

House of Commons Debates 05 July 2010

Political and Constitutional Reform

3.31 pm

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr Nick Clegg): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government's proposals for parliamentary reform.

Every Member of this House was elected knowing that this Parliament must be unlike any other—that we have a unique duty to restore the trust in our political system that has been tested to its limits in recent times—and if anything was clear at the general election it was that more and more people realised that our political system was broken and needs to be fixed. They want us to clean up politics. They want to be able to hold us properly to account.

So the Government have set out an ambitious programme for political renewal, transferring power away from the Executive to empower Parliament, and away from Parliament to empower people. That programme includes: introducing a power of recall for MPs guilty of serious wrongdoing; tackling the influence of big money as we look again at party funding; taking forward long overdue reform of the other place; implementing the Wright Committee recommendations, and taking steps to give people more power to shape parliamentary business; speeding up the implementation of individual voter registration; and increasing transparency in lobbying, including through a statutory register.

Today, I am announcing the details of a number of major elements of the Government's proposals for political reform. First, we are introducing legislation to fix parliamentary terms. The date of the next general election will be 7 May 2015. This is a hugely significant constitutional innovation. It is simply not right that general elections can be called according to a Prime Minister's whims, so this Prime Minister will be the first Prime Minister to give up that right.

I know that when the coalition agreement was published there was some concern about these proposals. We have listened carefully to those concerns, and I can announce today how we will proceed, in a Bill that will be introduced before the summer recess. First, traditional powers of no confidence will be put into law, and a vote of no confidence will still require only a simple majority. Secondly, if after a vote of no confidence a Government cannot be formed within 14 days, Parliament will be dissolved and a general election will be held. Let me be clear: these steps will strengthen Parliament's power over the Executive. Thirdly, there will be an additional power for Parliament to vote for an early and immediate Dissolution. We have decided that a majority of two thirds will be needed to carry the vote, as opposed to the 55% first suggested, as is the case in the Scottish Parliament. These changes will make it impossible for any Government to force a Dissolution for their own purposes. These proposals should make it absolutely clear to the House that votes of no confidence and votes for early Dissolution are entirely separate, and that we are putting in place safeguards against a lame-duck Government being left in limbo if the House passes a vote of no confidence but does not vote for early Dissolution.

I am also announcing today the details of the Government's proposals to introduce a Bill before the summer to provide for a referendum on the alternative vote system, and for a review of constituency boundaries in order to create fewer and more equally sized constituencies, cutting the cost of politics and reducing the number of MPs from the 650 we have today to a House of 600 MPs.

Together, these proposals help to correct the deep unfairness in the way we hold elections in this country. Under the current set-up, votes count more in some parts of the country than others, and millions feel that their votes do not count at all. Elections are won and lost in a small minority of seats. We have a fractured democracy, where some people's votes count and other people's votes do not count; where some people are listened to and others are ignored. By equalising the size of constituencies, we ensure that people's votes carry the same weight, no matter where they live. Only months ago the electorate of Islington North stood at 66,472, while 10 miles away, in East Ham, the figure was 87,809. In effect, that means that a person voting in East Ham has a vote that is worth much less than a vote in Islington North. That cannot be right. These imbalances are found right across the United Kingdom.

Reducing the number of MPs also allows us to bring our oversized House of Commons into line with legislatures across the world. The House of Commons is the largest directly elected Chamber in the European Union, and it is half as big again as the US House of Representatives. It was never intended that the overall size of the House should constantly keep rising, yet that is precisely the effect of the current legislation—the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986. Capping the number of MPs corrects that, and it saves money too. Having 59 fewer MPs saves £12 million a year on pay, pensions and allowances alone.

On the referendum, by giving people a choice over their electoral system, we give that system a new legitimacy. Surely, when dissatisfaction with politics is so great, one of our first acts must be to give people their own say over something as fundamental as how they elect their MPs. The question will be simple, asking people whether they want to adopt the alternative vote, yes or no; and the precise wording will be tested by the Electoral Commission. *[Interruption.]*

As for the date of the referendum, in making that decision we have been driven by three key considerations: first- *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Deputy Prime Minister. The statement by the Deputy Prime Minister must be heard with courtesy. If Members want to question him, they will have the chance to do so. The Deputy Prime Minister will be heard.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The first is that all parties fought the general election on an absolute pledge to move fast to fix our political system, so we must get on and do that without delay; secondly, it is important to avoid asking people to keep returning to the ballot box; and finally, in these straitened times we must keep costs as low as possible. That is why the Prime Minister and I have decided that the date for the referendum on the Bill will be 5 May 2011, the same day as the elections to the devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and local elections in England. That will save an estimated £17 million. I know that some hon. Members have concerns over that date, but I believe that people will easily be able to distinguish between the different issues on which they will be asked to vote on the same day.

Our Bill will make explicit provision for the boundary commissions to report on more equally sized constituencies and for the process to be completed by the end of 2013, allowing enough time for candidates to be selected ahead of the 2015 election; and we will ensure that the boundary commissions have what they need to do that. That means that, in the event of a vote in favour of the

alternative vote, the 2015 general election will be held on the new system, and according to new boundaries. These are complementary changes-the outcome of the referendum is put in place as the new boundaries are put in place, too.

The Bill will require the Boundary Commissions to set new constituencies within 5% of a target quota of registered electors, with just two exceptions: Orkney and Shetland, and *-[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear the second one.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The exceptions are Orkney and Shetland, and the Western Isles, which are uniquely placed, given their locations.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): What about the Isle of Wight?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to have to interrupt the Deputy Prime Minister, but the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) must not, however strongly he feels, shriek from a sedentary position in that way. It is very unseemly and if, I may say so, very untypical of the hon. Gentleman, who is normally grace itself.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The two exceptions are Orkney and Shetland, and the Western Isles, which are uniquely placed, given their locations. We have listened also to those who have very large constituencies, so the Bill will provide that no constituency will be larger than the size of the largest one now, and we intend that in future boundary reviews will be more frequent, to ensure that constituencies continue to meet the requirements that we will set out in our Bill.

