

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

## Public Bill Committee

# EUROPEAN UNION (REFERENDUM) BILL

*Sixth Sitting*

*Wednesday 11 September 2013*

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### CONTENTS

CLAUSES 4 AND 5 agreed to.  
New clause considered.  
Bill to be reported, without amendment.

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chairs:* †MR JOE BENTON, ANNETTE BROOKE, JIM SHERIDAN, MR GARY STREETER

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| † Bain, Mr William ( <i>Glasgow North East</i> ) (Lab)                 | † Reynolds, Emma ( <i>Wolverhampton North East</i> ) (Lab)           |
| † Burley, Mr Aidan ( <i>Cannock Chase</i> ) (Con)                      | † Sheerman, Mr Barry ( <i>Huddersfield</i> ) (Lab/Co-op)             |
| Campbell, Mr Gregory ( <i>East Londonderry</i> ) (DUP)                 | Smith, Miss Chloe ( <i>Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office</i> ) |
| † Dowd, Jim ( <i>Lewisham West and Penge</i> ) (Lab)                   | Vaz, Keith ( <i>Leicester East</i> ) (Lab)                           |
| † Ellwood, Mr Tobias ( <i>Bournemouth East</i> ) (Con)                 | † Wharton, James ( <i>Stockton South</i> ) (Con)                     |
| † Hart, Simon ( <i>Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire</i> ) (Con) | † Williamson, Gavin ( <i>South Staffordshire</i> ) (Con)             |
| † Hopkins, Kelvin ( <i>Luton North</i> ) (Lab)                         |  |
| † Horwood, Martin ( <i>Cheltenham</i> ) (LD)                           | Kate Emms, <i>Committee Clerk</i>                                    |
| † Latham, Pauline ( <i>Mid Derbyshire</i> ) (Con)                      |  |
| † Lidington, Mr David ( <i>Minister for Europe</i> )                   | † <b>attended the Committee</b>                                      |

## Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 11 September 2013

[MR JOE BENTON *in the Chair*]

### European Union (Referendum) Bill

#### Clause 4

##### EXPENDITURE

*Question proposed*, that the clause stand part of the Bill.

8.55 am

**Emma Reynolds** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship yet again, Mr Benton. You have done the hard yards in this Committee by chairing the first sitting. That seems like a long time ago now, but I want to put on the record my thanks for your patience and guidance.

Clause 4 is about the expenditure provisions for holding a referendum in the future. The Opposition do not seek to amend the clause at this stage. Although the Government have not yet calculated the exact sum of money a referendum is likely to cost, during the money resolution debate in the House the Minister for Europe quoted the sum of £75.3 million, which was the cost of the alternative vote system referendum.

We will return to the details of the Bill on Report. However, if the Bill were amended in the ways that we have sought to amend it in this Committee, it would have cost implications. For example, we discussed at length whether the franchise of the referendum should be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds. That would have a cost implication. We discussed whether the question should include another option. For example, in 1975, during the consultation on the White Paper, it was asked whether there should be an additional question, which would be “should the UK remain a member of the EEA?” It is open to colleagues to seek to amend the Bill on Report. I simply want to put on the record that if such amendments were made there would be cost implications because the counting of the vote would become much more complex.

We have discussed whether the franchise should be extended to Gibraltar. I am firmly of the opinion that Gibraltarians should have a say about whether Gibraltar and the UK remain a member of the European Union. However, again, there would be cost implications to including Gibraltar.

Finally, we discussed yesterday, in relation to an amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Cheltenham, how a referendum and an election could be combined. The hon. Gentleman used the alternative vote referendum as a guide to how that could happen. If the referendum were not held on the same day as a local, European or national election, the cost of the referendum would be much higher than the figure quoted by the Minister for Europe during the money resolution debate.

Before we return to this matter on the Floor of the House—I am not asking for an answer to this question today—it would be instructive if the Europe Minister would set out how much a referendum would cost if it did not coincide with another election. He gave us the

sum of money that the alternative vote referendum cost. However, that referendum coincided with the local elections that year, which reduced the cost. It would be helpful for colleagues on both sides of the House—and both sides of the argument—to have a clearer estimation of what the cost of a referendum will be if it does not coincide with another election.

**Martin Horwood** (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Benton.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East has made some telling points about the potential costs and the assumptions that are being made in the presentation of the Bill, as if the referendum would have a completely smooth passage, with everyone co-operating fully. Different scenarios need to be explored to establish whether we have taken on board all the cost implications of the possible referendum.

As the hon. Lady quite rightly pointed out, we have discussed some arrangements in Committee but that has not resulted in amendments to the Bill. If there were changes to the franchise, in particular a different electoral register for the referendum—if we decide to extend the vote to European Union citizens and to make special arrangements for Gibraltar and foreign citizens different from those for Westminster, European and local elections—there might be additional costs with the registration process, and costs to local government and returning officers to carry out the process. It will be interesting to hear the comments of the right hon. Member for Aylesbury on those points.

In particular, regarding Gibraltar, the right hon. Gentleman has clearly suggested that he is minded to look at arrangements that would allow the people of Gibraltar a vote on their own future in the European Union. We have had every indication, though no amendment, that that is a shared ambition among all parties. However, would the Government of Gibraltar be expected to defray the cost of the referendum, given that they had not requested it? That is an interesting discussion to be had. Is the right hon. Gentleman able to advise us on the likely cost of holding the referendum in Gibraltar if its Government are not willing to defray that cost? Has he had any discussions with the Government of Gibraltar on the referendum and its likely cost and timing?

I want to ask a further question in the same vein. Has the right hon. Gentleman had any discussions with the devolved and regional authorities in the United Kingdom about the cost of carrying out the referendum in their particular jurisdictions? Has he had discussions with the Welsh Assembly Government, the Mayor of London or the Administration in Northern Ireland about the possible cost of the question and the administration of the referendum in those areas?

In particular, has the right hon. Gentleman had discussions with the Scottish Government? We have explored various scenarios of what could be the uncomfortable interaction between the Scottish referendum and the proposed referendum. Let us imagine that, in 2014, Scotland votes for independence and enters a protracted period of negotiation with the United Kingdom, the EU, NATO and other international organisations—I do not know; I am not an expert in the matter, and perhaps other hon. Members are better informed. It is a

shame that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East, who is well informed on such issues, is not in his place today.

