



Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Oral evidence: [What next on the redrawing of Parliamentary boundaries?](#) HC 600

Monday 12 January 2015

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 12 January 2015.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Lewis Baston, Political Analyst](#)

[Watch the meeting](#)

Witness: **Lewis Baston**, Political Analyst, gave evidence.

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

Q70 Chair: Welcome, Lewis. This is our last session taking evidence on parliamentary constituency boundaries. I hope you will give us a good send-off. Would you like to say anything to start off or do you want to jump straight into questions?

Lewis Baston: I guess I would begin by saying that we have had the benefit of a dry run of the boundary system for two years. It would be sensible to learn some lessons from that process and I think there is a measure of consensus about some of the lessons from that. There is also a very specific problem coming up in the 2015 to 2020 redistribution. It will coincide with a very disrupted state of the electoral register because of the introduction of individual voter registration. I think there are very short-term problems connected with that but, rather than going for repeated sticking plaster-type solutions. it would be better to have a system that could command a measure of consensus going forward and hopefully provide a more stable footing for constituency boundary setting in the future than we have had for now and, indeed, than is possible, given the problems with the way the 5% threshold operates and the instability in the numbers on the electoral register that we see.

Q71 Chair: What does that stable footing mean for you?

Lewis Baston: I think there are two alternatives for this. They are both spun off from the same source, which is the decennial census that is generally regarded as being the very best Government tabulation of resident populations. It is much more complete than the electoral register even as it is now, let alone the electoral register going forward. There are two possibilities. You can do as many countries do and just use the basic base population number as the means of distributing seats, which is normal practice internationally. It is not practice here traditionally, but that is something

that could be considered. Possibly my favoured option would be to use the census figures to estimate the entitled population at census time in every ward thereby giving a reliable, complete number that you can use to do a redistribution every 10 years. I am open minded as to whether 10 years might slip into even 20 if you have a facility to do interim reviews to remove some of the anomalies in the middle.

Q72 Mr Turner: Perhaps I could start with a question on the issues that you have just begun with. What do you do with the 4 million or so people who are not registered because they live overseas?

Lewis Baston: Again, it is very difficult to see how they slot in. As I am sure you are aware, very few overseas electors are registered, a microscopic proportion. There seem to be two ways of dealing with this. At the moment it is 36 people per constituency on average. Even if it were 10 times that, we are still dealing with fairly small change. One could just allocate seats with reference to population and the overseas electors put in there will probably just all shake out reasonably uniformly. If it does not, we can look at it and perhaps adjust. It may be a case for the boundary commissions being given a bit of tolerance to reflect that kind of factor in their deliberations. The other would be to establish, as many other countries have done, diaspora seats, which has some merit to it, but I would probably prefer, given the relatively small numbers involved, to just slot them into the constituencies, as we do at the moment, by last registered address.

There are issues about how long somebody is away from Britain before they are no longer entitled to vote. I know there is a rather politicised debate over this and some arguments for 10 or 20 years; we have 15 at the moment. Of course, the other side of that particular coin is people who are non-citizens who have been resident here for absolutely ages. When I was research officer at the Electoral Reform Society, people would often phone up in one of these two categories, either long-term expatriate or long-term resident foreign citizen, and say, “Why can’t I vote? I can’t vote anywhere. I have lost my vote at home. I can’t vote here.” My answer, unfortunately, always had to be, “That is the way the law works at the moment.” I can see grounds for looking at both sides of that.

Q73 Mr Turner: We have been told that one way to significantly reduce the disruption of future boundary reviews would be to increase the allowability for variance from the electoral quota. What do you think of that?

Lewis Baston: I would suggest yes. I was convinced—I must say I was possibly a ready audience for the research that Professor Johnston and his colleagues did on this matter—that the number of cross-border constituencies that straddle county boundaries would be greatly reduced if one was to move to a tolerance of 10%. I would be in favour in general of it as allowing the commissions more room to achieve some of the other desirable objects of their mission to try not to cross local authority boundaries, keep communities together, keep continuity, all the familiar arguments. I was convinced by the Johnston paper that 10% would help a lot but that going much further than 10% would not help much more. So, I would be in favour. I would also be in favour of recognising a few more anomalies than we do at the moment, like the Isle of Anglesey as well as other islands off the coast of the mainland.

Q74 Mr Turner: What other islands are you thinking about? There is only one.

Lewis Baston: Oh, your own one, sir. I was thinking primarily of the Isle of Anglesey, the Isle of Wight, possibly some allowance for sparsely populated territory such as we have in the current Act in Scotland, and also possibly some allowance for very densely populated constituencies where the population is vastly in excess of the register.

Q75 Mr Turner: You are arguing that some areas should have representation even though they do not have the people; the people are not people as far as this Act is concerned. They are people who are not relevant, so why would you justify them?

Lewis Baston: The argument over the Bill in 2011 was made in terms of equality of electoral voice. I tend to the view that given variations in turnout and everything like that, one cannot be too precise about that. Factors such as turnout and the way people vote for different parties introduce huge variations in that measure anyway. What does not vary is the fact that this quantum of territory and people has a Member of Parliament who works for them. At the moment, there are some Members of Parliament, yourself and also some inner-London Members, who have colossal populations. They have 150,000 people. The work load on such Members is vastly in excess of a Member for a slightly above-average constituency with an older population that is on the register.

Q76 Mr Turner: Looking at Scotland, which has three or four MPs for each area, and Wales, which has some additional ones as well, and I am sure Northern Ireland, would you reduce that?

Lewis Baston: An interesting question. I guess the representation is channelled in different directions in those countries, the MSPs and so on. That is not an unreasonable argument.

Q77 Chair: In the long term, you have called for the rules for boundary reviews to be changed so that parliamentary constituencies are distributed on the basis of population. Is there anything else you have to say on why you favour this?

Lewis Baston: I would not want to make a hard-line argument for the principle of population over electorate, over qualified population. I would wish to argue that there are considerations here with regard to total population, and many other countries use total population. What I would argue for is an idealised total qualified population, what the size of the electorate would be if you had 100% registration. If you want to preserve the principle of equal-sized qualified electorates in each place, then that strips out all the vagaries of different categories of people being easier or harder to find and put on the register, differences in resources between local authorities and so on. That would provide a uniform standard, whereas at the moment it is a bit irregular.

Q78 Mr Turner: You said, I think, that you did not have any strong views, which I can quite understand, and yet you are now saying this is the best.

Lewis Baston: It is certainly the system I would advocate as having the potential to be a point of consensus. I feel that there are valid arguments in principle for population measures, but it may be impossible to produce a political consensus around them. That is a serious point.

Q79 Mr Turner: Representatives from the four boundary commissions believe they will be launching the next boundary review in 2016. What key changes to the rules must be made before then?

