

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Thirteenth Sitting

Wednesday 12 September 2018

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Motion to adjourn considered.
Adjourned till Wednesday 10 October at Ten 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,

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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>) (Ind)
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 12 September 2018

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

10 am

The Chair: Before we begin, I remind Members not to use electronic devices unless they are switched to silent. As the Committee cannot consider the Bill until the House agrees 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.

It is a privilege and an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. We will all now have seen the boundary commissions' reports that the Minister had sight of last week. As she admitted in our last meeting, the Government's strategy is to kick the boundary issue into the long grass. What has changed?

We are in a mess because the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, tried his luck at rigging the electoral system in his party's favour. The Conservative party since lost its majority in Parliament and now does not have support for the plans, even among its own Members. Many Conservative MPs refuse to support the proposals—for both self-interested and principled reasons—and the Government are running scared of holding a vote that would make those divisions public.

We all agree that we desperately need new boundaries. I worry that, if we are not careful, we will walk into another election with constituencies based on data that is more than 20 years old. We cannot afford to wait months for the Government to get their house in order. My Bill needs a money resolution so that we can work together on a realistic, practical and cross-party path forward. I hope that the Minister will consider that and see to it that we receive a money resolution, so that, whatever happens with the boundary review, we will at least have a parallel system that could deal with this issue.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I will keep my remarks focused, given that we are considering only the motion to adjourn, and respond specifically to a couple of remarks from the Bill's promoter, the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. He said that the purpose of the original boundary proposals brought forward when my former right hon. Friend David Cameron was Prime Minister was to rig the system in favour of the Conservative party. That needs to be put straight. It is simply not true, as he would know if he read the long debate that we had on the Floor of the House.

The proposals were about levelling the playing field so that seats were more equal in size, so that we did not have the ridiculous situation of having seats with very small electorates—there are many in Wales with electorates of around 40,000, for example—and also seats with close to 100,000 electors, meaning that a voter's vote in those constituencies can be worth half as much as in

another seat. That is simply not right. It is about having relatively tight spans so that every voter's vote is of broadly equal value across the country. That is the principle, and I think I am right in saying that it had Labour party support both when the legislation was going through and now, so we can put that party-political accusation aside.

The hon. Gentleman's second point, about timing, is relevant to the motion to adjourn. The Minister's remarks last week—I do not know whether she will add anything today; I do not think there is anything to add—made it clear that the Government and officials are getting on with drafting the Orders in Council, and she made the point that it is a lengthy process. Ministers cannot be dilatory about it, because in the legislation there is a legal injunction on Ministers to bring forward proposals "as soon as practicable", so they have to get this work done.

We are talking about detailed specifications for 600 parliamentary constituencies. There are only so many skilled draftsmen in Parliament, and they have other important legislation to draft—such as Brexit legislation and the thousands of statutory instruments that will have to go through the European sifting committee—so there are capacity constraints.

However, the Minister made it clear that that work is already under way, and said that it would take months. Opposition Members pressed her on that last week, and she said that she had chosen her words with great care and it would take that length of time, so she has set out the process. She made it clear which Ministers were responsible, and our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office has ultimate ministerial responsibility. I just remind colleagues of what I said yesterday: he is answering questions in the House today at 11.30 am, so those who wish to press him on that will have the opportunity to do so, if there are appropriate questions on the Order Paper. This Minister has therefore set out a sensible process.

My final point on proceeding with debating the Bill is that I still hold to what I said last time. If the House decides not to proceed with the boundary proposals as delivered by the four commissions, and if we are going to debate the Bill and the Government decide that they will bring forward a money resolution and proceed, two things are true. First, the Bill would need to be debated; the Government would clearly have to find time for that on the Floor of the House—as was the case with the original boundary proposals and legislation—so that all hon. Members, not just the select few in this Committee, could participate in the debate. Secondly, one would not want to have that debate without its being informed by the debate and the responses from individual Members on the commission proposals, which would by that point have been rejected, because one would want to take into account the reasons why Parliament had not supported the boundary proposals if one were then going to alter the rules. Unless we were going to alter the rules, while listening to that feedback, in a way that we thought would lead to more acceptable proposals, it would be a rather pointless and otiose exercise.