I am not aware of what the likely timing of the actual moment of independence will be if Scotland goes ahead and votes for it in 2014. It is quite conceivable that those protracted international negotiations would still be ongoing when the proposed referendum took place. That would be an interesting scenario. We would be voting on English, Welsh and Northern Irish membership of the European Union, but not on Scottish membership—that question, logically, ought to have a separate referendum. The Scottish Government might fully intend Scotland to be a member of the European Union regardless of how the rest of the United Kingdom voted. Should Scotland even vote in the referendum if it had already voted for independence from the United Kingdom? If so, would the Scottish Government be willing to defray the cost?

As I mentioned yesterday in a debate on my amendment, when we look at the administrative arrangements for taking the votes together, would we even have co-operation from the Scottish Government? Will the right hon. Member for Aylesbury expand on whether he has had discussions with the Scottish Government about such details and scenarios and their cost implications? If he has not, we have clearly not discussed all the potential cost implications, suggesting that, yet again, not all the i's have been dotted and all the t's crossed in the Bill, which was brought forward in a rushed and minimalist format, without pre-legislative scrutiny and without many of the details being thought through in the normal way for good and proper constitutional legislation.

Inevitably, therefore, much greater debate must take place in the later stages of the Bill. There must be more debate on Report and Third Reading and greater debate still in another place, where our noble friends are noted for their careful scrutiny and sometimes extended exploration of some of the detailed implications of legislation of this kind.

I look forward to hearing the answers, in particular about any discussions on cost that the right hon. Gentleman might have had with the devolved Administrations and the Government of Gibraltar.

**The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington):** Let me comment briefly on the points made by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham. The figure of £75.3 million, which I gave during the debate on the money resolution, is not a Government one, but was produced by the Electoral Commission, reflecting the actual known cost of carrying out the AV referendum in 2012 on the same date as local government elections. That is an actual cost, which comes from the Electoral Commission and not from Government, so we can all, throughout the House, have confidence in the accuracy of the figures.

**Emma Reynolds:** Surely the referendum was in May 2011, not 2012.

**Mr Lidington:** I apologise to the Committee; it must be something to do with the early start. The referendum seemed vivid and recent in my memory.

It is more difficult to give even an estimate for what a referendum would cost if it were held on a day when other elections, whether local or regional, were not taking place. We do not have a precedent for that since the 1975 referendum on staying in the European Union. Until the AV referendum, other referendums in the United Kingdom in the past 15 years have been mini-referendums, taking place in parts only of the United Kingdom, and not in the country as a whole. Clearly, there would be an increased cost and, if the Bill becomes law, we would need to do more detailed work on the estimates.

My central point is that the Bill is about the principle of giving the British people the final say. That is a political judgment and, frankly, the difference in expense between holding a referendum on the same date as local elections and holding one on a separate date, as a self-standing referendum, should not detract from the central decision that the Committee and the House are being asked to take: whether to endorse a Bill that gives the British people the final say.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham both said that were the franchise for the proposed referendum to be different from the normal United Kingdom franchise, it would inevitably impose additional costs. I am no technical expert in such matters, but I suspect that the marginal cost of printing some thousands of additional ballot papers would be pretty insignificant in the big picture. What is right, however, is that if the process of registration had to capture data on people who were not normally included on the electoral roll, there would be an additional cost to some extent for electoral registration officers.

**Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab):** The evidence is already there in a number of cases. I am thinking back to the most recent general election, when, for the first and so far only time, polling was on the same day as the borough council elections in London. If we are to remain on a fixed-term Parliament, that may subsequently happen every four or five terms. But of course there were people, principally EU citizens, who were eligible to vote in the borough council election but ineligible to vote in the general election. Having spoken to the returning officer in Lewisham about this, it caused some inconvenience, because of course the polling station staff were used to being given a name and then giving them both papers. I am sure that was replicated across the other 32 London boroughs. It caused some marginal difficulty for those EU citizens who wished to vote, but I do not think that the problems were either intractable or particularly inconvenient.

**Mr Lidington:** The hon. Gentleman is right. There is an administrative challenge, but it is far from insuperable. While 2010 was the first occasion on which London borough elections took place on the same day as the general election, in some of the shire counties it was the first time for some years that a general election had taken place on a day which was not also the day of local government elections. It is not a new challenge or unique to London. The technical challenge is how electoral registration officers ensure that for a general election, or for a referendum fought on the general election franchise, there is a proper mark or designation

[Mr Lidington]

somewhere on the register to show those who are eligible to vote in European and in local elections, but not in elections conducted on the general election franchise.

I think there is a trickier technical issue when it comes to the proposal from some members of the Committee to include 16 and 17-year olds. We would of course have the data for 17-year olds, because when you fill in the annual return to your local electoral registration officer you are asked to include details of anyone in your household who is going to be 17 or over during the electoral year in question. To add in 16-year olds would mean a change to the form that is sent out to householders, except of course in Scotland. Under the arrangements for devolved elections which are the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament, information will already have been canvassed on 16-year old attainers. So there would be an additional burden there. I do not think that there would be a problem if the House were to decide to include Gibraltar on the electoral register, because Gibraltarians are of course already entitled to vote in European elections. Gibraltar votes along with south-west England as a region represented in the European Parliament, so the process for capturing that electoral data already exists.

**Martin Horwood:** Does the figure of £75 million which the right hon. Gentleman quoted include Gibraltar voting, or does it not? He has just quite rightly explored various scenarios in which there would be an extra administrative burden if the franchise changed. Obviously that burden would fall in the first instance on returning officers, or in other words on local government. Does he imagine that central Government would fully meet the cost of any additional burden, or would that have to be met by local government? The right hon. Gentleman smiles and laughs at this suggestion. He may think that it is a minor point, but actually when we are making tough decisions about arts funding and central services at district council level, this is not a small question for local government.

**Mr Lidington:** In fairness, I do not think that my hon. Friend can have it both ways. On the one hand, he is advocating the extension of the franchise to include 16-year olds, and now on the other hand he is saying that it will all cost too much. My hon. Friend really needs to be consistent about this.

**Martin Horwood:** That is a complete misquotation. It was not at all what I was saying. I was not necessarily objecting to the cost; I was simply asking who would have to foot the bill.

9.15 am

**Mr Lidington:** The additional expense ought to be relatively marginal, unless there had to be a separate canvass of electoral data in addition to the normal annual cycle. Otherwise, all that would be necessary would be for the annual circular to householders to ask for details of anybody who would be 16 or over, rather than 17 or over, in that household for the year in which the referendum on Europe was to be held. I do not think that need involve great public expense, either to local or central Government.

**Jim Dowd:** On the second point made by the hon. Member for Cheltenham, it is not unknown for Governments of all kinds to will the ends without willing the means. Will the Minister give a simple undertaking that any expenditure involved in conducting the referendum incurred by local authorities' returning officers will be covered by the Government?

