



Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Oral evidence: [Voter engagement in the UK](#), HC 232

Tuesday 9 September 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- The Government

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Members present: Mr Graham Allen (Chair); Mr Christopher Chope; Mark Durkan; Paul Flynn; Fabian Hamilton; Chris Ruane; Mr Andrew Turner

Questions 793 – 840

Witness: **Mr Sam Gyimah MP**, Minister for the Constitution, Cabinet Office, gave evidence.

Chair: Hello, Sam. How are you? Welcome.

Mr Gyimah: Good morning.

Chair: We are not as unfriendly as we look. Hopefully we will be able to give you a nice baptism in coming before the Committee. We hope to see you again regularly, and if there are things that you want to bring to the House and to this Committee, please always feel free to let us know and we will try to do our best to accommodate you. Congratulations on your appointment.

Mr Gyimah: Thank you.

Q793 Chair: Did you want to say anything to start us off or do you want to dive straight into questions?

Mr Gyimah: Yes, I do have a few introductory remarks.

Chair: Please go ahead.

Mr Gyimah: Good morning and thanks for having me here today. I welcome the opportunity to take part in the inquiry on voter engagement. Obviously you have had a lot of interest and I know that you have heard a lot from enthusiastic individuals and organisations in the process of this inquiry. Voter engagement itself is a broad concept and touches on a range of areas. When I made mentioned to one senior politician that it was my first Select Committee hearing and it was on voter engagement, he replied, “Well, isn’t that what MPs do all the time, especially in their constituencies?” So it is a very broad concept.

I know you have focused a lot on voter registration. In my view, government, politicians, electoral administrators and civil society all have a role to play in engaging people in our democracy. As the Government specifically, I see the responsibility as ensuring that the structures and mechanisms are in place to enable people to participate in the democratic process. We are committed to ensuring that everyone who is eligible to do so has the opportunity to register to vote. As you are aware, online registration was introduced in England and Wales on 10 June and, without the risk of hyperbole, I think that is the biggest innovation project we have out there for engaging voters. It is making it simpler and easier for everyone to register to vote and I commend the officials who have been working on it to make sure it has happened on time. It is not too often that a government IT project starts without a big glitch, but fingers crossed.

Individual electoral registration helps to improve engagement by building greater trust in our elections and making voter registration easier and more convenient, but as I said, there are other organisations that have a role to play in this as well, some of whom you have heard from over the last few months. We don't have all the answers and there are a lot of organisations out there that are doing very interesting and exciting things as far as engaging with voters is concerned. We are working with a number of these organisations. The Royal Mencap Society is a good example: they are creating innovative resources to engage people with learning disabilities and promote voter registration. The media also have a role to play. They play a big part in engaging electors on a day-by-day—actually on a 24-hour news cycle these days—but you also may be aware of an initiative launched by Sky, Stand Up Be Counted. It lets young people create media about issues they are interested in and signposts them to where they can register to vote.

Finally, politicians and political parties have a role in voter engagement. There is a lot that we can do. Our responsibilities as campaigners, individuals and through our political parties are absolutely vital. I would like to draw the Committee's attention to a statutory instrument that is currently before Parliament that will allow registered political parties to be given information as to which entries on the register are IER entries and implicitly, therefore, which ones are not. Political parties themselves asked for this information to help to encourage people to register to vote. Given that we are so close to a general election, it presents a big opportunity to get as many eligible people as possible engaged with the democratic process and registered to vote.

I look forward to the discussion with you today.

Chair: Sam, thank you so much.

Q794 Mr Turner: What have the Government done over the course of this Parliament to encourage democratic participation?

Mr Gyimah: The Government have done a number of things. The principal one is individual electoral registration to make the registration system more secure but also, by having an online aspect to it, making it easier for more people to register to vote. As I said in my opening remarks, this is the biggest innovation project of its kind and we are investing £4.2 million so far in maximising the registration process.

Q795 Mr Turner: What is the Government's view of what is a desirable level of voter registration and turnout?

Mr Gyimah: There are two questions in that. In terms of voter registration, nearly 85% of those eligible are already registered to vote and this figure has stabilised recently since falling at the end of the 1990s. It varies across different groups and there are different reasons for this. We are working to get everyone who is eligible to vote to be on the register. Turnout has been falling for

the best part of a decade and the idea is that once you register people to vote and they are more engaged in the process, you look to get them to actually vote.

Q796 Mr Turner: What about people who are living overseas? It is said there are something like 3 million people who are not registered; the number registered is about 15,000. Isn't that a pretty pathetic response?

Mr Gyimah: I would agree that overseas electors are some of the most under-represented on the electoral register and more needs to be done to make sure they are represented on the electoral register. It is something that since I became the Minister I have asked officials to look into, to see what we can do in terms of the funds we are making available for maximising registration to target some of it at overseas voters.

Q797 Mr Turner: What are you aiming for? The total is 3 million. What is the number you are aiming for?