Lewis Baston: I think it is important that the rules are changed quickly because another thing the boundary commissioners were keen on is not being told what to do right at the last minute and having it changed all the time. I think there is a case for a short Bill to widen the variation and specify a couple more exceptions and also, I would argue, raise the target number from 600 to 650. I would argue also that something the Government can refrain from doing is bringing forth the order to remove the carried-over household-registered names between May and December 2015. I think there is a grave risk in that case of people who voted in May and thought, "Oh, that is okay, I was able to vote in May. I must be on the register. That is no problem," disappearing from the register in the autumn if the registers are purged of household names and the December 2015 numbers being the base of what could be a very skewed exercise.

Q80 Duncan Hames: At the risk of being a little topsy-turvy, it would be helpful for you to outline in more detail some of the problems that you identify from what I think you described as disruption to the register for reliance on it for the parliamentary constituency boundary review. Could you tell us more about these concerns?

Lewis Baston: For several administrative sociological reasons, the accuracy of the register has been deteriorating for a number of years. It is not just a new problem. Probably the early 1990s represented a stepping down, when people actually evaded registration because of the community charge. Before then there appeared to be very little difference in registration rates between different groups of people. After that we have had two deteriorations under the current register from nearly complete to around 90% and then down again. The new system, even on the more optimistic projections, is significantly worse than the current register. It would not matter so much if it were uniform, but it affects particular areas. The Electoral Commission has published large bodies of research and it is borne out if anyone just looks for a moment at the pattern of falls in registration both under the current registration system and even more under the new one. It is disproportionately young people, people who move house, private tenants, who fall off the register.

One particular problem with this, in my view, is the risk that there will be a double effect on some inner urban areas. For instance, at the moment the actual number of people on the register in, say, Manchester may not be that far off. You may have 90,000 people who are not there anymore and you may have 90,000 people who are there but are not on the register. If you are dealing with boundaries, that makes very little difference at all. Your global number is correct. The risk of the new system is we will end up kicking off the names who are not there any more and then not finding the names who should be there. There are very heavy implications for the resources of local authorities to do this. I did some fairly rough calculations, which seem to have been borne out by the results of the Electoral Commission's live run statistics from October, that inner London would lose perhaps four seats as a result of this exercise, the individual registration. That is comparing it with the situation in 2011 under the new Act where there is no additional effect. It is purely the effect of individual registration.

Q81 Duncan Hames: Just so that I am clear, if we take the example you gave of tenants who move house, you are identifying that it could be entirely proper that this process is removing people from the register who have moved, but from a boundary calculation point of view exclusively it would be preferable if they were left within the calculation if the new residents are not being picked up.

Lewis Baston: Yes.

Duncan Hames: Equally, therefore, if the new residents are being picked up and the old ones have not fallen off, that would not be a desirable situation to maintain, would it?

Lewis Baston: Correct. There is a rough and ready justice to the way it works at the moment. From the figures on the register and the calculations that both I and the Office for National Statistics did on an ideal 100% register, the distribution is not that different, which suggests that the errors are self-cancelling. The risk under the new system is that the errors will not be self-cancelling.

Q82 Duncan Hames: In the proposals that you have made, the population-based approach is certainly one that takes us away from these problems. You also made your point about urging the purge, as you put it, at the end of 2015 not to impact on the boundary review through its timing. If that were to occur because we were still relying on an electoral roll-based population figure, to what extent do you see that affecting the distribution of constituencies?

Lewis Baston: Based on the arithmetic models that I did, assuming a reasonable rate of finding and signing up people who are currently missing, I did think that the inner metropolitan areas would all

lose fairly heavily. In Manchester and Liverpool—I cannot remember the numbers exactly; they are in my research report—it is about half a constituency, which is quite a lot, and in London it is losing, as I say, possibly four constituencies for inner London. It is quite severe for these inner metropolitan areas. The areas that gain from this are much more dispersed. They tend to be areas with stable populations, older populations, and interestingly it is not just owner-occupied, well-off people. Areas that have very high concentrations of social tenants, like Moseley for instance, would gain as well.

Q83 Duncan Hames: Even though they have more secure tenancies?

Lewis Baston: These are the gainers, yes. They would gain, whereas more metropolitan cities—Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, London—would lose because they have much more transient populations.

Q84 Duncan Hames: It is particularly the areas with private tenants that could find their populations underrepresented?

Lewis Baston: Correct.

Duncan Hames: I think we have already heard about the solutions you propose. Thank you.

Q85 Chris Ruane: There are currently 7.5 million people missing off the register according to the Electoral Commission. At 75,000 people per seat, that is 100 extra parliamentary seats. IER might double that. Are there any benefits in drawing the new boundaries with potentially 13 million or 14 million people missing off the register?

Lewis Baston: We should not try to do it that way, which is why I think it would be a grave mistake in 2015 to use registers that a lot of names have been deleted from.

Q86 Chris Ruane: Is there any positive by leaving them off for any political party?

Lewis Baston: No, I do not think so. I think it would undermine the legitimacy of the exercise. It is shaky enough as it is that there were 700,000 people who joined the register between December 2009 and April 2010. A lot of them were distributed in areas such as we were talking about, the central cities and inner areas. Just on the scale that already takes place, these distort all the relativities between different constituencies and it would probably take place on a vast scale under the new registration system.

Q87 Chris Ruane: After the election, June 2015, whoever is in power will make the decision whether to bring forward the end of the old register from 2016 to 2015. This will have massive impacts for 1 December 2015, which is the freeze date for the new boundary review. It is a huge political decision whether to include or exclude an extra 200 parliamentary seats. Should that decision be a political one?

Lewis Baston: It is inevitably going to be political. The law is written that way. The maximum concession that the Government were prepared to give, I think, when the Bill was going through was that they put the date back but have the option to put it forward again. I think there is room for—

Q88 Chris Ruane: Why would they want to do that?

Lewis Baston: That is a parliamentary procedure point that I am ill-equipped to discourse on, but I would suggest that before a Minister does such a thing or considers doing such a thing, they need to be risk averse. They need to be absolutely sure that what they are doing is safe with regard to the

way the boundary system and the electoral system work. I think it is most unlikely that it is going to be in a fit state to do it at that time, but they should at least be in a position to ask this Committee to ask the Electoral Commission their view on the completeness and accuracy of the registers and whether this would be a good thing. That seems to me the minimum that a conscientious Minister should be doing.

Q89 Chris Ruane: Perhaps we can write that into our recommendations. On your assertion that equalisation should take place but there should not be a drop from 650 to 600 MPs, since 2010 there have been an extra 150 unelected Lords appointed and a proposal to reduce the number of elected MPs by 50. Does this seem very democratic to you if the whole reason behind it was to reduce costs to the taxpayer?

Lewis Baston: I think reducing costs is a bit of a red herring, conceivably. The scale of error on capital project estimates is much more than 10 years' worth of 50 MPs. There is also the same amount of work to be shared around. Moving from 650 MPs to 600 MPs is not going to change the amount of constituency business that comes in. It seems to me also a kind of false economy in that MPs are representing far more people than they did. The average population of a seat has gone up well over half since 1950 and the assertiveness of people is far greater.

Chris Ruane: Don't we know it.

Lewis Baston: The amount of work in this place has also changed a lot, the extent of Committee work and diligence that happens. I think there is a good argument for increasing the number of MPs, although I am reluctant to make it in forums in the world outside.

