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GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES BILL

Seventh Sitting

Tuesday 30 June 2020

(Morning)

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CLAUSES 6 TO 11 agreed to.
SCHEDULE agreed to, with an amendment.
Adjourned till this day at Two 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

Saturday 4 July 2020

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chairs: SIR DAVID AMESS, † IAN PAISLEY

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| † Afolami, Bim (<i>Hitchin and Harpenden</i>) (Con) | † Miller, Mrs Maria (<i>Basingstoke</i>) (Con) |
| † Bailey, Shaun (<i>West Bromwich West</i>) (Con) | † Mohindra, Mr Gagan (<i>South West Hertfordshire</i>) (Con) |
| † Clarkson, Chris (<i>Heywood and Middleton</i>) (Con) | † Shelbrooke, Alec (<i>Elmet and Rothwell</i>) (Con) |
| Efford, Clive (<i>Eltham</i>) (Lab) | † Smith, Cat (<i>Lancaster and Fleetwood</i>) (Lab) |
| † Farris, Laura (<i>Newbury</i>) (Con) | † Smith, Chloe (<i>Minister of State, Cabinet Office</i>) |
| † Fletcher, Colleen (<i>Coventry North East</i>) (Lab) | † Spellar, John (<i>Warley</i>) (Lab) |
| † Hughes, Eddie (<i>Walsall North</i>) (Con) | |
| † Hunt, Jane (<i>Loughborough</i>) (Con) | |
| † Lake, Ben (<i>Ceredigion</i>) (PC) | Sarah Thatcher, Rob Page, <i>Committee Clerks</i> |
| † Linden, David (<i>Glasgow East</i>) (SNP) | |
| † Matheson, Christian (<i>City of Chester</i>) (Lab) | † attended the Committee |

Public Bill Committee

Tuesday 30 June 2020

(Morning)

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

Parliamentary Constituencies Bill

9.25 am

The Chair: Good morning. You are all very welcome. Before we resume consideration of the Bill, I have a few preliminary points to which I always like to draw hon. Members' attention. Of course, the important one is that we must respect social distancing guidance. I will intervene to remind everyone if necessary—if we get too familiar. I remind Members to switch their electronic devices off or to silent mode. Of course, you want to bring in refreshments. I do allow that, given the detailed scrutiny that we are undertaking. I also remind colleagues that *Hansard* would be very grateful if Members emailed their speaking notes to the *Hansard* team.

The selection list for today's sittings is in front of you. Members may wish to take a copy; it is available in the room. It shows how the selected amendments have been grouped for debate. Grouped amendments are generally the same or similar. Please note that decisions on amendments take place not in the order in which they are debated, but in the order in which they appear on the amendment paper. The selection and grouping list shows the order of debates. Decisions on each amendment are taken when we come to the clause that the amendment affects.

Clause 6

TAKING ACCOUNT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARIES

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I beg to move amendment 1, in clause 6, page 4, line 37, at end insert—

“(2A) In rule 5(1)(d) (list of factors), after “local” insert “and linguistic”.”

This amendment would enable a Boundary Commission to take into account, if and to the extent that they think fit, the effect of boundary change on linguistic ties as well as local ties.

It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. It is also a pleasure to kick off this morning's proceedings by speaking to my amendment 1, which hon. Members will have noticed is designed to probe the Government and provoke a debate on the nature of local ties, what “local ties” might mean, and, particularly with relevance to Wales but not just to Wales, linguistic ties. I will confine my remarks to the Welsh language, although I acknowledge that there are other languages within the United Kingdom to which some of the points I will make may be just as relevant. As I said, this is a probing amendment that I hope will spark some sort of debate.

The amendment would enable the Boundary Commission for Wales to take into account, if and to the extent that it thought fit, the effect of boundary change on linguistic ties, as well as local ties, when considering boundaries. We heard on 18 June, in the first evidence session, from

Shereen Williams of the Boundary Commission for Wales. In answer to a question about local ties, Ms Williams mentioned that the commission in Wales looked at electoral wards and communities that are linked through joint programmes and projects. She went on to say:

“Also, quite uniquely, in Wales...is the Welsh language. We take it into account that you have constituencies where there are lots of links to the Welsh language. That is something we would like to keep together.”—[*Official Report, Parliamentary Constituencies Public Bill Committee*, 18 June 2020; c. 20, Q37.]

My concern, in tabling the amendment, was not that the Boundary Commission for Wales takes no notice of the Welsh language and the links that communities have in certain parts of Wales—far from it. I know from past experience that the commission has been very receptive, and not just in the way in which it consults communities on proposed new boundaries; it has also taken into account, in submissions on certain proposals, what the impact of those might be on the Welsh language and the community. Rather, my concern is how the Welsh language, and indeed the local ties, will be catered for in future developments.

I know that later, when considering another part of the Bill, we will discuss the fact that Wales in particular stands to lose quite a number of seats, which has consequences for the commission's work in redrawing the electoral map of Wales. It may be difficult for the commission to cater to all the different ties that fall under the statutory rule. In response to the next question, Ms Williams from the Boundary Commission for Wales said that

“it will be just as complex as the previous reviews, because we are losing quite a lot of seats.”—[*Official Report, Parliamentary Constituencies Public Bill Committee*, 18 June 2020; c. 20, Q38.]

