registers that are 22 years old. The registers will actually be completely up to date.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as one would expect, given that he is the distinguished Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which covers exactly this area of policy. I am grateful to him. The registers are absolutely up to date. The boundaries, however, are based on registers from 2000, meaning that we have not had a boundary review for some considerable time. That is important, because the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton was talking about the change that comes along with such reviews.

I accept that a boundary review that reduces the number of MPs from 650 to 600 and takes place 20 years after the last one will inevitably involve a lot of change to parliamentary boundaries. The reason we thought it sensible to have a boundary review every Parliament is that there is a choice once we have had that big change: either we have relatively frequent but smaller changes to parliamentary boundaries, or we have less frequent but more significant changes. My view, and the view that the then coalition Government and the House took

when the 2011 Act was passed, was that it was better to have more frequent smaller changes. On balance, having reflected on that before today and while listening to the hon. Gentleman's speech, I think that that is right. If we have boundary reviews only once every 10 years, they will just be bigger and more disruptive, so smaller, less disruptive reviews are probably to be welcomed.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The issue is not having a boundary review, but what has initiated it, which is the reduction in the number of MPs from 650 to 600. If we compare the average number of constituents in 1955 with the present day, the proposals in the review will increase that number by 40%.

Mr Harper: If we look at the existing range of constituency sizes—excluding the small protected island constituencies—we see that some Members represent mainland constituencies with perhaps only 40,000 electors, but others represent constituencies with nearly 100,000 voters. They seem to manage perfectly well, so I do not think that we will find things enormously challenging. I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) is in the Chamber. Her constituency is one of the largest in the country by population, and she does a fantastic job of representing her constituents in this House. Her local authority is seeking significant planning permission for house building to deal with the housing crisis, which means that her constituency numbers will grow considerably.

I have talked about the size of this lower House, and we represent relatively few people compared with legislators in comparable lower Houses. It would therefore not be impossible for us to have slightly more constituents each, on average, than at present.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The right hon. Gentleman says that we represent fewer constituents than Members of similar legislatures, but that does not seem to be the case. If we look at the figures for Commonwealth legislatures, Cyprus has 14,000 people per representative and Jamaica has 34,000. If we look at the Nordic countries, we see that Norway has 30,000 people per MP. On what evidence is he basing his assertion? I am rather confused.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman obviously has a very narrow view of the Commonwealth.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The obvious example to cite is India. According to a House of Commons briefing, it has on average 2,192,379 electors per representative.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am not proposing that we reduce the size of this Parliament to that extent, but if a legislator in a similar type of system is capable of representing more than 2 million people, I do not think that our rather modest changes should be completely beyond our wit.

I turn now to what the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton and other Opposition Members called the 2 million missing voters. That refers to the fact that electoral registration increased after the compilation of the 2015 registers, which are being used for the current review, and after the referendum, which was a big electoral

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event. The hon. Gentleman referred to the missing voters as if they were somehow not being taken into account, and Pat Glass said the same when she introduced her Bill last year. The important thing for a boundary review—my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) alluded to this in his point about the registers being up to date—is not the absolute number of electors, but how those electors are distributed across the country. The only thing that will make a difference to the number of seats is if the distribution of the electors changes substantially.

I must confess that I have not seen an up-to-date piece of work, but the excellent Matt Singh of Number Cruncher Politics published an interesting paper on 16 September 2016 in which he looked at that particular objection to our boundary review to see whether it made sense. He looked in a detailed, analytical way at the extra voters who came on to the electoral register ahead of the referendum to see whether they were distributed in a way that would cause a significant change if the boundary review were restarted with those registers. His short conclusion bears repeating:

“So to sum up, amid lots of misleading claims and counterclaims, there is a legitimate question about the effect of the date at which registration figures were taken.”

That was the point raised by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. The paper continued:

“But a detailed analysis of these figures and the subsequent 2 million increase in registration in the run up to the EU referendum provides the answer. The data does not support the suggestion that using the later version of the register would materially alter the distribution of seats. Instead it points to a very even distribution of the 2 million newly-registered voters between Conservative and Labour areas.”

That reflects well on Members on both sides of the House from across the country, because it shows that, in the run-up to that significant voting event, which we now know will change the direction and route this country takes, they did a fantastic job either of doing registration drives or of inspiring voters to register in a consistent way across the United Kingdom, rather than in a partial way that might have changed the distribution. The fact that some of those voters are not on the register that is being used for the current boundary review does not materially affect the distribution of seats across the country.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman has covered a great deal of ground, but will he cover the obvious ground? After spending £3 million, the Government know that the boundary review cannot get a parliamentary majority.

Mr Harper: I would prefer to test the opinion of Parliament, and we may or may not test Parliament's opinion today. The right process is to do what is set out in legislation. The boundary commissions in the four parts of the United Kingdom will report by October 2018. Orders will then be brought before this House and the other place, and we will vote on them. They might get through; they might not—I do not know the answer to that question. We have not seen the final proposals from the boundary commissions. In fact, we have not even seen the final draft proposals for some parts of the UK. The opinion of the House will be

tested in due course. If we were to take a view before a boundary review even started on whether we thought it would be approved by Parliament, I suspect we would never have a boundary review.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr has now disappeared from the Chamber, but he spoke about large wards. He is perfectly right that, in urban areas, the building blocks of parliamentary constituencies—local government wards—tend to be larger. I accept that was a problem in the abortive review that was not brought to fruition. The computer kit that the Boundary Commission for England used to do all the mapping could not split local government wards very well, but my understanding is that the commission has fixed the problem with support from the Cabinet Office and that it is now perfectly possible to split local government wards in urban areas. Trying to keep such wards together makes a boundary review difficult.

I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is not here, because I want to deal with his point about crime. It was effectively about working together, but I did not understand his argument—Conservative Members were looking slightly amazed as he made it. Let us take his example of Birmingham. He has a police force that covers the whole west midlands, and Birmingham has a city council and a number of parliamentary constituencies. My hunch is that Birmingham Members of Parliament do what Members of Parliament do in my county of Gloucestershire: when there are common issues that concern us all and that cross boundaries, we work together. The election of the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), unfortunately for my party, meant that Gloucestershire was no longer completely represented by Conservatives.

Dr Drew: That's democracy.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, but I am perfectly happy to work with him on common areas of concern, even though he represents a different political party. If we change parliamentary boundaries so that a particular part of a city or area is to be represented by two different Members of Parliament, the idea that somehow they will be incapable of working together, and with their police force and local authority, to deal with an important matter such as crime and the safety of their constituents is, frankly, nonsense. That was why Members were laughing at what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr said. They were not laughing at a serious issue; they were laughing at the idea that people cannot work together to solve such important problems.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am another west midlands MP with a very small constituency, and it might be worth the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) recognising that we also have the west midlands Mayor, Andy Street. We are very used to working together across boundaries.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Devolution of local government also goes back to the point about workloads. Again, it demonstrates that different areas of the country are grouped together for certain purposes, and we have seen that level of devolution

in the west midlands and we are seeing considerable levels of devolution in Greater Manchester under the Mayor, Andy Burnham.

Afzal Khan: Hear, hear!

Mr Harper: I am a great believer in that level of devolution. The hon. Gentleman is a distinguished former local government leader, and I do think that decisions in this country are too centralised. Giving important areas of the country with political leadership the ability to make more decisions for themselves is welcome.

Of course, there is nothing to prevent people from working together. I was impressed when I visited Manchester as a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions. I met the leader of Trafford Council, Councillor Sean Anstee, who is one of the local government leaders in Greater Manchester. He told me that local government leaders, even though they are of different political persuasions, have a shared vision on some of the big challenges for that area of the country. They are able to work together, notwithstanding their political differences. That blows out of the water the argument of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr about boundaries. It is perfectly possible for us all to work together.

I had planned to make a couple more relevant points before saying a word or two about the Bill. Obviously, I have just been addressing the five arguments of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton in favour of the Bill—I hope hon. Members feel I have adequately dealt with those arguments and have been persuaded.

There has been quite a bit of discussion about voter registration. Again, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr made some allegations about that, and I am disappointed he has not stayed around to listen to a response. He said that we have made it difficult to register to vote and that we have tried to drive people off the register, which simply is not true and is not borne out by the facts.

The Electoral Commission published a report in July on electoral registration at the June 2017 general election, and the report makes it clear that “more than 2.9 million” applications to register to vote were made in Great Britain between the Prime Minister’s announcement on 18 April and the deadline for applications. Ninety-six per cent. of those applications were made through the online service—I had the privilege of kicking off that service when I was Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform—which has made it much easier for people to register to vote. More than two thirds of those online applications were made by people aged under 34. I do not use 34 as a proxy for young; it is simply a fact that the Electoral Commission put in its report. The idea that, somehow, we have made it difficult for people to vote when all they have to do is use an electronic device to register online is simply not borne out by the truth.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: That is not the case for those who are homeless or for a number of other people who do not have a fixed abode. Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that those people are disadvantaged by the new system?

Mr Harper: No. I accept that some people may not be able to use the electronic method, but they are of course able to register in the traditional way. I think I am right

in saying, although the Minister will be able to confirm this, that many local authorities go to considerable lengths to make sure people who might be disadvantaged are registered to vote. I know many local authorities make great efforts to make sure homeless people are registered. Under the law those local authorities have a duty to get as many people legitimately registered as possible.

That brings us to the other part of the argument, because the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr said that people disappeared from the register. Yes, they did, because the registration process does two things. It deals not only with making sure the register is as complete as possible, so that everyone who is entitled to vote is on it, but with making sure that it is accurate and that only those people who are eligible to vote are on it. Many of the people who left the register when we introduced the new voter registration system were, in a sense, not really people at all. Many of them were people who were no longer in those constituencies and should no longer have been registered to vote but had not been removed from the register, and some of them were no longer alive and that had not been taken into account.

On accuracy, I also come back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex about how up to date the register is, as the other thing to remember is that the current boundaries are based on electoral registers from 2000. So however imperfect the current process may be, if we do not get this review done and have the boundaries implemented, Members are saying that they are comfortable for seats to be drawn on the basis of registers from 2000. That means that at the next election we would have the absurdity of people voting who were not alive when the registers on which the seats were founded were put together. That is absurd and it needs to be changed.

Kevin Foster: My right hon. Friend made some interesting points about the registration process. Does he agree that it is bizarre to be hearing in the 21st century arguments that electoral registrations should still be based on a concept of male heads of households formed in the 19th century, as the old system was?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. We had an argument about this at the time, and the concept that the head of household, who was invariably the man, should be responsible for registering people was rather out of date. Putting that responsibility on individuals is an improvement. As I said, all the evidence suggests, and the fact that a lot of people registered to vote in the referendum demonstrates, that this is not a difficult process. It is straightforward. The online registration system is much easier.

The only significant Electoral Commission recommendation—the Minister ought to reflect on this point—related to the problem that in the current system it is not easy for people to check electronically that they are already registered. A significant proportion of the people who tried to get registered for the general election were already registered and these were duplicate registrations. That puts a burden on electoral registration officers at a very busy time, and there would be some sense in our reflecting on whether we can improve the online system to deal with that.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the longer this boundary review is delayed without being implemented, the greater the unfairness becomes, particularly with regard to rural seats, which, in the main, have seen a large increase in population?

Mr Harper: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. We are not carrying out this process at a massively fast pace, and the boundary changes should have come into force some time ago, but there was an unholy alliance between the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats. I do not see any Liberal Democrats here today, which is surprising, because they are normally fascinated beyond all bounds of reasonableness with constitutional matters. As this Bill is of a constitutional nature, I am amazed that there is not a single Liberal Democrat here to debate it. I worked closely with them in the coalition Government—

Dr Drew: You finished them off.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman says we finished them off, but I do not think we quite did that, as there are still some of them left. I am amazed that none of them have troubled themselves to come to Parliament to debate this constitutional matter.

I come to the last couple of things I wanted to say about this Bill. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friends must not tempt me. You were not in the Chair at the beginning of this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, when Mr Deputy Speaker did us all a service by stopping us worrying that a dreadful mistake had taken place. When I looked at the Bill yesterday, I was astounded that on St Andrew's day a Bill had been produced that seemingly had omitted the entire part of the United Kingdom known as Scotland and had also inadvertently put Northern Ireland in Great Britain. Those of us who follow the constitution carefully will know that that is something we should not do. Fortunately, I was able to hear the excellent point of order from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson), who pointed that out yesterday—*[Interruption.]* He does not need to be here, because he is in his constituency, having made the point of order yesterday. Mr Deputy Speaker was able to answer it yesterday and made a statement, putting us all at our ease; there had been a simple, inadvertent printing error, and the official Opposition and one of its spokesmen had not inadvertently wiped out Scotland and confused where Northern Ireland went. I am pleased Mr Deputy Speaker was able to put us straight.

The only point I wanted to make about the Bill is that in clause 2(2) the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton has widened the variance from +/- 5% to +/- 7.5%. I touched on this in my opening remarks. It is welcome that he has accepted that the range of +/- 10% that his colleague suggested last year is too wide; that was the position the Labour party took when we were doing the legislation. Given that he is a Front-Bench spokesman, albeit not on this subject, I hope that at least the Labour party has accepted that a 20% span is too wide and that narrowing it is better. I welcome that change in his Bill.

I also note that the hon. Gentleman is suggesting, having said we ought to get on and do this, that instead of the boundary commissioners reporting by October next year, when we could get the boundary reports in

front of this House, we should delay a boundary review until October 2020. In one sense, I do not have a problem with that, because under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 we are not due a general election until 2022. However, I thought the Labour party's position was that it wanted a general election as quickly as possible, and therefore delaying the boundary review by a further two years would seem to be a problem.

I wish to put one final point on the record, although it is in the Bill. It is worth making the point that significant financial provisions are contained in the Bill, because money is spent in two ways. The number of Members of Parliament is increased from that set out in the current law, which would reduce the number of Members of Parliament, so a significant cost is involved there. Another boundary review would be necessitated, in addition to the one that is almost complete, so a significant cost is involved there, too. The explanatory notes show that if this Bill is to make further progress a money resolution would be required.

I think I have dealt comprehensively with all the arguments that the hon. Gentleman put forward in favour of his Bill. If the opinion of the House is tested, I hope colleagues will be persuaded not to give it a Second Reading, and I thank the House for its indulgence.

11.9 am

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Some of us have greatness thrust upon us, Madam Deputy Speaker. I only came in to observe the debate but, sadly, my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) has taken ill. I am sure that the whole House will wish her a speedy recovery.

It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). I suspect that he has a vested interest, given that he was the Minister who took through the original proposals, and wants to preserve his legacy. I do get a sense of déjà vu though, because of course I was the shadow Cabinet Office Minister this time last year, and I remember the right hon. Gentleman making virtually the same speech. I hope that the House will forgive me, but I will do almost the same.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for tabling the Bill. We are all largely in agreement that a review is needed; updating boundaries is a vital part of the functioning of our electoral system. However, it must proceed in a way that benefits our whole democracy and not just the short-term interests of one political party.

The Opposition strongly oppose a reduction in the number of parliamentary constituencies and welcome measures in the Bill to maintain the size of the House of Commons at 650 Members, correcting a decision taken by the coalition Government to have 600, a purely arbitrary number for which no logical case has been made. The cynic in me would suggest that it was chosen purely for political advantage.

Kevin Hollinrake: Surely the logical case is that that number is less, and therefore the cost of running this House will be less. Is that not logical?

Andrew Gwynne: I will come on to those points, because the hon. Gentleman will find that the cost of politics is already being cut in a number of ways. The duty of this House is to ensure that the Government

are held to account, and my concern is that the proposal to reduce the number lessens scrutiny on the Government of the day. That might not be a Conservative Government, and I would hope that the hon. Gentleman would want to preserve his rights, when he sits on the Opposition Benches, to hold a future Labour Government to account.

The lack of clarity from the Government has concerned many across the Chamber. The Government have stated that the boundary review is proceeding in accordance with legislation, but, according to three senior sources quoted in *The Times*, the plan is likely to be scrapped due to a lack of support from the Conservative Benches—*[Interruption.]* I hear “Hear, hears”. Perhaps this will be the latest casualty following the Prime Minister’s failure to win a majority in June.

If the review is going to be ditched, I say to the Government: stop wasting public money. This is a charade. Let’s ditch the review now and start a fresh one based on principles we can all agree on. Suggestions that this is being done to cut the cost of politics are red herrings. The claimed savings of £13 million a year are dwarfed by the £34 million annual cost of the 260 extra peers appointed by the former Prime Minister. Can the Government seriously talk about cutting the cost of politics after offering £1 billion to the Democratic Unionist party? The contradictions in the Government’s arguments are so blatant it is insulting. This Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton would also see potential savings by requiring the boundary commissions to report every 10 years rather than every five.

The Government claim that a reduction will bring the number of MPs in line with that in similar sized legislatures. International comparisons should indeed play an important role in policy making. However, by cutting the number of MPs and making their constituencies bigger and more remote, the Government endanger the MP-constituency link, which is envied by democracies across the world.

Michelle Donelan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Gwynne: I will not give way again, because many Members want to speak.

Cutting 50 MPs also presents a crisis of scrutiny, a concern raised by the Electoral Reform Society. Under the current proposals, the reduction would be made entirely from the Back Benches—the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), can shake her head, but there are no proposals to reduce the number of Ministers. That would only increase the Executive dominance of Parliament and undermine the influence of scrutiny from the Back Benches.

James Cartlidge *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will not give way.

As our great nation prepares to leave the European Union, the need for parliamentary scrutiny—I know that it is unfashionable on the Government Benches, where Members will not even take part in Opposition day votes—has never been greater. We are also, as we have heard, losing 73 Members of the European Parliament. That is cutting the cost of politics, for a start, but we in this House will be taking on more powers, more responsibilities and more legislative work. It is right

that we should have the ability to do that unhindered. That is another reason why we oppose the reduction in the number of MPs.

I am aware that our Northern Ireland colleagues have raised concerns about the Government’s proposals and about their potential to undermine political stability in the Province. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton has clearly listened and responded accordingly. The Opposition welcome measures in the Bill to have a fixed allocation of 18 Members of this House and to keep the protected areas already legislated for in 2011.

Our opposition is shared by many. The Hansard Society found no rationale for the Government’s decision, noting that there was a “real concern” that the number had been

“plucked from thin air—600 simply being a neat number.”

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee called on the Government to reverse their decision, stating that there had been a complete absence of consultation or research into the impact on Member’s roles and functions.