Q90 Chris Ruane: Finally, if this Committee was to make a recommendation that the new boundaries should be based on population and not on registration, are there any examples for us around the world of major democracies that have single-seat constituencies that use population rather than registration? Are we alone in what we are currently proposing?

Lewis Baston: We are out on a limb in asking for such extreme levels of equality over the entire country and using an electorate figure that is, frankly, flaky. The United States uses its decennial census to determine the entitlement of states to congressional seats. It uses unvarnished population, including illegal immigrants for instance, so there is a system just there. As you correctly say, there is an important distinction between single-seat systems and seats with PR where it can all come out in the wash a bit. I think the case for tolerating differences in size of constituency is very strong in MMP systems like the Scottish Parliament one. That may be outside your purview. If you look at the international comparator statistics, I think about 50% of countries use population, 33% use electoral register, and I do not know quite what the others do. It is a mainstream thing. As I say, there are not that many single-member systems out there.

Q91 Chris Ruane: Just picking up on what you said there, you said that this country is out on a limb in using registration instead of population. The current proposal is that we could end up with 13 million people off the register, equivalent to about 200 seats, and the actuality of increasing the Lords by 150 and reducing the Commons by 50. You mentioned before about a red herring. Do you think there is something quite fishy about these proposals that are being put forward?

Lewis Baston: I know in the United States the system of voter registration and so on has become, to use the word of the day, weaponised by political parties. It would be a grave shame if that were to happen here. I hope and I trust that Ministers in this country do not behave like that, but I do not know.

Q92 Chris Ruane: Have you ever heard of an organisation called Atlantic Bridge?

Lewis Baston: I have indeed, yes.

Chris Ruane: Do you know what they are proposing in America for voter registration?

Lewis Baston: I imagine it is extremely restrictive, knowing—

Chris Ruane: Voter suppression. Do you think there is an element of that in this country?

Lewis Baston: I would hesitate to allege that about the current policy. I think we are sailing pretty close to the edge. Let me say the Government have made their argument about individual registration in terms of restoring public confidence in the system. The evidence that public confidence is in any way restored by different administrative systems like this is zero. There is a very interesting judgment from a United States District Court, I think in Wisconsin, that looks at an awful lot of the evidence here. Indeed, it is a bit of the transparency effect. The more transparent something is the more people see what is wrong with it. The risk is that you have a situation where, after IER, there are still anomalies—cases of voter fraud cropping up here and there—and that is used to drive the public debate towards more and more restrictive voter suppression kind of tactics. I would hate to see that happen.

Chair: Lewis, thank you very much for your evidence today. It was good to see you.

Lewis Baston: Thank you all.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Mr Sam Gyimah MP**, Minister for the Constitution, Cabinet Office, and **Simon James**, Deputy Director, Elections Division, Cabinet Office, gave evidence.

Q93 Chair: It is good to see you. Welcome. Sam, I do not know whether you want to say something to start us off or are happy to jump straight into questions.

Mr Gyimah: I am happy to go straight into questions. I obviously have Simon James here with me.

Chair: Simon, very welcome. I am going to give you a nice, gentle lob to start you off in that case, Sam. I understand there is some good news about the transition to individual electoral registration, in particular the announcement that the DPM made just a couple of days ago, Friday, about an additional £10 million of funding for maximising voter registration. I wonder whether I could give you the opportunity to, in a sense, announce that to the Committee and to Parliament.

Mr Gyimah: Thank you, Chairman, for the opportunity to talk about what is a positive announcement. As you know, or as the Committee is aware, we transferred to individual electoral registration in June 2014 in England and Wales and in Scotland in September after the Scottish referendum. The transition has been successful. It is a two-year transition. We are halfway through it. Nine out of 10 electors were automatically transferred on to the register. As part of the plan to ensure that every voter who is eligible to be on the register had the opportunity to be on the register, the Government committed funding to maximise the register but also ensure the accuracy of the register, and £4.2 million was initially signed off soon after the transition to IER. That went to all local authorities plus five national organisations.

Last week, the Deputy Prime Minister announced a further £10 million, shaped by our experience of what is going on on the ground. The £10 million would largely go to local authorities again, who have the best understanding of what to do in order to get people on the register. There are a number

of other priorities that are reflected in that £10 million. For example, focus on fraud, 16 local authorities that the Electoral Commission had identified; forces personnel; something towards overseas voters; something towards students, but also black and minority ethnic voters. I can get the breakdown for the Committee if you have not received that already.

Chair: We will certainly take that up, Minister, if we have not received that. Thank you, that is very kind.

Q94 Mr Chope: Minister, the next boundary review is not now due to report until October 2018. Has the Government considered whether an earlier revision of rules is desirable in the light of the experience of the 2013 review?

Mr Gyimah: That is a very good question, especially if you consider that in England the last boundary review was in 2000. Come 2018, it would have been quite a long time since the last boundary review. However, where we are is that Parliament decided that the 2013 review should be moved to 2018, so that is a decision that was made by Parliament. The boundary commission obviously is independent, but Parliament sets the rules that govern how and when the boundary reviews should be carried out and has always had the final say on recommendations. There are no plans to change the current provisions as far as when the next boundary review would take place.

Q95 Mr Chope: You will be aware that the guidelines of the Venice Commission and the Council of Europe are that no individual constituency should vary in terms of the size of the electorate by more than 10% above or below the norm. The latest figures we have from the boundary commission show that of the 650 constituencies in the United Kingdom more than 40%—in other words 262 to be precise—exceed that Council of Europe guideline because they are either above by more than 10% or below by more than 10%. Does that concern you and what is the Government going to be doing about it?

Mr Gyimah: It is a concern of mine and it is a concern of the Government. That is why the PVSC Act was passed in 2011 in order to address this situation. If you take Arfon, which has roughly 38,000 electors, versus a constituency like North Cambridgeshire, which has 95,000 electors, we clearly do not have equal votes in our constituencies. We believe that seats should be of more equal size so that votes are of more equal value. As I said earlier on, Parliament has decided to delay the 2013 review, so the 2015 election will be fought on the current boundaries. Given the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, the next election after 2015 should be in 2020 and by then MPs will be fighting the election on boundaries that should be more equal than the ones we have at the moment.

Simon James: Could I clarify the sequence of events? I think the point you have there in terms of the divergence of current constituencies is a very valid one. In bringing forward the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill, which became the Act in 2011, the Government did recognise that equality was a principle that should be enshrined in legislation. As a result of that Act and the review, had the 2013 review completed then with the four exceptions, which I am sure you are familiar with, saving those four exceptions every constituency would have been within plus or minus 5%. It was a decision of Parliament, through the amendment brought forward as part of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013, to postpone that review and to enshrine that inequality for this next general election. That decision was postponed so under the current rules the next review will mean that by the next general election that equality will be there, but it was a decision of Parliament that ended up postponing that review.

