

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Ninth Sitting

Wednesday 4 July 2018

CONTENTS

Sittings motion agreed to.
Motion to adjourn considered.
Adjourned till Wednesday 11 July 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 8 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)	† attended the Committee

Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 4 July 2018

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

9.30 am

The Chair: Before we begin, I remind Members to switch their electronic devices to silent. Teas and coffees are not allowed in the sitting.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That, during further proceedings on the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, the Committee do meet at 10.00 am on Wednesdays when the House is sitting.

I thank Committee members for being here once again. I have proposed that we amend the sittings motion to give us another half an hour in the morning, so that, instead of starting at 9.30 am, we would start at 10 am, if Members agree to that. At least that will give us something different to discuss from in our previous meetings.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I am interested to hear my hon. Friend's suggestion. The problem is that if the Government were to move a money resolution—as well they should—it would give us half an hour's less debate in the morning. Does he think that might be a problem?

Afzal Khan: That is a valuable question. We can always propose to meet at 9.30 am once the money resolution actually comes through, as I am sure the Minister agrees.

It will come as no surprise to those who have regularly attended the Committee that we are once again unable to consider the text of the Bill, as the Government have obstructed its normal progress. However, I cannot claim that there has been no progress. As I am sure the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean—who is not here today—will point out, we are now one week closer to the boundary review. While the clock has once again gone forward, I would prefer Members of Parliament to be fulfilling their parliamentary duties rather than, annoyingly, waiting for time to run out.

I will briefly recap the course of the Committee's proceedings. We first met on 9 May and have met every Wednesday since, with the exception of 30 May. I calculate that, including our additional meeting on Monday 14 May, the Committee has, over two months, spent two hours and 12 minutes agreeing not to act. That is simply a waste of time.

If the arguments against the money resolution are clear, as the Government claim, they should have no trouble tabling a money resolution and instructing Government Members to vote it down. The refusal to allow the House to vote on a money resolution is a short-sighted and inexcusable obstruction of parliamentary processes. The arguments used to defend the Government's

actions are weak, and the Government have refused to acknowledge that their behaviour has been, at best, unusual.

The Bill can be put off but it cannot be postponed indefinitely. The Government know as well as the Opposition that the boundary review will be voted on sooner or later. Delays will not change the reality that the proposal to reduce the size of the Commons does not have the support needed to be passed. I encourage the Government to abandon this wishful thinking, so that we can ensure that our electoral processes are fair.

I restate the important point I made last week: we are delaying this Bill at the very moment that we should be proceeding with it. We are so close to the Boundary Commission's findings being made public that if they are accepted, the money to be allocated to the Bill will not be spent. From this point on, there is no financial logic to the refusal to table a money resolution. It is evident that, from here on, the Government's goals are purely political. Given the extent of the opposition to reducing the size of the House of Commons, it is only responsible for us to hammer out the details of this Bill, to prepare for the likelihood that the Boundary Commission's proposals will be rejected.

We cannot afford any further delay to boundary reform. The money resolution issue is a manufactured obstacle. By refusing to acknowledge the legislative authority of the House of Commons the Government have thrown a wrench into the wheels of Parliament. The current Government have been alarmingly consistent in their disregard for the will of the House. However, I and my cross-party colleagues who are disturbed by that behaviour will not back down. The downsizing of Parliament does not have support and the Government will have to feel the consequences of that sooner or later.

I thank you, Mr Owen, for your patience in allowing me to make a speech longer than those I have given in the past, and my colleagues on both sides of the Committee for their patience and attention.

Christian Matheson: I welcome the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton. In the circumstances, his proposal sounds eminently sensible.

You are a proud Welshman, Mr Owen, and I do not know whether you happened to watch last night's England versus Colombia World cup football match. I have a lot of sympathy for Colombia. It is a country that I have visited. It is varied and beautiful, from the Andean uplands down to the coastline of the Pacific and the Caribbean. It has passed through some difficult times, particularly with organised crime, but it is a beautiful and well-loved country, so I had sympathy for it in the match last night, but hard and persistent work by England still managed to win the day.

That puts me in mind of the Minister's position. If I may say so, she is a popular Member of the House who has undertaken her job diligently and is well thought of. Last night, unfortunately, the Colombia team resorted at times to gamesmanship and to bending the rules. There were a few cheeky tackles, and some simulation—diving, as we used to call it in this country. That is very much a metaphor for the Government's position at the moment: using procedural mechanisms to try to delay and frustrate what is, in a sense, inevitable.