On the electoral roll, constituencies must represent the communities they serve. This Government may try to stack the deck in their favour by drawing the boundaries based on the December 2015 electoral register, but since then more than 2 million more people have been added to the electoral roll following the increase in registration at the EU referendum and the 2017 general election.

It is easy for the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean to say that the first review would result in major changes and subsequent reviews in minor changes, but that depends on where the additional registration has taken place. In Bristol West in the run-up to the general election, there was a 12% increase in registration. Similar large increases were seen in Leeds Central, Leeds North West, Bethnal Green and Bow, Poplar and Limehouse and Wolverhampton South East. In this year alone, 1.1 million additional voters were added to the register, and a third of those were in London and the south-east. If we have concentrations of increases, we will have the domino effect that we have all been subject to in the first major review, so subsequent reviews will also be pretty extensive.

Any constitutional changes should be done fairly, with everyone given a voice. That is not what the Government and the boundary review have done. We welcome the Bill, which addresses these failings and sets electorate calculations using the 2017 electoral roll. It has been clear from the start that the Government have been interested only in their own political advantage rather than what is in the best interests of the country. We therefore welcome the Bill, which will address the failings of this Government and ensure that a fresh boundary review can go ahead in a way that benefits our democracy, and not just the narrow interests of the Conservative party.

11.19 am

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): In answer to the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who accuses us of pursuing political advantage, I would simply point out that we are pursuing a fairer distribution of constituencies, which, even though it might be to our advantage, puts Members on the

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Government Benches on the moral high ground, rather than defending the present distribution of constituencies, which is clearly unfair. I will come back to that point later.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on the Bill, although we all suspect that he might have had some help. The enthusiasm of the Opposition Front-Bench team for the Bill suggests that—well, we all like co-operating with our colleagues in the House, don't we?

The remit of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee includes the requirement to consider constitutional matters, and this includes parliamentary elections and boundaries. I draw the House's attention to the report issued by our predecessor Committee, the Public Administration Select Committee, in the 2010 Parliament, entitled, "Smaller Government: What do Ministers do?", since it addresses the consequences of reducing the size of the House of Commons for the relationship between the Commons and the Government, as has been touched upon already. I will return to that later.

The views I express today are my own, but I approach consideration of the Bill in the spirit of PACAC's core purpose—namely,

"to conduct robust and effective scrutiny in order to help create conditions where the public can have justified confidence in public services/government".

That leads me immediately to express concern about one key provision in the Bill. The House, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), can note with satisfaction that the Bill accepts several key principles established in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. It accepts that the size of the House of Commons should be restricted to a defined number, which has never been the case before, to prevent a return to the so-called ratchet effect, whereby the size of the House tended to increase as the population grew; it accepts the primacy of the principle of an electoral quota over any other statutory factor in determining the size of a constituency; and it accepts the 2011 revision of the consultation process and the removal of interim reviews.

I ask myself, therefore, why the Bill does not accept that deviations from the quota should be limited to the 5% limit established in the 2011 Act, rather than changing it to a 7.5% allowance. If one believes in electoral equality and fairness, one should favour the existing 5% provision, which achieves this more effectively than the proposed 7.5% provision would. For demographic reasons, wider disparities in constituency sizes have historically favoured the Labour party in England. The fact that the Bill does not propose returning to the 10% quota deviation, which the Labour party previously supported, implicitly concedes the substance of the equality argument—that the 10% deviation was unfair.

The fact that the boundary commissions have mostly completed their recommendations for new boundaries and that they allow only a 5% deviation also confirms that this is perfectly achievable. To propose 7.5% is simply an attempt to turn the clock back from a fairer voting system. Unless the Bill's promoter can somehow argue that 7.5% is actually fairer and therefore would

command greater public confidence, he should concede that the 5% deviation should be maintained. Of course, some communities will feel they have been put into the wrong constituency, but that always occurs, whatever the rules say.

I can personally be completely neutral on this point. Not only will my constituency be more or less the same after the boundary changes—though, sadly, I will lose the town of Harwich itself—but the constituency that Samuel Pepys represented when he was first elected in 1679 is almost identical to the shape of the one I represent today. [HON. MEMBERS: "Do you keep a diary?"] I am not going to read out my diaries. Those of us who have coastal constituencies are innocent bystanders to some of the turbulence that affects inland constituencies.

We should sympathise, however. The point made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), who is not in his place, is not to be dismissed, because we like to be elected and to serve as leaders of our communities, and if those communities are not coherent, that makes it more difficult. But let us be absolutely clear: that is an ancillary purpose of being elected a Member of Parliament; our primary job is to represent the national interest and our constituents in Parliament, not to represent Parliament in our constituencies. Sometimes in these debates about the role of MPs, we, and others, tend to lose sight of our primary purpose.

Current legislation provides for exceptions, such as the four island constituencies and the geographically very large constituencies, and the Bill accepts them as well, but not the 5% rule, even though it has been accepted in nearly every other part of the country. Perhaps the Labour supporters of the Bill prefer 7.5% over 5% because they believe that it might advantage their party. I fully accept that my party is keen on 5%, but that is only because it reduces potential unfair electoral disadvantage. It cannot be argued that we have made the electoral system less fair.

On the use of more up-to-date electoral data, I have considerably more sympathy with the Bill. The fresher the data, the better. That said, I take the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean—in the tangle of his rather long speech, this was by far the most important point—that we cannot jump at this opportunity to change the legislation until we can be certain that cancelling the current boundary review will not cause other unsurmountable and practical problems or too much cost and uncertainty. I can assure him and the Minister that PACAC will be taking evidence from the boundary commissions in the new year and asking them for clear advice on this question, and I am sure that in doing so we will want to pick up on many of the points raised in today's debate.

On the size of the House of Commons, I am actually rather sympathetic to the retention of 650 constituencies. We have heard in evidence to PACAC and in this House how Brexit means that parts of Government are having to increase their resources to manage responsibilities being repatriated from the EU. This will give MPs more responsibilities and powers as well, not fewer: more UK Government activity to scrutinise, more areas of policy to consider that are the direct responsibility of the Government, and of course more legislation.

As we leave the EU, PACAC is also conducting an inquiry into the consequences for devolution in the UK, and this is leading me to change my view on the wisdom of reducing the number of MPs in the House of Commons, because Westminster has devolved some of its powers. First, this devolution of primary legislative powers applies only to a relatively small part of the population—there is no devolution of legislative powers in England, which accounts for 85% of the UK's population, and therefore no meaningful reduction in the responsibilities at least of English MPs. Secondly, the present size of the House already reflects a reduction in representation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Thirdly, it is becoming apparent that devolution in the UK is far from finished business. A PACAC report produced just this week, "Devolution and Exiting the EU and Clause 11 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill: Issues for Consideration", highlights how we have previously tended to consider devolution as a binary question—powers are either reserved or devolved—but as we prepare to take back powers on matters such as agriculture, fisheries management and environmental protection, we find that there are powers we have to share among Westminster, Holyrood, Cardiff Bay and Stormont but for which there is precious little inter-governmental or inter-parliamentary machinery—in fact, there is no inter-parliamentary machinery. This machinery is necessary, however, if we are to provide the reassurance and proper procedures for resolving and scrutinising disagreements. A failure to resolve disagreements amicably can quickly become toxic, as we are seeing in the debate over clause 11 of the EU withdrawal Bill.

Moreover, disputes will be resolved only where there is trust and understanding between individual Ministers from each Administration and between MPs from each of the Parliaments. We need to get to know each other better, and we need more regular meetings, but at present there is no provision in any budget for this to take place. Such institutional machinery will take up the time and energy of Ministers and MPs, and will be permanently required, as we see is common in other decentralised nations. Now is not the time to be reducing parliamentary capacity.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean referred to the fact that this House is one of the largest lower Houses. I think that is a false comparison, simply because the House of Lords is not elected—we are the only elected part of this Parliament. The French *Assemblée Nationale* has 577 Members for a similar-sized population, but there is also an elected Senate of 348 Members, so there are 925 elected parliamentarians serving the whole of France. We do not have a comparable number in this House, and do not plan to, even with 650 Members.

The number of MPs in the House of Commons has not been below 600 since 1800, when our population was considerably smaller than it is today. After the Republic of Ireland seceded from the UK in 1921, the number dropped to 615, but that was when the Government were spending well under 30% of GDP, with much of that on foreign affairs and defence. There was little welfare and no NHS. There was very little new legislation every year and far fewer public bodies. The workload of the House of Commons has vastly increased, to the extent that the vast majority of hon. and right hon. Members are now full-time, or virtually full-time, parliamentarians.

We spend less time on primary legislation than we used to, but we barely look at the thousands of statutory instruments that pass through this House, which have increased from around 2,000 per year in the 1950s to 3,000 or more per year more recently, and Brexit means there will be more.

If we are not going to stick to the present size of the House of 650 MPs, the 2011 Act, which reduces the size of the House from 650 to 600, sits ill on our statute book, unless we also address the consequences for the number of Ministers. A PASC report under my predecessor as Chair, Tony Wright, raised concerns about the numbers of Ministers in Government and the impact of those numbers on the size of the payroll vote and on the independence of the legislature.

That 2010 report was entitled "Too Many Ministers?". It noted how the number of Ministers had grown steadily since 1900, doubling from 60 to 120, with the rate of increase particularly marked for Ministers below Cabinet level. Evidence submitted by the constitution unit to PASC for its further inquiry in 2011 "Smaller Government: What do Ministers do?" showed that the House of Commons has a larger number of Ministers in relation to its size than is the case in many other European countries. In 2010, the ratio of Ministers to Members of the House of Commons was 1:8, compared with 1:14 in Spain, 1:16 in Germany and 1:29 in France.

The increase in the number of Ministers has several detrimental effects. I appreciate that this is not a popular topic among MPs these days, most of whom hope for ministerial preferment and regard it as more likely if there are more jobs that the Prime Minister has to fill, but it has obviously been one of the reasons the number of Ministers has increased. However, there are downsides. The number of Ministers adds to the cost of politics. More Ministers make decision making across Government more complicated. Why has the Cabinet tended to grow and grow? That blurs lines of accountability.

However, as has already been pointed out, the most significant impact is on the independence of the legislature because it increases the relative size of the payroll vote. Those who hold a Government job are expected to vote with the Government or to resign, and the increase in the number of Ministers undermines the ability of the legislature to scrutinise the Government and to hold them to account. If we are going to reject this Bill and cut the size of the House of Commons, let us all agree at least that the number of Ministers should be reduced pro rata so that the ratio does not get any worse. In 2011, PASC recommended that the reduction in number of MPs from 650 to 600 should be accompanied by a corresponding reduction in the number of Ministers.

The number of Ministers is already subject to two statutory limits: the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975, which limits the number of Ministers who can sit and vote in the House of Commons to 95, and the Ministerial and Other Salaries Act 1975, known as MOSA, which limits the number of ministerial salaries that can be paid to 109. Of course, that does not limit prime ministerial patronage in other ways. Neither Act covers Parliamentary Private Secretaries, unpaid Whips and other informal appointments, such as envoys or party appointments. Nor does MOSA limit the number of unpaid Ministers who can sit in the other place. There is also the question of the growth of a new breed of quasi-Minister, which comes from the appointment

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of non-executive directors of ministerial Departments. That has become a pathway to becoming a Minister, and there are a great number of such people who play a very valuable role. There is therefore no lack of capacity for Prime Ministers to influence and control Departments. That is not a reason to maintain the number of Ministers in the House of Commons.

A reduction in the size of the House of Commons by a little under 8% would require a reduction in the number of Ministers in the House of Commons by just seven, but I think that that is an important principle. Should we make that a condition of implementing the 2018 boundaries review of 600 seats? I leave that question hanging in the air. If the reduction is made without reducing the number of Ministers, the percentage of MPs who are Ministers rises from 14.6% to 15.8%. More significantly, in today's House, paid Ministers represent 30% of Conservative MPs. In a reduced House, with an equivalent balance between the parties, that would increase to 33%—one third of all the Government's MPs would be paid by the Government. We are meant to be against bribery and corruption in this place, but that is a way of controlling what MPs do.

PASC's suggestions for reducing the number of Ministers in the Commons included reducing the absolute number of Ministers or appointing a larger proportion of Ministers from outside the Commons, by increasing the proportion of Ministers from the other place or by appointing Ministers who are not Members of either House—it is only a convention that Ministers are Members of Parliament.

I could not support the Bill as it stands, but I do regret that the Conservative party has become impaled on this commitment to reduce the number of MPs in the House of Commons, because I do not see colleagues in any part of the House hanging around without enough to do. I also regret all the more the fact that this reduction will result in a de facto increase in Government patronage relative to the size of the House. If we could have a fresh boundary review, keep 650 MPs, get that done in good time for a 2022 election and allow for a 5% variation against the electoral quota, I would hazard a guess that the majority in this House would settle for that. It would help the House to continue to meet the challenge of our workload, be less disruptive and, at least as importantly, not covertly increase the patronage of Governments in this House.

11.37 am

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin). It was also interesting to hear the contribution from my neighbour the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper)—we wave at one another across the River Severn. It is interesting and somewhat ironic that both the colleagues of the right hon. Gentleman who have spoken did not seem to agree with him as much as I am going to disagree with him. Perhaps that is because he was a member of the Executive and some of us have not had that opportunity.

I will keep my remarks much briefer than the right hon. Gentleman did, but I want to make a contribution because, quite simply, I support my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). It is

right and proper that we keep the size of this House as it is. It is somewhat ludicrous that, with an ever-increasing population, for whatever reason, we seem to be reducing the number of representatives in this House. Important though it is that we look at how to save money, there are other and better ways we can do that, not the least of which, some of us would argue, includes scrapping the House of Lords. However, that would be for another day and another debate.

My arguments start with the contrary point to that of my neighbour, the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean. Yesterday I was stopped in the street by someone from Minchinhampton—which is, as he may remember, now in The Cotswolds constituency—begging me to take up a case on their behalf, saying, “Why don't you come back and become our representative again?” In that boundary review, I argued the case for keeping Minchinhampton as part of Stroud. Those who know my area would hardly describe Minchinhampton as a bastion of socialism. It is probably as strong a Conservative ward as I have in the Stroud district, within the constituency and without. Locational representation matters in this place. It matters to the people outside more than we think it does. They like to know who their MP is. They may not always agree with them or always be of the same party, but when they come to us with their problems, they know enough about who we are, what we can do, and what we should do.

The relationship with our local authority matters. If these proposals go through as constituted, the Stroud district, which has only 100,000 people, will be represented by three different MPs. I think that is wrong. It leads to confusion and to bitterness because people want to know who their Member of Parliament is and want to know that they have a relationship with the local authority.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) *rose*—

Dr Drew: I will give way briefly; we have lots of people waiting to speak.

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman seems to be making the case for having no elections at all. I find that somewhat bizarre in a place such as this.

Dr Drew: As someone who has stood in seven parliamentary elections and knows his area rather better than the hon. Gentleman, I will take that as a slight rather than a positive intervention.

Location matters. It matters because geography matters, ties to an area matter, local authority representation matters, and the relationship with other constituencies matters. I could not represent any other area. No other area would have me! I am quite simply the MP for Stroud, the area I have always stood for. I would never stand for anywhere else because I believe that that is what I am best at, and I think I have done a reasonable job. I have been elected four times and lost three times, so, hey, I am ahead at the moment. It did not help my predecessor that in preparation for the boundary changes he moved his constituency office. That went down rather badly in the constituency and may not have helped his cause when we stood against each other again, as we have done on a number of occasions, for election earlier this year. Geographical representation has always had a

stronger hold on the way in which we decide on the electoral relationships than purely the numbers. If we want to do that, we might as well go to the Soviet system, where the constituencies are not even named—there is just a number and a way in which certain people are put in place. I believe in local representation and I will always argue that case.

As we have heard, in 2015 the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee savaged the Government's approach to reducing the number of MPs. It argued very strongly that we should not just look at the numbers and proposed a 10% variance. I would still adhere to that, because I do not mind representing more people. I would rather that the people I represent—

Michelle Donelan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Drew: I will not give way now, because other people want to speak.

I would rather that the people in the district also have a relationship to the constituency. If that means that I have more electors, so be it. That can be reflected in some additional help with case work and so on. It is important that we tie these relationships together, and anything that undermines them is a bad thing.

Michelle Donelan: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Dr Drew: Very briefly.

Michelle Donelan: Does the hon. Gentleman concede, though, that it is impossible for an MP to give the same service as another MP who has half the number of constituents, and that he is actually doing down our democracy by suggesting that we continue to increase the variation between constituencies?

Dr Drew: The honest answer is no. When I talk to colleagues who represent urban constituencies, it is clear that their casework, which consists of much more on the immigration front than mine would, will take them an awful lot longer than I would spend on many of the cases that I have to deal with. That does not mean that I end up with an easier road; I just think it is very important that we understand that constituencies have different profiles and we should reflect that.

I want to bring my remarks to a speedy conclusion, because I—

Wendy Morton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Drew: No, I will not give way any more.

I want to bring my remarks to a speedy conclusion because it is important that this Bill is given proper air time. I could argue on the point about the 10% variance, but, more than anything, it is important that we have a proper debate on the appropriate numbers. We have heard the arguments about the Executive versus Back Benchers. We should also consider the importance of locational representation so that people know that whoever they elect, whether it is their parish council, district council, county council, or MP—we will not be electing MEPs any more—the line of accountability follows through. Anything that undermines that is a jolly bad thing.

As Stephen Lukes says in his epic book “Power: A Radical View”, this is about “power to” rather than “power over”. It is about how we evolve representation. I get very worried when we come up with a figure that has just been plucked out of the air and tell people that that is unimportant who represents them and where that representation comes from. I very much support this Bill. I hope that we will have a proper debate in Committee and on Report. I think it is the case—as all Members other than my neighbour the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean seem to have recognised—that in the current arrangements we have the wrong arrangements.

11.46 am

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow two of my constituency neighbours—the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who made an excellent speech. I am afraid that I may not be as fluent or have the same stamina as my right hon. Friend, but I will try to make some of the same points. I also will refer to some of the points made by my neighbour from Stroud, perhaps with a couple of local examples to show why I cannot agree with him on a number of his points about geographical representation.

