

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Second Sitting

Monday 14 May 2018

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Motion to adjourn considered.

Adjourned till Wednesday 16 May at half-past Nine o'clock.

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the final version of the report should be clearly marked in a copy of the report—not telephoned—and must be received in the Editor’s Room, House of Commons,

not later than

Friday 18 May 2018

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:*Chair:* Ms NADINE DORRIES

Allan, Lucy (<i>Telford</i>) (Con)	† Norris, Alex (<i>Nottingham North</i>) (Lab/Co-op)
Bone, Mr Peter (<i>Wellingborough</i>) (Con)	Paisley, Ian (<i>North Antrim</i>) (DUP)
† Charalambous, Bambos (<i>Enfield, Southgate</i>) (Lab)	† Smith, Cat (<i>Lancaster and Fleetwood</i>) (Lab)
† Fletcher, Colleen (<i>Coventry North East</i>) (Lab)	† Smith, Chloe (<i>Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office</i>)
† Foster, Kevin (<i>Torbay</i>) (Con)	Stewart, Bob (<i>Beckenham</i>) (Con)
† Harper, Mr Mark (<i>Forest of Dean</i>) (Con)	Wiggin, Bill (<i>North Herefordshire</i>) (Con)
† Khan, Afzal (<i>Manchester, Gorton</i>) (Lab)	
Lee, Karen (<i>Lincoln</i>) (Lab)	Kenneth Fox, <i>Committee Clerk</i>
Linden, David (<i>Glasgow East</i>) (SNP)	
Mills, Nigel (<i>Amber Valley</i>) (Con)	† attended the Committee

Public Bill Committee

Monday 14 May 2018

[MS NADINE DORRIES *in the Chair*]

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

4 pm

The Chair: Before we begin, I remind hon. Members that electronic devices should be switched to silent. Tea and coffee are not allowed during sittings. If any Member would like to take their jacket off, please feel free.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Committee do now adjourn.

I thank hon. Members and Clerks for assembling again to consider the Bill. I can only apologise that, again, we will not be able to make any progress.

Colleagues will have witnessed the extraordinary urgent question that I asked the Leader of the House on Thursday. It was extraordinary, first, for the onslaught that she was subjected to from Conservative Back Benchers. Members from her own party lined up to attack the Government, accusing them of: behaving undemocratically; committing an abuse of Parliament; denying the democratic rights of Members; breaching undertakings they gave to the Procedure Committee, and sending out the Leader of the House to defend the indefensible. As the hon. Member for Wellingborough put it, she was

“sent to the wicket not only without a bat, but without pads or a helmet.”—[*Official Report*, 10 May 2018; Vol. 640, c. 900.]

Any Leader of the House fulfilling her duty as Parliament’s representative in Cabinet would have relayed this strength of feeling to her colleagues and come back with a money resolution. Clearly, that has not happened.

Conservative Members joined colleagues from Labour, the Scottish National party and the Liberal Democrats to universally condemn the Government. I register my thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate and for Nottingham North and to the hon. Member for Wellingborough for their contributions. I know others would have joined in if they could.

The urgent question was extraordinary, secondly, because it exposed how weak the Government’s arguments really are. After a certain point, the Leader of the House stopped attempting to answer questions that Members put to her and resorted to repeating the same two or three sentences over and over again.

First, the Leader of the House pointed to private Members’ Bills that have made progress in this Parliament. All that shows is that the Government will not block Bills that they already agree with. The function of a private Member’s Bill is to raise issues of public interest. At times, that may involve challenging the Government, if they are in opposition to the majority of Members and the public. The Government should not use procedure to block that, but allow an open and honest debate.

Secondly, the Leader of the House pointed to the financial initiative of the Crown, which is the principle that any spending of public funds must be proposed by the Government. I do not think anyone has proposed that we change that sensible, long-standing principle,

but it is deeply disingenuous to claim that the Government are blocking the Bill for financial reasons. The Government do not want to allow the Bill to be debated because it would hurt the Conservative party’s electoral chances. They want to rig the electoral system in their favour and are blocking a Bill that would stop them doing that.

Finally, the Leader of the House tried to defend herself against Members of her own party by arguing that they stood on a manifesto pledging to implement the boundary changes. First, as the hon. Member for Wellingborough made clear, he and others opposed that. Secondly, the Government could show some humility because their manifesto did not actually win them a majority. Thirdly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) asked, do the continual references to the Conservative party’s manifesto mean that we should expect Bills on foxhunting, grammar schools and the dementia tax soon?

The Government are starting to embarrass themselves over money resolutions. I urge the Minister to report back to her colleagues the anger in the Committee and across the House. The fundamental constitutional question of how many people should represent the country should be debated in the open, among Members and in front of the public, not in the back rooms of Government offices. If the Government are blocking the Bill because they do not think they can get enough of their Members to vote with them on it, they have more problems than just constituency boundaries.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I associate myself with my hon. Friend’s comments. It makes a mockery of the private Member’s Bill system that we are here again with no money resolution and no prospect of moving forward on the Bill. Last time we met, the Minister said that continuing with the boundary review changes had been in the Conservative party manifesto. That is true, but that manifesto did not win a majority at a general election, whereas this private Member’s Bill passed Second Reading in this House by 229 votes to 44. It is therefore clear that the will of the House is to progress with the Bill. By not presenting a money resolution, the Government are frankly making a mockery of the power we give our Back Benchers to pass legislation in this place.

I hope the Minister will take the message back to the rest of the Government that we want a money resolution, because we want to have the arguments out in Committee and on the Floor of the House and allow Members of Parliament—who, sitting in this Session, reflect the outcome of the general election—to make a decision. I hope she will take on board the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton and me and find a way of getting a money resolution so that we can make progress with the Bill.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I have nothing to add to what I said at the previous Committee sitting, nor to what the Leader of the House said last week.

Question put and agreed to.

4.7 pm

Adjourned accordingly till Wednesday 16 May at half-past Nine o’clock.