

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Eleventh Sitting

Wednesday 18 July 2018

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Motion to adjourn considered.

Adjourned till Wednesday 5 September 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 22 July 2018

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:*Chairs:* MS NADINE DORRIES, †ALBERT OWEN

Allan, Lucy (*Telford*) (Con)
 Bone, Mr Peter (*Wellingborough*) (Con)
 Charalambous, Bambos (*Enfield, Southgate*) (Lab)
 Fletcher, Colleen (*Coventry North East*) (Lab)
 † Foster, Kevin (*Torbay*) (Con)
 † Harper, Mr Mark (*Forest of Dean*) (Con)
 † Khan, Afzal (*Manchester, Gorton*) (Lab)
 † Lee, Karen (*Lincoln*) (Lab)
 † Linden, David (*Glasgow East*) (SNP)
 † Matheson, Christian (*City of Chester*) (Lab)

Mills, Nigel (*Amber Valley*) (Con)
 † Norris, Alex (*Nottingham North*) (Lab/Co-op)
 Paisley, Ian (*North Antrim*) (DUP)
 † Smith, Chloe (*Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office*)
 Stewart, Bob (*Beckenham*) (Con)
 Wiggin, Bill (*North Herefordshire*) (Con)
 Kenneth Fox, Adam Mellows-Facer, *Committee Clerks*
 † **attended the Committee**

Public Bill Committee

Wednesday 18 July 2018

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

10 am

The Chair: Before we begin, I remind Members that electronic devices should be switched to silent and there should be no hot refreshments during the sitting.

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

I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on the birth of her baby. It was a pleasure and a great help to have her on the Committee. I wish her and her family health and happiness.

Last week, when the Minister did not turn up, I was a little worried. I thought, “Is it another resignation?” I am pleased to see her here, and I hope that we will be able to work constructively once the money resolution comes forward.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is fair to say that the Minister’s absence was one that frankly could have happened to any of us, and I do not think any blame attaches to her. Does my hon. Friend agree that after Labour wins the next general election and we have a nationalised, unified railway system, all the trains will run on time?

Afzal Khan: I agree with my hon. Friend on both points. I accept that what happened to the Minister could happen to any one of us. I was just expressing my worry about what might have happened. On his second point, of course we want to see the railway system working properly. I get many complaints from constituents about the mess-up of the timetable, so the sooner we get that sorted out, the better.

This is our last meeting before the summer recess. I am also coming to the end of my first year as a Member of Parliament. At that milestone, I have been reflecting on what I have done, what I have not quite achieved and what can be done better next year. One sticking point in my mind was my private Member’s Bill. I am disappointed and more than a bit frustrated that we have not made any progress on it. Despite repeated calls from both sides of the House, we have reached this milestone without a money resolution.

Who knew that I would spend my first year in Parliament arguing over such an obscure, and until now uncontroversial, aspect of parliamentary procedure? When I was first elected as an MP, I thought I would have the chance to make a real difference in this place. I

was under the impression that we have a democratic system of government, where the powers of the Executive are balanced with the powers of Back-Bench and Opposition Members to produce the best legislation we can collectively. Instead, I have been surprised and deeply concerned by the lack of transparency and accountability in the way this Government operate.

Before coming to Parliament, I was a member of Manchester City Council for many years, and served as a Member of the European Parliament. In all my time in those two elected positions, I did not encounter an Executive as overreaching and fuelled by weakness and indecision as this one.

In my first year as an MP, I have been astounded by the lack of Bills and substantial business in the House. We seem to have had endless general debates to fill time while the Government try to work out among themselves what they actually want to get done. As parliamentarians, we would all rather spend our time discussing legislation than adjourn early, as it was proposed the House should do this week and as the Committee will be forced to do today.

Before we adjourn for the final time before the recess, will the Minister tell us when the Government will publish the Boundary Commission’s final recommendations? Are we to expect to resume these time-wasting Committee meetings every Wednesday morning when we come back after the recess? Will the Government stop arguing among themselves long enough to bring forward a money resolution and allow the Committee to discuss the Bill, which has now spent 10 weeks in limbo?