I have always felt that the primary reason for these boundary changes was to have more equal votes and more equal-sized constituencies so that our constituents could be more fairly represented in this place. As I will illustrate with some local examples, there are huge variations in the size of parliamentary constituencies, and that has made some people's votes count more or less than others, depending on where they live. Clearly, equal representation of voters in this place is a fundamental democratic principle, and it is proper that our boundaries reflect that.

I will illustrate that with a local reference. My own constituency of Thornbury and Yate has an electorate of about 68,000, while that of the neighbouring constituency of The Cotswolds is over 80,000, and that of my neighbour, the hon. Member for Stroud, is about 83,000. While I understand that there are some bigger variations around the country, the 15,000 variance between two neighbouring constituencies is still important. Some people will argue—my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean made this point—that I have a large constituency in sheer geographical terms. In fact, Thornbury and Yate is larger than Kingswood, the Minister's constituency, and Filton and Bradley Stoke—the other two constituencies in the local authority area—combined, but it has fewer electors than either of them.

I echo a point that has already been made: surely the job of a Member of Parliament is to represent the people who live in the constituency, not the landmass. It is the people—the electorate—who matter. I completely accept that there are a small number of exceptions to that rule, such as Orkney and Shetland, and the Isle of Wight, which have been discussed, but surely the people in Stroud and The Cotswolds deserve the same representation as the people in Thornbury and Yate.

We have talked a lot about local representation. The hon. Member for Stroud no doubt knows the village of Charfield very well, as it has close links to some towns in his constituency, and shares a lot of local services

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and a local identity with his area. Under the proposed boundary changes, they would become part of the same constituency—that is right. When people in those towns go to the GPs in his constituency, as is the case when my constituents use the shops in Wotton, they do not think about which local authority area they fall under; they think about the links in the community.

We should also remember that under the new proposals a lot of communities would be strengthened and brought together. This is not just about dividing some existing communities; a lot of them will be improved by the current proposals, as has been recognised in some of the public consultations. Berkeley is perhaps one of the most Conservative wards in the hon. Gentleman's and my constituency combined, and perhaps even in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean too. It was originally proposed to be part of the new constituency formed largely from Thornbury and Yate, but now it is proposed that it moves back into the Stroud constituency. It is right that local links have been reflected in proper public consultation. That shows that having an independent process, rather than a politically driven one, is a positive thing, despite that not necessarily being beneficial to either Member of Parliament representing those seats.

A number of Members have talked about the move to 600 MPs not being perfect in itself, but 650 is certainly not perfect in itself either. There has been some debate about holding reviews every five years, with this Bill proposing reviews every 10 years. I accept that there are some arguments about cost, but part of the reason I support boundary changes every five years is that I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean that it is surely better to have smaller, more frequent reviews that take into account changes in the electorate, rather than continuing the process that has happened over time of making rather significant boundary changes because the reviews are so infrequent.

That is especially the case for semi-rural areas that are expanding and taking on more developments. It is proposed that the west of England will have 105,000 new homes between now and 2036. Thousands of houses are proposed—I have already mentioned Charfield, which is expected to more than double in size if the current proposals go through. These semi-rural areas are undergoing larger changes because of development proposals. More regular reviews would be much better able to take such changes into account as development in those areas speeds up in the years ahead.

I want to touch on cost. A number of colleagues have discussed the cost-saving aspect of the existing legislation. While I do not believe that that should be the primary focus—that focus is to address the imbalance of representation between constituencies—it is clearly important. Reducing the cost of politics is, and still should be, an important factor. We have heard a number of figures—£12 million to £13 million a year saved just on pay, pensions and allowances alone, and £60 million to £66 million saved across the course of several Parliaments. This change should be part of the effort to reduce the cost of politics more generally. We have seen ministerial pay freezes in recent years, and some local councils have taken action to reduce the number of elected officials, too. My authority, South Gloucestershire Council, is leading

the way by reducing the number of district councillors by over 10% in the next year. I want to put on record my appreciation for the work that Conservative-controlled South Gloucestershire Council and its leader, Matthew Riddle, have done to make reductions and save over £100,000 a year in council allowances alone.

As was touched on earlier, there would be associated costs if we abandoned the review at this point. So far there have been more than 500 hours of public hearings, involving more than 20 members of staff, 21 assistant commissioners and 14 videographers. There have been numerous public hearings across England. The cost of scrapping all that and redrawing the boundaries on the basis of this completely new proposal would presumably run into many millions of pounds. I have seen no estimate from Opposition Members of where the money would come from or what the final bill would be.

The Bill repeats a proposal from the previous Parliament that has the sole aim of simply pushing back our proposals so that the next general election, and presumably the one after that and so on, will be fought on the current boundaries—as we have heard, those boundaries are based on figures that are over 20 years out of date—which would be a genuine outrage. The review is being conducted by the Boundary Commission, which is a completely independent and impartial advisory body that prioritises compliance with legal requirements, not political considerations.

As I have pointed out, if the Bill progresses, we will be ensuring that our constituents are not equally represented in this place and that their voices are not equal. It would be a regressive step if the Bill were to proceed. The central point is that the votes of our constituents should carry equal weight, and if we do not have seats of broadly the same size, some constituents will in effect be disfranchised and will not have the same voice in this House.

Much was made at the start of the debate about trust, but it will not do anything to engender trust in politics, politicians and this place if Labour Members make a party political move by kicking the boundary changes into the long grass, because they are worried about fighting another election on the current boundaries, rather than allowing us to fulfil a commitment made in the last two Conservative manifestos. I say to them that if the answer is 50 more Members of Parliament, they are asking completely the wrong question.

11.56 am

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I will try to ask the right question: why is the only measure that the Government are pushing to reform our disfigured electoral system one that will give them a numerical advantage? I should declare a vested interest, in that my constituency will disappear if the changes go through, and I do have a little regret at the fact that that will interrupt my promising parliamentary career just as I am beginning to get the hang of how this place works. However, that is not why I am making a speech.

It is revealing that the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), had to harp back to before 2010, when he became its Chair, to be able to cite an example of a useful reform. I have been on the Committee for three Parliaments, and I know

that the reputation of Parliament is as it was described by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). That is the crucial point—it is what this debate is about. The few people who are not looking at the coverage of the royal couple in Nottingham this morning but are watching our soporific exchanges here might be surprised at our self-indulgence, but our reputation fell to rock bottom during the expenses scandal and it is now worse—it is subterranean—and that is what we should address.

We must address the weaknesses in our system. If we want every vote to count, we can do that through a system of proportional representation. We need a system that is fair and through which the views of the people are represented. In two Parliaments during my time in the House, the Conservative party won 20% of the vote in Wales but did not get a single one of the 40 seats for Wales, which is outrageous. If there was a PR system in the United States, we would have been spared a President who behaves like a petulant child, and we would not have had to express our anger in the way we did yesterday. That shows the major weakness in the system.

Other scandals are certain to take place. What happened to the system for disciplining Ministers? Under the system set up by Gordon Brown, two Ministers were called in by the adviser on Ministers' interests. There was someone in place to do such a job, in accordance with the ministerial code, but since the Conservative Government have taken over, that post has been subsumed into other roles, and people are judged not by the adviser whose job it is, but by civil servants and others.

As has happened in some cases, there is now a process of absolution by resignation. Two Ministers have resigned to conceal what they were accused of doing. One was accused of having meetings with Mossad outside his ministerial role, and another was accused of considering giving international aid money to the Israeli army. Those two people lost their jobs, but they were not disgraced in the way that they should have been if the public had been informed. We had the case of two Ministers giving £3 million to a charity that was favoured by the previous Prime Minister.

Michelle Donelan: I am a little concerned that we are getting off the important topic under discussion—I would like to get back to it. The hon. Gentleman said that he wants to make votes count much more. Does he concede that the equalisation of constituencies would do that?

Paul Flynn: I accept entirely the logic behind the Bill and its arithmetic—I am not arguing about that. I am saying only that a massive programme of reform is urgent and essential. I was making a point about the two Ministers who threw away £3 million by giving it to a dodgy charity that went broke three days later. They were never called to account by the Prime Minister, but that should have happened. We must reform that system. We must get reform in the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments as well. We have a system whereby Ministers, former generals and others can—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is very good of the hon. Gentleman to sit down when I rise to my feet. He is an extremely experienced and dextrous parliamentarian, and I was going to say to him, politely, that he has

started his speech “broadly”—let me put it like that—and he cannot be accused of having attended too closely to the specifics of the measure before us. I feel sure that he will now apply his scholarly cranium with laser-like intensity to the matter before us, rather than to the matter that he might wish were before us.

Paul Flynn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I greatly appreciate that advice, and I shall try to focus my laser-like cranium on the effect that these measures will have in Wales. The Welsh Assembly has PR, but it now has the problem that it does not have enough Members for its increasing workload. If the number of Welsh MPs is to be reduced—it is almost certain that that will happen sometime in the future—there must be a compensatory increase in numbers in the Welsh Assembly. That would make the proposals logical and fair, but at the moment they are a piece of special pleading by the Tory party cynically to increase the number of MPs that they have in Westminster. That has nothing to do with reform of our constitution, which is in a very bad state.

12.2 pm

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), with whom I served—albeit briefly—on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. As ever, I am afraid that I may disagree with him on a number of points, but I will come to that in a moment. I will also keep my remarks brief, because many of the points that I wish to raise have already been covered by previous speakers, in particular in the eloquent speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), and by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin)—he has a distinguished history on this issue as Chair of the Committee on which I served. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on introducing the Bill, and although I do not support it, it is important that Parliament has the opportunity to discuss its principles.

I have two particular concerns about the Bill. The first relates to the proposal that we should renege on the commitment that was voted through this House in the Parliament before last to reduce the number of Members of Parliament from 650 to 600, thereby cutting the cost of politics. My second concern is the idea that we should change the principle regarding the degree of variance that we have in the boundary review following that reduction in the number of MPs, because I think that would take us further away from the principle of equal votes having equal weight in terms of the number of MPs who are elected.

On the first principle, it is very important that we in this place seek to cut the cost of politics. It is worth recalling how this legislation came about in the first place. If Members cast their minds back, the context to all this was the expenses scandal. The hon. Member for Newport West rightly says that it knocked the public's confidence in this place considerably. In response, the then Leader of the Opposition, the then Member for Witney, made a large number of proposals to reduce the cost of politics and to restore confidence in politics. In advance of this debate, I took the opportunity to re-read his speech from September 2009 entitled “Cutting the Cost of Politics.” It passes the test of time quite well—I

[*Oliver Dowden*]

should declare an interest, as I had a very small role in one or two of the measures included in it—and made the point that we in this place, particularly at a time when the previous Labour Government had massively maxed out the country's credit card and were in the process of giving us the largest budget deficit in our peacetime history, should seek to reduce public expenditure, including in this place.

The speech contained several good proposals in that regard. For example, it suggested: a 5% cut in Ministers' salaries, which is what the new Government did when they came into power; a cut in the use of Government cars, which again they did when they came into power; and a cut in ministerial travel. I must say that with hindsight we perhaps went a little far on that last point. We now have the slightly extreme situation where some Ministers are required to travel economy on very long flights, only to be told that they are not allowed to read the contents of their boxes because they are travelling in economy. That does not necessarily serve the public interest. By and large, however, it contained a sensible package of measures that sought to restore trust in this place by cutting the cost of how it did business.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It was really important to cut the public purse at every level of government. I was a councillor at that time and we voted to reduce the cost of politics locally, as did many other Conservative councils. [*Interruption.*] We had no regrets, because it was the right thing to do for the public purse and to show leadership.

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Councils up and down the country, including Hertsmere Borough Council which I represent, did a fantastic job of living within their means and cutting excessive expenditure.

Huw Merriman: As my hon. Friend was at the centre of power then—I am sure he will be again soon—I would be very interested to know why there was no proposal to cut the number of Ministers by 10%. I was struck by the arguments advanced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin).

Oliver Dowden: I must correct my hon. Friend before I move on to his substantive point. I am quite confident that as a Member of this place my role in national life has increased, not decreased. It is a great privilege to represent the people of Hertsmere in this place.

On my hon. Friend's specific point, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex makes an important point, which should be considered by the Prime Minister of the day should the legislation ever be put into effect—I very much hope it will. The Prime Minister will have some discretion. The legislation sets out a maximum number of Ministers, but it is my understanding that the Prime Minister does not have to take up the entire allocation. The Prime Minister of the day may wish to choose not to take up that allocation. I do not think that that is an argument of such strength that it means we should revisit the entire legislation at this point, because the benefits of proceeding with the existing legislation as it stands outweigh that.

It is worth noting that the speech I mentioned earlier also made the case, as part of cutting the cost of politics and restoring trust, for reducing the number of Members of Parliament. An interesting question, which was raised by the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), is how we actually came by the 600 figure, which some Members have suggested is somewhat arbitrary. I think that, in a sense, one number is as arbitrary as another, but the rationale at the time was a 10% cut in the number of Members of Parliament. Those who are good at maths will note that that takes us not from 650 to 600, but down to 585. However, as Members may recall, the then Leader of the Opposition did not succeed entirely in winning in the 2010 election, and was forced to enter into a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. As part of the negotiations on the proposals, the Liberal Democrats consistently argued for more Members of Parliament, while the Conservatives made the case for cutting the cost of politics and having fewer Members of Parliament. We met somewhere in the middle with 600, which at least had the benefit of being a round number.

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend has mentioned that the Liberal Democrats argued for more Members of Parliament as a result of the coalition. Sadly they are unable to advance that argument today, because they are not here.

Oliver Dowden: I had noted the absence of the Liberal Democrats, and I regret it, because I will make some further points about their role in our failure to deliver the reduction that we wanted. It would have been nice if they had had the opportunity to intervene and respond, but sadly they were unable to make it.

The reduction in the number of Members of Parliament was an important part of the package, because, as other Members have pointed out, it involved a reduction in the cost of this place—and a reduction from 650 to 600 will still save £66 million over a five-year Parliament. At a time when we have to make difficult decisions to ensure that we live within our means as a country and do not burden our children and grandchildren, we should not pass up any saving to the public purse, but the more fundamental point relates to trust.

We have delivered on every aspect of the programme to reduce the cost of politics except the measure that relates most directly to us in this place. I do not think that our constituents will look very kindly on us if we choose to reverse the legislation that we introduced during the 2010-15 Parliament, apparently for no other reason than, as some have suggested, the electoral advantage to Opposition Members. I urge Members to stick to what was originally agreed. It is a source of great regret to me that, because the Liberal Democrats effectively reneged on their promise, we did not manage to legislate for the boundary review during the last Parliament—and here we are again, not in the subsequent Parliament but in the one after that, refighting exactly the same battles and having the same debates all over again.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is making a good case for reducing the cost of democracy by reducing the number of Members of Parliament. Does he agree that tackling the democratic deficit is at the heart of what we are trying to do? If we pass this Bill and kick other measures into touch, we will not be addressing that issue, and it is an issue that affects my constituents.

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is my second, and principal, reason for disagreeing with the Bill, and I shall come to it very shortly.

The point about cutting the cost of politics has been made by many other Members, so I will not labour it, but the statistics are pretty clear. With 600 Members, we will still be relatively over-represented in terms of the number of MPs per capita in comparison with most comparable countries. I do not think that we will be selling our constituents short in terms of our capacity to represent them. I am sure that I am perfectly capable of representing 10,000 more constituents, and I hope that most other Members of Parliament are as well.

The second argument, which in a way is more powerful, is that we also need to ensure that we have equal weight for equal votes. This argument goes back not years or decades, but centuries, as has been noted—back to the Chartists. The Bill proposes to increase the degree of permitted variance from the current 5%; although it is welcome that the proposal is now to increase it to 7.5%, rather than the original 10%, that still allows up to a 15% variation in the size of constituencies, which means a Member in one constituency will have to work that much harder, as it were, because more people will have to vote for them than in another comparable constituency. There is an inherent unfairness in that.

The contrary argument for why we should have this greater degree of variance was made by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), and it is that there is often a geographical link between areas that should be respected. This argument has been used many times to justify not changing the boundaries; indeed, it was used to say we should stick within county boundaries. It does not have any salience at all with the general public and the people who elect us, however.

The House of Commons Library has produced a very helpful note on my constituency of Hertsmere, setting out how the boundaries have changed over the decades and centuries. The constituency has at times encompassed parts of north London. Indeed, it has encompassed Enfield, Barnet, Watford and South Hertfordshire. That has not made any significant difference to the representation that their residents have from their MP.

My constituency currently encompasses a wide range of different places, from areas closely linked to Watford such as Bushey, to Borehamwood, which is a town, and very small villages that still feel as though they are many hundreds of miles from London even though they are but 12 miles away—beautiful, idyllic little English villages such as Letchmore Heath, Aldenham and Ridge. There is, therefore, a combination of urban and rural. Indeed, I represent Aldenham East, the most prosperous ward in the entire country, which sits cheek by jowl with Cowley Hill, one of the poorest wards in the country. As has been noted many times in this debate, it is incumbent upon MPs to represent their constituencies as they stand, and I think all MPs are capable of doing that. It rather demeans the role of MPs to say they are not capable of representing very diverse constituencies that look in lots of different directions, as my own constituency does. So I am not persuaded by that argument.

The argument I am very persuaded by was made by the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) and is about trust in politics. The boundary proposals will contribute to restoring trust in politics. First, they will

reduce the cost of politics so our constituents pay less for us to be in this place. They will also restore trust in politics by sticking by something that was already agreed by this House in the Parliament before last, and not seeking to overturn it because doing so meets the temporary electoral interests of certain parts of this House. I therefore urge Members not to support this Bill, and instead to stick by what was agreed in the 2010 Parliament.

12.19 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): As a new Member of the House, this is the first time I have taken part in a private Member's Bill Friday. [*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) is suggesting that I take the full three hours available, but I will not do so, having sat through the last almost three hours with some Members waffling on for the best part of 50 minutes. If we were to talk about the current state of politics, I might start—[*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South is right: the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who spoke for 50 minutes, has left the Chamber. Perhaps he is away talking to himself in the mirror.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on bringing forward the Bill. It is notable that he has had a meteoric rise as part of the class of 2017. He has been fortunate in the ballot for private Members' Bills, and he is now on the shadow Front Bench. That is almost as meteoric as my rise to the position of deputy assistant junior Whip for the Scottish National party. I do not intend to speak for very long, but I want to say that we in the SNP believe that the UK Government should abandon their plan to cut the number of MPs, particularly in Scotland, where the proposal to cut 10% of Members is absolutely unacceptable. I want to take a few minutes to talk about the other place along the corridor—the "ermine vermin". Also, we need to think not necessarily about cutting the cost of politics but about the Government's proposal to cut the cost of scrutiny. I also want to talk about EU scrutiny and about the proposed unfeasibly large seats. I will finish by referencing some of the provisions in the Bill.