**Mr Lidington:** I am sure, as is always the case, that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will want to talk to returning officers closer to the time about all the practical arrangements, including the costs that might be involved in running a referendum. It would be premature for those discussions to start while the Bill is still in Committee in the House of Commons.

I was asked about the position regarding Scotland and other devolved areas. The United Kingdom's membership of the European Union is a reserved matter under all three devolved settlements. Foreign affairs, including membership of international organisations, are expressly reserved to the Government of the United Kingdom, so that is a political decision for the UK Government and Parliament. We may then need to discuss the operations of a referendum where they start to come within the province of devolved Administrations. Again, that is something to be addressed if Parliament gives its consent to the Bill and we know that the referendum will go ahead.

I was also asked an interesting question by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham about what would happen if Scotland were to vote in favour of independence but the subsequent negotiations about the future relationship of Scotland and the UK had not been completed by the time of a referendum on the EU, before the end of 2017. That was an ingenious question from my hon. Friend, piling a Pelion on Ossa of uncertainty and hypothesis.

I am going to take my stand with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland. He says repeatedly—I agree wholeheartedly, as I hope my hon. Friend might—that it is important that we do not, as the Government of the United Kingdom, engage in any kind of pre-negotiation about the terms or circumstances of the relationship of an independent Scotland, post 2014, with the remaining UK.

There is a very important reason for adopting that attitude. If the people of Scotland vote for independence, from the day that that decision is taken Ministers in the UK Government become advocates for the interests of the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Government and Parliament in Holyrood will become the advocates for the people of Scotland in those negotiations about the terms of Scotland's withdrawal from the UK. However, up until that date it is the duty of the United Kingdom Government to speak and act on behalf of and in the interests of the people of Scotland as much as of any other part of the United Kingdom. That is why we are not engaged in any type of pre-negotiation.

**Martin Horwood:** That was a rather convoluted but ultimately clear answer that no, the Minister has not had any discussions with the Scottish Government about

the potential scenario in which Scotland ends up voting in a referendum on the future of England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the European Union despite the fact that it has already voted for independence and has no interest in the matter, and it might well be expecting English taxpayers to foot the bill for the referendum taking place in Scotland. That, at least, was clear enough.

I would like to press the Minister on the other question I asked: has he had any discussions with the Government of Gibraltar about the cost or process of the referendum taking place there?

**Mr Lidington:** I am in the process of consulting the Government of Gibraltar about the proposal that they should be included in the electorate in a referendum on Britain's place in the European Union. It would obviously be open for the Government of Gibraltar to comment on technical matters as well as on the principle.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 4 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

### New Clause 1

#### PUBLIC INFORMATION ON THE UNITED KINGDOM'S MEMBERSHIP OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

(1) It shall be the Government's duty to undertake a public information campaign on the question of EU membership.

(2) The public information campaign shall include the preparation of a booklet of no more than 10 pages summarising the meaning of the referendum question, and the possible impact of leaving the EU on the UK economy, the international interests of the United Kingdom, and its political influence globally.

(3) It shall summarise the main arguments for and against membership of the European Union.

(4) The booklet shall be distributed, so far as is practicable, to all households in the United Kingdom and Gibraltar.—(*Emma Reynolds.*)

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

**Emma Reynolds:** I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

I will briefly outline why I have tabled new clause 1. I am not going to press for a vote, but at some stage in our consideration of the Bill it is important that we should consider whether it is appropriate to put into the Bill an obligation on the Government of the day—we do not know what they will look like—to undertake a public information campaign at the time of a referendum. Obviously, that should be as dispassionate and objective as possible, and set out the advantages and disadvantages of our membership of the European Union, and the advantages and disadvantages of leaving the European Union.

I have set out in the new clause that the campaign should take the form of a booklet of no more than 10 pages. It is important that the information is concise, simple and informative so that people have the opportunity to consider the advantages and disadvantages. That is important because recent polling suggests that quite a number of people are uncertain about how they would vote in any such referendum, and many people suggested that they would like more information. It would certainly be useful for people making such an important decision about our membership of the European Union to have

at their disposal information that is easy to understand and digest and that makes it easy to weigh the arguments for and against.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes a good case, but I think she is facing an uphill task. When I asked the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether he had ever had an independent evaluation of the cost to this country of leaving the EU—the impact on our economy, on our jobs and on the future well-being of our economy—he said that he had never had such an analysis.

**Emma Reynolds:** I have had a similar experience when putting oral and written questions to the Minister for Europe. Earlier in our deliberations on the Bill, I asked whether the Government have even started to assess the costs of withdrawal, and I was faced with the answer that the Government think it is in the national interest for the UK to remain in the European Union. That might not be the opinion of some of the Government's Back Benchers, but it certainly seems to be the Government's current position. I am sympathetic to my hon. Friend. For the time being we do not have an assessment by the Government and it seems that they have not embarked on one. That is why I think it is important that we add new clause 1 to the Bill. It might not be the current Government who are in place in 2017 or earlier. It might be a Government of a different political colour. I would hope so, but we do not know.

**Mr Sheerman:** It could be a Lib-Lab Government.

**Emma Reynolds:** It could be a Lib Dem Government, for all we know, if they get all those leaflets out. We simply do not know what the Government of the day will look like when this referendum takes place. Therefore at some stage in our deliberations it is worth considering in more detail whether we should include in the Bill an obligation for this type of public information campaign. Finally, and this depends on whether earlier clauses are amended in relation to Gibraltar, if the franchise were extended to Gibraltar that information campaign would extend to the good people of Gibraltar. I do not wish to push the new clause to a vote. It was tabled as a probing amendment. We will return to the matter in more detail on Report.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**The Chair:** Does the hon. Lady intend to withdraw the new clause at this stage?

**Emma Reynolds:** I am happy for there to be a debate on this.

**The Chair:** In that case the hon. Lady must move the new clause.

**Emma Reynolds:** I beg to move new clause 1.

**Martin Horwood:** I am relieved that that the hon. Lady managed to move her amendment before withdrawing it. The emerging tactics on the Labour side of the

[*Martin Horwood*]

Committee, in moving amendments that they do not support themselves and sometimes trying to withdraw them before they have even moved them, are perhaps indicative of the overall Labour political strategy these days. Who knows? That would be an unfair and uncharitable comment to colleagues who have supported me on many issues in this Committee.

**Jim Dowd:** On what premise does he assume that there is a Labour strategy?

**Martin Horwood:** I could not possibly comment on that. I will not rise to that as I am sure you will tell me off, Mr Benton.

