

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

OVERSEAS ELECTORS BILL

Fourth Sitting

Wednesday 14 November 2018

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New clauses considered.
SCHEDULES 1 AND 2 agreed to.
Bill to be reported, without amendment.

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,

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chairs: † MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON, SIOBHAIN McDONAGH

Bradshaw, Mr Ben (*Exeter*) (Lab)

† Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey (*The Cotswolds*) (Con)

† Davies, Glyn (*Montgomeryshire*) (Con)

† Dunne, Mr Philip (*Ludlow*) (Con)

† Elmore, Chris (*Ogmore*) (Lab)

Gapes, Mike (*Ilford South*) (Lab/Co-op)

† Graham, Luke (*Ochil and South Perthshire*) (Con)

† Lake, Ben (*Ceredigion*) (PC)

† Lopresti, Jack (*Filton and Bradley Stoke*) (Con)

† Matheson, Christian (*City of Chester*) (Lab)

Moran, Layla (*Oxford West and Abingdon*) (LD)

† Norris, Alex (*Nottingham North*) (Lab/Co-op)

† Skidmore, Chris (*Kingswood*) (Con)

† Smith, Chloe (*Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office*)

† Snell, Gareth (*Stoke-on-Trent Central*) (Lab/Co-op)

† Stewart, Bob (*Beckenham*) (Con)

Adam Mellows-Facer, *Committee Clerk*

† **attended the Committee**

Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 14 November 2018

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

Overseas Electors Bill

New Clause 3

PROMPT TO REGISTER AS AN OVERSEAS ELECTOR

“(1) If the registration officer receives information that leads him or her to believe that a registered elector has moved, or is going to move, outside the United Kingdom, the registration officer shall contact that elector to prompt him or her to register as an overseas elector.

(2) The Electoral Commission may issue guidance for contact under subsection (1).”—(*Christian Matheson.*)

Brought up, read the First time, and Question proposed (31 October), That the clause be read a Second time.

2 pm

Question again proposed.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Robertson. I shall miss our weekly meetings when they come to an end. I have little to say about the proposed new clause. The Bill is quite clearly defined and I do not believe that the new clause is necessary. We do not want to put in complications that make it more difficult for the electoral community and electoral registration officers. I hope, in the spirit of having a Bill that will help overseas electors to be able to vote, that the Opposition withdraw the new clause.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): Thank you for the chance, once again, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I will be brief. Can we believe that it was Halloween when we last gathered? Let us hope this is a more auspicious afternoon.

I will just repeat some themes that I raised in response to a previous group, particularly amendment 37, namely that the Government do recognise the time constraints on administrators when dealing with those last-minute applications to register to vote. That is true domestically, but it is true for overseas voters in particular. As I have said, we have already amended the timetable for parliamentary elections to maximise the time available. I certainly agree that overseas voters should be encouraged to register as early as possible, and I certainly hope that bringing in online renewals, which the Bill does, will assist in that.

Perhaps the message will go out from this Bill Committee and voters will in due course take inspiration and get ready to register to vote. Crucially, major organisations such as the Electoral Commission will, as part of their duties, ensure that people know what they have to do to register. Such organisations run those campaigns before elections to ensure that people are aware of when and how to register to vote.

I endorse the position of my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire. I do not think the proposed new clause is necessary. It raises important themes, but I think they can be considered in other ways.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is indeed a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I express gratitude to the Member in charge and the Minister for their responses. It is not our intention to push the new clause to a vote. I therefore beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 7

REPORT ON THE REPRESENTATION OF OVERSEAS ELECTORS

“(1) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State shall, within 12 months of this section coming into force, lay before Parliament a report on the representation of overseas electors.

(2) That report shall include—

- (a) consideration of how well overseas electors are represented by their MPs and any related consequences of the provisions of this Act,
- (b) an assessment of any additional demands that may be placed on MPs and their resources as a consequence of the provisions of this Act,
- (c) any plans the Government has to monitor the representation of overseas electors, and
- (d) an assessment of alternative models of representation of overseas electors, including the creation of overseas constituencies.”—(*Christian Matheson.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Christian Matheson: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

New clause 7 is about the nature of the representation of overseas voters. I understand what the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire has said about this being a simple Bill, but this proposal goes to the heart of some of our more serious concerns. Given the issues about the definitions of residence and local connection, there is a lack of clarity about where new overseas voters will register.