She was referring, of course, to the change to 650 as opposed to 600. We also know that demographics and the relatively slower rate of growth in the Welsh population will mean that we will probably stand to lose further seats in subsequent boundary reviews. I am quite concerned about how the commission goes about its work to try to incorporate all the different local ties, including the Welsh language and linguistic links.

If Members needed to be convinced any further about the importance of the Welsh language in Wales, in our afternoon evidence session on 23 June, in response to a question from the Minister, Dr Larnier said:

“There is a lot of very well-backed-up evidence in Wales that Welsh speakers, particularly fluent, first language Welsh speakers, tend to hold slightly different opinions on a whole range of ideas...I would absolutely say that the ability to speak Welsh is a really important part of some people's identity.”—[*Official Report, Parliamentary Constituencies Public Bill Committee*, 23 June 2020; c. 128, Q245.]

I suppose that gets to the nub of the issue that I want to probe today: how does the “local ties” rule really capture the extent of the different elements that could constitute identity for some of our communities? I appreciate that identity is not something that we could ever capture perfectly, as it is very subjective. Rather, I am probing into whether under the statutory rules we can ensure that the importance and prevalence of linguistic ties, particularly in Wales, are maintained in future reviews.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): With regard to linguistic ties, how does the hon. Gentleman see dialect as being included within that—not so much

the separate languages, but the separate ways and methods of communication and separate vocabulary, as seen in dialects?

Ben Lake: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that point. The debate about dialect is very interesting, and could certainly spark quite a bit of interest in Wales. He might be aware that northerners, or gogs as we call them in Wales, hold quite proudly that their Welsh is somehow superior to that of us mere mortals in the south. Of course, I am a west Walian, so I am better than both. However, he makes a good point on the distinction between dialect and language.

For the purposes of linguistic ties in Wales, I think it would be only fair for the Boundary Commission for Wales to consider the language as a whole. It would be unfair, and perhaps impossible, to draw the commission into adjudicating which dialect is more important. People feel quite passionately about whether they speak north Welsh, south Welsh, or west Walian as I do.

It is a good point, perhaps, for other languages. I do not want to interfere in the war of the roses that we had last week between Yorkshire and Lancaster, but people feel quite strongly about their dialects and accents. I would not be opposed to that being captured by the “local ties” considerations as the boundary commissions do some of their work in different regions. That would be a perfectly appropriate consideration for them to make. In Wales, I would not want the commission to have to tie too closely to the different dialects, but certainly the language itself is something that I want it to hold true to.

I reiterate that my remarks are not a criticism in any way of the Boundary Commission for Wales, which does incredible work. I fear that subsequent boundary reviews will be of greater complexity due to there being fewer seats, but the commission’s operation is compliant with Welsh language standards, and I know that it does a lot of work to ensure that it works as bilingually as possible, both in terms of its day-to-day administrative operation and when it consults with different communities. That is so important, especially when consulting with Welsh language communities.

I should mention that the naming of constituencies is not an issue for anybody to be concerned about. I am quite relaxed about that. We have two wonderful languages in Wales and we are very fortunate in that regard. I am happy that the names are bilingual; if anything, it is a bonus and a win-win situation. It is not a matter of the naming of constituencies, although I know there was quite a bit of work on that in the commission’s previous review.

My final point is that in subsequent reviews we may find that there are a greater number of Welsh speakers in the first place. I am happy that there has been progress in recent years in encouraging more people in Wales to be bilingual. This may well be a fear we need not address in the future, but at the moment it would be good to know how the different considerations that we can capture under local ties are prioritised, whether there is a hierarchy and how that works. In future reviews, if Wales has a smaller number of seats to divide the electorate, I would be concerned that the Welsh language may be a secondary or tertiary consideration, and would be relegated in that sense. Naturally, I would oppose that.

Can the Minister say how the Welsh language will be treated in future reviews, especially when the task of allocating seats within Wales will be far more complicated? I would be grateful. Diolch, Mr Paisley.

The Chair: Before I call the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), I remind Members that Tony Bellringer submitted a paper late last night. You should have an electronic copy of that. There are no hard copies, but there is an electronic copy.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Paisley, in a much cooler room.

I commend the hon. Member for Ceredigion on his amendment. He has made an extremely strong case for the importance of recognising language. I know how important the Welsh language is. I was brought up in south Wales, albeit not west Wales, and we all have views on the parts of Wales we know and love well. Now, more than when I was at school, Welsh is a living language. I commend everybody who has made that possible.

Within the rules that are already set out in schedule 2 to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986, “local ties” can take account of language. Indeed, in the hon. Gentleman’s own advocacy for his amendment, he set out clearly that the boundary commission is already receptive to arguments made with regard to the Welsh language and it has already been shown that Welsh can be taken into account in the local ties.

The reason I have chosen to speak to this amendment is that I want to share with the Committee a way that we might think about this. There are lots of different ties that can be called local ties, including language. My concern about specifying language on the face of the Bill would be the impact that that might inadvertently have on other local ties. By having language on the face of the Bill, it might imply that other local ties that are not specified in that way may not be taken into account, or not be treated as well as they might have been in the past.

