

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

## ELECTIONS BILL

*Third Sitting*

*Thursday 16 September 2021*

*(Morning)*

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### CONTENTS

Examination of witnesses.  
Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.

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**Monday 20 September 2021**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chairs:* †CHRISTINA REES, SIR EDWARD LEIGH

† Anderson, Fleur ( <i>Putney</i> ) (Lab)	† Randall, Tom ( <i>Gedling</i> ) (Con)
Bell, Aaron ( <i>Newcastle-under-Lyme</i> ) (Con)	† Rutley, David ( <i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i> )
† Bristow, Paul ( <i>Peterborough</i> ) (Con)	† Shelbrooke, Alec ( <i>Elmet and Rothwell</i> ) (Con)
† Clarkson, Chris ( <i>Heywood and Middleton</i> ) (Con)	† Smith, Cat ( <i>Lancaster and Fleetwood</i> ) (Lab)
Furniss, Gill ( <i>Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough</i> ) (Lab)	† Smith, Chloe ( <i>Minister for the Constitution and Devolution</i> )
Gibson, Peter ( <i>Darlington</i> ) (Con)	† Smith, Nick ( <i>Blaenau Gwent</i> ) (Lab)
† Grady, Patrick ( <i>Glasgow North</i> ) (SNP)	Adam Mellows-Facer, Chris Stanton, <i>Committee Clerks</i>
† Hollern, Kate ( <i>Blackburn</i> ) (Lab)	
† Hunt, Jane ( <i>Loughborough</i> ) (Con)	
† Mayhew, Jerome ( <i>Broadland</i> ) (Con)	
† O'Hara, Brendan ( <i>Argyll and Bute</i> ) (SNP)	† <b>attended the Committee</b>

**Witnesses**

Heather Harper MBE, Chairman, Conservatives Abroad

George Cunningham, Chair, Liberal Democrats Overseas

Anne Wafer, Communications and Social Media Officer, Labour International

Maurice Mcleod, Chief Executive, Race on the Agenda

## Public Bill Committee

Thursday 16 September 2021

(Morning)

[CHRISTINA REES *in the Chair*]

### Elections Bill

11.30 am

**The Chair:** Before we begin, I have some reminders. I encourage hon. Members to wear masks when they are not speaking. Please also do what you can to give one another and members of staff some space. *Hansard* colleagues would be grateful if Members emailed their speaking notes to [hansardnotes@parliament.uk](mailto:hansardnotes@parliament.uk). Please switch electronic devices to silent mode. Tea and coffee are not allowed during sittings. We just have some private business before we start.

11.30 am

*The Committee deliberated in private.*

#### Examination of Witnesses

*Heather Harper, George Cunningham and Anne Wafer gave evidence.*

11.31 am

**Q118 The Chair:** We are now sitting in public and the proceedings are being broadcast. We will take oral evidence from Heather Harper MBE, chairman of Conservatives Abroad, who is on Zoom, from George Cunningham, chair of Liberal Democrats Overseas, in person—he will be brought in now—and from Anne Wafer, communications and social media officer for Labour International. She is having a bit of trouble joining us at the moment, but we will make a start.

Before the first Member asks a question, I remind all Members that questions should be limited to matters within the scope of the Bill and that we must stick to the timings in the programme order that the Committee has agreed. For this session, we have until 12.15 pm. Could the witnesses please introduce themselves? Heather, would you like to go first?

**Heather Harper:** I am Heather Harper, chairman of Conservatives Abroad—the global network of Conservative members and supporters around the world.

**The Chair:** Thank you. George Cunningham, would you like to introduce yourself?

**George Cunningham:** Thank you very much. First of all, honourable Members, I am very happy to be with you today. I am the chair of Liberal Democrats Overseas, which is one of three local parties that are abroad, the others being LibDems in France and Liberal Democrats in Europe. I am the chair of Lib Dems Overseas; I have also been chair and vice-chair of Brussels and Europe Liberal Democrats, so I have covered geographically all the areas of the party outside the UK. I stood for Parliament in the 2015 UK general election while being

disenfranchised because of the 15-year rule, so I was a candidate without a vote. It is very nice to be with you today.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Q119 Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I thank the witnesses for giving up their time this morning to allow this Committee to find out a little more about your thoughts on this legislation. I am going to make the slight assumption that all the witnesses have had the experience of being an overseas elector. Could you all outline your own experiences of being an overseas elector, in terms of being able to receive and return a ballot paper in time to make the deadline for the election? I ask because we have seen evidence showing that a lot of overseas electors' votes do not get counted because they do not get returned in time. Mr Cunningham, would you like to go first and outline any experiences that you have had that the Committee would benefit from knowing about?

**George Cunningham:** It is important that we try to take as much of the pressure off the councils having to do this and try and automate things as much as possible. Effectively, using a purely postal system is denying thousands the ability to vote and in some countries, such as Indonesia and parts of Africa, there is no postal service worth talking about. The outcome is that British citizens living closest to the UK get a chance to vote, but it is denied in far-flung places. If you imagine the numbers in Australia, for instance, of British citizens, you are basically excluding almost a million over there out of the 5.5 million or so British citizens abroad.

The problem is accentuated further with the abolition of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act and a possible shortening of the time period between the proroguing of Parliament and election day. There is also an issue—and this is personal experience—of prepaid envelopes. In some countries, local postal offices that do not really get the information do not accept them as prepaid. They just chuck them in the bin because they do not have local or national stamps on. So it might be best not to have them prepaid so that post offices see that the correct postage stamps have been put on for mailing.

As coming up with a secure system online voting does not seem yet to be on the cards, our embassies and consulates could get involved, as is the case with other countries. A few days could be saved if they were posted out by the embassy on the day the election was called, based on the register held there. Alternatively, ballot papers could be downloaded from the UK website, limited to those who have registered online via the gov.uk website, and then mailed back, because that cuts in half the amount of time for the stuff to come back.

Proxy votes are not adequate because we are talking about people who have been away for more than 15 years so they have lost a lot of friends, perhaps even through death. We have to do the best we can to speed up this whole process, and also to reduce the pressure on councils.

**The Chair:** Thank you. Heather, would you like to add anything?

**Heather Harper:** Only that, although I have been an expat for many years, I have not personally voted from overseas. However, having worked on these matters

with so many of our overseas voters, I would say that I am very strongly supportive of the Bill in its current state because it addresses so many of the issues that have arisen from the complaints, in just some of the things that are addressed, and the difficulty in overseas voting. What is in the Bill is very streamlined and will increase overseas voters and make it much simpler and easier to vote—or register, rather.

