

Positions of the parties on the Overseas Electors Bill 2017-19 December 2018

a) Conservative Party

As supporter of the bill, the Conservative Party's position is clear: the goal of 'Votes For Life' was adopted for the first time by the Conservative Party in September 2014 and included in its Manifestos for the elections in 2015 and 2017. Although it was included in the Queen's Speech under David Cameron in May 2015, the Cabinet Office did not issue a formal policy statement until October 2016, seeking feedback from interested parties. When Theresa May became Prime Minister after the EU Referendum she confirmed her government's commitment to the manifesto pledge but in the absence of any further statements or policy documents, many supporters of the bill feared that it was being 'kicked into the long grass', possibly due to the pressure of passing Brexit legislation. However, it became clear in February 2018, soon after the appointment of Chloe Smith as Minister for the Constitution, that the Government was backing the Private Member's bill sponsored by Glyn Davies as a 'Handout Bill'.

As pointed out by MP Geoffrey Clifton-Brown [in Parliament](#) in 2014, it is the Conservative Party that has always been at the forefront of introducing and extending legislation to enfranchise British citizens living abroad. They have consistently argued that in an increasingly globalised world, British citizens should not be penalised for living outside the UK: many of them contribute directly or indirectly to the UK economy in various ways and many of them continue to pay tax in the UK. In recent years, the international wing of the party, [Conservatives Abroad](#), has played an active role on behalf of its members in persuading the party leadership to adopt the policy of granting 'Votes For Life'.

Although the principle of enfranchising overseas electors has always been presented by the Conservatives as non-partisan, it is probably fair to say that the party's support for it has traditionally been underpinned by an assumption that it attracts more support from the overseas electorate than Labour. Whilst this may have been true in the 1980s and 90s, Britons living abroad now constitute a far more diverse cross-section of the population both in terms of age and socio-economic profile, so logically they will also be more politically diverse.

b) Labour Party

Labour's opposition to the bill, made clear during all the parliamentary debates so far, was confirmed in a [letter](#) to veteran ex-pat campaigner Harry Shindler and reported in the press in June. This position was entirely in keeping with its traditionally hostile attitude towards the principle of extending the franchise to overseas electors as demonstrated during previous parliamentary debates on relevant legislation. (See summaries of debates under 'History of Overseas Voting' in the Resources section of this web-site).

A number of objections of principle have been common themes in their opposition over the years: concerns about the impact on the British system of democracy based on the constituency link, concerns that tax exiles and non-tax payers should not be allowed to have a say in how the country is governed, and concerns that non-resident citizens would lose any connection with the UK and therefore not be able to

make a valid decision in casting their vote. During the 1980s, Labour opposition was also largely underpinned by negative stereotypes of expatriates as either wealthy tax dodgers or criminals living the life of Riley on the 'Costa del Crime'. But by the time they came to power under New Labour in 1997, the internal debate had moved on and electoral registration levels were so low anyway that the political implications of the overseas vote were not considered threatening. This did not however prevent them from reducing the restriction on overseas voting rights from 20 years to 15.

Labour's opposition to the current bill is interesting in that it is based largely on concerns for the negative impact of its implementation on electoral administrators, who have not in the past been given much consideration. The arguments are based on issues raised by both the Electoral Commission (EC) and the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA).

- The Electoral Commission published a short [briefing paper](#) in February 2018 which stressed three key considerations:
 1. The need to clarify regulations governing 'permissibility of donations'
 2. The need to improve access to the actual voting process which is currently fraught with practical difficulties
 3. The need to take account of the additional resources that will be necessary to enable electoral administrators to deal with the increased workload that would follow from a large increase in the number of registrations if the bill is passed
- The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) had also alerted Government in its [election reports](#) to the fact that electoral services were already overstretched and under-resourced to the point where the integrity of the electoral process was at risk. They argue that the anticipated increase in the number of registrations implied by introducing Votes For Life would impose an increased burden on an already over-loaded system.

Despite the Labour Party's formal opposition to the bill, there is also some sympathy for the principle of granting Votes For Life within the ranks of the party, notably the party's international wing, [Labour International](#) (LI) whose Honorary President, MP Mike Gapes, spoke in its favour in the [Second Reading debate](#). He read out a motion passed by its Coordinating Committee stating:

"Many of the concerns about voting are related to fears and anger about the loss of rights normally associated with citizenship such as pensions, health care and the right to family life. This should be dealt with by the government allocating these issues to...a...minister and by establishing a forum for the concerns of overseas UK citizens."