I understand that this announcement will raise questions from those in all parts of this House, as these are profound changes. Let me just say that, yes, there are technical issues that will need to be scrutinised and approached with care as these Bills pass through Parliament, but ensuring that elections are as fair and democratic as possible is a matter of principle above all else. These are big, fundamental reforms that we are proposing, but we are all duty-bound to respond to public demand for political reform. That is how we restore people's faith in their politics once again. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Jack Straw (Blackburn) (Lab): I begin by thanking the right hon. Gentleman for early sight of his statement. First, will he acknowledge that his proposal today to abandon the 55% requirement for Dissolution following a vote of no confidence represents the first major U-turn of this Government, and it has come in less than two months? Why did he not think before about the impossibility of a Government hanging on after they had lost a vote of no confidence by a simple majority? That would have saved him a great deal of embarrassment. As to his now subsidiary proposal for a two-thirds majority for any other Dissolution, what is its purpose? It is not completely superfluous? Either he is in favour of fixed-term Parliaments as long as the Government of the day enjoy the confidence of this House or he is not.

On the issue of a referendum on the alternative vote system, the House will be well aware that just such a proposal was in a Labour Government Bill and was agreed by this House but not the other place before the election. Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that during the general election campaign he told *The Independent* that the alternative vote system was a "miserable little compromise", saying

"I am not going to settle"

for that? Could the Deputy Prime Minister tell the House what has changed his mind?

Let me turn to the question of the date for this referendum. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that he decided on this May date, which coincides with the Scottish parliamentary and Welsh Assembly elections, and local elections in some, but by no means all, parts of England without any prior consultation with the Scottish Executive, the Welsh Assembly Government, the Northern Ireland Executive or-as far as one knows-local government? Will he confirm that none of the four previous referendums held in the United Kingdom-the EU referendum in 1975, and the more recent Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland referendums-has been held on the same day as elections? What is the argument for not following that precedent? Would it not have been altogether more sensible to consult widely on the best possible date and then to add the date to the Bill in due course? What is the argument against that?

The House will be well aware that we not only sought before the election to legislate for British voters to have a choice about whether to have the alternative vote system or to continue with first past the post, but we pledged to do so in our manifesto at the election. So my party is in support of voters having that choice at a referendum. However, is the right hon. Gentleman aware that we will not allow that support to be used as some kind of cover for outrageously partisan proposals in the same Bill to gerrymander the boundaries of this House of Commons by arbitrarily changing the rules for setting boundaries and by an equally arbitrary cut in the number of MPs?

There never has been an issue about the need for constituencies to be broadly equal in size. That principle has been embodied in legislation for decades and has all-party support. As it happens, six of the 10 largest constituencies in the United Kingdom are Labour and only three of the 10 smallest are Labour. The right hon. Gentleman has agreed in debates in this House since the election that there is a huge problem, highlighted by the Electoral Commission this March, of 3.5 million citizens who are eligible to vote but are not on the electoral register. If his aim, as he says, is principle and to make the system fairer, why has he said nothing in his statement about how he will ensure that those 3.5 million are included in the Boundary Commission's calculations about the size of constituencies and how he will get them on to the registers in time for the review?

If the right hon. Gentleman now accepts that there is a case for Orkney and Shetland, with an electorate of 37,000, and the Western Isles, with an electorate of 22,000, to be given special consideration, what on earth are the arguments for natural and historic boundaries elsewhere not to be taken into account by the Boundary Commission and by the legislation? As he claims that he wants to "empower" the people-his word in his statement-is it his intention that local communities should continue to have a right to an independent local boundary commission in their area if those local people wish it? If that is his intention, when he says, "we will ensure the Boundary Commissions have what they need" to complete this huge task by the end of 2013, only two years after this legislation has any chance of getting through, what additional resources and staff will the Boundary Commission be given?

Let me now turn to the right hon. Gentleman's proposal to cut the number the number of MPs from 650 to 600-the most arbitrary and partisan of all his proposals. Does he recognise that his international comparisons are tendentious in the extreme since virtually every western country has many more proportionately elected representatives below the level of their national Parliaments than we do, whether the other nation is a federal state such as Germany or a unitary state such as France?

As for all the nonsense that the right hon. Gentleman came up with about how under Conservative legislation passed in 1986 the number of MPs has allegedly been rising inexorably, does he

recognise that over the past 50 years the total number of Members of this House has increased by just 3% whereas electorates have increased by 25% and that the work load of Members of Parliament and the demand from constituents on them has expanded exponentially? How will having fewer Members of Parliament enable the British people to be given a better service by their Member of Parliament?

Is the Deputy Prime Minister aware that his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, when he gave evidence to his local Oxfordshire boundary inquiry in 2003, castigated the notion that there might be too many MPs? He said then:

"Somebody might take the view that at 659 there are already too many Members of Parliament at Westminster."

He continued

"I certainly hope that is not the case."

Was not the Prime Minister right then, and are not he and his deputy completely wrong now?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Before I deal with the questions that the right hon. Gentleman raised, I want to acknowledge, recognise and pay tribute to the fact that he and his colleagues in the previous Government—certainly in the early years—were a party, at one point, of political reform. They introduced significant reforms: getting rid of the hereditaries in the other place; changing the electoral system for election to the European Parliament; and devolving power to Wales and Scotland. Opposition Members have a choice, and I hope that they will take this opportunity to rediscover that spirit of political reform.

I shall respond to the right hon. Gentleman's specific questions. He suggested that for the Government to listen represents a major U-turn. We listened to the objections raised on both sides of the House to our proposed 55% threshold, and we have acted on them. The inclusion of the two-thirds threshold gives an additional, new power to Parliament. Let us be clear what we are doing with the fixed-term provisions—provisions that his party used to support. We are taking power away from the Prime Minister and giving Parliament more power over the Executive. Surely that is something that he and other Opposition Members would support.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the fact that the referendum will coincide with elections being held on the same day. Is he seriously suggesting that people are incapable of taking more than one decision in a day, or of filling in an extra box to answer yes or no to a straightforward question? That is misleading and patronising at best. He claims that the ambition to have more equal constituencies is "outrageously partisan" and involves gerrymandering. It was the Chartists, back in the 1840s, who first proposed equal-sized constituencies. The Labour party used to believe that votes should have the same weight, wherever they were and whatever part of the country people found themselves in. How on earth can he and other Labour Members brand something as simple as giving fairness to every voter in the country as "outrageously partisan"? This proposal is based on a simple principle of fairness and he should support it.