**Q120 Cat Smith:** I have one follow-up question. There have been concerns raised that this legislation, by expanding the franchise for overseas electors and removing the 15-year limit, would also allow permissible donors. I was just wondering if the witnesses had any thoughts on whether those two issues should be separated: the right to vote and the issues of keeping transparency in regard to money in British politics separate. Do you have any thoughts, Mr Cunningham, on the separation of financial donations and the franchise?

**George Cunningham:** They are two separate issues. It is important to recognise that a lot of people living abroad are pensioners or teachers—they are all kinds of people from ordinary walks of life like ourselves. They are all equal in front of the law and in front of God, let us say. That is one issue. There is a separate issue concerning the financing aspects, which, of course, many of us consider to be very unsatisfactory, but I do not think it has affected things enormously. The fact that companies can donate and so many companies that are foreign are on the stock exchange and de facto foreign, and through their subsidiaries they can donate to the parties here: that is the critical issue that needs further addressing in a separate Bill. I think it should be disassociated from the Elections Bill.

**The Chair:** Heather, would you like to add anything to that?

**Heather Harper:** Yes, I would. Electoral law regarding donations to political parties is set out in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, which already allows British citizens on the electoral roll to donate to any party. UK nationals living overseas are not foreigners, and they should not be conflated with foreign donations. I do not see any significant effect on donations. It may increase our membership, which is £25 a year—quite honestly that is hard enough to get most of the time. Conservatives Abroad is not an organisation that solicits large donations; our emphasis is on engagement. There is already a robust a legal framework in place that bans foreign donations—I do not see any significant increase there. What is important now is to increase the awareness of voter registration.

**The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith):** A big welcome to our two witnesses. George, it is lovely to see you again in person, and Heather it is very good to see you again. Is it the case that Anne is still unable to join us?

**The Chair:** Unfortunately, we have no news, so we have to press on.

**Q121 Chloe Smith:** Not to worry, but in principle, it is great to have a cross-party panel to discuss this part of the Bill. Picking up on Heather's theme of British citizens abroad not being foreign: do you think they should be treated differently in any way to citizens here in the UK?

There will be a few logistical differences, but do you think we ought to endeavour to treat them as similarly as possible to other kinds of citizens on the electoral register?

**Heather Harper:** I think they should be treated exactly the same. One of our expatriates in France said,

“We want to be able to live our lives not as some kind of second-class citizens denied our right to participate in the democratic processes of our country, but as fully capable and fully recognised citizens of the UK.”

Minister, our British citizens have a long history of living and working overseas, starting with explorers, engineers, teachers, scientists, hospitality workers, sportspeople, financial services and health workers. Many of them return to our country with a new-found wealth of knowledge and experience that they gained overseas. They should be treated exactly the same as every British voter. We are one of the few democratic countries in the world that actually denies, and puts a time limit on, their citizens' right to vote. In answer to your question: they should be treated equally.

**Q122 Chloe Smith:** Thank you, that is very clear. George, if I could pull up this theme with you, can you describe a few ways that British citizens abroad do have a legitimate interest in politics here? For example, I know that you have a specialism in foreign affairs—there is one heading to start with. Perhaps, you can go from there?

**George Cunningham:** First up, I have to say the Liberal Democrat party has long campaigned for the abolition of the 15-year rule and for establishing the institution of overseas constituencies, which we feel is the best way for people to have their voices heard. Perhaps we will come back to that. The commitment to both of these is featured in our 2017 and 2019 general election manifestos. We support the Bill's aim to abolish the 15-year rule as an important first step for British citizens having equal rights, to be properly represented and to have their voices heard.

With that in mind, we have the unfortunate—from our perspective—situation of the referendum in 2016, which showed that a lot of people who had lost their vote were not able to participate in something that would fundamentally change their lives in Europe. That is the most prominent thing that has happened, but there are many other things that, if we had MPs representing overseas constituencies, are issues of concern to overseas voters regarding the UK. For instance, unfreezing pensions; in Australia, Canada and in many parts of Africa where, if there is not a reciprocal agreement, people's pensions are not increased, meaning that they receive something like a quarter of the pension received by UK citizens here. This is an important campaigning issue. Another is NHS access. We have a member who is very sick at the moment, and it is not possible for him to access the NHS because he has not been living in the UK for a while. There are many issues there that are of great importance to us.

Our voice will be heard so much more. Many of those who will have been abroad for more than 15 years when the rule is, hopefully, abolished are of course pensioners, who are the most affected by these things, which have to be addressed. Those are some examples of issues that are of concern to UK citizens abroad in terms of the importance of treating everybody equally—all citizens being equal in front of the law.

**Q123 Chloe Smith:** Thank you so much. I have one last question to both witnesses. Members of the Committee will know that I am very keen on the correct use of terms in this area. When we say “disenfranchise,” we should talk very specifically about the ability to be registered to vote or not to be registered to vote. This area of the Bill actually is one of the narrow areas where that is a relevant concept, because of course it seeks to enfranchise more. Currently, there is disenfranchisement happening for citizens who have been abroad for more than 15 years. I wonder whether you might have some examples or anecdotes from your members or friends of how that feels—on the day that one has lived abroad for more than 15 years, one is suddenly kicked off. Perhaps you might have some examples of how that feels from your members’ perspectives.

**Heather Harper:** I have many examples; I have just mentioned Christopher from Paris. My inbox is full of people from around the world who are so angry about their right to vote because they basically feel that they are not valued. I do have to say, though, that this is not a party political issue. This is about granting the right for all British citizens to register to vote, so I have to acknowledge the fact that Harry Shindler, of the Labour party, has been campaigning for his right to vote for the last 20 years. I have been working hard—with support, indeed, from Labour International—to represent all the people who have been disenfranchised. Harry, by the way, says,

“I fought for my country” —

he is 100 years old

—“and I feel that I have been fighting for my right to vote, why should I be denied that?”

The Bill will improve the House significantly. It will get people to actually register, and it will encourage people who have fallen off the register because of the difficulties that they have faced: they come up to the 15-year rule and think, “No, I can’t be bothered, because I am going to be disenfranchised,” or they face difficulties in having to annually re-register.

Minister, removing the 15-year rule and treating everybody equally removes the uncertainty about who can and who cannot vote. By making the registration last for three years, the process is less cumbersome and more people will be encouraged to engage with it. By introducing the prior residency criteria, the Bill is going to help, in particular, younger family members who have not previously been registered in the UK.

The Bill addresses so many of the issues that actually have stopped overseas British citizens from registering to vote. I hope that that goes some way to answering your question.

**George Cunningham:** Two things come to mind. One is Brexit and the impact that it has had on our citizens in the European Union. This is an ongoing issue that has not been resolved. They are very frustrated about the fact that many of them had no say, and then were left in the lurch in many respects. To give them the vote will perhaps push more of an interest within Parliament to protect their interests and see ways in which the situation they face can be alleviated.