Q96 Mr Chope: Yes, it was a decision of Parliament. Obviously, it was a decision of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parliamentarians to do what you have described as making the system more unequal. The enshrinement of that inequality is going to make things worse because at the

moment, taking the 5%, which was the figure set out in the Act, 219 constituencies are currently within the 5% plus or minus, which means that over 400 are outside those parameters. If that is the test of equality and fairness, then how is it that the Government are so relaxed about doing anything about this? Why aren't the Government saying, "This is intolerable. This is well outside the standards that are expected in the Council of Europe that we expect of other newly emerging democracies. We are not even prepared to apply those principles to our own situation"? Why are the Government so relaxed about it?

Mr Gyimah: I would not say the Government are relaxed about it, but ultimately there was an amendment to the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act and that amendment got carried, which effectively means that Parliament has spoken, whatever the Government's—or certainly one part of the Government, the Conservative part of the Government—views are on this. It is not the first time. There is precedent for boundary commissioners' recommendations to be rejected. In 1969, the Labour Government invited MPs to vote down a boundary order, which they did. Frustrating and deeply unfair though it is, it is a constant feature of the legislation here that commissions may formulate proposals for new constituencies that may not get passed through Parliament. What we do have is a deeply unfair situation in terms of giving equal votes equal value.

Q97 Mr Chope: Do you have any plans to revisit the 5% either way? Obviously, some people are saying you could have 8% or 10%. Is there any view that you should do that?

Mr Gyimah: The key objective is to achieve equality and fairness, which judging from your line of questioning you are very much in favour of, and to give everyone's vote a more equal weight wherever they are. That is the starting principle for the Act. The Government consider that setting the tolerance level at 5% would restore equality and fairness in the setting of constituency boundaries while also giving scope for other factors: physical geography and local ties. The view is very much that to go beyond the 5% tolerance level of the electoral quota might move too far away from what we set out to achieve, which is to give everyone's vote more equal weight. There are, therefore, no plans to change that tolerance level.

Q98 Mr Chope: Are you, Minister, aware of any other countries of the 47 countries in the Council of Europe that have such a wide variation as we have currently in our country?

Mr Gyimah: My feeling is that we are probably an outlier when it comes to this, but I am not aware of the specific detail on this.

Q99 Fabian Hamilton: Minister, one specific recommendation we heard from the Boundary Commission for Scotland when they gave us evidence recently was that, "It would be preferable to specify that the electorate in a constituency has to be within a certain percentage of the average constituency electorate for that part of the UK". Some flexibility is already provided for in the 2011 Act with regard to Northern Ireland, but is the Government sympathetic to allowing local variations in the electoral quota in different parts of the UK?

Mr Gyimah: The short answer is no, but to expand on it, the Act makes provision for review every five years. That ensures that boundaries remain up to date and fair. It is important that we do have every constituency being equal, whether it is Scotland or Wales or England, and that boundary reforms ensure that is the case. There is no justification, I think, for fixing the allocation of seats in one part of the UK, which is what effectively the Scottish request would end up doing. There is a specific issue with Northern Ireland about giving them flexibility but it will not result in overrepresentation in terms of number of seats. That is why we have been able to allow that degree of flexibility for Northern Ireland.

Q100 Fabian Hamilton: The boundary commissions that we interviewed recently took different approaches to how factors other than the electoral quota were made. For example, geographical considerations, local government boundaries, boundaries of existing constituencies, local ties and communities, and, of course, inconvenience caused were all considered in the sixth general review. Have the Government provided any guidance to the boundary commissions about how they should take into account those criteria that do not have a strict arithmetic basis?

Mr Gyimah: I will take a stab at it and, Simon, you can come in with more technical detail. Obviously, it is the responsibility of the boundary commissions to carry out the review. The Government's prime concern in this particular context is that of giving equal weight to equal votes. That is the overriding concern, while obviously taking into account things like local ties but also the geographical location. That has led to four exceptions, two in the Isle of Wight, Orkney and Shetland, and also the Western Isles. There are four exceptions there, but overall the Government's view is that the weighting has gone too far the other way. That is why we have ended up with the inequality in constituency sizes that Mr Chope alluded to in his questioning. What the Act seeks to do is that by having a review every five years and putting at the centre of it equal votes and equal weight for those votes we address what is the imbalance today.

Q101 Fabian Hamilton: Minister, before Simon comes in let me put this to both of you. If you really were committed to equal weight for equal votes, wouldn't you want to have a proportional representation system? Even if you have equal numbers of voters in constituencies, irrespective of community and geographical boundaries—which, frankly, I think is a big mistake but that is a personal view—you are still going to find that where a particular party is dominant people who want to vote for other parties have less weight to their vote. Surely, if you really were committed to equality, you would commit yourself to pure proportional representation. Don't the two follow?

Mr Gyimah: I do not think they necessarily follow. The present situation, just to give you some of the statistics, is deeply unfair. Within England, based on figures from 1 December 2013, Manchester Central had 95,000 electors and North West Cambridgeshire had 91,000, compared to Wirral West, which has approximately 54,800 electors, and Workington, which has 55,000. In Scotland, Glasgow North has 56,800 and Arfon in Wales has an electorate of 39,800. Whatever your views are on the electoral system of this country, this is a deeply unfair situation, never mind the fact that the Member of Parliament for Arfon, who I am sure is very assiduous and very hard-working, would have a very different work load to the Member for North West Cambridgeshire with 91,000 voters. Yes, there might be an argument around having a proportional representation system, but this is something that needs to be fixed and that is what the Act does. Moving on to a proportional representation system, you probably remember that there was a referendum on a more proportional voting system, which—

Q102 Fabian Hamilton: That was not a PR system.

Mr Gyimah: Well, it was the alternative. It was a formal representation, which the British people complete rejected.

Fabian Hamilton: But it was not a PR system.

Mr Gyimah: It was not that we chose to focus on this rather than a formal proportional vote. The Government's constitutional package sought to deal with the inequality in boundaries as well as the voting system.

Q103 Fabian Hamilton: But the implication of what you say about the work load implies that the needs of every voter in the Wirral, for example, are similar to the needs of those in—was it North West Cambridgeshire that you quoted?

Mr Gyimah: Yes, North West Cambridgeshire.

Fabian Hamilton: But surely the needs of different geographic locations or different urban settings are very different. The needs of constituents are very different.

Mr Gyimah: I don't think either you or I should prejudge what the needs of voters in any constituency are.

Q104 Fabian Hamilton: No, but you are implying that the work load for anybody who has far fewer voters is considerably less and I am arguing that, depending where that setting is, it may be equal to the work load of a much larger constituency.

Mr Gyimah: It may be equal, but what is certainly the case is that one Member requires significantly fewer voters to get elected than another Member in a much larger constituency.

Q105 Fabian Hamilton: What worries me is that in the past all parties have had a consensus over the boundary commissions' criteria for redesigning and "reboundarying", if you like, constituencies based on the building blocks of council wards. The consensus has been based on issues that I have just mentioned like communities and natural and artificial boundaries, roads, railways and so on. My worry is that in a city like Leeds, which I represent, the boundary commission, under the criteria that you put that were purely arithmetical, was dividing communities from each other that historically had been very closely connected.

