

Written evidence from Brexpati – Hear Our Voice¹ (TEB 20)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee The Elections Bill inquiry

Preface

BHOV is extremely concerned about the implications of the many various elements of The Elections Bill. The fact is that the Bill conflates and combines issues under the banner of one piece of Legislation. We view this confusion as undemocratic and in theory could assign voting rights to one group and remove from others. Any adverse effects are likely to be felt disproportionately by the very people the Bill should enfranchise.

In this evidence we aim to identify the key areas where we believe the Elections Bill can deliver positive change. We will focus on overseas voting but also touch on voting and candidacy of EU citizens and changes to postal and proxy voting.

Moving forward – Who are the British living Overseas and why they DO matter

Migration matters. Contrary to the constant barrage of negative portrayals of immigrants, emigrants, expatriates, refugees, asylum seekers or whatever word is used to describe human beings who move from one country to another, the fact that we are all human beings seems to have been forgotten. We could go on ad infinitum at the injustices, the stereotypes, the downright unfairness that many migrant groups face, some having to move under the most terrible of circumstances. What we as a group don't see happening is the want to understand or the need to self-reflect on matters relating to migration. We as a group of emigrants/immigrants know what modern mobility is like. Membership of the European Union gave us the four freedoms, Free movement of goods, capital, the Freedom to establish and provide services and most importantly in this context the Free movement of persons. Free Movement of persons was two-way. Not just into the UK, statistics say that there are 1.2 million British citizens living in the EU/EFTA and nearly 80% are working age or younger. Previous research in our group demonstrated that most of our members moved for work and the second reason was for love. It must be noted that not all migrants move away permanently. For more info on the modern mobile British Citizen please read our research document here <https://bit.ly/3kFBFPA>

Overseas Voting – Where we are now

Currently British Citizens living overseas lose the right to vote in the UK after fifteen years. Those still eligible to vote, in theory, should be able to vote in person, by post or by proxy at their last registered address in the UK. There were some issues reported anecdotally in our

¹ [Brexpati – Hear Our Voice](#) (“BHOV”) was founded by Debbie Williams MBE in June 2016. In addition to Debbie, there is a ten strong core team. BHOV is a Citizen’ Rights campaigning and support group. In recognition of our work, Our membership mostly consists of British Nationals living in Europe (“UKinEU”). However, not exclusively so, other members are British Nationals living in the rest of the world and EU citizens living in the UK. Debbie and BHOV received a European Citizen's Prize in 2017 from the European Parliament. Our aim is to raise awareness of the complexities of Citizens’ Rights issues, to disseminate information and provide a support network to the BHOV community.

group and others that voting papers for the EU Referendum, by post, did not arrive, either at all or in time. There isn't any published evidence or statistics to support this theory, which is also in itself is denying people a democratic voice. During the EU Referendum of 2016 the franchise, denied many people, who would be directly affected, to the right to equal Universal Suffrage and Human Rights. This group included EU citizens living in the UK as well as British Citizens living overseas. Taking one set of UK residents only, the franchise did however, for sake of comparison, include citizens of the Commonwealth who were resident in the UK at the time of the EU Referendum. British citizens living overseas are directly affected by UK policy decisions some examples (not an exhaustive list) are taxation, pensions, health and social care, benefits and stipends, housing and not forgetting bilateral treaties and diplomacy.

Overseas Voting – Where we need to go

When mentioning Votes for Life, it would be remiss of us to not mention Mr Harry Shindler OBE, who's tireless campaigning for the rights of British Citizens overseas has been extraordinary, there are many others, Jane Golding OBE, and Roger Boaden OBE both of British in Europe. Sue Wilson and Bremain in Spain have also done exemplary work on this issue. We hope that this evidence and all the historic work put in by so many results in positive change. Last week we ran a straw poll in our group, based on The Elections Bill. To summarise the main findings, there was overwhelming support for British Citizens living overseas to have a Vote for Life. Also, interestingly to have dedicated representatives i.e., MPs. A selection of member comments (initials used, not full names) can be found here, their voices need to be heard:

JG

The Government should stand by its manifesto promise since 2015 to give Votes for Life and NOT incorporate it into an other contentious Bill

LJ

- 1. Being a UK SRP, I am reliant on the UK government for payment and updating of my state pension. Plus hugely reliant on any policy changes they make in that respect.*
- 2. I am still a British citizen.*
- 3. I care greatly about my family and friends still in the UK who are even more at the mercy of the UK government than I am.*