I understand the hon. Gentleman’s argument and why he wants to put it forward, but my concern is that that might inadvertently affect the way the boundary commission views other local ties. I hope that the Minister, while listening to the point, will see that the Government should not accept the amendment at this point.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I rise to support the arguments made by the hon. Member for Ceredigion about the ties that are the Welsh language. I do not think it is possible to overstate the fact that the Welsh language is a cornerstone of Welsh identity. Although in the past we have seen a decline in the Welsh language, that is now reversing with the Welsh Government’s target of 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050. The hon. Gentleman’s arguments may one day become quite irrelevant if Wales is entirely full of Welsh speakers.

We have previously referred to the Council of Europe’s Venice commission, which recommends that boundaries be drawn

“without detriment to national minorities”.

[Cat Smith]

Welsh language speakers are a national minority who require protection within this legislation. Welsh language ties are an important part of identity, and I would like the Minister to provide some clarity about the use of the Welsh language as a factor in the commission's decisions. Language is an indicator of local ties. Although I do not speak Welsh myself—*dwi ddim yn gallu siarad Cymraeg*—and my life is probably all the poorer for it, I recognise the importance of the Welsh language to the Welsh identity, as does the Labour party. I therefore congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion on having tabled this amendment.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion on having tabled this probing amendment, because our whole debate about clause 6 has emphasised the point about local ties and local communities. We must use this Committee to emphasise to the boundary commissions that although we do not necessarily need to legislate—the hon. Member for Ceredigion presented this amendment as a probing amendment, to spark that debate—we are discussing a very important section of this Bill, as I said last week, and it is incumbent on the boundary commissions to take notice of what has been said.

Rule 5 in the 1986 Act is exceptionally important. One can only draw on one's local experience, so I come back to Leeds, because that is my area; it is where I live in Yorkshire, but there is a world of difference between inner Leeds and outer Leeds. The communities are very different. I have made reference to the long-serving previous Member for Leeds East, George Mudie, who was horrified at the thought of such different communities coming into an area that he had represented for so long. I hope that when the boundary commissions do the reviews, they take real notice of the debates about clause 6. Intelligent and sensible points have been made by Committee members on both sides of the Committee during this debate, which should act as the key guidance. Rather than us putting things on the face of the Bill, the commissions should consider the over-driving will and well-thought-out arguments in all the areas we have debated.

Again, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having tabled a thought-provoking and important probing amendment to this Bill, because it is important that we probe all of its aspects. Everything that has been said during this debate—even on the comical side, such as the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, on the other side of the Pennines, and I joshing last week about the wars of the roses—shows the importance of local identities and how they are put together. That is a very important aspect, and I hope the boundary commissions will take notice of it when they are drawing up their first draft.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab) *rose*—

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con) *rose*—

The Chair: We now have a brace of speakers. I remind Members that they should confine their comments to amendment 1 proposed to clause 6, as there will be an opportunity to speak on clause stand part.

Christian Matheson: It is a great pleasure to see you in the chair again, Mr Paisley. I will speak very briefly, reflecting on the contributions made by right hon. and hon. Members.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell: this is a thoughtful and thought-provoking amendment. Somebody with my own experience would not necessarily have thought of it, but I am now giving it great consideration. However, having listened to hon. Members from both sides of the Committee, my concern is that although we can discuss what is important and what we want the boundary commissions to regard as important factors when deciding boundaries, none of them is relevant as long as we have such a tight variance—5%—around the quota that trumps everything else. The Committee has already considered this. Something as important as language and identity, which the hon. Member for Ceredigion has spoken about, simply will not get a look in because nothing else matters. I ask the Committee to bear that in mind.

I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman intends to press his amendment to a vote—we will wait and see what his decision is on that—but I ask hon. Members to think about that as we progress through consideration both of the amendment and of the rest of the Bill. Members on both sides of the Committee talk about the importance of community, of identity and of keeping together communities that share common interests, but unfortunately none of that will make a difference when the commissioners come to do their work, because of the very tight variance that we are asking them to use, which is the only consideration in the Bill.

9.45 am

Whether or not the hon. Gentleman presses his amendment to a vote, having provoked me and other hon. Members to think about those forms of identity and community, which I am certainly for, I hope that we will give those matters real thought and consideration and not shackle our hands and those of the commissioners when they are doing their work.

Shaun Bailey: It is great to see you in the Chair again, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion for his probing amendment. I am a something of a fledgling Welsh speaker and taught myself in his constituency. *Ydw, 'dwi'n gallu siarad Cymraeg—ddim yn rhugl, ond yn iawn. Diolch yn fawr iawn. {Translation: Yes, I can speak Welsh—not fluently, but okay. Thank you very much.}*

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke made a really pertinent point—my one concern is that the amendment could better limit how it define local ties—but the hon. Gentleman makes some really good points about language. Unless someone has been there and experienced a language in a community, they can never fully appreciate it, particularly in Wales. I speak of Wales because in my experience, the language, the community and the identity are so fundamentally ingrained there, meaning that the level of conversation and the way it flows is totally different depending on whether it is in Welsh or in English. That needs to be experienced as a Welsh speaker.

As many hon. Members have said, this is a really interesting probing amendment and it is great that the hon. Gentleman has tabled it so we can think about that. Hopefully, reaching 1 million Welsh speakers,

which I think is an absolutely vital goal set by the Welsh Government and one with which I agree, will change the dynamic. I was pleased to hear in our evidence sessions about how the Boundary Commission for Wales takes language into account, which we saw in the proposals for the joined-up constituency of Ceredigion and Machynlleth in the aborted review; language played some role in drawing that boundary.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we cannot forget linguistic considerations. However, as my right hon. Friend for Basingstoke said, we need to be really careful not to constrain ourselves, so I cannot support his absolutely fantastic amendment, which I hope the Minister will consider carefully none the less.

