

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

## PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

*Eighth Sitting*

*Wednesday 27 June 2018*

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Motions to adjourn considered.

Adjourned till Wednesday 4 July at half-past Nine o'clock.

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**Sunday 1 July 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)	† <b>attended the Committee</b>

## Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 27 June 2018

[MS NADINE DORRIES *in the Chair*]

### Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

9.30 am

**The Chair:** Before we begin the sitting, I will make the usual announcements: Members who want to take off their jackets, please do; switch off mobile phones; there can be no tea or coffee. As the Committee cannot consider the clauses of the Bill until the House has agreed to 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 Members and the Clerk for attending this sitting of the Committee on the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill. Regrettably there is nothing new to report on its progress. I continue to be inspired by my colleagues' devotion to it and to the larger parliamentary process. In a representative democracy there is nothing more important than to ensure that electoral processes are free and fair.

It is acknowledged on all sides that electoral boundary reform is long overdue, although we disagree about how that must be addressed. I acknowledge the arguments that have been put forward by those who are stalling on a money resolution. First, they argue that a boundary review is going on, and we should allow the process to finish uninterrupted. The argument, in that line of thinking, is that we would endlessly spend money on another boundary review. Secondly, it is argued that according to the separation of powers, tabling a money resolution is the prerogative of the Crown. I do not want to add much on that point. Many of my colleagues have provided sound arguments against it, supported by historical evidence.

It is clear that the Government's refusal to table a money resolution is at best misguided and at worst a disturbing trend towards the obstruction of the parliamentary conventions on which our democracy depends. Will the Minister confirm that the lack of a money resolution is a response to financial concerns? Does she agree that the convention holds that soon after a Bill passes Second Reading the Government table a money resolution?

In relation to the first point that is argued, we all know that there is a boundary review going on, but it is also true that instructions were given to reduce the size of the House of Commons from 650 to 600 Members. That measure has far from unanimous support. The final boundary proposals have not been released, but they are in serious danger of being rejected on those grounds alone. No one can predict the future, but there is a consensus that the boundary review is unlikely to pass. As the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs said in its report, the

Government "cannot be confident" that the House of Commons will approve the suggested changes. Will the Minister clarify whether she agrees about that?

Last week the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean made the point that the Boundary Commission report is only a few weeks away. I welcome that, because it means that now is possibly the best time to go forward with the Bill. The final boundary proposals are due soon. If the House votes for them, the money that the Government are reluctant to commit will not be spent. If it rejects them we have contingency plans to put in motion, but if the money resolution delay continues we shall be unprepared for a rejection of the final boundary proposals, and new boundaries will unnecessarily be delayed further.

That data that our current boundaries are built on is 18 years old—old enough to vote, if it could. We need to prepare responsibly for the vote on the Boundary Commission recommendations and begin line-by-line analysis of the Bill. The facts are clear: the electoral boundaries need to be updated. There is a serious danger that the current boundary review recommendations will be voted down. The Bill is a serious attempt at cross-party compromise and it has received a unanimous Second Reading. If we act responsibly we will move forward with the Bill, to ensure that the people of the UK are represented fairly.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Dorries. I have a few remarks on the motion to adjourn, picking up on the comments made by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, whose Bill it is.

First, we have an update on where we were last week, because there are now only three full sitting weeks until the Boundary Commission's report. I agree that there is not consensus or 100% unanimity about Parliament's decision a number of years ago to reduce the size of the House—of course not. It was a hard-fought battle to get it through, but the House agreed to it, as did the House of Lords. It is an Act of Parliament; it is the law. Rather than anticipating what decision the House might make when faced with the Orders in Council suggesting that we implement the reports of the boundary commissions—whose final versions we have not yet seen—we should wait for that decision.

As I said last week, in answer to a point from the hon. Member for Glasgow East, who unusually is not in his place today, there is an injunction on Ministers in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011, and in the amended legislation on parliamentary boundaries, to bring forward the proposals as soon as is reasonably practicable after the boundary commissions have reported. I do not think that Ministers can just not do anything for ages. We will get a reasonably early chance to make a decision.