The England team have been putting in the hard work and long hours, just as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton has been doing. What was the result last night? My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North was watching the match with me and he knows that eventually the right and inevitable result came, which was that England won through, as much by graft and character as flair. Much as the Minister is respected in the House, I must tell her that, as we saw, gamesmanship never wins through in the end and the right result is always reached. Perhaps she will take a note of the match result and move away from the idea of not moving the money resolution, and on to the real match.

I have a serious question for the Minister: I want to probe the Government's exact intentions. We foresee one of two possible outcomes, probably in September. One is that when the Government lay the order for the new boundaries under the final proposals to be issued by the various boundary commissions, they will be accepted by the House. The other outcome is that they will not. So what contingencies is the Minister thinking about? In either situation it would be appropriate to table the money resolution for the Bill and to begin consideration. Does the Minister intend to continue without tabling a money resolution for an indeterminate period, irrespective of either of those two outcomes, or has she considered contingencies where she might—

The Chair: Order. I have been very lenient with the England fan in his interpretation of what is a very narrow sittings motion to change the time to 10 am. If it is agreed, we can pursue other matters in a debate on the Adjournment of the Committee, but the hon. Gentleman should narrow the scope of his remarks. It is not for the Minister to respond to the sittings motion that the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton has moved.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful for your guidance, Mr Owen. In that case, I will sit down in support of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton. I will leave those thoughts with the Minister to consider for next week's meeting, which may well be at 10 o'clock.

The Chair: I call David Linden, who I am sure will take a different tack.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Owen, for what I believe is the ninth sitting of "I'm in a Public Bill Committee, Get Me Out of Here". I do not want to detain the Committee for too long; I know there are various World cup fixtures for the rest of the day, so it would be disappointing if I sought to detain the Committee.

I want to reflect on events last night. I was struck that a number of right hon. and hon. Members were disappointed by the idea that votes and scrutiny were taking place during the supply and estimates process. I appreciate there was a football match on last night. I warmly congratulate England on a fantastic victory and wish them well in the quarter finals.

However, it strikes me as strange that right hon. and hon. Members, such as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean, turn up to the Committee and say that bringing forward a money resolution would commit to spending huge amounts of public money, yet we have this bizarre situation in the UK Parliament where we authorise the spending of hundreds of millions of pounds through the supply and estimates process, and the idea is that it goes through on the nod. What we are looking for here is a money resolution that amounts to, I believe, somewhere between £8 million and £12 million, and we have the absolute charade that this Committee—

The Chair: Order. That is very wide of the mark. The motion before us is very narrow. The debate is on the Question that we change the time in the sittings motion from 9.30 am to 10 am.

David Linden: Thank you, Mr Owen, I am grateful for your guidance. I have no problems meeting at 10 o'clock. I would be quite happy to meet at 9.30, 9.31, 9.32, 9.33, 9.34, 9.35, 9.36, 9.37, 9.38, 9.39, 9.40, 9.41, 9.42, 9.43, 9.44—

Christian Matheson: Does the hon. Gentleman have a preference for a starting time?

David Linden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am an early riser so my preference would be 6 am, 6.01, 6.02, 6.03, 6.04, 6.05, 6.06, 6.07, 6.08—

Afzal Khan: What is the hon. Gentleman's opinion of a 10 o'clock start?

David Linden: Ten o'clock is a serious amount of the way through the day for me. Obviously, if the majority of the Committee wishes to meet at 10 o'clock, I would not seek to hold that back.

As I say, I would be happy to meet earlier in the morning. I am an avid listener of "Good Morning Scotland" on BBC Radio Scotland. As long as I have sufficient time to listen to that, I would be happy to come to this Committee to meet hon. Friends. I do not want to test the patience of the Chair too much this morning, so I will say that I am very happy with 10 o'clock. If other Members wish to take a different tack and meet earlier, I would be amenable to that.

Question put and agreed to.

The Chair: As the Committee cannot consider the clauses of the Bill until the House has agreed a 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.

Question put and agreed to.

The Chair: The Committee will meet again next Wednesday at 10 am, not 10.01, Mr Linden.

9.44 am

Adjourned accordingly till Wednesday 11 June at Ten o'clock.

