

My Lords, I am grateful to the noble Baroness the Minister for introducing this Bill.

We are debating this legislation in a very different context from what was originally envisaged. Here we are in Parliament having to learn, as best we can, how to do our business virtually. In present circumstances, how could we have coped with the important work of debating the health of the nation, how could we hold the government to account, without the wonders of modern technology? And the way the internet allows us to deal with our business here must surely stab us awake to the necessity of making these facilities available to the population at large. It must heighten our awareness of the need to improve the country's infrastructure and to ensure the universal availability of broadband for everyone, regardless of whether they live in urban or rural areas, in their own houses or (the focus of this Bill) in shared dwellings.

The Bill seeks to address the issue of telecoms network operators being unable to gain access to multiple dwelling buildings in cases where a landlord has failed to respond to requests for access. This is, of course, a welcome step for tenants wishing to access or upgrade broadband services, and we certainly do not oppose the Bill.

However, I must say to the Minister that we – and many of the key players in the telecommunications industry – had anticipated a much more wide-ranging and ambitious piece of legislation.

Under the last Labour government, the UK achieved a strong roll-out of so-called first-generation broadband, connecting many people to the internet for the first time and greatly improving speed and reliability for those who already had a connection. The government of those years had a clear digital strategy; we commissioned specialist reports and introduced detailed and ambitious legislation, including the 2003 Communications Act and the Digital Economy Act

of 2010. The target set by that legislation was no less than 100% broadband coverage by 2020.

As is the case with technology, things have moved on. In theory, much quicker and more robust services should now be available to vast swathes of the country. I say “in theory” because politics as well as technology has moved on and a decade of Conservative rule has seen the 2010 target missed by a mile. The roll-out of second and third-generation fixed broadband has been left largely to the market, with entirely predictable consequences.

Over the last decade, and despite being one of the world’s largest economies, Britain has rapidly fallen down the international league tables. In 2018, Britain ranked 35th out of 37 countries assessed by the OECD for the proportion of fibre in its total fixed broadband infrastructure. That should give Ministers cause for serious concern and reflection.

We know that 99% of 16 to 44-year olds were regular internet users in 2019. Getting online is increasingly vital for young people to stay connected with their peers; what’s also noticeable is that the proportion of older people using the internet is growing all the time. Noble lords in this House are the best evidence of that!

The importance of a strong connection to the web cannot be overstated at the best of times, and certainly not in the current climate. The internet enables locked down pupils and students to keep on learning; shut in older and vulnerable people rely on online orders to get their groceries in; the internet contributes hugely to getting the nation be fed, its banking done, its entertainment needs met. Countless people are currently doing their work at home - how on earth could they have done this without the availability of broadband?

We know from Ofcom that almost 700,000 people in the UK are without a decent broadband connection. We also know that there are significant regional disparities across the UK. The most innovative new services, such as those which do not require a landline, are often available in and around London or other major cities, but not in towns and villages.

The Government's response to these worrying trends has been to tweak the universal service obligation. This Bill is evidence of that. In doing so, and as we have debated on many occasions, it's chosen to pursue the least ambitious option put to it by Ofcom. Not full-fibre, nor gigabit-capable, but 10 megabits per second.

The USO is now in force and I am confident that Ofcom will do everything within its powers to enforce it. However, there seems to be a palpable lack of ambition on the part of the government. This is seriously problematic. The body's own guidance states that once requested, new connections may not be delivered for up to 24 months. That is hardly the hallmark of a world-leading dynamic digital economy.

The noble Lady the Minister, in her recent (March 25th) letter to all noble Lords, has offered warm words about the Government's commitment to fibre and other innovative services. However, the Prime Minister does not seem to share her commitment. The Queen's Speech promised full fibre for all by 2025. Number 10 has since then downgraded that commitment. First of all, it became "universal gigabit-capable" broadband. And now it's been further watered down – it's now being described merely as an "acceleration of roll-out."

How can individuals and businesses have confidence in delivery when the goalposts have been moved so drastically and so frequently?

How can the firms responsible for delivering infrastructure have confidence in the Government's approach when what ought to have been a flagship piece of legislation, the Bill we're now debating, is so short and so narrowly focused, and the public funding available for roll-out so lacking?

My Lords, there is another issue that could have been addressed in this legislation, but which is conspicuous by its absence. It has already been debated at length in the Commons so I do not wish to detain colleagues with a lengthy argument at this time. However, it would be remiss of me not to mention it at all.

The issue is that of so-called high-risk vendors in the roll-out of new telecommunications infrastructure in the UK. Granted, 5G is a different form of telecommunications to fixed broadband, but as we have heard so often, it has the potential to revolutionise how individuals and businesses go about their everyday lives.

The Government has introduced a cap on the proportion of technology high-risk vendors can provide. This was welcomed by my party, but we require further detail on how that market share will be reduced – and over what timescale. The Government needs to spell out when and how it intends to address the need for increased support for research and development in this area so that the UK can be better resourced and less reliant on both technology and expertise from overseas. We're told that such considerations will be part of a forthcoming Telecommunications Security Bill. It's a pity that these matters were not part of the Bill we're dealing with today.

Again, I say to the Minister that this is not the position that one of the world's largest economies should find itself in. So we must learn lessons from others, and do so quickly, and then invest in meaningful change in the UK if the nation is once again to become a pioneer in digital – as it was under the last Labour government.

My Lords, as I said at the beginning of my remarks, we will not oppose this Bill. But we will seek to improve it.

In doing so, I would like to say this to the Minister. We know that the instruction from NO 10 has been to resist amending legislation. However, doing so is not a weakness, and it is what this House exists to do.

The Government claims to be ambitious when it comes to a digital revolution. This Bill, important as it is, is hardly evidence of that. The Opposition is equally, if not more ambitious. Industry wants the licence and the tools to lead the way. Let us make this Bill fit for purpose, so that people in all parts of the UK have a broadband connection that is fit for purpose.