The reason that I do not think we should act in parallel—as I also said last week—is that the Bill makes some significant proposals about changing the size of the House, the frequency of boundary reviews going from five to 10 years and the amount of flex in the size of the seat. We will want to debate those issues having listened to the debate on the Boundary Commission's proposals. They will be debated on the Floor of the House, so all Members will get the opportunity to discuss them, and I think that that is what we want.

My final point was also made last week—forgive me for repeating it, Ms Dorries. There is a strong case for saying that if the House were to reject the Boundary Commission's proposals, and therefore the Government wanted to give Parliament an opportunity to look at an alternative strategy, the Government should find time to consider the Bill in all its stages, including Committee, on the Floor of the House. It is a constitutional Bill. All stages of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 were debated on the Floor of the House. I would argue that it is not right to debate changes that significantly affect Parliament in Committee, with relatively few Members present, so that all Members could debate them only on Report. The Government cannot make the decision about finding time on the Floor of the House until we know the position with the boundaries.

For all those reasons, I think the Government's position is sensible. They have made it clear that they are not trying to kill the Bill: they want to hold it in suspended animation—or whatever other phrase we might choose—until the House has had a chance to consider the Boundary Commission's report. I think that is a sensible way forward. I recognise why the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton is frustrated by it, but the period of his frustration is shrinking as time passes; we do not have many sitting weeks until the Boundary Commission's report. I hope that the current approach will eventually meet with his approval.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to see you in the Chair, Ms Dorries. It is always worth restating what a great pleasure it is to follow the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean, who, week after week, makes considered and relevant comments about the nature of the Bill. We appreciate that he is taking the issue seriously even if we do not necessarily agree with the comments that he is making.

The right hon. Gentleman points out that we have only three sitting weeks left before the recess, and that after the recess the Order in Council is likely to be laid. That is a good reason to crack on with the Bill now and give it detailed consideration in Committee, as it cannot possibly complete its parliamentary passage through both Houses within those three weeks. We could, however, carry on with the detailed consideration of the Bill and get on with the stages that we are able to, before the Order in Council is laid. If the decision is taken not to accept the Boundary Commission's proposals, we would have something waiting in the wings and we could crack on quickly. I remind the Committee that no one—certainly no one in the Opposition and, if I may be so bold as to speak for them, no one on the Conservative Benches either—denies that we need a review of boundaries.

**Mr Harper:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he said in his opening remarks.

I would just add, and I say this gently because I accept that he was not responsible, that the Labour party—including the hon. Gentleman and the Bill's promoter—has now accepted that we need to update the boundaries. That would be a bit more credible if it had not kiboshed the last boundary review that was supposed to have been completed in 2013. We should have done it by now and had it in place for the 2015 election. It was, of course, the Labour party and the

Liberal Democrats who kind of did a slightly dirty deal in the House of Lords, and then in the House of Commons, to kibosh the last review. So his protestations about wanting a rapid conclusion would be a bit more credible if his party had not done that in the past.

**Christian Matheson:** I cannot perceive that any deal with the Liberal Democrats is ever dirty, but I would take advice from the Conservative party on that matter.

That review was kiboshed—I was not in the House at the time—because it continued with the notion of reducing the number of constituencies from 650 to 600, which does not enjoy Opposition support, particularly at a time when other constitutional changes mean that we need to maintain the strength of the House. We are where we are.

In his speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton, talked about a “disturbing trend towards the obstruction of the parliamentary conventions on which our democracy depends.” I know the Minister personally and I do not believe that is her intention. It may be the intention of Ministers elsewhere in Government, but I do not believe it to be hers, although she represents the whole of Government in this Committee. I hope she will respond to some of the questions that have been raised.