MS

I was disenfranchised in the by the UK many years ago as I am a British National in Spain. I have been further disenfranchised by Brexit having now lost my vote in European elections in Spain. Consequently, I have no representation at a national or international level anywhere. I fully support "the restoration of voting rights" for UK nationals who have been, or will be, disenfranchised under the 15 year rule. However, I am in full agreement with opposition parties in not supporting the bill as it currently stands. ANY bill that gives me my vote back BUT disenfranchises others because of the proposed necessity to produce ID is not something I can support. The issue of voting rights for UK Nationals should be a bill in its own right.

PB

I believe a dedicated MP for a particular global area is important as our concerns may be different to those in a UK constituency.

This is from Wikipedia on the Italian solution:

The Overseas Constituencies (Circoscrizione Estero, or "Foreign district") consists of four electoral zones which elect Deputies and Senators to the Italian Parliament. Italy is one of the few countries to reserve seats for those citizens residing abroad. There are twelve such seats in the Chamber of Deputies and six in the Senate of the Republic (8 deputies and 4 senators from legislature XIX).

Each of the four constituencies elects at least one Deputy and one Senator, with the remaining seats distributed between the electoral zones in proportion to the number of Italian citizens resident in each.

HS

I can still vote in the UK but not for much longer. As a UK National, decisions taken in the UK continue to affect me so I value my vote. I find it particularly distressing that the structures in place for voting from abroad are not fit for purpose with many people not receiving postal votes till it is too late to submit them.

Direct representation for those of us living outside the UK would be a very good thing.

JB

Removing the 15-year rule would bring the UK into line with most democratic countries (there are still a few other exceptions) which set no limit. Any limit is arbitrary as each expatriated citizen has a different connection with the home country - some very close, others more distant. Those who no longer think it's important don't have to vote, there's no obligation - but this shouldn't deny the right to those who do. Going abroad doesn't mean losing citizenship - a citizen has a permanent right to return and in that sense remains concerned by all national issues. In the UK voting is seen as a privilege rather than as a right (hence the blanket ban on prisoner voting, which is also controversial), but I believe it should be seen as a birth right that can only be taken away in the most extreme circumstances (e.g. electoral fraud). Brits cannot vote in national elections in the host State unless they get another nationality. We were particularly concerned by the outcome of the Brexit referendum, which admittedly had its own separate franchise, but that franchise was based on the ordinary election franchise. And the Referendum Act was voted upon by a Parliament over which we had no say in the first place.

ED

1. I am still a British citizen and decisions made and laws passed by the British government still affect me even though I don't live there e.g. Brexit, immigration and travel rules, inheritance laws...

2. My family (mother, brother, grandparents, Aunties and Uncles all live in the UK and I care deeply about them and what happens to them

3. My French family and friends are shocked that I cannot vote in the UK, that British overseas citizens are not represented at government level and in Parliament. NB: French citizens living overseas can vote in national elections, there is a Secretary of State for French citizens living overseas and MP's representing French citizens living overseas.

CK

I think voting rights should reflect people's mobility. I don't see anything wrong with having a vote in a country you moved to and retaining a vote in your birth country. What happens in both countries affects you and often you are contributing in both countries. Restoring our vote and giving us representation could help raise the profile of UK nationals around the world who are currently undervalued and ignored assets of the UK. I am currently completely disenfranchised which makes a mockery of democracy and puts people like me in a vulnerable position.

Overseas Voting – Recommendations

1. Votes for Life
2. Dedicated MP's
3. Overseas Constituency
4. Voting at Embassies/Consulates
5. Clear and concise government information on voting by post, in person and by proxy.
6. British community representatives abroad (working with Embassies and consulates).

Conclusion

To move forward as a democratic nation, care and consideration must be given to the suffrage of every resident or citizen (regardless of location). The benefits to society as whole if more people can vote, will ensure that society as whole benefits. Voting is good for well-being of the collective and the individual. Old, tired stereotypes and thinking need to be dropped, British citizens living overseas need a democratic voice, they need to be heard. Since the EU Referendum, their lives have detrimentally changed, from voting rights to residency, to livelihoods and working patterns, many now have no vote at all – anywhere. It's time to make amends for the many years of disenfranchisement suffered by so many. Use that soft power and let them be heard.

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