The proposed new clause requests a detailed report on the representation of overseas voters, including how they might be “represented by their MPs” and

“any additional demands that may be placed on MPs and their resources as a consequence of the provisions of this Act”.

The current guidance provided to MPs regarding constituency correspondence with expatriates is vague at best, perhaps because there are not many expatriate constituents at the moment. In its unamended form, the Bill does not define the responsibilities of Members of Parliament towards their overseas voters. We assume that the current precedents and position will be maintained.

The code of conduct for Members of Parliament simply states that Members have “a special duty to their constituents.”

I am pretty sure that each and every one of us holds dear that individual link between ourselves and our constituents, with one Member representing a single constituency. Of course, conventions to preserve that special relationship—one with which other Members do not interfere—have developed over time. However, those precedents are not the subject of formal parliamentary rules, and it is therefore important that the Bill considers how individual Members can best represent the views of overseas voters registered in their constituency.

Given the Minister's insistence, which I respect, on treating overseas voters with the same importance as UK-based, domestic voters, there needs to be a detailed discussion about how best to achieve democratic representation before we open the floodgates, potentially to millions of new voters. What assessment have the Government made of the representation of overseas voters by Members of this House? This issue is particularly significant as the Government are continuing with their plans to reduce the number of Members by 50, while at the same time increasing the number of voters by several hundred thousand or more. How would such an exponential increase in the number of overseas voters affect the resources given to individual Members of Parliament? I also ask the Minister whether the Government have any plans to monitor the representation of overseas voters by Members to ensure that their voices have equal value to the voices of domestic constituents, which is an aim that I respect.

The Minister has talked about extra resources for electoral registration officers. Have the Government considered whether any extra resources may be required to handle the growth in the number of overseas voters swelling the size of our constituencies, and will any representations be made to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority on that point? Have the Government considered whether, as a consequence of the Bill, they need to clarify if hon. Members are required to act fairly and equally in representing domestic and overseas constituents?

This probing amendment is designed to encourage consideration of the effect that the growth in the franchise will have on how we in this House operate, and whether sufficient resources are available. It is not my intention to delay the Committee too much this afternoon, but I would be grateful to hear other Members' views.

Glyn Davies: I understand what has led the hon. Member for City of Chester to table the proposed new clause. I have a considerable understanding of why the Opposition have tabled many of their amendments throughout our consideration of the Bill. I have resisted a lot of those amendments because they have sought to extend the Bill into areas that I did not want it extended to. The purpose of the Bill is to extend the franchise, and I want to stick to that. That is my position on this new clause as well. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not press it to a vote, because we need to stick to the purpose of the Bill.

Chloe Smith: I have two arguments on the treatment of new clause 7. First, I have a preliminary argument, if Members will bear with me. My comments in response to previous amendments that would have required reports on various matters and delayed the legislation until their publication stand true for new clause 7. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire, whose arguments I endorse, I am sceptical about whether the proposed new clause would add value to the Bill.

I have two additional comments about the substance of the new clause. First, it asks for an assessment of the demands placed on MPs and of their performance in representing their constituents. That is not a matter for the Government in respect of constituents at home or overseas, and I do not accept that it should be. It is not for the Government to monitor or report on MPs' performance of their duties. This is a clear case of the

difference between the Executive and the legislature, and it is important that that difference stands. The code of conduct for Members of Parliament describes their responsibilities as Members of the House, and I think that is how this is best done. The application of the code is a matter for the House of Commons, and particularly for the Committee on Standards and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am slightly concerned, but I hope that the Minister will be able to answer my question. In a general election, our electoral communications are sent out by the Post Office. Am I right to assume that they will be sent to all overseas voters? Will the Post Office and the Government pay for every single overseas voter on the electoral roll to receive an electoral communication from all parties campaigning in the general election?