It does depend on the country within the European Union and the reactions towards our citizens, and I am happy to say that many countries have tried to be as helpful as possible concerning our citizens, albeit in terms of residency rights that is a bit of an issue. There

will be a voice for those who are in pain because their pensions have been frozen, and perhaps it would then become more of a political issue. Certainly in our party we would be encouraged to put some overseas issues into the manifesto for elections, and I think that would be very helpful to them. I actually see positive things.

Of course, if there are no overseas constituencies, it would be so much simpler to register. If a person has a British passport and is above the age limit, then surely they would be able to vote for a constituency, which has a geographical limitation. This would help, for instance, where a child has not been living in the UK—at the moment they continue to be disenfranchised, even if they are British citizens. This would overcome the problem.

**The Chair:** Before I bring Patrick Grady in, we have good news and bad news. The good news is that the technical fault is nearly resolved; the bad news is that we are not quite there yet. Minister and Cat Smith, would you be content to repeat your questions to Anne Wafer once she joins, if we have time?

**Chloe Smith:** I am happy to, as long as it does not take time away from colleagues.

**The Chair:** Is the Committee content with that?

**Hon. Members indicated assent.**

**The Chair:** Thank you.

**Q124 Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** I am interested in the point about the children of overseas voters, because one of the effects of removing the 15-year limit is that there could be voters who have lived overseas for 15, 16, 17 or 18 years. An individual can vote at the age of 16 in the Scottish Parliament now, and I think it is the same in the Welsh Senedd elections. Sixteen-year-olds cannot vote in the UK yet, but someone who has been outside the UK for 16, 17 or, indeed, 18 years will be able to vote. There will be people joining the electoral register at the age of 18 who have spent their whole lives without a vote in the UK, while people who have spent the equivalent amount of time away from the UK will now continue to be able to vote. I would be interested in any reflections on that.

I was also interested in something you said in passing, George, about an overseas constituency. I wonder if either of the panellists have a view on that. At the moment, a vote goes towards wherever the voter last resided, and I can well understand the point that although someone maintains an affinity for their country and has citizenship of the UK, surely after a considerable passage of time the local issues in the constituency will have changed considerably. Not every single overseas voter will still be paying attention to the exact circumstances in the constituency in which they lived. Is there any merit in the concept—which exists in other parliamentary democracies—of a dedicated overseas constituency that is represented by an MP for the overseas?

**The Chair:** Before you answer, may I interrupt to say that our third witness, Anne Wafer, is now with us. Anne, would you introduce yourself to the Committee please?

**Anne Wafer:** I am sorry for the delay; my computer decided to update something at just the wrong moment and it is now running a bit slowly, so it may not be perfect. It has been fine—it was perfect for the test.

Anyway, I am from Labour International, the international section of the Labour party. I am the communications officer. We have about 3,000 members, who live all over the world. I live in Slovakia and am the secretary of the central and east European branch. I could answer the question that has just been asked. Is that okay? Can I carry on to that, or do you want to know more about me?

**The Chair:** No, that is a lovely introduction and we will leave it to the first two witnesses to answer that question first, and then you can come in, Anne. That will be fine. Heather, would you like to go first?

**Heather Harper:** I am not in favour at all of an overseas constituency. The home constituency is and always has been the fundamental building block of democracy. All Britons overseas hail from all parts of the country, and their insight into their home constituency should not be lost in any way. Nor should their voices be muffled by being aggregated into a few catch-all expat seats.

Boundary changes may have occurred and may still occur to those constituencies from which our members departed when they went out to the world to study or work, but it is the town or area that our members call home. I think that is fundamental.

An idea that some members of Conservatives Abroad have come up with is an expats office, akin to the one that has looked after British veterans' affairs under various Governments. Such a ministry, office or agency would be able to serve as a focal point for communication to and from expats, enabling the Government to gain insights from our global Britons and to swiftly address all the concerns and queries raised by expats.

**George Cunningham:** On my side of course, as we say in our manifesto, we are for overseas constituencies. We look at France especially, but also at other countries, to see how well that system works. Specific issues that are of concern to our members and other British citizens abroad are specific to being abroad. For instance, say in Australia or in Canada, when it comes to frozen pensions, they want the Government to negotiate an arrangement with the Government of Canada and the Government of Australia—a reciprocal arrangement—so that they can upgrade their pensions to a proper level.

These are the kinds of areas—that is just one of them, but there are many other areas, for instance within the European Union—where people want to have a way to funnel their view. If you dissipate that voice across 650 constituencies, only a tiny number of people in each constituency voice that view within the totality of the work of the Member of Parliament.

We understand that maybe we cannot reach overseas constituencies yet; we understand that this Bill is a building block. That is why we support this Elections Bill when it comes to the overseas side—pretty much—but we would like to see overseas constituencies as a stage 2 in due course.

**Anne Wafer:** I left the UK in 1978. Before then, I was a student and then I lived in a few different places. The job I had before I left was a one-year contract, so I cannot actually remember where I was last registered to vote, and this could be a problem; it may be a place that I do not now have a lot of connection with. Obviously you cannot just choose a constituency at random. If

there was the opportunity to pick one that you had some proven connection with, rather than the last one, I think that would suit us better.

Also, I wonder how we can find out. I am pretty sure that I was registered, but I do not have a clear memory of it, because in those days you did not have to register yourself. How do we find out where we were last registered and how do we prove it?

Moreover, I know that our members have been talking about having a constituency for overseas citizens, or would be interested in that, but I am not sure that now would be the time to include that. If this becomes law, as it probably will, potentially a lot more people will become interested in joining political parties and registering to vote, so for that reason perhaps an overseas constituency is a good idea. At the moment, we will probably just take this step, if we can. But we have certainly been considering it, and some of our members live in countries where that is allowed—where they do have overseas constituencies. So yes, we would look at that favourably.

**The Chair:** Only one member of the Committee has indicated that they wish to ask a question, so I now call Cat Smith, the Opposition spokesperson, and then the Minister to ask a couple of catch-up questions.

**Q125 Cat Smith:** It is good to have you with us, Anne, having resolved the technical issues. My opening question to the other panellists, before you joined us, was about the experience of voting as an overseas elector and delays in the postal system. Do you have any thoughts on how the Bill could be improved to ensure that overseas electors who have a ballot could return it in time for the close of poll?

**Anne Wafer:** I am very pleased to meet you, Cat. The last constituency where I was registered to vote may well have been Lancaster, your constituency, because that is where I went to university, and I would be very happy with that.

On problems, I have been abroad for more than 15 years, so I do not have a vote. I notice that the Bill will extend the vote for parliamentary elections, but it does not mention referenda. I think that is an important omission, because it is a big bone of contention for our members that we could not vote in the EU referendum. I did see some news that said we could vote, but then the same day I saw another piece of news saying they had decided we could not.