Afzal Khan: The right hon. Gentleman's contributions have always been very reasoned, throughout the process in which we have been engaged. The one thing that I am

struggling with is this: we have been meeting here every week since May and this time is being wasted. If there were a money resolution, we could discuss the Bill line by line, and then, when the matter got to the House, we could discuss it both ways. What is the loss for us, not having a money resolution? By having a money resolution, we could iron out all the detail that needs to be dealt with. We meet every week in any case.

Mr Harper: If I follow the hon. Gentleman's logic through, that does not really work, because of course if we had a money resolution—I know we do not—we would be debating the Committee stage of the Bill here, but that would just then be repeated all over again, because the Committee stage would be done on the Floor of the House too, so the time would be wasted.

I suggested to the hon. Gentleman last week that, if he is concerned about the 30 minutes or so that we spend together on a Wednesday and the time it takes for the House, a potential way forward might be for him to engage with the usual channels and have a discussion about whether some arrangement can be reached whereby the Government might agree—I do not know, because I do not speak for the Government; I am a Back Bencher—to bring forward the boundary proposals as soon as is practicable, as the Minister set out, and if the House chose not to proceed with those, they might be prepared to make some of the commitments that I have suggested, about this being debated on the Floor of the House. In those circumstances, it may be that it is agreed that we then do not meet every Wednesday for a debate on the motion to adjourn, but with a commitment about what might happen if the House chooses not to proceed with the existing proposals.

I am sure that the Government would entertain having the conversation. I do not know what they would want to agree. They might not be prepared to agree to that—I do not speak for them. However, it seems to me that that might be a productive set of conversations to have, and then we would not spend the House's time in this Committee, pleasant though it is, and we would know where we were. There would be a two-stage process. The House would have the opportunity to take a view on the existing proposals, which have been introduced and are now being turned into legislation. If that were not to go through, there would be a fall-back, a plan B—that seems to be the terminology that people like today. That might be a sensible way forward.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has made an intriguing proposal about taking the Bill back on to the Floor of the House, but could he clarify something? Why would the Government's attitude on the Floor of the House be any different from the stonewalling we see in this Committee?

Mr Harper: Again, I speak just for myself. My point is that the Government would not agree to take the Bill back on to the Floor of the House now. It would be a two-stage process. The Government have made the commitment already; the Minister made that last week. I do not know whether she will speak today—I am not sure she would have much to add, so I, for one, would not be disappointed if she did not, apart from being generally disappointed when we do not hear from the

Minister. I do not think she has a lot to add, so I do not think there is any requirement for her to speak today if she does not wish to.

As I said, there would be a two-stage process because I do not think it would be appropriate to debate new rules and new ways of achieving boundaries without being informed by the feedback on the existing ones. When the boundary commissions' proposals are brought forward as Orders in Council, there will be a debate in Parliament and Members of Parliament who do not support the proposals—and there will be some, on the Opposition Benches at least—will be able to put on the record the reasons why they do not support them and the rules that led to their drawing up.

Not having that information to hand and debating in detail would not work. For all we know, the House might agree to the proposals, in which case there will be no point in changing the law in the first place. We would simply waste a huge amount of time on the Floor of the House of Commons. It seems to me that the most sensible approach is to park the Bill formally. It is parked in an informal way at the moment. There may be some benefit in having that conversation with the Government and getting an agreement.

As I said, I do not know if that agreement could be reached, but it seems not unreasonable to try. That would avoid the minor inconvenience—it is only a minor inconvenience—of our meeting every week but not being able to make substantial progress.

Afzal Khan: The right hon. Gentleman's proposal is sensible. Last week, we had an informal discussion and I offered to meet the Minister to see if some sort of resolution could be found as a way forward that was acceptable for both things that are trying to run in parallel here.

