

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

## PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

*Sixteenth Sitting*

*Wednesday 24 October 2018*

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Motion to adjourn considered.  
Adjourned till Wednesday 31 October at Ten o'clock.

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**Sunday 28 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)	David Weir, <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 24 October 2018

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

### Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

10 am

**The Chair:** With all electronic devices now switched to silent, we move to the motion to adjourn. I remind the Committee that we cannot consider the clauses of the Bill until the House has agreed the money resolution.

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

The way that we draw our boundaries in this country has until recently inhabited a sacred space in our politics. We have four independent boundary commissions that independently consider the population and community ties across the UK and produce proposals for how many MPs there should be and where the boundaries of those constituencies should lie.

It is essential that that process remains independent. We need only look to the United States to see the danger of their approach. Extreme gerrymandering has eroded public faith in the political system. Debate around boundaries has been poisoned by party-political fighting, and lengthy lawsuits have recently reached the Supreme Court.

I believe strongly that we must keep our process independent. The current proposed boundaries have been expressly designed to benefit the Conservative party, and 2 million people have been disfranchised from the process. The Government have cut the number of MPs to an arbitrary 600 and equalising electorate size has been given priority over community ties.

My Bill has cross-party support. It is nonsense that we are in these endless Committee sittings, wasting time instead of pressing ahead with my Bill to produce the new boundaries our democracy needs.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): I will speak briefly. I did not intend to speak—I know everyone says that—but the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton said a number of things that cannot land on the record without correction.

First, I agree with him completely that the process covered in his Bill and the process under way absolutely have to be independent. I agree that the way other countries draw their boundaries, for example, the United States, is not one that I wish to follow. There, elected politicians sit with a map drawing boundaries.

My challenge to the hon. Gentleman is that that is exactly not what happens in this country. The boundaries that are now with Parliament, and with the Government for converting into orders, have not been drawn by party politicians. They have been carefully drawn by independent judicial office holders. They have obviously listened to evidence from the political parties, as one would expect, but all political parties have been able to give evidence. They have heard evidence from other people and produced independent proposals.

Of course, those proposals are shaped by the rules set by Parliament. Those rules are about equalising the size of constituencies, and I think there is general agreement that constituencies should be of equal size, not for our interest, but so that votes across the country are of equal weight wherever voters live.

I do not know whether it is still true, or whether someone has polled it, but I think it would be the case that reducing the number of Members of Parliament remains the most popular policy of the coalition Government. With 600, we would still have more politicians in the country at that level than many other comparable democracies.

**Afzal Khan:** Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman could enlighten us as to where the number of 600 comes from.

**Mr Harper:** It is not scientific. I think I set it out when I took through the original legislation. We made a decision to reduce the size of the House. There is nothing magic about 600. The current number is 650 and we decided to reduce that by about 10%, because that was about the amount we were shrinking of the rest of the public sector, and 600 is a round number. Rather than saying it was 587.5 or 592, it is 600. There was a conspiracy theory at the time about this special number that was specially designed to have some specific effect, but it is just a round number—600 seems a more sensible number than 604. There is nothing magic about it, but there was a general sense that it would be better to have slightly fewer Members. By comparison with similar western democracies, we actually have quite a lot of Members of Parliament at our level of government, and it seems sensible to make a modest reduction.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that we have a lot of Members of Parliament, but there are even more Members of the House of Lords. What will the Government do to reduce that number?

**Mr Harper:** I do not want to go too far into that or you will pull me up, Mr Owen, but I brought forward an ill-fated attempt both to radically reduce the size of the House of Lords and to make it more democratic. If we had received support from the Labour party for the programme motion so that we did not spend the whole of the 2010-15 Parliament talking about it, we might have made some progress. Sadly, that was not to be, and now it is not at the top of this Government's priorities because we have other important matters to deal with.

I just want to put on record that I think it is incredibly important that we have an independent process for drawing boundaries, but that is indeed what we have in this country. I would like the Government and Parliament to be able to consider the boundaries that are drawn up by that independent process before we make progress with the Bill.

**David Linden:** It is, as ever, a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Owen. I looked at the Order Paper and saw that this is the sixteenth meeting of the Committee—my goodness, I am sure there will be a Netflix documentary about us soon.

I want to pick up on one or two points made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean. As I was not a Member of this place during his time as Chief Whip and when he was a member of the Government, I was not aware that he was a great reformer who sought to abolish our cronies in ermine. I am none the less disappointed that he was not successful at that—I am sure he would have had the support of the Scottish National party, and he certainly would have had my personal support. He is absolutely right to make it clear that the boundary commissions are entirely independent; none of the members of this esteemed Committee is questioning the impartiality of the fine civil servants who serve on the boundary commissions.

It comes back to the principle that has been directed to civil servants by Government, which is to reduce the number of seats from 650 to 600. The noise of a reversing JCB digger could almost be heard as the right hon. Gentleman talked about how they arrived at this magical number of 600. The technical way of saying how they found it is that they put a wet finger up in the air, and that is how they came up with the figure of 600—I have other feelings about that.