Brexit has affected our right to free movement within Europe and our right to bring home any European-born family members, for example, which is going to be much more difficult. A lot of people would have liked to return with partners, family members and foreign-born children, and maybe elderly parents who need care and do not want to be left behind, but that is much more difficult now. We would very much like to have voted in that referendum, although it probably would not have made any difference to the result. However, there could be future referenda, perhaps to rejoin or for regional assemblies, or anything like that, so we would like referenda to be included.

There will be quite a lot of bureaucracy involved. I feel as though I have been swotting for an exam that I never attended the classes for, because I have stepped

in fairly last minute and I have not paid particular attention to the Bill before. However, I do know what our members' opinions are, because they have been campaigning for a long time for voting rights to be extended to people who have been abroad for more than 15 years. One of our best known members is Harry Shindler, who lives in Italy and turned 100 in July. He has been campaigning for the extension of voting rights for a long time, and I am sure that some of you have worked with him—Heather, I have seen a photograph of you with him. He is still a very active member at 100 years old.

We are very strongly for this part of the Bill, but there are other parts that we are not so happy about. There will be quite a lot of bureaucracy involved. We are used to that, because anyone who has lived abroad has had to fill in forms for British bureaucracy, or the bureaucracy of whatever country they live in, but hopefully registration will be made much simpler for everyone.

I notice that there is a section on accessibility. Accessibility at polling stations does not affect us directly, but it does affect our family members, so we think that should be a lot stronger.

**Q126 Cat Smith:** If I might interrupt slightly, Anne—I apologise—it might help if I direct some more specific questions to you, because I did ask a specific question to both the other witnesses this morning about political donations. Concerns have been raised about how extending the franchise also makes overseas electors permissible donors, with no time limit. Do you think there is merit in separating permissible donors from eligible electors?

**Anne Wafer:** That could be a concern, because the perception is that British people who live abroad are all wealthy and living in tax havens with lots of money. That is not necessarily true, certainly among our members. I have not studied that part of the Bill closely, but there does now seem to be a potential for wealthy people living abroad to be allowed to send huge amounts of money to their favoured political party. There needs to be some regulation of that. I cannot really say any more about it because I have not studied the details of exactly how that would work under the Bill, but yes, I would be concerned about that.

**Q127 Cat Smith:** Very quickly, you told the Committee earlier that you left the UK in 1978 and are not entirely sure if or where you were registered when you left. You were asking how you could check that you were registered to vote, and there are no records, so do you recognise the potential for electoral fraud, given the lack of records going back more than 15 years?

**Anne Wafer:** I do not know. I study genealogy, and there are electoral registers going way back to the 19th century, so I wonder why there are no records, because that is news to me. I assumed there would be. There would need to be some proof that you had that connection and lived in a particular part of Britain. I am getting my pension from Britain, so that should be sufficient proof, for example. It is not a very big one—I am getting a tiny pension—because I left quite early, but I am getting one, so there should be an alternative way of proving that you had that connection and had lived there.

There are a lot of measures in the Bill on voter fraud, but there does not seem to be much evidence that it actually happens. I am sure there are ways to prevent

it without disenfranchising people, which has a bigger effect on the electoral result than small amounts of voter fraud. As people who live abroad, we have to jump through so many hoops to sign up to register and get proxy votes, and I do not think the potential for voter fraud is very high. Obviously there need to be some protections in place, but it should not be too difficult to prove that you have lived in a place. If you have a pension from Britain or had a job in Britain, there must be some record that you lived there.

There should be some flexibility in what records could be provided if no record can be found that you were on the voting register, because we do not want to be disenfranchised on that account. Although I have lived abroad for a long time, I still have a lot of connections. I lived in Ireland before I came here, but I visit my family every year when I can—of course, the pandemic has prevented that—and take a strong interest in politics.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Anne. We are running out of time, so I would just like to squeeze the Minister in.

**Q128 Chloe Smith:** Anne, welcome. It is lovely to have you with us and thank you so much for your time. If I may start with a reassurance for you personally, given what you have been saying, the Bill includes exactly what you are arguing for: that you should be able to prove either last residence or registration, which are the two tracks that answer your concern.

**Anne Wafer:** I did see that, but I was not quite sure how that would work in practice. I did see something—maybe not in this Bill—about how if you had left before you were old enough to register, then you could prove residence. Hopefully it is not just limited to that but is extended to everyone.

**Chloe Smith:** That's right, Anne.

**Anne Wafer:** Can you assure me of that? It might have been a preliminary discussion—

**Q129 Chloe Smith:** We think the Bill as constructed covers, if you like, children in both categories—those who were born abroad and those who were born in the UK and moved. We think we have got that covered with the residency and registration idea. May I just—

**Anne Wafer:** Does it cover oldies like me, though—the residency?

**Chloe Smith:** Absolutely, yes.

There are three questions I put to the witnesses previously. I will ask them swiftly. I asked, first, whether witnesses thought that British citizens overseas should be treated as equally as possible with British citizens in the UK. Secondly, I invite you to suggest what kinds of policy topic matter to overseas citizens. In other words, what are their interests in UK politics? For example, pensions are one interest, but there might be others. Thirdly, I wonder whether you have examples from your membership, your friends or your network of how people feel when they get, effectively, kicked off the register

—disenfranchised, in the proper sense of the word.

**Anne Wafer:** Can you ask the first question again?

**Chloe Smith:** Of course. Should British citizens overseas be treated as equally as possible with those in the UK?

**Anne Wafer:** Yes, I think so, although even as members we are not treated completely inclusively. Of course, we cannot stand candidates in Britain, but other than that, in our party we are equal to any other constituency Labour party that is in Britain. We send delegates to conference and everything else, so I think as citizens that should be the case as well, because we still have an interest in our country and the regulations still affect us. Many of us are getting pensions, and some of us will want to return at some stage. I thought of returning, but I couldn't afford it—it is too expensive there.

On policies, my members are interested in a huge range, not just ones that affect us directly. Climate change is a big one. That is a huge one for us. Reversing austerity—all the Tory cuts to all sorts of things; we want to reverse them. We have family members—for example, I have a sister who is disabled. My father is 97. I have nieces and nephews who are disabled. I have nieces and nephews with children and new babies. We are all concerned for everybody in Britain and that they have better lives.

As I say, climate change is a big one. One of our motions at conference will be on proportional representation, which a lot of our members think would be a good idea—changing the electoral system. Reform of the House of Lords is one we would be concerned with.

**Chloe Smith:** Those are great examples. Thank you so much—they are a bit broader than we might normally discuss. That is really helpful.

**Anne Wafer:** One would be the education system. We are very much against tuition fees for universities. We want to be rid of those. We are very concerned about what has happened to people during the pandemic, and we need the green new deal and regeneration of jobs, but those need to be green jobs because of the climate crisis.