The right hon. Gentleman cited the figure of 3.5 million unregistered voters, and I agree that something should be done about that— [*Interruption.*] Something has needed to be done about it for the past 13 years, and we will bring forward proposals to accelerate individual electoral registration, precisely to help to do that.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether local people would be heard during the boundary review process. Yes, of course they will. He also returned to the issue of the size of the House of Commons. Let us remember that existing legislation—the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986—already suggests that our Chamber is far too large. If we do not change that by capping the number of MPs, that number will just ratchet up and up.

It seems to me that the right hon. Gentleman and the Labour party have a choice. Are they in favour of reform, or of the status quo? Over the past few weeks, the signs have not been very promising. Last week, he turned his back on any progressive reform of our criminal justice system. Every day since the election, he and his colleagues have opposed every measure that we have put forward to sort out the black hole in the public finances that they created. Is the Labour party a party of progress or of stagnation? Is it a party that stands for something, or does it just stand against everything? Is the Labour party in favour of change, or just in favour of itself?

Several hon. Members *rose* -

Mr Speaker: Order. A great many right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye, and accommodating most, let alone all, of them will require economy in questions and answers.

Mrs Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if a referendum on a major constitutional issue such as voting reform is to be seen as fair, it should not be the case that a mere 50% of those voting on the day should make the decision? Ought there not to be a threshold of, say, 40% of those entitled to vote, as was the case in 1978 in Scotland?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The coalition agreement is very clear that the referendum will be decided on the basis of a simple majority. If we had thresholds for legitimacy, many Members of this House would not be here right now. It is a simple principle that a simple majority should be sufficient to pass the referendum one way or the other, and that is what we will do.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): Does the Deputy Prime Minister accept that if we are to reform our democracy, one of the most important things is that we take not only our people, but our Parliament with us? Will he therefore ensure that there is effective pre-legislative scrutiny of the two Bills that he has proposed and the Bills that are to come? Without that, he is in danger of denying the legitimacy that his proposals will depend upon.

The Deputy Prime Minister: Of course I agree that it is essential that the Bills are properly scrutinised. As the hon. Gentleman knows, given that they are constitutional Bills, every stage of the passage of the Bills will be taken on the Floor of the House, so that every hon. Member can scrutinise these important Bills and have their say in the final shape of the legislation.

Mr Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (LD): Obviously, I welcome the historic progress towards the alternative vote referendum and the fixed-term Parliaments. May I be a little more parochial and ask a question on the issue of constituency size, as for the past 27 years, under three sets of radically different constituency boundaries, I have had the privilege of representing the largest geographic constituency in this place—just below the 13,000 sq km cap that my right hon. Friend proposes to introduce? Can he confirm that the boundary commissioners will retain the flexibility in the Scottish context that they had last time round for the Westminster boundaries, when they could have opted for two Highland council area seats—that is a land mass the size of Belgium, let us remember—but in fact they opted for three?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I recognise, of course, the outstanding job that my right hon. Friend does across a constituency that is by far the largest in the country. That is why, taking the cue from his constituency, we will specify in the Bill that no new constituency can be any larger than his present constituency—just shy of 13,000 sq km. As for the basis upon which the boundary commissions will make their decisions, the exceptions on the face of the Bill will be very limited—for obvious reasons, the two island constituencies that I set out, and the geographical cap in size that I specified. Beyond that, the duty will be on the boundary commissions to deliver what we have always intended should be delivered—constituencies that are more equal in size in terms of the number of voters in each constituency.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): If one were to cut the number of MPs but keep the same number of Government Ministers, as is laid down in statute, one would have increased the stranglehold of the Government over the House. If the Deputy Prime Minister is to proceed with the cut, will he undertake to cut the number of Ministers, and if so, could he cut it by 22?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The key question is whether the package of reform increases the power of Parliament to hold the Executive to account. That is the fundamental issue of principle which members of the Labour party, when they were in favour of political reform, used to understand. This package of reform unambiguously puts this Parliament back in the driving seat.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I commend the Deputy Prime Minister for changing his mind on the 55% proposal, but may I ask him to think again about the timing of the referendum? The reason that the Electoral Commission recommends against holding referendums on the same day as elections is not that people cannot decide on more than one thing at a time, but that it leads to differential turnouts, which means that the subsequent referendum is unrepresentative. Would that not be unfortunate on such an important issue?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Electoral Commission, which the right hon. Gentleman cited, said just last week:

"There are benefits of holding elections and referendums on the same day—for example to encourage turnout, but there are risks associated with combination too."

What we must do is act in order to minimise those risks and increase the benefit. The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. There were real problems in the elections in 2007 which, as analysed in the Gould report, raised concerns about combining elections at the same time, but let us remember that as the Gould report demonstrated clearly, the complexity at that time arose from the coincidence of elections to Holyrood and very complex and lengthy ballot papers for the local elections in Scotland. In the proposed referendum, there will be a very simple question to which there is a simple yes or no answer. I think people will understand that that is best held at the same time as they go to vote on other matters, rather than asking them to return to the ballot box on another occasion, at great additional expense to the taxpayer.

Mr Elfyn Llwyd (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Making this announcement and fixing, to use the right hon. Gentleman's word, the date of the next general election for the same day as the Scottish and Welsh elections totally ignores the strong recommendations of both the Gould and Arbuthnott reports. It sounds to me not like the respect agenda, but actually like the contempt agenda.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I do not recognise that it is contemptuous towards the people of Britain, wherever they live, to give them that opportunity for the first time—an opportunity, by the way, that was first promised by the Labour party in its 1997 manifesto, but never delivered, like so

many other points of the political reform agenda that remained undelivered over the past decade. I do not think it contemptuous to ask people-wherever they live in Wales, Scotland, England or whatever part of the United Kingdom-to have their say on the electoral system that elects Members to this House, and to ask them to do so on a very simple yes or no basis at a time when they are voting in any event. It underestimates the people of Wales, Scotland-the United Kingdom-to suggest somehow that they are incapable of deciding more than one thing on the same day.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): That is not the suggestion being made. We all know that voting reform-changing the voting system-is a big deal in here but of very scant interest to the vast majority of our voters. What is the justification for artificially inflating turnout by coinciding the referendum with other elections, when the right hon. Gentleman has yet to receive any formal advice on that topic from the Electoral Commission?