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I echo right hon. and hon. Members in welcoming this debate and the very thoughtful way in which the hon. Member for Ceredigion has proposed his amendment. It is important that we look at those issues, and he has given us great food for thought in the way that he has presented the topic.

That said, I will argue that the proposal should not form part of the Bill, and will do so on the basis of a point that we have covered a number of times in our deliberations so far, which is that we ought to retain the framework of factors in the schedule to the Bill at a relatively high level, thereby giving flexibility to the boundary commissioners rather than being any more specific. To be clear, we are talking about the list of factors in a specific paragraph of the schedule to the Bill. As the Committee will be aware, any boundary commission may take those factors into account when making recommendations if, and to the extent that, it sees fit. Those factors already include any local ties that would be broken by changes in constituencies.

I will make just one other preliminary point before I go on to how the boundary commissions have already been able to accommodate the importance of the Welsh language. It is that the amendment would have to apply to all the boundary commissions. The nature of putting something into these factors is that it would have to apply across the United Kingdom. Hon. Members might question whether that would be appropriate for the other boundary commissions to the extent that the hon. Gentleman has argued it is appropriate for Wales. There are some questions there. For example—Mr Paisley, I hope you do not mind me saying so—it is obvious that in Northern Ireland this would be quite a particular argument to put in the context of language and culture, which would have different effects from those in Wales, Scotland or England. For that reason alone, I hesitate to accept this amendment.

That said, the Welsh language is very important. It is an official UK language and one of the great inheritances of our Union, which we all have a responsibility to protect and develop. It is a manifesto commitment of this Government to support the ambition for 1 million people in Wales to be able to speak Welsh by 2050 and I am delighted that there are some in the Black Country as well, as demonstrated by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West. The UK Government are working closely with our counterparts in Cardiff on that commitment. I am pleased to say that 11 UK Government Departments have implemented their own Welsh language schemes, too.

In 2017, the Boundary Commission for Wales voluntarily adopted the Welsh language standards that became applicable to its sister organisation, the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales. It reports annually on how it has delivered against the Welsh language standards. The most recent report outlined that the Boundary Commission for Wales had implemented a language preference system for all correspondence with the public and confirmed that it published all online and offline material bilingually at the same time.

A critical part of the commission's work is its extensive public consultation. We have touched on this in other parts of the debate. Equal status is given to Welsh and English throughout these consultations. I think that is very important, because it allows people to be able to advocate for their views in whichever language they are most comfortable with.

As the hon. Member for Ceredigion set out, the Boundary Commission for Wales already seriously considers Welsh language issues and links under the "local ties" factor. At the 2018 review, the boundary commission moved to designating all constituencies in Wales with English and Welsh names, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. I can give some examples for the benefit of the Committee of how the boundary commission takes account of language.

During the 2018 review, a report by the assistant commissioners into the proposed constituency of Gwynedd noted that there was strong support for including four particular electoral wards in that constituency,

"because of the strong Welsh language, social and economic ties between that area and Gwynedd."

[*Interruption.*] Did my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke wish to intervene?

Mrs Miller: No, I just cleared my throat.

Chloe Smith: It was so emphatic that I thought it was another marvellous point coming from my right hon. Friend. Let me meet that noise of approval with another example from the 2018 review about naming constituencies. The commission initially proposed naming two constituencies in alphabetical order: "Colwyn and Conwy" and "Flint and Rhuddlan". However, the order of these names was reversed in the final recommendations after the commission received advice about

"a Welsh language convention of naming geographic place names from north to south and from west to east."

I make no comments about the merits of north, south, west or east Wales. The hon. Member for Ceredigion has already done that very capably. I should also note that the Boundary Commission for Wales raises the issue of Welsh language links in the meetings and briefings with the various political parties at the start of any boundary review, and it is open to the parties and members of the public to raise Welsh language links in the extensive consultation carried out during a review.

I hope that I have provided reassurance that the law as drafted already gives the boundary commissions—in this case the Boundary Commission for Wales—all they need to take account of languages and how they contribute to local ties. This is a pressing case in Wales. I hope the examples I have given show that that is already happening in action. On that basis alone, I suggest that the amendment should not be accepted.

[Chloe Smith]

However, I will advance one other, perhaps darker and more serious argument than the one the hon. Member for Ceredigion intended, and I certainly do not cast aspersions on him for making those points. I want to highlight a slippery slope that could occur with such an argument. It is right that the legislation does not set out characteristics of people, but sets out characteristics of place. There is an important moral dimension to that. It is easy to foresee a slippery slope, whereby other characteristics of people could be argued for in terms of how constituencies ought to be drawn. Although we have not given him much time yet in our debates, we could think back to Governor Elbridge Gerry in 1812 in Boston who did that. Of course he gave his name to the term “gerrymander”, because he created a constituency that looked like a salamander that had the characteristics of people that he wanted to be seen in one constituency. We should be cautious about the idea of opening up to placing people together because they have a certain characteristic, as opposed to local ties of place, which perhaps give a more respectable way to look at community. I am conscious that the hon. Gentleman certainly did not go that far in making his argument, and I would not want to say that he had done so. I am grateful to him for his thoughtful presentation of the issues, but I hope that the set of arguments I have put both demonstrate how the language is rightly taken into account, and show some of the dangers of going further with the amendment. I urge the hon. Gentleman to withdraw it.

