

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

## PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

*Thirtieth Sitting*

*Wednesday 24 April 2019*

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### CONTENTS

Sittings motion agreed to.  
Adjourned till Wednesday 5 June at 10 o'clock.

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**Sunday 28 April 2019**

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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)	Adam Mellows-Facer, <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 April 2019

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

### Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

10 am

**The Chair:** I welcome Members to the 30th sitting of the Bill Committee. I hope you all had a good Easter break.

*Motion made, and Question proposed,*

That, notwithstanding the Order of the Committee of Wednesday 4 July 2018, during further proceedings on the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill the Committee do next meet at 10.00 am on Wednesday 5 June.—(*Afzal Khan.*)

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): I will endeavour to speak briefly. It is a great pleasure to be here at our 30th meeting. I have been to many of them—not all of them. I will happily support the motion moved by the hon. Gentleman when the Committee comes to decide on it.

The only other two things I have to say, if you will indulge me, Mr Owen, are that I wish the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North, all good luck on her maternity leave. The Committee has had a number of maternity and paternity considerations, which perhaps indicates how long it has been going for. Finally, I welcome the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay. He has served a long apprenticeship—perhaps too long—as a Parliamentary Private Secretary, which he has conducted with some considerable skill, and I was incredibly pleased to see the Prime Minister recognise his talents. He has been rewarded—if indeed reward is the word—by taking over from my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North in sitting in the ministerial chair. On that note, having wished him well, I am happy to support the motion.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is, as always, a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. You reminded us that this is the 30th sitting of the Committee. It is a sad indictment that there have been more Committee sittings than I have had birthdays on this Earth, but that is another story.

I also welcome the Minister to his position and once again wish the hon. Member for Norwich North all the best as she goes through the last part of her pregnancy. As the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said, the Minister had been a PPS on the Bill Committee for some time. In that role, he was often restricted from speaking, so I am sure we are all excited to hear what he has to say, not just about the Bill but about any potential money resolution to it. We will reserve judgment on whether a new Minister means a new approach. I know it is not a fashionable thing to do, but I remind the Committee that the House voted for the Bill at Second Reading and wanted to see it proceed. I hope he will bear that in mind.

If we are to take the Committee seriously—whether we will be here in June is a different story—it is still not too late to bring forward a money resolution. The Government can magic up Fridays, as we have seen in recent months, and if they could do that for a couple of extra Fridays and there is the will in the House to bring forward the money resolution, we could get the Bill expedited. I am sure that the Minister, a reforming Member of this House who will want to honour the House's will, will stand up in a few minutes to say exactly that.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What a great pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I echo the sentiments of the hon. Member for Glasgow East and the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean in welcoming the Minister and congratulating him on his appointment to the Government. I also wish him well for what I believe will be his first oral questions later today. On behalf of the Opposition, I send our very best wishes to the hon. Member for Norwich North—the Minister on maternity leave. Perhaps the Minister will pass on our best wishes to her and her family. We reckon, as has been suggested, this will be the third baby—God willing—born during the Committee's proceedings. That was a subtle dig by the hon. Member for Glasgow East, as some of us have had a lot more birthdays than 30 sittings. I promise the hon. Gentleman that it will come to him eventually; another young whippersnapper will be snapping at his heels before long and if this Committee goes on long enough, who knows if it might be his own child doing the chattering?

The Opposition fully supports the proposal, made by the Member in charge, for an additional sitting. A cloud on the horizon is the uncertainty over the date of the next state opening of Parliament, the Prorogation of Parliament and the start of the next parliamentary year. We are still waiting to hear from the Government when that date might be. As the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean has reminded me in the past—and I am always grateful for his counsel, as he is an experienced Member—once the new parliamentary year starts, this Bill will fall.

As long as the current parliamentary Session continues, the Opposition will support the endeavours of the Member in charge in pushing the Bill forward. The bottom line is that the need for the Bill has not gone away. To have had 30 sittings of the Committee without a money resolution is an affront to the House. Whether or not we have a state opening of Parliament and the Government sort out their own internal difficulties, bite the bullet and have the courage to put a new parliamentary Session's legislative programme to the House for approval, the need for the Bill and for a new, modern, fair and up-to-date set of boundaries will still be present. Whatever happens on 5 June, if we go into July or if the parliamentary Session spills over into the autumn, we will still be here pressing the case for up-to-date boundaries.

The Minister has been a PPS, which is almost like taking a vow of silence, but this is his opportunity to stand up and give us an understanding about progress in the drafting of the orders for the Bill, and about any discussion, through the usual channels and the office of the Leader of the House, about when time might be made available to debate the current boundary proposals, so that if they are rejected—or indeed if they are

passed—we can move on with consideration of the Bill. I shall be here to support my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton on 5 June, because we need to move forward and get some certainty about these boundaries. I wish the Minister well and ask him to take our best wishes to the hon. Member for Norwich North, and I hope he will now be able to illuminate the Committee about progress on these matters.

**The Chair:** Before the Minister speaks, I add my congratulations to him on being appointed to the Government. We talked about age and anniversaries, but over the years since I have been here the Wales Office Ministers have all got younger and younger. I welcome the hon. Member for Torbay to the role and to the other duties he has, and I look forward to hearing him address the motion.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster):** Thank you, Mr Owen. I look forward to working with you in the spirit of co-operation and positive engagement, so that we can do the best for those we seek to represent and serve.