Mr Harper: As I said, I do not speak for the Government but it seems to me that that might be a sensible way forward. We are now in the short return in September and have almost run into the conference recess. There is obviously a period before we return on 9 October—we would reconvene on 10 October—to talk again. There is a little bit of time before we rise.

It is sometimes difficult to have usual channels conversations outside sitting times but I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he kicks those off. It is his Bill so he needs to initiate those conversations. We will see where we get to. We might be able to make considerable progress. That is just an idea; I do not speak for the Government, but it seems a perfectly constructive way forward and I commend it to the hon. Gentleman.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you back in the Chair, Mr Owen, for our proceedings. What a pleasure it is, as always, to follow the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean. I come to the Committee this morning to offer a couple of observations on what happened on Monday. I was at an event in Scotland with a number of my hon. Friends from the Scottish National party. We were all at a table and all of a sudden around 10 o'clock they all went on to their phones. It was like watching pupils get their report card from school. Everybody was frantically looking through what was happening to their seats, whether their seat would be abolished and what the proposals looked like.

[David Linden]

I tend to take the view, as a Scottish nationalist, that at the next general election, I hope that we can have 59 fewer seats, by way of Scotland becoming independent. I accept that is perhaps not an immediate prospect. My view is that it is absolutely unacceptable for Scotland to lose the six or seven seats under the current proposals.

Last week, the hon. Member for City of Chester and I talked about our not-so-favourite newspaper, the *Daily Mail*. I confess I am not avid reader of the *Financial Times* but it was sitting in the Members' Tea Room yesterday. I noticed a small article in it that suggested that the Government are now considering the possibility of delaying the votes on the boundary changes until after Brexit.

That presents several difficulties for the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton because we are in a two-year Session. The problem is, if we wait until Brexit at the end of March, we will probably be heading for prorogation before a new Queen's Speech within a month of that.

10.15 am

I am sure my view is increasingly shared across the House. The Democratic Unionist party has since changed its mind and is not minded to support the Government's proposals to reduce the number of seats to 600, which gives the Government a clear mathematical problem, and that is without the intervention of the hon. Members for Wellingborough, for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for countless other Conservative constituencies.

We will have the problem, as the Government realise, for reasons of internal Conservative party politics, that they are petrified of putting the proposals to the vote. We all know that that is the case. If the Government were so confident that there was a majority in the House for 600 seats, they would schedule that vote straightaway. It will not have escaped the House's notice that we have endless general debates—on Monday afternoon, we had one on the EU withdrawal. It is not as if that has not been debated—in the European Research Group, but not least on the Floor of the House of Commons—and I would argue it is not the best use of the House's time. If the Government are confident that there is a majority in the House for 600 seats, they should put it to the vote and test the will of the House.

It comes back to the fundamental issue of parliamentary democracy—of the House of Commons taking back control. In December 2017, the House of Commons gave a Second Reading to the Bill of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, and said that it should be taken into Committee. The Committee of Selection met. All of us, whether we are serving a penance or fresh-faced Members looking to cut our teeth in a Public Bill Committee, were sent to this Committee to consider the Bill line by line and clause by clause, but the Government have thrown it into parliamentary purgatory.

We will still be meeting here in March. I predict that the Government will eventually put the proposals to a vote in the House, because they have to, as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said. They will be defeated. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton will probably run out of time and the Bill will die. The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean talked about not

wasting time, but in reality, some innocent young Conservative MP from the Back Benches—perhaps even the hon. Member for Torbay—will have to bring this very measure back as a private Member's Bill. It will leave some poor Conservative with egg all over their face. Let us give up the charade.

Mr Harper: I want to pick up on the hon. Gentleman's point about democracy, because more recently than Second Reading, a motion was put to the House on 19 June. The House was given a clear choice about whether to allow this Committee to make progress on the Bill without a money resolution. Notwithstanding predictions about what the House might do in future when it is given the Orders in Council, it made a clear majority decision for us not to proceed, so the Government are actually following the will of the House.