Mr Gyimah: Not necessarily. I agree that historically wards have been the building blocks of these boundaries, but part of the boundary commissions' proposals also involved a public consultation in which the public had three months to make their case. I know in my constituency I was due to lose one ward to a neighbouring constituency and my constituents quite rightly made their case and in the revised proposals the boundary was changed. The boundary commission's view is not final on this. There is the opportunity for the members of the public to lobby and make the case where they feel geographical location or local ties are particularly important.

We have arrived at a situation where it is much easier—and we discussed this in an internal meeting a while ago—without a clear guidance in terms of arithmetically where you want to end up, just to add an extra constituency. So the number of constituencies has been creeping up over time, while not enshrining any equality in terms of our constituency sizes in the system. I think this helps redress that balance but also avoids the situation where the boundary commissions could take the easy route, which is, "We are not sure what the numbers are. Let's just add another constituency," which is why we have ended up with 650 seats and that is not where we started.

Simon James: Thank you very much. If I could consider your first point, which might help give some context for that discussion. Just one point for the record. You mentioned the list of factors that the boundary commission may take into account. You mentioned inconveniences caused by the changes. I am sure you are aware that that final category is disapplied for the first review because there was an understanding during the passage of the Bill that the very first review, going from 650 to 600, would cause a huge amount of disruption. So that final criterion is disapplied for the first review, but your question was whether the Government has considered giving guidance to the boundary commissions about how to apply the others that you rightly mentioned—geographical features, local government boundaries and so on.

I think the Government has been clear in that there is one criterion that the boundary commission must take account of and that is the numerical one: plus or minus 5%. Everything else is down to

the discretion of the boundary commissions and I think Governments have a long tradition of not involving themselves in the detail of geographical ties or community ties and so on. Our view is that that is down to the boundary commissions. I think it is right that the Scottish boundary commission may take a different view from the English Boundary Commission on exactly how to interpret those. Scotland is different from England and I think it is very helpful that decisions on those matters are taken by people based in Edinburgh and in Scotland.

Q106 Fabian Hamilton: Are you happy that the approaches taken by each of the boundary commissions in the sixth boundary review have varied? Is that okay?

Simon James: Certainly from our review of the lessons learned documents and so on, and from what I know of the processes, there were divergences. Those divergences were entirely within the rules. I know the boundary commissions do constantly talk to each other and learn from each other, but Scotland is different from England is different from Northern Ireland is different from Wales. If the proposals differ, so long as they are within the rules then that strikes me as quite understandable.

Q107 Fabian Hamilton: But Leeds is not different from North Yorkshire.

Simon James: I would say that you could compare it to other parts of England and the boundary commission, I am sure, when they are considering local ties within Leeds, will apply similar criteria to local ties in a comparable city. That is different from rural North Yorkshire. The conditions that would apply in rural North Yorkshire might be the same as those that apply in rural Cornwall, for example.

Q108 Mark Durkan: This Committee has heard that the existing arrangements for public consultation are not satisfactory and I suppose one point highlighted there would be the arrangements around public hearings and when they take place in the process. Has the Government considered that aspect?

Mr Gyimah: Which aspect, sorry?

Mark Durkan: The public consultation.

Mr Gyimah: Yes.

Q109 Mark Durkan: We certainly have received evidence as a Committee, and no doubt you have received some of those observations, not least in respect of when the public hearings take place in the boundary process.

Mr Gyimah: There are a number of proposals out there in terms of how consultation for a boundary review should be conducted. It has been said that we should have an online consultation. We should let the public have online tools to create their own boundaries. I am sure a lot of us MPs, given the opportunity to create our own boundaries, would take that opportunity. On a more serious note, we have tried to balance between two things: the speeding up of the review process to have more frequent reviews and engaging and involving the public in the consultation.

At the moment anybody, including members of the public, is able to have their say on proposals. The period for representations on proposals was extended from one month to three months and there are also opportunities to make oral representations at public hearings. Ultimately, it is for the boundary commissions to decide how best to engage with the public at future boundary reviews. I was not the Minister at the time, but looking back on this, and certainly in my own experience as a local MP, there was the opportunity for the public to engage with the process but also get changes that they wanted implemented.

Simon James: I will reflect, if I may, on the improvements to the consultation process that the new system has brought in. No system is perfect. There has been feedback on the system of public hearings and the Government welcomes that but—and I am sure you have all had personal experience of this—the previous system was one of public inquiries and I think the feedback we got from those was that they were dominated by either legal or quasi-legal representatives. People would hire barristers and Joe Public would find it very difficult to turn up at one of those meetings and have his or her voice heard because it was incredibly adversarial and they were set out like planning committees with reference to plans and so on.

What we saw with the public hearings was that they were much more accessible. Anybody could turn up. Having been to a few myself, Members of Parliament were treated more or less the same as members of the public; all with the same courtesy but they were all given an equal hearing. I think the system of public hearings as we have it now does encourage a lot more people to respond.

Q110 Mark Durkan: You mentioned that there has been some advocacy around online consultation, use of social media and various other internet opportunities. Are you attracted by any of those or are you averse to them? Have you or ministerial colleagues identified, from other experiences, models that might be used?

Mr Gyimah: From the Government's point of view, what we want to do is speed up reviews and ensure they can happen every five years, within that constraint of course. If the boundary commission felt and was able to introduce a more dynamic way for the public to get involved, for example online tools, then I am sure the Government would be supportive, but it is one of these things where it is the decision of the boundary commission rather than the decision of Ministers on how that public hearing and engagement with the public works.

Q111 Mark Durkan: Another dimension of that, maybe taking it further and you touched on it in your first answer to me—and I understand it is used in some American states—would be the possibility perhaps of making mapping tools available to the public. You touched on it. Are you persuaded or attracted by any of that? Would you look at possibly doing a pilot in that regard?

Mr Gyimah: The general point I will make here is that the more reviews we have, which is the intent behind the Act, every five years, the more I would expect the boundary commission is going to have to think of creative ways of engaging the public, because this is not a once every eight or 12-years Act. As we go down this track I would not be surprised if they have to think of more creative ways of having the public involved and certainly we cannot be in the situation in which the way we engage on, say, boundaries is totally at odds with how the public interacts with other forms of consultations that are out there. I would not be surprised if we have some innovation further down the track but, as I have said, it is one of these things that the boundary commission has to look at.

Simon James: I would support that. Again, ultimately it is a matter for the boundary commissions, but I think they have shown how they can innovate and move with the times. With previous boundary reviews, in terms of public consultation it was a case of loads of documents dumped in a library or possibly in a dusty council office and people would have to know they were there and go and consult. Clearly, in this day and age, these things are put on the internet. The legislation stipulates that the boundary commissions must make these things available and must consult the public and I think that itself gives the boundary commissions enough leeway to be able to look at online mapping, engagement via Twitter or whatever.

Q112 Mark Durkan: On that point where, again, you have repeated the point of the intent still being to have the boundary reviews five years, have you had any cause to reconsider that?

