

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Fifth Sitting

Wednesday 6 June 2018

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Motion to adjourn considered.

Adjourned till Wednesday 13 June 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

Sunday 10 June 2018

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:*Chairs:* Ms NADINE DORRIES, †ALBERT OWEN

Allan, Lucy (<i>Telford</i>) (Con)	Mills, Nigel (<i>Amber Valley</i>) (Con)
Bone, Mr Peter (<i>Wellingborough</i>) (Con)	Norris, Alex (<i>Nottingham North</i>) (Lab/Co-op)
† Charalambous, Bambos (<i>Enfield, Southgate</i>) (Lab)	Paisley, Ian (<i>North Antrim</i>) (DUP)
† 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)	
† Matheson, Christian (<i>City of Chester</i>) (Lab)	† attended the Committee

Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 6 June 2018

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

9.30 am

The Chair: Before we begin proceedings, I remind Members to turn their electronic devices to silent mode and not to drink tea or coffee during our sittings. If people wish to go outside and have a break, that is a matter for them.

As the Committee cannot consider the clauses of the Bill until the House has agreed a money resolution, I call Afzal Khan to move that the Committee do now adjourn.

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

I thank hon. Members for coming here on this lovely Wednesday morning. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester, who is now Labour's Front-Bench lead on the Bill. I can only offer my apologies that our time will not be well spent as we are meeting just to adjourn: without a money resolution, we cannot discuss any part of the Bill.

I am determined not to let this rest, as MPs from all parties have made it clear that it is unacceptable that we have not yet had a money resolution. Parliamentary precedent and the will of the House dictate that we should be able to debate the Bill in Committee, and we have only a few weeks before the summer recess.

As the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee said in its report, the Government "cannot be confident" that the House of Commons will support the implementation of the boundary commissions' proposals when they come before us in the autumn. We all agree that we need new boundaries, and the Bill could be a real alternative to the boundary commissions' proposals—it would not mean resorting to current boundaries for a 2022 general election. However, if we are to have that, we need to get a move on.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. As you were not in the Chair for our previous sitting, you have the blessing of not having already heard what I am about to say. I want to respond to a couple of points made by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. First, I cannot think of a better way to spend some time on a Wednesday morning than sitting in a Committee Room with such esteemed colleagues from both sides of the House. It is a great pleasure, and I look forward to doing so for many Wednesdays to come, even if it is only for a short time and not for as long as we would hope.

The Government have made their position clear, and it should not come as a surprise to the hon. Gentleman: they have not ruled out bringing forward a money

resolution, but they feel that the House should have the opportunity to consider the boundary commissions' reports, which are under way. I note what he said about the report from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), but we should not prejudge the House's decision on the boundary commissions' reports. It is reasonable to wait for the House to see those reports—we have not seen them yet—and for it then to make a decision. We can then come back to this issue. That is a reasonable position, and the Committee may then be in a position to consider the significant detail of the Bill.

If the Labour party is really signed up to having more equal-sized constituencies, and boundaries drawn using electorates more recent than 18 years ago, on which current boundaries are based, it should not keep trying to put blockages in the way. The last time there was a boundary review, Labour worked with the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords to disrupt it and put it off for five years. I am afraid that it is difficult to see this as anything other than an attempt to do the same all over again. None the less, I look forward to seeing the boundary commissions' reports and the debate we will then have in the House. We can then come back to this issue.

As the Minister has said on numerous occasions, the Government will then be able to reflect on whether to bring forward a money resolution, and then we may be in a position to debate the Bill. I for one love talking about this subject, as the hon. Gentleman will know from studying *Hansard* when we took the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 through the House. We spent many happy hours on that on the Floor of the House and I look forward to the opportunity to do so again.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton for welcoming me to the Committee. I can inform the Committee that my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) has commenced maternity leave. I have no further news than that but it is my great pleasure to substitute for her.

