

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

OVERSEAS ELECTORS BILL

First Sitting

Wednesday 17 October 2018

CONTENTS

Sittings motion agreed to.
CLAUSE 1 under consideration when the Committee adjourned till
Wednesday 24 October at Two o'clock.

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the final version of the report should be clearly marked in a copy of the report—not telephoned—and must be received in the Editor’s Room, House of Commons,

not later than

Sunday 21 October 2018

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON

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| † Bradshaw, Mr Ben (<i>Exeter</i>) (Lab) | † Moran, Layla (<i>Oxford West and Abingdon</i>) (LD) |
| † Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey (<i>The Cotswolds</i>) (Con) | † Norris, Alex (<i>Nottingham North</i>) (Lab/Co-op) |
| † Davies, Glyn (<i>Montgomeryshire</i>) (Con) | † Skidmore, Chris (<i>Kingswood</i>) (Con) |
| † Dunne, Mr Philip (<i>Ludlow</i>) (Con) | † Smith, Chloe (<i>Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office</i>) |
| † Elmore, Chris (<i>Ogmore</i>) (Lab) | Snell, Gareth (<i>Stoke-on-Trent Central</i>) (Lab/Co-op) |
| † Gapes, Mike (<i>Ilford South</i>) (Lab/Co-op) | † Stewart, Bob (<i>Beckenham</i>) (Con) |
| † Graham, Luke (<i>Ochil and South Perthshire</i>) (Con) | Adam Mellows-Facer, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| † Lake, Ben (<i>Ceredigion</i>) (PC) | |
| † Lopresti, Jack (<i>Filton and Bradley Stoke</i>) (Con) | |
| † Matheson, Christian (<i>City of Chester</i>) (Lab) | † attended the Committee |

Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 17 October 2018

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

Overseas Electors Bill

2 pm

The Chair: Welcome, everybody, to the Public Bill Committee on the Overseas Electors Bill. Please ensure that all electronic devices are switched to silent mode. I am afraid that only water is allowed, not tea or coffee, but Members are welcome to remove their jackets.

Ordered,

That, if proceedings on the Overseas Electors Bill are not completed at this day's sitting, the Committee shall meet at 2.00 pm on Wednesdays on which the House sits.—(*Glyn Davies.*)

The Chair: Before we begin line-by-line consideration, I remind Members that the required notice period for tabling amendments in Public Bill Committee is three working days. Amendments should therefore be tabled by the rise of the House on Friday for consideration on the following Wednesday.

For those who are relatively new to the process, it may be useful if I give a brief explanation of the arrangements. The selection list for today's sitting, which is available in the Committee Room and on the Bill website, shows how selected amendments have been grouped for debate, generally on the same or similar issues. The Member who has put their name to the leading amendment in each group will be called first; other Members who wish to speak on any amendment in the group will then be free to catch my eye. A Member may speak more than once in a single debate.

At the end of a debate on a group of amendments, new clauses or schedules, I shall again call the Member who moved the leading amendment or new clause. Before they sit down, they will need to indicate whether they wish to withdraw it or seek a decision on it. If any Member wishes to press to a vote any other amendment, new clause or schedule in the group, they need to let me know.

Decisions on amendments take place not in the order in which they are debated, but in the order in which they appear on the amendment paper. In other words, debates occur according to the selection and grouping list, but decisions are taken when we come to the clause that the amendment would affect. New clauses and schedules are decided on after we finish consideration of the existing text of the Bill. I shall use my discretion to decide whether to allow separate stand part debates on individual clauses and schedules after debate on the relevant amendments.

Clause 1

EXTENSION OF FRANCHISE FOR PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: BRITISH CITIZENS OVERSEAS

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I beg to move amendment 1, in clause 1, page 1, line 14, after "citizen," insert " (iii) is aged 16 or over;".

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I put on record my congratulations, and those of the Liberal Democrats more generally, to the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire for presenting the Bill and steering it to Committee. The subject has been in our manifesto for a very long time, as I know it has been for most parties. I look forward to continuing to support the Bill.

Since this is my first Public Bill Committee—my party is quite small, so we do not feature on such Committees very often—I thought I had better make the most of it, so I decided to table some amendments. However, I reassure the hon. Gentleman that I have no intention of derailing anything, so I hope he will see my amendments in a spirit of improvement and nothing more.

Amendment 1 relates to a proposal that it is time to consider seriously: extending the franchise for overseas electors to 16 and 17-year-olds. That, of course, is in line with the policy of my party and many others. It is worth mentioning that, in the last general election, the majority of votes were cast for parties that support it. I am grateful to the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for City of Chester, for adding his name to the amendment. I note that several other hon. Members present have also expressed support for extending the franchise for various reasons, and I hope I can count on their support today.

In the debate on the money resolution, the Minister said:

"Now is the time that we should reach out to our citizens—our people around the world—and say, 'You are British, and we are proud that you are British and we welcome you into our democracy.'"—[*Official Report*, 16 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 572.]

I sincerely hope she agrees that that should extend to 16 and 17-year-olds. Rightly, they play a crucial part in the Welsh Assembly, which last week voted overwhelming to include them in Welsh Assembly elections. As we know well, in Scotland, 16 and 17-year-olds played a critical role in the referendum. The idea that 16 and 17-year-olds are not ready to vote has been roundly proven to be wrong. As education spokesperson, I go around schools a lot. Young people are desperate for a chance to grab hold of democracy.

I was one of those 16 and 17-year-olds who would not have been in this country at that age. My father was a diplomat and we travelled around the world. At that point, I was strong in my Britishness and I felt so tied to the country. Just because I was not here on terra firma does not mean that my heart was not here. That is the spirit that the whole of the Bill expresses: just because someone is abroad does not mean that they are not British—quite the opposite.

I fully recognise and anticipate that the Minister will argue that the amendment would lead to an anomaly, as only those 16 and 17-year-olds who are overseas would vote in elections but not everyone else. I would accept that anomaly. It would show that 16 and 17-year-olds would and can participate in those kinds of elections and it may open the door to that wider debate. That is why it is important to talk about it today.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am sorry to fire a torpedo at the hon. Lady. Perhaps I am being thick, but the Bill deals with people who have been out of the United Kingdom for 15 years or more. How will that apply to a 16-year-old?

Layla Moran: Let me give myself as an example. I was born in this country—in Hammersmith—and we left when I was one. I would have been tied to an address, but we left and I did not come back until university. I came back for boarding school because I had to, but my brothers and sisters did not because I went to boarding school only because we were in a country that did not have adequate schooling—in fact, we started our own school, but that is a long story.

The amendment would have applied to me, because when I was 16, had there been a general election, I could have had the chance to vote: I lived here when I was one and I was on my parents' passports at that point. I took my first flight to Nepal when I was six months old.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to say a few words under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon made clear that there are anomalies in our current electoral system. She referred to developments in Wales, but several hundred thousand young people have already voted in an election, including 16 and 17-year-olds: the Scottish referendum, which was on a different franchise to the referendum we had on the European Union.

The numbers of people who would be affected by moving from a 15-year threshold for 16 and 17-year-olds to an indefinite threshold would be very low. By definition, it may be only hundreds or even fewer, but there is an important principle at stake about the future of the country. I do not want to reopen the debate about the EU referendum—I am sure you would call me to order if I did, Mr Robertson—but by definition young people have a longer interest in the future of our country than older people, because we are all mortal. Therefore, I support the amendment. It is also supported by many organisations that campaign to widen our democracy. On that basis, I am happy to give my support.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Robertson. Yesterday, I was—I think—next door with a delegation of young people of various school ages from Nottingham who wanted to talk to me about hate crime. They had taken part in research under the auspices of Nottingham Citizens, our chapter of Citizens UK, and pulled together what they felt was the hate crime situation in schools. They wanted to see me and my colleagues, and it was made clear to me that while I may have been the host of the meeting, they would be chairing it. They wanted to take control. That is a good example of the bright young people of my city, who are reflective of the country, and I thought it was a nice way to begin giving my support for the amendment.

This issue is of real substance and of its time, and it is time that hon. Members did something. We have the perfect opportunity here to dip our toe, as has been said.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): My hon. Friend raised hate crime at Prime Minister's questions. Am I to think that he was inspired to do so by young people who do not currently have the vote?

Alex Norris: Yes, absolutely. They asked me directly how I intended to act on their behalf, and I said I would give them a voice. Today was the start of that, and I think we are close to securing a meeting with the Home

Secretary, which will be one way to do it. I will come shortly to what that has told me about votes at 16—this is not just an interesting story, but one that is pertinent to the amendment, which I know you will be keen on, Mr Robertson.

It is probably helpful that no colleagues from the Scottish National party are on the Committee as I admit this—I hope colleagues from Plaid will not tell them. Like other Committee members, I canvassed during the Scottish referendum. I did so because I love the Union and think it is important. I had a say and, like many others, I went to express it. Actually—I am probably in relatively good company in this room, if not in any other—I enjoy canvassing and am a keen supporter of it. I am probably not supposed to admit that.

I enjoy talking to people on the doorsteps, but I really like talking to—*[Interruption.]* In fact, I will go even further: one period of canvassing I particularly enjoyed was a summer by-election in Norwich North—I think it was in 2010. The weather was tremendous and we canvassed all day and went out at night. It was fantastic—other than the result, I had a tremendous couple of weeks. This is not a story of where I have been canvassing, which is everywhere, but in that referendum I enjoyed talking to 16 and 17-year-olds because they took the issue seriously and obviously understood what a seismic moment it was and the importance of reflecting on their futures and what they wanted. Frankly, it was too important to leave to those older than them and they wanted to have their say. I thought that referendum was an excellent model and hoped we would roll it out across all elections. I still do.