**Q130 Chloe Smith:** Anne, we have just one minute left. May I ask you the third question to finish the set? In this area, without reform, people are essentially kicked off the register a day after they have been 15 years abroad. How does that feel?

**Anne Wafer:** Most people are not happy about it. Some people get citizenship when they get voting rights in their own countries, where they live, so maybe they are less upset in that case. We can vote in local elections in the countries we live, or we used to be able to. I have not checked whether I still can since Brexit. But yes, we are not very happy about being kicked off the register for sure. We would like that changed. We finished on hearings on that one.

We are also not happy about—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Anne. Unfortunately, we have come to the end of our time. May I thank all the witnesses for their evidence this morning and the Members for their questions? We are now going to move on to the next panel.

## Examination of Witness

*Maurice Mcleod gave evidence.*

12.16 pm

**Q131 The Chair:** We will now hear oral evidence from Maurice Mcleod, chief executive of Race on the Agenda. For this session, we have until 1 o'clock. Welcome, Maurice. Can you please introduce yourself for the purpose of the record?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Hi there. My name is Maurice Mcleod. I am the chief executive of Race on the Agenda, an anti-racism charity.

**The Chair:** Thank you. Minister, would like to come in first on this question?

**Q132 Chloe Smith:** Welcome, Maurice; it is good to have you with us this morning. Can you explain first of all whether you feel that the policy of having a free local voter card to accompany voter identification, so that is for the 2% of people we anticipate may not have the ID that is being asked for, will be a good thing and whether there may be any points that you suggest would need to be taken into account in its design?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Hello, thanks for having me. It is not a bad idea to make it free and allow local authorities to give out these passes. The problem is that it ignores what it feels like to be part of that group without any voter ID—part of that group that is reticent even to cast a vote.

Probably everyone in this room and everyone listening sees the value of voting and feels like it is an important part of their democratic rights and that they can affect things if they turn up and vote. When you are talking about people who often do not feel very connected, do not feel very engaged, do not feel very empowered within society, yes, you can say "This is only a small hurdle, you just need to apply to your council and they will give you a free voter ID," but that is just another hurdle that gets in the way, though. It is just one more step away from them feeling that they can engage with our democratic process. So I think it is a good thing. If we are going to have voter IDs—I would strongly argue that we do not—at least give people access to getting them for free, sure. I just think that does not solve the problem.

**Q133 Chloe Smith:** Okay, thanks for that initial view. In that case, would you join me in letting the message go out from this Bill Committee and witnesses that we all want to encourage as many people as possible to register to vote and to participate?

**Maurice Mcleod:** I absolutely agree with that. I would go further. I do not really understand why you are not automatically registered. I remember turning 18; you get your national insurance number because going out to work and paying your national insurance and your tax are important rites of passage. I do not know why we do not do the same with voting. You should not have to apply to register to vote; you should be automatically registered.

**Q134 Cat Smith:** Thank you Maurice for your time this morning. We have seen American civil rights groups campaigning quite strongly about the introduction in some US states of ID requirements to access the ballot.

They have found that, when it comes to providing ID, some groups are finding it harder to prove their identity than others. In this country it has been very difficult for me to find out what level of ID people hold based on their race; it is not data that is held by the DVLA with driving licenses, nor the Home Office with passports. Can you share with the Committee your understanding of what groups are less likely to have photo ID?

**Maurice Mcleod:** You are right that part of the problem is that this data is not always readily available. The data I have found—the Government's own data—says that while 76% of white people hold a form of relevant photo ID, such as a driver's license or a passport, when it comes to black people, about half do: 47% do not hold one of those forms of ID. There are 11 million people in Britain who hold no form of photo identification. That drastically discourages people from voting. You are adding an unnecessary extra burden on people who we want to turn out and vote.

**Q135 Cat Smith:** To break that down a little bit further, I have seen evidence that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are also less likely to have ID. The free local voter card, proposed by this legislation, looks set to be delivered by local authorities. Do you have any insight into how people who are not resident in the same local authority for any length of time might have their access to those ID cards impacted?

**Maurice Mcleod:** You are very right to bring up the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Of all of the communities that make up Britain, they are already among the groups that are most likely to be disenfranchised. You do not need to be a genius to work out that if you are moving around, and your residence is not set in one place, it makes it very hard to know who to engage with, and what needs to be done to get the ID that allows you to vote. It cannot be assumed that everyone has good links with their local authority and understands where they need to go.

Looking at other communities, you have to acknowledge that the slightly hostile way that we have dealt with migration means that there is nervousness among some communities, even with people who are perfectly legal and allowed to be here. Sometimes there is a nervousness about engaging with the authorities on anything other than something that is considered essential. Sadly, for a lot of people, voting is not something that they consider essential.

**Q136 Cat Smith:** That final point links to my last question. You have alluded to a hostile environment, and a nervousness to engage with—what is seen as—an establishment. Do you think that the requirement to show voter ID will increase or decrease participation among black voters?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Without a doubt, I believe it will decrease participation. There is already a problem with getting people from minority communities to even register to vote. Now you have to register to vote, and you also need to find some form of voter ID to—as has been said—solve a problem that I am unsure anyone thinks exists. It is very hard to see the impact of this being anything other than voter suppression within those groups. There is certainly not any suggestion that this will increase voter turnout—I cannot see how you would even make that argument.

**Cat Smith:** Thank you so much for your time.

**Q137 Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con):** Maurice, it is nice to talk to you, and thank you for coming to the Committee. I note that you are a Labour councillor in Battersea and a self-confessed Corbynite, and that you previously described the Government as

“Diluting rights, denying racism, delegitimising protest, and diminishing voter turnout.”

You added:

“Anyone who doesn't see a concerted campaign at work here simply isn't looking.”

What is that concerted campaign?

**Maurice Mcleod:** We have had mention of what happened in America with voter suppression, the methods that some parts of the political machine have gone through and the fights to pull back the other way. I think that there is a concerted effort, first, to instil the idea that our voting system is not secure, that there is loads of fraud, that there are loads of people doing something dodgy and that people are cheating. As I have said, I do not really see much evidence of that. Our voting system is pretty trusted and robust. So first, there is this idea of bringing in a measure. When you bring in a measure in Parliament, people think, “Oh, there must be a reason that they're doing this; it's because there's loads of fraud.” It undermines faith and trust in our democracy.

Secondly, as I have said, these measures also put an extra barrier in the way of groups that some parts of the political establishment may think will not turn out for them or are not particularly strong supporters of them. What some people behind this may be thinking is, “If those people do not turn up and vote, is that such a bad deal?” When I said a concerted effort, that is what I mean.

