

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Fourteenth Sitting

Wednesday 10 October 2018

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Motion to adjourn considered.

Adjourned till Wednesday 17 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,

not later than

Sunday 14 October 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>) (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 10 October 2018

[NADINE DORRIES *in the Chair*]

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

10 am

The Chair: The usual before we begin: everybody please switch off mobile phones, which includes me; no coffees or teas allowed but, if anyone wants to remove a jacket, please feel free to do so.

As the Committee cannot consider the clauses of the Bill until the House has agreed a money resolution, I call the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton to move that the Committee adjourns.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Committee do now adjourn. Thanks to everyone for coming. I hope we all had a good break.

The energy after the Labour party conference was quite a contrast to the tumbleweed blowing around the hall in Birmingham.

The Chair: Order. Mr Khan, I would not ordinarily allow comments about party political conferences, so please keep them to the Bill.

Afzal Khan: Thank you, Ms Dorries. Perhaps it is that lack of energy that is to blame for our stagnation in this Committee. The Minister has told us that it is a very long and complicated process to translate the boundary review recommendations into a motion to put to Parliament. I do not believe it would be so complicated in fact. I am sure that an efficient Government could get anything done if they had the energy and focus. Clearly, this Government are more interested in kicking the can down the road than in bringing the issue of boundaries to a head.

The Government already face threats of rebellion from 80 MPs over the Prime Minister's Brexit deal. Why would they anger even more of their Members by pushing through an unpopular boundary review that is doomed to be voted down? The answer, of course, is because that is what would be best for our democracy.

We cannot continue with boundaries based on 20-year-old data. The current review excludes a million voters and will reduce democratic accountability just when we need it most. For the sake of our democracy, we must abandon the arbitrary and harmful attempt to reduce MPs, and my Bill would do just that. But, as we know, the Government have no problem with putting the interests of their party above the interests of the country.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a great pleasure, Ms Dorries, to be back in Committee and to serve under your chairmanship. I see our numbers are dwindling once again. The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean, who is normally assiduous about attending and has been very helpful in pointing out intricacies of procedure that I have not yet got my head around, is not

here. Let us hope that is only a temporary absence. I would like to think he is made of sterner stuff and has not been worn down.

I see that our friend from the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Glasgow East, is not with us this morning. I again assure the Minister, the Committee and you, Ms Dorries, that we shall not be worn down. The reasons we will not be worn down are very much those just stated eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton, who has been a personal friend for many years, long before either of us was privileged and honoured to be elected a Member of this place.

There is a clear, pressing and dire need for a boundary review, but one that is fair. The Government's basis for the current boundary review is to equalise the number of constituencies, but my hon. Friend makes the point that even that aim will not be achieved because there are a million voters missing from the register. Therefore, we will get constituencies that vary hugely in size, simply because the registers on which they are based are inaccurate.

I am looking at *Hansard* from our sitting on 5 September. We learned that the new boundaries—as opposed to the current boundaries—as published on 5 September will not be brought before the House any time soon because of the complicated drafting of the orders. The Minister was pressed by me on the point that it might take several months. She said:

“I confirm that I used the word ‘months’ and I deliberately did so. I intend to be realistic with the Committee that those instruments are complex and need to be prepared fully and correctly.”

She was, as she promised,

“quite straight about that with the Committee.”—[*Official Report, Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Public Bill Committee, 5 September 2018; c. 88.*]

I then looked at the previous instruments that the House had agreed and they did not seem that complicated to me. I am not a parliamentary draftsman and I have never been a Minister.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Yet.

Christian Matheson: Yet. I have never given instructions to civil servants to brief parliamentary draftsmen on.

However, it is not that complicated an order. I have gone so far as to assist the Minister by drafting the order myself. I know that we do not name staff here, so I will not mention them. I have not checked it with the Clerks in the Public Bill Office, but I am sure that they will be fairly satisfied, because all that needed changing was the dates, the parent Acts of Parliament from which the order would be derived and a few of the numbers. It then required taking volume 1 of the report, and the list of constituencies and the wards of which those constituencies are comprised.

I did not photocopy it because I wish to save paper, but if the Minister and her staff wish to pull it off the internet, that would be an easy way forward. They can then staple that to the draft order, ensure that the Clerk is happy with it and we can introduce this new order—I am trying to be helpful here—in a matter of a couple of weeks, I believe. It is not complicated.

The one thing I confess is that I have done only the England version. There are versions for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. My good friend the hon. Member

for Glasgow East offered to do the Scotland version. I think I could turn my hand to those three as well. They are slightly more complicated because the previous versions included Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly constituencies, but I think we can easily get over that.

I offer a helping hand to the Minister. The order is easy. I have drafted it. If it is not perfect now—it might be; I might have surprised myself with my ability to draft an order—it is near as damn it. I believe, therefore, that we can move this matter forward.

The alternative is that the delay is not about drafting the order, but the fact that the Government think that they cannot get a majority of their Members to vote in favour of these new proposals any time soon. The Government are being sucked ever further into the morass of Brexit, with a whole section of Government Members acting akin to unguided missiles, firing off all over the House.

There is an element of wild disunity on the Government Benches, which means that any vote on the boundaries is not likely to get through. Subsequently, the Government are frit and do not have the courage to bring forward the proposal that they themselves generated. The complexity of the drafting is nothing more than an excuse. Today, that excuse has been eradicated, because I am quite happy to hand this proposal over to the Minister. We

can get over the problems of delay and move to vote on the new 5 September boundary proposals as soon as possible.

As I have said previously, those proposals will either be accepted or rejected by the House, but the Bill will remain on the Order Paper and will need to be dealt with one way or the other. The best way for the Government to deal with it is to vote against it on Third Reading. I urge them to show their hand, have the courage of their convictions—this was their idea, after all—and bring this matter to a vote, on both the proposed 5 September boundaries, which the boundary commissions have just produced, and the proposed guidance to the boundary commissions on a new set of proposals, which is enshrined in the Bill.

Let us see the colour of the Government's money and the strength of their conviction. Let us see the support they have in the House and stop kicking this down the road. I make a genuine offer to pass over this order to the Minister, so that she can share it with her civil servants and we can move forward apace.

Question put and agreed to.

10.10 am

Adjourned accordingly till Wednesday 17 October at Ten o'clock.

