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PRISONER VOTING

I will today be making a statement in the House setting out the Government's approach to the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights on prisoner voting. This is a complex and highly contentious issue which I am sure will benefit from careful scrutiny by Parliament.

As you will know, the Strasbourg Court found as early as 2004 the United Kingdom's bar on prisoners voting to be "general, automatic and indiscriminate" and concluded that it was, in the Court's view, in violation of Article 3, protocol 1 of the European Convention of Human Rights – the right to free and fair elections.

In its most recent judgment, the Court confirmed its position that a complete bar was outside the "margin of appreciation" afforded to individual member states to decide how far prisoners should be enfranchised. The Government is obliged, before 23 November, to "bring forward legislative proposals" to give effect to the judgment; and to enact the required legislation.

I am today publishing a draft Bill – the Voting Eligibility (Prisoners) Bill – for pre-legislative scrutiny, and the Government is requesting that a Joint Committee of both Houses be appointed to conduct that pre-legislative scrutiny.

The draft Bill sets out three different potential approaches for the Committee to consider. Presenting a draft Bill with that range of options reflects the spectrum of views that exist on this question. The Committee, once established, will consider whether approaches beyond those canvassed in the draft Bill should also be considered by Parliament in due course.

There are a number of existing select committees, including your own Joint Committee on Human Rights, which may have a strong interest in this subject; indeed a number have previously considered different aspects of the issue. My view is that a bespoke Joint Committee would be the most appropriate approach for PLS.

It is open to those Members with an interest in serving on the Joint Committee to make representations via their parties in the usual manner.

When the Joint Committee has finished its scrutiny, the Government will reflect on its recommendations. We will continue the legislative process by introducing a Bill for full debate and scrutiny as soon as possible thereafter.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'C' followed by a horizontal line that tapers to the right.

CHRIS GRAYLING