The Deputy Prime Minister: With respect- [*Interruption.*] It is absurd to suggest that it is artificially inflating turnout by just giving people the opportunity to have their say. There is absolutely nothing wrong with giving people the opportunity to have their say and doing so on a very simple basis, with a simple question and a simple yes or no answer, at a time when people are voting in any event-unless the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that we waste millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on organising it for another occasion. I see no logic in that whatever.

Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a great shame that the Deputy Prime Minister did not have the guts to fight for the best change in the electoral system, and the one in which he once believed and I still do-that is, proportional representation. Would it not be fair to give the electorate a say on that as well as on the alternative vote in the coming referendum? If he couples the alternative vote, which benefits only the Liberals, with a reduction in the number and redistribution of seats, which is designed to hurt the Labour party, is that really democratisation or the biggest gerrymander in British history?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Once again, another Labour Member calls a simple act of democracy-giving people in a referendum the right to have a say about how we are elected to this House-gerrymandering. Only in the weird and wonderful world of a party immersed in the most mind-numbing, introverted leadership contest would that be called gerrymandering. It is simply aimed at one objective: to make sure that our elections are conducted more fairly and people's votes are of the same weight wherever they find themselves in the United Kingdom. That is an issue of principle which I believe is right, and I hope that when the hon. Gentleman thinks about it he will join the rest of us who want to give people the chance finally to reform our broken political system.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I am grateful to the Deputy Prime Minister for having listened to the views of Back Benchers on the ludicrous 55% proposal, but will he reconsider the answer that he gave to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)? If the right hon. Gentleman's avowed intent is to give more power to Parliament at the expense of the Government, how can it be right to maintain the current number of Ministers while reducing the number of MPs who hold them to account?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Gentleman. He is a long-serving Member who will always hold any Government's feet to the fire, and I respect him for that and pay tribute to him-

Hon. Members: Answer!

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise- [*Interruption.*] Order. There is simply too much noise in the Chamber. The House must behave in a more seemly fashion.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will also agree, however, that the measures that we have announced today will strengthen the role of Parliament in holding the Executive to account. They will strengthen the power of this House to throw out a Government through a motion of no confidence, and if a Government are not re-formed within 14 days there will be a general election and a Dissolution of the House. That seems to me to be a very significant shift that takes power away from the Prime Minister, which has never been done before, and gives more power to the House. It is something that I hope the hon. Gentleman will welcome.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Government's decision to implement Labour's election manifesto pledge for a referendum on the alternative vote system. Many Labour Members will support a yes vote in that referendum, but we will not support the gerrymandering of parliamentary constituencies. What concrete action will the Deputy Prime Minister take to reduce the number of people-3.5 million-who are eligible to be on the electoral register but are not?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for a referendum that would allow people to have their say on the electoral system. I believe, none the less, that the boundary changes that we are proposing are perhaps more modest than he and other Labour Members fear. [*Interruption.*] Well, it is a cut of 7.7% in the number of Members of this House. It brings the size of this House much more into line with existing legislation on what it should be, it starts to bring the size of this Chamber into line with those in other parts of the democratic world, and-this is perhaps part of the answer that I should have given to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope)-it does not impede the ability of this House to hold Ministers, however many or few of them there are, to account. That package, combined with the additional powers of Dissolution, provides fairness in the votes that are cast and provides more power to this House.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): I am sure that the Deputy Prime Minister has, like me, noticed how the Labour party has mutated from a party that believes in political reform to one that would quite like it, but not now, and not this particular reform. Given Labour Members' opposition, as with the 1832 Reform Act, to their rotten boroughs being removed, does he see that they have now given up on the idea of one person, one vote of equal value?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I agree. It is quite remarkable for a party that was once proud of its credentials as a movement of political reform now to act with barely disguised paranoia about a perfectly logical approach to redrawing our boundaries and with churlishness at the opportunity finally to have a referendum that would usher in AV, which is a proposal that the Labour party used to make-a party, remember, which back in 1997 fought the election campaign on a manifesto commitment to giving people the right to have their say about how people are elected to this House. This is, yet again, a commitment to political reform that the Labour party has failed to deliver and that we are now delivering for them.

Several hon. Members *rose* -

Mr Speaker: May I reiterate the request for short questions and economical replies? A very large number of colleagues wish to contribute, and I would like to enable them to do so.

Mr Ian Davidson (Glasgow South West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister now regret using the term "fix" in the context of the political system? Does he believe that the referendum that takes

place-I would support that-will remain simply on the question of the voting system, or might it not also give people the opportunity to express a view on whether they support the programme of increasing VAT and making cuts that the Liberals have endorsed, and allow us to give a verdict on whether we approve or disapprove of the Liberals?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I suspect that I know how the hon. Gentleman might vote in that referendum. No, the referendum question is just on the narrow point of giving people the option to support the alternative vote system, and it will be susceptible to a simple yes or no answer.

Mr Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's proposals to equalise the size of constituencies. Does he agree that this is not just a case of giving equal weight to each vote but very important in the context of removing an element of bias in our electoral system and making the system that we have much more proportional than it is at the moment?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. It cannot be right that we can have a situation whereby, as I cited earlier, there are 20,000 more voters in one constituency than in a constituency just 10 miles down the road. That means, quite simply, that the weight of the vote where there are 20,000 more electors is worth less than that in a constituency just 10 miles down the road. It seems to me that it is obvious to most people that that is unfair and needs to be changed.

Frank Dobson (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): As the Member with, I believe, the sixth largest electorate in the country, I am acutely aware, despite having 86,000 electors, that in the most deprived parts of my constituency very large numbers of people are not on the electoral register. There is a huge bias in our system against the most deprived people living in the most deprived areas, and unless the Government do something to get them on the register, this really will be a fix.

The Deputy Prime Minister: But what did the previous Government do for 13 years? Of course we can all agree with the right hon. Gentleman that it is bad and wrong that 3.5 million people are not on the register-he is absolutely right about that-but we will take measures to increase and accelerate individual electoral registration. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I genuinely apologise that I have to keep interrupting the Deputy Prime Minister, but I want to hear him. I want to hear the content of his arguments and his mellifluous tones, and I keep being prevented from hearing him by people chuntering away from a sedentary position. Please do not.