We are in the rather bizarre position of having a House of Lords with more than 800 Members. I believe that it is second in size only to China's National People's Congress, which is absolutely ridiculous. It is the only legislature other than that of Iran in which members of the clergy are allowed to legislate: it has 24 bishops, temporal and spiritual. Other than Lesotho, it is the only legislature that has hereditary chieftains, in the form of its 92 hereditary peers. That makes an absolute mockery of the place. Even more scandalous is the fact that Members of the House of Lords clock in, get their tax-free £300 a day, and then leave. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) is looking at ways of tracking how often they are actually in the building. There has certainly been evidence in the past that they turn up and then leave again within a few minutes, which is totally unacceptable. Also, if the proposed changes went through, we would find ourselves in the bizarre situation of having more Members of the House of peers with a Scottish address than elected Members of Parliament for Scotland.

[David Linden]

Under the leadership of David Cameron, the Government appointed 126 Conservative Members of the House of Lords, 56 Labour Members, 51 Liberal Democrats and 31 independent and Cross-Bench peers. Conservative Members in this place spend a huge amount of time telling us about cutting the cost of politics, yet they are quite happy to condone appointments such as those. I do not see anyone trying to intervene on me at this stage, so perhaps they understand that this is a pretty daft situation.

Oliver Dowden: As the hon. Gentleman is seeking an intervention, perhaps he would like to note that the cost of the House of Lords has actually fallen, not risen, since 2010, so the cost of politics is being cut in relation to the upper Chamber.

David Linden: The point is that if we continue on the current trajectory of appointing Lords, we will have more than 1,000 Members in the other place, so I think that that falls on its feet.

I also want to touch on the question of EU scrutiny. As we leave the European Union, we are going to lose 73 Members of the European Parliament. That will mean a lot of EU legislation coming back to London. I hope the Government will resist the temptation to execute a power grab, and instead put those powers on to Edinburgh and Wales. Under the Government's proposals, however, there would be fewer MPs to scrutinise all that legislation. During the referendum campaign, I remember leavers telling us that 75% of our legislation was made in Brussels. If all that legislation is coming back to this place, we will need to scrutinise it, yet there will be fewer Members of Parliament to do so. That makes a mockery of the argument that we are taking back control. Where is the parliamentary sovereignty there? Hon. Members have already touched on the question of the payroll vote. The combined number of Parliamentary Private Secretaries and Ministers accounts for 22% of this legislature, but I see no proposals from the Government to reduce their numbers.

I also want to talk about the proposals for some unfeasibly large seats following the boundary changes. My group leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) already has seven islands in his constituency. Bizarrely, the proposed new seat of Argyll, Bute and Lochaber would have 30 inhabited islands. I was speaking to the current member for Argyll and Bute, my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), yesterday. He told me that if he turned left from his house and went towards Glasgow airport, he could get to Canada more quickly than he could get to Canna in the proposed new constituency. That is ludicrous. The proposed new Highland South constituency would be the size of Cyprus. I do not know whether parliamentary allowances would allow a new Member to have a helicopter to get around that constituency, which would be five times the size of Luxembourg. Charles Kennedy, who sadly passed away, said that

"having represented three such vast constituencies over the course of nearly 30 years now, I can say that the current one is by far the most impractical. It has to be said that the other two were gigantic and posed particular problems, but there comes a point

at which geographical impracticality sets in and nobody can do the job of local parliamentary representation effectively."—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2010; Vol. 517, c. 661.]

Charles Kennedy was a very wise man, and I think we should listen to that.

I do not want to filibuster on this Bill, as some Government Members may have done, so I will finish up by making reference to its provisions. We certainly welcome the relaxation of requirements so that the electorate per constituency has to be to within 7.5% of the electoral quota to preserve local representation. However, I am concerned that the Bill contains a provision for a fixed number of MPs for Northern Ireland but not for Scotland, so I hope that the Bill will have its Second Reading today and will be taken into Committee, where I will be seeking an amendment to remedy that.

I hope that Government Members do not reject this Bill's Second Reading, and I commend the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton for bringing the Bill to the House.

12.36 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing this Second Reading debate. It is a privilege to follow so many wise and learned contributions, especially that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). I disagree slightly with the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), because I was hanging off almost every word of my right hon. Friend's tour de force, which drew upon his great experience of taking a similar Bill through Parliament. My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) also brought considerable experience and thought to this matter, and his contribution gave me much pause for thought.

My predecessor in this House, Lord Hague, once told many of his constituents just how uniquely our particular form of parliamentary democracy was seen by his many international counterparts. He described how, after a high-level summit, the G20 leaders could scarcely believe that the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom had to depart their supper to get on a plane and fly back to his rural north Yorkshire constituency to hold a surgery for Hawes. He explained that "Hawes" was not what they had thought and that it was in fact a rural town in Wensleydale with a small population of 1,000 people. Hilary Clinton, the US Secretary of State at the time, was shocked that senior members of the UK Government had space in their diaries for such an amazing activity on a Friday. The people from countries with proportional representation could not quite fathom the concept of a constituency, and some of the more aloof dignitaries present wondered why on earth he was meeting any members of the public in the first place.

That brief story illustrates the enduring strength of our parliamentary democracy and, in particular, the close connection to our constituents that all Members of this House are privileged to have. Ours is a robust system, underpinned by centuries of tradition and custom. Our electoral system is precious, and any changes to it must therefore be considered extremely carefully. Having spent a little time considering it, I believe that the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 made some sensible and overdue changes to that system. In discussing potential changes to that Act, I will confine my remarks to three simple points.

First, there is a strong, unarguable case for the equalisation of the number of electors. Secondly, I will turn to why I believe that modestly reducing the number of Members of this House to 600 is, on balance, sensible. Finally, I will take this opportunity to discuss my experience of the ongoing boundary review, with particular regard to one village in my constituency: Great Ayton.

Turning to the case for equalisation, as the former Deputy Prime Minister and Member for Sheffield, Hallam once put it, it is a patently obvious principle that each person's vote should carry the same weight. The principle was similarly endorsed by the independent Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Today we find ourselves in a situation where the largest constituency has more than 93,000 electors, compared with just over 40,000 in the smallest. It cannot be fair that constituencies vary in size by as much as 100%. The outcome is that a vote in a constituency like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) counts for half as much as a vote in a constituency like Arfon. Requiring constituencies to be within a narrow band of 5% of the average quota is sensible, reasonable and very fair.

Some have claimed that these adjustments are, in some way, political gerrymandering, that the Conservative party or the Government are redrawing the boundaries, but nothing could be further from the truth. These reforms are being led by the different boundary commissions of the United Kingdom. Independent bodies, the boundary commissions have always carried out their role with due diligence and impartiality. I have every confidence in the boundary commissions and their well-established independence. I am yet to hear any evidence to the contrary.

It would, in any case, be unwise to interpret any particular short-term advantage that might accrue to any particular party as fixed and immutable. Interestingly, when looking at elections by the number of people who changed their vote—a measure of electoral volatility—the last two elections, in 2015 and 2017, were the most volatile since the elections at the time of the great depression and immediately after world war one. That shows we live in an age when no party can lazily count on the fixed support of the British people. I am confident that the small changes to our boundaries and to our system will in no way stop the British people expressing their strongly held views about which party they want to represent them in government.

On the more nuanced issue of the appropriate size of this House, I acknowledge the concerns raised by Members on both sides of the House about modestly reducing the number of MPs to 600. The speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex gave many of us pause for thought and some ideas to consider. He called for a decrease in the number of Ministers to coincide with the reduction in the number of Members, thereby ensuring that the Executive can still be held to account. It is an interesting suggestion, and I am sure the Minister will bear it in mind, but I am optimistic about the capacity of this House to hold the Government to account, even with 600 Members. As with so many other things in life, it is quality, not quantity, that counts. I have been here only a short time, but I have seen time and again how just one Back-Bench MP, one Select Committee report or, indeed, one shadow Minister

can scrutinise the Government at the highest level, shine light on issues and, ultimately, change the course of policy.

Another question raised by our having a smaller body is whether it would be able to handle the volume of work that Westminster is used to doing, especially with the repatriation of powers from the European Union. That is a fair question to ask but, over time, the direction of travel is unquestionably to devolve more powers away from Westminster. The other Parliaments and Assemblies of the United Kingdom have taken on more and more responsibility, as have the police and crime commissioners. Now, with the devolution that the Government are continuing, metro mayors stand to further change the distribution of power within the United Kingdom. All those moves should make it easier for a smaller House to manage as effectively as it has always done in conducting the nation's business.

This House is frequently compared with others around the world. One comparison I have heard is that this House is larger than the US House of Representatives and the US Senate combined, which is a surprising statistic given that the United States has five times the economy and five times the population. But, as has often been pointed out, the legislature of a federal republic and that of a unitary parliamentary democracy such as ours cannot be so easily and directly compared. It may be more appropriate to touch on some of the other parliamentary democracies around the world—systems that have emulated our Westminster-style of government. Japan is one such example. It has a population of 127 million, but its House of Representatives has just over 450 Members; a Japanese Member of Parliament has, on average, 270,000 constituents. The Canadian House of Commons, again similar to ours, has only 330-odd Members, with each Canadian MP representing more than 100,000 constituents. Australia is leading the charge on having a streamlined lower House, with only 150 MPs. It was with interest that I noted the constituency of Richmond in Australia boasted 35,000 electors more than my constituency of Richmond in Yorkshire. As an aside, because we are here on a Friday, I thought it was worth noting that Richmond is the UK's most copied international place name, with more than 55 Richmonds to be found across the world, in places as diverse as South Africa, India and Germany—

Kevin Hollinrake: And London.

Rishi Sunak: And indeed London. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) is not in his place, but he will of course know that Henry VII, the earl of the original Richmond in Yorkshire, was so taken with the place that he decided to rename that part of London called Sheen and build a palace there in honour of the Richmond in Yorkshire—but we digress.

Even with these reforms, the point remains that our constituencies will still be much smaller than those of comparable parliamentary democracies. I acknowledge that an increase in our electorates will mean an increase in our postbags and inboxes, and that with no obvious change in our office resources to match, we will all have to work that much harder to represent our constituents. We talk a lot in this House about productivity, so it is only right that we as Members do our bit to drive up the UK's productivity. Similarly, as we have heard, when

[*Rishi Sunak*]

public money is tight it is eminently reasonable that politics should not be immune from our efforts to bring the nation's finances back under control.

David Linden: It is a bit ironic that the hon. Gentleman is talking about how the public purse is under huge strain; I look at the Benches where the Democratic Unionist party would be. Does not what the Government did by bribing the DUP with £1 billion in the confidence and supply agreement relate to exactly that point?

Rishi Sunak: On representation, I feel pretty good that the Conservative Benches are lined with colleagues participating today, unlike the Opposition Benches. The hon. Gentleman talks a lot about money for the DUP, but that is deeply insulting to the people of Northern Ireland, who are receiving any money that the UK Government are spending on regions—Scotland, Wales and Yorkshire also receive funding. When we talk about money going to the regions from this Parliament, it is going to the people of those areas, not their politicians.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) defended well how this measure will cut the cost of politics, and we would do well to heed that. Of course we do not want to see any weakening of that fundamental link between MPs and their constituents, but I do not think that increasing the size of constituencies by 10%, as the original 2011 Act does, will in any way undermine that strong connection we have today.

Thirdly, I should say that this is not just about the number of constituencies, but about where we draw the lines, so the last point I wish to make is about how the boundary review affects my constituency. Constituency boundaries must reflect the way people live their lives. Ordnance Survey maps, detailed as they are, cannot always capture the close bonds of community that have been forged between towns and villages over centuries. The village of Great Ayton, the boyhood home of Captain Cook, has been an integral part of my constituency for more than a century, taking part in the election of Richmond's MPs in as many as 27 general elections in that time. So it is not difficult to imagine the shock of local people when the Boundary Commission originally recommended that they be transferred to the neighbouring constituency of Thirsk and Malton. In no way was that a reflection on the excellent work that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton does; it was more about the surprise that they would be pulled out of the Richmond constituency and pushed into another, separated from them by the vast expanse of the North Yorkshire moors.

On any level, local people were puzzled by the decision. The local secondary school for children in Great Ayton is based in Stokesley, which would remain in the Richmond constituency, as would the GP services they use. The transport link—the A172, which links Great Ayton with Northallerton, our county town, which contains the businesses and travel links that everyone uses—also stays in the Richmond constituency. Any way one looked at it—from the point of view of transport, education, health, business and history—pointed to the fact that Great Ayton belonged with its cousins in Richmond.

On a personal note, I of course did not want to stop being the Member of Parliament for a community for which I have a great deal of affection, and I was struck

by the number of constituents who wrote to me to express their concern. It is no wonder that the Boundary Commission noted that it had received significant opposition to its proposals. Along with broad cross-party agreement that those proposals were flawed, the commission was inundated with submissions and public meetings were packed with people coming to express their point of view.

I was delighted when the Boundary Commission accepted the case that retaining Great Ayton was compelling. The wonderful part of the country that I have the privilege to represent will remain intact. For me, this was a positive experience of the Boundary Commission doing its job diligently and constructively. It listened, engaged and did its utmost to accommodate a community's wishes and I remain grateful to it.

I remain in support of the original 2011 Act. Constituencies with an equal number of electors are a fundamental democratic principle and a reform long overdue. Reducing the number of MPs will cut the cost of politics without endangering the critical scrutiny or constituency link that Parliament provides. Lastly, in making the changes, we should be mindful of the individual character of constituencies and encourage the Boundary Commission to listen and adjust its proposals when they do not match the reality on the ground. We are fortunate to have the electoral system that we do, and I am sure that it will continue to serve us well for generations to come.

12.42 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and congratulate him on introducing the Bill.

The constituencies created by this methodology are more of a random mishmash of voters than actual constituencies. My own constituency of Aberavon has certainly been a victim of this arbitrary and poorly designed gerrymander. Initially, the boundary review proposals brutally cut in two the town at the heart of my constituency, Port Talbot. The high street was cut off from the main shopping centre and the steelworks was cut off from Sandfields, the housing estate built for its workers.

Fortunately, the Boundary Commission for Wales saw sense and reunited the communities in its revised proposals. Unfortunately, the upshot was that the Afan valley and its communities of Bryn, Cwmavon, Cymmer, Glyncoerrwg and Gwynfi were separated from Port Talbot and put in the neighbouring constituency of Neath. For anyone who knows the reality of life in our part of the world, this is a clear example of cobbling together a mishmash of voters instead of building on natural communities with shared interests.

As unacceptable as the initial proposals were to my constituents, the suggestion that the Afan valley be cut off from the rest of my constituency is equally bizarre and insulting to the culture and heritage of our people. There is a natural affinity between the communities of the Afan valley and Port Talbot. To disregard that would be to ignore the community links, leaving them isolated from their natural home, and lumped into a constituency where they would feel sidelined. The case of Aberavon illustrates why the broader terms of the boundary review are impractical and should be abandoned. Wherever we draw the line on the map, using the existing criteria we

carve up communities and force unnatural alliances between very different communities to create a new constituency. Far from being more democratic, it risks alienating millions of people from the democratic process and leaving them without a voice in our political system. Wales, of course, will be particularly hard hit by the review, losing 11 of its 40 MPs, and at a time when the impact of Brexit will probably fall hardest on our part of the world and when the need for the strongest-possible voice in this place could not be greater.

Six hundred is an entirely arbitrary number. Given the House's increased workload after Brexit, it is absolutely clear that the number of MPs should remain at 650. MPs should represent broadly equal numbers of voters, but this should not come at the expense of local community cohesion. Greater flexibility is needed, therefore, in the review process to allow for constituencies to be more equal in size and for the disparity in size between some of the smallest and some of the biggest constituencies to be reduced. This process must, however, above all recognise the need for local community cohesion and representation and recognise the ties that bind our people and the importance of the link between our people and our MPs. That should be the driving purpose of the review, as opposed to the bare-faced gerrymander the Government are attempting to force through.

12.46 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who clearly cares deeply about the needs of his constituents, though I disagree fundamentally about the purpose of the 2011 Act, which rejigged the boundary system. I must take issue with my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) when he described some of those speaking in the debate as anoraky. Far from hearing anoraky people, we have heard sensible people engaged in constitutional matters, yes, but also in one of the most important things we can ever talk about in this place, which is of course the way we represent our constituents. I am particularly grateful, therefore, for the opportunity to speak today.

We have heard about the Bill's main aims: to retain 650 constituencies, to allow for a 7.5% limit, to make the boundary commissions' use of electoral data be from this year's general election, and to alter the timing of subsequent reviews. Having listened to today's speeches, I think that many of us agree that there is a case for some change, but I am not convinced that the Bill is the way to go about it. As many colleagues know, I have the enormous honour to represent the area where I have lived all my life. I am very familiar with where my constituency starts and finishes. My childhood was spent living on a farm that crosses the boundary line.

As you know, Mr Speaker, I live on the Northamptonshire-Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire-Warwickshire border, so boundaries are a concept with which we are extremely familiar. Indeed, we have continual difficulties with cross-border issues, though these are not constituency cross-border issues—we work very well with our neighbouring constituencies, as you know, Mr Speaker. We have difficulties with, for example, police and fire and health services, and of course the church diocese divides close to the bottom of our garden. We are split between two local enterprise partnerships, OxLEP and the South East Midlands LEP.

Boundary change is not a new concept to me either. When my father stood down as the MP for Daventry in 2010, his constituency had just been divided, during the fifth periodical review. It was a case—dare I say it?—of two for the price of one, when my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who is in his place on the Front Bench, and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) were elected to the House. Between them, they inherited the constituents my father had represented for two and a half decades.

My own constituency was created in 1553—I am looking at my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin)—during the reign of Mary Tudor. When visitors come to Parliament and are shown the beautiful stained glass in St Stephen's Hall, they can find the arms of some of the oldest parliamentary cities and boroughs, and if they look carefully, they see that Banbury is there. Just as we are one of the oldest constituencies, we are also, as several hon. Friends have said, one of the largest, with over 90,000 people on our electoral roll—almost 20,000 more than the constituency of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan).