**Q138 Paul Bristow:** Given your description of voter fraud as non-existent—you have just made that claim now—what do you make of the evidence that we have heard of voter fraud in Tower Hamlets, Birmingham and my constituency, Peterborough? Did that not exist?

**Maurice Mcleod:** If I said non-existent, that is not what I meant. I meant that it is very small. Yes, there have been issues in various places. To my mind, though, those issues would not be fixed by voter ID. The suggestion that there is a massive lack of faith in our electoral system just is not borne out in the polling. That is not the evidence of anyone that I have spoken to or any research that I have seen. People trust our electoral system, and that is a good thing. We should not do anything that undermines that.

**Q139 Paul Bristow:** You tweeted that the Government “wants to bring in Voter ID to tackle non-existent voter fraud.”

I suggest that you take a look at the evidence from Peter Golds, Lord Pickles and others yesterday; it may enlighten you.

In 2018, you argued that people should be able to vote online. You then dismissed one social media user's comment about fraud by saying,

“Sure, I understand the security risks but they are no greater than the risks of postal voting or even voting in person.”

What are those risks of postal voting or voting in person?

**Maurice Mcleod:** I see what you have done there. I was arguing, and I still argue, that we should move to online voting eventually. We should have ways of allowing more people to vote in more easy ways that fit in with their lives, so that they do not have to take time off work and go to a polling station, a post box or wherever. That is what I was arguing for. When I said that there are no more risks with that than with other types of voting, I meant that there are hardly any risks with those other types of voting, and therefore there are no risks with online voting.

**Paul Bristow:** But that is not quite what you said. You said:

“Sure, I understand the security risks”.

**The Chair:** Order. Online voting is not in the Bill. He was entitled to respond, but we are going a little bit wider than we should. Do you have a small supplementary?

**Q140 Paul Bristow:** Yes, absolutely. In 2019, you claimed that

“Voter ID will have a terrible impact on voter turnout.”

Why do you think that this impact has not been seen in any of the Cabinet Office trials, or indeed over many years in Northern Ireland?

**Maurice Mcleod:** That is valid. The Northern Ireland point is brought up a lot. I think I am right in saying—I could be wrong—that there is more of a tradition for carrying ID there than there is here. I could be wrong on that; I am not sure. I have not really looked into that too much.

**Paul Bristow:** No, I think you are wrong.

**Maurice Mcleod:** Am I wrong on that? Okay. It stands to reason that if you have a chunk of the population that does not have what you are being asked to have to turn up to vote, then you are going to lose voters among that demographic. I do not think that is really controversial. I am not sure how you would argue against that. You can argue that there is a bigger problem that needs to be fixed than I seem to think there is, but I do not see how you can argue that it is not going to dissuade people—it is not going to encourage more people to vote, is it?

**Paul Bristow:** Are you arguing that there are no—

**The Chair:** Order. I think we will move on. You have had quite a few questions. Patrick Grady is waiting to come in.

**Q141 Patrick Grady:** Thank you, Ms Rees. If we read the evidence from yesterday, we will see that Lord Pickles and Richard Mawrey described Tower Hamlets as extreme and isolated. Richard Mawrey said:

“Voter fraud played a very small part, funnily enough, in Tower Hamlets.”—[*Official Report, Elections Public Bill Committee*, 15 September 2021; c. 14, Q13.]

Thank you, Maurice; your contributions have been extremely helpful. You spoke a little bit about automatic voter registration. Could you say a little more about how you think that might work in practice and what impact it could have on turnout and participation,

particularly among minority communities? Could you also say something about access to postal voting among minority communities and what impact that has? Does that help or hinder turnout, participation and engagement?

In Scotland, we have recently extended the franchise for Scottish Parliament elections to pretty much everyone with settled status, including EU nationals and people with settled refugee status. Are there any lessons that might be learned from that, particularly in terms of the message it might send to counteract some of what you have described as the hostile environment and how it might make it clear that everyone is welcome and everyone ought to participate in the democratic system?

**Maurice Mcleod:** I will try—sorry; I was not writing those down, but I will try to remember the questions.

The first was about how automatic registration could happen—I think that is what you said. I am not a techie, so there is no way I will be able to describe what the functions would be to make sure that happens, but, as I said, the same process that issues a national insurance number or the same process that says, “You are now this age and a British citizen, or whatever, therefore you can work and pay taxes” should also say, “Therefore you can now vote” and some information should be sent out with that. It might say, “Congratulations, you are 18”—you can argue whether the voting age should be younger, but it should be like a rite of passage—“You are now an adult in our society. You now have this right to have a say in how we are run as a country.” That would send a really strong message, rather than having to apply.

One of my fears about the Bill is that the people who will be most impacted by it and who really will be excluded from having a say are probably the people who are less able and probably less keen to talk about it. It is not something they are bothered about; they do not vote, so they do not vote. They are not going to be marching on Parliament demanding a vote that they do not use anyway. You end up arguing on people’s behalf.

I cannot remember the second part of your question.

**Q142 Patrick Grady:** It was about how postal voting helps with participation and turnout in minority communities? Then I asked about expanding the franchise.

Picking up on what you said there, however, that relates to some of what was discussed yesterday. Is there something about civic education and awareness raising about the importance of participation in our democratic systems among minority communities that might also help to increase turnout and participation?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Absolutely. We should do loads more for all communities, not just minority communities. Learning how your country works, how you get involved in it and how you change things, if you feel that they need to be changed, should be among the most important things that we are taught as we grow up in this society. Instead, it is seen as a bit of a fringe subject or people say, “Oh, let’s not talk about politics because it might get too political and then we might be accused of being one way or the other.” Instead, we should have a real love for democracy. We should instil the idea that you, as an individual, have a say in the country that you run. That is really important and I do not think we do anywhere near enough of that, so we should consider anything that increases knowledge among the public about how you change things—what’s a councillor;

who's an MP; what's an Assembly Member; what do these things mean; who does what. Most of us do not know this stuff—most of us in this room might do—most people out there do not know this stuff. Anything that improves that would be great.

In terms of extending the mandate, I personally am of the opinion that anyone who is resident here should have a say in what goes on here. Anyone who lives and works in our society should have a say about what goes on here. I would extend that in ways that may be tricky to do, but I think prisoners should have a say—lots of people should have a say. In my opinion the mandate should be extended to all residents in this country.

You mentioned postal voting. I have not got any evidence of whether it has a particular impact on black and minority ethnic people, but I know that you have a longer window when you have a postal vote. We should give people the ability to go down and post their vote in the middle of night, or whenever they want to fit in with their lives; we all live these piecemeal, sometimes slightly precarious, lives and we have responsibilities. You cannot always say, "Right, I am going to go down on a Thursday and queue up if I need to, and vote" because you might need to be at work or drop off your kids. Just allowing people to vote by post is massively beneficial.