This suggests that they are assuming that the current political mobilisation amongst Britons abroad is essentially Brexit-related, which may well be the case. However, the EU Referendum and its aftermath has been a real wake-up call for many who

had previously not voted or taken much interest in UK politics, and this might trigger more support for Votes For Life.

Created after Conservatives Abroad, LI it has expanded considerably in recent years, and currently boasts 3,300 members. This reflects an increase in international mobility and the democratisation of lifestyle migration, leading to greater socio-economic diversity of the expatriate population. LI has played an active (but so far unsuccessful) role in trying to persuade the party leadership to support Votes For Life, as can be seen on their web-site [here](#).

Although the arguments put forward by Labour against this bill draw upon serious concerns regarding the pressures on the electoral system and the practical difficulties involved in implementing it, procedural objections have also been invoked as explained on the main Overseas Electors Bill page of this web-site.

it is also possible to detect an underlying apprehension that the political implications of increasing the size of the overseas electorate will not be to its advantage.

c) Liberal Democrats

According to Layla Moran, MP for Oxford West and Abingdon, the Liberal Democrats are wholeheartedly backing the bill to introduce Votes For Life, and they voted with the Government in the Money Resolution debate. Yet their [2017 Manifesto](#) <https://www.libdems.org.uk/reform> is rather more ambiguous : it pledges to 'Enable all UK citizens living abroad to vote for MPs in separate overseas constituencies, and to participate in UK referendums'. It is therefore not clear whether or not 'the enabling of all citizens abroad to vote' is conditional on the creation of overseas constituencies. The question of overseas constituencies will be dealt with in a forthcoming discussion paper on this site.

The reference to voting in referendums is clearly an acknowledgment of a major shift in support towards the party from Britons living in the EU as a result of the EU Referendum as demonstrated by the large increase in the membership of [Liberal Democrats Abroad](#) <https://www.libdemsabroad.org/> . Reflecting its federal party structure, there is not one but three branches of LibDems Abroad: [LibDems in Europe](#), [LibDems in France](#) and [LibDems Overseas](#), all of which support the aim of Votes For Life.

Historically, the LibDems have tended to have a rather fluid position towards the various changes in legislation over the years, but one constant theme to emerge from parliamentary debates is their commitment to securing unlimited voting rights for Britons working in international organisations such as the EU, NATO, the UN, the Council of Europe etc. This would obviously be delivered if Votes For Life is passed. A second concern of LibDems relating to overseas voting has been the question of its impact on party funding, and this was again raised by Layla Moran in the Third Sitting of the Committee proceedings of the Overseas Electors Bill.

d) Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)

Currently the party only organises within Northern Ireland and membership is open to people

resident in NI. Associate membership is open to people living anywhere else, both in the rest of the UK or elsewhere. There is no specific international section and in relation to the Overseas Electors Bill, it is expected that MPs will support the government.

e) Green Party

Green Party has a [policy](https://policy.greenparty.org.uk/ny.html) <https://policy.greenparty.org.uk/ny.html> which seeks reform of nationality laws and considers that citizenship should be based on residence in and commitment to a geographical area, and would be lost by extended absence. Voting rights should be based on residence rather than nationality. Green Party MP Caroline Lucas voted against the Overseas Electors Bill in the Money Resolution debate on 16th October.

f) Plaid Cymru

Plaid Cymru does not have a separate international section and has no stated policy on overseas voting. Its representative on the Committee that scrutinised the Overseas Electors Bill during the Autumn of 2018, Ben Lake, MP for Ceredigion, voted against the Government on amendments tabled by Labour.

g) Scottish National Party (SNP)

The SNP's position is against the principle of voting rights for citizens who live outside Scotland. This policy was implemented for the independence referendum in 2014 when even Scots in the rest of the UK were not allowed to vote. Their position is that voting rights should be based on residency, and they embraced an inclusive definition of the demos by allowing resident EU citizens and 16-17 year olds to vote in the referendum since they are allowed to vote in Scottish Assembly elections. The intervention by SNP MP for Glasgow East, David Linden in the [Money Resolution debate](#) on the Overseas Electors Bill 2017-19, indicates that his party will oppose the bill on these grounds.

Overseas Voting Abroad