I am not particularly minded to support this new clause although I am open to persuasion. I understand exactly what the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East is getting at. There are a number of possible objections to this. The first is the quite basic one that that there is a whiff of propaganda on the rates about this. In a free democracy we should not have the information about the sides of an argument presented through official channels. It should be up to the political parties, the media, and the press to put those messages across in free debate.

We have public service broadcasters in this country who are obliged to present a balanced view of political debates. The BBC and Channel 4, as public service broadcasters, are under a duty to do this. We have a lively media in print and increasingly online that I am sure would be extremely active in the referendum campaign. I do not think there would be any shortage of information flowing around about the arguments for and against the referendum question when it happened. I cannot see that the public information document would add a great deal.

If the hon. Lady is talking about the necessity of presenting some of the implications of exit from the European Union, I agree that that is very important. The spirit of some of my amendments, debated in an earlier Committee sitting, was to make sure that Government Departments had reported in official form on the implications of exit and laid those reports before Parliament. That is important and needs to be done, but to turn that information into a short publication at public expense is not necessarily the right thing to do.

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): Yet again, unusually, I find myself in ashamed agreement with the hon. Gentleman. I remember that in the 1975 referendum objective information was apparently going to be provided; it turned out to be purely pro-European propaganda. Unfortunately the political class across Europe has shown itself not to be neutral in these matters at any time. Providing information should be left to those campaigning on either side of the argument—political parties and the like.

9.30 am

**Martin Horwood:** Who would have guessed that in a European Union Referendum Bill Committee I would have agreed so much with the hon. Member for Luton North?

**Emma Reynolds:** I hate to try to prise open the great friendship or marriage between the hon. Member for Cheltenham and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North, but surely my hon. Friend's argument against the impossibility—as he would have it, I guess—of having an objective assessment of the advantages and disadvantages could also apply to the amendments the hon. Member for Cheltenham spoke to in an earlier sitting about reports on the implications of leaving the EU? I imagine that if my hon. Friend followed his argument to a logical conclusion he would also conclude that those implications would be presented in a non-dispassionate, non-objective way.

**Martin Horwood:** The answer to that is that when Government Departments lay information before Parliament the civil service is under a duty to present the correct and dispassionate version of that information. Any statistics have to be in line with the guidance of the Office for National Statistics and, if necessary, checked, by the National Audit Office, perhaps, or even the Public Accounts Committee and other scrutiny Committees; an example could be the Environmental Audit Committee in the case of implications for our presence in climate change negotiations, our membership of the EU emissions trading scheme and things like that. There are plenty of tools at Parliament's disposal to ensure that the information laid before it is objective, accurate and correct. I do not think that that would necessarily apply in the case of a booklet going out to the public.

**Jim Dowd:** In 1975, of beloved memory for my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North, myself and one or two others here, that is exactly what did happen: the Government provided funds for both sides of the argument, and also distributed a pamphlet to every household in the country, even though the Government's official position was in favour. The pamphlet included sections relating to the opinion of Commonwealth countries, as portrayed to the British Government, and also gave an outline or indication—I would not say an analysis—of the consequences of saying yes or no.

**Martin Horwood:** That is an important point. I was 12 at the time, and cannot quite remember how objectively the information was presented in that booklet. I am sure that, with a little research, I could come to a conclusion on what the hon. Gentleman has said.

**Emma Reynolds:** Given that I had not been born, I do not remember the 1975 referendum.

**Mr Sheerman:** She has only been here five minutes.

**Emma Reynolds:** I have indeed only been here five minutes, as my hon. Friend keeps reminding us, although it feels a bit longer than five minutes right now; it is three and a half years, but never mind. Surely, if it is possible for Government Departments to present to Parliament, in a dispassionate and objective way, the implications of leaving the European Union, it is also possible for the Government as a whole to present, in a short, informative booklet, in a dispassionate and objective way, the advantages and disadvantages of either remaining a member of or leaving the European Union? It is not beyond the capability of Government to do that, and it would be desirable for the Government to do so.

**Martin Horwood:** I am not sure that it is not beyond the competence of Government to do that. We have examples before us at the moment. The balance of competences review is going on; that is publishing, in semesters, the weight of evidence on the advantages of various competences being exercised at British or European level. We have the “Trident Alternatives Review”, an excellent document that went into a great deal of detail. They are being summarised in the media in cursory ways and politicians are being reduced sometimes to single sentence soundbites. The ability to present that kind of evidence objectively in a leaflet is challenging.

I do not necessarily object to the various campaigns receiving a degree of public funding, but the opportunity will be there for those campaigns, political parties and other organisations, such as trade unions, the CBI and others, to put arguments across in leaflets and other popular formats. However, to try to produce an official document that does that is both unnecessary, given the amount of debate that will be around, and challenging.

The point I was about to make before the last series of interventions was that even agreeing on the case for or the case against might be quite a challenge. Actually, I suspect that most of us on the yes campaign side would find it reasonably easy to agree something straightforward, but as the hon. Member for Luton North has said—I am not sure whether he said this in the Committee, but he said it on the margins—while many in the Conservative party are convinced that the European Union is a socialist conspiracy, he knows that that is not true; it is actually a capitalist conspiracy.

There may be other arguments. Given the bizarre, convoluted discussions we have had on the franchise, we might find that Irish, Maltese or Cypriot citizens, who would have a vote in the referendum, might vote for exit to get rid of the troublesome, handbagging United Kingdom and allow the rest of Europe to get on with the European project. There are therefore different arguments and rationales for voting one way or another in the referendum and trying to produce an official summary of the arguments for and against would be a little bit of a challenge. The Electoral Commission might be able to advise on that and help, but that is a reason to pause for thought before voting in the new clause. Perhaps our noble friends might be able to explore that at greater length when the Bill reaches their end of the corridor.

The third reason to be cautious is the cost. We have seen recently that ambitions to fund publicly the provision of information to electors proved challenging in the police and crime commissioner elections and in the alternative vote referendum. There might well be some of the same cost implications in this referendum, too.

**Emma Reynolds:** One of the reasons why the turnout in the police and crime commissioner elections was so low was because people did not have enough information available. Actually, many of the people I spoke to on the day who were normally reliable voters but refused to vote in that election said that because they had not had information from any of the candidates—such information was not publicly funded—they would not vote. If the Government had wanted to do the elections properly, they would have provided funds to enable candidates to put information to people and then we might have had a bigger turnout. Is not the hon. Gentleman in danger of falling into that same trap?