Mr Gyimah: We are starting from quite a low base, given that they are the most under-represented. I think the first step is to make sure that when we allocate funding to maximise the register, we do what we can to include overseas voters in that formula. I have just about begun discussions with officials, so I can't really give a guarantee in terms of the number that we are aiming for.

Q798 Mr Turner: You would accept, I guess, that it is very difficult to have television adverts and so on that would get to them as easily as we attack those in this country.

Mr Gyimah: There could be a number of ways of doing this. One way, and I am not saying this is firm policy, could be looking at doing something through our embassies overseas. That could be a way of doing it. There could be advertising. There are a number of ways that you could do this but, as I said, I have only started the discussions on that.

Q799 Mr Turner: But you would be aiming to hit those "registrees" by the time of the next election? They have to be able to register by the time of the next election, this forthcoming election.

Mr Gyimah: That is my aim.

Mr Turner: Thank you for that.

Q800 Paul Flynn: You have told us it is important for the electoral registration officers to get out their public awareness leaflets to combine with the Government's programme for individual electoral registration. We have had evidence from Nottingham City Council that states that the letters there could not be sent out because of a computer problem and they are being sent out this month, in September. Do you know how many other authorities have been affected in the same way?

Mr Gyimah: Sorry, could you speak up a bit? Do I know—

Paul Flynn: Do you know of any other authorities? Was Nottingham unique in not sending out their letters at the same time as the IER campaign?

Mr Gyimah: The responsibility for sending out the letters lies with the local authorities. I can't give you the authorities other than Nottingham, if there are any, but by the time we finish the process in December all the letters should have gone out from the local authorities.

Q801 Paul Flynn: It certainly would be a great advantage if they were sent out in most areas in that time, but if there has been a failure do you think it is likely to have a very serious effect on public awareness of the change?

Mr Gyimah: I don't think I will accept the argument that there has been a failure to get letters out on time. We have a time period within which this has to be done. Local authorities are aware of that and we would expect that within that time period they would get all the letters out. In fact, judging by some of my correspondence and the complaints about the open register, I would say that there are a lot of people who are receiving their letters and in those letters being made aware of the fact that they have to opt in or out of the open register and we are getting the complaints. So I would say that it is going as smoothly as can be for such a huge project.

Q802 Paul Flynn: There was an optimistic result in the last general election when the turnout went up to 65% from 59% in the previous one, but we have seen a lamentable result in the elections for police and crime commissioners. They were at the very poor level of 15% originally but on the by-election that took place recently it went down to 10.4%, which is a ludicrous number for claiming that it is a democratic vote and expression of opinion. What do you think the feeling will be? What do you think the repercussions of derisory votes at these levels will be on the reputation for representative democracy?

Mr Gyimah: That is a hypothetical question. I have those turnout figures in front of me and the 2010 turnout was 65%, 2005 was 61%, 2001 was 59% and 1997 was 71%. So you can see that turnout is dropping in general elections and also we saw that in the PCC elections. I would say that the responsibility for turnout lies with all of us. It lies with politicians and the political parties. After all, as politicians it is in our interests to get people out to vote for us. What the Government have to do is make sure that the mechanisms and the structures are in place so that people can get on the register.

Q803 Paul Flynn: The justification for having police and crime commissioners was that there was a demand from the public to elect people to these offices, but it is clear that the public don't think so; 90% of the public turned their backs on the process in the by-election. It is not a question of blaming the voters. The voters are clearly saying they don't want police and crime commissioners or they are not interested enough to bother to vote. Wouldn't it be sensible to abandon this expensive, failing experiment?

Mr Gyimah: My job as the Minister for the Constitution is to look at voting and election turnout, not the policy of police and crime commissioners. What I can say, however, is that we have just introduced police and crime commissioners. These are some of the first elections we have had and we know, whether they are parish or local council elections or European elections or general elections, at certain times of the year you are more likely to get a higher turnout than at other times of the year. The general election turnout is a lot higher because people are more engaged with the general election than they are with the local council elections. So I would not infer from turnout that the policy itself is a failure but, as I said—and I wasn't blaming the voters—it is incumbent on us politicians, the principal participators in the democratic process, to make sure that we get our supporters out to vote.

Q804 Paul Flynn: In 2000 there were 3.9 million people who were not registered to vote. Now, there are 7.5 million people who are not registered to vote. Doesn't this represent a dangerous disengagement with the democratic process? What is the Government doing to address this?

Mr Gyimah: I think we should be very careful how we characterise the point you just made that now there are 7.5 million people who are not registered to vote. What has happened is that as we go through the transition to IER we have realised that there are 7.5 million people who have fallen off the register. We have to take a step back and realise why IER was a good policy, which is to make sure that we have completeness but also accuracy of the register. We can't have completeness at the expense of accuracy but, yes, where there are people who should be on the electoral roll who are not it is incumbent on Government to make sure they are. That is why in phase 1 we have committed £4.2 million across all local authorities and also five national organisations to reach out to those people who have fallen off the electoral register to engage them and make sure they register to vote.

Q805 Paul Flynn: Are you concerned that certain public figures who have rather higher profiles than any of us, and even Government Ministers, are urging young people not to vote and presumably not to register?