I wanted to make a brief contribution today because, having looked at the Order Paper for the main Chamber, we are of course considering some very important legislation for Northern Ireland. One point that I made in Committee last week was that before my time as a Member in this House, when I was a researcher, and now as an MP, I have seen the Government countless times bring forward legislation for Northern Ireland very quickly. The Minister is a former Northern Ireland Minister herself, so she will know how quickly legislation for across the water can be drafted. I find it a little bit bizarre that legislation for Northern Ireland can be drafted so quickly and, indeed, passed so quickly—in one day—yet Orders in Council take months to be brought to the House.

**Mr Harper:** I may be wrong, but I think the reason why Northern Ireland legislation tends to be dealt with differently is because there is generally a consensus between Front Benchers on the proposals that are brought forward. It is only because there is agreement on the process that it can be done like that. If what is being proposed for Northern Ireland is politically contentious between the parties, it simply would not be possible to bring it forward on an emergency basis. We have established in our relatively limited debates in Committee on Adjournment motions that there is no consensus across the parties on the subject of parliamentary constituencies. I do not think that the process would work in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests.

**David Linden:** I caution the right hon. Gentleman—if he wants to talk about contentious issues in Northern Ireland, I do not think that the Government are on their finest form with some of their proposals for how they will treat Northern Ireland over the backstop. It is fine if he wants to lecture me on that—I dare him to do so.

I ask the Minister: how many civil servants in the Cabinet Office are working on the preparation for this? The final number I would like to find out from the Minister—I would be grateful if she gave it to me sooner rather than later—is this. We are talking about cutting the cost of politics, but we are approaching that

wonderful time of year again when the turkeys are stuffed—when people put on ermine robes and become new Members of the House of Lords. It is around this time of year when we find out the long list of new Members of the House of Lords. How many new lords can we expect next year?

**The Chair:** Before I call the hon. Member for City of Chester, I just want to put on the record the fact that I understood every word that the hon. Member for Glasgow East said.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): And of course, Mr Owen, we understand and follow every word you say as you direct us. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, but that pleasure is tempered by the disappointment that, once again, we have failed to receive the money resolution that would have allowed us to proceed.

It is genuinely always a pleasure to listen to the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean. I have said previously that his experience is invaluable in this Committee. Let me put on record the Opposition's view that there is absolutely no question about the Boundary Commission's integrity—none whatever. There is an issue, of course, about the guidance, which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, that the House gives to the Boundary Commission when it makes its decisions and proposals.

The Bill would not reduce the number of constituencies, but it would allow an ever-so-slightly greater tolerance about the national average than the boundaries currently awaiting the House's decision. It would allow for an equalisation of the size of constituencies, and a greater recognition of communities of interest around them, which make up an important part of the identity that electors feel with their parliamentary constituency. We absolutely want to progress to greater consistency across the numbers in parliamentary constituencies, because it is not helpful to have too great a divergence from the national average and constituencies of too great a size.

Hundreds of thousands of voters were not on the register on which the existent boundary proposals were based, so there will inevitably be a great variation in the number of voters. It has been suggested to me that some of the inner-city seats in London might have well in excess of 100,000 residents—150,000 in two cases—but not voters, because people have fallen off the register.

**Mr Harper:** On that point, of course whenever we draw a cut-off line and start a process, we cannot possibly be completely up to date. A big change happened with the general election and the referendum, and the analysis that was carried out by Number Cruncher Politics and the Library shows that the distribution of those voters is broadly equal across the country. If they were all on the register, it would not make a material difference to the distribution of seats across the country, so the hon. Gentleman's fear is unwarranted.

**Christian Matheson:** I am grateful for that intervention, and I take the right hon. Gentleman's point. I shall look up that report, but that still does not negate the problem that there are hundreds of thousands of people who are not actually on the register.

[*Christian Matheson*]

I do not intend to detain the Committee for much longer, save to say that we need progress, and we are being prevented from making progress by the Government's failure to bring forward the money resolution or the alternative to it, which is the orders for decision by this House. I believe they are doing that because it suits the internal dynamics and politics of the Conservative party. Those considerations are overriding the national need for a decision on this matter. The longer this goes on, the more unhelpful the Government's position is.

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):** I will respond to the two questions that the hon. Member for Glasgow East asked me. I will not touch the second, because it is absolutely nothing to do with the scope of the Bill. On the first, I will simply say for clarity—

**The Chair:** Order. May I just say to the Minister that what is discussed is a matter for me? It was not out of order, and if the Minister wishes to respond, she may do so.

10.15 am

**Chloe Smith:** I beg your pardon, Mr Owen. I spoke too strongly, and of course I respect your decision.

In any case, let me deal with the question about the number of civil servants working on the orders, which, as I confirmed last week, are being brought to Parliament, quite correctly and in line with the expected process. I am not able to give a number, because my civil servants, whom I have the greatest respect for and gratitude to, work on a number of things at any one time. There is simply no way to say how many are working on one thing and how many on another. However, I confirm again to the Committee that that work is being done to a speed I am satisfied with, and that the orders will come back to Parliament as soon as can be.

**Afzal Khan:** If the Minister is not able to give us those numbers, will she give us an idea of the timescale for the work and when it is likely to make progress?

**Chloe Smith:** Forgive me, Mr Owen, I am a little confused. Am I continuing my remarks now?

**The Chair:** No, you have finished your remarks. However, Mr Khan asked a question in his winding-up speech. Whether you wish to answer it is a matter for you.

**Chloe Smith:** I believe I answered that question last week.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.16 am

*Adjourned till Wednesday 31 October at Ten o'clock.*