Particularly if the exercise is opened up to the levels of public engagement that we are talking about, people might be more motivated to engage in that process and to stick with it if they thought the boundary was at least applying for maybe the length of two Parliaments rather than it being a fleeting boundary change. Will people invest that effort and that engagement?

Mr Gyimah: The five-year review is in the Act, so it would require primary legislation to change it and there are no plans to change the Act.

Q113 Paul Flynn: The boundary commissions for Scotland and Northern Ireland both recommended that the number of constituencies be fixed for a longer period than five years. Does the Government have any views on that?

Mr Gyimah: Yes, the Government does have views on that. The Government's position is that currently we have a situation where reviews are every eight to 12 years. The rationale for moving down to five years is to ensure that boundaries are consistent with changes in the local population. To move from the five years in the Act would be to move from the principle that underpins the legislation, which is that you want boundaries to be equal and you want them to reflect changes in population. There are no plans to vary it for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Q114 Paul Flynn: The present situation is that the next review will be over by 2018 and the new boundaries in place by 2020. Is this still the view of the Government? Have any discussions taken place with the political parties to amend this?

Mr Gyimah: There are no discussions taking place to amend this. We anticipate the next review would happen as set out in the Act.

Q115 Paul Flynn: It was a pleasure at the weekend to notice that the Prime Minister had a spasm of enthusiasm for democracy and wants fair play to the Green party in allowing them to take part in the parliamentary debate. It was a shame there was only one MP who supported this application when it went in on 10 November last and it was not the Prime Minister.

Mr Gyimah: Excuse me, which application?

Paul Flynn: The Green party on 10 November wrote to all newspapers and the television and said they wanted to take a fair share, but, as I say, there was only one MP here, one Lord, who supported it. There was no one from the Labour and Conservative party. Could we take this enthusiasm by the Prime Minister as a major conversion and will he react to this by not continuing with a reform that will still leave the minor parties cheated as a result and the only reform that will give fair play to the minor parties is proportional representation? Isn't that right?

Mr Gyimah: On proportional representation, as I said, we had a referendum for an arguably more proportional form of electing MPs to the House of Commons and that was rejected by the public. That has been done as far as this Parliament is concerned.

Going back to this issue about Scotland and Northern Ireland, if you were to allow a situation where the review happened on a longer timetable versus, say, England, we are likely to have a situation where the changes do not reflect the changes in the electors across the UK. You could have one part of the UK having a greater or lower share of seats than was justified by its level of the electorate, so you would be perpetuating the current problem in some parts of the UK but not in others.

Q116 Paul Flynn: If we continue with this reform system, the main problem in the undemocratic part of it will be again that the number of people who decide who the next Government will be would be about 500,000 to 1 million people who happen to live in marginal seats. That will

remain the same and our democracy will continue to be a travesty until some form of proportional representation is introduced. Isn't that true? This is a very minor kind of reform.

Mr Gyimah: I do not perceive this as a minor kind of reform at all. Having a situation where one constituency has 95,000 electors and another has 38,900 electors is deeply unfair and needs to be redressed. You might consider it to be minor. I think it is a deeply unfair and flawed part of our democratic process.

Q117 Paul Flynn: The AV referendum was determined by the amount of money that was spent by people on lobbying. Is this what the Prime Minister's view is in the next election, with his chest of spending—that it should be decided by lobbying rather than a fair representation of people's views in a balanced way in a debate?

Mr Gyimah: I have a very high opinion of the British electorate. There was a question that was put to the British electorate. I think the British electorate are very capable of making up their own minds, irrespective of how much money is involved in a campaign, and they overwhelmingly rejected it.

Q118 Paul Flynn: Are you happy with a system that is based purely on the numbers of people in constituencies? You mentioned Arfon as one. Arfon is one of the few constituencies in the country where the MP has to conduct his or her business in two languages. That is a major consideration. A contemporary one, certainly in my constituency, is that the major part of my constituency work is immigration. The cases are prolonged, detailed and numerous. The difference in the distribution of asylum seekers under section 95 is that I have 400 in my constituency and Cardiff has twice the number of all of the south-east of England outside of London, yet the constituencies of the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary's constituency and the Chancellor of the Exchequer added together have two asylum seekers. Should that not be a factor that is taken into account?

Mr Gyimah: I would not try to prejudge the level of work order demands placed on any of my colleagues in the House of Commons. I take the view that they all work assiduously hard for their constituents and sometimes it may be obvious what the nature of the demands on them are and other times it may be less obvious, but at the heart of this is not simply the work load of the MP. That is obviously a point to be made and I did make that point. At the heart of this is that you need to have equal votes so that every vote has the same weight. That is why you want to equalise constituency boundaries.

Q119 Paul Flynn: In the past we have taken sparsity as a factor and acknowledged that constituencies that have huge rural areas should be allowed to operate with a smaller population and now there are other factors involved that should be taken into account. Aren't you bringing in a new injustice in this reform, which does not do what it is supposed to do to make sure that votes are of equal weight? You are introducing new injustices and new anomalies.

Mr Gyimah: You have not pointed to a single injustice in your line of questioning. There are exceptions, as I said—of Orkney and Shetland, and of the Western Isles—where the geographical nature of the constituency has been taken into account. It is the same with the Isle of Wight but also Northern Ireland, which is particularly small with a small population. There has been a little bit of flexibility allowed there while, at the same time, ensuring that we do not end up in a situation, in the case of Northern Ireland, where you have over-representation. It has been done and, ultimately, the work was carried out by the boundary commission and it was for Parliament to approve it. This has not been done by the Government. We live in a country where politicians cannot draw these boundaries themselves or in a way in which they see fit. We have boundary commissions that are independent, professional and know how to carry out this sort of work.

Q120 Paul Flynn: Mr Chope's comment about the comparison with Council of Europe countries, and some of these have newly minted democracies, was that our electoral system, our democracy, does not represent the will of the voters because of the lack of proportional representation and other factors. Do you think we should be in a position to have delegations in the Council of Europe from Belarus and Azerbaijan to examine the purity of our democracies?

Mr Gyimah: There are many factors to a functioning democracy and I would say that our voting system has served us very well. It has served us very well in delivering very clear answers in terms of Government. Obviously, in the 2010 election that did not happen and we had a coalition, but it has served us and the British public very well. If the Labour party feels very strongly about changing the current first past the post system, I look forward to it proposing that in its next election manifesto.

Q121 Mark Durkan: In relation to the Northern Ireland point, the Act allowed an additional discretion in respect of Northern Ireland simply because it may not have been mathematically possible, given the smaller number of sites, to achieve the 5%. It was not some big concession around flexibility. It was a recognition simply that the requirements of the law may not be available in practice after Northern Ireland had had its number of seats decided.

On the point about the suggestion from both Scotland and Northern Ireland that the number of seats might be fixed for more than the five-year period, I do not think either boundary commission were saying that the boundaries necessarily had to be fixed for a longer period, but just that those boundary commissions would know that the number of seats were fixed, that maybe they could be reviewed even within the five-year Parliament. That is particularly important in Northern Ireland in circumstances where, as the law is currently, the parliamentary constituencies are also the Assembly constituencies: currently six seats but would be five seats. Five-year reviews of parliamentary seats also means five-year reviews of multi-seat Assembly constituencies.