I find it regrettable that, when we talk about votes at 16 and 17, we get into this tennis match of what 16 and 17-year-olds can and cannot do—whether they can drive a car, get married, serve in the armed forces or pay taxes—which I do not think adds up to a particularly persuasive case either way. It just makes for a bit of a fudge that means it goes into the too-hard-to-deal-with basket.

There is one compelling reason for votes at 16 and 17, which is why I will be glad to continue to advocate it: it is the last chance we have to talk to a young person when in education, employment or training about what voting is and why it matters. When I canvass—some of this will relate to the deprivation and challenges in my community—in any session anywhere, people will say, “I just don't know anything about it. It's a long way from anything I know about. I wouldn't know how to make up my mind. I am not going to participate.” That is a significant group of people. It is characterised as apathy, but it is not. It is our failure rather than theirs because we have been unable to demonstrate in a non-partisan way what an election is. We have been unable to demonstrate that it will not be scary to cast a ballot, and that everyone has to decide what is right for them in their life and there is no right or wrong answer in that sense. Where better to do that than in the last couple of years of education?

Christian Matheson: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I have heard a suggestion that some adults do not vote because they are too scared—they find it intimidating because they believe that they do not know how to go to a polling station and cast a vote. My hon. Friend seems

[*Christian Matheson*]

to suggest that, by incorporating education into the voting process, we would encourage people to vote throughout the rest of their lives.

2.15 pm

Alex Norris: I absolutely agree. Letting a person cross the threshold for the first time is a good way of dispelling some of the fears and barriers, and good for creating a culture and a habit of voting for life. That would be a positive thing, however people choose to use that ballot. The point I raised in Prime Minister's questions today was that the report on hate crime made it clear that young people in my city did not know what it was. I do not mean that they did not know about positive relationships—I do fear for my community on that—but technically they did not know whether the words that they heard banging around, whether from older siblings or on the television, were being used lawfully or unlawfully. Again, I felt that that was a failure on our part to skill people up to do that, and this issue fits into the same category. The best thing about this measure is that the majority of people would, at some point in that period, experience the practical application of a vote. They would be able not just to learn in the classroom but to actually do it, which would be really positive.

I will conclude with a quote about this from someone in a far more esteemed position than mine. I think she is entirely right. She is the former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs. The year was 2015, and she said:

“Voting is a habit that is formed early and we ought to treat it as such...It is important that we take...a progressive stance on these matters.”—[*Official Report*, 18 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 527-532.] That came not from Nottingham North but from Norwich North, and I desperately hope that the Minister feels the same today and will support this important amendment.

Christian Matheson: What a great pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. You and I have a shared interest in horse-racing, although I have not seen you at Chester racecourse recently. I was there twice over the summer, and you are more than welcome if ever you choose to venture to Chester which, of course, has the oldest racecourse in the country. I hope I may wander just a little in my opening remarks and say that it is a great pleasure to see my good friend, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire. He and I also have a shared interest, which is the wellbeing of the beautiful country of Colombia. I think he has personal connections there, and I have an interest because of the plight of trade unionists and civil society in Colombia. He and I will continue to work together on that issue, just as we will work together on the Bill, and I congratulate him on the Bill, which has completed Second Reading and is now in Committee.

It is a pleasure to work with the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon. I have not worked with her before, but she has already earned a fine reputation in this place. Her speech was important thanks to her use of personal experiences to demonstrate the strength of her argument. The breadth and diversity of experience that hon. Members right across the patch bring to the House is one of its real strengths, and I welcome that.

I am a little surprised that the Bill has already reached this stage. It has leapfrogged other private Members' Bills in a similar departmental area, and it secured a money resolution in the House last night. I do not decry that—once a Bill completes its Second Reading it is right for it be accorded a money resolution, and I am genuinely pleased for Friend the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire that the matter can proceed. I suggest to Conservative Members that the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), should also be given a money resolution.

Turning to amendment 1, I believe that all hon. Members agree that no area of electoral law is more important than the franchise—who gets to vote, and who is able to participate in our democracy—because it underpins the democracy that underpins this country and all that is good in it. I welcome this opportunity to discuss in detail the intricacies of the Bill and point Ministers towards areas where our democracy could and should be strengthened.

Labour supports diversity. British citizens now live all over the world, strengthening the multiculturalism of our country. I talked earlier about the experience of the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, and British citizens living abroad can bring their experience back to the UK if they return. We should project British values abroad, although that is not under discussion at the moment. Overseas electors play a significant role in providing a close connection not only to our European neighbours but to countries across the world, and we must continue to encourage that valuable connection.

The Bill denies overseas British citizens aged 16 and 17 a vote. It states:

“A person is entitled to vote as an elector at a parliamentary election in a constituency if...on the relevant date, the person...qualifies as an overseas elector in respect of that constituency...is not subject to any legal incapacity to vote (age apart)...and...is a British citizen”.

It also requires that

“on the date of the poll, the person...is not subject to any legal incapacity to vote,...is a British citizen, and...is registered in a register of parliamentary electors for that constituency”.

As it stands, there is no mention of including young voters in the franchise. The Bill will further embed and entrench the current laws that prevent 16 and 17-year-olds either abroad or in the UK from engaging in parliamentary elections. The voting age for UK parliamentary elections remains 18 for the whole of the UK, and under current legislation a person must be 18 or over to vote in all elections in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

I echo the words of the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, who spoke about consensus in the Opposition parties. Labour strongly believes in the right of our young people to engage in our parliamentary democracy through voting in general elections. The Bill gives us the opportunity to grant British 16 and 17-year-olds living overseas that right, and it could be a trailblazer or a test bed—I will come on to that in a little while. Amending the Bill to enfranchise 16 and 17-year-olds could be a first step in granting young people the vote. As this Bill is under consideration, it might be the opportunity that hon. Members are looking for. In a political atmosphere that is becoming increasingly unpredictable, one thing is certain: it is only a matter of time before votes are granted to 16 and 17-year-olds.

There is cross-party support for the change. Members from both sides of the House recognise the overwhelming importance of sustaining a modern democracy by listening to young people. To encourage greater numbers of young people to become lifelong, politically active and participatory citizens, institutional reform is required. I was very interested to hear the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North, who talked about the importance of engaging young people from an early age, and the effect it would have on them in terms of lifelong participation. I worry that we sometimes underestimate the danger, which I highlighted in my intervention, that members of the public are intimidated by voting because they were not given the opportunity to learn about it early in their lives.

The amendment is simple: with the value of the franchise in mind, we wish to include 16 and 17-year-olds in the changes proposed for the electoral franchise for overseas voters. The change would enfranchise young people of our nation, who deserve a say in the way we run our parliamentary democracy. The amendment would add 16 and 17-year-old voters to the individuals who can qualify as overseas voters. We believe that, in the context of any extension of the franchise to overseas voters, the views of British 16 and 17-year-olds living abroad must be included. It is our duty as representatives in Parliament to strengthen the foundations of our democracy by giving young people a say in the democratic process. The Bill presents us with the opportunity to grant young people, as politically engaged citizens, the ability to participate in parliamentary elections and to begin a life of political engagement. By doing so, we would strengthen our democracy and open it up to a generation of young people living overseas, who are currently excluded from our democratic process. We are talking about enfranchising a new generation of citizens through greater access to information, communication and self-empowerment. Young people, both overseas and in the UK, are becoming increasingly engaged politically. We cannot continue to deny them access to our parliamentary democracy.

The case for votes at 16 at all parliamentary elections is stronger than ever before, particularly given the mood of young people post-Brexit. We hear stories that the majority of senior citizens voted to exit the European Union while the majority of young people voted to remain, and that an even greater majority of people between 16 and 18 would have voted to remain if they had been given the chance. As we all know, there is a real sense of division and discord in the country. It is greatly magnified or amplified among young people because 16 and 17-year-olds were not allowed to take part in that vote, and they felt that their future was being decided by others—a future in which they have a greater stake, because they have more of it to come. There is a real sense of grievance.

Young people who are British citizens, especially those living overseas in the European Union, feel that their future has been decided for them by another generation. Votes at 16 for young overseas voters is an essential part of securing votes for life. I am interested to know what the Minister and the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire think about extending the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds, given their party's insistence on the importance of granting votes for life to our overseas

voters. If that is truly a priority for the Tory party, attention must be paid to educating and informing young people who are living abroad.

Engagement in political life should not be limited to people above the age of 18—I think my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North hinted at that point. I am sure that the Government agree that involvement in politics from the age of 16 can only be beneficial for our young people, making them more likely to engage in politics throughout their lives. Young people overseas will of course bring the added dimension of a different experience to those living solely in the UK.

Alex Norris: I am enjoying the case that my hon. Friend is making. A greater proportion of 16 and 17-year-olds than 18 to 24-year-olds voted in the Scottish referendum, which perhaps shows that the connection to education had built a sense of participation and encouragement. Does he agree that we might benefit from that approach?

Christian Matheson: That is a concrete example. We need to look into the reasons why 16 and 17-year-olds voted in greater numbers than 18 to 24-year-olds. It also raises the slightly different issue of why 18 to 24-year-olds do not necessarily feel involved. Perhaps they do not feel an attachment; perhaps they do not feel that it is relevant. We always scratch our heads and worry about that. It could well be that, because they did not start getting involved early enough in democratic processes, we have already lost them. My hon. Friend makes a very valid point—unfortunately, it throws up as many questions as answers, because we need to look more carefully at why previously young people did not feel that politics was for them, and why they seemed to embrace the Scottish referendum in particular.