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend will have to forgive me, because I do not have any detail to hand about how the Bill will change that situation. However, I would be happy to come back to him and to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire on that point, which is important and well made, although it may not necessarily relate to new clause 7—I suspect it is more general.

Certainly, whether as candidates at an election or as Members of Parliament, with the privilege of being elected, we would all wish to perform that role to the best of our abilities, and to communicate with our constituents whether at home or abroad. My point, in the context of new clause 7, is that that is not a matter for the Government.

The hon. Member for City of Chester said that we should look at how constituencies may be swollen—I think that was his choice of word—by the number of overseas electors. I think he asked that the question of whether more resources may be needed to deal with that be directed to IPSA. I would point out that the Boundary Commission, using the concept of a quota, already serves that function by conducting regular reviews. I do not think that an additional function is needed. The fundamental concept of a quota will not be changed as a result of any of the current debates in the House about boundaries.

I hope that those two points are helpful to the Committee and that the hon. Gentleman accordingly feels able to withdraw his new clause.

Christian Matheson: I thank the Member in charge and the Minister for their responses, in view of which I do not intend to divide the Committee. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 13

OFFENCE OF REGISTERING TO VOTE AS OVERSEAS ELECTOR IN MORE THAN ONE CONSTITUENCY

“(1) A person commits an offence if he or she is an overseas elector and is simultaneously registered to vote in more than one constituency.

(2) A person guilty of an offence under this section shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale.”—(*Alex Norris.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss new clause 14—*Consolidated register of overseas electors*—

“(1) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State to compile a single, consolidated register of overseas electors for UK parliamentary elections.

(2) The Minister for the Cabinet Office or the Secretary of State may, by regulations, specify requirements for the publication, availability for inspection and sale of information in that register.”

Alex Norris: New clause 13 is my last stab at allaying the concerns that electoral administrators have expressed following the publication of the “votes for life” document and the Bill. In this case, their concerns relate to double registration. The principle is that when electoral registration officers use address data to verify someone’s eligibility to register, they will establish whether someone has lived in that place. However, they will not try to establish whether that is the last place where the person lived, or whether they have lived in multiple places and are having the same conversation with multiple electoral registration officers around the country, and possibly voting in two or more places. That seems to be a specific, live danger that might merit an individual sanction, which is what the proposed new clause suggests.

2.15 pm

Since we tabled the new clause, we have talked about this issue in Committee, and a lot of water has flowed under the bridge. The message has obviously come out very clearly—from Members on both sides, to be fair—that there is no desire or appetite to treat an overseas elector any differently from a domestic elector. We all cast a single, indivisible ballot, and that seems perfectly sensible.

On reflection, however, that is not the same as saying that we will always be treated the same. I register at my home address, as does my wife. We are both registered to vote in Nottingham, but I am also registered somewhere else. I am registered here in London—I suspect that every member of the Committee might be in the same situation—so my wife and I are slightly different. It does not mean that I can vote in both places in the same election, which would be breaking the law, but I am treated differently by the system.

I do not think that this new clause is radically out of line with saying that when the circumstances change, sometimes so should the approach. We think there is a clear danger of people registering more than once. We are perhaps at risk of creating a bit of a market in where people choose to vote, because they will choose to go where their vote might have the most impact. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester knows that sometimes elections can be decided by fewer than a hundred votes.

Christian Matheson: Indeed.

Alex Norris: The next time, he won by 9,000, which is 100 times as many. They have got to know him, and he cleaned up.

Christian Matheson: Indeed, again.

Alex Norris: It might create a bit of a perverse incentive for people to do things that they should not.

Bob Stewart: The hon. Gentleman referred to the hon. Member for City of Chester, who is extremely popular with my old soldiers. That will give him quite an advantage, despite the fact that he is from that accursed Opposition party. I want to reassure him that he is extremely popular with old soldiers, and they will probably—despite my instructions to the contrary—vote for him.

Alex Norris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I think he might have made my hon. Friend blush, which is certainly a first in the time that I have known him.

I think that I have dealt with new clause 13 adequately. I am pushing new clause 14 with a little trepidation. It is not that it is not party policy, but more that we do not have a policy in this area and I am not sure how much the party would welcome my writing one. However, I thought I would just test this, because it is a matter of interest.