Mr Gyimah: Government Ministers are not urging people not to register.

Paul Flynn: No. I am trying to avoid his name but Russell Brand, who has 7 million followers on Twitter, which is rather more than we as MPs and politicians have—

Chris Ruane: Combined.

Paul Flynn: Combined, yes—is urging people not to vote. Do you think this is a dangerous trend? This is someone who is hugely influential, an attractive figure that young people will follow, and young people are the ones who are more disengaged than anyone else. Do you think you ought to be out there trying to counter this trend in some way with equally attractive figures urging people to vote and to register?

Mr Gyimah: That is a very good point, Mr Flynn, but I would tend to look at the data. We know that people are not apathetic and research by Demos shows that young people in particular care deeply about political issues and having their say but do not always show this at the ballot box. There is no one quick fix. If there was we would have implemented this already. That is why our plan to engage voters involves politicians and civil society organisations but also involves organisations like UK Youth and Scotland Youth who have a national reach and can engage young people, not to mention some other innovative organisations like Bite the Ballot who we have been working with. So there is no quick fix to this. You are absolutely right to say that in a democracy as old as ours we should be expecting higher levels of voter engagement and participation, and it is incumbent on all of us to make sure that we help deal with it. It is sad when a leading celebrity feels that they can encourage people not to vote and that video gets more hits on YouTube than any political interview. It is a travesty of where we are.

Q806 Paul Flynn: Are the Government concerned about the distortion in policies that results when Government have attempted to retain benefits and protect benefits for those who are on the register, such as rich pensioners, but then cut benefits for those who are not registered and don't vote, such as young people?

Mr Gyimah: I think the main argument to encourage people to be on the register and to vote is so they can have their voice heard. We have to make young people aware that they should make their

voice heard and if they make their voice heard then Government policy would reflect their concerns—which is not to say that it doesn't at the moment. I would not go as far as saying one Government policy is what is driving young people away. After all, this is not a trend that started overnight; it is not a trend that started under this Government. Disengagement of young people in politics is a long-running trend in British politics and we have to make sure that we do everything we can to get them more involved.

Q807 Paul Flynn: I am not blaming any Government or any party. Parties go out and try to get the maximum votes and they know how to do it.

Mr Gyimah: But you mentioned specific policies.

Paul Flynn: It means looking after rich pensioners like myself and if necessary neglecting young people who are not going to vote.

The final point I want to make is that right throughout this inquiry we hear again and again about the differences in the level of registration and it varies on all kinds of demographic factors: age, ethnicity, housing tenure. Do you think this is a problem? There seem to be huge gaps between, say, black and Asian groups and the other groups, between those living in council houses and those living in private houses. This means that ultimately decisions on politics will be distorted in favour of those who are exercising their vote and against those who neglect to.

Mr Gyimah: Before taking that point, can I just place on record that I think it is inaccurate to say that somehow the current Government is ignoring the concerns of young people. We have the lowest number of NEETs since records began; more than 1.5 million apprenticeships are being created all to help young people get into work. Those are just two examples of policy, not to mention other areas in Help to Buy. There is a lot being done to help young people and I would not want anyone watching this inquiry to accept your premise that somehow there is a trade-off between pensioners and young people and that this Government is perpetuating that trade-off. That is certainly not the case.

To go to your actual question about the groups of people who are under-represented on the register, Mr Turner touched on overseas voters. They are the most under-represented on the electoral register. Also we have black and minority groups and social tenants that are under-represented, as you mentioned. That is why we are working with five organisations around the country and all local authorities, and what we have done with the distribution of the £4.2 million funding that is available is looked at things like how accurate the registration is and the proportionality of it—that is, funding should be allocated in proportion to the problem it seeks to correct. We have tried to make sure that this is done at the most local level to people, so EROs have a lot of responsibility in getting people on to the register, but also equity so that areas of similar levels of under-representation should receive similar funding. It is forward looking and it is consistent. These are the principles that underlie how we have allocated the £4.2 million to make sure that the groups of people that you mentioned who should be on the register are reached by the people most local to them and encouraged to be on the register and to vote.

Paul Flynn: Just to make the point that I was not in any way trying to make a political point. This Committee rises above the vulgar Punch and Judy show of politics that takes place elsewhere and we operate on a plane above such things.

Mr Gyimah: That is a good to hear. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you, Paul, for a little bit of light relief with your comments there.

Q808 Chris Ruane: Minister, you will be aware that it was Labour that introduced the 2009 Act for IER and introduced it with all-party consensus to be introduced in 2015 after five years of getting the missing 6 million people on to the register. Can you explain why one of the first acts of the Government in 2010 was to break this consensus and bring forward IER by one year to 2014?

Mr Gyimah: What we are continuing to do on IER is the—

Chris Ruane: Not continuing to do. Going back four years ago, what was the reason for breaking this consensus on the 2009 Act and bringing forward the introduction of IER by one year to 2014?