I was never a true believer in votes at 16; I am a convert, which is perhaps why I am attacking the subject with so much zeal. It was the experience of the Scottish referendum that sealed the deal for me.

2.30 pm

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire is smiling ruefully, wistfully perhaps; I note his mirth. As they say in American courtroom dramas, “Let the record show that he is shaking his head wistfully.” The point is that it was absolutely clear that young people in Scotland were energised by the referendum. They were engaged, arguing and debating among themselves. That certainly changed my mind; we should not simply dismiss the younger generation.

The experience in Scotland has shown how successful extending the franchise to young people can be, with 75% of 16 to 17-year-olds voting in the independence referendum. Sixteen-year-olds can now vote in council elections in Scotland and the Welsh Government are looking to do the same for council and Assembly elections. You might pull me up on this, Mr Robertson, but that puts me in mind of Boundary Lane, which is in my constituency and is half in England and half in Wales. Obviously, I represent the English half. We might soon be in the absurd situation where a 16-year-old living on one side can vote in his or her council elections and the 16-year-old living on my side cannot vote in elections. Such is the nature of national geography.

There is no silver bullet for improving participation in politics, but we cannot overlook the importance of contact with politics in the formative years. I suspect that that is the point my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North makes concerning young people in his constituency who have a concern about an issue but do not have the confidence or education to know how to put that concern into action. They came to see him yesterday and today he raised their concerns with the Prime Minister.

Involving and engaging our young people in politics is vital for the future of our democracy, making our young people feel that they can have a say. Evidence from the referendum and the 2017 Scottish council elections demonstrates that, when a 16 or 17-year-old is able to vote, turnout rates are much higher than those among 18 to 24-year-olds, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North said in his intervention.

If an individual has voted once, they are more likely to vote in future. Young people are aided by the encouragement of families and schools, meaning that they became politically engaged at an early stage. If we are able to spark political engagement from that early stage, we are more likely to encourage individuals truly to vote for life, engaging in the political process throughout their lives.

My hon. Friend mentioned that the Minister had, in a previous role, summed up the situation well, saying:

“Voting is a habit that is formed early, and we ought to treat it as such... It is important that we take—dare I say it?—a progressive stance on these matters.”—[*Official Report*, 18 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 527-532.]

In reminding the Minister of her words on this matter, I am now trying desperately to think of things I have said in the past as an APPG chair. I wonder whether they will put a hole under the waterline of any of my future arguments when I am a Minister, which of course will not be too long hence. I shall reflect on that later, after the Committee adjourns.

There is a sense that overseas younger voters might even bring a greater energy to their parents. The younger generation who want to register to cast their democratic ballot might be able to energise parents who perhaps worry about the bureaucracy, which we will consider in later clauses. Younger voters want to get involved and have their say, and offering them the opportunity to take the most important and responsible of actions—namely voting to choose a democratically elected Government—will energise and inspire their parents to do the same. Of course, that amounts to a reversal of the usual situation whereby parents either try to get youngsters involved or their apathy is infectious and has been passed on to the next generation.

The issue can no longer be overlooked by the Government, given the cross-party support for votes at 16. As the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon has mentioned, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru—[*Laughter*.]

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester, where Welshmen can of course still be shot with an arrow inside the city boundaries at dusk. The words he is looking for are “Plaid Cymru”, and I apologise to my hon. Friend for laughing so heavily at his pronunciation.

Christian Matheson: As a Cheshireman I shall seek out my crossbow forthwith, but let us not go down that road. In addition to the parties I have mentioned, Plaid Cymru and the Green party are fully supportive of extending the franchise. Even senior politicians in the Conservative party, including the former First Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), and the leader of the Scottish Conservative party, are fully paid-up members of the votes at 16 club. Surely that also means that they are fully paid-up members of the overseas votes at 16 club, which is the issue under consideration. It is time the Conservatives recognised the need to update the current voting franchise to reflect the modern make up of British society, in which 16 and 17-year-olds are politically engaged, educated and aware enough to make informed decisions about the political environment.

Our country is well overdue a change to its voting laws. In 2004, the Electoral Commission published a review of the voting age, which concluded that it should remain the same “for the time being.” It recommended, however, that the situation be reviewed in five to seven years, and I will return to that issue. The commission qualified that by stating that

“circumstances may change the context significantly over the next few years. In particular, citizenship teaching may improve the social awareness and responsibility of young people.”

That has certainly been the case, as our young people are better informed than ever, thanks to access to the internet and social media. Although fake news and disinformation pervade, young people are becoming more adept at spotting that and are becoming more critical, we hope, about what they read, which is all part of a political education.

In 2006, the Power commission published its final report “Power to the People”, which supported that conclusion. The commission drew up a set of proposals and recommendations to increase political participation, including lowering the voting and candidacy age to 16, with the exception of candidacy for the House of Lords. I have no idea what the minimum age is for the House of Lords.

Alex Norris: One hundred and sixty.

Christian Matheson: I think that is a little bit much. If those arguments apply to domestic 16 and 17-year-olds, should they not also apply to overseas voters? If a review is to take place—as I have said, in 2004 the Electoral Commission called for one—is not the Bill the perfect opportunity and vehicle for that review, and is not clause 1 the perfect clause with which to undertake it?

The Power commission explained the recommendations, stating:

“Our own experience and evidence suggests that just as with the wider population, when young people are faced with a genuine opportunity to involve themselves in a meaningful process that offers them a real chance of influence, they do so with enthusiasm and with responsibility.”

There is absolutely no reason why that should apply to UK-based 16 and 17-year olds but not to 16 and 17-year-old UK citizens who live overseas. The report went on to state:

“We recognise that few people take an interest in a sphere of life or an area from which they have been deliberately excluded. Reducing the voting age to sixteen would obviously be one way of

reducing the extent of such exclusion for many thousands of young people, and of increasing the likelihood of their taking an interest, and taking part, in political and democratic debate.”

Those recommendations are increasingly relevant in a Parliament where only 2% of MPs are aged under 30, despite 16% of the UK’s population being aged 18 to 29. I confess that I do not know what percentage of the UK’s overseas citizens are aged under 30; I will try to dig that out. Young voices are consistently under-represented in our politics. In the period from 1979 to 2017, the average age of MPs at elections has been consistently around 50 years old—not that I am complaining, of course, about a candidate being 50 years old.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): Was it your big year this year?

Christian Matheson: It certainly was. Government Members may well be surprised to hear that I was indeed 50 this year—[HON. MEMBERS: “Never!”] I am afraid none of us is getting any younger.

The statistics are similar at local level, with just 2% of councillors aged 18 to 29. There is no better time to begin listening to the voices of our young people and properly representing their views. As MPs, we vote every day on issues that will have a direct impact on their generation—university fees, zero-hours contracts and the minimum wage, to name but a few—yet we refuse to allow them a say.

There is an argument, with which I have a lot of sympathy, that if somebody chooses to live abroad, it is perhaps less important that they have a say in what is going on in the United Kingdom, and that the decisions need to be taken by those who will be affected by them; but for young people, more so than for adults who might be permanently resident abroad, there is an importance in having a say, because it has an impact on their future.

I give the example of a young person who is living abroad but wants to return to education or university in the UK; the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon mentioned that she came back to school in the UK. Whereas there could be criticism of expanding the franchise overseas to everybody who wants to vote, no matter how long they have been abroad, those young people have a greater stake in having the vote, because they may choose to have a future back in the UK, separate from their parents or guardians.

What are the Government doing to ensure that this vital section of our society is being listened to? What conversations has the Minister had about the views of young voters? Perhaps now is not necessarily the time for the Minister to consider that, but I put the question out there. The Government can no longer ignore the issue.

Voices from the Votes at 16 coalition continue to demand action. The coalition is made up of more than 60 member organisations, including the British Youth Council, the Children’s Rights Alliance For England, Barnardo’s, the Electoral Reform Society, the Inter-generational Foundation, the YMCA, Christians on the Left and Oldham Youth Council. That reminds me that my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) had a private Member’s Bill

on that very subject, relating in his case to 16 and 17-year-old UK residents, as opposed to 16 and 17-year-olds overseas.

How will the Government act to involve our young voters in politics and ensure that their voices are heard, and to avoid isolating them before they have even had a chance to exercise their right to vote? Not if but when votes at 16 become a reality nationally, as they will under a Government willing to listen to the evidence and to the voices of young people, that must be accompanied by compulsory political education in schools, ideally at key stage 4.

Who could argue against our young people studying in depth—for the first time in history, I hasten to add—how this place works, who it works for and what the different parties that sit here represent? We all have school visits in our constituencies and down here in the excellent education centre, which is a real asset to Parliament. When those visits are opened up to questions, the youngsters will look around and shuffle a bit—regardless of whether they are primary or secondary school pupils—waiting for the first person to ask a question. The teacher will eventually pick someone and say, “Right, Jane or Jonny, you ask the question.” Once the ice is broken, there is always huge interest and lots of different questions, as young people demonstrate their desire for more knowledge.

2.45 pm

A proposal for such education would be problematic for youngsters who were being educated abroad in a foreign school system. I am referring to overseas voters. For younger overseas voters in a UK-focused school system, it would be possible. That includes, for example, children from forces families and children at international schools that are based on the UK system and syllabus.

A former Labour Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, pushed for compulsory citizenship education in schools, recognising that the education to grow people into responsible, well-rounded and aware citizens in our communities is best done at a young age. We want to build on that achievement by giving young people the rights and responsibilities that we know they are capable of wielding. For the first time, all young people would have the opportunity to develop the political appetite that I know they have, but too often lose once they leave school, feeling that their voice is not heard and that decisions are made for them, not with them.