**Martin Horwood:** The hon. Lady makes an important argument, but she is conflating two quite different matters. In the police and crime commissioner elections the normal, free communication to the whole electorate from candidates was not publicly funded. I do not object to providing balanced public funding in some form to the yes and no campaigns; that is a well established principle in elections and referendums. I challenge the idea that a single, official communication should go out. If such a leaflet had gone out during the police and crime commissioner elections that said, “It’s very important that you vote on this,” I do not think that it would have had a great impact. People did not vote in those elections partly because they did not see them as important, or did not know about them, but also because they thought that politics should keep well clear of involvement in the police.

None of those arguments apply in this case. Argument about the European Union vote would be all over the media. Nobody would miss the fact that a referendum was going on. Everybody would understand its importance and, of course, party politics would be mired in that debate from the outset, so those arguments do not apply at all.

**Emma Reynolds:** There is a question about the lack of objective information regarding the police and crime commissioner elections, because many voters said to me on the day that they did not understand what the new PCCs were going to do. Keen proponents of the commissioner model have now said that as people get used to the idea of PCCs and see what they do, they might be more motivated to exercise their vote next time. In the same way, would it not be useful to have an unbiased and objective account of the implications of deciding to vote either way in a referendum? I tabled the new clause because people often complain that the information they receive about the advantages and disadvantages of our membership of the European Union seem biased and weighted to one side of the argument.

**Martin Horwood:** I take the hon. Lady’s point, but the fundamental reason why I am not really persuaded is that I just do not think that the leaflets that she envisages will really have the impact she expects. In the context of a European Union referendum campaign, leaflets would be vanishingly unimportant overall. My background is in marketing and, although a keen proponent of tackling climate change, I was always sceptical of the previous Labour Government’s attempts to produce official public education campaigns on the subject. The amount of media weight—to use the jargon—that was achieved through official communications was extremely small compared with the average run of Sunday supplements with climate change specials that were coming out left, right and centre, which were far more important in shaping public opinion. One BBC documentary probably had more weight than all official Government communications on climate change put together. A similar situation would apply here. This attempt at official communication would be challenging in principle, as I have explained, and would just disappear in the massive public, media and political debate around the EU referendum, in which both sides of the argument

[*Martin Horwood*]

would be fully aired and objectively so by the public service broadcasters. I am therefore not persuaded to support the new clause.

**Mr Sheerman:** I want to speak briefly in favour of the new clause. The fact is that we have a scurrilous press. Most of the press in this country is pretty awful. Rupert Murdoch still owns much of it. Alexander Lebedev, who is well-connected at the highest levels in Russia, owns three newspapers and goodness knows what he believes about membership of the European Union. I wonder what *The Sun* will be saying. Good information should be available to everyone in the run-up to the debate.

The Government may not like that because even though the Committee has been good and civilised under your chairmanship, Mr Benton, it is a bit of a furtive way to introduce such an important proposal. It is a bit by the back door. We all know that. The real truth, which we have not really discussed, behind why this is a Private Member's Bill is that the Government do not have the courage to do it themselves because of disagreements between the coalition partners. That is why proceedings have happened in this way. That is not to criticise the promoter of the Bill, who has acted entirely honourably and with integrity. Historians looking at the Bill, however, will see that the manner in which the Government introduced a major policy that will affect our country's future for years to come was scurrilous and furtive. They chose not to say, "We're going to go for a referendum." There is a right-wing caucus within the parliamentary Conservative party now that is terrified of this new party that is eating into its vote in by-elections and local and other elections. That is why we are here, and why we need to support the new clause.

**Martin Horwood:** I suggest that the hon. Gentleman is rewriting recent political history a little. He is painting a picture of a disagreement between coalition partners. In the coalition negotiations, it was rapidly agreed what process would be followed on referendum legislation. That legislation was introduced and the Minister for Europe argued for it vociferously, supported by me as the spokesman for the Liberal Democrats. We had virtually unanimous coalition agreement that it would go forward. It is now the European Union Act 2011. The Government agreed that legislation after many hours of consideration. What has changed is disagreement within the Conservative party, not the coalition.

**Mr Sheerman:** I am very happy to amend my view of history to some degree.

**Emma Reynolds:** In 2011, there was obviously a tenuous agreement between the coalition parties, but it is clear that there is no longer such an agreement. Regardless of whether there was a debate between the parties on the European Union Bill in 2011, the fact is that there is clearly profound disagreement between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives on this matter.

9.45 am

**Mr Sheerman:** On another matter, we all know that in the House all this week there has been a similar issue. A Bill to tackle lobbying embraces only about 1% of that

because the Deputy Prime Minister must be given the fig leaf of having introduced some sort of lobbying register in the House. We all know that that is an ineffective way of controlling lobbying because 99% of it will not be touched. It is the hamfisted way in which the Government run into trouble, and in the process they have managed to alienate almost all the charities throughout the country.

**Martin Horwood:** The hon. Gentleman is a much better authority on Governments running into trouble than anyone on the coalition side of the Committee.

There is no disagreement officially in the Government, because they have on their record the European Union Act 2011. What has happened is that an hon. Member has introduced a private Member's Bill, which the Prime Minister, as leader of the Conservative party, has chosen to support. I am not sure whether the rest of the Conservative party will ever have the chance of voting on that as policy because I do not think they are allowed to vote on policy, so it is difficult to know what the corporate view is. The issue has arisen from disagreement in the Conservative party; it does not reflect a change in the official Government position, although I understand what Labour Members are saying.

**Mr Sheerman:** The hon. Gentleman accused me of rejigging or misinterpreting history. Everyone can remember that the Prime Minister made it clear that any hon. Member who came high in the ballot for private Member's Bills would be persuaded to introduce such a Bill. That is the truth of the matter, and everyone knew that that was the chronology of events. That is why we are in this Committee discussing this important Bill that was introduced in a way that I have never seen during my time in the House. A provision that will affect the whole future of our country is being introduced through a private Member's Bill, but was not in the manifesto of any political party. In this country political parties are accountable because they go to the country with a manifesto, and if it has a majority, they are given a mandate to implement it.

**Jim Dowd:** I want to examine briefly my hon. Friend's comment that this is a private Member's Bill that will affect everyone's life and that that is unprecedented. I do not think it is entirely unprecedented. Many of the great social reforms of the 20th century started life as private Member's Bills—for example, abolition of the death penalty, abortion law and so on. However, it is unique in not calling on the Government and Parliament to do something now. It is trying to say that someone else must do it at an indeterminate future date.

**Mr Sheerman:** My hon. Friend is right. It was remiss of me not to take into consideration the far-reaching impact that private Members' Bills have had on our country, but I still believe, in terms of the future of our economy and our broader social and economic life, that this is the most important and far-reaching private Member's Bill that I can recall.