David Linden: I am very grateful as always to the right hon. Gentleman, who participated in that debate, as I did. Several hon. Members were very clear when they stood up on the Back Benches. As a Government Back Bencher, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay did very well when he suggested that, although he did not support the reduction to 600 seats, he would not vote on the motion based on a technicality, because he did not think that it was appropriate for the House to take that route.

We are all big enough and ugly enough to have conversations with hon. Members across the aisle, and it is clear that there is not a majority in the House. That is precisely why the Government will not have that vote on the Floor of the House, because frankly, they have enough ongoing division within themselves, let alone with the other side of the House. If the Government are serious about respecting the will of the House—if the Leader of the House in particular, who is one of those great people who believe in parliamentary sovereignty—and genuinely want to take back control, they should schedule the vote. We will have the vote.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Chair: Order. I am keen to hear from Back Benchers, starting with Alex Norris.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Owen. Over the weekend and on Monday, I read coverage relating to this vote. One national newspaper quoted the Minister from our meeting last week, and the Committee was characterised as obscure. I am not sure whether it is a promotion or a demotion, after 13 or so weeks, to have reached the ranks of obscure. When we are still here in March, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East said, I wonder whether we will become veterans. I have not been here very long, but I wanted to become a veteran, so that will be very exciting.

What is at the nub of this and what saddens me about it is that our politics should never seek to emulate American politics. I do not think that the Americanisation of British culture in general is a great thing. However, if anyone watches American politics now, as I know lots of people in this building do with great interest and sometimes horror, they see is that everything—whether it is the colour of the napkins or the electoral system—

becomes a partisan arm wrestle. Everything, whether it is appointing judges or whatever it is, becomes an exercise in narrow advantage.

I am willing to take much of what the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean says at face value. The intentions at the outset, many years ago now, were very honourable. However, this has now become—without doubt—an exercise in political advantage: “the Government want this process to happen; it would help them. We do not want it to happen; it would not help us.”

If someone is a student of British politics, as I know lots of people in this room are, they will know that that has never been the way in which we have done our boundaries. Our boundaries and the way in which we have dealt with this system has been characterised by fair play and equity. Of course, I understand that we do not want to have ballooned constituencies in some parts of the country and tiny ones in others, but at the same time we want conversations about how to set a fair system—one that gives people as equal a voice as is physically possible—without tilting the scales one way or the other, because that goes against British values and our democracy. And whether we like it or not, we are in that territory now. Nothing could make that clearer than the fact that the vote on this issue is now being kicked further down the road, because the Government are not sure that they will win it.

Mr Harper: I am reflecting on this from memory, so I hope the Committee will forgive me if I have not got it quite right, but I think the hon. Gentleman is putting a gloss on the way that this process perhaps worked in the past. I seem to remember that in 1968 the then Prime Minister, Lord Wilson, brought forward to the House a set of boundary proposals that were not advantageous to the Labour party and he asked the House to vote them down. As it happened, it did not work because he lost the 1970 general election. Nevertheless, the idea that this process has somehow always been conducted in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests is perhaps not an accurate reading of the historical record.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention; his recollection of 1968 may well be stronger than mine, for obvious reasons. Perhaps I am putting a gloss on things and maybe we are looking back, as we tend to do, through sepia or whatever, but the point is that we have never been more partisan and red state/blue state than we are today, and this process is the perfect example of that.

So for goodness’ sake, let us kill this process off. We have got complete recognition that something needs to change—the boundaries need to change—but we have got this zombie hangover from the last Parliament in front of us; well, it is not in front of us today, but it will be in many months’ time. Of course I do not mean my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton, but the boundary review.

Let us put this boundary review to bed. Let us get down to discussing what I think are pretty good first principles in this Bill and let us get to where we all want to be. It will reflect on all of us better; it will also be better for our mental wellbeing, I suspect. Ideally—this is my major goal—we might have an outcome before the baby of my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who has been born during these proceedings, goes to university.

David Linden: I forgot to say in my remarks that the first week back I will not be here, because I will have a second child by that point. In the course of this Bill Committee, two children will have been born and the money resolution has not been granted. I give advance notice and my apologies.