It is also a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, though it is also bitter sweet and rueful, because it seems to me that the pleasure will be denied. Proceedings here will be over all too soon, for no other reason than political manoeuvrings, because the Government have failed to recognise a democratic vote on Second Reading to allow the Bill to proceed to Committee stage. The House made a decision and we should respect that.

The Government have form in talking out private Members' Bills but I venture the possibility that this is the first time a private Member's Bill has been blocked by not being talked about. This is the first time for such a Bill not to be talked out but to be simply knocked into the long grass.

Mr Harper *rose*—

Christian Matheson: The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean is more experienced in the matter and I always love to hear his view.

Mr Harper: I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to an example I gave at the previous sitting of the Committee when the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood was serving on the Front Bench. That was the private Member's Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on the European Union referendum, a measure that we now know commanded majority, albeit only a small majority, support in the country.

That Bill did not receive a money resolution, despite the fact that the Prime Minister of the day was in favour of one. There were all sorts of complicated coalition-related reasons for that. This is not the first time that a Bill has not made progress. The Leader of the House, gave several examples in the debate in the House. This is certainly not the first time and probably will not be the last.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for pointing me in the right direction on that. He talked about reasons within the coalition for not bringing forward a money resolution. I cannot see any reasons why a money resolution should not be brought forward now. At least we could make progress in Committee and then take the Bill back to the House for Report and Third Reading to see whether it still commands support.

I respectfully suggest to the Minister that this really is not a good look. It does not look as though the Government are engaging well in the democratic process. There may be reasons not to introduce a money resolution but the impression it gives is of stifling democracy and ignoring a decision made on the Floor of the House on Second Reading. I am reminded of Oscar Wilde's famous aphorism:

"There is only one thing in life worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."

That applies very much in the case of this Bill. It might be problematic for the Government to talk about the Bill but it will be even more problematic if they do not, because they will give the impression of running scared of a democratic decision that might not suit their political position.

The Minister's position seems to be to knock this into the long grass, to see if we can get to recess without a money resolution, and once the House returns after the summer recess, to see if we can get the debate that the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean might have been referring to. That is the debate on the current boundary provisions, which we know are based on an out-of-date register lacking 2 million voters, thus distorting representation.

Mr Harper: It is the case that whenever a boundary review is set in train a line has to be drawn somewhere. I would make two points. First, the current boundary review uses electoral registers that are more up to date than existing constituencies, which are 18 years out of date. Secondly, analysis by Matt Singh of the Number Cruncher Politics website, which I have referred to in the House before, shows that the distribution of those 2 million voters across the country was broadly proportionate to the existing electorate. In other words, contrary to the impression the hon. Gentleman was trying to give, that would not have made a significant difference to the distribution of parliamentary constituencies.

Christian Matheson: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need a boundary review, that the current constituencies are 18 years out of date—that is unacceptable—and that there is a size discrepancy that needs to be addressed. The problem is that when the current boundary review was launched, the Electoral Commission expressed the view that the current electoral registers were deficient. We asked for time to be given to update those registers. The Government did not provide that time, and sure enough, shortly afterwards, as the European referendum came along, those 2 million extra voters suddenly reappeared on the register.

We know that the registers, although they may be less than 18 years out of date, simply are not sufficiently up to date or fit for purpose for the task 18 months or two years ago, so what is going to happen now? It strikes me that the Minister's job is to knock the Bill into the long grass—to knock the ball away as often as she can between now and the summer recess, or between now and when the boundary review comes back. It is a bit like Geoffrey Boycott at the crease—I know you are a cricket lover, Mr Owen—knocking back every ball.

The Chair: Order. Perhaps I can help the hon. Gentleman. I am indeed a sports lover, and I go by the rules. Under the rules of the Committee, we are debating a motion to adjourn rather than the clauses of the Bill. Will he therefore focus on the matter of adjourning the Committee until 13 June, rather than on the details of the Bill, which we are not allowed to discuss?

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful for your guidance, Mr Owen. My point is that the Minister seems to wish to seek an adjournment now and at future sittings in order to knock back, in Boycott fashion, consideration of the detail of the Bill.