We have an opportunity to tackle that head on, culminating in young people being granted the right to vote at what we now know is the right age, whether they are overseas voters or UK-based voters. I am reminded of what I think is the Jesuits’ phrase—give me the child at seven, and I shall give you the man. The interests of young people are shaped, and they are given the freedom to develop, when we promote and expand their interest and their experience, and they will then develop into fully participating citizens.

We have cited the Minister’s words. I am pleased to be able to inform her that she is not alone in supporting, on a personal basis, votes at 16 for overseas or UK-based voters. Labour has led the way on the issue with a series of private Members’ Bills. I have referred to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton and

other colleagues, but even within the Minister's own party, strong support has been expressed for lowering the voting age.

Some prominent Conservative politicians, such as the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson, and the right hon. Members for Putney (Justine Greening) and for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), have stated that they support lowering the voting age to 16. Even a former Chancellor of the Exchequer has claimed that there is widespread support among Conservative MPs for lowering the voting age. Does the support from senior Conservatives extend to overseas voting?

Writing in a 2016 pamphlet published by the Tory Reform Group, Ruth Davidson spoke of the engagement of 16 and 17-year-olds during the referendum on Scottish independence. Ms Davidson suggested:

“Those in favour of the status quo argue that while the referendum offered a clear, unambiguous choice, parliamentary elections present a more muddled, multi-layered decision which require a more mature electorate. But having watched and debated in front of 16 and 17 year olds throughout the referendum, I have found myself unable to agree. My position has changed. We deem 16 year olds adult enough to join the army, to have sex, get married, leave home and work full-time. The evidence of the referendum suggests that, clearly, they are old enough to vote too.”

I assume that the arguments Ms Davidson is making in response to her experiences in the Scottish referendum would also apply to 16 and 17-year-old overseas voters.

In July 2018, the Electoral Reform Society published a pamphlet on the case for votes at 16, backed by the Tory Reform Group. The right hon. Member for Loughborough wrote:

“We cannot now have elections in different parts of the United Kingdom where 16 and 17-year-olds can vote and then other elections where they cannot.”

To break the quotation for a moment, that puts me in mind of my dilemma on Boundary Lane, where there are two different parts of the United Kingdom on two different sides of a street. The right hon. Lady went on to state:

“But the most patronising argument, which I suspect has been recycled from the time of the Suffragettes, and which really doesn't stack up, is that 16 and 17-year-olds aren't mature enough to vote. Making such a sweeping generalisation on the basis of no evidence whatsoever should be given no air time.”

Again, those are compelling arguments for votes at 16 and they apply as much to 16 and 17-year-olds who live overseas as they do to domestically domiciled 16 and 17-year-olds.

In a report by the Electoral Reform Society entitled, “Civic Duty: The Conservative Case for Votes at 16 and 17”, the right hon. Member for Loughborough wrote a beautiful piece about the importance of votes at 16, comparing them to the extension of the franchise to women, which we are celebrating this year:

“In the same way that allowing all men and women to vote seemed a brave step forward—but is now something we wonder why it took so long to achieve”—

she is absolutely right—

“I think the time has now come to allow votes for 16 and 17-year-olds.”

Indeed, many of the arguments that we used before 1918 to try to prevent universal suffrage can be compared to the current arguments rejecting votes for 16 and 17-year-olds. The right hon. Lady pointed out that

“there is one overwhelming reason why this area has to be addressed. By accepting that 16 and 17-year-olds in Scotland could vote on their future in their 2014 referendum, the arguments for not extending the franchise further were completely undermined.”

Indeed, if 16 and 17-year-olds were able to act responsibly in the Scottish referendum, handling the votes with sensibility and maturity, why would they be unable to do that in British parliamentary elections? Those are all sound, persuasive and compelling arguments that apply equally to 16 and 17-year-olds living in the UK and to 16 and 17-year-olds domiciled around the world who would be considered overseas voters.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Christian Matheson: I give way to the hon. and gallant Gentleman, who is a good friend of mine.

Bob Stewart: The hon. Gentleman mentioned Chester racecourse, the birthplace of the Cheshire regiment in 1689. I presume that the hon. Gentleman might be in favour of 16 and 17-year-olds fighting in a war, because at the moment they cannot fight until they are 18.

The Chair: Order. That is slightly beyond the scope of the amendment.

Christian Matheson: With permission, I say to the Committee—I have said this to the House before—that the hon. Gentleman is held in extremely high regard in my constituency. He and I have enjoyed Chester racecourse together just as I hope you and I will in future, Mr Robertson. There is a preclusion on the deployment of soldiers under the age of 18, which is probably the right thing to do, but the hon. Gentleman is the expert on matters military, not I. I defer to his expert opinion and judgment in this matter.

The divide in opinion is not necessarily party political, but between those who are willing to listen to the compelling evidence for votes at 16 and the many benefits they will bring to our democracy, and those who choose to ignore them. Is it not time that Ministers, and those in the Conservative Government more widely, consider updating their stance on this issue? Is not the amendment the perfect opportunity to do so? It is not the Conservative party as a whole that is standing in the way of granting this basic democratic right to young people, but individual Ministers in the party. Such Ministers must reflect on their own views and consider the impressive and commendable statement by the right hon. Member for Loughborough, Chair of the Treasury Committee, who said:

“It is time politicians stopped wringing our hands and wondering why young people aren't politically engaged—and instead took the most obvious step to address this: by extending the franchise to our 16 and 17-year-olds.”

That lesson could surely be applied to this Bill.

Across the world, Governments recognise the need to include young people in democratic culture through voting. If we extend the franchise to overseas voters without this change, we may be in the contradictory position whereby young people cannot vote in UK elections, but their fellows in the countries and jurisdictions where they are living can vote in their home elections.

Let me list a few. In 2006, the Isle of Man lowered the voting age. Jersey and Guernsey followed in 2007. Also in 2007, Austria became the first member of the Council of Europe and the European Union, and the first of the developed world's democracies, to adopt a voting age of 16 for all municipal, state and national elections. Turnout for 16 and 17-year-olds in the 2008 Austrian federal elections was 86%. That reminds me of the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North made about energising 16 and 17-year-olds, who then vote in greater numbers. Our hope is that that will continue throughout their lives.

In 2009, the Council of Europe proposed an expansion of democracy by lowering the voting age to 16. Even Norway lowered the voting age from 18 to 16 in the 2011 local elections as a trial in 21 municipalities. Some 58% of the enfranchised 16 and 17-year-olds voted. That was somewhat lower than the overall turnout level of 63% in those municipalities, but much higher than the turnout among regular first-time voters aged 18 to 21, which was 46%. As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North described, 16 and 17-year-olds consistently vote in higher numbers. Imagine a 16 or 17-year-old UK citizen living in Norway who cannot vote in the UK, while his or her Norwegian counterparts can vote in Norway.

The Scottish independence referendum is a case in point. It was the first time the vote has been extended to 16 and 17-year-olds in the UK. Turnout among 16 and 17-year-olds was 75%, and 89% of 16 and 17-year-olds registered to vote. As hon. Members are aware, as a result of such a successful turnout in June 2015, Members of the Scottish Parliament passed the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015, which enabled 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in elections in Scotland. The experience in Scotland shows us how successful extending the franchise can be. As I said earlier, that was my moment of conversion—perhaps my moment of persuasion. I was always open to the idea, but that event sealed the deal for me and persuaded me that it was both feasible and the right thing to do.

However, we are now in the ridiculous position whereby a 16-year-old living in Scotland can vote in local elections but is denied the right to vote in UK general elections. It is time we caught up with the progress made across the Union of the United Kingdom. Even the Welsh Labour Government are looking at extending the franchise to young people for council and Assembly elections. It is vital that we have equal rights across the United Kingdom for all elections, and that means equal rights for 16 and 17-year-old overseas voters. This amendment would achieve that equality of rights.

This is not a leap of faith. I have highlighted the evidence and the precedent for change from other countries on our doorstep, but votes at 16 need to be trialled as a democratic experiment at the very least. People across the United Kingdom have changed their minds: there is now widespread support for votes at 16 after elections in which young people could vote. Public opinion in Scotland shifted after the Scottish referendum in 2014. Some 60% said that voting at 16 should be introduced, up from 44%, when ICM asked a differently worded question immediately after the 2014 European elections.

Moreover, in 2015, the Welsh Assembly conducted a consultation to determine public opinion among young people. It heard 10,000 views from people aged 11 to 25,

most of whom were in the 14 to 17 bracket. Some 53% said that the voting age should be lowered to 16 in all UK elections; 29% said, "No"; and 18% said, "Don't know". It would be interesting to see whether 16 and 17-year-olds living overseas would respond in the same way—perhaps the Government would consider a survey of overseas voters and potential 16 and 17-year-old voters.

3 pm

The Welsh Assembly also held a consultation that showed a huge number in favour of young people having the opportunity to learn about politics and the voting system: 79% said it was important for children and young people to have a political education; and 77% said that school or college was the best place to do that. It is time that we caught up with the progressive thinking of our friends across the rest of the United Kingdom.

Central to the amendment is the inclusion of votes at 16 and 17. The UK Government define an adult citizen, as shown on British passports, as someone over the age of 16. Young people have the freedom to travel independently from the age of 16 and to live and work abroad. If a 16-year-old can move abroad and live overseas, they should be capable of taking part in our democratic process by registering as an overseas voter under the Bill. Need I remind the Committee of the numerous other responsibilities placed on young people at the age of 16? However, they are still unable to vote. The hon. and gallant Member for—

Bob Stewart: Beckenham. I am surprised you don't know that.

