

Fixed Term Parliaments Bill

House of Commons Second Reading

Monday 13 September 2010

This briefing sets out the Commission's view on key issues arising from the Fixed Term Parliaments Bill ahead of the Bill's second reading.

The main focus of the Bill concerns an important constitutional question which we believe should be decided by Parliament and on which we do not take a view. However, if a fixed-term length for the UK Parliament is introduced, it will provide an opportunity to make some related changes to electoral processes, which will help voters and others involved in elections.

We have asked Government to give a commitment that an appropriate subsequent legislative opportunity will be found to introduce these changes in plenty of time for the next general election. Our views on these issues are set out below.

Extending the election timetable

The Commission and others, including many Members of Parliament and the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA), have highlighted examples of problems for electors (particularly service and overseas voters), electoral administrators and candidates caused by the current deadlines, including those for electoral registration and absent vote applications. A longer timetable would, for example, allow more time for ballot papers to be printed and returned for service voters serving overseas.

A longer timetable for Westminster elections could be created by bringing the key deadlines into line with those used for the majority of elections currently held in the UK. This would mean that the election timetable would begin 25 working days before polling day, rather than the current 17 working days. It would also mean that the deadline for nominations would be 19 working days before polling day, rather than 11 working days under the current timetable. Others have suggested that the timetable could be extended even further, including the AEA which has recommended a standard timetable across all elections of 30 working days.

It is important that the implications of any changes to the deadlines are considered carefully and we have therefore urged the Government to review this issue thoroughly in order to produce a coherent timetable for UK general

elections that addresses these concerns as far as possible. The Commission will of course be ready to support such a review.

Campaign spending by candidates

We have also urged Government to separately review the rules governing the regulated periods for candidate spending at general elections, to settle on periods which are appropriate in the context of fixed term Parliaments; and to find an opportunity to put in place clear rules in plenty of time for the next general election.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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