**The Chair:** I have Tom Randall, followed by Fleur Anderson, Kate Hollern and Jerome Mayhew. If there is time at the end, I will bring Paul Bristow back in.

**Paul Bristow:** Thank you.

**Q143 Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con):** Mr Mcleod, good afternoon. I would just like to clarify a couple of points. You said in your evidence earlier that you had seen stuff. You are here as the chief executive of a charity, Race on the Agenda. The charity has not commissioned any research into this matter at all?

**Maurice Mcleod:** No, it has not.

**Q144 Tom Randall:** So, there is no primary evidence about participation? You are just commenting on stuff that you have seen in the press or elsewhere?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Absolutely. I am not claiming that this is based on any specific research that ROTA—that is my organisation—has done. There is an amount of research out there, I guess.

**Q145 Tom Randall:** Sure. We heard some evidence yesterday about voter fraud and where it has occurred. We heard evidence from Tower Hamlets, as we discussed, and Slough and inner-city Birmingham, where voter fraud has occurred. Those places tend to have higher non-white populations than other places. Would you agree that the serious victims of voter fraud are ethnic minority people?

**Maurice Mcleod:** I would argue that it is all of us. If there is anything going wrong with our electoral system, we all suffer. We might end up with a Government who we do not want or a local authority that did not actually win the vote. We all suffer if there is voter fraud.

**Q146 Tom Randall:** To the extent that it does occur, if voter fraud affects an area, it is more likely to affect—as we heard yesterday, the biggest victims in Tower Hamlets

were the Bangladeshi population, who were disenfranchised because an election was stolen from them. If we agree that it is a problem, it is going to affect non-white populations in this country.

**Maurice Mcleod:** Yes, if we agree that it is a problem. I am afraid that I have not seen the evidence from Tower Hamlets, but I will take your word for it; I am sure you are right. Like I say, I am not sure whether it would have been solved by the measures that you are talking about bringing in, but if it is a problem, everyone suffers. I do not think just the residents or the voters in a particular area who might be disenfranchised suffer. We all suffer because our system does not work properly then.

**Q147 Tom Randall:** Sorry, you say you don't know, but perhaps examples from Tower Hamlets are more pertinent than examples from the United States.

**Maurice Mcleod:** Yes—sure, of course. Absolutely. But I would also like to know how prevalent this is. Is it a one-off situation in one place that needs to be dealt with in a particular way, or is it an endemic thing in our system? I am not really convinced that it is endemic in our system. I guess that is what I am saying.

**Q148 Tom Randall:** Finally from me, we talk about how it affects ethnic minority groups, but that is not one group of people. Do you accept that there is a lot of diversity within that? When you say that this might have a particular effect on minority groups, what does that mean in practice?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Do you mean the voter ID measures?

**Tom Randall:** Yes.

**Maurice Mcleod:** If there are particular groups—the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community was mentioned earlier; those communities are particularly vulnerable to this—who, for one reason or another, are less likely to have the ID required, the impact will fall disproportionately on them. If a larger percentage of black Caribbean people do not have this ID, bringing in the measure will have a bigger impact on them.

**Q149 Tom Randall:** My understanding is that Cabinet Office data suggests the reverse of that. That is your supposition on this point, but you have commissioned no research to back that up?

**Maurice Mcleod:** No, I have not.

**Patrick Grady:** On a point of order, Ms Rees. Can I just confirm that witnesses have been invited to speak to this Committee on the basis of their experience and there is no requirement or expectation of any of the witnesses who appear today or who appeared yesterday to back up their evidence with primary source research evidence? We have not asked any other witness to detail the evidential base. We are entitled to ask questions and witnesses are entitled to respond on the basis of their experience. Can I confirm that, please?

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr Grady. The witnesses have been invited to give evidence on the basis of their experience. They do not have to have any research as a back-up. We are very grateful that the witnesses have agreed to come along and give evidence.

**Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Further to that point of order, Ms Rees. Is it not the purpose of this Committee to scrutinise any evidence that is given to us, regardless of whether it is backed up by data?

**The Chair:** Yes, it is perfectly proper to ask any questions you want, but I was just clarifying that it is not necessary for the witness to be backed up by research.

**Chris Clarkson:** But it is appropriate for us to push back if we do not agree?

**The Chair:** Of course. You can ask scrutinising, relevant questions.

**Q150 Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): Good afternoon, Maurice. Thank you for coming to speak to the Committee. You said earlier that this does not solve the problem. Can you say anything about things that would solve the problem that you see of lower voting numbers among the black community? Just for the record, there was only one trial of the ID pilot scheme in the format that is in the Bill. That was in Woking, which has an 84% white population, so perhaps you could say that the Government also do not have the primary evidence that is needed.

But if the Bill does go ahead in this way and ID cards are expected, are there any other measures that could mitigate the potential for suppression? From your experience of working with the black community, what would need to be put in place that would make this less of a bad deal?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Thank you. As I was saying earlier, if we cannot move to a place where people are automatically registered and you get sent your photo ID that is relevant when you turn up and vote automatically, I would like to see a massive effort from all local authorities to actively seek out the people who do not have photo ID. Authorities must contact them and say, "Look, here's a form, here's how you apply for your free photo ID from the council." It is not enough just to say, "Oh well, if people want it, it's easy enough for them to go on this website or turn up at the town hall and ask for this stuff." Yes, it is easy for us because we want those things, we want our vote and we see the value in it. So much more needs to be done.

It is bigger than just getting people voter ID cards: it is making our democracy transparent and making it easy to engage with your local authority, MP or Assembly member. It is making all those paths much clearer and simpler to use than they currently are. If you know how the system works, who to put pressure on and how to impact your world, you have a much better existence. If you are not that of sort of person, politics just happens to you. It is not something that you actively engage in. We should be doing everything in our power to encourage and show people where their power is, what they can do and what they can change. If you have a society that feels it cannot make changes or be engaged in the way that it should, people switch off or get distracted into things that do not benefit society at all. That is a bit wider than the question you asked, but we need to be proactive in reaching out to these communities. We can find them. We can work out who does not have a driving licence. We can work out where these people are, so let us do that and ensure that they have everything they need to be able to express their democratic rights.

**Q151 Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): Thank you for attending this session. It is interesting that you are the first black witness that we have had and you were invited along to talk about race. I apologise on behalf of the Committee for the way you were treated. The evidence we had yesterday from Peter Golds and Eric Pickles verified that election fraud does happen on very rare occasions. I would like to pick up your point about reaching out to communities and how we engage, encourage and assist people to get involved in the democratic process. Is there anything in the Bill that will enhance that communication and support?