Christian Matheson: The hon. Member for Beckenham mentioned some of this a short while ago. At 16, one is eligible to pay tax, get married or even join the Army—albeit, as my good friend said, they cannot serve in a frontline deployment. It is absurd that 16-year-olds can have all those rights and responsibilities, but are not granted the ability to engage in the democratic process and decide which party sends their older comrades into combat. The Opposition strongly believe that lowering the voting age to 16 will help energise and engage young people and ensure that their voices are heard. Once again, that applies entirely to young UK citizens living abroad as well as young UK citizens living in the UK.

The Government must act now before they undermine the integrity of the democratic process across the four nations. If we are to extend the franchise overseas, we should give that opportunity to young voters as well. This is an opportunity to see how well it would work.

At the centre of the debate is a simple point: the notion of votes for life. If the Government truly stand by that—and it is important to respect an individual's right to vote in every election—why do we not open that up to the thousands of 16 and 17-year-olds currently unable to vote? How can we justify allowing individuals who have been detached from British society for a significant time to have the immense responsibility of voting in our parliamentary elections when we still deny 16 and 17-year-olds any say in our parliamentary democracy?

[*Christian Matheson*]

The Office for National Statistics estimates that 890,000 British citizens reside in other EU countries, of whom 83,500 are under 15 and 90,000 are aged between 15 and 29. Those young people, as well as those living in the UK, need to be granted the vote. Current voting laws create barriers to democratic engagement. Votes for life should begin at 16, just as political engagement in education should start from an early age. We must encourage our young people to feel included in our democratic system. By denying them the vote, we risk deterring them from politics altogether. If we want long-term overseas voters to feel included in the UK, we also want 16 and 17-year-olds to feel involved in the democratic process of the country to which they feel they belong.

Glyn Davies: It is a pleasure to lead on a Bill with you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. We have spent some time together at sporting events; this is rather a new thing for us. I would also like to thank all Members who have agreed to serve on the Committee—it looks as if it might take some time before we reach the end. I will first make some general remarks about the Bill, then turn to the amendment.

The Chair: Order. The amendment is really to be addressed.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I will take your advice, Mr Robertson, and I will move straight to the amendment, although I did have some quite important remarks to make.

I understand that there have been calls, including today, for the voting age to be lowered, and there are different views across the House of Commons. Indeed, I have expressed my own views. I am surprised the Opposition spokesman did not dig out some of the quotes on votes at 16 that I have made in the past. However, there are no plans to lower the voting age and the House of Commons has repeatedly voted against it.

I want to stress that this is a single-purpose Bill, with the aim of removing the arbitrary 15-year rule for overseas electors. Whether one is in favour of or against votes at 16, that is not part of the Bill. If it were, it would completely dominate and change the Bill. I hope on that basis, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon will withdraw the amendment.

Chloe Smith: May I add my voice to those congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire on securing this important Bill? I fully support its principles and intention. We have laid those arguments out at several prior stages, so I am confident that we know what we are dealing with.

I would add my remarks on amendment 1. I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon for tabling it and the hon. Member for City of Chester for adding his capacious comments to the argument. As my hon. Friend has set out, there is a range of views across the House on the subject of the voting age but it is a fact that the House of Commons has repeatedly voted against. The Government also stated in their manifesto a commitment to retain the voting age at 18. That being the case, we are carrying out that promise.

I will add that the Government fully and passionately recognise the importance of engaging young people in decision making. We are working in partnership with young people in the form of numerous civil society organisations such as Bite the Ballot, the British Youth Council and Operation Black Vote, to increase engagement of young people across the country in our precious democracy.

We have also taken the opportunity to use events such as the suffrage centenary year and National Democracy Week, which we ran for the first time this year, to encourage that further. I want to impress the Committee with my strong support for the engagement of young people in general, but that is not for this Bill.

Although the hon. Member for City of Chester tried to inveigle us into believing that this would be the perfect vehicle, which I think were his words, he later conceded that now is perhaps not the time to consider these issues. Once he has sorted out whether this is or is not the perfect vehicle, I can confirm that I do not think that this is a very good vehicle at all for the argument because—

Christian Matheson: Will the Minister give way?

Chloe Smith: No, I will not. I will be brief. The hon. Gentleman has had ample time to put his arguments. The Bill is not a moment for a “democratic experiment”, to quote the hon. Gentleman further. It is also not the moment to fracture the franchise; it is a moment to extend the franchise. It is not right to make the franchise one thing in one sense and another thing in another sense.

I address that argument directly to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, who has rightly brought the argument here today in a spirit of wanting to explore the issues, and I applaud her for that. She said at the outset that she wanted this to be an exploratory debate, and I am grateful that we have had that today. The bottom line is that the Bill seeks to do something different. It is about extending the franchise geographically; it is not about the age at which the franchise starts, and I do not think that it would be a wise course to have two different age starting points for the franchise within the democracy that we hope to sustain for UK parliamentary elections. I hope that the hon. Lady will feel able to withdraw the amendment on that basis. I look forward to making progress through the Bill.

Layla Moran: I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate. I do not agree that this is not the time to discuss this matter, or that we should not vote on it. It may well have been voted down in the past, but let us face it: the shifting sands of politics are moving so fast that I do not even know what happened yesterday, let alone what will happen tomorrow. What I do know, though, on behalf of many of the young people I speak to day in, day out, as I have done for the whole of my career, is that this is absolutely the time to press such an amendment to a vote, and that is what I intend to do.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 7, Noes 8.

Division No. 1]**AYES**

Bradshaw, Mr Ben	Matheson, Christian
Elmore, Chris	Moran, Layla
Gapes, Mike	Norris, Alex
Lake, Ben	

NOES

Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Lopresti, Jack
Davies, Glyn	Skidmore, Chris
Dunne, Mr Philip	Smith, Chloe
Graham, Luke	Stewart, Bob

Question accordingly negatived.

Alex Norris: I beg to move amendment 33, in clause 1, page 2, line 7, at end insert
“and

- (c) the person satisfies at least one of the following conditions—
- (i) he or she was included in a register of parliamentary electors at some time in the past fifteen years;
 - (ii) he or she was resident in the United Kingdom at some point in the last fifteen years;
 - (iii) he or she is a member of the United Kingdom armed forces;
 - (iv) he or she is employed in the service of the Crown;
 - (v) he or she is employed by the British Council;
 - (vi) he or she is employed by a United Kingdom public authority;
 - (vii) he or she is employed by a designated humanitarian agency;
 - (viii) he or she is the spouse or civil partner of a person mentioned in sub-paragraphs (iii) to (vii) above and is residing outside the United Kingdom to be with his or her spouse or civil partner.

(1A) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State may by statutory instrument define ‘United Kingdom public authority’ and ‘designated humanitarian agency’ for the purposes of subsection (1)(c).

(1B) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (1A) is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.”

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 34, in clause 1, page 2, line 9, leave out “in the past” and insert “since 1 January 2004”.

Amendment 35, in clause 1, page 2, line 17, leave out “in the past” and insert “since 1 January 2004”.

Alex Norris: Let me say, in the spirit of what the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon said, that this is my first amendment; it is certainly my first sole amendment, so I am very much looking forward to discussing it. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire on securing a private Member’s Bill, getting it to this stage and even securing the support of the Cabinet Office in drafting it. He has done very well indeed. In a previous debate, we did not get to hear some of the broader substance, because it perhaps was not in line with the amendment, but I suggest gently that it might be in line with the amendment that I have tabled, because I am not seeking to change the meaning

of the hon. Gentleman’s Bill, and if I am missing something of the meaning of his Bill, this might be a good moment for me to understand that.

It may not be widely known that this is the second private Member’s Bill Committee of the day for me, as it is for my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester, the Minister and even the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who was so deprived of my contributions this morning that he has joined us in the audience to listen now—I for one greatly appreciate it. At the moment, we cannot make any contributions in that Bill Committee, because we are stuck in parliamentary stasis. I explain this to everyone I see now. People think that we are from a different planet—to a certain extent, they already did—because for 15 consecutive Wednesdays we have met here at 10 am, or 9.30 am for the first few sittings, but every time, we discuss only a motion to adjourn. It is very sad to see that Bill stymied in that way, but I am not the sort of person to be jealous of this Bill has got through and managed to jump the queue ahead of that one. I believe that a rising tide raises all boats and I believe in private Members’ business, so I congratulate the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire.

3.15 pm

I have a few suggestions on this group of amendments and some later ones that I think would improve the Bill; I will be interested to hear the hon. Gentleman’s contribution and those of others about whether that is considered to be the case. I sought a place on the Committee on the private Member’s Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for the same reason that I am glad to be on the Bill Committee for this Bill: I am passionate about our democracy. Democracy, it seems to me, is at its weakest point globally in at least 30, if not 70 years.

In that spirit, we should always be very sure about the changes we make to our democracy. Anybody who knows anything about the rules of political parties knows that the little amendments that are made for whatever reason at some point have a habit of creating all sorts of different conclusions later down the line. We ought to ensure that we play out the scenarios that they might present, but also ensure that the changes we make are proportionate to achieving the goal. If we can achieve the same goal by being more surgical, we should seek to do so.

In that spirit, I turn to amendment 33, which I hope achieves the same goals that the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire seeks, but in a slightly tighter way. As other hon. Members will have done, I have listened to previous stages of this Bill, including yesterday’s money resolution debate. We heard lots of legitimate stories from individuals about the reasons why someone, often in the most profound service of this nation, might be away from the country and lose the basic right to vote, which of course seems unfair. In my amendment I seek to pick all that up, so that that would not be the case.