I wish all Committee members a good recess.

The Chair: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I congratulate him on completing his first year as a Member, but we are not really interested in hearing what Members who have served for more than a year have done in Parliament up until today, so I ask them to refrain from telling us about that and concentrate on the motion to adjourn the Committee till 5 September.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I am grateful for your guidance, Mr Owen, but Members will be pleased to hear that I did not intend to take them through a 13-year whistle-stop tour of my parliamentary career, tempting though that is.

Let me make a few remarks very much connected to the motion to adjourn. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton on securing a private Member’s Bill slot in his first year in Parliament. Some of us have been here quite a long time and have never managed to get one, although, when I was a Minister, I spent a lot of Fridays here, generally explaining why people’s private Members’ Bills were not very well drafted or not a very good idea. However, the process is important, and he has carried the Bill to this point with great skill, so he should be pleased with that.

On the rather unfair contribution of the hon. Member for City of Chester about trains, I think I am right in saying that my hon. Friend the Minister was actually stuck on a tube train, which are of course run by Transport for London—a state-owned transport authority run by the Mayor of London. Therefore, any criticism—of course, Government Members did not criticise—should

sit squarely with the Labour Mayor of London for running a malfunctioning tube system. I would not make that point, but the hon. Gentleman was slightly unfair to the rail system. I say that only because I was provoked.

The more serious and substantive point, which is relevant to timing and therefore to the motion to adjourn, is about what happens next. I think I am right in saying—I have put this on the record previously—that the Boundary Commission for England has made it clear that it intends to send its report to the Leader of the House before we return in September so that she can lay it before Parliament during the September sitting. I confess that I do not know what the other three boundary commissions intend. Perhaps the hon. Member for Glasgow East can inform us.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am concerned about waiting on the Leader of the House to schedule this process. I declare an interest: I am expecting a daughter in the autumn. The Leader of the House promised that arrangements for proxy voting would be brought before Parliament, but she failed to do that. Last night, a major furore broke out because a pairing arrangement was broken. I therefore caution the right hon. Gentleman not to take too seriously the promises of the Leader of the House, who has not been great at bringing plans before the House.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman has made that point before. I think I am right in saying that the legislation that sets out how the Boundary Commission process works puts some pressure on the Government to bring forward proposals as soon as is practicable, so there is some legal force for doing that. I confess that I do not know what the other three boundary commissions will do, but certainly the Boundary Commission for England will produce its report in September, when we get back.

We will then know what the boundary commissions all recommend and, as I have said before, the Government have made it clear that they will look at those reports. They can then test the will of the House, and they have said that if Parliament takes the view—I hope it does not—that it does not want to proceed with what is set out in the boundary commissions' reports, they will reflect on whether to bring forward a money resolution for the Bill and on whether the Bill is the right vehicle to deal with that set of circumstances.

I recognise that this process has been frustrating for the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, but in terms of parliamentary weeks we actually do not have much longer to wait until we have the boundary commissions' substantive reports in front of us. Members of the public will think that is a long way off, because they will take into account the summer, but it is actually not many sitting days away, so I counsel him to be a little more patient. I look forward to seeing him when the Committee reconvenes on Wednesday 5 September, and I join him in wishing all Committee members and those here serving Her Majesty's Government a pleasant summer recess. I look forward to seeing everyone in September.

David Linden: It is, as ever, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood on the birth of

her son, Elijah. I commend the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, who has become a genuine friend since we were elected in June last year. The fact that he has had the patience to sit through this process is testament to his character. I very much hope we do not have to wait much longer.

We all saw the shenanigans play out last night, and we have all read in the press today that Government Whips threatened Conservative remainers—the rebels—with an early election, so we know that the Government possibly have an appetite to contest elections with the current boundaries and 650 seats. I therefore suggest that their current position is somewhat weak.