It follows from new clause 13 that having a codified place would be one tool for ensuring that we do not have double or treble registration. Members might say, and they are probably right, that my view is perhaps that we could have a single register for the whole of the country, and I probably do think that. We could certainly start with overseas electors, which would offer a chance to eradicate any fraudulent activity. In France, they do it at municipality level, so it is certainly technically possible. I wanted to probe and test the waters to find out whether it is seen as desirable, and I would be very interested to hear from the Minister as well as the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire. I will not say any more, because I think the new clauses are relatively self-explanatory.

Christian Matheson: I rise briefly to thank the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham for his generous words.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North has tabled an interesting proposal in new clause 13, and makes the point that registration in more than one constituency is not the norm, although it is not unusual. As he suggested, many hon. Members are registered in more than one constituency, myself included. That certainly is not something that we seek to prohibit because there are legitimate reasons for it; for example working in two places, being a student, or—dare I say it—being a multimillionaire and having more than one residence. There are legitimate reasons for doing so; the offence is in voting twice in the same election. I do not wish to put words in the Minister’s mouth, but I know that she is very keen to clamp down on electoral fraud.

My main concern relates to overseas registration. As there is no direct physical link—for example, a property where the voter is registered—it is slightly easier to register in more than one constituency for the same election.

New clause 14 is intriguing, as it targets an issue of concern that needs to be considered, and I would be interested to hear the responses from the Minister and the Bill’s promoter, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire. The proposal of a national centralised register is an interesting idea. Now that voters are asked to provide their national insurance number when they register, it would be easier to make a national register of voters.

We in Her Majesty's official Opposition do not currently have a position on that, but I would be interested to hear the views of other members of the Committee. I thank my hon. Friend for his new clauses.

Glyn Davies: I can only, almost parrot-like, repeat the comments that I have made on so many amendments. I understand the thought process behind the proposed new clauses, but I feel that they are unnecessary. Voting in two places is against the law and I do not see any point in creating a huge new database, because that is unnecessary to achieving the Bill's objectives.

I was impressed to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham make such complimentary remarks about the hon. Member for City of Chester. A number of people just over the border in Wales may well have the same positive view of the hon. Gentleman. It sticks in the back of my mind that a Welshman seen in Chester at certain times of day can be shot, legally, under medieval law.

Christian Matheson: After dark.

Glyn Davies: That might lead some people to have a pretty negative view of Chester, but I do not share that view. I like Chester, have been there quite often and always feel very safe.

I do not think that the proposed new clauses are necessary. The issues are already covered and I hope that the hon. Member for Nottingham North will withdraw the motion.

Chloe Smith: I am almost inclined to break up this Chester love-in and invite people to Norwich, an equally fine medieval city—some would say finer, but we will have to take that up in another Committee at another time.

The hon. Member for City of Chester is correct: the Government are 100% committed to maintaining the integrity of the register and guarding against electoral fraud. There are, however, already provisions in place to address the circumstances that new clause 13 seeks to address. I will briefly go through those for the Committee's information.

Under the new system, all overseas applicants will be required to prove their identity and establish a verifiable connection to an address in the UK before they can be added to the register. That address must be the last one at which they were registered or resident. The Bill does not allow for cherry-picking, so that concern is unwarranted.

As I said in response to amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Nottingham North for an earlier sitting, the Bill sets out that the declaration made by the applicant must contain any of the prescribed information and satisfy any other prescribed requirement, which may include other information to be requested or a requirement for it to be attested. The Bill already contains tools to address some of the issues in new clause 13.

I turn to what electoral law already does before the Bill's provisions come into force. As the hon. Gentleman has said, it is an offence to vote at more than one location in the same election—in this case, a general election. Conviction for such a practice carries a financial penalty, which is an unlimited fine in England and Wales, and up to £5,000 in Scotland.

The law already provides that a British citizen may register to vote as an overseas voter only in relation to one constituency. That will remain the position under the Bill's provisions. If they were registered to vote in more than one constituency at the same time, it could be because false information was provided to an electoral registration officer. It is, therefore, already an offence under section 12 of the Representation of the People Act 1985 to provide false information to an ERO in relation to an overseas elector's declaration. A person found guilty may face a fine, which is an unlimited fine in England and Wales, and up to £5,000 in Scotland.