Sub-paragraphs (i) and (ii) speak for themselves, but sub-paragraph (iii), exempting the UK armed forces from the 15 years so that they have that vote for life, would seem to make perfect sense. In the same spirit, we should not wish those who serve our country in the service of the Crown as civil servants—some 1% of our civil service are permanently based abroad—to miss

their vote, nor those working for the British Council, with the services they perform for our nation and our standing in the world. Critically, sub-paragraphs (vi) and (vii) cover UK public authorities and designated humanitarian agencies.

We heard stories about people working for charities in other parts of the world, embodying the very best of British values, but falling foul of this issue. We should not want that to happen, and that is why I have covered it in this amendment. We have a lot of faith in ensuring that our Ministers get things right, so I also covered giving Ministers scope to define those terms so that things are not missed, because if we did an exhaustive list in this regard we would probably not cover it all this afternoon.

What I have sought to do with this amendment is to cover the idea that someone might be in the service of our country but miss out on the vote in a way that none of us, I think, would deem legitimate, while maintaining the basic 15 years, as a slightly narrower and tighter way of achieving what I think the hon. Gentleman is trying to achieve—although, as I say, we have not quite heard those prefacing arguments, so I may well be wrong and may well be corrected on that. That is with regard to amendment 33.

I have a strong practical attachment to amendments 34 and 35. I, like many in Parliament, came here from a career in local government—I am not sure, looking around this room, whether anyone here did. As all parliamentarians do, we had a role in elections, seeing electoral registration officers and those who count the votes and staff the polling stations; but those who have served on their council for a while also know that those people do not come out of a cupboard. They are the same people who work in leisure services, are chief executives or work in social work in the councils, but they are wearing a different hat. It is a bit like an international break in football: Raheem Sterling has been wearing his Manchester City shirt, but this week he is wearing his England shirt. Around elections, it feels very much like that.

One thing we do know is that, while we might have a day-to-day working relationship with someone, around the election period we must be very careful to recognise their distinct role. After an election, we might talk about how it went. Polling day is a long day, because we do 15-hour stints, but so do they. We go to a count, but so do they. It is increasingly clear that these people are under pressure to deliver the excellent free and fair elections—the beauty of British democracy. They have to work really hard and resources are tight.

In amendments 34 and 35, I have sought to give those people time to bed that in. That means that the 15-year rule would be retained from 1 January, but would slowly die: it would become a 16-year-rule, then a 17-year-rule, and so on. It is practically very difficult, and to a certain extent undesirable, to ask our electoral registration individuals to reach back. The 15-year rule was previously the 20-year rule until 2002, so 16 years ago. It would be very difficult to ask our registration officers, who are hard-pressed and doing the best they can, to reach back possibly 30, 40 or 50 years, to verify that the individual who is making a votes for life application is doing so legitimately. That is too much, and slightly unfair of us to ask.

I am not advocating on their behalf without basis; in its reports of 2016 and 2017, the Association of Electoral Administrators said that staffing the 15-year rule is very difficult and resource-intensive, so to ask them to do more would be a real challenge.

Mike Gapes: Could there not be some mechanism whereby dates of birth and birth certificates were looked at, to see where the child was born or where the parents were resident at the time of the birth? Would not that data be of assistance?

Alex Norris: Anyone who has ever been interested in genealogy knows there are a broad range of ways to try to establish where people were at certain points in time. The issue is that with every level of extra difficulty, the whole system gets much harder. Under the current rule, the association says it takes two hours to legitimately verify one voter. Every layer added on top of that will only make that longer. There comes a point at which we are asking too much.

Instead, the amendment would stand the 15-year rule as it does today, so that those people would register as they normally do. That would take two hours each time, but we are managing to do that now, so presumably we can be confident that with the right resources we can continue to do so. Then, every year, that starting register of anyone who joins would carry on. Those grandfather rights, as the lawyers call them, would grow across the years and we would get to what the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire seeks, but in a way that would be practically deliverable by our electoral administrators, who are pressed.

Layla Moran: How many people does the hon. Gentleman think that would exclude? We are talking about large numbers of people who have been here for far more than 15 years. Does not the amendment stop their right to vote completely?

Alex Norris: I cannot find the numbers; perhaps the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire may help when he responds. I will be clear because I make no attempt at subterfuge: the amendment would mean that the Bill would not enhance the position of people not currently eligible to vote. Trying to get to that position is very difficult to the point of being an incredible undue burden.

Mike Gapes: I declare an interest—at least currently, until I am purged by Momentum—as the honorary president of Labour International. Members of Labour International, who are active members of the Labour party, have been living in Brussels or France—I was with one in Madrid last week. They have been living outside this country for more than 15 years—in some cases 17, 18, 20 or 22 years—and had the right to vote. In those cases, surely that information would be available already, so I cannot see why they would not be permitted to have a vote, even though they left the UK some 22 or 25 years ago.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's contribution. Yesterday, we heard from the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) about an individual just like that, who was of strong Labour stock, just like us, who would not be included. I understand that, but I

have to go back to the point that although they may have had a registration in the past, verifying that is exceptionally difficult for the registration officer.

My hon. Friend mentioned using other data, such as birth data, but every layer that is added to it adds exceptional complications. We might sit around and say what a good idea that is, but in practice it would be really difficult and would put an onerous burden on already hard-pressed registration officers. For that reason, my amendment meets in the middle. Perhaps it is imperfect, but it achieves the long-term aims of the Bill in a practical way.

Christian Matheson: I do not intend to speak at length on these three amendments. Amendments 34 and 35, which my hon. Friend was just talking about, talk about the practical difficulties in the administration of overseas electors. My office sought advice from one of the electoral registration officers in my region who is known to me. They talked about the difficulties of finding information to verify the individual.

Council tax records will go back only five or six years, and they do not always keep historic electoral registers, so if somebody had moved away 20 or more years ago, the manager in the electoral registration office would not know how to start going about finding their information. The view of the electoral registration officer who my office spoke to was that they would simply have to start taking people at face value when they applied to be an international voter, because there would be no real way to tell if somebody was eligible or not, and they do not have the resources or the time to do that research.

The current process for an overseas registered voter is complex. It takes ages to verify somebody because the office has to contact the local archivist. Many offices are now paperless. There used to be 15 years' worth of voting registration documents in this office in my region, but now they do not have any storage space for the voting records, so they have to call an archivist to get the information they need about whether the person was on the register, which can take many days.

They have also found issues with boundary changes, which cause difficulties in figuring out someone's ward and polling district. That is important because the registers are based on polling districts, but they might disappear as the wards are rearranged, which makes it harder to track down where the individual polling district is.

Layla Moran: I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to my amendment about overseas constituencies. Many of those issues are solved by that amendment. Would he be willing to support that as well?

Christian Matheson: I confess that my focus has been on the earlier parts of the Bill and I have not had a chance to check that yet. Perhaps the hon. Lady and I can discuss that in due course.

If an individual had lived abroad for 10 years, there could have been two boundary reviews since they had moved, so their previous residence could have been transferred to a new polling district. Even if they had only lived in one house, it could now be in a new polling district. My contact, the electoral registration officer who my office spoke to, felt that that is all manageable

when someone has been abroad for only about five years, but if it is longer than that, there will have been more boundary reviews, so it becomes increasingly difficult.

If I may make a more political point that is nevertheless entirely relevant, cuts to local authorities mean that electoral registration officers have been under huge pressure in the last few years. My local council, Cheshire West and Chester Council, has had £57 million of cuts in four years. It is focusing entirely on putting what money it has left in the most critical areas, such as children's services and looking after vulnerable adults, but plenty of local authorities simply do not have the resources to manage that in the austere times still with us, whether austerity has ended or not.

3.30 pm

Amendments 34 and 35, which were tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North, would provide a practical solution to a difficult problem. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon talked about fundamentally changing the nature of the Bill, but the amendments would allow the extension of the franchise to overseas voters over time, irrespective of the 15-year rule, but make it more manageable. More voters would become eligible each year, rather than a huge number coming forward and applying at once.

I will float a scenario: the Bill passes and then there is another general election outwith the normal schedule—whether hon. Members want one is a different matter. The Prime Minister might find herself in a position where she seeks a general election and there is then a huge influx of overseas voters now able to register but for whom verification of their registration is very much more difficult and, as a result, electoral registration officers fail to cope. Of course, at the same time they would have to be registering voters domiciled in constituencies in the UK. At the previous election, we saw examples of voters who had applied perfectly in time but whose registration had not gone through. I am concerned that, unwittingly, we may get into a situation where that might happen again. The suggestions from my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North appear to be a sensible solution.

The other thing to say—I am checking the time to ensure that the Minister and Member in charge have a chance to respond—is that the Government tell us that they are extremely concerned about electoral fraud. Indeed, as part of a trial in certain areas, they have introduced an obligation for voters to show a form of identification before they vote. The problem with all this complication is that it potentially makes fraud easier to perpetrate and to get away with, particularly if, as my contact in the electoral registration business says, they would simply have to accept applications on good faith because they do not have the resources to combat it. If the Minister is really serious about cutting down electoral fraud, she must bear that in mind.

On the debilitating effects of local government cuts, by 2020 local authorities will have faced a reduction in core funding from the Government of nearly £16 billion since 2010, which is 60p out of every pound the Government have provided to spend on local services. Next year, 168 councils will receive no more core central Government funding at all, and the Local Government Association says that a further £1.3 billion will be cut in 2019-20.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is the inadequacy and underfunding of our electoral system really a reason to disenfranchise thousands of UK nationals who live abroad of the right to vote? Other countries that are poorer than us seem to manage this perfectly well and reasonably. Why should it be beyond our wit to do it?