I would like to consider the position of the Minister at the moment. It is a rather tricky role that she has been asked to play. I could not help but notice that another member of the Committee is not in his place today—the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham. He is very well thought of in my constituency because of his service in and leadership of the Cheshire Regiment. I do not know if hon. Members have ever been on battlefield tours with him, but they are well known and one of his battlefield tours is of the D-day landings. I recall the D-day landings on the night of 5-6 June 1944. The Orne river bridge and the canal on the eastern flank—

**The Chair:** Order. Mr Matheson, this is going dangerously off-track.

**Christian Matheson:** There is method in my madness, Ms Dorries, if you would just bear with me.

The 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry—the Ox and Bucks—under the command of Major Howard, were tasked with securing the flank and the bridge, now known as the Pegasus bridge, over the canal. Major Howard was given the rather open-ended commission to “hold until relieved”—to hold the bridge and flank until relieved—by Brigadier Lord Lovat. That was one of the key engagements, using the glider force from the Air Assault Brigade for the first time to maintain the eastern flank despite fierce counter-attacks from the Germans throughout the night. Lovat did indeed eventually relieve Howard.

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):** I finally understand where the analogy is going, but does that make the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues the Germans?

**Christian Matheson:** I would like to think that we are all on the same side in this Committee and all want the finest parliamentary representation possible. What it

[Christian Matheson]

does mean is that we have finally managed to get the Minister to contribute to the Committee, which is fantastic. “Hold until relieved” was Major Howard’s injunction and that has been the rather open-ended injunction that the Minister’s colleagues have given her.

There is a potential ending: the appearance of Lord Lovat and the commando brigade coming from Sword beach, in the guise proposed by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean. If the Minister can hold for three more weeks, perhaps we will get to the place she is going, but hold until relieved, when we are talking about parliamentary democracy, is not the ideal scenario. I pay tribute to the Minister for her resilience in all this, but it would be nice if she could respond to some of the questions that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton has posed.

9.45 am

**Mr Harper:** I am extremely grateful, Ms Dorries, that you bore with the hon. Member for City of Chester, because that was a quite entertaining story. We would have been very disappointed if you had cut him off before we saw where it was going. Although I have never served in uniform, the comparison the hon. Gentleman just made is one of the most complimentary that anyone has ever made about me in the House, for which I am grateful.

**Christian Matheson:** The right hon. Gentleman deserves it. I go back to my previous point—he has enhanced his personal reputation in this matter. Thank you for bearing with me, Ms Dorries. Open-ended commissions and instructions are not always helpful. At some point, we need to get to a conclusion in this matter. Simply knocking it into the long grass is not the way forward for parliamentary democracy. Debate is always better than closing down debate. With that, for one more week, I resume my seat.

**Chloe Smith:** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. Out of personal courtesy to the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, I rise to state that there is no more I can or will add to what has already been said on the subject. I do not think the place to answer his questions is under a motion for adjournment.

*Question put.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 3, Noes 6.*

### Division No. 1]

#### AYES

Foster, Kevin  
Harper, rh Mr Mark

Smith, Chloe

#### NOES

Charalambous, Bambos  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Khan, Afzal

Lee, Karen  
Matheson, Christian  
Norris, Alex

*Question accordingly negated.*

**The Chair:** The Committee has voted not to adjourn. Unless a Committee member can offer a motion for debate, I shall have to ask a Committee member to move another motion to adjourn.

**Christian Matheson:** I would like to offer clause 1, if that is at all possible, for a general debate, which means that we do not have to enact any money resolutions that have not yet been tabled.

**The Chair:** Without a money resolution, I cannot accept a motion to consider clauses of the Bill or amendments; I am afraid we are just not charged in this Committee with doing that.

**Mr Harper:** I will move a motion to adjourn again, to give the Committee a second opportunity.

**The Chair:** I can accept the motion to adjourn only from Mr Khan. I will suspend the Committee so that we can have an informal discussion.

9.48 am

*Sitting suspended.*

9.50 am

*On resuming—*

**Afzal Khan:** I beg to move, That the Committee do now adjourn.

*Question put and agreed to.*

9.51 am

*Adjourned accordingly till Wednesday 4 July at half-past Nine o'clock.*