The Deputy Prime Minister: They chunter because they do not like to be reminded that they did nothing on voter registration for 13 years. They did nothing to give people the chance to have a say about how we are elected to this House, or to rectify the unfairness of the way in which votes are distributed across constituencies. If we could work together across parties to deal with these big issues, including ensuring that those who are not registered become properly registered, I would welcome that, but I just do not think it is helped by the right hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson) somehow accusing a new coalition Government, who have been in power for only a few weeks, of failing to do something about a problem that his Government did nothing to rectify for 13 years.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend has made a brave and courageous statement for a Government who want radical reform. However, does he agree that referendums should not be held on the same day as elections, so that we can have proper debate? Would it not be

a good idea to hold a series of elections on that date, and perhaps another vote that was a matter of yes or no?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but I disagree with him for the simple reason that I do not think that the question that will be put forward will be very complex. Is it a simple choice: do people want to have the alternative vote as the system by which Members are elected to this House—yes or no? I personally do not see why it would be right to incur the additional cost, complexity and delay that would arise if we had the referendum on a separate date.

Hugh Bayley (York Central) (Lab): We already know that the Prime Minister will campaign for a no vote in the referendum, and many of his Conservative hon. Friends will back his lead. If the Deputy Prime Minister is seeking a yes vote, he will need a lot of support from people such as me—electoral reformers on the Labour Benches. Does he realise that he is not likely to get that if there is a single question on both increasing the size of constituencies and moving to AV? The only way he will get support for AV is by having separate questions on AV and the number of constituencies.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The review of the boundaries will not be subject to a vote in the referendum. The referendum question will simply be on whether people—yes or no—want the alternative vote as the means by which Members are elected to this House.

The hon. Gentleman alludes to the fact that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I will be on opposite sides of the argument. I understand that for the hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members it is difficult to imagine that there might be different shades of opinion in Governments. I read in the newspapers this weekend of a pollster for the Labour party who disagreed with the party but was too frightened to leave the Government because she said she knew that she would be smeared in the newspapers. At least we on these Benches are grown-up enough to be open and relaxed about differences where they exist.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Could the right hon. Gentleman assist me by saying how much consultation there has been with either residents of the Isle of Wight or those further afield?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Of course there must and will be consultation with the hon. Gentleman's constituents, as there will be with constituents up and down the country. I recognise, of course, that he will have particular concerns as he represents an island constituency, but I hope that he will be able to see the virtue of a general principle of fairness and more equal constituencies applying across the United Kingdom, with the exception of the two island constituencies that I referred to earlier.

Cathy Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab/Co-op): I wonder whether the Deputy Prime Minister could give a clear answer to a simple question. Did he or any of his Ministers have discussions with the Scottish Government or any of the Scottish party leaders prior to the date of the referendum being trailed in the press? If he did not, what does that say for the so-called respect agenda for the devolved Administrations?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Clearly, we will be consulting with the devolved Administrations. *[Interruption.]* I do not think that there is anything wrong with the Government's putting forward their proposals in the manner that we have. We have been open and transparent about it and moved as fast as we can. We have told the House first; I often hear Opposition Members complaining that announcements should not be communicated to others. We have come to the House at the earliest

possible opportunity. The date and all other matters will now be subject to full scrutiny here on the Floor of the House of Commons, as is right for all Bills that have a constitutional significance.

Mr Mike Hancock (Portsmouth South) (LD): Could the Deputy Prime Minister kindly inform the House about who was consulted about the date of the referendum? If anyone was, what was the response he got? Can he also assure me that there will be legislation before the summer about the reform of the House of Lords, which seems to be sadly lacking in the statement that he has made to the House this afternoon?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I will not repeat what I said earlier about the consultation on the measures that I have described today. As for the Bill for the reform of the other place, I remain determined—we remain determined as a coalition Government—to produce a draft Bill, for the first time in more than 100 years in the debate about reform of the other place, by the end of this year.

Mr Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): May I ask the Deputy Prime Minister specifically what consultation there was with the First Minister about the issue of the Assembly election and the AV referendum being held on the same day?

The Deputy Prime Minister: It is within the gift of this Government to make the proposal and to come to this House first with the announcement. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways; he cannot criticise us for talking to others outside the House when in fact this time we are doing what he and his Labour colleagues have been saying for weeks—that we should come to this House. That is what we have done and that is the right way to proceed.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister wants to hold a referendum to change the voting system and make a coalition Government more likely in future. Why does he not think that it is worth letting people see for much longer what a coalition Government look like, so that they can make an informed choice on the voting system rather than having the decision thrust on them so quickly? Why the rush?

The Deputy Prime Minister: By the time the referendum is held, people will have had a whole year; I suggest that that is long enough for them to make a judgment, even if my hon. Friend has made an instant judgment himself.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): In 1832, Wales had 32 MPs and a population of 1 million. Now Wales has a population of more than 3 million and there has been only an 8% increase in its percentage of MPs. Is that just?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am afraid that I do not agree with the right hon. Lady's assumption that the worth of the House should be judged by the number of Members sitting in it. I do not think that a constant inflation of politicians is a sign of the health of any democracy. I really do not think that a cut by 7.7% of the number of Members in the House is the chilling, draconian measure that she and so many Opposition Members seem to think it is.

Mark Reckless (Rochester and Strood) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister proposes a referendum on how we are elected. He has also proposed an in-or-out referendum on Europe. Is he aware that some of us will vote to give him a referendum on AV only if he gives us the in-or-out referendum?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the coalition agreement also includes clear provisions for a referendum lock on any further transfer of power and sovereignty from

Parliament to Brussels and Strasbourg. That will reassure him and everybody else that that matter will be put to a referendum of the whole country.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I have heard before the words that the right hon. Gentleman uses about making every vote count, and I supported him, although in that case they referred to a more proportional voting system. However, I would support him in making every vote count in terms of equal constituencies if he could confidently show the House that that would be the result of the changes. In view of the fact that the census will report in 2013 and that he proposes a new registration scheme, what resources has he sought to ensure that everyone eligible is registered, so that we can get genuinely fair and equal constituencies?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady will know, we need to start with the work of the boundary review as soon as possible in order that it can be concluded in the timetable that we have set out. That is why the boundary review will be based on the electoral register that will be published at the beginning of December this year.