I have just checked the allegation of fraud made by the hon. Member for Peterborough and, in those cases, it was found that no offences were committed. Does the message that electoral fraud has happened in black and ethnic minority communities act to disfranchise those communities, which we are trying to reach?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Sadly, I think it does, whether deliberately or not. I think we should always lean towards things having been done in good faith, but if you say things like, "There is very serious electoral fraud, and it happens in areas where there are lots of black and Asian people," it is not a massive leap in people's minds to, "Okay; so black and Asian people are somehow doing electoral fraud. That is what we're clamping down on. We're stopping people doing something dodgy to our process." That is exactly the sort of alienating message that ends up with people saying, "I'm not interested in any of that stuff. All that politics stuff has nothing to do with me." Those sorts of narratives do play into that, I am afraid. I have forgotten the beginning part of your question, but I worry about the narrative of, "We need to solve this massive fraud problem that is happening in minority ethnic areas." I will not say it is a dog whistle, but I think it has an impact on minority communities, certainly.

**Paul Bristow:** On a point of order, Ms Rees.

**The Chair:** I do not really want to go down the road of more points of order. The Committee is becoming quite agitated. If there is anything you would like to raise, perhaps it could be raised after the witnesses have left. Would the Committee be content with that? We are against the clock, and more Members would like to come in.

**Paul Bristow:** I am perfectly happy to raise my point afterwards, but it is worth noting that it has been implied that my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling and I were unreasonable in our questioning, and that it may be because the witness comes from an ethnic minority. It is perfectly legitimate to place on record that that is not the case. Our questions were perfectly in order. I find it insulting that the hon. Member for Blackburn would even suggest such a thing.

**The Chair:** Can we leave it there, please? Your comments are on the record now. We need to move on and take more questions, but your point is noted.

**Q152 Kate Hollern:** A final question from me. Ladies wearing face coverings turning up to polling stations will require there to be a lot more female staff in polling stations. How can that be managed, and how can we reassure communities that polling stations will have the facilities and staff required?

**Maurice Mcleod:** That is very hard. You make a really good point. It is all very well saying that photo ID should be used, but if you are not supposed to reveal your face to a man who is not in your immediate family, that is really hard. Even if councils say, “We’ll make sure there are women, or people who know what should happen, at the polling station,” there is still that worry in your head, if you are that woman who is not that confident about whatever, and you need to go out and vote. There is still that concern—“Will I be treated properly? Do they know what my faith needs?”

If that is the route we go down, I would want to see a real effort, through mosques and any other faith groups that would be impacted, to bring those communities on board and show them, “This is how it will be. It will be completely safe. We totally get what you need to do to be observant.” It is another worry—one that I have not brought up so far. Not everyone can use their face as ID as freely as the rest of us.

**Q153 Kate Hollern:** Thank you very much. Is the voter ID scheme as set out in the Bill compatible with the right to vote under the European convention on human rights, particularly when read with the anti-discrimination provision in article 14 in mind?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Sorry, I am not sure. Can you say that again?

**Q154 Kate Hollern:** There is some suggestion that the Bill could contradict the Human Rights Act. Do you have any experience or knowledge of that?

**Maurice Mcleod:** I do not, I am afraid. I am not from a constitutional background or a legal background, so that is not something I could comment on.

**Kate Hollern:** Very finally, how do you—

**The Chair:** We have to move on. I promised Jerome Mayhew that he could come in, so if we have time at the end, I will bring you and Paul Bristow back in, Ms Hollern. We are against the clock. Mr Mayhew?

**Q155 Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con):** Thank you very much, Ms Rees. Maurice, thank you very much for taking part in this evidence session. In your primary evidence, you suggested that you were very concerned about the voter participation of BAME groups if photo ID were required. The rationale that you gave—I took a note at the time—was that between 47% and 50% of BAME potential voters had photo ID. Is that correct? Is that your view?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Sorry, can you say that stat again? I may have got the stat jumbled at the time. Can you repeat that?

**Jerome Mayhew:** In your evidence earlier on today, you suggested that when you started to look at BAME voters, the incidence of availability of photo ID dropped to 47% to 50%. Is that your view?

**Maurice Mcleod:** Yes. I believe it is 48% of black people.

**Q156 Jerome Mayhew:** So roughly that. I am not holding you to a particular percentage, but roughly 50%. That is the basis of your concern, or one of the bases of your concern, about the fear of reduced voter participation in black and ethnic minority communities. Is that right?

**Maurice Mcleod:** It is part of it. It is one of the things that gives me concern that this will have a particular impact on those communities, yes.

**Q157 Jerome Mayhew:** We have a slight advantage. I am not going to try to trip you up on this; I am just going to read out some data that we have the advantage of having. In March of this year, the Cabinet Office undertook some independent research, done by the independent research company IFF, in which they telephone interviewed 8,500 people from right across the country to establish the facts—the real data—behind that assertion. Their conclusion was that among the general population, 98% of the population had relevant photo ID, and in the BAME communities, that figure was 99%. Given that very significant difference between your concern that it was less than 50% and the reality that it is 99%, would you accept that your concerns are based on a false premise and that you are, to that extent at least, reassured?

**Maurice Mcleod:** If it turned out that 99% or whatever you just said of BAME people do have relevant ID, that is quite reassuring indeed. There was lots of talk about this in the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities’ report; I would be interested in seeing a proper breakdown, because it is all very well saying, “Minority ethnic people have IDs”, but if that ignores Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people in particular, or particular groups who have much lower numbers of take-up, that would still be a concern. In fact, it would mean that those groups are even more marginalised, because they are a special case: their lack of the required ID is not being flagged up.

**Q158 Jerome Mayhew:** I quite understand. We have already heard that “BAME” includes a large number of sub-groups, but under the methodology of that independent research, one of the key areas was

“What percentage of the eligible population do not hold at least one form of photo ID currently under consideration for the voter ID requirement?”

and

“What is the level of ownership of the required photographic ID in groups with protected characteristics? specifically with reference to:

Race or ethnicity  
Disability; and  
Age.”

This was a very thorough and independent piece of research, and if that is the case—you can look at it on the gov.uk website, so it is publicly available—that would, as you say, provide you with a degree of reassurance.

**Maurice Mcleod:** I would feel slightly better. If everyone had a relevant form of photo ID, I would feel slightly better about this. It is like saying you need to bring your front door keys when you come along and vote. Most people have a front door key; it would still stop some people from voting.

**Jerome Mayhew:** I agree, and you made some very good points. Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Order. I am afraid that brings us to the end of the time allotted to the Committee to ask questions, and indeed for this morning’s session. On behalf of the Committee, I thank our witness for his evidence. The Committee will meet again here at 2 pm this afternoon to continue taking oral evidence. I invite the Government Whip to move the adjournment.

*Ordered,* That further consideration be now adjourned.—(David Rutley.)

1 pm

*Adjourned till this day at Two o’clock.*