My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) made some very flattering comments earlier about my ability to represent my constituents, and he also made the point that we are growing locally at an unprecedented rate. As a national leader in house building, we have 23,000 new homes planned in the next decade. We are building houses at the rate of three a day, and these are often not one-bedroom properties but long-term houses for families, with three, four or five bedrooms and with plenty of space for families to grow. Yet, as every new resident registers on my electoral roll, their vote is, effectively, diminished. The vote of Mrs Clark, Mrs Wood or Mrs Smith in Glasgow North is worth almost twice as much as Mrs Clark's vote in Banbury.

The idea of equalising the number of constituents predates all of us in this House. The Chartists first suggested it in the people's charter of 1838, and it is important to read what the charter said. Point 5 of the Chartists' demands—[*Interruption.*] This is a working-class movement for political reform—Opposition Members might want to listen. Point 5 refers to equal constituencies, securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors, instead of allowing less populous constituencies to have as much or more weight than larger ones.

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Lady will know that the Chartists also called for annual elections, so are we having one next year?

Victoria Prentis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I sincerely hope we will not be having an election next year; I think we have had enough for now.

James Cartlidge: Surely the key point my hon. Friend is making is that, whereas the Labour party is seeking to defend the status quo, Conservative Members are the radicals and the reformers.

Victoria Prentis: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and he makes the point I was going on to make: while we do not, of course, agree with everything in the people's charter—for example, it provides only

[Victoria Prentis]

for votes for men, and Conservative Members are passionately in favour of votes for women—we do adopt the more far-reaching ideas in it, and we believe very firmly that votes must count equally.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Prentis: I think I had better make progress for a minute.

The independent Committee on Standards in Public Life also endorsed the idea of fairness of votes for our constituents in 2007. One vote, one value must be a vital democratic principle. To make that happen, boundary reform was a key pledge in the manifesto on which I stood in 2015 and again in 2017. The Boundary Commission is already well on its way to making that a reality. It has been working hard on drawing up proposals, consulting, analysing responses and revising its plans. My own association, like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), has taken considerable time and effort to engage with the Boundary Commission's recommendations, to gauge the thoughts of constituents and to draw up responses.

While my constituency, under the new proposals, will remain one of the largest in the country—I think it will still be the fourth largest—I will lose a chunk of my electorate as it drops to 78,250. Just as a parent loves all their children equally, I of course love all the areas I represent equally—I would be sad to lose any of them. I could no more choose between Hook Norton and Finmere than I could between my daughters, but my belief in democracy is stronger. Ensuring fair representation and that a vote in north Oxfordshire counts the same as it does anywhere else is extremely important to me.

Huw Merriman: I would choose Hook Norton over Finmere as Hook Norton has a fantastic brewery, although Finmere is nearer to my family home.

Mr Speaker: I am most interested in the autobiographical details of the hon. Gentleman, with which I was personally familiar, not least on account of the whereabouts of members of his family—my illustrious constituents—but other Members are not so fortunate.

Victoria Prentis: I, too, am very aware of the whereabouts of members of my hon. Friend's family, but I am also aware of the marvellous brewery in Hook Norton, which I am ever proud to represent and from which so many hon. Members are pleased to buy wares from time to time. Christmas is coming and it is doing a very good pack.

Given the pace of change in my own area, I have considerable sympathy for the suggestion made by many hon. Members that we should use more recent data. Unless we have a defined date, which we do not, and a set of electoral registers to assess, there is no right or wrong time to do this. The excellent Library briefing observes:

“Whichever data Parliament directs the Commission to use, there will always be a latency between the data used for a review and the boundaries that come out of a review being implemented.”

If we agree to move the goalposts today, what is there to stop another Member coming along in two years' time and changing things again? The Boundary Commission is an independent and impartial advisory body that prioritises compliance within legal requirements, not political considerations. In my view, we must let it get on with the job.

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 229, Noes 44.

Division No. 52]

[12.56 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Dent Coad, Emma
Abrahams, Debbie	Dodds, Anneliese
Alexander, Heidi	Doughty, Stephen
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Dowd, Peter
Amesbury, Mike	Drew, Dr David
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Dromey, Jack
Ashworth, Jonathan	Duffield, Rosie
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Eagle, Ms Angela
Barron, rh Sir Kevin	Eagle, Maria
Beckett, rh Margaret	Efford, Clive
Benn, rh Hilary	Elliott, Julie
Blackman, Kirsty	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Elmore, Chris
Blomfield, Paul	Evans, Chris
Bone, Mr Peter	Farrelly, Paul
Brabin, Tracy	Fletcher, Colleen
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Flint, rh Caroline
Brake, rh Tom	Flynn, Paul
Brennan, Kevin	Fovargue, Yvonne
Brown, Lyn	Foxcroft, Vicky
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Frith, James
Bryant, Chris	Furniss, Gill
Buck, Ms Karen	Gaffney, Hugh
Burden, Richard	Gapes, Mike
Burgon, Richard	Gardiner, Barry
Butler, Dawn	George, Ruth
Byrne, rh Liam	Gill, Preet Kaur
Cadbury, Ruth	Glindon, Mary
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Goodman, Helen
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Grady, Patrick
Carden, Dan	Green, Kate
Chapman, Jenny	Greenwood, Lilian
Charalambous, Bambos	Greenwood, Margaret
Cherry, Joanna	Griffith, Nia
Coaker, Vernon	Grogan, John
Cooper, Julie	Gwynne, Andrew
Cooper, Rosie	Haigh, Louise
Cooper, rh Yvette	Hamilton, Fabian
Coyle, Neil	Hardy, Emma
Crausby, Sir David	Harris, Carolyn
Creagh, Mary	Hayes, Helen
Creasy, Stella	Healey, rh John
Cruddas, Jon	Hendrick, Mr Mark
Cryer, John	Hendry, Drew
Cummins, Judith	Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Cunningham, Alex	Hill, Mike
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Hillier, Meg
Dakin, Nic	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
David, Wayne	Hopkins, Kelvin
Davies, Geraint	Howarth, rh Mr George
Davies, Philip	Huq, Dr Rupa
De Cordova, Marsha	Hussain, Imran
De Piero, Gloria	Jarvis, Dan

Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Gerard
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Laird, Lesley
 Lavery, Ian
 Lee, Ms Karen
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Lowell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Linden, David
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian

Nandy, Lisa
 Norris, Alex
 Onasanya, Fiona
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Laura
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Stewart, Bob
 Streeting, Wes
 Sweeney, Mr Paul

Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 West, Catherine

Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Woodcock, John
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nick Smith and
Thangam Debbonaire

NOES

Argar, Edward
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Cartlidge, James
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Davies, Mims
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Eustice, George
 Fernandes, Suella
 Foster, Kevin
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freer, Mike
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hall, Luke
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Heapey, James

Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Merriman, Huw
 Morton, Wendy
 Norman, Jesse
 Perry, Claire
 Philip, Chris
 Pincher, Christopher
 Prentis, Victoria
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Sunak, Rishi
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Rebecca Harris and
Stuart Andrew

Question accordingly agreed to.

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

Question agreed to.

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

Points of Order

1.9 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will have seen that the board of NHS England met yesterday to consider the latest budget settlement for the national health service. It concluded that the underfunding of the NHS now means that it will not be able to continue the 18-week target for treatment. That will mean our constituents waiting longer and longer in pain and distress for operations, and it is also in conflict with the NHS constitution, which is enshrined in statute that was passed by this House. Given the gravity of that decision, can you tell us whether the Health Secretary has given you any indication that he intends to come to the House to explain why our constituents will have to wait longer for elective operations?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, in response to which the answer is no. I have received no indication of any intention by the Secretary of State or another Health Minister to come to the House to make a statement on that matter, but the resources of civilisation have not been exhausted, and the hon. Gentleman will know that there are means by which, through the use of the Order Paper, he can pursue it—I rather fancy that he will do so.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am saving up the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)—it would be a pity to waste him at too early a stage of our proceedings.

Andrew Gwynne: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) was drawn at Question 4 for Monday's Communities and Local Government questions. Her question was to ask what recent assessment the Secretary of State had made of the effect of changes in local authority funding on the provision of mental health services for young people. Yesterday, she received a letter from the Secretary of State transferring that question to the Department of Health, effectively pulling it from Monday's business.

Children's services across England are in crisis, and many mental health counselling and support services for young people are wholly or in part funded by local councils. Local councils are corporate parents and have statutory responsibilities for the mental health of the children in their care. They are often co-commissioners of services, and they have statutory public health, and health and wellbeing responsibilities. What can we do to ensure that that oral question is reinstated so that CLG Ministers can be held to account for what is happening in local government in respect of children's mental health?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for his courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to raise it. It was at least in part—I say this in a non-pejorative sense—a rhetorical inquiry. I think that I can say safely, without fear of contradiction—again, non-pejoratively—that he was, on the whole, more interested in what he had to say to me than in anything that I might have to say to him.

Nevertheless, in so far as the hon. Gentleman is genuinely seeking advice—I think that, to an extent, he is—my response is as follows. I appreciate that it is deeply annoying for right hon. and hon. Members if the Department in question transfers their oral question and they therefore lose their slot at Question Time. The Table Office does its best—it always has done in my 20 years' experience in this place—to advise Members on departmental responsibilities, but ultimately it is for the Government to determine how responsibilities are divided among Ministers and which Department should answer a particular question. I am therefore afraid that it would not be appropriate for me to reinstate the transferred oral. I am advised that the hon. Gentleman might be able to use his ingenuity to find an orderly way to raise his concerns at Question Time on Monday. It will, of course, be open to him to seek to do so, if he is speaking from the Opposition Front Bench, and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) may, for example—I speak hypothetically—seek to air her concerns at topical questions. If she seeks to catch my eye, she may be successful, and if she were successful, any attempt to thwart her would have been thwarted.

Huw Merriman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is the first point of order I have made, but I was so taken aback by this that I felt I should do so. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) referred to peers as vermin in ermine, and I have confirmed that with Front Benchers. I seek your advice as to whether that was unbecoming of this place.

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that it most certainly was unbecoming of this place and of the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). It was said—as far as I can imagine, because I did not hear it—*sotto voce*. If it was muttered inaudibly by accident I am, frankly, surprised, because in the short time that the hon. Gentleman has been a Member of this place, I have always thought him an articulate fellow who speaks lucidly in terms that are readily audible and intelligible. If, on the other hand, it was a deliberate ruse to blurt these words out in a manner intended not to be heard, but nevertheless to be incorporated in the *Official Report*, that is unworthy of somebody with the budding aspirations and potential stature of the hon. Gentleman. I hope he will not resort to such a tactic again. We should, seriously, treat each other in this place with basic courtesy. In referring to Members of the other place, it is not appropriate to make that comparison or to draw that analogy. We will leave it there for now.

Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Bill

Second Reading

1.17 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am sure that many Members have already noticed that the Bill is in not my name, but that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey). It is a huge honour to take over the Bill from my right hon. Friend following her recent and richly deserved promotion to the Government. I am very grateful to her for having brought this important Bill before the House and for entrusting its further safe passage to me.

The purpose of the Bill is to make our prisons safer and more secure. It would amend the Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Act 2012, which was guided through Parliament and brought to the statute book by my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford). I am very happy to have an opportunity to build on his previous work.

Let me start with the problem that the Bill is intended to tackle: the presence of mobile phones in our prisons. These illicit phones cause significant harm both inside and outside our prisons, where they are used to co-ordinate the smuggling of drugs and other contraband. Mobile phones are key enablers of the illicit economy in our prisons, which drives a significant amount of violence and self-harm. They also have an impact outside the prison walls. They can often be used to harass victims and witnesses, or to run organised crime gangs outside prison. The high price that mobile phones command in our prisons funds the organised criminals who supply them to carry out other illegal activities.

The 2012 Act recognised the significance of the threat and provided the Secretary of State with the power to authorise governors to interfere with wireless telegraphy in their prisons. Using this authority, governors are currently empowered to carry out interference to prevent, detect or investigate the use of devices capable of transmitting or receiving images, sounds or information by electronic communication such as mobile phones.

Despite the authority provided in the 2012 Act and the considerable use that has been made of its powers, mobile phones continue to cause real and severe problems in prisons throughout the country. In particular, prisons continue to face the challenges posed by the increasing availability of mobile devices. Although governors have been authorised under the Act to interfere with wireless phone signals to combat the use of illicit mobile phones, and although seizure figures show how effective they have been in using the detection equipment available to them, the sheer number of seizures demonstrates that the Act needs to be expanded.

Hard-working prison staff make every effort to detect and confiscate illicit mobile phones and SIM cards, but the figures illustrate the scale of the problem. Only last year, 20,000 phones and SIM cards were found in prisons in England and Wales—approximately 54 each day. That is a significant increase on previous years, with just under 17,000 found in 2015, 10,000 in 2014, and just over 7,000 in 2013. Having met prison officers in my local prison in Lewes and heard at first hand

about the problems that mobile phones cause them, I believe that the Bill will significantly improve safety and make their jobs easier.

It is clear that the current ban on mobile phones in prisons is not working, and that the 2012 Act needs to be expanded to combat the increasing problem. The Bill will build on the Act by allowing the Secretary of State to directly authorise public communication providers and mobile phone operators to interfere with wireless telegraphy in prisons, as is set out in clause 1. As a result of the 2012 Act, mobile network operators are already involved in work to combat illicit phones, but because the authority to carry out interference lies with individual governors, the role of the mobile phone operators has so far been limited. Clause 1 provides both the authority and a clear line of accountability in primary legislation for mobile phone network operators to become more actively involved in combating the problem. It is of course important to ensure that such activity is subject to safeguards that are needed to prevent inappropriate use. To that end, further consequential changes are made in the schedule to the Bill, which amends sections 2, 3 and 4 of the 2012 Act.

The schedule amends section 2 of the 2012 Act so that safeguards that already apply to authorised governors will also apply to authorised public communications providers. Like an authorised governor, any authorised public communications provider will have to comply with directions from the Secretary of State which must specify descriptions of the information with which governors are to be provided, the intervals at which it is to be provided, and the circumstances in which the use of equipment authorised for the purposes of interference with a wireless signal must be modified or discontinued. There will also be directions aimed at ensuring that authorised interference does not result in disproportionate interference with wireless technology outside prisons.

Section 3 of the Act governs retention and disclosure of information obtained by means of interference. It provides that information must be destroyed after three months unless the governor of a prison authorises its retention on specific grounds. When the information is retained, the governor must review its retention every three months, and must destroy it if its retention is no longer justified. Under the Bill, responsibility for deciding about retention and disclosure will still rest with the governor of the relevant institution, but because relevant information may now be obtained by a mobile phone operator or public communications provider, who may have been authorised in respect of multiple institutions, the Bill amends section 3 to clarify which governor is responsible for decisions about retention and disclosure in such cases.

The House had an opportunity to consider similar provisions to those in the Bill during its scrutiny of the Prisons and Courts Bill in the last Parliament. I am pleased to say there was genuine cross-party support for the measures, but two concerns were raised. The first was about prisoners accessing legitimate telephone services to retain contact with family members, friends and their communities outside prison. Multiple pieces of research, including the Farmer review, show that maintaining contact between prisoners and family members is crucial. Ministry of Justice research shows that prisoners who maintain contact with a family member are 39% less likely to reoffend than those who cannot. It is therefore

[*Maria Caulfield*]

crucial that we enable that to happen, and some Members have stressed that mobile phones are a tool to maintain that contact.

While being able to contact family members using legitimate telephone services while in prison is key, the Ministry of Justice already has a programme of work under way to ensure that prisoners have access to legitimate phone services and do not need to turn to mobile phones. The Department is trialling in-cell handsets and call tariff reductions in the prison estate, starting at HMP Wayland, and the ongoing trials aim to test the impact of this technology further. Conservative Members have already lobbied the Minister about this important issue through “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, and if I was not confident about this work, I would not be recommending the Bill.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on this important Bill. I have constituents who work for Winchester prison. While they stress the need for family connections, they also have grave concerns about connectivity through illicit mobile phones. The Bill can address both of those points.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. Existing legislation bans mobile phones, so prisoners should not be accessing them to contact their family. That is not to say that contacting and keeping in touch with family members is not important; it is crucial both for inmates’ welfare and to reduce reoffending.

The second concern raised previously was about the possibility of interference activity in prisons having a detrimental effect on properties close to prisons, perhaps by blocking legitimate signals completely. My constituents in Lewes are worried about this. Under the powers of the 2012 Act, there was a small risk that genuine customers could be disconnected if their phones were incorrectly identified as being used in a prison without authorisation. To counter that, under this Bill, before any system is deployed, Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service will calibrate and test its approach, including any technology and infrastructure measures, with mobile network operators and Ofcom to ensure that only those handsets that are being used in a prison without authorisation will be identified and stopped from working.

The increased active involvement of mobile network operators under this Bill should be welcomed as reassurance that genuine mobile phone use near prisons will not be blocked. Mobile operators will be the first to know about any leakage from prisons through spikes in complaints, and I am pretty sure that Members of this House will be contacted by their constituents if mobile phone signals outside prisons are affected.

The Bill is not intended to facilitate any one technical solution. Instead, it gives mobile network operators the authority to become more directly involved. By doing so, it provides the freedom, and perhaps the stimulus, to develop a range of solutions. Authorising operators will also add an element of future-proofing to the process, which has been missing so far. As the experts, they will be aware of new technical developments and will be able to adapt their solutions in response to them.

I hope that Members will support this important Bill and the contribution it can make to improving the safety and security of our prisons. I commend it to the House.

1.29 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to speak here today in support of the private Member’s Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (*Maria Caulfield*). She has clearly done a tremendous amount of work, on top of the preparations and foundations that had been laid by the right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (*Ms McVey*), who first presented the Bill to the House. As someone who has taken two private Members’ Bills through this place—my aim is to make it a hat trick, but who knows? It is all down to the ballot—I really appreciate how much hard work my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes has put into getting the Bill this far. I sincerely wish it a safe and secure passage through its remaining stages here and in the other place, so that it can take its rightful place on the statute book.

My hon. Friend has a prison in her constituency, and she therefore brings a huge amount of experience and knowledge to the debate. I cannot bring any such experience, but I know that my constituents are very interested in the Bill, as I am sure all our constituents are. The fact that this topic has frequently been raised at Home Office questions is a further indication not only of the fact that the Government take the issue seriously but of the interest in it from Back Benchers and from our constituents.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that even those of us who do not have prisons in our constituencies understand that people who have been locked away to protect the public should not be able to communicate with their former criminal associates in our constituencies?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes a valid and pertinent point. People who go to prison should not have the connections and privileges that those of us in the outside world enjoy. I know that a lot of my constituents would take that point on board as well.