Ben Lake: I will keep my remarks brief. As I set out earlier, amendment 1 was a probing amendment and I am pleased with the debate we have had. We have not only highlighted the importance of the language in Wales, but had a bit of a discussion about what constitutes local ties, and how we might try to balance them out. I agree with the Minister that the Boundary Commission for Wales has done sterling work in the conservation of the language and in adopting the Welsh language standards voluntarily. I know from experience in my own part of the world that in the proposed boundary change of 2018—or even before that; I have lost track—the Welsh language was a key consideration that informed the final recommendation. In no way did I try to criticise the work of the boundary commission in tabling the amendment. The boundary commission does very good work. My concern relates to how local ties are balanced in the future, but I accept the point about not only the appropriateness of having the language on the face of the Bill, but the possible unintended consequences for the boundary commissions. With that in mind, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Chloe Smith: I managed to give some of the principal arguments for clause stand part earlier, so I will not detain the Committee long. If hon. Members can bear to think back to what was said, I explained why clause 6 was important in allowing a fixed picture of local government boundaries to be taken into account, and explained the necessity of fixing that point in time. I also explained the rationale for our inclusion of prospective

changes in the Bill. Having heard no further questions or comments on any of those points, I hope that the clause will stand part of the Bill.

10 am

Mrs Miller: This will probably be a slightly longer speech than I would have hoped given the note that we received from the boundary commission last night. Now might be a relevant point to discuss the content of that note, although it will not necessarily be easy given that we have had it for such a short period. The reason why it is relevant to discuss it at this point is that clause 6 refers to the rules to achieve the overall objective in the Bill, which is to create constituencies of equal size, and those rules are set out in schedule 2 of the 1986 Act. Therefore, in this stand part debate I would like to talk about three different points so that the Minister might be able to respond and so that they are on the record for the boundary commission to understand the importance of these things to getting this right.

The first point is the content of the boundary commission’s note, which will help us create equal-sized constituencies by looking at sub-ward level. The second point is about protected constituencies, which I know we will come on to when we consider my string of amendments to the schedule, but I will briefly touch on it. The third point is how we take into account future growth, which I raised in an evidence session, but it was interesting that nobody really answered the question, so I am going to raise it again for the Minister to perhaps respond to.

Looking at the first issue, the number of electorates per constituency at sub-ward level, I put on record my thanks—and I am sure the thanks of the whole Committee—to Mr Bellringer of the Boundary Commission for England and his team for the note of 29 June and such a rapid response to the issues raised when he gave evidence. The lengthy note we received uncovers that we have hit upon something important. My right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell and others made the point several times that it is important that, first and foremost, we look at equality in the context of local ties. I think the only issue I take with the note from the boundary commission is the assertion that wards always—they say generally—

“reflect communities of broad common interest in an area”.

I think they mostly, but not always, do that. We could all give great examples of where wards even in our own constituencies do not particularly reflect communities of broad common interest.

Alec Shelbrooke: I thought I would intervene on my right hon. Friend rather than make a speech later because she is making absolutely the right points to sum up this stand part debate. A very important line that I picked up in the letter said that,

“wards generally reflect communities of broad common interest in an area, and to split them therefore risks splitting local ties”.

My right hon. Friend will agree that we do not want to argue with that statement, but that should also be the guidance for forming the constituencies: if the commissioners recognise that at ward level, they must recognise it at constituency level as well when choosing the wards that they are going to build constituencies from.

Mrs Miller: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. Again, we can all think of constituencies, either our own or in our area, where that will be a considerable challenge for the boundary commission—where, in their words, there is going to be a significant review of constituency boundaries, particularly in constituencies such as mine, where the town of Basingstoke is now, one could argue, really too big to be one constituency. The debate is important and the Committee has shown the value of the process in raising this.

I note from the boundary commission's response that they are not against looking at sub-ward level splits, which is obviously a matter of fact and they have done that in the past. However, I sense a reticence there for the future. I hope when the Minister responds she can underline the importance of ensuring that reticence is alleviated. Mention is made of the cost of splitting wards and pulling together data at a sub-ward level. There is a great focus on polling district data, which was not the only source of information that was mentioned in the evidence sittings and our debate. Yet the focus in the Boundary Commission for England's response seems wholly to be on that form of information. Scotland and Wales already use postcode data, yet no mention is made of that in the response.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): The boundary commission settled on the fact that it has to be units available across the entire country and then solely focuses on polling districts, which we have already said are subject to political considerations. What are not, of course, are postcode areas, which also represent, broadly speaking, cohesive communities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is an area that the boundary commission should consider?

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is right. It feels to me that the issue needs further consideration by the boundary commission. It is a great shame that even though it has already done an extensive piece of work with Ordnance Survey, surveying polling districts between 2013 and 2018—at a cost of a quarter of a million pounds, according to the note—there still seems to be resistance to looking at that in more detail or, as my hon. Friend suggested, at other data sources, which are presumably much more readily available. I understand that the Post Office delivers post every day, and therefore must update its information on a regular basis—particularly when new houses are built. Many of us will have had constituency casework on that issue.