**James Wharton (Stockton South) (Con):** The hon. Gentleman tempts me to drift from the strict topic of the new clause, but how much of the history of this

topic should be included in the 10-page booklet that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East would introduce with her new clause?

**Mr Sheerman:** My view is that some information would be good. There was a very good *Evening Standard*-sponsored debate a few days ago where a serious number of leading economists and leading business people wiped the floor with those urging us to leave the European Union. That sort of debate should be broadly shared with the electorate of this country and of Gibraltar, but the fact is that we will not have that.

I do not know what the Prime Minister was doing meeting privately with Mr Lebedev in a pub the other night. Perhaps they were discussing the attitude of Mr Lebedev's three newspapers towards Europe. I do not know what the conversation will be with Rupert Murdoch, but I do know that the power of the press will be largely anti-Europe and for us leaving the European Union. Some dispassionate, objective information to the electorate would be a small effort to correct the imbalance we will see in the campaign, if we get to the referendum stage.

**Mr Lidington:** I completely understand and accept the spirit in which the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East moved her new clause. It is perfectly reasonable for her to test the waters in this debate over how information should be provided to the electorate by the Government or other parties during a referendum campaign, but I am not persuaded by the particular text of the new clause, and I will explain why. I completely share her hope for there to be a well-informed, wide-ranging public debate in the approach to a referendum and during the weeks of the formal campaign itself. There will be a need for public information, and I do not think that anyone who has spoken in this debate has dissented from that view.

If the Committee looks at how the referendum campaign and the approach to it will be conducted in the course of the political calendar, there is a general expectation that the British Government will want to make their view widely known and explain the reasons for the recommendation that they put to Parliament and the British people. The hon. Lady's new clause invites us to consider the extent to which we need to prescribe in statute how the public should be given information and the extent to which we need to depart from the existing framework of statutory governance in that respect.

Under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, which was put in place by the previous Government, the Electoral Commission is empowered to designate an umbrella group to represent each side of the referendum campaign. The commission must either designate an organisation for each outcome of the referendum, for both the yes side and the no side, or it is free to take the decision to designate none at all. It is not permitted under law simply to designate an umbrella organisation for one side of the case. It seems to me that that is a perfectly sensible provision. An organisation that has been designated by the Electoral Commission as an umbrella organisation has certain benefits. It is entitled to one free mailshot to each household or elector; to a referendum broadcast; and to the use of public rooms free of charge. In addition, designated

umbrella organisations are eligible for a grant from public funds of up to £600,000. During the AV referendum both the no and yes campaigns made use of the free mailshot and of the referendum broadcasts.

In addition, the Electoral Commission may choose to undertake its own mailshot to electors, outlining information as to what the referendum is about, how to register to vote and how to exercise the vote. There is nothing in the PPERA that would prevent the United Kingdom Government or the devolved Administrations from commissioning and publishing factual reports on the subject matter of a referendum, except for the provision in section 125 of the Act that prevents central and local government alike from publishing promotional material about a referendum during the 28 days immediately prior to the poll.

I am not persuaded that we need to lay down in statute, in the way that the new clause suggests, how the Government might go about presenting their case. It is perfectly reasonable—indeed, logical—to expect that the Government of the United Kingdom will want to make their case. I find it inconceivable that there would not be one, if not several, debates in Parliament about the conclusion of negotiations on the Government's recommendation for a referendum. I would fully expect the devolved Governments in each of the devolved parts of the United Kingdom to be making their views known. If Gibraltar is included in—and even if Gibraltar were to be excluded—from the vote on this, as all members of the Committee have acknowledged, Gibraltar would be affected by the decision of the United Kingdom for or against continued EU membership. Therefore I would expect the Government of Gibraltar to have their views and to want to express those. If we are going to constrain and lay down precise obligations on the Government of the United Kingdom, as the new clause provides, then the question arises as to whether we would have similar statutory provisions in respect of devolved areas of the United Kingdom. Since Gibraltar has its own constitution, dating from 2006, we would be stepping a bit outside the boundaries of what is constitutionally possible if we were to try to lay down limits on what the Government of Gibraltar could do and say within their own jurisdiction.

A lot of this is going to happen anyway and we do not need the new clause. I am glad to be able to strike a note of coalition unity at this stage of the proceedings, in that I have a lot of sympathy with what my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham said, in questioning the efficacy of the large-scale distribution of written information with OHMS stamped, metaphorically if not literally, upon it. It is a sad truth that people these days are much more inclined to look to third parties to provide endorsement of a particular political stance. After all, that is why all mainstream political parties in this country are eager to identify and recruit reputable third party endorsements for their policy platforms.

**Emma Reynolds:** I find the relationship with the coalition more and more mystifying, given that the right hon. Gentleman spent the last 10 minutes disagreeing with the hon. Member for Cheltenham, in saying that there should be a public information campaign in the form of some sort of mailshot. That is exactly at odds with what the hon. Gentleman was actually saying.

10 am

**Mr Lidington:** What I said was that the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 provides for the designation of umbrella groups, entitles such groups to a free mailshot to each household on the register, and allows them to apply for a grant from public funds of up to £600,000 to help fund the cost of literature or other campaigning materials. It seems to me that a decent framework already exists.

It is striking that the most serious questioning of the PPERA arrangements has come from the House of Lords Constitution Committee in its report “Referendums in the United Kingdom”, which was published in the 2009-10 parliamentary Session. That Committee did not recommend that the existing framework be replaced by the notion that the Government should be responsible for supplying greater quantities of literature. Instead, the Committee advocated a model provided by electoral referendums in New Zealand in 1992 and 1993, in which a wholly independent body provided information and ran the public education process.

I accept the sincerity with which the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East tabled the new clause, but I am not persuaded by the case for it. It is not sensible to tie the hands of a future Government over precisely how they will express their opinion and make recommendations to the public. To include in primary legislation such details as a limit on the number of pages is a little *de trop*, and we should be wary of getting involved in such micro-management of the public information process.

**Mr William Bain** (Glasgow North East) (Lab): Does the Minister recognise that it is important to give the Committee, and indeed the wider House, a sense of what the policy of the Conservative part of the coalition on promotional materials actually is? We remember during the 1975 referendum that a potted version of the sort described in the new clause was delivered to every household in the country. In the referendum in France in the mid-1990s, an entire copy of the treaty on European Union was delivered to every household in France. Does the Minister not recognise that not only would the amendment help the country, but it would assist him in dealing with the party management problems he would be sure to face if the plenary Chamber began to understand that he intended to deliver a copy of the entire renegotiated treaty to every household in the country? Would not many Government Members be sceptical about such a measure?

