

England: Historic Counties

Question

11:06:00

Asked by

Lord Lexden

To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to ensure the preservation of England's historic counties.

The Minister of State, Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Lord Greenhalgh) (Con)

The history and traditions of this country are very important and the tapestry of our historic counties is one of the bonds that draws the nation together. We support various initiatives to celebrate our historic counties and encourage local leaders across Great Britain to do the same.

Lord Lexden (Con)

My Lords, do our historic counties not enable us to recall many elements of our long and glorious past? Should they not appear on all maps, as a matter of course? Should they not be used on all ceremonial occasions rather than, as is sometimes the case, the more recent artificial creations?

Lord Greenhalgh (Con)

My noble friend is right to raise this issue. The Government have taken steps to ensure it is easier to recognise historic counties. In 2014, planning rules were changed to allow councils to put up boundary signs marking traditional English counties. In 2015, the Government commissioned Ordnance Survey to produce historic and ceremonial county-boundary datasets, and we are open to other ideas.

Lord Blunkett (Lab)

My Lords, the national insurance hike last week skewed funding under the Barnett formula still further. If the historic county of Yorkshire, which has a population slightly larger than Scotland's, had its own Barnett formula, it would receive an extra £12 billion. Would that not be levelling up?

Lord Greenhalgh (Con)

My Lords, I thought the supplementary questions might go in any direction, but I recognise that the noble Lord is a proud Yorkshireman and that he will do all he can to ensure the county gets the resources it needs.

Baroness Rawlings (Con)

My Lords, in preserving Britain's historic counties, will the Government reassure your Lordships that they will not make more changes to the way they are governed?

Lord Greenhalgh (Con)

My Lords, I recognise that we need stability and point out that many areas have not seen significant change. The last reorganisation in London, where I was a local councillor, was in 1965 which, I have to say, was before I was born. I recognise that we need stability in our administrative structures.

Lord Wallace of Saltaire (LD)

My Lords, all surveys suggest that Yorkshire has one of the strongest senses of common identity of any region or county in England, historically as a single county but occasionally divided into three. The Government, nevertheless, seem determined to divide it into four, each with its own elected mayor, and have just forced a reorganisation on to North Yorkshire. Why have the Government insisted on disregarding very strong representations from almost all councils in Yorkshire, in the way they have pushed their version of "devolved" government?

Lord Greenhalgh (Con)

My Lords, I point out that Greenhalgh is a Lancastrian name, so I dispute Lancashire being second to Yorkshire, but that is a matter for debate. Devolution has required a degree of local consultation and decision-making. We are seeking to reflect functional and economic areas in our devolution programme, so it is important that it continues to be locally led.

Lord Hannan of Kingsclere (Con)

My Lords, the maiming of our historic counties in the Heath years, with the destruction of some of the oldest political units in the world, was one of many lamentable acts emanating from that ministry. It may be a bit much to restore completely the administrative status quo ante, but will the Minister at least undertake to align ceremonial counties with the 92 historic counties that make up England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?

Lord Greenhalgh (Con)

My noble friend has called for that realignment, but we do not have any plans, so I cannot reassure him. But things in government change and he is making his case strongly.

Baroness Blake of Leeds (Lab)

I am happy to emphasise the strong feeling about Yorkshire in this Chamber. As we have heard, Britain's historic counties are central to local identities and Yorkshire is the perfect example of that. Unfortunately, the Government have resisted the locally led One Yorkshire devolution deal, supported by 20 out of 22 local authorities, which would celebrate our historic county by bringing power, resources and jobs to the region, allowing it to develop its full potential. Do the Government have any plans to reassess their policy on this and support the ambition of the Yorkshire leaders board and the One Yorkshire committee, which has cross-party support from Members of these Benches?

Lord Greenhalgh (Con)

My Lords, we continue to look at devolution matters. As the noble Baroness knows, we considered One Yorkshire, but we are some way down the line in creating mayors in the different regions. We recognise the real, proud tradition in Yorkshire, which we should reflect in our national way of life.

Lord Randall of Uxbridge (Con)

My Lords, I should declare that I am a vice-chairman of the Historic Counties All-Party Group and a proud son of Middlesex. Would my noble friend—and fellow Middle Saxon, I believe—agree that just changing the administrative boundaries should not in any way harm the importance of those historic counties? Perhaps he will agree to a meeting with the all-party group and our indomitable special adviser, Mr Russell Grant, so that we can discuss these matters.

Lord Greenhalgh (Con)

My noble friend makes that very easy: I even have Russell Grant's book on historic counties here. He has had a great impact on our department and I am very pleased to meet the all-party group and Mr Middlesex. Yes, I am a proud wearer of a Middlesex tie, admittedly from when I was younger, fitter and svelter. It is very important to consider these issues.

Lord Caine (Con)

My Lords, as one of the Members of this House who was born, bred and still resides in the West Riding of Yorkshire, I assure my noble friend that the Government and the new Secretary of State would be immensely popular across the whole of Yorkshire if they were finally to overturn the vandalism of the early 1970s and restore the territorial integrity and names of the ancient ridings of God's own county.

Lord Greenhalgh (Con)

My Lords, there is a very strong Yorkshire theme today. The Government proudly flew the Yorkshire flag outside our headquarters to mark Yorkshire Day. That beautiful flag was part of the display in Parliament Square that flew for a week to mark Historic County Flags Day on 23 July. We recognise that people should take great pride in their local identities and we continue to do so, irrespective of the local administrative areas.

Lord Holmes of Richmond (Con)

My Lords, would my noble friend agree that our historic counties have a critical role to play in the levelling-up agenda, with their proximity to the people and as an enabler of local identity? Has he ever had the opportunity to visit Worcestershire county cricket ground—surely one of the loveliest spots in the world to spend a sunny summer's afternoon?

Lord Greenhalgh (Con)

My Lords, my travel schedule is changing with every question. I have not been to

Worcestershire; I am very happy to take in a visit to see the delights of that county ground, particularly over a delightful English summer. Of course, the Government recognise that historic counties are a very important part of our identity and need to be promoted wherever possible.

Lord Flight (Con)

I support my noble friend Lord Lexden's request. County boundaries have been changed in the past, particularly by the Heath Government, but mercifully were restored subsequently. However, there can be some case to amend boundaries largely to accommodate urban population developments. I suggest that county boundaries might be reviewed every 25 years to check whether the growth in urban areas within them needs to be addressed.

Lord Cormack (Con)

Not a good idea at all.

Lord Greenhalgh (Con)

It sounds like someone is pre-empting my response. We need to recognise that historic counties are there and part of our fabric and history. We also need to realise functional economic areas, which do change with time. Obviously, we will reflect our administrative boundaries as the demography of the country changes.