Furthermore, it is an offence under section 13D of the Representation of the People Act 1983 to provide false information to an electoral registration officer for any purpose connected with the registration of electors. A person found guilty of that offence may face a custodial sentence of up to 51 weeks in prison, or a fine, or both. There is a separate offence of providing false information when making a postal vote application, under section 62A(2)(b) of the 1983 Act, and that is clearly stated on the postal vote application form. A range of offences are already covered in law, so proposed new clause 13 is unnecessary.

The changes proposed by new clause 14 are also unnecessary. It is already possible to obtain information about overseas electors. At present, each ERO maintains the register for their local area. Those officers will mark on that register those electors who are registered to vote as an overseas elector, and they will also produce a list of overseas electors for their area. Parties and candidates are entitled to be supplied with copies of the register and lists of overseas electors. EROs also produce electorate figures for the Office of National Statistics, which will then show separate figures for the number of overseas electors registered.

If I have read it correctly, proposed new clause 14 also argues for a single register of overseas electors. I hear the slightly broader argument made by the hon. Member for Nottingham North about whether there should be a single register of everyone in this country. The constituency link remains our guide in this case, as it does in all aspects of registration. The constituency link is very important to the way in which our electoral system has developed over decades, and it is also important in this regard. A single register for overseas electors would result in them being treated differently from domestic voters. The proposal is unnecessary.

I hope that those are helpful points of fact and argument. On that basis, I hope that the hon. Member for City of Chester, who is clearly beloved, will reconsider the matter, and that the hon. Member for Nottingham North will withdraw the motion.

Bob Stewart: No love-in this time, but I am worried about two things connected to the proposed new clauses. The first is how difficult it would be for an electoral registration officer to ascertain someone's home 50 years ago. That would be extremely difficult. I know there will be records, but as time goes by people's memories will obviously recede and blocks of flats and houses will be knocked down. I just think it is quite difficult that that is the sole criterion for having a vote.

By the way, I am totally supportive of the Government—please do not think I am against them—and I think Her Majesty's Opposition will support them,

[Bob Stewart]

too, so if there are any problems from you, see me later—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry: if there are problems from the hon. Member for Nottingham North, he can see me afterwards in the corridor.

Secondly, I am slightly queasy at the idea of someone leaving this country at a relatively young age, going abroad and staying there for 50 years, to the relatively old age of 70, which is around my age—or older; perhaps another 20 years—and, despite not having contributed or paid tax to this country, still having the right to decide how we govern ourselves. I know it is the only way—we cannot suddenly make it an arbitrary 15 or 30 years—but I nevertheless remain slightly queasy because I would like all who vote in our general elections to have a stake in the country, and that normally means by being present at some stage.

2.30 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend might not know that I lived abroad for a number of years, in Asia and the United States. Although I have not reached those advanced years yet, the more years I spent away did not take away how British I felt. In fact, with regard to the level of engagement with a country and its political discourse, I became more, not less engaged. Furthermore, overseas residents can make voluntary contributions through national insurance. They can still contribute both politically and financially to our country.

The Chair: Order. Before the hon. Member for Beckenham resumes, I remind the Committee that we are discussing new clauses 13 and 14, not the general principles of the Bill.

Bob Stewart: Forgive me, I thought I was on new clause 14. I will shut up in that case, having been admonished by you, Mr Robertson. I totally agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, but he had a stake in the country while he was away. My queasy thought is that, while they may be very small in number, some people might not. That is my point and now, Mr Robertson, I am quashed.

Alex Norris: I appreciate all the comments that have been made. In the spirit of what the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham has said, it is important to be sure of the implications of these matters and to monitor them over time. I hope we will all keep an eye on that.

I am grateful to the Minister for clarifying the measures in the 1983 and 1985 Acts. That goes quite a way to reassuring me, so I will not push proposed new clause 13 to the vote. On cherry-picking, I did not miss the point about last registration, but I still do not know how on earth an electoral registration officer would know it was the last one. They would know it was a valid one, but they would not know what the person did next, if they had left the local authority area. That is perhaps something to consider as we go along, but probably not this afternoon.