Dan Rogerson (North Cornwall) (LD): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement. He will be aware that the boundary between Cornwall and England was set more than a thousand years ago, sadly by conquest. Will the direction that he and the Government give to the Electoral Commission through the Bill take account of such ancient boundaries?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I hear what my hon. Friend says about the boundary between Cornwall and England, although I am sure that many of his constituents would be delighted to know that they are also citizens of England and the United Kingdom. The rule of thumb will be that the Boundary Commission should seek to redraw boundaries according to the simple principle that constituencies should be of a more equal size than they are at the moment, within the parameters that I have described. That will be the predominant requirement on the boundary commissions, and it will be of greater weight and importance than any other considerations.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): On fixed-term Parliaments, does the Deputy Prime Minister agree with the statement that the Prime Minister made during the general election campaign that unelected Prime Ministers ought to face election automatically within six months?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We have been very clear in the coalition agreement that we want to see the introduction of a Bill for fixed-term Parliaments in which exceptional elections will be just that, and so that we will never again be subjected to the pantomime of 2007, when the Government of this country were paralysed by the Prime Minister's dithering and indecision on whether or not to call an election. The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives have finally put an end to that.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Will the Deputy Prime Minister confirm that with an approximate 8% reduction in the number of MPs, there will also be at least an 8% reduction in the ridiculously high administrative costs of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority?

The Deputy Prime Minister: IPSA, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is entirely independent.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): We are the only Parliament in the world whose second Chamber is larger than the first, and Labour's next phase of reform would have addressed that- [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must hear the right hon. Lady.

Caroline Flint: Is it true that the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition plans not only to allow existing peers to remain until they die, but to create nearly 200 more peers at a time when they are going to cut the number of MPs?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am delighted to hear that the right hon. Lady is already talking about the next phase of Labour's reforms. I wonder what that is. Is it the phase that was in the manifesto in 1997 that was never delivered; the phase about improving individual electoral registration; the phase in favour of a referendum; the phase to devolve power; or the phase to decentralise government in this country?

Caroline Flint: Answer the question!

The Deputy Prime Minister: At the rate the Opposition are going, there is never going to be another phase.

Mr Speaker: Order. It has been a bit broad so far. I gently remind the Deputy Prime Minister that we must focus on the policies of the Government, rather than those of the Opposition.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it is the responsibility of local authorities to address their record in electoral registration in time for this new electoral role in his boundary review?

The Deputy Prime Minister: It is indeed.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As I hope the House knows, I am a supporter of mathematics in all its guises, but to use mathematics as a cover for what is essentially the gerrymandering of constituencies is an insult to mathematicians everywhere. Newcastle has thousands of unregistered voters, and it also has an identity that we want to keep without continual boundary reviews. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that the only votes that did not count at the last election were those of Liberal Democrat voters in search of a progressive party?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I remind the hon. Lady that we all fought the last general election on a boundary review based on the electoral register of 10 years ago. The system is deeply, deeply imperfect. What we are trying to do—and it did not happen in 13 years under the Labour Government—is hold a boundary review, without threatening the identity of Newcastle or any other area. We want it to be done quickly and for it to be established on the simple principle of fairness, with all votes being of equal worth wherever people live in the United Kingdom.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the right hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson) is an excellent constituency MP, thereby demonstrating that he is fully capable of representing 86,000 constituents, contrary to what the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) said, and that all of us should be capable of doing the same?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I happen to agree that if the right hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson) can do it with a larger constituency than that envisaged in our Bill, any of us can.

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): The referendum has been set for May 2011, but the people of Northern Ireland expect to have two elections on that day already—for the Northern Ireland Assembly

and for local government. Do the Government plan to move the local government elections to March, with the referendum and the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in May? That would be two elections in two months. What happened to saving money?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have been consulting with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point of principle. If we were to do what Opposition Members suggest and parcel out votes on different days, it would not only incur greater expense but devalue the elections that came later in the cycle. Let us imagine having three different votes on three different matters over the course of three months—that would be an act of disrespect to voters in Northern Ireland as it would to voters in other parts of the UK.

Gavin Barwell (Croydon Central) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on an excellent statement. I ask him to look again at one issue—the timing of the referendum. I understand his arguments on cost and convenience to electors, but a further consideration is the perception that the referendum is fair. Holding it on a day when my constituents in London have no local elections, but people in Scotland and Wales are electing their national Parliaments, could lead to a skewed result.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises the question of the date, as many others have. I simply reiterate that it is uncomplicated to ask people to answer yes or no to a simple question on the alternative vote at a time when they are voting on other matters. I do not accept the argument that it is difficult for people to make those different decisions on the same day. I hope that he would also agree that to do otherwise would incur significant additional cost at a time when we are rightly seeking to keep costs down.

Mr Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): On three occasions this afternoon, the Deputy Prime Minister has been asked about the 3.5 million people missing from electoral registers. On two occasions he has mentioned individual registration. Does he not realise that that will compound the problem and potentially drive the figure up to 5 million or 6 million people? Where is the equality in conducting the review, with all those people missing from the registers?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We have inherited a register from the previous Labour Government. For 13 years, nothing was done about the large numbers of people who are not on the register. We are now looking at the matter urgently. I disagree with the hon. Gentleman that individual electoral registration would not help to deal with the problem if it is done properly, and if it is properly resourced and given sufficient time to be implemented correctly. That is what we will be seeking to do.