You are talking about the individual bailiwicks of Assembly Members being affected by some of these issues and you are also talking about community sensitivities and geo-sectarian issues that arise. Would the Government not accept that there may be a case, notwithstanding the arguments that you as Minister have made about the desirability of the other measures in the Bill, for affording some measure to Scotland and Northern Ireland for fixing the known number of seats and creating more certainty there, particularly given devolution and all of the other factors and the issues that are arising with all the arguments around English votes for English laws?

Simon James: I think I would respond with two points. The first is, just to be clear, as I am sure you are aware, that in fixing that number of seats for each of the four constituent nations—even doing that for, say, 10 years rather than five, let alone even longer than that, but for the length of two reviews—you are automatically building in additional inequality and the simple rule that everybody bar the four constituencies is plus or minus 5% will almost certainly no longer apply for the second. That is a trade-off; I do not know what the answer is there but that is a trade-off.

Q122 Mark Durkan: But the Act says the rule does not have to apply in Northern Ireland anyway. It is a leeway.

Mr Gyimah: The Act says a small tolerance.

Simon James: Yes, okay, but the Act does not give Northern Ireland any more or fewer seats. But the second point I would make is, just thinking about why the Scottish and Northern Ireland boundary commissions might be making that point, and I think you have said it yourself, it is largely about concerns about disruption in future reviews. Scotland might have 50 seats and then in the new review they might have to do one on 49 or on 51. That level of disruption remains to be seen, I suppose, because one starts with 600 seats and then when one gets the registers in—it was

2011 last year, but it will be 2016 for the next review—one then divides up that 600, as I am sure you know, to the four nations according to the Sainte-Laguë method. I think the level of change that there will be over five years remains to be seen. There will be some movement of electors north to Scotland. There will be some movement south from Scotland to England. Pure speculation here, but if there is change it may be that Scotland has one fewer or one more seat. I am not sure the case is yet made that there will be so much disruption that Scotland might lose five seats. Clearly each nation has lost an awful lot of seats in this first review.

Q123 Mark Durkan: Depending on IER, England may lose seats.

Simon James: As the new system beds in then it is always based on the same system.

Q124 Chris Ruane: The timing of the drop-off of voters from the changeover of householder registration to IER is absolutely crucial because it could influence the size of the electorate for the next boundary review. The freeze date is 1 December 2015. I asked the Minister at the last meeting at which we interviewed him what was the reason that the Government decided to bring forward the date of the introduction of IER by one year. It was the settled will of all political parties in 2009. The first act of this Government was to bring that forward by one year. What was the reason, if you can refresh the Committee?

Mr Gyimah: We have had an exchange on this a number of times and you have your views and I have mine. I do not think we are going to agree.

Q125 Chris Ruane: Could you share what your views are?

Mr Gyimah: As far as the 1 December 2015 date is concerned, the Electoral Commission will come up with its own assessment of how complete and accurate the register is in the summer of this year. Based on that, the Government at the time can take a view on the 1 December 2015 date and whether the register at that point should form the basis of the next boundary review.

Q126 Chris Ruane: Could the Minister just refresh the Committee on the reasons why the Government brought forward this legislation by one year and broke the consensus? I have my views, that is right, and I do not want to give them to this Committee, but I would like to hear the Minister's views on why it was so critical to bring forward this legislation by one year. Could the Minister just enlighten us?

Mr Gyimah: I was not the Minister at the time. We have had this conversation a number of times and what I would say is that IER is going very well. Nine in 10 electors have been transferred on to the new register.

Q127 Chris Ruane: The question was not whether it was going well or not. What was the reason for bringing forward this legislation by one year, breaking that consensus and bringing it forward by one year?

Mr Gyimah: I will ask you to venture your views because you have views on it, so I will leave it to you.

Q128 Chris Ruane: No, I am not being questioned. The Minister is being questioned. What was the reason for bringing it forward by one year?

Mr Gyimah: I will not offer any views beyond what I offered last time you asked me that question.

Chris Ruane: Can you recap what they are?

Mr Gyimah: I will not offer any more views than what I offered last time.

Q129 Chris Ruane: If I can move on by saying that we have just heard from Lewis Baston who has warned that if the Government brings forward the end date for the transitional arrangements for IER then the next boundary review could be particularly skewed as a result of people being removed. The Minister congratulated himself. He said this has been a success, 90%. That means 4.5 million additional people are going to be missed off the register. There are already 7.5 million currently missing off the register. That could be 12 million, 13 million or 14 million missing off the register. This is critical. What will be the guiding principles? If you are the Minister in June and you make the political decision on whether to drop these missing millions off, what will be your guiding principles?

Mr Gyimah: First, can I just say something about the numbers that you have bandied about? There were people missing off the register before the introduction of IER and so IER is not responsible for 7.5 million people off the register, which was the Electoral Commission's last estimate. That is the first point. The second point is IER is about the completeness but also the accuracy of the register. Where people were on the register who should not be on the register, it is right that they come off the register.

The third point is the Government is investing significant sums of money to ensure that we have as complete and accurate a register as possible while learning all the lessons that we can from Northern Ireland, which tried this before we did. I would say, given that we are halfway through what is a two-year project, the conclusions you have drawn are a partial snapshot midway through this project. I would rather wait for the evidence come next year when the Electoral Commission, who are responsible for this, come up with their evidence and make a judgment then rather than speculate ahead of that.

Q130 Chris Ruane: The Minister said there were 7.5 million people missing off the register before under Labour. He is absolutely correct. This Government has introduced the biggest change in the electoral administration since the great Reform Act, or so it claims. This massive change is coming about—

Mr Gyimah: This Government has taken forward the biggest change in the electoral registration system that was first introduced by the last Labour Government.

Q131 Chris Ruane: That is right. The last Labour Government said this must happen after the 2015 election so that from 2010 to 2015 we can concentrate on getting these current missing millions back on the register, this 7.5 million. What success has the Government, along with the Electoral Commission and EROs, had in reducing this 7.5 million over the past four years before it introduces IER? How many people are off the register now, currently?

Mr Gyimah: The evidence we have from the Electoral Commission tells us that the electoral register, which declined prior to 2011, has now stabilised, and that is independent research by the Electoral Commission. I think that is positive news. There is obviously still a lot of work to be done as far as the completeness and accuracy of the register is concerned. No one in Government is saying there is not more work to be done, hence the £10 million that we announced just last week towards that.

Q132 Chris Ruane: Is it positive news that when these huge changes are coming about there are 7.5 million people missing off the register? The Government has had four years to put these people back on. It has failed to do so, so it is moving forward with 7.5 million people missing off the register and, if the figures are not improved, another 4.5 million to 5 million missing off the register. What will

the Minister's guiding principles be in June when he makes that decision whether to drop off these missing millions before the freeze date for the next boundary commission?