The main aim of the Bill is to authorise public communications providers to disrupt the use of unlawful mobile phones in prisons. When I was reading the background papers for the Bill, I was interested to note that in 2016, approximately 13,000 mobile phones and 7,000 SIM cards were found in our prisons. The number of phones represented an increase from 7,000 in 2013. Those shockingly high numbers are a further indication of why the Bill is so important. I hope that it will make it easier for the governors of our prisons to tackle this problem. It is a way for us to show that we are on their side.

The illicit use of mobile phones undermines the safety and security of our prisons and enables criminals to access the internet. It is unacceptable that criminals should be able to continue to direct illegal activity from behind bars. The Bill will create a new power for the Secretary of State to authorise public communications providers to interfere with wireless telegraphy in prisons in England and Wales, in addition to the existing authority that can be given to governors.

Mims Davies: The Serious Crime Act 2015, introduced by this Government, which created the new offence of coercive behaviour, has been transformative for people in threatening and difficult relationships. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill could also help to manage those difficult situations that do not seem to stop when one party goes to prison?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. What we are trying to do here is tackle the problem while keeping a focus on what prison is all about. It is about trying to reduce reoffending, and about rehabilitation.

A number of years ago, I visited an organisation in the north of England and met one of its pastoral workers. He explained to me how some individuals seemed to go through a revolving door, in that they would go into prison, come out, reoffend and go back in. It is not right for those individuals to be caught up that sort of lifestyle, nor is it good for others in prison. Importantly, it is also not good for our communities, so my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) makes an important point. It is worth remembering that almost half of all prisoners are reconvicted within a year of release, and the cost to society of reoffending by former prisoners is estimated to be up to a staggering £15 billion a year, so this Bill is vital.

I had intended to ask the following question of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes, but I failed to intervene, so perhaps she or the Minister will clarify this later. Will the Bill create an extra burden on prison governors? My understanding is that it will not and that it will actually make their job a lot easier, but it is important to get clarity on that for those listening to the debate.

If we can take this Bill through Parliament and if we can transfer powers to public communications providers, that will enable us, the Prison Service and prison governors to stay a little more ahead of the curve or at least keep close to it. We all know how quickly mobile technology, and technology in general, can change, and we so often hear how quickly new powers that we have legislated for can become out of date because those who seek to do us harm are one step ahead of us. I therefore hope that the Bill will go some way towards addressing that.

Kevin Foster: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill's key purpose is to shift powers to the providers? Ultimately, it is the providers that have the technology and the teams of skilled people. The Bill also is about them ensuring that their networks are not being used to continue criminal activity by those behind bars, from whom the public should be protected.

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding me of that. The Bill will hopefully give the initiative to those who are at the heart of technological advancements so that we do not have to legislate again if we are behind the curve after six months or a year. This is about the Government working in partnership with prisons, governors, the Home Office and providers. If we can get it right, that has to be the way that we continue to move forward. *[Interruption.]* My right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton is nodding. I appreciate that she cannot contribute to the debate, but it is so good that she is here and lending her continued support to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes.

I want to touch on one or two other points about mobile phone use in prisons, which is often raised in the Chamber. If I check my record, I think I will find that I have asked questions about it. As Mr Speaker knows, I frequently ask questions on various topics that affect my constituents and my constituency—as he would of course expect. The Government have made it clear that the illicit use of mobile phones undermines the safety and security of prisons and enables criminals to access the internet, which should not be the case. In addition to the Bill, other action is being taken to tackle the issue of mobile phones in prisons because the number of devices seized continues to be high, as I said earlier.

Some £2 million has been invested in detection equipment, including handheld detectors and portable detection devices. Every prison in England and Wales—I sadly note that no Welsh colleagues are here today, but I am sure that they are listening to the debate—is being equipped with technology to strengthen searching and security, including portable detection poles that can be deployed at fixed points, such as at reception, and extra portable signal detectors to use on the wings in support of searches. In September, an invitation to tender was launched for the testing and purchasing of new equipment to block mobile signals at close range. Other new technology is being trialled, including body cameras, to tackle the threat posed by contraband smuggled into prisons, which includes mobile phones.

This is a further example of the Government's continuing good work to support those working on the frontline—in this case, our prison officers and governors. A few weeks ago we debated the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill, which is another good example of the Government and the Opposition working together to protect the protectors.

I will support the Bill, I sincerely wish it good and safe passage through the House, and I look forward to following its progress.

1.40 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak on Second Reading. It will come as no surprise to those who follow my contributions in this House that this is exactly the sort of Bill that I like to be here to support on a Friday. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) has picked up the Bill, following on from the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), and introduced it, having been lucky in the ballot. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), I had a private Member's Bill passed in the last Session and came to watch the doffing of caps as it received its Royal Assent. It is always good to see people coming forward with ideas, and it is a reminder that Back Benchers can make a difference in this place.

Wendy Morton: On Back Benchers introducing legislation, does my hon. Friend agree that sometimes what seems like a small piece of legislation—often just one or two clauses—can make a big difference? I believe this Bill will do that.

Kevin Foster: My Bill will make a big difference to the future of community radio, and this Bill will hopefully make a big difference to protecting many of our communities.

[Kevin Foster]

As I said in my earlier intervention, this is not just a Bill for people who have a prison in their constituency. This is about preventing people who have been sent to jail by the courts—particularly those who have been jailed as a deterrent and to protect the public—from continuing their criminal activities via modern technology. A Victorian designing a prison such as Dartmoor, which is remote and outside Princetown, would have thought prisons keep people away from communication. Many of our jails are located away from populations.

The idea for keeping people in prison is not just to punish them but to protect wider society. That means preventing people from running their activities in prison. When most of our jails were built—even 20 years ago—the explosion of technology would have been unimaginable. At that time a phone call could have been made via a mobile network, but people now effectively have an entire computer on their smartphone. They are able to tweet, to use social media and email, and to go on encrypted sites. These forms of communication are all far beyond any unopened letter, and our law clearly needs to keep up to date with that huge change. Even when the rules were passed a few years back, smartphones, smartwatches and various other items of wearable tech that could be smuggled into and used in prisons would have been unimaginable.

I welcome the Government's action to stop contraband getting into prisons, but there is an obvious solution, which is to block the signals. That technology exists, and the onus should not be on a governor to turn over a whole jail to try to find every last phone. Likewise, people on duty need to be alert at all times, so use of technology is not a sensible part of their working day.

The onus should also be put back on the operators. Most operators will be up for this, because I cannot see any national network wanting to install a mobile mast to deal with demand from a local prison. They will not want to do that. [Interruption.] Mobile phones can sometimes even be heard in this Chamber, which shows their reception. [Interruption.] I do not know what on earth that is. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. That most peculiar noise is not reminiscent of any mobile phone known to me. [Interruption.] It is an extraordinary pinging sound that should be discontinued. I suppose it shows the breadth and diversity of mobile phone noises. I hope the problem has now been addressed.

Kevin Foster: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is ironic that that would happen in this of all debates—we have a debate on where it is inappropriate for a mobile phone to be used being interrupted by a mobile phone left on the Benches. I suspect the Member whose phone it is will find the Deputy Chief Whip of our party wanting to talk to them about her views on where mobile phones are not appropriate. It is not just in jails, but in the Chamber.

Mims Davies: I would like to help the debate and my hon. Friend. I believe that was a signal displaying that a phone has been lost, allowing it to be found by the

person looking for it. This highlights just how technically able these phones can be—we may not know how capable they are.

Kevin Foster: I completely agree with my hon. Friend on that. Modern phones can monitor someone's heartbeat and health, and do a range of other things. We have just touched on how they can even be used to determine location, which becomes a real issue as this technology gets more accurate. One of the great train robbers was helicoptered out of a prison, so knowing exactly where someone is in a large complex can be a very useful piece of information for someone looking to carry out a violent break-out. Making it clear that someone cannot just be pinned down via mobile phone or a piece of wearable tech is one of the things—

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) for giving us the benefit of her wisdom. I was concerned that you might look at this Bill and think that there is perhaps some use for it here in the House of Commons, Mr Speaker—let us hope not! On a more serious point, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) was touching on security and safety in relation to the mobile phone that went off a few moments ago, and he was making a salient point. Does he agree that at the heart of this Bill there is something important in relation to the safety and security of prisons, all the prison staff and everybody who resides in a prison?

Kevin Foster: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on that. I suspect that someone might propose an amendment in Committee to say that we should define this Chamber as somewhere where certain things can be interfered with, particularly the noise of a mobile phone.

This Bill is about public protection. It is not about putting in place a rule just to spoil someone's fun. It is about taking someone offline and stopping them using technology for harassment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) discussed, for the purpose of continuing to manage their criminal gang, for locating exactly where someone is in a jail or for intimidating prison staff. I will not provide names, as it is not appropriate for me to do so and I do not have this person's permission, but I have had to deal with a member of our prison staff who was badly assaulted while doing his duty in one of our prisons. He explained to me that sometimes certain prison staff will be targeted by some of the inmates and by gangs outside. Again, technology does not help us on that, as it allows images to be taken, people to be located and others to see who is there. We forget that a mobile phone is not just a way of communicating; it is a way of recording almost everything that is going on.

Wendy Morton: I wonder whether this Bill will also help to reduce prisoner-to-prisoner bullying and harassment that could occur through mobile phones.

Kevin Foster: It has the potential to do so, although there will always be issues with those who are confined in spaces because of violent offences and the backgrounds they have. My key concern is preventing their being able to do this outside and to continue intimidating victims. I have a particular concern about those on remand intimidating witnesses. The whole point is that they are

in on remand to prevent them from absconding and from interfering with a witness, who may be the main part of the evidence against them. An ability to communicate outwards opens up opportunities to do so or to co-ordinate with people with whom they should not be co-ordinating via a mobile phone. The technology is in place, which is why it is right that through this enabling Bill—it does not set out the whys and wherefores—we are allowing providers to switch off those phones. As I mentioned earlier, they do not want their networks to be used for these purposes. They want to ensure that they are secure.

I am conscious that time is moving on. I am pleased to support the Bill and I note the work that is being done. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills pointed out, when about 13,000 mobile phones are seized in prisons each year that is not just a minor problem. I welcome the efforts being taken in every prison in England and Wales, and, given that the operators work on a UK-wide spectrum, I hope that there would also be co-ordination with authorities in Northern Ireland and Scotland—although no Members from those two nations are in the Chamber—to crack down on people in jail.

I suspect another technology we will return to is drones, and how they start to impact on safety and security in prisons. We have seen dramatic footage online and in the media of what is happening, and it would be interesting—although probably not in this Bill—to discuss how we can use technology as it develops to prevent drones from entering certain areas or to interfere with their command signals. That will probably not just be an issue for prisons, and I know that a Bill on drones is forthcoming. That will be a good thing for us to debate.

It is absolutely right that today's Bill has been introduced, because, ultimately, it provides that stop. We can do a lot of work, we can have body scanners, checks and cell searches, but ultimately the way to kill off a mobile phone is to break its signal and stop it being used. We need to say to the operator that they have the ability to do so, and that there are ways in which they can locate a phone that is being used, as we have seen in cases of missing persons or that have tracked back what was happening with a phone. Fundamentally, a mobile phone regularly being used within the confines of a prison wall is a mobile phone that should not be being operated. It should be switched off. It is a potential breach of the sanctions.

As has been said, people are sent to jail as a punishment for criminal offences or because, in order to protect the public, it is in their interest to take away an individual's liberty and certain ways of communicating. None of us would suggest that someone on remand for a sexual offence should be able to put letters into the postal service without their being monitored; the situation should be exactly the same in this instance and with electronic communication.

Wendy Morton: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill sends out a strong signal to those in prison that the use and holding of a mobile phone will not be acceptable anymore?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It will send out a strong signal by helping to cut off a signal; ultimately, that is what the Bill will do.

I am conscious that we are on Second Reading. There will clearly be opportunities in Committee and on Report to explore the Bill in greater depth, and any commensurate orders that the Government introduce to implement it will offer the opportunity for parliamentary scrutiny.

I totally welcome the Bill, which is part of our catching up with modern technology and ensuring that people are kept safe. That is why it is vital that it is given its Second Reading and that it has Government support. I am certainly looking forward to hearing my hon. Friend the Minister's comments. I welcome the debate so far and hope all hon. Members will give this Bill the Second Reading it deserves.

1.54 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey), who is in the Chamber today, on introducing the Bill, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) on taking it up. I have not yet had the pleasure of taking a Bill through the House, so I am delighted to be part of the process. I know that my right hon. and hon. Friends have been adamant campaigners on this issue. This absolutely matters to my hon. Friend, given the prison in Lewes, and I congratulate her on an excellent speech.

We are in a sphere of new challenges—I see the Minister in his place, and I look at the notes from the MOJ about the challenges in our prisons—and it is vital for the safety of our prisoners, prison officers and visitors that every necessary power be available. I found myself having a strange conversation with some prison governors during the Conservative party conference—they were not at the conference; they were on a walking holiday and found themselves in the same hotel as me. They had started their careers as prison officers and they raised several points with me, as well as highlighting many of the changes they were facing.

I mentioned in an intervention the issue of coercive behaviour and the conducting of threatening and dangerous relationships from behind bars—for example, prisoners continuing to coerce and threaten family members or, as we have heard, people going through a court process. Some prisoners, though deprived of their liberty, can still cross the line and threaten individuals. That was of great concern to the prison governors. I also mentioned earlier my surgery work with prison officers at Winchester Prison. In fact, some of my early surgery work involved supporting them in their challenging job. They raised with me, a new Member of Parliament, the fact that new technology was affecting how they worked. They were keen for the MOJ to understand the growing pressures on their security and the issues they had to deal with.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Does she not agree that prison officers work under very stressful conditions and that the Bill would enable them to get rid of the curse of mobile phones in prisons, take the pressure off them and make prisons a safer working environment?

Mims Davies: I absolutely agree. That was exactly their point—that it was becoming a more dangerous and difficult job, that they could be tracked down, perhaps on the school run or in the community, through

[*Mims Davies*]

connections within the prison, and have their families threatened. It was enlightening to learn about the pressure on our prison officers brought about by the changes in technology to which prison inmates still had access.

Let me put that in context. Winchester Prison was built in 1846. It is a typical Victorian prison. It has a capacity of about 690 inmates and now takes offenders from the age of 18. It does great work on community rehabilitation—it is one of the 10 pathfinder prisons—and is working hard to reduce violence, incidents of self-harm and suicide and is doing as much as is humanly possible to make sure that time spent in prison is practical and useful for the next stage of their lives. If, however, a prisoner is still being hassled from the outside and cannot get away from it, how can they move on?

Hon. Members will recognise the concerns raised in the House over several years about the use of mobile phones in prisons. For every prison in England and Wales, being equipped with technology is vital. We heard earlier the annoyance of a phone going off when it is not wanted, but if someone relies on it and cannot get a signal, it is a disruptive force, and that is simply what the Bill does. It is so important. We heard the figures earlier: 13,000 mobile phones—an increase of over 7,000 in just three years; 7,000 SIM cards, and these all have a value within the prison environment. Some inmates will be digital natives, having grown up with digital technologies, and for them connectivity will be absolutely normal, so being deprived of it could be very helpful.

This is an excellent Bill, and I think it will be very helpful in prisons. The interference we have seen with the court process, and the impact of social media on juries and judges, is highlighted in our courts now, so we need to make sure that prisons are not another place where pressure can be applied.

I commend this Bill and I wish it a safe passage, because it matters to our prison staff, to their families, to visitors and to all the people who rely on our prisons being secure. It will also help our governors, and eventually keep our communities safe. Ultimately, that is what we are looking for: to rehabilitate and help people and to keep our communities safe. I wish the Bill all the speed in the world, and I commend it to the House.

2 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I am honoured to follow my hon. Friends, who have made some passionate contributions to the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) on continuing the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey) on promoting this much-needed and important Bill. If it is passed—I am very glad the Government are supporting it—it will be a crucial component in our armoury in the fight against crime, as we seek to ensure the safety of all our citizens.

I am pleased to follow my colleagues and to talk in support of the Bill. I am particularly pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), who is my neighbour in Hampshire. She made extensive reference to Her Majesty's prison in Winchester, which is a large secure establishment serving both of our areas. I have met constituents in my surgery in Fareham who have been released from Winchester. On the whole,

they have had very positive experiences, and I congratulate the staff at Winchester on their pioneering work and the efforts they put into providing inmates with a safe and appropriate climate for their terms in custody.

I am proud that in Fareham we have Swanwick Lodge, which is a secure unit. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh mentioned rehabilitation, and Swanwick Lodge provides accommodation for children and young people between the ages of 10 and 17 who have been caught up in crime. I have been to visit Swanwick Lodge, and I have been taken aback and impressed by the commitment, dedication and expertise of all the staff, who are really trying to transform the lives of young people who have, unfortunately, found themselves caught up in crime but who want to come out, to reform themselves and to make their future better than their past.

The Bill contains new powers for the Secretary of State. It would authorise public communication providers, including mobile phone network operators, to interfere with wireless telegraphy so that they can disrupt unlawful mobile phone use in prison. For me, as I said, that is critical in the fight against crime.

That raises many issues about the balance of privacy and security, and about the pace and character of technological change in the 21st century. That is why the Bill has my support, in that it will equip our law enforcement officers and security agents—those at the forefront who are tasked with the difficult challenge of keeping us all safe—to stay three, four or five steps ahead of the criminals. That is important if they are to be effective in disrupting plots, to identify threats, to intercept communications and to properly take action before attacks are carried out.

Mims Davies: Given her time in the law, will my hon. Friend comment on how the change in mobile technology has affected the court process and the matters she was involved with, and on how we must catch up when it comes to mobile phone usage and the pressures in the prison system?

Suella Fernandes: I am grateful for the reference that my hon. Friend makes. Yes, I was a barrister for 10 years and worked in and out of the courts. Part of my work was serving on the Treasury counsel panel defending Government Departments, including the Ministry of Justice, and decisions by the Parole Board on sentences. On occasion, I visited prisons in that capacity.