Mr Gyimah: In terms of where we are, it is an Act of Parliament now that IER has to be completed in 2015. As you know, no Parliament—

Chris Ruane: Sorry, started in 2014—

Chair: Chris, you are going to have to let the witness answer in his own way and then come back if you are not happy.

Mr Gyimah: It is a fundamental tenet of our democracy that no Parliament can bind future Parliaments. This Parliament has made a decision for it to be completed in 2015. From where I sit, we are confident that there should be no overall reduction in the completeness of the register. That is the most important issue, that we don't have an overall reduction.

Q809 Chris Ruane: What was the reason for bringing it forward one year? It was one of the first acts that the Government did. When they scanned the economic landscape and the social and cultural and constitutional landscape, they said, "This is the most important thing that we want to put forward and we want to bring it forward by one year." What was that reason?

Mr Gyimah: Speed and efficiency, I guess, and we have consulted on this widely.

Q810 Chris Ruane: Are you guessing at that?

Mr Gyimah: It was extensively debated in Parliament, supported by all the main political parties concerned with running elections. If we can do it in 2015, which I think we can, then that is a good thing.

Q811 Chris Ruane: Would the Minister like me to give him the reason for it?

Mr Gyimah: I think you want to speculate on a reason.

Chris Ruane: No, the reason given by previous Ministers who have held your post is that there was great concern about electoral registration fraud and postal ballot fraud, when in essence there had been one case in about five years. Was this programme brought forward by one year, the consensus broken by one year, to gain party political benefit for, one, the 2015 general election and, two, for the freeze date of 1 December 2015, which is the freeze date for the Boundary Commission?

Mr Gyimah: I don't think so at all. You seem to have made up your mind about this and you have asked this question a number of times. As I said earlier on in my remarks, accuracy of the register

is absolutely important. We can't have elections where the result is in any doubt because the register was inaccurate. So, while completeness is important and it is something we should be aiming for, we should also speedily make sure that the electoral register is accurate. So many decisions in our country hinge on the results of elections and who gets to occupy which position. I think it is commendable that the Government places accuracy on the same footing as completeness of the register.

Q812 Chris Ruane: By rushing it, by bringing it forward a year, a number of issues have arisen. One of them is IT. The Minister could not answer before for the number of local authorities that still have issues with their IT system. The IT system is crucial because you are handling millions of bits of information. There are still 12 local authorities who have issues with their IT. Can the Minister say something about that and indeed the other issues that have been caused by rushing IER, and I am thinking particularly about electoral registration officers who repeatedly break the law and do not conduct door-to-door canvassing? There are 98 who have done that in the past six years. Also, about 260 EROs have not conducted local government database matching. Can the Minister say something about the problems of IT, about EROs that break the law in not conducting door-to-door canvassing, and EROs that did not conduct data matching on the dry run? Those are three challenges as a result of bringing it forward.

Mr Gyimah: Mr Ruane, thanks for those three questions in one. I will try to answer all of them. Overall I think that the IT has worked as well as planned. As well as handling high numbers of applications, which you have touched on, the vast majority of electors have been confirmed. Let's go back: on 10 June we introduced IER. Since the launch of IER, the digital service has processed 1.5 million applications. Over 80% of these were made through online registration; over 90% of users have provided feedback saying they are very satisfied; preparations are well on track for Scotland. This is not a programme that is in chaos in the way that you suggest. With any new system, however, there are teething problems. When you use it for the first time there have been problems in some places with the software. I am grateful to the EROs for their professional and dedicated approach in managing these. The bigger problems that delayed the start of the write-out, which was touched on earlier on, have now been dealt with and we are not aware of any authorities that are unable to start the write-out due to problems of software. There is no single remaining problem affecting all users and my officials are committed to working in partnership with each software supplier and the authorities such that we are making sure that the register is as complete and accurate as possible.

Q813 Chris Ruane: The Minister mentioned teething problems and dry runs are supposed to enable EROs to spot those teething problems. The Minister did not answer, and I left him time at the end, on the issue of electoral registration officers that did not data match their 14 or 15 databases locally to improve on the DWP data match. There were 137 that informed the Electoral Commission that they did and about 260 that either did do it and did not bother telling the Electoral Commission or absolutely did not do it. What action can the Minister take against these recalcitrant EROs that do not adopt best practice?

Mr Gyimah: On data matching, as you know, we are doing a lot of data matching with the DWP database. We are also piloting data matching with the DVLA database.

Chris Ruane: With respect, those are national government and the question is about local government.

Chair: Chris, we will come back to that. You must let the witness answer the question and if you are not happy come back again when he has finished, otherwise you are going to be endlessly repeating your question and I know that is not what you want.

Mr Gyimah: Thanks, Mr Allen. It is good to have some passion in these discussions, as Mr Ruane is demonstrating.

Chris Ruane: Now give me some answers.

Mr Gyimah: As I said, on data matching we are matching with the DWP database but also piloting matching with the DVLA database, and I do envisage that problems of matching will persist as we go through this process.