Christian Matheson: There are already problems within the administration of electoral registration. We saw it at the 2017 election and we hear it now from electoral registration officers. Further cuts will put further pressure on those officers, and that will undermine their ability to manage the process efficiently. It is sadly a fact of life that, if local authorities are being asked to do more with less, they are more likely to spend it on areas other than electoral registration.

The Bill as it stands would demand a hugely complex administrative task of our electoral registration officers. They do not always have the necessary training or resources to be responsible for carrying out the in-depth, time-consuming research that is necessary to register overseas voters who are not present on any voter register. Local electoral officers would be expected to do extensive research into people's past history and residency, for which they are not prepared. It would open electoral registration up to between 4.7 million and 5.5 million new overseas voters. Not all of them would choose to register, of course, but even if only a small proportion did, that would be fairly overwhelming for the already overstretched electoral registration officers.

Let us imagine, for a moment, the task of registering an overseas voter, who last resided in the UK 40 years ago. That is along the lines of the example given by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South about long-term absentees from the UK. They would have to provide to the electoral registration officer their name, date of birth, age and the last address for the last day on which they were resident in the UK. The electoral registration officer must then research and find the last residence of the applicant, without using the electoral register, if they have been away for that long. They would have to research whether the house still existed, whether the address was still the same, and which polling district, ward and constituency the house used to be in, taking into account all the boundary reviews.

That detailed information about the historical residence is difficult to find. I seriously doubt if electoral registration officers will be able to carry out that sort of research, even if it was not on a mass scale and there were only a few tens of applications every year. Will the Minister tell us whether she has had any conversations with local electoral administrators or the Association of Electoral Administrators to prepare them for this massive change and to warn them what might be coming down the road?

I am keen to wrap up shortly so that the Minister and the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire can respond. Amendment 33 seeks to extend and widen the franchise in the way the Minister spoke about in the debate on amendment 1. It does so by striking a balance between throwing the doors open completely to people who might not have lived here for many years and allowing those people who are perhaps in the service of the United Kingdom or one of its agencies.

The hon. Member for Beckenham mentioned members of the armed forces—one of the bodies included in the amendment. It puts me in mind of the 1945 general

election, that landmark in British history and in the history of my party. The results of the election were delayed for several weeks for all the servicemen who were serving abroad and had to have their votes brought in. I had the privilege this year to visit our British forces in Estonia, Gibraltar and Cyprus. There clearly are British servicemen and women serving abroad.

Those service deployments are normally for only two or three years; some can be a little bit longer. There are, of course, also civilian deployed staff who may stay on deployment for far longer. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North's amendments make practical proposals that will help to roll out the extension of the franchise to overseas voters in a more measured and controlled fashion. I commend him for bringing them to the Committee.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am very grateful, Mr Robertson, for your allowing me to speak. I do not in any way want to prolong the Committee, but I want to appeal to the hon. Member for Nottingham North by using one specific example of why his amendment should not be pressed, and I hope he will consider it seriously.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) yesterday instanced the personality of Mr Harry Shindler. Mr Shindler is 97 years old. He is bedridden. He is a war veteran of distinction: he served at Anzio. He came back to this country after the war. He married an Italian wife and went back to live in Italy, and he lost his vote in 1997. Under the hon. Member for Nottingham North's amendment 34, the grandfather rights procedure, Harry Shindler would lose his vote. He said this last night, and members of the Committee might like to consider this:

"As the longest-serving member, and servant for many years, of the Labour Party, I am ashamed that Labour people...tried to stop this Bill yesterday. The Overseas Electors Bill is an issue of principle and not political. I went to war to give the people of Europe freedom and I and all British citizens should have our democratic right to vote. It is an elementary right and no Member of Parliament should deny any fellow citizen this right. It is disgraceful to try to block other British citizens like me their right to vote. I appeal to this Committee to do that which is just".

He calls on us to right this wrong and to strengthen our "great democracy".

I hope that the hon. Member for Nottingham North will consider the many people like Harry who have taken a great interest in this country, who fought for this country, but who have lost their right to vote. Surely, if we live in a great democracy—one of the oldest democracies in the world—we should consider people like Harry, and carefully consider giving them that right to vote. I hope that right hon. and hon. Opposition Members will not hold this Bill up.

Glyn Davies: I very much associate myself with the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds. He put that very well; I too know Harry Shindler.

The Bill will only enfranchise those who can prove a real and discernible connection to a UK address via a previous registration or residence. At its core is the need to scrap the 15-year rule for overseas voters and rightly ensure that this group can vote for life.

On amendment 33, I too recognise the valid contribution of individuals employed, for example, as Crown servants in the British Council or military personnel overseas.

I am pleased that there are existing provisions in the Representation of the People Act 1983 to ensure that those categories of electors are not disenfranchised by the current 15-year rule. The Bill will mean that no other British citizen who was previously resident or registered in the UK will be blocked from voting in this country. That will apply equally to those who were employed overseas by a UK public authority or employed by a designated humanitarian agency. I hope, on that basis, that the hon. Member for Nottingham North will feel able to withdraw amendment 33.

Chloe Smith: This is a very interesting amendment. My understanding of what the hon. Member for Nottingham North is trying to do developed slightly as he made his comments, and I am grateful for the way in which he explained what his amendments seek to do. I will take them in two halves and respond to some points in relation to amendment 33 before coming on to the other two amendments.

On amendment 33, I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman recognises the challenge of the residency test. At the moment, there is no way for a person to join the register if they had been resident in the UK, as opposed to previously registered. Those are the two different concepts that we are dealing with, and I think the hon. Gentleman recognises that in what he is trying to do with amendment 33. I welcome that, because the residency issue aims to put right an injustice that, for example, could apply to the children of British citizens who moved abroad. I believe that the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon might have been such an example. Having left the UK at such a young age, she could not possibly have been registered in this country, but of course, she had been resident here.

Layla Moran: I was resident here, but my brothers and sisters were not. They were born after me, and were born abroad. Are they less British than I?

Chloe Smith: There we go. It is very helpful to have such personal experience of the issues raised in the Bill. However, I feel duty bound to say that the Bill might not help in the instance of the hon. Lady's brothers and sisters, although it would help in her own instance.

3.45 pm

The hon. Member for Nottingham North still holds firm to the principle of having a 15-year limit in amendment 33. I do not agree with that, and neither do the Government. We think that it is right to lift that 15-year limit and say that it should be open-ended, which is the central premise of the Bill.

Secondly, I understand that in the amendment the hon. Gentleman seeks to extend the definition of the category that we think of as "Crown servant" by a few types of person or worker. Like him, I welcome those people's service and I welcome what they do for our country, but it is my contention that the unamended Bill does that better by allowing everybody to come in under the lifting of the 15-year limit. That objective is met first and foremost by the unamended Bill.

To conclude on amendment 33, let us stick with the principle that is set out in the Bill, which is that the lifting of the 15-year rule performs those two functions in a better way than the hon. Gentleman's amendment. I hope he welcomes that consideration of his argument.

On the other two amendments, my understanding has come on since the hon. Gentleman got to his feet, so he may still wish to correct me if I get this wrong. As I understand it, he sees his amendments as providing a kind of rolling entry to the UK franchise by sticking a fixed date in the legislation and then having a year-by-year admittance, as he described it. I disagree with that on principle, and I will try to set out why. Again, I hope that he will welcome this engagement with his arguments and that it is helpful to the Committee.

Gradual admittance to the club of democracy is a bad idea in principle. We are considering the principle of enfranchising people because they are British overseas, however long they have been overseas, so it would be a case of justice delayed being justice denied to say that they should be admitted gradually to the club. That is the first point.

We are of the view that a cut-off of any kind, whether it is rolling or fixed, is arbitrary. To say to somebody that they would have qualified on new year's eve but they do not qualify on 1 January of whatever year is still the wrong thing to do. Instead, it is right to lift that cap entirely and say, "You are British. You have your part in the UK voting system." I do not think that in this country we would say to any other category of British voter, "You may come in only one at a time if you are of that category."

Mike Gapes: When these issues were first discussed many years ago, there was a five-year deadline, which became 20 years and then 15 years. In those days, we did not have the internet and Skype, and we did not have the ongoing communication and connection between people living abroad and this country. We also clearly had far fewer people who travelled to work in other countries for several years and who kept their main home there but came back from time to time, whether to visit families or not. Does the Minister agree that the arbitrary definition to which she has referred relates to a different context from the world we live in now?

Chloe Smith: That is correct. The premise of the Bill is that the world has grown smaller in the way that the hon. Gentleman describes and that people are, or can if they wish to be, much more in touch with their home country. The point is that we are seeking to enfranchise those people who wish to be. We are throwing open that door, rather than opening it an inch at a time.

I will pick up on the reference to Mr Shindler, whom several hon. Members present know. I say this with the greatest respect, and I do not wish to be mawkish, but he is very elderly. Alas, if very elderly people were put in the position of being allowed in one year at a time, I do not think that would necessarily bode well for someone his age being able to get the justice that many of us feel that he and others deserve. I hope that that suffices as a thought towards amendments 34 and 35.

Let me come on to two other very important points that have been raised: the burdens that might be placed on registration officers, and how the Bill helps. Those points are absolutely relevant to this section of the debate. The point has been bandied about that registration officers should fear the Bill because it places new burdens on them, but that need not be the case. I want to send out a message to reassure members of the Committee

[Chloe Smith]

and, of course, the registration community—the community of EROs, who work so incredibly hard to run our registration systems and then, with their colleagues, run our elections. New burdens that arise from this Bill will be funded by central Government. That is clear in the impact assessment; it has been made clear by my Department; and I make it clear again here today. The broader arguments made by the hon. Member for City of Chester about local government funding pressures are not relevant. New burdens from this Bill will be funded. I am very happy to reiterate that. It is there in the impact assessment and here in our discussion today.

