

Summary of 2nd Reading Debate: 23rd February 2018

Glyn Davies presented the Bill by putting forward three main arguments in support of it:

1. It would bring justice to all UK citizens living abroad who were currently the object of discrimination because of their place of residence.
2. It would recognise the importance of the 'soft power' of British citizens around the world in promoting UK interests, often working for UK companies, or making indirect contributions to the UK in various ways.
3. It would remove the arbitrary time limit on voting rights, introduced at a time when it was assumed that living abroad for 15 years would lead to a loss of connection with the UK; this was no longer relevant since the internet had revolutionised communications, meaning that people can now easily follow British affairs from around the world as they happen.

The Minister for the Constitution Chloe Smith, MP for Norwich, added that the bill was part of a wider ambition to strengthen British democracy by extending the franchise, and several Conservative MPs stressed that it was a non-partisan bill, and not a political issue.

This non-partisan approach was endorsed by the Labour MP for Ilford South, Mike Gapes, who presented himself as honorary president of Labour International <http://www.labourinternational.net> and who supported the aims of the bill.

Other Labour MPs however presented a number of objections to it:

1. The Government's use of a Private Member's Bill to introduce a manifesto pledge was described by the Shadow Minister for the Constitution Cat Smith, MP for Lancaster & Fleetwood, as 'deeply concerning' and showed disrespect for an important part of the parliamentary process open to Back Benchers.
2. She also spoke at some length about concerns that the bill would have a negative impact on the delivery of electoral services which were already overstretched and under-resourced, as documented in several reports by the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) and the Electoral Commission (EC).
3. Sandy Martin, MP for Ipswich, argued at great length that there should be 'no representation without taxation' and that tax avoiders or exiles should not have a say in how taxes are raised in the UK.
4. Jo Stevens, MP for Cardiff Central, argued that British democracy could be better strengthened by giving votes to 16 & 17 year olds and by addressing the problem of under-registration of domestic voters.

There were also suggestions of a more political nature from the Opposition, implying that overseas electors were mainly registered in affluent areas and that preventing registration by overseas electors in more than one place would be difficult to manage under the proposed new legislation unless a central register was introduced.

Support for the Bill came from Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford & Abingdon West, Layla Moran, based partly on her personal experience of living abroad but also on the lobbying of many of her overseas constituents in the EU.

Broadly speaking then, the debate revealed that Labour policy was to oppose the bill but that the Liberal Democrats supported it. The Government was able to mobilise enough

support from within Conservative ranks to ensure that at the closure of the debate the bill successfully passed the Second Reading stage and would be progressed to a Public Bill Committee for further discussion and amendment.

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