I come back to the idea of the private Member's Bill system being an absolute sham. I have an interest in this Bill because, I must confess, I am interested in parliamentary and constitutional reform. With the greatest respect to the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, one of the greatest difficulties I find about this place is that too often we indulge in navel gazing about it. It is sad that, although this Bill is very important in terms of the number of seats in this House and the wider issue of how we scrutinise legislation, it is not the only Bill for which a money resolution is being withheld. My hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) has a very good Bill—the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill—which is about how this country treats people who come from some of the most vulnerable parts of the world.

Afzal Khan: I want to ensure we are clear on this point. My position throughout has been that the Government should not withhold a money resolution from any private Member's Bill that has passed Second Reading. We fully support the refugees Bill.

David Linden: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I should clarify that that was definitely not a dig at the Labour party.

We come back to the central issue that we hear regularly, particularly from the Leader of the House, whose job is actually to stand up for the House in the Cabinet—I am not sure she always does that very well—about Parliament taking back control. The fundamental point is that last December, the House voted by a majority for this Bill on Second Reading. It authorised it to go into Committee, and the Committee of Selection set up this Public Bill Committee and commanded us, as Members of the House, to scrutinise the legislation line by line and clause by clause. It is not a very lengthy Bill. I daresay that if we had the money resolution, although some of us in this Room like to talk at length, we could probably consider this Bill clause by clause and line by line in one or two sittings at the most. It seems a waste of time. There are civil servants here, and it strikes me that it is a huge waste of their time, too, for us to go through this charade every single Wednesday morning. We turn up here and know that we are not going to make progress. It is disrespectful to the civil servants.

Mr Harper: I just want to pick up the point about Parliament taking back control and the democratic point. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, on 19 June, the Labour party tabled a motion asking the

[Mr Harper]

House whether we should debate the content of the Bill, notwithstanding the fact that there is not a money resolution. The House gave its clear view that we should not do that until there is a money resolution. The House was asked that question and it gave a very clear answer, by a majority of 15, that we should not proceed until there is a money resolution. That is indeed Parliament taking back control.

David Linden: Well, I recall that, on that day, the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) said that he favoured the Bill in principle, but he voted with the Government because of a technicality relating to how the motion was drafted. Although the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean is absolutely correct that the motion was defeated during Labour's Opposition day debate, the main issue is that there is a clear majority in the House to retain 650 seats. I reckon that, if the question was put to hon. Members in a simple motion that says, "This House believes that there should be 650 seats in the House", the right hon. Gentleman would find that there is a majority in the House for that. I would be very happy if that motion was brought forward. I would certainly be able to vote for it myself.

Tempted though I am to talk about my first year in Parliament—I was having a quick look in my diary, and it has been a very busy year indeed—I will spare the Committee this morning. I hope that, by the time we come back in September, the warm Prosecco and all the shenanigans of the Conservative party might have died down, although I do not hold my breath. Perhaps when we come back in September, Her Majesty's Government will treat this Committee and the House with respect.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I start by apologising—I have been to see the parliamentary nurse; I am absolutely deaf in one ear.

As someone who has come from a constituency, I find it incredible that I come here every Wednesday morning and nothing happens. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is absolutely disrespectful. I have told people back in Lincoln about it: I am sorry, but it is wrong and it shows contempt for parliamentary procedure.

10.15 am

David Linden: The hon. Lady makes a very valid point. We have had 11 or 12 sittings of the Committee and, although it has been enjoyable, it is sad. When all the Parliamentary Private Secretaries were resigning, I thought my friend the hon. Member for Torbay would have the courage to do that, but he is hanging on. At this rate, he might end up as Prime Minister, being the only one left in the Government. We will hold out in that hope.

In all seriousness, we have reached a point in this Parliament where things are clearly fractured and the Government are very fragile. We will see what state they come back in after the summer. I would not rule out that we might be going back to the country.