There is a precursor to that—I can give a record of credit to it—which is that we did the same for the individual electoral registration reform. We have been fully funding electoral registration officers for the additional burdens brought by that reform. Indeed, we then went on to make further reforms to ease those pressures, because that is, of course, what we all want. We are not in the business of asking people to do more work for fun. We are in the business of asking people to do that work so that we have a flourishing democracy in which individuals' voices count and British citizens are properly enfranchised and involved. Again, that is the fundamental point of this Bill.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: To put this issue to bed, could the Minister say a little more? She is right about the financial implications of the Bill. The explanatory notes state clearly:

“The Government plans to provide funding for electoral registration officers' costs, in accordance with the new burdens doctrine.”

Could the Minister give the Committee a little more information on how that would work? For example, would an ERO who had one application to register under the procedure get a different amount from an ERO who had 100 applications? How will the funding work?

Chloe Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for the opportunity to add further clarity. Essentially, the answer remains simple: all new burdens that arise from this Bill will be funded. I can also reassure the Committee that I am in close touch with the Association of Electoral Administrators, the Electoral Commission, of course, and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives. They are all part of the wider community of registration officers and their colleagues in the relevant parts of local government who do such hard and important work for our society and whom we as a Government seek to support every step of the way.

On future reform, the UK Government, in partnership with the Governments of Scotland and Wales, are seeking to alleviate some of the pressures that relate to the canvass process in our electoral systems. That is another good modernisation opportunity and it will also relieve the pressures that registration officers can find themselves under from some of the aged processes in our electoral law for registering people. I am absolutely in the business of supporting our registration officers, finding ways to help them in their work and, specifically in the case of this Bill, ensuring that any new burdens are met.

Let me turn to some of the smaller changes proposed in the Bill. They are smaller compared with the big point of principle, but of course they are not small at all

to an administrator whose job it is to operate the system. I can confirm that we will reduce the amount of information that an elector needs to supply in a renewal of registration. We are going to give EROs a more streamlined system for processing those renewals and recommend email as a method of communication between the ERO and the elector. There are a number of other ways in which we can help streamline those processes so that the Bill can achieve its really important goal—that big principle—while also creating a system that EROs will find operable and easy to play their part in as we extend the franchise to where it should be extended.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to colleagues on both sides of the Committee for contributing to an interesting discussion. We have probably set a good shape for the rest of our consideration of the Bill. We have had a discussion about the pragmatic versus the purist. I am not a daft lad—I hope Members have noticed that—so I can read a room, and I get a clear sense that we want a pure and full implementation. I will make my remarks with that in mind.

I was excited to hear the Minister say that there is no desire for gradual or partial admittance or delay, and that if someone is turned away from a polling station and does not come back, that constitutes a denial. I will hold her to that in future sittings and beyond. I was glad to hear the positive messages about resourcing, but we need to understand that things start from the context of deficit: University of East Anglia research from 2016 says that 43% of EROs have suffered real-terms cuts, and in the EU referendum only one quarter of the 254 local authority electoral authorities felt sufficiently resourced to do their jobs. When those new resources are introduced, it must be understood that the existing resources are not sufficient. We have clearly heard today the Minister's desire to provide resources to electoral registration officers, and I am excited about that.

I hope there will be clear support for the 33 recommendations in the association's report, which it produced after the 2017 general election, on how to improve elections. If they receive that support, EROs will be able to do their jobs properly and that would enrich all elections. In that spirit, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Christian Matheson: I beg to move amendment 2, in clause 1, page 2, line 39, at end insert

“‘resident’ must be defined in regulations made by the Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State”.

The amendment considers the definition of “resident” in the Bill. The ambiguity surrounding the notion of residency is critical to the future integrity of our franchise. There needs to be a comprehensive and lengthy discussion about the definition of residency before the Government can even consider enfranchising millions of overseas electors who would be eligible under the new provisions. A clear definition of residency is central to the Bill, and a multiplicity of complex and ambiguous cases that remain within the definition must be resolved before any progress is made.

There is no clear definition of electoral residence. Currently, residence is understood to mean a considerable degree of permanence. That means that a person with two homes who spends the same amount of time in

each can legally register at both addresses. I fall into that category as a Member of Parliament with a flat in London and my primary home in Chester. I think a lot of hon. Members will be in a similar position.

4 pm

The Law Commission's 2016 interim report recommended that the law on electoral residence, including factors to be considered by electoral registration officers, and the law on special category electors should be restated clearly and simply in primary legislation. Nearly two years later, the Government have yet to respond to that report.

To reduce vulnerability to fraudulent behaviour—I mentioned this in relation to an earlier amendment—we need to establish a clearer definition of residency. The concept of residency is at the centre of the Bill, which seeks to enfranchise millions of British overseas electors based solely on an electoral connection to a past residence. Therefore, what it means to be resident is critical to the verification of overseas voters under these proposed provisions.

The definition of residence, however, remains complex and vague. Entitlement to be registered to vote turns upon residing within the electoral area in question. Residence connects a person to a geographical area that has democratic representation; it provides a person with an electoral connection. Besides noting that that is the purpose of residence, defining residence is difficult and the law on residence is complex. For example, there are questions about untypical cases of residency, such as individuals living in mobile homes or on boats, or individuals who are couch surfing. Again, it tends to be younger people and those at the lower end of the economic scale, including those who have fallen on hard times and perhaps those who fall into more difficult categories, who are being excluded or precluded from voter registration. Those cases can be difficult to capture under a universal understanding of residency.

Similarly, cases in which individuals are absent from home for a period of work, or for some other reason, can also pose problems. Some people have more than one residence and the law says nothing to assist registration officers in determining whether they are entitled to be registered in respect of a second residence. If a person spends equal amounts of time in each residence, it is unclear where they would be registered.

There is a further special category of electors, namely those who are categorised by the concept of notional residence. Notional residence ties an elector to a place, even if he or she may not actually reside there. This category includes merchant seamen, mental health patients, remand prisoners, service voters—we have talked about them previously—as well as overseas electors and homeless persons. Various legal devices are used to establish notional residence, notably a declaration of a local connection.

The Law Commission's 2016 interim report proposed the provisional view that one legal structure should govern all special category electors. Currently, the detail of the law governing this special category is complex. In summary, section 5 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 lays down factors that tend to establish residence, without seeking to define it. Therefore, there is no single definition of residency, only a discussion and explanation of the factors that establish it.

The Law Commission summarises the current approach to residency by stating:

“Case law has expanded on statute to establish that residence connotes a considerable degree of permanence, and has also emphasised that the standard of accommodation should not determine residence. Our consultation paper proposed that the law be restated simply and clearly, setting out the factors registration officers should consider to make consistent residence decisions...Of the 35 consultees who addressed this proposal specifically, 34 agreed with it. There was a strong consensus among stakeholders that the law on registration was unduly complex.”

Clearly the experts agree that more clarity is required before the Bill can proceed.

Indeed, there is widespread agreement that such change is needed. The Scottish Assessors Association, which represents registration officers in Scotland, summed up a corpus of views among administrators that residence defied simple definition, stating:

“The current law is outmoded and contradictory”,
and that

“classifications such as ‘home’, ‘second home’, ‘work’ and ‘student’...are no longer reliable in terms of definition.”

The SAA concluded that it

“supports a clear and simple restatement of the law that will reflect modern life and promote consistency and fairness in terms of access to the democratic process”.

The Labour party was more equivocal in our response, emphasising the difficulty in defining residence and proposing a solution:

“The purpose here must be to allow persons to easily register for any address for which they qualify, whilst preventing fraudulent registrations. For registration purposes it may be that people have to describe their residency or attachment to an area in explicit terms which could be challenged at a court or other hearing.”

Any restatement of the law will indeed require caution. We did not detect disagreement in the consultation response, or at the events we attended, with our summation of the current law. There is universal agreement that the provisions of the 1983 Act are almost impenetrable. We therefore recommend proceeding, assuredly but cautiously, to restate the current law in primary legislation.

I will raise a few of the multiplicity of complications we face as a result of the lack of clarity surrounding the definition of residency. A person's entitlement to be registered to vote turns on their being resident within the electoral area in question. Therefore, residency connects a person to a geographical area of democratic connection. When used in the context of electoral residence, the concept of residence can be stretched to cover a variety of circumstances, provided that a democratic connection to a geographical area is maintained.

There are a number of diverse scenarios in which we can debate whether somebody is resident for the purposes of electoral registration. Clearly, not all cases follow the most straightforward and most common format in which a person is settled at premises at a given address that is publicly recognised as such. This central example of residence covers most of the UK's population. The house has a postcode, street name and house number and so on. Residents at this house spend the majority of their time at this address.

Glyn Davies: I beg to move, That the debate be now adjourned.

The Chair: I am afraid that that motion can be agreed only at the end of a speech.

Christian Matheson: In that case, I will wind up fairly quickly.

There remains a real sense of confusion. The Law Commission and others agree that the concept of residence lacks clarity and a review is long overdue. As so many of the Bill's proposals in relation to overseas electors depend on being able to establish a connection to a constituency, now is the necessary time to establish residence. UK electoral law does not give a definition of residence; it

provides indicators for registration officers to come to their own view, which relate to specific situations, such as temporary absences due to work or study.

There needs to be a comprehensive and lengthy discussion about the definition of residency before the Government can even consider enfranchising the millions of overseas electors who would be eligible under the new provisions.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(*Glyn Davies.*)

4.8 pm

Adjourned till Wednesday 24 October at Two o'clock.