Q814 Chris Ruane: Does the Minister know what the average match is across the UK as a result of—

Mr Gyimah: I don't have the information to hand.

Chris Ruane: But it is critical. Again, if I can tell the Minister it is about 79% for the DWP databases. That takes it up to 86% once they are cross-referenced with the local government databases. So the ones who have done this local government data matching have got high scores and the ones that haven't have got low scores. Surely it must be of concern to the Minister that this was not done on the dry run and is it being done on the live run? What are the Minister's views?

Mr Gyimah: That is why we are also piloting the DVLA matching, to improve completeness.

Q815 Chris Ruane: With respect, those are national databases. They have been done and dusted and brought forward. My issue is with the EROs who do not do the job that is expected of them, that they are paid to do. Some of them have done it, 137 have done it; 260 have not done it. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Mr Gyimah: You dismiss national databases but the DWP—

Chris Ruane: No, I am saying that is fine. We have done it.

Mr Gyimah: —has a date of birth and national insurance number. That is actually quite a key database.

Q816 Chris Ruane: I agree with you entirely—79%. It is getting it up to 100% that is the issue. In my local authority, where the local ERO, Gareth Evans, did do the database matching locally, he got his registration rates up to 92%-93%. In local authorities that did not do it they were much lower. What is the Minister going to do about it?

Mr Gyimah: I think that most of the EROs are working very hard to make sure that we do complete the register. If you have a specific complaint about a specific ERO by all means write to me and I will have a look at it.

Chris Ruane: About 260 of them.

Mr Gyimah: You keep saying 260. I don't know what the basis of that number is.

Chris Ruane: Those are the ones that did not inform the Electoral Commission that they had conducted that function.

Mr Gyimah: I don't know what the basis of that number is, so if you—

Chris Ruane: It is what the Electoral Commission have given to me or your own department have given to me in parliamentary answers to parliamentary questions.

Mr Gyimah: I don't know what the basis of that number is.

Chris Ruane: I just told you.

Chair: Do you have another question, Chris?

Q817 Chris Ruane: Yes. The fact that we have 1.4 million people registered online since June is absolutely great, and I congratulate the Minister and the Government for doing that. I come back to my previous questions, which are that there are lazy EROs and lazy local authorities that do not bother doing the functions that they are supposed to do for electoral registration. Is there any correlation, has there been a breakdown by the Minister and his department on where those 1.4 million people have come from? Of the 383 local authorities, which have the best registration rates and which have the worst? Has the department put them in ranked order and then compared ranked order for the online version and also for the ranked order of poor performance? In other words, we have a good system; is it being made good use of by all EROs?

Mr Gyimah: What we are doing is trying to maximise the register and there are a number of ways in which you go about doing that. One way is the methodology that you suggest, to try to look at the level of registration in every local authority. There is another way, which we have done and that is why we can allocate the funding based on the principles that I outlined before. There are six principles, the first of which is accurate registration and the overall aim is to make that as high as possible, and to be able to do that we need to know how each local authority is performing. The second principle is proportionality and that we are allocating funding in proportion to the problem that it seeks to correct, and we can only do that with a view of how different local authorities are performing. The third is subsidiarity, making sure that the EROs who are as close as possible to the people they need to register are the ones responsible. We understand the analysis. We have the analysis you suggest and the three main principles behind the £4.2 million I have just outlined support the kind of strategy that would flow from your methodology.

Q818 Chris Ruane: Exactly on that issue, on the allocation of funding from this £4.2 million, Bite the Ballot can go into a sixth form with a 100 sixth-formers and register every one of them at the cost of 25 pence per registration. The Electoral Commission have conducted registration campaigns in the past. In 2005 they were paying £73 for every electoral registration form download. When the Minister's department was allocating this £4.2 million, they gave nothing to Bite the Ballot or to Operation Black Vote. Does the Minister think that an organisation that can recruit voters at 25 pence per registration should be given funding compared to an organisation that does it at £73.33 per registration?

Mr Gyimah: That is a good question.

Chris Ruane: Have you got a good answer?

Mr Gyimah: While we are on Bite the Ballot, the Government obviously commends them for their efforts. Just to give you a sense, the phase 1 funding was £385,000. That was awarded between 24

successful applications covering 60 local authority areas in phase 1. That activity resulted in a net increase of 98,927 electors across the funded areas, 30,633 of which came from under-registered groups. Just under a third of those—

Chris Ruane: Sorry, was that 19,000?

Mr Gyimah: 98,927 from across the funded areas and 30,633 came from under-registered groups. Just under a third of those targeted through this funding registered to vote. There is no sure fire way of registering different groups. This is good value for money, but what I can say about Bite the Ballot is for the £4.2 million that we have given, there is nothing to stop a local authority from employing or taking on Bite the Ballot to help with its registration drive, as I think Ceredigion Council has done. So the formula we have adopted does not rule out Bite the Ballot deploying their skills in areas where the local authority feel that they could make a difference. In terms of the national organisations that we allocated funding to, like Scottish Youth and UK Youth Council, it is because they are truly national organisations.