Mr Harper: Without wishing to embarrass my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay, people need to understand that the only thing that keeps him as a Parliamentary

Private Secretary is the thought of being able to come to this Committee every Wednesday. This Committee and the colleagues in Committee keep him serving in Her Majesty's Government. We are all doing our bit to keep him here.

David Linden: The right hon. Gentleman has got that spot on. I made this point last week, but I have to repeat it. Although people generally say only two things in life are certain, death and taxes, in a Parliament where everything is falling about us, in my view the only two things in life that are certain are that the Committee will meet on a Wednesday and that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will take part in Adjournment debates.

It has been very nice spending this time on a Wednesday morning in Committee, and I have thoroughly enjoyed it, but we are all paid close to £80,000 a year to be legislators and to scrutinise legislation. We can come here to spend three, four, five or six minutes making funny speeches and having a bit of a laugh with each other but, fundamentally, we are all legislators—let us start behaving like them.

The Chair: Does the Minister wish to respond?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): No.

The Chair: Then I call Chris Matheson.

Christian Matheson: Thank you, Mr Owen. It is a great pleasure to follow my good friend the hon. Member for Glasgow East, who taught me something I did not know: the Government have failed to table a money resolution for another private Member's Bill, one in the name of the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

Will you indulge me a moment, Mr Owen, so that I may make a quick statement to correct the record? It is relevant to the Bill.

The Chair: If you can frame it in the context of the Adjournment debate.

Christian Matheson: Indeed. This being the Adjournment of the last sitting before recess, I want to correct something that I said in the debate on the motion that the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean mentioned. I said in that debate that, when the Government introduced individual electoral registration, 2 million voters fell off the register. The Minister suggested that I check the figures. I have done—I am very grateful for her guidance—and 600,000 voters fell off the register according to the figures I used. I got the 2 million figure because in the next year, 2 million extra voters were added to the register for subsequent elections. I am happy to correct the figure that I gave.

That correction amplifies the problem that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton, seeks to correct with the Bill, which is that the boundary changes that are currently being considered will be based on seriously flawed electoral data. That is one reason why

we need to crack on with the Bill: to address the very problem that I mentioned, albeit with slightly confused figures.

I pay tribute to the Minister, who has stoically held the Government's line. The Opposition have sometimes found her contributions frustrating, but she has had a job to do and she has done it with tenacity. She has got to where she needed to get to, which was for the Bill to reach the summer recess without being discussed. In the next two or three parliamentary weeks there is the chance, as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said, for the House to make a decision on new, revised, and I believe, probably flawed proposals—flawed because the basis on which they were drawn up was flawed.

Notwithstanding that, the Minister still has to indicate what the Government's position on the Bill will be. Whether or not the House accepts the new boundary proposals in September, the Bill will remain on the Order Paper. At some point, the Government will have to table a money resolution. The alternative is that they do not table one and allow us to continue meeting in perpetuity, or at least until the end of this Parliament, in the absurd circumstances described by the hon. Member for Glasgow East.

At some point, a decision will have to be taken on the Bill. I suspect that since the Government cannot kill off the Bill in Committee, they will have to move a money resolution and seek to have the Bill dismissed on Third

Reading. The Government will still have to table a money resolution, irrespective of the results of the vote in the House in September. If the Minister does not wish to contribute today, I hope that she will take away with her on recess the thought that we cannot continue to meet in perpetuity on Wednesday mornings and not make a decision to proceed. At some point, something will have to give, and it will not give simply because we pass—or do not pass—the Boundary Commission's proposals in September.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton. I think the Committee knows that he and I have been friends outside this place for many years, and it has been a great pleasure to sit with him and other hon. Friends. It has been a pleasure to see other hon. Members, particularly the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean, who is an esteemed colleague on the Government Benches.

We will be back in September. If I may speak on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton, I think it is fair to say that we will be back for as long as it takes to get the Bill through Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

10.22 am

Adjourned accordingly till Wednesday 5 September at 10 o'clock.