I thank Members for their best wishes to me on taking on this new role and I will ensure that their best wishes are passed on to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North, who starts her maternity leave this week. It is a sign of a modern, inclusive Parliament that we have arrangements in place to ensure that taking on the role of Government Minister does not require a choice between having a family and pursuing a ministerial career.

I am happy to support the motion and the proposal to sit on 5 June. Having been at the other sittings on the Benches behind, it would be disappointing if I were now to find that this was the last sitting, and that I would no longer see my friends the hon. Members for Glasgow East and for Manchester, Gorton at 10am on Wednesdays. As they are aware, the House has considered since Second Reading whether the Bill should proceed and be considered in this Committee without a money resolution, and it has decided that that should not be the case. The Government have made clear, through the usual channels, their view on a money resolution.

That said, reports have been laid before the House from the independent boundary commission, and the work on the order that will be necessary to bring before Parliament continues although, as Hon. Members will appreciate, it is a lengthy and complex document, which will require significant preparation before being presented.

**David Linden:** Can the Minister update the House on the progress of that document? Is it 25%, 50% or 75% done? Surely the Minister will have some idea from the civil servants what kind of progress they are making. Can he give the Committee an indication of the percentage of progress in that respect?

**Kevin Foster:** The hon. Gentleman will realise that statutory instruments are not completed by a third, a half or a quarter, but once orders are prepared, they are ready to come before the House. It is a complex motion, given that it covers every street and house in the United Kingdom, in terms of ensuring that they are appropriately represented in this place. It will be submitted in due course.

**Christian Matheson:** May I ask the Minister a technical question? Is it the Government's intention to bring forward all four boundary orders in one, or will they be brought forward as and when each individual one is ready?

**Kevin Foster:** I will briefly respond. Work continues on the orders, and we will bring them forward in the appropriate manner, as determined by the nature of the legislation to be considered by the House. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that it will need to be an Order in Council presented to the House for its approval. It is a complex document, which will take some time to produce.

**Afzal Khan:** I have nothing to add other than my best wishes to the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Norwich North, and congratulations to our new Minister, the hon. Member for Torbay.

*Question put and agreed to.*

**The Chair:** We now move to the motion to adjourn. As the Committee cannot consider the clauses of the Bill until the House has agreed to the money resolution, I call Afzal Khan to move that the Committee do now adjourn.

**Afzal Khan:** I beg to move,

That the Committee do now adjourn.

Thank you, Mr Owen. Happy 30th sitting of the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill Committee. Traditionally the 30th is the pearl anniversary, but unfortunately MPs' expenses would not allow me to buy each member of the Committee a pearl. Perhaps I might offer some pearls of wisdom instead.

Hon. Members might notice that the next proposed meeting is not in a month's time, as has become our tradition, but in five weeks. That is to take account of the possibility of a recess at the end of May. After the chaos of the Easter recess, we will see whether MPs ever get a break again. I hope that after our week off last week, the new Minister has come back rested, refreshed and ready to take on the issue of parliamentary boundaries.

The Tories' mishandling of Brexit means that we will have to fight the European elections, the local elections next month and a possible general election. There is reason enough there to look at the building blocks of our democracy—constituency boundaries. These elections will no doubt mean more electors, as people register to vote this year, making the proposed 2015 cut-off date for the boundary review even more ridiculous.

Last month, in my role as the shadow Immigration Minister, I took the Immigration Bill through Committee stage. Though it was not a massive Bill, it was longer than this one, and we got through it in two weeks. We should have been done with this Bill a year ago, but we will keep on meeting until we can make some progress. I hope the Minister can assist us further in this progress.

**Mr Harper:** I had not intended to speak, but, as ever, the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton has provoked me.

On the point that the hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned about how long it will take to do the statutory instruments, looking at historical precedent, I think I am

[Mr Harper]

right in saying—I am sure the Minister will correct me if I am not—that the last Labour Government took around 10 months to get orders drafted on the boundaries issue. It can take a considerable period of time to get these things done. That would take us right through to the autumn of this year. It would be difficult for anybody from the Labour party—or the hon. Member for Glasgow East—to say that anything less than 10 months was unreasonable, since that was the length of time that their own party took when they were in government.

Finally, I want to address the point made by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton about the distribution of electors. It is not the number of electors who are on the register at any particular time that is relevant here, but their distribution across the country. The argument about cut-off points, which we have had before, is that even if more electors are registered, if those electors are broadly similarly distributed as at a previous cut-off point, they do not make a material difference in the distribution of constituencies.

As the House of Commons Library analysis showed when we looked at this before, there was no significant material difference in the electors who were added post 2015 for the European referendum or for the 2017 general election. They did not make a material difference in the distribution of seats, so I do not think that the passage of time makes the original cut-off period null and void.

I still think that the Government's process is the right one—to finalise the Orders in Council, bring them before the House and allow the House to debate and vote on them. If the House passes them, we have our new boundaries. If the House fails to support those Orders in Council, at that point the House and the Government can reflect on the appropriate way forward, the House having taken a decision on the process that has already been under way and is nearing its completion. That is the sensible way for this Committee to consider the matter as it decides whether it wishes to adjourn.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.16 am

*Adjourned till Wednesday 5 June at Ten o'clock.*