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): Does the Deputy Prime Minister not agree that, in addition to the three welcome modernising proposals, which give more power to the legislature over Government, more power to the voter and more power to individual MPs, who will have greater authority because a majority of their constituents will support them, the Bill gives us the opportunity to respond to the other fallacious argument—that there is gerrymandering in the Bill—and ensure that we can have a modern electoral registration process that captures everybody in the months before voting, so that there can be no excuse for anybody who wants to vote not being on the list and no argument that the constituencies will not be fair in future?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. Once the synthetic fury about the proposal dies down, I hope not only that Members in all parts of the House will see that the proposal to cap the number of Members of this House at 600 is a sensible one, based on the simple principle of fairness and equality, but that this will be accompanied by greater efforts—I hope that we will be able

to work on this across party lines-to ensure that those who want to vote are registered to vote in the first place.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister touched on the malign impact of big money on politics in Britain, a point on which I totally agree. Does he not accept that the only way to control that is to have rigid and low limits on spending at elections and between them, to ensure that Lord Ashcroft and his friends do not buy elections in future?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should of course strive towards a cross-party approach on party funding, which is something to which this Government will return. We explain clearly in our coalition agreement that we want to pick up from where the cross-party talks on funding reform in the previous Parliament collapsed-and collapsed on all sides-and finally get big money out of British politics, so that the way in which we conduct ourselves and fight campaigns is beyond reproach.

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): Is my right hon. Friend aware that preferential voting systems such as AV are used for internal party elections in most, if not all parties in this House, as well as for elections to positions in this House-including your position, Mr Speaker-and that some Members were elected to this House using such systems until 1950? Given that, does he understand why some Members believe that preferential voting is good enough for us, but not good enough for the public?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that preferential voting is not as alien a concept as it is sometimes made out to be. All three main parties in the House use a form of preferential voting to elect their leaders-in fact, the Labour party is doing it right now-and a form of preferential voting was used for the election of the Mayor of London. AV is not a proportional system; it is a preferential system, and it is right that people up and down the country should now have their say on whether it should be introduced or not.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On the issue of Wales, if the Government received a request from the Welsh Assembly under the Government of Wales Act 1998 to delay the Welsh Assembly elections by a month, as is allowed under the regulations, what will the Government's response be? Is the Deputy Prime Minister ruling that possibility out?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I will of course consult the Secretary of State for Wales, and, indeed, the Secretary of State for Scotland. I know that the Secretary of State for Wales is in Cardiff today. If that request is made, we will of course have to take a decision at that time.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): In reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), the Deputy Prime Minister used the argument that people would not be confused about voting on two separate issues on the same day. I entirely agree with him, but if we are going to change the voting system, it must have complete credibility, and there is a real risk that in holding this referendum on a day when there will be differential turnout in different parts of the United Kingdom, it will not have that credibility. Will the Deputy Prime Minister reflect on the fact that if we are going to make this change, it would be in his interest for it to have complete legitimacy?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I hear what my hon. Friend says. I suspect, to be honest, that for those who quite rightly wish to argue that there should be no change to the system, almost any date will be construed in one way or another as being a reason for why the vote should not proceed on that date. My view is that the arguments we have put forward-of cost; of getting on with it, given

that we have all recently fought an election campaign in favour of political reform; and of preventing people from returning over and over again to the ballot box—are arguments well made, which I hope my hon. Friend will, over time, share.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): May I be the first Member unequivocally to say to the Deputy Prime Minister this afternoon that he has my full support for a yes vote in the referendum? On civil service reform, does he intend to prohibit the practice whereby Ministers can make political appointments by granting temporary civil service status to members of staff? Will he tell me how many people are currently in that position?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I cannot answer the latter question. I am very grateful, however, for what the hon. Gentleman said at first—that he is keen to provide support for the referendum campaign.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What consideration has been given to the gerrymandering—an issue raised across the Floor—of postal votes in connection with electoral reform?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I think there is widespread concern on both sides of the House about the evidence of irregularities in the way postal votes are administered. We are indeed looking at that right now.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): When the Deputy Prime Minister said only months ago that the electorate of Islington North was 66,472 while only 10 miles away, the comparable figure in East Ham was 87,809, was he referring to the position before the general election at which point the Boundary Commission came in to remedy that situation? Does he not think that it was perhaps disingenuous to mislead the House in that way? Does he accept that—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I did appeal for economy in questions and time is moving on; we must progress. I think that we have got the thrust of his question, and we are grateful for it.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The figures I cited were the figures that prevailed at the time of the last general election.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Deputy Prime Minister is a student of Germany. In that context, he will be aware of what happened in the early 1980s when Hans-Dietrich Genscher betrayed Helmut Schmidt, crossed the floor, propped up a new Government without the election of Helmut Kohl. Is it his aspiration to be the Hans-Dietrich Genscher in British politics? *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Prime Minister: Yes, exactly: "Nein" is the answer.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): It will probably come as no surprise to the Deputy Prime Minister that, in common with other Members, I fundamentally disagree with his arguments about boundaries and cutting the number of MPs, but will he accept that whoever is right or wrong on that argument, it is an entirely separate argument from whether we should change the voting system? Why, then, has he sought to put all this together in one Bill? Does not this appear to be more of a deal between coalition partners than the deal that he should be involved in—a deal with the British people to give them a say on the kind of voting system that they want?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I of course agree that as far as the referendum is concerned, it is purely on the issue of the electoral system. I disagree with the hon. Gentleman, however, that there is somehow no link at all between the electoral system by which Members are voted to this House and the size of different constituencies. In a sense, it seems to me that both these measures are complementary; they work hand in hand to deal with a fundamental unfairness whereby votes in some areas are frankly disregarded while in other areas the worth of someone's vote is much greater than elsewhere. These measures taken together seek to remedy that.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the opportunity for the electorate to have a chance to vote on AV, but does the Deputy Prime Minister share my concern that it gives a second bite of the cherry to minority parties such as the BNP?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I think that the alternative vote system, were it to be introduced, would not be susceptible to the dangers of some other electoral systems of fostering and allowing extremist parties to get a foot in the door of mainstream politics. If it were susceptible to such dangers, I would be as concerned as she is.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister had the audacity to mention the Chartists, who did not believe in taxing the poor, but did believe in annual Parliaments. Will the Deputy Prime Minister tell us the average length of a Parliament since 1867 and why this Government, of all Governments, should last longer?

Mr Speaker: May I ask the Deputy Prime Minister not to read a history book before providing his answer?

The Deputy Prime Minister: This is 20 questions by a historian. The last Government—the hon. Gentleman's party in government—governed for five years. We are merely legislating—*[Interruption.]* Instead of setting history questions, why does he not think about why his party, which was once a party of political reform, now seems to be backing off from that long-standing political tradition? It is a great shame that that is happening.

