



House of Commons

Tuesday 2 December 2014

Overseas Voters (15 Year Rule)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.40 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to allow British citizens resident overseas for more than 15 years to vote in UK Parliamentary elections and referendums; and for connected purposes.

It is estimated that there are 5.5 million UK citizens living abroad, of whom possibly 1 million are under 18 and a further 1 million are debarred by the 15-year rule and who maintain strong cultural, emotional, financial and historical links with this country. However, under current laws, British citizens who live abroad can only vote in UK parliamentary elections for a maximum of 15 years from the date they last lived in the UK. I believe this to be incredibly unfair and unjustified, given that many people who have lived abroad for more than 15 years decided to move to a different country only after having paid into this country's system for the whole of their working lives, and still have strong connections to the UK. Why should they, after all that, be disfranchised by their country of origin?

The 15-year limit we impose on voters is one of the strictest in the world. Indeed, from my research, the only countries with stricter rules on overseas voting are Ireland, Greece and Malta, where citizens who have left their country are not allowed to vote at all. However, countries as diverse as the US, France, Japan, South Africa, Belgium, the Czech Republic and Italy all have no limit on the ability of their citizens to vote from abroad. We must surely question why, as a country with a proud history of democracy and a wide franchise, we set some of the strictest rules in the world against our own citizens.

Much of the opposition to abolishing the 15-year rule is centred around the fact that relatively few of the 3.5 million citizens living overseas and currently eligible to register to vote actually do so. Only about 32,000 overseas citizens are registered, which is disappointingly few. I have been pressing the Electoral Commission for some time dramatically to step up its efforts to increase the number of eligible overseas voters, and I am pleased it has now accepted a target of 100,000 voters to be registered by May 2015—before the general election.

There are some possible reasons why overseas citizens do not register to vote. It might be that many are simply not aware of it, so we should do more, through passports, pensions and Government Departments, to make them aware of their rights. Until recently, it has been a long, drawn-out process, involving paper forms having to be sent across the world simply to register, but under changes made by this Government, I am pleased to say we have now made progress, and people living abroad can now register to vote online in just a few minutes at www.gov.uk/register-to-vote. A further deterrent was the time it took to return postal votes from around the world, but again the Government have recently introduced changes to the individual voter registration system increasing the period for returning postal votes from 17 to 25 days, which will be of considerable advantage to people living around the world.

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Despite the low registration figures, however, we should not simply discount such a large number of British citizens and take away their right to vote. If that many people living in this country were disfranchised, there would be an outcry. I strongly believe that one reason registration numbers are so low is the deterrent effect of the 15-year rule. I have had people contacting me from all around the world, saying “What is the point in registering to vote now, when I will lose my vote after 15 years?” It is not that they do not want to vote, but that they do not want to have to register and then lose that right.

Contrary to the assertion by some that people living abroad do not care about participating in UK elections, people actually feel very passionately about it. I have had people contacting me from across the world, thanking me for raising this issue today. They want to vote; they want to engage and take part, but they are prevented from doing so by this 15-year rule. I strongly believe that the rule acts as a real disincentive for people to register and vote.

Throughout history, it has been the Conservative party that has championed the rights of overseas voters. Only under a Conservative Government have the rights of overseas voters been extended. Labour and Liberal Democrats have consistently tried to limit the voting rights of our citizens around the world. Indeed, in 1998, when there was a Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into the issue, Labour and Liberal Democrat members urged that the length of time should be reduced—despite the Home Office saying that the vast amount of correspondence received on the subject was in favour of an extension of the limits.

The extent to which the Opposition parties have denied the right of overseas voters was clearly demonstrated here earlier in the year when I and a number of my hon. Friends tabled amendments to the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 to abolish the 15-year rule. However, these efforts were thwarted by a combination of Labour and Liberal Democrat Members, and the same thing happened in the other place when the noble Lord Lexden tabled the same amendments.

It is absolutely right that citizens living abroad should be able to participate in our democratic process. After all, more often than not, they are the people who have worked hard through their working lives and contributed to the system through taxes and national insurance, and they usually keep their UK bank accounts. They should therefore have the right to maintain a say in

how that money is spent. Indeed, decisions of the UK Government continue to have effects on overseas citizens once they have left our shores.

Many hon. and right hon. Members will have received correspondence regarding overseas pensions. This is a classic example of an issue that continues to affect citizens after they have moved away from this country. They should be able to raise these issues with their votes, just as citizens living within the country are able to do. I would urge all those who feel strongly about this or any other issue to register for an overseas vote. If they do so in significant numbers, their voice will be heard.

It is clear from my conversations through our Conservatives Abroad network around the world that many people living abroad often pay closer attention to British politics and current affairs than many who live

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here. They are absolutely passionate about this country; they diligently read the British press and listen to our media; they often have families and friends in the UK whom they visit. As true democrats in this mother of Parliaments, we should encourage and facilitate all the millions of overseas voters to register, and we should abolish this 15-year rule. This would send a strong signal to those people that we are enormously grateful that they are the unofficial ambassadors, trade envoys and representatives for our country around the world. This is why I am pleased that the abolition of the 15-year rule is now official Conservative party policy, and will feature in our manifesto ahead of the general election in 2015. It has always been our party that has recognised the rights of overseas voters and understood their desire to remain linked to this country.

Today's Bill is an important part of a long-running campaign by some very determined people for the unfettered right of all British citizens living abroad to have the vote—the universal franchise. Up until now, only the Conservative party has campaigned on this issue. Today, however, I issue a challenge to all other parties to join me in this campaign, to make this a cross-party issue and to ensure that it duly happens.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, Miss Chloe Smith, Sir Roger Gale, Glyn Davies, Henry Smith, Mr Nigel Evans, Sir Peter Bottomley, Sarah Newton, Alistair Burt, Mr Dominic Grieve and Dr Liam Fox present the Bill.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 March 2015, and to be printed (Bill 129).

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