Perhaps individual political parties might want to pick that issue up with the boundary commission. My feeling is that the Committee would want to press further for it to look at it in more detail.

Alec Shelbrooke: Is not the point—and the thing that we are trying to avoid—the fact that in previous boundary reviews there have been significant changes from draft 1 to draft 2, when things have moved to the evidence stages? Is not it better for the boundary commission to approach the matter with the advice and thought provided by the Committee, to try to get draft 1 right, so that there will just be minor changes in draft 2?

Mrs Miller: There is an old adage in the business world about doing the right thing right. Yes, the commission should do the right thing right first time, and not create

re-work. I note from the letter that the Boundary Commission for England wrote to the Committee that it recommends that it should give priority to mapping metropolitan areas, given the late stage we are at, and the concerns it might have about being able to map the whole country at this stage. I think that that is part of the answer, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton said, there is also room for it to look at other datasets, so that it will not be quite so focused on just one solution. I note from the submission that one member of staff was given the matter as a project. Perhaps if a little more resource was put into it, it could be turned around a little more quickly.

I am not quite sure how the Committee can put further pressure on to the boundary commission, but my ask to it would be why it is not looking at other datasets and why it cannot resource the matter more. Surely the Government, for whom the project is important, would want to look at any suggestion of additional resources that are needed to complete the work in a reasonable timeframe so that such data could be available, whether that is only for metropolitan areas or for a broader cross-section of the country.

The second issue that I wanted to turn to, briefly, is protected constituencies. Clause 6 touches on the rules in schedule 2 and I think we can be more ambitious for the Bill, in relation to using the concept of protected constituencies not just in England and Scotland but Wales. We will discuss two amendments on that later in our proceedings, when we can pick up on some of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Ceredigion and show our understanding of the importance of community. As a kingdom of islands, sometimes we need rules in place to respect that unique nature of the United Kingdom. We will come on to that shortly.

My final point is on taking into account future growth, which I raised with a couple of our evidence givers. I suppose I am thinking about constituencies like my own, Basingstoke, which has grown significantly in the past three decades, from being a sleepy market town predominantly surrounded by the most amazing and beautiful Hampshire countryside, when it was the constituency of David Mitchell, the father of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), to what it is today, which is one of the top 10 centres of employment in the south-east—still surrounded by the most amazing and beautiful Hampshire countryside.

To the west of the town is a major development area by the name of Manydown, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). No houses have yet been built, but they will be, and to stop unnecessary change in the future it will be important for that in some way to be taken into account geographically in the setting of the boundaries.

Please do not get me wrong: I am not asking for that to be taken into account in the quotas, but surely with such major areas, which have already had many hundreds of thousands if not millions of pounds-worth of development put into planning for the future, it would be an unnecessary change pending in the future for it not to be taken into account. I am sure every single Committee member can think of somewhere in or near their own constituency where that would be the case.

Given that one of the factors in the rules—I think I have this right—is that we can look at such things for the future, I hope that the boundary commissions will

[Mrs Miller]

be able to think about the geographical nature of what they do, not just the numerical population-based nature of it. However, I did not get a sense from their response, or from others, that that was something they were focused on yet. I hope that we can register that with them at this early stage, to stop what my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell said in his intervention on planning for the future and instead to get things right first time.

Christian Matheson: I find the right hon. Lady's contributions thought-provoking and very helpful. Mr Speaker—

The Chair: Thank you!

Christian Matheson: Mr Paisley! Not yet—maybe next year.

May I express a sense of frustration at what I am hearing in Committee, including from the right hon. Member for Basingstoke, who has just spoken? She was absolutely right to talk about the importance of geographical nature as a consideration for the commissions, not just numerical nature.

As with the previous section of the debate, however, I worry that we are making heavy weather of the whole process. We have been talking about splitting wards and how the Boundary Commission for England—in particular, with Mr Bellringer's note to us from last night about splitting wards—might somehow obtain data to help it split wards more accurately, or split streets, and perhaps we can even use postcode data. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton talked about using postal districts—I think I am roughly quoting him correctly.

We are making extremely heavy weather of something that we need not make heavy weather of, because the answers are already there. The only reason we have these difficulties, these problems and this debate is that the one consideration that the Bill gives to the boundary commissions is the tight 5% tolerance. Everything else flows from that. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke rightly talked about the importance of geography, not just numbers. Unfortunately, everything else that the Bill does denies that hope. We cannot have it both ways. We are making it difficult for ourselves, and for the boundary commission, by making everything else subservient to that one numerical fact.

10.15 am

There is consensus that we need to equalise, as far as possible, the size of constituencies, and that the disparities in size are clearly undesirable and unacceptable. However, even if the proposal to bring us down from 10% to 7.5%—the Committee has already considered that, so I will not stray too far, Mr Paisley—would give us some level of parity and equalisation, we are tying the hands of the boundary commissions far too much. Every other consideration that hon. Members keep mentioning frankly becomes irrelevant. It is the same argument as it was for the Welsh language. It is a great idea, but unless we show a little more flexibility on the tolerance around the national average it is, frankly, unachievable.

Alec Shelbrooke: We are almost straying into new clause 2, which I think we will debate this afternoon. The hon. Gentleman is talking about how much easier

it is with the 7.5%, and I hope that we can explore that further. In Leeds and in Kirklees, two West Yorkshire constituencies, 7.5% does not do it; we still have to split wards. Perhaps he can challenge my argument this afternoon.