The use of mobile technology has transformed not only the way that people in prisons communicate but, in relation to my hon. Friend's point, the way in which we use our courts system. I am very glad that this Government are at the forefront of leading technological change in our courts so that we can speed up the filing of papers and the exchange of documents. We can even use technology so that witnesses can be cross-examined or examined-in-chief via satellite television links. Inmates in prison can be questioned by counsel in a court on the other side of the country if it is not convenient or feasible for them to travel. This technology has been integral in speeding up justice. Obviously that should not be done at the cost of good justice and proper decisions, but it cuts costs and enables swifter decision making, and that cannot be a bad thing.

I have a particular interest in this Bill because, along with my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), who I see in the Chamber, had the privilege of serving on the Joint Committee on the draft Bill that became the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. It was an extensive Bill that dealt with the very issue we are talking about—powers to enable our law enforcement agents, intelligence officers and policemen to be ahead of the curve when tracking down crime. During its passage, we met many experts at the forefront of this challenge, and also many opponents of greater security powers such as Liberty and Big Brother Watch—organisations that advocate for privacy rights. I applaud their work in many respects.

In the course of my work on the Bill, I was struck by the pace and the character of technological change. Methods that we all use innocently to book holidays, to buy our shopping and to communicate with friends and family across the world are also, sadly, abused by people who are trying to harm society and take advantage of vulnerable people. Terrorists use WhatsApp. Serious fraudsters use telecommunications. Paedophiles use secret Facebook groups to pursue their insidious aims. I am glad that this Bill is the next step in this fight. It will continue the Government's work in cracking down on crime, and it has my full support.

2.7 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) on bringing this sensible and important private Member's Bill to the House today. She set out very eloquently and persuasively a strong case for the need for the Bill. In particular, she highlighted the fact that it extends powers in the 2012 Act, and is very necessary. There was no need to go to the trouble of placing a mobile phone in the Chamber; Labour Members readily support and agree with the Bill.

I do not really disagree with anything that Government Members have said. All hon. Members have made very persuasive arguments for and cases in support of the Bill. A key thing that was mentioned several times is that in recent years the number of illegal mobile phones confiscated has rocketed, with 7,000 confiscations in 2013 rising to 13,000 in 2016. That makes it clear that further action does need to be taken to curb their use. Those behind bars are not just using phones to call friends and family; they are using them for a range of criminal purposes, from arranging criminal activities on the outside to arranging contraband to be smuggled in.

While we support the Bill, the wider intention to cut down smuggling and contraband and the Bill's role in broader prison reform are also important. Although restricting the operation of phones may reduce their use and complicate smuggling, that alone will not stop it. This is not a silver bullet. The Bill will not stop the demand for contraband, as there will always be a demand for banned items, specifically drugs and new psychoactive substances, which are among the most dangerous of the items smuggled into prisons that we must crack down on. Indeed, the demand for NPS has risen dramatically, just as their dangers have increased, with a serious impact on offenders' mental health and rates of violence and even deaths in prison.

The Bill will not stop that, despite its good intentions, because there are technical challenges in achieving 100% success in blocking mobile phones. Indeed, phones are

just part of the wider problem that makes substance smuggling in prisons possible. Many factors make it easier, such as the decreased number of prison officers. The number of band 2 to 4 officers fell from 31,000 in 2010 to 22,000 in 2017, substantially reducing the ability of prisons to restrict the flow of contraband. Without prison officers, we cannot hope to stem the flow of contraband, because we will not have staff on the balconies and the wings, inspecting incoming and outgoing packages and even getting to know prisoners to effectively gather intelligence.

The Government supported the 2012 Act as a means to tackle substance misuse in prison, but they failed to back it up with other measures to tackle contraband, such as ensuring that we have a fully staffed and trained prison officer workforce. Instead, they are choosing to make the prison officers' jobs even harder, leaving them overworked and underpaid. Blocking mobile phones is just one strand of the efforts to tackle contraband, but it requires other approaches, too. The Government should remember that if the Bill moves forward. This Bill should be just one part of prison reform, not all of it.

As other hon. Members have pointed out, the Bill originally appeared as clause 21 of the Prisons and Courts Bill, but that Bill was dropped at the election and the prison aspects were not taken up in the courts Bill. It is worrying that the Government now have to rely on private Members' Bills to legislate for such important reforms. That calls into serious doubt the Government's ability to progress with other much needed reforms. We are concerned that efforts to improve prisons will rely on handout Bills and Back Benchers' good will.

To sum up, there is a wider substance misuse and smuggling problem in our prison estate, which is having a damaging effect on prison safety. We support the Bill and the powers to tackle the use of mobile phones and the supply of contraband to prisons. The wider intentions of the Bill are to restrict the use of phones to arrange criminal activities and organised contraband smuggling, but it will not solve the contraband problem. Instead, the Government have to get their act together and commit to real changes and real reform.

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) for bringing forward this Bill. I note that she is the second Member to be associated with it, the first being the Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household, our right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Ms McVey). Recognising my hon. Friend's considerable talents, I hope from a selfish perspective that she is not elevated as quickly as our right hon. Friend, so that the Bill can proceed through the House quickly.

I strongly agree with my hon. Friend's assessment that the Bill is an important contribution to making our prisons safe and secure. The Government strongly support it, and I urge Members on both sides of the House to do the same. The reason for our support is clear: the illegal supply and use of mobile phones present real and serious risks not just to the stability of our prisons, but to the safety of the public.

[Mr Sam Gyimah]

The Bill addresses one of the most serious current threats to the safety and security of our prisons. Illicit phones erode the barrier that prison walls used to place between prisoners and the community. They can be used to harass victims and carry on extremist activity, as well as for organised crime, gang-related activities and commissioning serious violence. This is therefore a serious problem for our prisons.

I note the point made by the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) about the wider issues of prison security and stability, but the Bill focuses on just one aspect of our plans to bring safety and security to our prisons. Mobile phones are key to the illicit economy in prisons, whether they are used for co-ordinating the smuggling in of contraband, or for organising payments for the contraband once it is inside. That in turn drives a devastating cycle of debt, violence and self-harm.

We need to benefit from technological advances. Those involved in organised crime have benefited from the rapid pace of technological change when it comes to smaller, more sophisticated phones becoming available, or new network frequencies being activated. We need to turn the tables on the criminals, and to do so we need to make even greater use of the skills and knowledge of the mobile network operators. We are already working closely with operators to develop groundbreaking technology so that we can block mobile phone signals in prisons. Making mobile phones in prisons ineffective in such a way is the surest means of disrupting the market for those involved in organised crime.

The Bill provides the enabling powers that will enable us to continue such direct partnership working. It will allow us to continue to tap into operators' expert knowledge and specialist skills to come up with new and creative solutions to address the problem of illicit mobile phone use in prison. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes made clear, the Bill is not tied to any one technical solution. It provides a clear line of accountability in primary legislation to allow mobile network operators to be more directly and independently involved, while retaining appropriate safeguards to regulate activity. That makes the powers in the Bill as future-proofed as they can be.

Members have made several points during this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) rightly raised the link to coercive behaviour, and I welcome her support of the Bill. I confirm that improving the effectiveness of anti-mobile phone activity is intended to minimise opportunities for bullying, harassment and coercive activity behind bars. As I said at the start, public protection is the Government's No. 1 priority.

The Bill will help governors by providing them with an extra tool to tackle the prison security problems posed by mobile phones. Under the 2012 Act, governors are required to comply with directions from the Secretary of State and to make decisions about the retention and disclosure of data. The amendments that will be made to the Act are not new obligations, and we judge that they will not impose any unimaginable burden on governors.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes mentioned, we should of course make provision for prisoners to contact their families. That is important for prisoner rehabilitation and to help to reduce the incidence of self-harm, as well as to bring stability to our prisons. As we tackle the illicit use of phones, we will continue to

provide legitimate ways in which prisoners may contact family and friends. I recognise and endorse my hon. Friend's powerful point.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend for taking on the Bill, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton for her earlier work on it, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) for his sterling work in starting all this off in 2012. This Bill is important for prison security, and for protecting victims and the public, and I commend it to the House.

2.19 pm

Maria Caulfield: With the leave of the House, I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) asked about the Bill's impact on prison governors, but it will actually reduce their workload because responsibility will lie firmly in the hands of the mobile phone operators. Governors have tried hard to keep up with technology, but each time that we move from 2G to 3G or 4G, they have to start the process again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) made the excellent point that mobile phones are no longer just phones; they are small computers with a wide range of capabilities. Blocking phone signals will not just block people's ability to make calls, but stop them from communicating in other ways.

My hon. Friends the Members for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) and for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) highlighted the important work that is being done in HMP Winchester and the fact that prison officers have asked for such legislation to make their lives easier. I welcome the support for the Bill from across the House. The shadow Minister highlighted the wider impact that this Bill will have in our society, because it is not about just reducing crime and problems in our prisons.

The only objection to the Bill seemed to be when mobile phones fought back against it live in the Chamber, so I hope that it has cross-party support. I am grateful for the widespread support for the measures. The Bill is small but important, and it is gratifying that it has been endorsed by Members on both sides of the House. I am not surprised by that endorsement because I believe that there is a shared understanding of the problems in our prisons, and a shared willingness to try to deal with them.

I thank the Bill's sponsors: my hon. Friends the Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), for Angus (Kirstene Hair), for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and for Christchurch (Mr Chope), the hon. Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly), for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn), and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). The fact that those sponsors include a Member for Wales shows that there is support for the Bill across the United Kingdom. Although the Bill will not apply in Scotland, I understand that the Scottish Government hope to introduce changes.

If the Bill receives its Second Reading, I will look forward to it completing all its remaining stages successfully. If and when that happens, I am confident that it will make a significant contribution to improving the safety and security of our prisons.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Principal Local Authorities (Grounds for Abolition) Bill

Second Reading

2.23 pm

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is a timely debate because Christchurch Borough Council is this very day sending out voting papers for a local referendum to ask every local elector in Christchurch whether he or she consents to the abolition of Christchurch Borough Council and its forced merger with Bournemouth and Poole into a unitary council. The electors will have two weeks in which to give their response.

The Bill, which I hope has the support of the Government, would make it absolutely clear that principal local authorities, including district councils, are on a par with parish and town councils, and could not be abolished without their consent. Unfortunately, the current law does not seem to make that absolutely clear. It has been suggested that it would be possible for a group of councils to get together and effectively bully another group of councils and force them to be abolished against their will.

There have been, however, words of encouragement from the Secretary of State who, in his statement of 7 November, greatly emphasised the need for consent, and said that that had not yet been demonstrated in the local government reorganisation in Dorset. During the Adjournment debate of 15 November that was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), the chair of the all-party group on district councils, the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), said:

“Finally, when looking at district councils that may wish to merge—there will be no compulsion to do so—we will ask them whether it would create a credible geography for the proposed new structure.”—[*Official Report*, 15 November 2017; Vol. 631, c. 549-50.]

There is therefore quite a lot of encouragement from some of the obiter dicta of the Government on this issue.

The Bill would put it beyond doubt that councils could not be abolished without their consent. In January last year, Christchurch councillors voted, by a majority, against the abolition of their council, as did Purbeck and East Dorset councillors. Despite that, much energy and many months have been wasted by local government officials trying to engineer a situation that, in my view, is designed in their own best interests, because a merger will mean that they either receive substantial pay-offs, or become part of a larger organisation with enhanced salary bands. The Bill would make it clear that it is for elected councillors to decide these issues. It would be only if they supported such a proposal that a local referendum could be called.

Parliament approved measures that provide that if councils wish to increase their council tax by more than 2%, they have to get the consent of local people in a local referendum, paid for by local people. However, if people want to take over a council—in the case of Christchurch, an ancient borough with no debts but assets in excess of £50 million—can that really be done without local people having the final say? There seems to be a certain inconsistency to the Government’s approach.

That is the essence of the Bill. If it were already on the statute book, Christchurch Borough Council would not have to spend money on a local referendum, because the matter would have been closed last year when the district council voted against abolition.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): My hon. Friend, as usual, is introducing a very important Bill. In Northamptonshire, everyone seems to agree that there should be reorganisation, but the individual councils cannot agree what form that should take. How would the Bill help in that regard?

Mr Chope: It would put a lot more pressure on councils to agree. It would mean that no individual council or group of councils could impose a majority opinion on the minority. We are talking about the essence of local democracy. There is nothing more local than a local district council that is accountable to its own electors. From time to time, the Government have suggested that it would be appropriate to abolish that level of local democracy, but I think that is anathema. It should not be done unless there is full-hearted local consent from elected councillors and local people.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Chope: I will not, actually, because I have only one more minute to go.

This is analogous to the EU referendum. We wished to take back control over our national democracy, so why should we wish to take away from local people and their local councils the right to decide their own future and therefore potentially force them to surrender valuable assets and control over vital services such as planning, the allocation of housing and so on? During the Adjournment debate to which I referred, the Minister said that those were very important matters.

I will not be able to finish my speech today, but I hope that there will be an opportunity for the debate to be adjourned until a time when, with any luck, the need for it will have evaporated.

2.30 pm

The Speaker interrupted the business (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May 2018.

Business without Debate

COASTAL PATH (DEFINITION) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May 2018.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (NATIONAL DATA GUARDIAN) BILL

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

TYRES (BUSES AND COACHES) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018.

Mr Speaker: A splendid day—my birthday.

JUDICIAL APPOINTMENTS AND RETIREMENTS (AGE LIMITS) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 May 2018.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) will be a very busy bee on that day, in addition to all the others.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENFRANCHISEMENT AND EDUCATION) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (3 November), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 11 May 2018.

VOTER REGISTRATION (NO. 2) BILL

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

Hon. Members: Object.

Mr Speaker: Second Reading what day?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): A very important day, Sir: your birthday next year.

Mr Speaker: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman shares my sense of the day's importance—the view will not be universal.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2018.

Passports: Parental Identification

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Chris Heaton-Harris.*)

2.32 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Travelling with one's child should provide lasting, happy memories. From seeing how our little ones react to their first flight to watching how they take on their first journey on the channel tunnel, travelling with a toddler can prove both thrilling and—as I am sure you are aware, Mr Speaker—stressful in equal measure. However, for a growing number of parents in the UK, trips abroad are blighted by confrontations that are both unnecessary and entirely avoidable.

I have chosen to highlight this issue because I believe that a critical purpose of our work in the House is to ensure that British institutions keep pace with the changing nature of our constituents' lives. Throughout the past century, as women have fought for economic and political equality with men, it has been this House that has introduced laws to cement progress and make those campaigns worthwhile. From the Equal Franchise Act 1928 to the Equal Pay Act 1970 to the Equalities Act 2010, Britain has a strong record of addressing the grievances of the marginalised, but also of being proactive to ensure that the British institutions can support the ever-diversifying demographics of British society. With that in mind, I intend today to focus on the issue of children's passports, and to draw attention to the unfortunate reality that a number of parents are being penalised simply for failing to share their child's surname.

Before I address the scale of the problem, I should probably declare an interest: I am a parent who does not share a surname with my young daughter, and I was stopped at the border on my return from a recent trip to France. As my husband Chris and I approached passport control, I happened to be carrying Azalea and pushing the pram, and, through no fault of anyone's, I was separated from my husband in the queue. When I reached the counter, the border official looked at my passport for a long time, looked at my daughter's passport, and then said, "Who is this girl?" I am sure Members can imagine my surprise. I replied, "This is my daughter." I accept that my daughter looks very different from me; for a start she is quite tall for her age—if people can believe that. I told the official that she has my husband's last name, a decision we took collectively upon her birth. To my shock, the situation became quite tense. The official kept asking me for more and more documentation, which I did not have, and I explained over and over again that the child had my husband's last name, not mine. My daughter was saying, "Mama, mama," and crying because the unfortunate incident took so long, but even that did not seem to convince the border official.

My problem was that there was a real air of suspicion and I was made to feel that I was doing something wrong when I had just gone on holiday with my daughter and husband. I then had to go and find my husband, bring him back to the border official and convince him that this was my husband, this was my daughter and I was the mother. I wonder what would have happened if my husband had not been there. Would they have let us go? What would have happened next? These are the kinds of questions that many people have emailed to me since this incident came to light.

It is not only women who travel with their children; numerous LGBT couples have contacted me regarding their adopted children. One such couple said that they “have been questioned mercilessly at the borders wherever they go.” The same applies to foster parents.

I have a few statistics that I would like to share with the Minister. Between 2010 and 2014 at least 600,000 mothers and fathers have been quizzed at airport, ferry and Eurostar terminals because our out-of-date passport system does not recognise that their children might have a different surname from them. That was first highlighted by the Parental Passport Campaign a few years ago, and it is a reasonable assumption that more than 1 million people could have been quizzed in this manner by now.

Choosing to retain a surname is a neutral choice. I know that some choose to see it as a feminist statement and I certainly abide by the notion that no woman is a man’s property. However, for me, the increasing numbers who keep their surnames are often just a simple reflection of changing life circumstances. According to the experts at STEP, who advise families on succession planning, more than 3 million couples in the UK choose to cohabit, rather than marry or enter a civil partnership.

I personally chose to keep my surname for professional reasons. I was already elected as a councillor under my name when I got married, and had also written for my local newspaper under my name, so I felt no need to take a new name. A number of high profile surveys in recent years have shown that I am far from alone in this choice. According to a 2013 survey by Facebook of its 33 million UK users, women are increasingly keeping their own names. Some 38% of women in their 20s said they were intent on keeping their surname after marriage, up from 26% of women in their 30s. A 2016 YouGov survey showed that

“for those people who wanted themselves and their spouse to keep their original surnames upon marriage”

the most popular option, at 42%, was for the children to have a combined version of their parents’ surnames. The next most popular option in the YouGov survey was for the child to receive the father’s surname, which was preferred by 32% of men and 21% of women, while only 18% of women and 12% of men wanted their children to receive the mother’s surname.

While the YouGov poll found that 59% of women would take their husband’s name—again, a perfectly valid choice—that figure is a huge decrease from that in a similar poll into British attitudes in 1994, which found that 94% would take their husband’s surname. So the trajectory of this trend is clear, and provides an undeniable opportunity for our passport authorities to consider the need for change.

From the day that the excellent *Guardian* reporter, Jess Elgot, covered my troubles at border control, I have been inundated with emails from parents who have faced the same situation. I will relay some of their anecdotes shortly, but first I want to reflect on the Government’s position on this issue.