Alex Norris: I am sure that we all want to pass on our congratulations to the hon. Gentleman. Yes, let us at least get this done before those children are at university, if not at school.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Owen.

What we see here is an anti-democratic process. It was 1 December 2017 when this Bill passed its Second Reading, so we are now more than nine months down the line and we have been meeting ever since, because the Government will not grant us a money resolution.

We have been given various reasons why we have not been given a money resolution. We were told that the boundary commissions’ proposals were coming and that it was best to wait for them to arrive, so that both matters could be considered together. Now we are being told that there are some complex resolutions and instruments that need to be prepared for that to happen. Surely the Government should have been ready for that. They knew when the boundary commissions would report. The proposals are the same as they were a year ago. The Government must have known what was coming—what landed on their desk cannot have been a big surprise—so it is no excuse for them to say they need more time to prepare and introduce those instruments.

Mr Harper: With the greatest respect, the boundary commissions gave their final proposals to the Government only on Monday. The Government could not have drafted the Orders in Council until they received those proposals. They could not have anticipated that the draft proposals would remain unchanged, and I do not think they remain completely unchanged. Drafting legislation is a complex process. Only certain people in Parliament can do it, and it is detailed, technical work, so it takes time. To be fair, I do not think the Minister is making that up.

Bambos Charalambous: If nothing has changed since the previous proposals were presented about a year ago, draft instruments should be ready to go now. Certainly, nothing whatsoever has changed in my constituency, and I am not sure what has changed in other areas. The majority of things have remained the same since last year.

This is an attempt to run down the clock on the Bill. There are only two more sitting Fridays this year. We are told there may be more coming next year, but we do not know when they will be announced or on what dates they will be. Even if the Bill got out of Committee, we would need another sitting Friday for it to get its Third Reading, and a number of other Bills would be ahead of it in any event. This is purely an attempt by the Government to run down the clock on the Bill.

If the Government are so confident about the proposals, why will they not put them to a vote? I know why—because they would lose. I heard the hon. Member for

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

Wellingborough say openly in business questions last Thursday that he would vote against the proposals if they were brought to the Floor of the House. I understand that a number of his colleagues share that view. Certainly, Labour would oppose the proposals were they put to the House—that is my opinion—so the Government would lose.

We need clarity. People say a boundary review has not taken place for a substantial period, so we all agree what the issue is and that it needs to be resolved, but we have a log jam with respect to how that should be done. The way to get out of it is to ensure that the Bill gets a money resolution, progresses out of Committee and has its Report stage soon.

Christian Matheson: It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I know hon. Members find these proceedings rather frustrating, but I do not. I have learned stuff today. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate makes an intriguing point about the Government running down the clock given the limited number of sitting Fridays. That had not occurred to me.

One of the problems the Minister faces is that she is running out of time, excuses and patches of long grass into which to kick the Bill. We kicked it into recess, but recess ended. We kicked it again when we were given the excuse that we had to wait for the drafting, which I will return to in a moment. The long grass of the conference recess will put matters off again, but time and room will continue to run out.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean, who talked about some of the procedures that might be used. He mentioned that he does not speak for the Government. The Minister does not speak for the Government in Committee, either—she hardly speaks at all. It was nice to hear from her last week. I am hoping, perhaps against hope, that she contributes today. We shall see.

The right hon. Gentleman also suggested that we should wait and see what the House's response is to the proposals published this week, but my good friend the hon. Member for Glasgow East and my hon. Friends have already pointed out that the House has pretty much made its decision. How do we know? Because the Government are kicking the proposals into the long grass. They know they cannot win a vote—that is the sticking point.

I see from the Order Paper that this is not the only Public Bill Committee meeting today. The Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill will meet just down the corridor this afternoon. I am pleased to see that on the Order Paper, but I cannot help but wonder whether the money resolution has been moved for that—I suspect it has.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): Last night.

Christian Matheson: The Minister often points me in the right direction—not always, but sometimes.

