

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Eighteenth Sitting

Wednesday 14 November 2018

CONTENTS

Motion to adjourn considered.
Adjourned till Wednesday 21 November 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 18 November 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)	Gail Poulton, <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 14 November 2018

[ALBERT OWEN *in the Chair*]

Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill

10 am

The Chair: The usual rules apply to hot drinks and electronic devices. I remind the Committee that it cannot consider the clauses of the Bill until the House has agreed a money resolution. I therefore 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.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. Last week saw the United States mid-term elections and what I believe should serve as a dark warning about the path on which the UK Government are currently embarking. I was shocked to watch the campaign and the results unfold as the extent of political meddling and voter suppression came to light. That was clearest in Georgia, where the Republican candidate, Brian Kemp, was also the Secretary of State, overseeing the election. He pulled out all the stops to suppress the votes for his opponent, including purging the voter rolls, putting 53,000 voters—

The Chair: Order. I have to tell the hon. Gentleman to come to the subject of the adjournment of this Bill Committee and not give a history lesson about the US mid-term elections. I appreciate that there is interest in that subject, but it is not one for this Bill Committee.

Afzal Khan: Thank you, Mr Owen. I am trying to make a link to the adjournment of this Committee. The sort of behaviour that I have described also went on in a number of other states in America. Why is that important? Because I believe that the actions of the UK Government are taking place in the shadow of the abhorrent moves to suppress the vote in the USA. It is widely accepted that the UK is influenced by the rhetoric and policy shifts in America. The UK Government are rolling out voter ID laws and, now, a boundary review that disfranchises 2 million voters. Our democracy has a proud tradition of fairness and independence, which must be protected. We could make real progress in these sittings with a cross-party approach to a fundamental part of our democracy.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the amount of talk about how short of money and resources this country is and everything being cut, the fact that hon. Members' time, which is a valuable resource, is being wasted in this way is absolutely scandalous?

Afzal Khan: I could not agree more. This is a waste of our time and the public's money. We could make real progress by taking a cross-party approach to a fundamental part of our democracy, but instead we are left debating procedure.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): As ever, it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I found myself coming here on a morning when, although

this place is obviously very volatile at the best of times, in the past 24 hours, it has been even more volatile. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton is right, and his point was backed up by the hon. Member for Lincoln: this whole exercise is entirely futile. When considering the amount of pressure that will exist in this place over the next 24 hours, few people would conclude that having another general election on the current boundaries before Parliament prorogues in April was unlikely; I think that it is probably very likely. We therefore come back to the central question about the boundaries that we want and what they should reflect. The boundaries of my constituency were put in place when I was 11 years old. I do not think that anyone here believes that constituency boundaries do not need to be looked at again. However, the fundamental question is whether to reduce the number of constituencies from 650 to 600, and I rather suspect that very soon we will be going to the country on the basis of 650.

The Chair: I just remind the Committee that the boundaries of my constituency were set in 1546.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, and it is always a great pleasure to receive historical instruction from you, notwithstanding that you are here today in your capacity as Chair and not as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn, although I am reminded of many happy childhood holidays in your beautiful constituency.

I rise to speak once again in support of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton. My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln talked about a waste of time. Of course, it is a waste of time not just for the Committee, but for the Minister and her officials. Obviously, we do not talk directly about officials, but it would be better if the Minister and her team spent their time drafting the orders, which we have been told are particularly complicated, rather than wasting time in this Committee.

Of course, among all the noise, the heat, the clamour and the frenzy of Brexit—it is getting more frenzied by the hour, it would seem—the main development this week was the announcement by the Leader of the House that there would be some extra sitting Fridays. That gives the Back Benchers whose Bills are in the process an extra opportunity to secure their passage through this House—notwithstanding the advice, which I always welcome, from the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean, who is not in his place today, that Bills such as this one might ordinarily be taken on the Floor of the Chamber in a Committee of the whole House.

The interesting thing in relation to the Bill about the Leader of the House's announcement is that it throws a spotlight on the fact that originally, when the Government decided that this Session would be not one year, but two, and thus extended its length, they did not at the same time double the number of sitting Fridays, when private Members' Bills are considered. That essentially meant we would have only half the number of sitting Fridays.

I am mindful of the fact that you are keen that we stay on topic, Mr Owen, but I make this point because it shines a light on the Government's tactics in closing down, using not argument or debate, but procedural

chicanery, any opportunities that hon. Members of all parties and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton might have to progress a private Member's Bill.

By closing down the number of sitting Fridays, the Government are halving the opportunities for hon. Members to take forward debate. If it was a one-off that the Government had not moved the financial resolution for this particular Bill, that would be bad enough. However, because it is part of a pattern that includes halving the number of sitting Fridays and then realising later that in order to get some of their more favoured Bills through they have to add a couple extra, it puts the Government in an unfortunate light, as one who use procedural chicanery rather than debate, discussion and a democratic vote to close down proposed legislation that they do not like.

It is becoming more apparent by the week that this Government do not have confidence in their ability to see their legislative programme through the House and are using whatever procedural means necessary to prevent legislation they do not like. As I say, this is unfortunately part of a pattern, and that is why it is with regret that we must now move to the adjournment of this Committee yet again; but we shall be here again at the same time next week.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Once again we find ourselves here, adjourning for what I think is the 17th or 18th time—I cannot remember how many. We will soon reach the one-year anniversary of this Bill's Second Reading. I know that because it passed on the day before my birthday.

In that time, very little has happened to progress this Bill. We were told initially to wait for the Boundary Commission to report. It has reported. We are now told that we are waiting for the civil servants to draft the orders required for the vote to happen in the House, and again that has not been forthcoming. I have had my private Member's Bill drafted from scratch in that time,

so if Ministers and civil servants need help, I suggest they ask the Public Bill Office or other parts of the House to assist them, if that is what is causing the delay.

My constituents are aware that the Boundary Commission has reported. They are in great uncertainty. They ask me what is going on, and all I can say to them is that once again we are adjourning and we have no idea when the Bill will progress, whether there will be a vote and whether it will progress at all. This morning, I had a conversation with a former Cabinet Minister of this Government; she seemed quite surprised that we were still adjourning and had not resolved the matter.

All I ask is that the Minister does whatever she can to progress this Bill. There is great uncertainty; people are concerned about the fact that it is not making progress. My council is doing a boundary review of its wards now, so all that is changing and pushing it further away. It makes nonsense of our voting—or not voting—on legislation that looked at the electorate in 2015 and at boundaries that may no longer exist. For that reason, great speed is needed to progress this. I urge the Minister to do all she can to make sure that the Bill progresses, otherwise we could vote on what came forward previously from the Boundary Commission.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I simply want to pass comment on the starting point of the Bill's promoter, the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton. I make no comment on the United States's politics or conduct, but in relation to the United Kingdom he made some quite unfounded insinuations about gerrymandering and voter suppression, which is, frankly, quite offensive, let alone ridiculous. That has nothing to do with the way that we conduct either our elections here, nor our independent boundary reviews, which are the subject of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

10.11 am

Adjourned till Wednesday 21 November at Ten o'clock.