Christian Matheson: I would not challenge the right hon. Gentleman. I take the advice that his local knowledge makes him an expert to give. We listen to each other and say, "Actually, in those circumstances it wouldn't work." However, the number of areas where we would not need to do that would be far fewer. I think that the Leeds issue, with wards of 17,000, is quite an extreme one. I suspect that some of those will have to be split anyway, but we make heavy weather by making the number of those instances, and their frequency, much greater as a result.

Mrs Miller: I am intervening only because the hon. Member referred to what I said. To be clear, what I am calling for is more rigour in the process. I do not hold with his assertion that by giving people more leeway we will get a better answer. We need more rigour in what is being done, and more detail from the boundary commission, to ensure that the commission comes up with the right answer and we get equal constituency sizes. There will always be special cases—that was the point that I was making—and they have to be recognised, but I was not calling for a more lackadaisical approach; I was calling for more rigour and detail in the system.

Christian Matheson: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that clarification. The point that I was making in response to her speech and other contributions was that as long as we insist on 5%, none of the other considerations that hon. Members across the Committee are calling for will be possible or indeed relevant. I believe that it is important, for example, to have community ties. Language ties had not occurred to me until they were raised by the hon. Member for Ceredigion in relation to the previous clause. I found that very thought provoking, but there has to be a balance between the aim of achieving equal-sized constituencies and achieving the community ties for which hon. Members are calling. Unfortunately, at the moment we are not hitting that balance.

Chloe Smith: I will keep this fairly brief, but I wish to take a moment to acknowledge the arguments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and other members of the Committee regarding the evidence that the Boundary Commission for England has now provided to us. I confirm that I will look at this matter in the Department to see whether there are any ways that the non-legislative side of it could be taken forward. I am not in a position to say anything more about that at this point, but I wanted to acknowledge it now as part of the stand part debate on clause 6.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 6 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 7

ALTERATION OF THE "REVIEW DATE" IN RELATION TO
THE 2023 REPORTS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Chloe Smith: Hon. Members will remember that clause 1 made certain changes to the timing of boundary reviews; it did that by establishing the end dates of boundary reviews—namely, the dates by which the boundary commissions must submit their reports to the Speaker. We discussed then how the next boundary review, starting in 2021, would have an end date of July 2023, to allow a slightly compressed timetable of two years and seven months for that review only. The intention there was to provide the best possible chance of the new boundaries being in place ahead of the next general election.

Clause 7 is the other side of the same coin. It sets the start date for the next review. The formal start date of a boundary review is known as the review date, and the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 defines it as being two years and 10 months before reports are due to be submitted. Clause 7 amends the 1986 Act—I am talking now about rule 9(5) in schedule 2—making a change for the next review only, by maintaining the review date of 1 December 2020. For all subsequent boundary reviews, the review date will continue to be two years and 10 months before reports are due to be submitted.

As we have already discussed, bringing this back up to the general level of the arguments on this Bill, it has been well over a decade since the results of a boundary review have been implemented. Our constituencies are therefore based on electoral data that is up to 20 years old. The purpose of this provision is to ensure that the next boundary review, starting in 2021, finishes as promptly as possible, but without compromising the processes of the boundary commissions. The timetable of two years and seven months has been discussed with the boundary commissions and with parliamentary party stakeholders who, as I outlined in an earlier session, all support the move. I therefore hope that it will also have the support of this Committee as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 7 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 8

REMOVAL OF DUTY TO IMPLEMENT, ETC. IN RELATION TO
CURRENT REPORTS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Chloe Smith: It is that part of the morning, Mr Paisley, where you keep me on my feet all morning, going through a rattle of clauses. Here we go.

The Chair: The smiles on colleagues' faces cannot be hidden.

Chloe Smith: Exactly; the audience awaits—or, as my three-year-old managed to learn to say the other day, “And the crowd goes wild!”. That surprised me coming out of the mouth of a three-year-old, but perhaps the same will be true of the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill Committee.

Christian Matheson: Just wait and see.

Chloe Smith: What does clause 8 do? It removes the legal obligation to implement the 2018 boundary review. As hon. Members will recall from when we discussed clause 5, the Bill will amend the existing legislation to ensure that we continue to have 650 parliamentary

constituencies, as we do now. In order to achieve that, clause 5 set the number of constituencies at 650 for future reviews. That in itself does not resolve the current legal obligation on the Government to implement the 2018 boundary review, which was based on 600.

The boundary commissions have submitted their final reports for that review, but the recommendations have yet to be brought into legal effect. Clause 8 therefore brings the 2018 boundary review to a close without implementation. It removes the Government's obligation to bring the recommendations of the 2018 review into effect, because those proposals would take us down to 600 constituencies at the next election, which this Committee has already agreed is undesirable.

Under this clause, that obligation would be removed retrospectively, with effect from 24 March of this year. I can explain that specific date to the Committee: it is the date on which the Government announced their intention to retain 650 constituencies in the written ministerial statement that I laid before the House. Without this clause, there would be a very irregular situation. We would be legally required to implement the 2018 review and implement the reduction to 600 constituencies at the next general election. I think that this Committee would agree, having already taken the decision to move from 600 back to 650, that that situation would be confusing and undesirable. Therefore this clause, although technical, is important and I urge that it stand part of the Bill.