Q819 Chris Ruane: The Minister said there is no sure fire way to register specific groups. I would say that there is and Bite the Ballot have done it in theory and in practice at 25 pence per registration. Can I ask the Minister if you will go away and report back to this Committee, because it is one of the recommendations I want to put forward, that funding is allocated to groups that have known, proven track records in registration?

Mr Gyimah: This has been looked at a number of times and, as I have said, the current formula for funding allocation is very carefully thought through to be distributed across all local authorities to respond to the level of need there and to make sure that it is being done at the most local level. It is then up to local authorities to decide how they use the funding that they receive. That does not rule out Bite the Ballot getting involved at all. On a wider point, the department has collaborated successively with Bite the Ballot on a number of other projects, so there is no such thing as a bias against Bite the Ballot as you seem to suggest. I think the Rock Enrol project is a piece of software on which the department collaborated with them. Where it works to collaborate nationally, we are definitely open to doing it; where it makes sense for solutions to be implemented locally, we will focus on the local one. I think in this case in terms of maximising the register and the allocation of the £4.2 million, we see the local way as the principal way of delivering that solution.

Q820 Chris Ruane: Thank you. There are currently transitional arrangements when we move into IER from household registration to individual and they will cover the general election, so there will be a carryover for the general election next year. The transitional arrangements are due to end in 2016. The Government want to bring that forward again to 2015. If that is done, then we will see drop-off from household to individual registration. For the freeze date for the Boundary Commission but just as importantly for the Scottish Government elections, the Welsh Government elections and the local government elections in 2016, is there party political advantage in bringing forward the ending of those transitional arrangements, which your party if you are in government will have to decide in June next year? Is there party political advantage?

Mr Gyimah: Once again, you have asked four or five different questions in one. It is for the next Parliament to decide, following the advice of the Electoral Commission, as to whether the transition should conclude in 2015 or 2016. It is in all our interests that we have as many people registered to vote and to turn out to vote and to be engaged in our democracy, so I resent the suggestion that party political advantage is what is driving this. In the short time that I have been at the department, I've seen you have a lot of officials, who are impartial, who are working incredibly

hard to make sure that the transition to IER works effectively and online voter registration, which is the biggest modernisation project, does actually work. So I do resent that suggestion.

Q821 Chris Ruane: There is no criticism of your staff. The decision that we make next June will be a political decision made by your party and if there is an additional 4.5 million missing off the register, as well as the 7.5 million who are currently missing, then it will damage democracy.

Mr Gyimah: Can I just answer with one point? Lots of your comments are prefaced with “if”. There is a lot of speculation and hypotheticals in the points that you are making. If we are going to be making policy, it should be evidence-based rather than based on lots of “ifs”.

Q822 Fabian Hamilton: Can I follow on from what my colleague, Mr Ruane, was saying, Minister, about electoral registration officers? We have had quite a lot of discussion in this Committee about EROs and the work they do, especially when we had evidence from the Electoral Commission last week. As you know, and as Chris said, electoral registration officers are currently the lynchpin really of electoral registration in the UK, and I think we are all agreed on that, but are you confident that EROs are doing everything they possibly can to ensure that the registers are both complete and accurate? As you may know, the Committee wrote to Greg Clark asking whether there was scope for doing more to recognise high achieving EROs. You wrote back and said that this is something that you were going to consider further. What are your thoughts on how this might work?

Mr Gyimah: I am confident that EROs are taking this as seriously as they should. In terms of rewards for high performing EROs, it is something that as the new Minister I will have to look at and come back to you.

Fabian Hamilton: So you will write to the Committee on that?

Mr Gyimah: Yes.

Q823 Fabian Hamilton: Thank you. Electoral registration officers, as well as returning officers of course, are not currently subject to the Freedom of Information Act. Both the chief executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators and the chair of the Electoral Commission told us that they were in favour of bringing EROs and returning officers under the Act. Will the Government take any action on this, either by issuing a section 5 order or amending the primary legislation in order to rectify this situation? Is this a priority for you?

Mr Gyimah: EROs are distinct officers under the Representation of the People Act, but I do agree with you that this does seem like an anomaly. It is something that I am happy to look at. The Government believes in the important role that transparency plays, so I am happy to look at this. In fact, in terms of what I have seen so far I know that many EROs choose to voluntarily disclose information when requested to under the Freedom of Information Act, despite not being required to by law. The Representation of the People Act 1983 also gives the public the right to access a variety of government documents. For instance, they are able to inspect the electoral register under supervision. So there is some transparency. In terms of how we move forward, officials have discussed bringing EROs under FOI with their counterparts in the Ministry of Justice who have responsibility for Freedom of Information. It appears likely that EROs could be included through an order, as you suggest, and it is something that I am going to look into.

Q824 Fabian Hamilton: So you think the best way would be an order rather than further primary legislation, for which there will not be very much time left in this Parliament?