Mr Gyimah: I think that ultimately the dates on which you complete such a huge transition is a matter of judgment and a judgment—

Chris Ruane: Political judgment?

Mr Gyimah: It is a judgment but it is a judgment—

Chris Ruane: Made by a politician.

Mr Gyimah: Politicians make judgments all the time. That does not make them wrong, because they were made by politicians. The completeness and accuracy of the register is the backbone of IER. As I said, the last Labour Government introduced IER. We all think it is a good thing to have a system of registration where it is not the head of household or it is not the warden of a college who determines whether or not someone is on the register, and I am sure you agree. Going through that process is not going to be straightforward but so far there is a lot that we should be satisfied about, bearing in mind that there is still a lot of work to do to ensure the completeness of the register and appropriate steps are being taken to achieve that. Asking me to speculate on what would happen if I was the Minister and—

Chris Ruane: Just guiding principles.

Mr Gyimah: And if David Cameron was Prime Minister and appointed me to this job, what I would do I think is just fantasy. It is not for me to be able to speculate. The Electoral Commission will come out with its assessment and the Government at the time will have to act on that basis.

Q133 Chris Ruane: The Electoral Reform Society have given us a briefing that says, “It should be noted that among the major democracies with single member constituencies population is the basis of the electoral districts in the United States, Canada, India and France. Only the UK and Australia use registered voters and, of course, in Australia registration is compulsory and much higher.” Would it not be a better, more simplified and fairer system if we used, for the calculation of boundaries, the actual population of an area, not the registration of an area, so that the 7.5 million people would at least be calculated and included in the actual redrawing of those boundaries and the additional 4.5 million people who have already dropped off the register would be included as well so those 13 million or 14 million people would be included in the calculation?

Mr Gyimah: I will leave Simon to talk about how we have always calculated the constituency side.

Simon James: The question of equality being based on electorate rather than population, I am sure you will recall, was debated in the House and the principle that Parliament decided on was that it would be on the basis of registered electors. That is a principle. It is underpinned by some practical issues. We have a census that takes place every 10 years. There is no system of accurately recording the population more frequently than that. ONS publishes estimates but they are just that, estimates. The advantage of using the electoral roll is that it records registered electors. Basing it on population would then bring in all sorts of other practical issues as well, and it is not just a headcount. There would also be a decision about whether or not to include those under 18 or whether it would be pure population and so on.

Q134 Chris Ruane: Would using the census be out by a factor of, say, 14 million? Using the electoral register, could it be out by a factor of 14 million? Which one would be more accurate, do you think: the register that has 14 million people currently not on it for IER or the census? Which one would be the most accurate?

Simon James: Parliament has taken the decision and the Act says that it is based on registered electors. That is the system the boundary commission uses.

Q135 Chris Ruane: As far as you are concerned, a professional in this field who has studied it for many years, which one do you think would be more accurate: using the census with its pluses or minuses or the electoral register with its 14 million minus?

Simon James: It is not for me to question what Parliament has decided.

Q136 Chris Ruane: You have no viewpoint on that?

Simon James: They are irrelevant. It is up to me to implement what Parliament has decided.

Chris Ruane: What, 14 million people are irrelevant?

Simon James: I think that is a matter for Parliament to consider.

Q137 Chris Ruane: The final question is, when we conducted scrutiny on the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill we concluded that there may be a case for reducing the number of Members of the House to 600, but the Government has not made it. Is this something you think would benefit from a second look before any change to the number of parliamentary constituencies is implemented? Can I add that since 2010 the coalition—the Government—have appointed an extra 150 unelected Lords at great cost and the whole reason that the Government were proposing the reduction of the number of MPs is on cost. So it has increased the number of Lords, unelected, by 150 and proposes to reduce the number of elected Members of Parliament by 50. Does what has happened over the past four years totally undermine the reason for reducing the number of MPs from 650 to 600?

Mr Gyimah: As you rightly pointed out, cost was one of the reasons that was cited during the passage of the Bill as a reason to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600, bearing in mind that the current size of the House of Commons being 650 is simply based on the sum of the individual decisions of the four separate boundary commissions and has crept up over time. There is one way to analyse this, which is the Commons versus the Lords. The other way to analyse this is to look at the number of people on the register versus what other comparable democracies have. A strong case could be made that on that basis in the UK we are over-represented in the Commons and that—

Q138 Chris Ruane: Are we over-represented in the Lords?

Mr Gyimah: The Act we are discussing is to do with the Commons, not the composition or the number of the House of Lords.

Q139 Chris Ruane: We are also discussing the reasons for this, which is the cost of Parliament, both Houses. One has gone up by 150 and one is proposed to come down; the unelected element up by 150 and the elected element down by 50. Would that be good for democracy?

Mr Gyimah: If you are asking me, if you were to reduce the number of MPs from 650 to 600, does it shine a spotlight on the number of peers we have, I would say the answer is yes. As far as implementing this particular Act is concerned, I think there was a strong case made during the passage of the Bill. We would need primary legislation to change it and there are no plans to do that.

Q140 Chris Ruane: The number of Lords has gone up by 150. If we reduce the number of MPs what will be the net savings, or will there in fact be additional costs?

Mr Gyimah: I have not done that calculation but I would say that the—

Q141 Chris Ruane: Could I ask the Minister and his civil servants if they would provide those? I have put down parliamentary questions on this. The cost of an MP, you can do it like that. The cost of a Lord, there is no answer. Can I ask the Minister if he and his civil servants can provide the average cost for a Lord and the average cost for an MP so that we can perhaps, as a Committee, make our own calibrations to see if the Government have achieved what you say are the goals of it, which is an exercise to reduce the cost of Government?

Mr Gyimah: It is reducing the number of MPs from 650 to 600 and the cost saving is one, albeit the strong argument that was made for this.

Q142 Chris Ruane: What is the other?

Mr Gyimah: A number of things have happened since the passage of that Bill in terms of the Commons, not just the number of MPs in the Commons but the position of Scottish MPs in the Commons and whether Scottish MPs can vote on English laws. We have a lot of constitutional questions that are being thrown out, but probably not all were in such sharp focus at the time of the Bill. If the way you are going to look at this is simply, “Let’s look at the number of Lords and let’s look at the number of MPs in the Commons and compare the costs,” my suggestion would be, in addressing the big constitutional issues, that that is not the only one we need to be considering in this context. There are a lot of other broader issues we need to look at to work out whether or not this is the right path, although it will take primary legislation to undo this.

Q143 Chair: Sam, if you have a moment to consider whether you could drop us a line on the relative costs, I think the Committee would appreciate that.

Mr Gyimah: We will do our best.

Chair: You will also have a chance to talk about those broader issues on devolution. I believe you are coming back to see us. Excuse me, it is not yourself. It is Greg Clark. The Government will have a chance to talk about those broader issues because Ministers are coming back to talk to us about the devolution package, which is another of our current inquiries. Sam, thank you so much for your time. Simon, thank you indeed for your contribution, too. Thank you so much. Thank you, colleagues.