Our Border Force has a duty under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Work to protect vulnerable children and those who could potentially be trafficked is vital, and I pay tribute to the efforts of the Border Force in that endeavour. Child trafficking is an

unspeakable evil, which is why nothing I am suggesting today would compromise the efforts of the Border Force to tackle it; quite the opposite. I hope that my suggestions will reduce an administrative burden on the Border Force and make it easier to separate those engaging in criminal behaviour from those parents who are simply trying to go on holiday with their kids.

The Government’s position on this issue is inflexible, and their reluctance to engage with simple solutions is quite surprising, not least as any such changes to passports would not require legislation. In September and October, I asked the Home Secretary a number of questions on the matter. For one, I asked whether the Government had any record of the number of occasions on which British women had been asked by border control to prove they were related to their children. The Minister responded by saying that this was not something that the Government recorded, and that it was therefore not possible to provide the information. The Minister added that

“it is not currently mandatory for a parent to produce documentation that explains their relationship to the child they are travelling with”.

In principle this is welcome, but such a position has not prevented many thousands of British parents from being unduly harassed and interrogated by officials at the UK border. Similarly, when pressed on the need for reform in 2014, a coalition Minister said:

“A passport is a document for travel. Its fundamental purpose would change if it were to be used to identify a parental relationship.”

I find that strange. The Government’s policy is to stress the need to verify the identity of parents and those travelling with children, yet they also try to swat the issue away by suggesting that a passport’s fundamental purpose would somehow change if it were to be used as an identification document.

Before I outline my proposal today, I want to reflect on three particularly problematic cases that I hope will prompt Ministers to give more considered responses on this. I will not be letting this matter drop! The first case involves Helen, who wrote to me following her ordeal at Gatwick in August, on her return from holiday in Italy. She mentioned that her eldest daughter was from her first marriage and did not share her surname. She also mentioned that her daughter had special needs and struggled with her speech and social situations. After a long wait at passport control, Helen’s daughter was asked, “Is this your mother?” Helen explained that her daughter was unable to provide reliable answers, and that in the process of having her passport updated, she had actually sent paperwork to explain her condition.

The border official had no information on record about her daughter, or about who her primary carers were. Helen rightly asks what would have happened if she had allowed her daughter to answer the original question. She might well have said no, and then what would have happened? The assumption would be that Helen’s daughter may have been questioned separately. Helen tells me that this would have led to her daughter having a major meltdown that could have caused long-term emotional damage. After this, Helen was informed that she should have registered her daughter’s disability with Gatwick airport, as it is the airport that can offer support, but this was not pointed out when she applied for the passport. In her email to me, Helen said:

[Tulip Siddiq]

“I cannot explain in an email how painful this was for us all, genuinely thinking that our re-entry to the UK depended on my daughter who has minimal cognitive ability and all because of her surname”.

Another anecdote I want to share with the Minister is about Jane, a mother of three, who wrote that she was left

“incredibly angry and deeply humiliated”

by a dispute involving her 12-year-old daughter at Stansted earlier this year. She explained:

“They refused to believe I was her mother because we didn’t share the same name and in the end my husband had to be called back from the baggage carousel to ‘claim’ her. I felt incredibly angry and deeply humiliated. I will travel with my children’s birth certificates in future but feel furious that I should have to do this.”

Samantha similarly wrote in with her experience at border control, saying:

“Every time I have re-entered the UK I am made to prove that I am the mother of my daughter. My daughter is 7 in a few weeks and over the last few years has been quite distressed by the atmosphere of accusation and suspicion, even though I always travel with a copy of her birth certificate.”

Samantha raises an extremely valid criticism of the process, which seems to be disproportionately focused on the parents’ return to the UK. She said:

“This situation astounds me on many levels, but my main concern is the lack of attention to people allowed to leave the UK. I have travelled with my daughter to a number of countries all over the world and have never been asked to prove her identity when leaving the UK. This means that she could be taken by anyone, anywhere, so how is this upholding the UK border control’s explanation of this treatment as ensuring the safeguarding of the child and minimising child trafficking? It also means that anyone technically with the same surname has the right to travel freely with her, without questioning.”

So in addition to those with differing surnames being penalised, Samantha’s story shows that it is important to reiterate the fact that having the same surname as the child does not guarantee that the adult with them is their legal parent or guardian. Those stories are just the tip of the iceberg and, frankly, I could have reeled off hundreds of cases for the Minister to reflect on today.

Children’s passports were introduced in the 1990s and list the child’s name and date and place of birth only. It is high time that they were updated to reflect the changing circumstances of British families. Expanding the details in children’s passports to include their parents would improve the time taken when passing through immigration and would relieve stress upon the numerous airport security measures. Support for including both parents’ names on child passports has come from across the House, and many of my colleagues support my efforts today.

I will finish with a few questions for the Minister. Does he accept that including both parents’ names on child passports does not require legislation, nor would it require great expense? The names of the parents are recorded on the application for a child’s passport, so why not make the names available to border control when the passports are being checked so that the relationship between adult and child can be established? In addition, is it not the case that border officers could simply have access to the registry office database in the case of couples that are married? Does the Minister accept that including parents’ names on child passports could save

time, confusion and, ultimately, money at the border? Surely the Government can see that that would help the authorities to identify when a child is related to the adult accompanying them. Lastly, will the Minister commit to reviewing children’s passports? If Brexit is to bring new passports for the country as a whole, now seems as good a time as any to iron out issues with the current format.

Those questions are important because the current situation, whereby parents are subject to harsh questioning at the border, is unfortunately creating a great deal of upset. For many, it feels like 1950’s attitudes to marriage are prevailing at the detriment of common sense and acceptance of how the nature of families is changing. Neither I nor the many thousands who have signed up to the campaign want to interfere with anything that prevents child trafficking, but it is clear that the policies need amending to recognise that more and more children will not have the same surname as both of their parents. I do not want my daughter to grow up thinking that the only way to avoid being penalised at the border is to adopt the surname of her future partner. She and the many thousands of children currently in the same situation should be able to grow up in a world where they can travel at ease, knowing that their identity is one of their choosing and does not leave them treated as criminals by over-zealous border officials. I hope that the Minister can address the points that I have raised, so that we can move on from a policy that is not achieving its stated aims and is making many hundreds of thousands of people extremely unhappy.

2.47 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): I genuinely congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing this debate and, as she made clear, on giving voice to the many people who feel aggrieved about the issue—that is not in doubt. She is entirely right that the bureaucratic systems that we set up have to keep up with the times. Her experience at the airport sounds horrendous, and I would feel exactly the same as her if I was in that situation. Her experience has triggered a reaction from the many people who have been made to feel the same way. She said that she was made to feel as though she had done something wrong, and that is wrong.

I encourage the hon. Lady to listen carefully to the end of my remarks, because I will place on the record some things that I have to place on the record, some of which will sound a little inflexible and unhelpful. However, I spoke with the Immigration Minister this morning, and he wants to try to find a way forward. If that is not evident from the prose that I am about to disgorge, I ask her to listen carefully to the end of my speech. There is a lot of common ground here, and I am sure that the hon. Lady and I are as one on wanting to ensure that people legitimately entering the UK have an experience that is as swift and easy as possible when crossing the border. Everyone shares that objective. As a parent of six, I understand some of the additional challenges of travelling with small children, so I certainly do not underestimate the stress that that can cause, and our border system should not be doing anything to exacerbate that stress.

I am sure that the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn will agree that ensuring a smooth and swift passage through the border cannot be the only objective.

It is equally important to carry out checks to ensure that those who cross the border are doing so lawfully and legitimately, which of course involves carrying out checks and a Border Force officer conducting an interview where any factors warrant further interest.

An important element of that—again, I am sure there is no difference between the hon. Lady and me on this—is ensuring that the system protects the welfare of children whomever they are travelling with. Of course, the vast majority of children who cross the border are travelling with one or both parents, often returning from a holiday, and there are absolutely no grounds for concern.

But, sadly, we cannot ignore the fact that there are cases that give rise to safeguarding concerns where children are taken across borders, be it because they are travelling without the consent of others, because of trafficking, forced marriage or abduction, or because they are travelling in contravention of a court order. Additionally, there will be many instances where children travel when not with a parent or guardian—again, mainly with consent, but there are occasions when that is not the case. I hope the hon. Lady will agree that we have to take reasonable steps to ensure that we avoid putting children at risk.

Quite rightly, Border Force officers are required at all times to consider and protect the welfare of children who are travelling. Under section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, all those concerned with the operation of the borders and immigration system have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, which means they may stop anyone where they have reason to undertake further checks. The key point is that this duty would not change, nor should it, if parents' names were to be included in children's passports.

I understand why the hon. Lady makes these suggestions, and I can see why it appears attractive to provide information to border officials from a verified source. However, information in a passport can only reflect the situation at the point when the passport was issued. Children's passports last for five years, and a lot can happen in that time. Relationships can break down, parents may disagree on the best arrangement for the child, and the police, social services or the courts may become involved. Information in a passport could rapidly become out of date and need to be replaced.

A passport, other than one that is brand new, even if it contains parents' names, would not provide conclusive evidence to a Border Force officer that the person accompanying a child has the right to do so or is acting in the best interests of the child's welfare. The Border Force officer would still need to make inquiries and be satisfied that no further intervention is required, exactly as now.

The hon. Lady has proposed that HM Passport Office adds an observation to the child's passport detailing parents or guardians with a surname different from the child's. This information could be verified only at the time the passport was issued and, due to the ability to change names in the UK and overseas, and the fact that circumstances can change, this could rapidly become

out of date. The point about observations is that they, like the core information in a passport, are designed to be about the individual and last for the lifetime of the passport.

The hon. Lady may be aware that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office adds the name of the person with whom a child is travelling to an emergency travel document when it replaces a lost passport. However, it should be remembered that, in such instances, the family will be subject to interview. All those with parental responsibility must provide consent, and the document is for a single verified journey. The person or persons travelling with the child will have been subject to at least the level of checks undertaken by Border Force.

I appreciate that questioning by a Border Force officer may appear intrusive or unnecessary, although, as I have explained, it is done from the best of motives. To allow those travelling with children to prepare, and to make travel as smooth as possible, we have published a leaflet, available on gov.uk, titled "Children travelling to the UK" setting out in what circumstances we might ask questions of a person travelling with a child and why we might do so—principally the child protection reasons I have set out.

The leaflet sets out suggested documents the accompanying adult might want to bring to help smooth the process. It also refers to the questions we might ask and contains a firm commitment:

"We will always do this as quickly as possible and in a way which is sensitive to the interests of the child and the adult involved... We do not wish to delay your journey any longer than necessary."

I appreciate the sincerity of the hon. Lady's position and the way in which she has advanced her cause. When she says she will not give up, I absolutely believe her. I have sought to explain that there are formidable difficulties with what she proposes, and we need to be certain that nothing we do, however well intentioned, has the effect of increasing the risk to children. As a mother herself, I am sure she will appreciate that.

Having said that, I have spoken to my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister and I know he understands that the present situation is causing difficulties, particularly in cases where children have a different surname from that of a parent. I am therefore happy to give the hon. Lady the commitment, on his behalf, that he will actively consider how we can take this forward. Child protection is an absolute imperative, and we cannot compromise on that, so I am certainly not going to stand at this Dispatch Box today and make promises that cannot be delivered on. However, I do give her the absolute undertaking that he will give this matter his fullest consideration, with the aim of trying to find a workable solution. I again congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate and I am sure that this will not be the last word on this matter, either from her or from the Government.

Question put and agreed to.

2.55 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Friday 1 December 2017

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): A formal meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 7 November. European Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

European Free Trade Association (EFTA) dialogue

In their annual meeting, Ministers met with representatives from the EFTA group of countries to exchange views on how best to make economic growth inclusive.

Early Morning Session

The Eurogroup president briefed Ministers on the outcomes of the 6 November meeting of the Eurogroup, and the Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers decided that Pilar Jurado Borrego, director-general of Spanish customs, is to be the EU's single candidate for the position of secretary-general of the World Customs Organisation. Ministers were also briefed by the Economic and Finance Committee (EFC) chair on the EFC's discussion of the single supervisory mechanism review.

VAT e-commerce package

Ministers considered the various items which make up the VAT e-commerce legislative package.

Review of the European System of Financial Supervision

The Commission presented its legislative proposals on financial supervision to Ministers. This was followed by an exchange of views.

Current Financial Services Legislative Proposals

The Council presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Insolvency

The Commission presented its proposals on resolving existing non-performing loans, preventing the build-up of future non-performing loans, and measures to increase the efficiency of the general insolvency framework in member states.

Follow-up to the G20 Meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF Annual Meetings in Washington

Ministers received information from the presidency and the Commission on the outcomes of the 12-15 October G20 and IMF meetings.

European Court of Auditors' annual report

The president of the Court of Auditors presented the auditors' report on the implementation of the budget of the European Union for the 2016 financial year.

Statistical package

The Council discussed the autumn statistical package and reviewed progress achieved, and Ministers exchanged views on the prospects for European co-operation on statistics. Council conclusions were also approved.

[HCWS300]

HEALTH

Congenital Heart Disease Services

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): We are today making a statement on the decisions taken by NHS England at its board meeting on 30 November 2017 regarding future commissioning arrangements for adults' and children's CHD services in England, following its review of and full public consultation on these services.

CHD services are a specialised service currently commissioned by NHS England. There have been concerns about these services, especially children's congenital heart surgery, which date back to the early 1990s and which have been the subject of a number of reviews.

Heart surgery is becoming ever more complex and technically demanding. Surgeons now operate on babies that may be only hours old and will in the future be able to operate on babies before they are born. This demands a highly skilled and experienced team of doctors and nurses able to operate on sufficient numbers of patients to maintain and improve their skills. It also requires that a wider range of other specialist children's services are also present on the same hospital site. This determines what medical care is available by the bedside for a child in a critical condition, which is important because many children with CHD have multiple medical needs.

The new congenital heart disease review was established in July 2013, and on 23 July 2015 the NHS England board agreed the standards—almost 200 in total that cover the entire patient pathway. These standards were collaboratively developed over a two-year period by patients and their families and carers, clinicians, commissioners, and other experts. They were the subject of extensive public consultation, and all the views put forward were considered before the standards were finalised.

Patients and their families told NHS England that while it was a good thing to have standards, they only really mattered if they ensured that they were met. Following a self-assessment of providers against these standards, NHS England announced in July 2016 that it was minded to make a number of changes in the way it commissions CHD services. NHS England set out proposals to implement the standards, and asked for views in a full, formal, public consultation that ran between 9 February 2017 and 17 July 2017.

With this review, NHS England has been asking how we can take the good service we have today across the country and turn it into a truly great service for the long term; a service fit for the 21st century. When its proposals are implemented, patients and their families can be confident that they will be able to access the very best CHD services in the world, regardless of where they live.

Having noted the results of the consultation, and in order to support the full implementation of the standards, NHS England agreed a number of recommendations regarding future commissioning arrangements for CHD services in England at its board meeting on 30 November 2017. It also agreed proposals for full implementation of all the standards, and confirmed its support for recommendations regarding better information, funding for formal CHD networks and the development and delivery of a rolling peer review programme that will cover all of the standards at all trusts.

The following recommendations were considered and agreed by the NHS England board at its meeting on 30 November 2017:

for Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital NHS Foundation Trust to provide level 1 adult CHD services in the north-west, with Manchester University Hospitals Foundation Trust providing the full range of level 2 adult CHD services as an integral part of a north-west CHD Network;

to continue to commission level 1 CHD services from University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, conditional on the trust achieving full compliance with the standards in line with its plan to do so and demonstrating sufficient progress within required timescales;

to note the outline proposal presented by the Royal Brompton and Harefield NHS Foundation Trust for how full compliance against the standards might be achieved; to confirm that NHS England should work with RBH and other potential partners on the full range of options for delivering a solution that could deliver full compliance with the standards and ensure the sustainability of other connected services; and to continue to commission level 1 CHD services from the trust, conditional on the trust demonstrating sufficient progress within required timescales;

to continue to commission level 1 CHD services from The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust until at least March 2021, with NHS England to consider further the future commissioning of both the trust's advanced heart failure and transplant services and its level 1 CHD services;

to cease to commission level 2 CHD services, including cardiology interventions in adults with CHD, from the following trusts: Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, and University Hospital of South Manchester NHS Foundation Trust (note, this trust has now merged with Central Manchester University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to form Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, which will be providing level 2 adult CHD services under the recommendations).

This will mean that in future level 1 CHD services in England will be provided by the following hospitals:

Alder Hey Children's Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (children's services) and Liverpool Heart and Chest Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (adult service)—subject to the conditions described by NHS England;

Birmingham Women's and Children's Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (children's services) and University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust (adult service);

Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust (children's services) and Barts Health NHS Trust (adult service);

Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust (children's and adult services);

Royal Brompton and Harefield NHS Foundation Trust (children's and adult services)—subject to the conditions described by NHS England;

Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust (children's and adult services);

Newcastle Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (children's and adult services)—subject to the conditions described by NHS England;

University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust (children's and adult services);

University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust (children's and adult services)—subject to the conditions described by NHS England; and

University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust (children's and adult services).

And that in future level 2 CHD services in England will be provided by the following hospitals:

Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust (adult service);

Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust (adult service);

Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (adult service);

Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (children's and adult services);

Papworth Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (adult service).

The commissioning of CHD services in England is a matter for NHS England. The Government will continue to hold NHS England to account as NHS England takes forward the recommendations of its review. Full details of NHS England's recommendations, including its implementation proposals, are available on its public website.

[HCWS299]

HOME DEPARTMENT

National Crime Agency: Inspection Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The National Crime Agency (NCA) was established to lead the fight against serious and organised crime. It has the power to task other law enforcement partners and a capability, with local to international reach, to disrupt the impact of serious and organised crime on the UK.

This is the third HMIC inspection of the NCA. It looked at the support provided by the agency to law enforcement in respect of serious crime investigations. Specifically, it focused on three related NCA teams: Specialist Operations Centre, Crime Operational Support, and the Serious Crime Analysis Section.

This report has been published today. I will place a copy of the report in the Library of the House. I have asked HMICFRS to publish this report on my behalf and it is available online at <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/>

The report finds that the three teams in the NCA provide an effective and efficient service but that in order to meet the needs of present day policing there must be a concerted effort to respond to the eight recommendations and four areas for improvement set out in this report. It is for the director general to respond to these recommendations, in line with the requirements of the Crime and Courts Act 2013.

[HCWS301]

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