That covers proposed new clause 13. I have served the purpose of proposed new clause 14 by giving it a run out, so I will not push that to a vote, either. On that basis, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

Question proposed, That the Chair do report the Bill to the House.

Glyn Davies: This may be traditional but it is not just a tradition: I really do want to thank everybody who has played a part in the Committee stage. There has been a huge amount of detail. I have been resistant to a lot of the amendments tabled, but I have tried to listen carefully to everything that has been said about them. A lot of good points have been made. It has certainly expanded hugely my knowledge of the issue and of private Members' Bills. When I put my name in the ballot, I had not anticipated the commitment required. It will be interesting to see whether I will be inspired to accept a Whip's instruction to put my name in the ballot next year. I thank everybody involved in our long consideration of the Bill, including you, Mr Robertson, for chairing the Committee so ably and in such a friendly manner, and all the officials.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): May I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire? He has handled this Bill in exemplary fashion. I persuaded David Cameron to put this measure in our 2015 manifesto, and I persuaded the Prime Minister to put it in our 2017 manifesto. I have had a very long interest in this matter and I am delighted that it has got through this stage.

I pay tribute to the Minister for all the work she has done. Long before she became the responsible Minister, she was a strong supporter of the matter. I also pay tribute to the Opposition, in a genuine sense. I have been a Member of Parliament for 26 years and I cannot remember how many of these Committees I have served on over that time, but I do not remember any that have been handled in such good-mannered fashion. I pay sincere tribute to the hon. Member for City of Chester and his team. With that sense of goodwill, I hope he will persuade his party to give the Bill a fair wind, when it comes to Third Reading and in the House of Lords, because that is the right thing to do and we need to get this on the statute book.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Mr Robertson, will you advise me on how to get on the record my tribute to my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire, who has been tireless in his efforts to achieve justice for those British citizens around the world who are disenfranchised?

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire, I lived in both the United States and Asia—though I suspect not quite at the same time—and saw many people who had lived outside of the UK for more than 15 years but who had every intention of returning in their retirement and felt completely disenfranchised. That is why, just before my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds was involved with the international office of the Conservative party while we were in opposition, I had a role as the parliamentary chair for international voters and visited a number of our members around the world. It is a pleasure to see

them so ably represented in the Public Gallery today. I met many people who expressed their frustration at this clear injustice.

I add my commendation to Opposition Members, who have taken such a constructive view in Committee to righting this wrong, for their own reasons, not least—as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds—those elderly Labour voters who are as disenfranchised as those elderly Conservative, Liberal Democrat and, I dare say, Green and Plaid Cymru voters in other countries who cannot vote at present. If the Bill passes Report and Third Reading and gets through the House of Lords, as I sincerely hope it will, we will all be able to take some credit for playing our part in restoring natural human rights to people around the world.

The Chair: I think Mr Dunne has put on record his admiration for the promoter of the Bill.

Christian Matheson: During this process, the Opposition have sought, as is our role, to probe, test, check and pause for thought. We hope that we have done that in a constructive manner that reflects some of the concerns about the practicalities of the Bill, including those of the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission about its implementation.

I am most grateful to Government Members for their kind comments. It is easy to be constructive when we have constructive engagement on the other side as well—it is a two-way process—so I thank and pay tribute to them. I also pay tribute to the Minister and her team for the way in which they have engaged with us, and thank my fellow Opposition Members, who have engaged carefully in the discussions. Most of all, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire. I know this issue means a lot to him and he has put the effort in. We shall return to further issues on Report and Third Reading, because it is absolutely right that we continue scrutiny of the Bill. I pay tribute to and thank the hon. Gentleman for taking the Bill through. Finally, I thank you, Mr Robertson, and your co-Chair, Ms McDonagh, for the way in which you have gone about the business of the Committee.

The Chair: From the Chair, I thank all hon. Members for the good humour that they have displayed during the passage of the Bill.

Bill accordingly to be reported, without amendment.

2.40 pm

Committee rose.