10.30 am

I want to return to the Minister's point, which was reflected in the contribution of the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean, about the delay that we face in the Government's tabling the necessary orders. The Minister said that they are complicated to draft. The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean talked about the lack of capacity in Government. If that is true—I have no reason not to believe it—it shows, once again, the chaos and catastrophe of Brexit sucking the life out of Government, and taking up huge amounts of public resources, when we should be dealing with more relevant things.

I took the liberty, however, of digging out the last set of orders. There are four of them: for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The last one was from 2007, which reminds us—as other hon. Members have done—of the need for an updated set of constituencies. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton talked about being almost 20 years out of date. I want to put on record the Opposition's desire to get a set of constituencies that reflects matters.

On the face of it, the previous order is a weighty document of 74 pages in the PDF version. I am not sure whether PDFs were invented in 2007—they certainly were not in 1997. It is a hefty volume, but 70-odd pages simply list the constituencies and the wards that would make them up. As my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate mentioned, that is simply a matter of transposition from the Boundary Commission's final report.

Let us look at the rest of the order. It is four articles long with an introductory preamble, which I am sure I could just cut and paste from the previous report. Article 1, "Citation and commencement," reads:

This Order may be cited as the Parliamentary Constituencies (England) Order 2007... This Order shall come into force on the fourteenth day after the day on which it is made."

That is not complicated drafting.

Article 2, "Parliamentary constituencies in England," reads:

"England shall be divided into the parliamentary constituencies... which are named in column 1 of the Table in the Schedule to this Order".

In other words, it simply refers to the schedule, which is simply a reproduction of the report that the Boundary Commission presented to the Government and the Government presented to the House. Article 3—

The Chair: Order. I tell the hon. Gentleman that we do not need to hear the whole order. However, he is responding to remarks made in the debate. In general, he can make reference to it, but not quote it verbatim.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful for your guidance, Mr Owen. As you will know, I always accept the guidance of the Chair. If it gives you any comfort, it would not delay matters long, because the order is extremely short and simple. There are two extra articles, one about electoral registers and one about revoking previous orders.

I will make an offer to the Minister, who I think may have not understood the full complexity—or lack thereof—of the orders. If it will help, between now and next Wednesday, I will draft the order for her, based on

this. I am sure the Clerks would also be helpful and then she can give it to the parliamentary draftsmen, and we can get the work done. It might take a week or so longer for me to type up the orders for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but that is only because I am slow at typing.

David Linden: I am happy to take Scotland for the hon. Gentleman.

Christian Matheson: What a generous offer! There is a serious point. With the greatest respect—I moderate the tone of my language—the Minister’s excuse does not hold water and is not acceptable. The orders are simple—they simply reproduce what the boundary commissions gave us. They are not a reason to delay the vote in the House.

What is the reason? We know what it is: the Government do not have a majority. Some hon. Members in the extremist Brexiteer wing of the Conservative party are agitating about Brexit and looking to make trouble wherever they go, and others simply do not approve of reducing the size of the House while the size of the Executive—the Government—is not reduced, so the House cannot perform its scrutiny.

We have talked about party advantage this and party advantage that, but many hon. Members on both sides of the House are dedicated to the House, its service and its stature in being able to undertake its role of scrutinising the Government. They do not like the Government’s proposals, not because of self-interest, but because they damage the standing of the House. That needs to be put on the record as well as the suggestions of party advantage.

My offer stands. If the Minister picks up the phone and asks me to help her to draft the order, I will do so, but I suspect that the parliamentary draftsmen will do a better and quicker job, if they are given the nod. I wonder if the delay is not because the drafting is complicated, but because the Government are looking for yet another patch of long grass into which to kick it. Those patches are running out.

Chloe Smith: I am only sorry for the slightly imaginary world in which some Opposition Members seem increasingly to live. The factual position is as I set out last week, and I have nothing further to add this week.

Question put and agreed to.

10.37 am

Adjourned accordingly till Wednesday 10 October at Ten o’clock.

