Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

Does the hon. Gentleman have any threshold at which he thinks we would be completely without any validity at all? Perhaps he would like to suggest a threshold.

Chris Bryant

I was actually trying not to suggest a threshold. The hon. Lady is right in one sense, of course. I hope that this might appease my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton as regards some of what he said. There is a complexity about the referendum that we might have next May, because we might have very differential turnout in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England.

If, for instance, there were to be a very low turnout in England that returned a no vote and a very high turnout in the other places—there is a Scottish parliamentary election, in Northern Ireland there are two other sets of elections and in Wales there is the Assembly election at the same time, and in Wales and Scotland those feel in many senses like general elections—returned significant yes votes, people might start to question the validity of what we were doing. This is all the more important because the referendum is not just an advisory referendum—as referendums have always been in the past—but an implementing referendum. In other words, if there is a yes vote, it comes into law. It happens, and the next general election will be held on the basis of the alternative vote.

I am not convinced by the arguments that are being advanced in favour of thresholds. I personally will be voting yes in the referendum. I do not believe that there should be a referendum, but there is a legitimate argument that others might want to consider about whether the fact that we are combining the polls will produce a differential turnout in different parts of the country that might make a necessity of a threshold.

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