

Justice at last for Brits abroad

[Harry Scoffin](#) examines how a change in the law could benefit Brits abroad

Friday 19 September 2014



Photo Credit: Laertes CTB

The long struggle for British expatriates to be recognised by their homeland's political class with comprehensive voting rights looks set to reach a resolution. They're not all of the stereotyped beer-swilling Benidorm variety. The vast majority of the five million Britons abroad are decent, ambitious and enterprising – unsung British ambassadors. Successive governments have failed to give expats a voice. It is against this background that the Conservative Party announced this month that lifting the arbitrary 15-year limit on expat voting would be a firm manifesto commitment at the forthcoming general election, which was met with jubilation by those who support expats having the unqualified right to vote in British general elections. Is the party's pledge to give the vote back to all expats a cynical ruse to get votes, when a number may already have the right to vote abroad? Perhaps, but this shouldn't matter. The issue should transcend party politics and short-term electoral thinking.

Under the current rules, Britons living and working abroad are disenfranchised automatically after 15 years. Even those permitted to vote may be unable to do so due to the challenges in receiving and returning the paperwork before the postal vote closes. The latest drive by the Electoral Commission to sign up "missing" Britons abroad by sending out the patronising "use your vote" message misses the point when the voting set-up is ineffective and so old fashioned. Expats should be able to cast their votes in the embassies in the countries in which they reside. Other alternatives could be adopting the New Zealand style "email-out, post back" format, or e-voting.

With trust in politics so low, why have our politicians until now been reluctant to widen the franchise to those Britons who are genuinely keeping abreast of political developments in their home nation and have UK interests? There hasn't even been a debate. The argument that overseas UK nationals have deserted the UK in search of a better life and so therefore should not have a say in the future of their country simply does not bear scrutiny in these times. It is quite normal to know of expatriates who pay UK tax on their earnings, pensions or properties. And it goes beyond financial ties. Our increasingly globalised and technological world makes it easier to maintain family (and home country) bonds through regular contact, such as video calls, and travel. Fundamentally, people don't give up their roots or where they came from. Today, expats' links with the UK are far less likely to diminish.

It is true of course that not everyone given the vote may necessarily be up to speed on policy and party manifestos. However, this is no different from a number of existing UK voters, who are conditioned by their morning newspaper and inherent prejudices. In fact, it could be argued that expats are able to make an even more informed and objective decision at the ballot box, as they are not leading a life in Britain day in, day-out.

The Tories are not alone in having recently changed their outlook on expat voting. It was revealed in February that the Liberal Democrats were studying bold proposals to have “overseas constituencies” with expats from across the world being able to send a representative to Parliament, bringing the UK system in line with France’s expat model. The Lib Dems are also planning to revise their policy on political reform to include overturning the illiberal 15-year rule. With this emerging consensus between the blue and yellow teams, it is disappointing that the 15-year cap wasn’t removed during the current Parliament. Nevertheless apparent cross-party agreement on addressing the issue augurs well for the future, particularly if accompanied by simplified voting procedures. British politicians may finally be realising the good many expats do abroad. Whether working for British or foreign companies, they are frequently sacrificing family back home, and flying the flag for Britain. And who knows, if they are able to influence political outcomes in the UK, they may even return!



5 comments

The Lizard King

25 Sep '14 at 11:28 pm

I am justice, I am fire, I am pain. This is the reign of the lizard king.

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Brian Cave

26 Sep '14 at 10:38 am

I am an 82 year British Citizen living in France.

It is fantastic to read this article. I, and many like me, have no National vote anywhere. All my (and of many like me) income comes from the UK. Many of us have investments (savings) in UK Banks and Building Societies. Many have property in the UK. Many of us fought for our country in WWII. We are as affected by decisions made by the Westminster Government as most who reside in the UK. Yet we are treated as second class (if that) citizens.

Unfortunately I fear many of us are so disillusioned by the politicians that many just opt-out of protesting, and give up, apparently apathetic. Yet one of us -Harry Shindler at 93 years old who lives in Italy is still fighting. We, the ancient, need the youth like you to help us fight our cause. That is to say, the cause of the British Citizen worldwide, to be recognised for our worth and what we have done in the past for the reputation of Britain.

Thank you Harry Scoffin for putting forth our cause so well!

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Rod Harper

26 Sep '14 at 6:01 pm

Your article argues very well the case for full voting rights for British expatriates and is refreshing in coming from a member of the younger generation, which can tend to favour policies traditionally associated with the Labour party. It wasn’t mentioned in your article but let’s hope that the Labour party will not be left behind the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in responding to the demands of their many potential voters abroad who are currently disenfranchised after 15-years away.

Ironically, at the recent Labour party conference 91-year-old Harry Smith of Barnsley was lauded after

reflecting in a speech on his life before the NHS. Yet this same party still seems very resistant to supporting any move in Westminster to remove the 15-year-limit and has been ignoring over many years the demand for his right to vote of long-term Labour supporter and WWII veteran Harry Shindler, a long-term resident of Italy but also still very charismatic at the age of 93!

[Report](#)

J. A. Bosworth

26 Sep '14 at 6:42 pm

Harry Scoffin's comments need to be sent to every PM and Peer at Westminster as a matter of priority. As we are currently in one of those rare periods propitious for Electoral and Constitutional change, the opportunity to regain lifetime voting rights for all UK nationals – irrespective of where they live in the world – should not be missed.

It is a relatively simple matter to include the abolition of the 15 Year Rule – and the inclusion of an Inalienable National Right to a UK Vote – in the arrangements currently being made to settle the Scottish situation.

This reaffirmation of the principle of Universal Adult Suffrage would be supported by the European Union and bring the UK back into the ranks of truly democratic nations.

[Report](#)

Kenneth Warburton

29 Sep '14 at 1:51 pm

Thank you Harry Scoffing for putting our cause forward so well. I entrust that one day the shackles of our inability to vote can be relieved with true representation so we can rid our Great Britannia of the vermin foreigners that have replaced our rightful vote.

We must fight to repatriate the foreigners, end the benefits we wastefully spend on those of lower classes and follow the likes of Mr. Scoffings example!

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