I am reminded of my old mate Michael Atherton and his famous 185 not out to save the test in Johannesburg. The rest of the England batting order collapsed, but Mike managed to save the day. I say to the Minister, however, that that test was not won. Mike Atherton did not succeed in winning the test; he managed only to stave off a decision until the next match. My advice to her, therefore, is that consideration of the Bill may be delayed, but the day of reckoning will come. It would be better for her and for the Government's reputation if they allowed us to get round to discussing the detail of the Bill, rather than giving the impression that the Bill is not worth discussing, for political reasons as opposed to anything in it.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What a pleasure it is to be back in the political purgatory that is the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill Committee. I am disappointed that the other Chair, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), is not here, because we could have called it, "I'm in a Public Bill Committee... Get Me Out of Here!" We seem to meet fairly regularly to consider at length the Bill, which the House passed on Second Reading, but of course is being stonewalled in Committee by the Government.

I warmly welcome the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for City of Chester. I am sure that we all wish the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood a very

[David Linden]

safe delivery of her baby. I myself—well, for reasons of biology, clearly I am not expecting a baby, but my wife is expecting one in the autumn. At this rate, I wonder whether we will have a money resolution by then. It seems bizarre that we may go for nine months before we get one. The Bill received its Second Reading last year, and since then a number of Bills that were behind this one in the queue have been expedited, in the sense of having been given money resolutions.

9.45 am

Alarming, not that long ago the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill, which I believe was 92nd in the queue of private Members' Bills, received its money resolution. That Bill was brought forward by the hon. Member for Wellingborough. It seems somewhat bizarre that the Government spend huge amounts of time saying, "We need to be careful about committing public money and bringing forward money resolutions." Surprisingly, I think I was the only Member other than the hon. Gentleman and the Minister to speak in the debate about that resolution. Sometimes the Government say that money resolutions are very important, yet in the case of the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill, the money resolution passed in 13 minutes. There seems to be a case of having a cake and eating it here.

I am approaching one year in this House. As one pulls together an annual report and reflects on the first year, people start to ask questions about what has been done. It is embarrassing to say that I came along to this charade on a Wednesday morning to debate a Bill that cannot be debated, and to get to debate a sittings motion. Probably the only thing I can do is stand up and go through my diary and say we could probably meet a bit sooner than next Wednesday.

I am reminded of some of the work I have been doing with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. I had the great honour and privilege of going to Tunisia after the Arab spring as part of a delegation about capacity building there. During that time, I felt I had to stand up

and apologise for that title of "Westminster Foundation for Democracy", because this is a place of limited democracy. We see that today when we have a Bill in front of us that we cannot debate and cannot even consider clause by clause.

I remember the hope in the faces of those young Arab women in Tunisia that democracy was coming. They would say, "You are from the Mother of all Parliaments. Tell us about this great democracy." It was quite embarrassing to tell them that we are the only country other than Lesotho that has hereditary chieftains and the only country other than Iran that has unelected clerics legislating.

The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean talks about boundaries that are 18 years out of date. I do not hear him talk about a private Member's Bill system that is decades upon decades out of date and that is inherently unfair to Back Benchers who want to introduce legislation. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton brought forward legislation that commanded the support of the House of Commons on Second Reading. We see an arrogant Government blocking that by the most dishonourable means.

As the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean has said, we will come here for many Wednesdays but we are probably reaching a particular point. The elephant in the room is the lack of Democratic Unionist party attendance. We all know that that party holds the key here. They are probably just awaiting the right point to cave in on the Government and I suspect that this Bill might be part of that.

We can come here for Wednesday upon Wednesday. The hon. Member for City of Chester is right. There will come a day of reckoning. I look forward to that day but until then I am happy to stand up and make speeches. However, I do not think that is a great use of my time. This is probably the most embarrassing job I have been asked to do in my first year in this place.

Question put and agreed to.

9.48 am

Adjourned accordingly till Wednesday 13 June at half-past Nine o'clock.