**Mr Lidington:** I am delighted to welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Committee. He has obviously spent the early hours of the morning closeted in the Library trying to frame that intervention. I hope that he feels a sense of catharsis after having managed to get that off his chest, and that his brief visit to our proceedings has been rendered worth while. Against my instincts, let me treat his intervention seriously and try to respond the point he raised.

**Mr Sheerman:** On a point of order, Mr Benton. It is not up to any member of the Committee to determine who attends or when we attend. We are all very busy people, and most of us have tried to attend the Committee

as well and as often as we can, but we have other duties. It is not the Minister’s job to try to set a standard for attendance in the Committee, and it is certainly not his job to criticise my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East, who has been an assiduous contributor to our proceedings.

**The Chair:** That is certainly a fair point of order. At the same time, I must give consideration to the fact that I do not think the comment was intentionally offensive. The observation is noted, therefore.

**Mr Lidington:** I have to say that if the hon. Member for Glasgow North East found my remarks offensive, Glasgow politics must be much more thin-skinned than I ever assumed was likely.

**Martin Horwood:** The Minister’s remarks were well made, and I am sure that the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, would agree if she was representing him, as she did in his absence yesterday.

**Mr Lidington:** I am paying close attention to Mr Speaker’s circular that we all received earlier this week on parliamentary etiquette, including about whether it is appropriate to intervene immediately after arriving late for parliamentary proceedings, but I shall leave the point there.

Returning to the intervention of the hon. Member for Glasgow North East, when we have a referendum in 2016 or 2017—whichever year it takes place—there will be no doubt whatever about the formal policy position of the Conservative party or of what I hope will be a Conservative Government. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made it clear in his Bloomberg speech in January that he wants to achieve reforms of the European Union that will alter for the better how it operates and, in so doing, make the British people feel much more comfortable with their place in Europe. He set out his hopes for a referendum campaign and, as Prime Minister, he will make his and the Government’s position clear at that time. It is completely implausible to imagine that there will be any doubt.

Individual hon. Members will have to make up their minds what they will do in a referendum campaign and which side they will advocate. In all my years in the House of Commons, my experience is that the issue cuts across party boundaries. It is always likely to do so, and I would be surprised, when we come to a referendum, if individual members of different parties did not dissent from the majority view and leadership of their party, and they will make their opinions known to their constituents and the national electorate.

I cannot let the hon. Member for Glasgow North East get away with his passing reference to the French referendum in the 1990s. His intervention reminded me that the French called that referendum because they felt they had been bounced by the decision of our then Prime Minister, Mr Blair, to submit the European constitution to a referendum. The French had a referendum on the European constitution and rejected it. They had the opportunity to vote, but the people of the United Kingdom were denied a vote on what became the Lisbon treaty, despite the Labour Government’s promise to hold a referendum.

**Emma Reynolds:** The right hon. Gentleman is usually a keen and accurate historian, but he has fallen down somewhat on this occasion. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East was referring not to the French referendum on the constitutional treaty—which took place not in the 1990s but in 2004—but to the one on the Maastricht treaty, copies of which were sent out to every household in France.

**Mr Lidington:** The hon. Lady reminds me that France, like some other European Union countries, has already had more than one opportunity for the public as a whole to have a say about the nature of their relationship with the European Union. That throws into stark relief the fact that that has not happened in the United Kingdom. The absence of that opportunity to vote is one of the main reasons why we have seen such public disaffection from Europe today. One of the key arguments in favour of the Bill is that it will provide a means of settling this argument definitively for a generation or more.

I want to draw my remarks on the new clause to a conclusion.

**Mr Sheerman:** Before the Minister does that, he used the phrase “I am not going to let him get away with that.” I am not going to let the Minister get away with not addressing the manifesto question. Should not a major decision such as this—to put a referendum before the electorate of this country—be in a manifesto and acted on if that manifesto gets the approval of the electorate, and enjoys majority support in the House of Commons, rather than being introduced in this back-door way?

**Mr Lidington:** I really do not think it accurate or fair to describe as a back-door procedure the Private Members’ Bills procedure that has been accepted by both sides of this House for many years. It is a perfectly legitimate way to seek to change the law. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear that at the next general election, in 2015, he will, as leader of the Conservative party, include such a referendum commitment in our party’s manifesto and platform for government. He will seek a mandate from the British people to lead a majority Conservative Government on that basis and on the basis of the rest of the manifesto. He could not have been clearer when he spoke in January on that matter.

The new clause raises important questions, but the extent to which it seeks to establish in precise detail how a public information campaign ought to be conducted is a mistake. I hope the hon. Lady will withdraw it, but she is right to have raised these important subjects.

**Emma Reynolds:** First, I welcome the Minister for Europe back to the Committee. We had some extensive deliberations yesterday, and the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Norwich North, responded elegantly and eloquently to our concerns about clause 3. I agree with the Minister, to the extent that in his opening remarks he said that we would need a well-informed and wide-ranging debate should there be a future referendum on our membership of the European Union, as laid out in the Bill. He also helpfully set out the provisions of the PPRA, pointing out that, if

such a referendum takes place, the Electoral Commission can designate an umbrella group which could deliver a mailshot to every household.

My new clause 1 simply provides for something for which there is already precedent. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East said, a precedent was set in France, and precedents have also been set in the UK: the 1975 referendum on our EU membership, which has already been mentioned; and the May 2011 referendum, so dear to the hearts of many Liberal Democrats, which did not go their way. That is why I find the remarks of the hon. Member for Cheltenham so surprising. In that referendum, the Electoral Commission produced a 12-page booklet on the advantages and disadvantages of the alternative vote system compared with the current voting system.

**Martin Horwood:** With respect, that answers precisely why Liberal Democrats are so sceptical about repeating the process.

**Emma Reynolds:** The 12-page Electoral Commission booklet is not to blame for the failure of the campaign to introduce the alternative vote system, which was roundly defeated on that occasion.

10.15 am

I respect the Minister’s point that public information would be available. He said that a lot of this will happen anyway. However, we simply do not know which party or parties will be in government in 2016 and 2017. We are, therefore, distrustful of any future Government, because we do not know which parties will be in power. I think it is appropriate, relevant and necessary to put in the Bill an obligation for a public information campaign. I take the Minister’s point that we could perhaps drop the “no more than 10 pages”. I agree that that is too prescriptive; it would be up to the Electoral Commission, or the umbrella group designated by the Electoral Commission, to make that judgment.

**Jim Dowd:** I am grateful for the opportunity—since we were talking about who was or was not here at various stages of the Committee—to apologise for my late arrival yesterday. It was due to an emergency visit to my dentist for some root canal work. On balance, I think I had a better time than the Committee. The 1975 booklet was 15 pages.