Mr David Hamilton (Midlothian) (Lab): No matter how much gerrymandering the Deputy Prime Minister does, it will not make one bit of difference in Scotland, because there will not be another Tory who gets elected up there. The biggest issue I face every year is the number and complexity of elections taking place, and the type of elections taking place. Surely the logic is to have a referendum with a multitude of choices, so that people decide once and for all which electoral system to adopt, ending the current plethora of electoral systems.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I agree that the development of different electoral systems for different bodies creates complexities of its own. However, we should not make the best the enemy of the good. We are aiming not for excessive neatness, but simply asking people whether they want to change the system of election to this House to the alternative vote—yes or no. As our political system evolves, the longer-term question, which the hon. Gentleman poses, is whether we should seek greater consistency across different elected bodies' electoral systems.

Mr Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): If the boundary review goes ahead on the basis of the register in December, it is likely that at least 10% of my electorate will be missing from that register. Contrary to what the right hon. Gentleman said about individual registration, all the evidence suggests that its introduction, especially on an accelerated programme, is likely to make matters worse. If more than 3.5 million people will be missing from the register, all of us in the House need to ask whether that will be good for democracy.

The Deputy Prime Minister: As I said, we have inherited the deep flaws in the register from the previous Government. It is incumbent on all of us, and on local authorities that administer the process, to encourage people to register in the first place. Clearly, with the prospect of the boundary review being conducted on the new electoral register, local authorities and every Member of the House have an added incentive to innovate locally, door to door, to get more people to register in the first place.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): On the issue of recall, does the Deputy Prime Minister consider himself in danger of recall, given the serious wrongdoing he has inflicted on the people of Sheffield, Hallam?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Thanks for the relevant question.

As the hon. Gentleman is aware, the loan pledged by the last Government to Sheffield Forgemasters—an outstanding company about which I suspect I know a great deal more than he does—was announced for political purposes, just before the general election, to allow the then Prime Minister to make a late-night photo-opportunity visit to Sheffield Forgemasters two days before the election, and the Government made that announcement in the full knowledge that they did not have the money to make the promise in the first place. What was cynical—deeply cynical—was for a Government to raise the hopes of people in Sheffield by making promises which they knew they could not afford.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): In his statement the Deputy Prime Minister mentioned sorting out the influence of big money in politics. Does that include trade union money?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Clearly, any new arrangement for the funding of political parties will need to be binding on all political parties in a consistent manner, and that is what we will aim to achieve.

Gordon Banks (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Lab): The Prime Minister is already committed to answering questions in the Scottish Parliament on issues of real importance. Can the Deputy Prime Minister tell us when the Prime Minister will go to Holyrood to answer questions about the referendum date?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I think that that is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I am sure that he will reply to the hon. Gentleman's question as soon as he knows when he will be answering questions in the Scottish Parliament.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): My right hon. Friend and I used to represent a region containing 4.2 million people in the European Parliament, and we now represent constituencies with electorates of roughly the same size. Can my right hon. Friend tell us how large he thinks the electorate would be in the ideal seat?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We estimate, on the basis of calculations that will need to be derived from the electoral register published in early December, that the optimal size will be about 75,000.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Deputy Prime Minister think again about the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope)? If there is a reduction in the number of Members of Parliament but not in the number of Ministers as set out in the Ministers of the Crown Act 1975,

there will be an increase in the ratio between the number of Ministers and the number of Back Benchers. Does he understand that point, and will he now address it?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I simply do not accept that there is an imbalance between the number of Ministers and the manner in which they are held to account by a House which will be about 7.7% smaller. I believe that a House with 600 Members will be as well equipped to hold this and, indeed, any other Government to account as the present House is with 650.

Jim McGovern (Dundee West) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister seems to accept that chaos occurred both during and following the 2007 election in Scotland, when more than 100,000 ballot papers were spoilt. The Gould report recommended that never again should people be presented with different ballot papers on the same day. The Deputy Prime Minister chooses to ignore that. Can he tell us why? He constantly refers to a ballot paper saying simply "yes or no". Can he answer "yes or no" to this question? Has he consulted the Scottish Executive?

The Deputy Prime Minister: As it happens, the hon. Gentleman is wrong on a point of fact. The Gould report said very clearly that there was merit in votes coinciding on the same day, but said equally clearly that the way in which the ballot papers were designed in the 2007 election caused enormous confusion to voters. I do not believe that that dilemma will arise for people in this referendum, given the simplicity of the choice and the simplicity of the question.

Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): Does the Deputy Prime Minister accept that in poorer working-class areas, fewer people register to vote and there is a lower turnout? Does he agree that it is important for those communities to have fair representation?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I accept, of course, that we must all make efforts—as individual Members and, as I said earlier, in co-operation with local authorities—to encourage people to register to vote if they are not already registered. However, I cannot escape the fact that we are having to operate with tools which we inherited from the last Government, and which allowed the wholly unacceptable circumstances in which 3.5 million people are not on the electoral register to occur in the first place. We will do whatever we can in trying to remedy that, but I ask the hon. Lady and other Opposition Members what on earth they were doing for 13 years if they feel so strongly about the problem now.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): If we move forward on House of Lords reform to an elected House, which I would support, will we then subject the poor voters of Brigg and Goole and other constituencies to a referendum on the electoral system for that House too?

The Deputy Prime Minister: In the Bill that we will publish before the end of the year, we will also propose the electoral system by which Members of the other place would be elected.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister has repeatedly suggested that the electoral register was inherited from the last Labour Government, but he also agreed with his colleague, the hon. Member for Chippenham (Duncan Hames), that it is within the domain of local authorities to compile the electoral register. Which one is it?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Clearly, the system is one that we have inherited from the previous Government, but equally it is right that local authorities have a statutory responsibility to take steps to make sure the electoral register is up to date. I do not think those two things are mutually exclusive.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can the Deputy Prime Minister confirm whether the new, reconstituted constituencies will cross current regional boundaries?

The Deputy Prime Minister: They may do, but the intention is that they will none the less retain the key building block of any constituency, which is ward boundaries. We want to keep that building block in place, as it would be simply too complicated to conduct the boundary review on the scale that has been proposed by any other means.