Mr Gyimah: It is the way that is being considered but it would not be straightforward. For example, extending the FOI to EROs has the potential to increase the burden on them and also local authority budgets. That is something that we have to look at. Also the nature of their work means that there are times when workload is significant during the annual canvass and the impact of an FOI Act on the ability to carry out these functions will need to be thought through. It is not straightforward but that seems to be the way to do it if we are going to do it.

Q825 Fabian Hamilton: Would there be any further resource attached to such a change in the law? As you rightly say, there are times when those officers simply will not have available resources or time or staff to carry out those Freedom of Information requests and yet they will be under an obligation to do so: which will come first, electoral registration or the smooth running of elections, or the provision of the information that is requested under FOI?

Mr Gyimah: They are all very good points and that is why we have to consider it carefully, but you are on the right track for the type of solution that you have mentioned.

Q826 Fabian Hamilton: Can I move on to electoral fraud? A recent report by the Electoral Commission stated that, "Reports of electoral fraud are not widespread across the UK but there is a consistent underlying level of concern about electoral fraud". Do you think that level of electoral fraud merits the proposals that the Electoral Commission is consulting on around requiring, for example, some sort of identity documents at polling stations and restricting the handling of postal ballots by campaigners? Are we over-reacting to a problem that really is not there although it is perceived to be there?

Mr Gyimah: That is a very good point. Any measures to change the electoral system obviously have to strike a balance between safeguarding the integrity of the election but also ensuring voters are able to participate in elections. In terms of verifying identity at polling stations that you mentioned, allegations are not widespread and are more likely to be recorded in areas at high risk of electoral fraud, so it is not clear that we need a nationwide ID scheme as a proportionate solution.

Q827 Fabian Hamilton: You wouldn't be in favour of a nationwide ID scheme at polling stations, in spite of the recommendations or thoughts of the commission?

Mr Gyimah: Requiring ID at polling station could disenfranchise legitimate voters who forget to take their ID with them or who are put off going because they do not have appropriate ID.

Chris Ruane: Good on you.

Q828 Fabian Hamilton: He took the words out of my mouth. That is encouraging, because I can't help agreeing with you. Do you think, and as Minister do your officials think, that the perception of fraud is far greater than the actual cases of fraud reported or the evidence of that fraud? Is it the usual thing that where there is the rare case of fraud the media blows this up out of all proportion?

Mr Gyimah: The way I would answer that is that the integrity of elections is so important that even one instance of fraud is something that we should be very concerned about.

Q829 Fabian Hamilton: Of course, absolutely, but would you agree that sometimes the public thinks that every election is fraudulent and we can't trust any of the results, in certain areas?

Mr Gyimah: That is not perception of where the public is. Obviously cases of fraud do get high media coverage and it is right that we live in a democracy where that is the case.

Q830 Fabian Hamilton: My colleague Chris says that it is 37%.

Chris Ruane: 37% think that there has been corruption in elections.

Fabian Hamilton: 37% of the entire population?

Chris Ruane: Yes.

Fabian Hamilton: That is obviously a poll of some sort that will be done on a sample.

Mr Gyimah: That is a number, I don't know who undertook the poll or what the poll is based on, so I wouldn't really want to comment on that. I think the principle is that we want all our elections to be free and fair and we live in a country where that should be possible and we should not be surprised that where it appears not to be possible it gets a lot of media coverage.

Q831 Fabian Hamilton: Do you see part of your role as trying to restore that confidence so that the 37% that believe there has been fraud is reduced to a negligible figure?

Mr Gyimah: A big part of restoring that confidence is the move to individual electoral registration, as I said, because it is about making the register accurate and complete so that the right people participate in elections.

Q832 Fabian Hamilton: Can I move on briefly to public awareness and information campaigns? We have heard some extremely positive things about groups that have carried out registration campaigns such as Bite the Ballot, as you mentioned earlier, and of course the Electoral Commission has said it has a role in supporting organisations that work in that area. What more could Government do to provide support to individuals and organisations that want to encourage democratic participation?

Mr Gyimah: We are doing a number of things. As I said, in terms of maximising registration we are working with five national organisations, but we also have innovation projects going on. I mentioned the Royal Mencap Society as an example, where they are trialling some new ideas in engaging with people with disabilities and there are a number of other innovation projects as well. We are very keen to trial new and different methods using civil society organisations to reach out and make people aware.

Q833 Fabian Hamilton: Would you support Sheffield University's initiative to register all students who are registering for their course when they start on the course to register them to vote as well? Is that something that you could encourage throughout the country?

Mr Gyimah: It is a good idea. We are working with the NUS along the same lines as well, but it is a good idea.

Q834 Mark Durkan: Throughout the inquiry, witnesses have put forward different proposals to improve both registration and turnout. Have you any thoughts on measures that would do most to increase voter participation?

Mr Gyimah: From the Government's perspective, where I started was the Government can put in place the mechanisms and the structures. On what would increase voter participation in terms of people turning up to vote, my personal view is it is incumbent on us politicians to go out and put out a platform and a programme that engages and excites people and gets them to turn up to vote. There are a number of ideas that have been suggested, for example lowering the voting age and different ways of voting.

