

Fixed-term Parliaments Bill

House of Lords Committee Stage – Day 1

Tuesday 15 March 2011

This briefing sets out the Commission's view on key amendments to the Fixed Term Parliaments Bill ahead of the Committee Stage in the House of Lords.

The main focus of the Bill concerns an important constitutional question – that of the length of the UK Parliament – which the Electoral Commission believes should be decided by Parliament and on which we do not take a view.

Please note that this briefing paper comments only on certain amendments which the Commission believes raise significant issues of workability or policy. We also welcome amendments that give effect to recommendations we have previously made. The note does not comment on every amendment tabled, and the absence of comment on an amendment does not imply that we support it.

Clause 1 - Polling days for parliamentary general elections

Amendment 1 seeks to move the date of the next UK Parliamentary general election from Thursday 7 May 2015 and instead to introduce weekend polling, which would take place between Friday 8 May and Sunday 10 May 2015.

Amendments 8 to 10 seek to allow polling to be conducted on one day or two consecutive days between 2 May 2015 and 10 May 2015.

While the Commission is not in principle opposed to polling day being moved to the weekend, we have stressed that any such change should only be made if there is clear evidence that it would be of significant benefit to electors. At present, we do not believe that there is sufficient evidence on which to reach a definitive conclusion about the benefits of moving polling to a weekend, and we would therefore not support these amendments.

The Commission has, however, evaluated a number of local pilot schemes involving advance voting – where electors would be able to vote in a supervised polling station within their local electoral area between one and seven days before the principal polling day – and has concluded that such facilities could help to enhance the accessibility and convenience of the electoral process. We have called on the Government to consider introducing advance voting as part of a comprehensive electoral modernisation strategy.

Clause 3 - Dissolution of Parliament

Amendment 53 seeks to extend the overall timetable for UK Parliamentary elections from 17 to 21 days between the date of dissolution to polling day.

The Electoral Commission and others, including many Peers, Members of Parliament and the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA), have highlighted examples of problems caused by the current election timetable and associated deadlines for electors (particularly service voters and overseas voters), candidates, political parties and electoral administrators. A longer election timetable would, for example, allow more time for ballot papers to be printed, issued and returned by service voters posted overseas.

While we support the principle of extending the timetable for Parliamentary elections, it will be important to ensure that the implications of any changes to the deadlines are considered carefully and we have urged the Government to undertake a comprehensive review in order to develop a coherent and consistent timetable and associated deadlines for future elections. The Commission would be ready to support such a review, but we would not support further changes to the election timetable without consideration of other key deadlines.

For these reasons we welcome the intention of this amendment, but rather than including such a provision in this Bill. We would however welcome a clear commitment by the UK Government to conduct such a review, and to legislate for changes in good time before the next General Election.

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