**Mr Sheerman:** How do you know that?

**Jim Dowd:** Because I can count beyond 10. To get to 15, start at one and work your way up. I do think the description is unnecessarily prescriptive. It would be a lawyer’s dream, because it does not specify either the size of the page or the size of the print. It could go on for ever.

I think the Minister was disingenuous to claim, albeit indirectly, that that would be the sum total of the campaign. As I understand it, the new clause indicates an element of it—one that is hopefully relatively objective. It is something that will go to all households to augment what those in favour and against are stating. On this question above all, it would be ridiculous for any Government of any colour to say that they have no opinion, as the decision would clearly dictate Britain’s place in the world for decades, if not centuries, to come.

**Emma Reynolds:** That brings me to a point on which I think the Minister for Europe and I would agree in a referendum: wanting to continue our membership of the European Union. That might be very different from the view of some hon. Members in the Committee and in the House. That will be an interesting development.

The point made by the Minister and by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge is right: I do not mind whether the booklet is 10 pages or 15 pages. We can consider the new clause again on Report. I will by then ensure that it is not so prescriptive. As my hon. Friend pointed out, the font size and page size have not been prescribed, so the 10-page limit is somewhat meaningless.

It is worth reiterating what I said in my opening remarks on the new clause. In many of the opinion polls, a substantial proportion of people say they do not know what they would do in the event of a referendum on our membership of the EU. Some more detailed polling suggests that people say that they do not know because they have not arrived at a decision and do not feel they have the information required to do so, notwithstanding the fact that there would be a lot of information available and coverage in newspapers. I am sure that certain newspapers would say that we should come out, and others would say that we should stay in. Notwithstanding all the information available to the electorate—for that reason, actually—I still think it would be valuable to have an unbiased account of the advantages and disadvantages of staying in or leaving, because I do not think that there would be an objective account in all that information. People feel that some of the information they get from political parties is biased, and I think they would prefer to have something that is objective. Should a referendum take place, a booklet of some number of pages would be appropriate. I think we will come back to the subject on Report, so I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

*Clause, by leave, withdrawn.*

*Question proposed,* That the Chair do report the Bill to the House.

**Mr Lidington:** May I briefly express my thanks to you, Mr Benton, to Mr Streeter, and to Mr Sheridan, who took the Chair for a while during our first sitting, for your patience, for your endurance at times in presiding over us, and for the good humour and tolerance that you have shown during our proceedings? I pay tribute again to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South, who introduced the Bill. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham and the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East. I also thank my hon. Friends and Opposition Members on the Committee. Our proceedings have taken place in a good-humoured atmosphere. There has been an exchange of views and some robust debate, but I do not think that the tone threatened to become embittered, and that is extremely welcome.

I also thank the Clerks and the *Hansard* writers, and my officials from both the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Cabinet Office for the support and advice that they have given during the Committee's proceedings.

**Martin Horwood:** May I briefly add my thanks to you, Mr Benton, and to your fellow Chairs for keeping us on the straight and narrow? I thank the right hon.

Member for Aylesbury, the officials, the House of Commons staff, and the Clerks and others, especially with respect to our first sitting of the Committee, which looked at one stage as though it would continue into August. Their patience with the machinations of politicians was much appreciated.

Many issues have been raised in Committee, including serious issues about the status of Gibraltar and conformity with the European Union Act 2011 and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. We have discussed the franchise, the costs, the complexities of the timing, and the interaction with the Scottish referendum. We have also discussed the EU reform negotiations and even the German elections. We have discussed issues to do with the provision of information, many of which are as yet unresolved. The Minister said that he would return to us with information about the status of Gibraltar, but that issue is still unresolved. That reflects the hurried and slightly ill-considered nature of the legislation and its severe need for further scrutiny on the Floor of the House and in another place.

The best argument in favour of a referendum was the one recently put by the right hon. Member for Aylesbury, who said that it would at least settle the argument for a generation. I suspect that that is a consummation devoutly to be wished, not least by the three party leaders. I might put it more in terms of lancing the boil of Euroscepticism once and for all. These are serious issues and they deserve a great deal more deliberation. My thanks again to you, Mr Benton, and to the officials who have supported us in this process.

**Emma Reynolds:** I should particularly like to thank you, Mr Benton, for your guidance, patience and endurance. You chaired the first few hours of our proceedings and are now chairing the final stages. Given that this is my first experience of a Bill Committee upstairs, and my first experience of a private Member's Bill Committee, it was extremely useful to have your guidance and that of the Clerks. I should also like to put on record our thanks to Mr Streeter and Mr Sheridan.

I should like to reiterate the thanks to officials in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Cabinet Office. I thank my hon. Friends for their support and their attendance. I also thank Government Members for their attendance. Overall there has been friendly and collegiate discussion in Committee. I welcome that, and I hope it continues. There are further issues—I will not list them now—that will need more detailed consideration on Report. We should all be proud that we have nevertheless covered a lot of ground in Committee.

**Mr Sheerman:** May I thank you, Mr Benton, for being so tolerant, certainly of me and my interventions? I should also like to thank colleagues. One of the advantages, or disadvantages, of being the Chair of a Select Committee for 10 years is exemption from Committee duties. It has been a nice return to the camaraderie, which I remember fondly from when I was a younger Member, that arises from the intense situations in which we put ourselves in these Committees. I thank you for your tolerance, and I am grateful for the tolerance of colleagues, whom I annoyed slightly sometimes by suggesting that they might not have been here very long.

**James Wharton:** It would be remiss of me, as the promoter of the Bill, if I did not put on record my thanks for your chairmanship, Mr Benton, and that of

Mr Sheridan and Mr Streeter, and for the excellent work of the Clerk and all those who made the Committee possible. On behalf of the whole Committee, may I thank everyone who has contributed to what has been an excellent process? I am pleased that it is drawing to an end. I hope that by expressing my thanks on behalf of everyone here, other Members will consider that what they want to say has been said, and will not feel the need to make a further speech stressing our gratitude to everyone who has contributed.

**The Chair:** On behalf of my co-Chairmen, I should like to extend a thank you to the promoter of the Bill, the Minister, the shadow Minister and all members of

the Committee for their courtesy to the Chair, and for the pleasant way in which the proceedings of this very important Committee have progressed. I should like to add my thanks on behalf of fellow Chairmen to the learned Clerk, the *Hansard* Reporters and all the staff who have contributed to a very successful Committee.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly to be reported, without amendment.*

10.29 am

*Committee rose.*