Q835 Mark Durkan: Do you have thoughts on that?

Mr Gyimah: My view is that it is mixed. A significant proportion of the public don't think we need to lower the voting age, or more of the public think that we shouldn't lower it than should lower it. Widening the franchise doesn't necessarily mean that more people are going to turn up. If we really want turnout, want people to participate, I think a good starting point is making sure that people who are currently on the roll do turn out to vote. It is like looking for another solution rather than addressing the problem that is in front of us.

Q836 Mark Durkan: What about the means of voting? If you are not sure about widening the franchise in terms of who is eligible to vote, do you have any views on how to make voting more accessible, modernising the voting method?

Mr Gyimah: I would say that online electoral registration is pretty modern. That you can today get on to the register on your smartphone is a pretty modern way to do things.

Mark Durkan: But you can't vote that way.

Mr Gyimah: It is fast and secure and it is ground-breaking. In terms of voting itself, you can vote by proxy, you can vote by post, and I don't think we are in a position yet in terms of technology to go to a place where people can vote say in the way you would vote on the "X Factor". I don't think we are there yet.

Q837 Mark Durkan: In terms of improving participation, you don't see a role for government at different levels, whether it is local authorities, as we have heard, at the level of EROs making sure more people are registered and also encouraging more participation. It is really just down to parties to sex up election campaigns so that more people participate.

Mr Gyimah: Looking at the options that are there, you have widening the franchise, electronic voting, weekend voting, all of these have been suggested a number of times over the years. In my view there are more downsides than upsides. Looking at the electronic voting example, security and avoiding fraud becomes quite a big issue if you have that method of voting available. If we had weekend voting, there is no guarantee people don't say, "Well, it is my weekend and I am not going to go to the polling booth. I have to go and watch my favourite football team," or something. I think where we are is we should be looking to make sure that people who are currently on the register or people who should be on the register get on the register and through civil society, politicians and the Government do our best to make sure that they are as engaged with the political process as they should be.

We shouldn't despair. Knowledge of Parliament and what it does is incredibly high at the moment. When you look at the research from Demos, people are really excited and engaged with the political process. It is just that we need to make sure they turn up to vote, and that is a question for political parties.

Q838 Mark Durkan: The written evidence that we received from the Electoral Commission makes it very clear that they have called “upon the current, and previous, Government to conduct a comprehensive election modernisation strategy for many years”. They have also said that, “Such an initiative is now both practical and timely”, which raises the question whether or not the Government could have responded more positively to those calls. But your answers seem to suggest that you regard those calls as somewhat misplaced, that the status quo is okay. It is just some people need to do better at using it.

Mr Gyimah: I am not suggesting the status quo is okay. We would not be engaging in a big project, IER, we would not be introducing online registration, we would not be putting £4.2 million now—and we are looking at more in the future—into maximising the register if we thought the status quo was okay. The question was specifically, as I understood it, getting people to the polling booth to cast their ballot and I outlined some of the innovations that people have talked about. What I said is that widening the franchise does not address that specific problem, electronic voting has its downside in terms of fraud, and there is no reason why weekend voting has an advantage over voting on Thursday, as we do in England. Again, we come back to there is no simple solution but I believe that what the Government is doing, which is making sure that we have a complete and accurate register and making it very easy and simple for people to get on that register, is an important and critical first step.

Q839 Mark Durkan: But you see no merits in any of the suggestions that you have mentioned, in testing them in any way?

Mr Gyimah: There are some good arguments for them but I think at the moment the downsides outweigh the upsides, but then you would not have talked about online registration 10 years ago so you never know, their time may come.

Q840 Chair: Thank you. If colleagues don't have any further questions, Sam, thank you very much for coming along today. We much appreciate you giving your first evidence to the Select Committee.

Mr Gyimah: Thank you. Can I just make a final point?

Chair: Of course, yes. Please do.

Mr Gyimah: I know there were a number of questions on ERO performance standards and I didn't have the information to hand. I do have it to hand now and I am pleased that a report that we have recently commissioned by the Electoral Commission that monitors performance has come up, which tells us that a lot of EROs met their performance standards in 2013. They identified 22 who failed to meet performance standards, which is obviously disappointing. It represents an improvement on 2012; 30 failed in 2012, 22 in 2013. We expect them to meet their full obligations and Ministers are fully prepared to issue a formal direction to EROs if necessary to ensure that they comply with their statutory obligation.

Chris Ruane: It was 80 in 2010.

Mr Gyimah: The number I have here is 30 in 2012 and 22 in 2013.

Chris Ruane: 80 in 2010.

Mr Gyimah: To answer your question, we are prepared to make sure they meet their statutory obligations.

Chair: Minister, that is very helpful and, like you, we will be keeping an eye on those people who particularly repeatedly are not doing the things that we assume that they are meant to be doing. I hope that you will support us if we put forward proposals about how we can improve the performance of everybody in the field. Minister, thank you so much for joining us today. I don't know whether "enjoy" is the right word but I hope you have enjoyed being here.

Mr Gyimah: It had its moments.