Cat Smith: I will make a brief comment, not least to give the Minister a breather and a chance to get some water as she rattles through the clauses. I just ask her whether she is pleased to be able to have clause 8 in the Bill because the 2018 review did not have the automaticity clause that future reviews will have.

Chloe Smith: The debate would not have been complete had the hon. Lady not raised that point. I think it is fair to say that we have answered that one comprehensively in the course of these Committee proceedings so far; and given that we have also already agreed that automaticity is the right thing to do in this Bill, I am not going to entertain the argument any further.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 8 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9

REMOVAL OF DUTY TO REVIEW REDUCTION IN NUMBER
OF CONSTITUENCIES

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chair: Déjà vu, Minister.

Chloe Smith: Here we go again, Mr Paisley.

This clause is connected to clause 8, in that, as I have already said, the Bill seeks to maintain the number of constituencies at 650, reversing the changes from the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 that provided for 600. Section 14 of the 2011 Act also imposed a requirement on the Government to make arrangements for a committee to carry out a

[Chloe Smith]

review of the effects of the reduction to 600 constituencies. I know we all love being on committees, but I think we can agree that we do not need another committee to do that particular function, having just agreed clause 8 and, earlier, that there should be 650 constituencies. Therefore we are cancelling those arrangements. They would have been required to be made no earlier than 1 June 2020 and no later than 30 November 2020—in other words, this year. As the reduction in the number of constituencies has not taken effect and clauses 5 and 8 already stand part of the Bill, the duty to review the reduction in the number of constituencies is entirely redundant.

Like clause 8, this clause is retrospective, and it will be treated as having come into force as of 31 May this year. That is obviously the day before 1 June—the start of the period within which the Government were to be required to make arrangements for a review to be carried out. Without this clause, the Government would be legally required to make those arrangements to undertake a redundant review, so I urge hon. Members, on the grounds of sensible work and governance and the need for no more committees, to support the clause's standing part of the Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 9 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 10

EFFECT OF ORDERS IN COUNCIL UNDER THE 1986 ACT
ON NI ASSEMBLY CONSTITUENCIES

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Chloe Smith: Clause 10 makes a different kind of provision, and it will take me a little while to explain the detail of it, so I trust that the Committee will bear with me while I do. This clause makes specific provision in relation to Northern Ireland and how boundary review recommendations are brought into effect there. I shall make a couple of preamble points that outline related legislation.

First, existing legislation—the Northern Ireland Act 1998—dictates that constituencies in Northern Ireland automatically mirror UK parliamentary constituencies. Therefore, when a boundary review is brought into effect for the United Kingdom, the constituencies for the Northern Ireland Assembly, each of which has five Assembly Members, will automatically change. Currently, that change happens at the next Assembly election. By the bye, this is not the case in either Scotland or Wales, where the boundaries used for the devolved legislatures are not linked in law to UK parliamentary constituencies, and are devolved matters.

The other point to bear in mind at the outset is that the Northern Ireland Assembly has scheduled elections, so we can predict when there will be moments when a UK parliamentary boundary review will finish close to an upcoming Stormont Assembly election. One of those moments, we can foresee, is in 2031/32. In addition, if, as there has been in the past, an unscheduled Assembly election were to be triggered close to the end of the boundary review, it would be important for there to be clarity about the boundaries to be used.

10.30 am

The clause creates a buffer period between new UK parliamentary constituencies coming into force and them being used for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly. It amends the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to ensure that if the period between the boundary review recommendations coming into force and the notice of election for an Assembly poll is less than six months, that poll will be conducted according to the old constituencies. The notice of election that I referred to must be published at least 25 working days ahead of an Assembly election, so in effect, if there is a Stormont election within six months and five weeks of the new parliamentary constituencies coming into effect, that election will be run on the old boundaries.

One exception to that is if, during the six-month period, the UK Parliament was dissolved prior to a general election, the new constituencies would also be used for a subsequent Northern Ireland Assembly election. It would clearly not make sense, and would cause some public confusion and complication for the administrators, to have a general election in Northern Ireland on one set of new boundaries and then revert to an older set of boundaries for an Assembly election following shortly thereafter. That is the exception to what clause 10 does more generally.

Clause 10 is a sensible provision. It has been developed in close consultation with the Northern Ireland Office and others, and it takes into account the specific nature of Assembly elections in Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 10 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 11

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS AND
SAVINGS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Chloe Smith: On a point of order, Mr Paisley. Are we dealing with the schedule and its amendments after the stand part debate?

The Chair: Yes, we are.

Chloe Smith: Clause 11 gives effect to the schedule to the Bill that contains minor and consequential amendments, including the repeal of provisions that are now spent or superseded. The schedule contains several minor provisions. As I mentioned at the beginning of our line-by-line scrutiny, one such provision clarifies that references to the Secretary of State include the Minister for the Cabinet Office, which alone takes up three of the 11 paragraphs that make up the schedule—perhaps a reflection of how minor the provisions are.

Others provisions in the schedule include paragraph 4(2) which, to reflect clause 5 of the Bill, which amends the number of constituencies to 650, updates the UK electoral quota to be based on 646 rather than 596. That reflects the number of constituencies minus the four protected constituencies. I acknowledge, however, that we will come on to debate aspects of that matter later. To reflect clause 4's changes to public hearings, paragraph 5 tidies up the references to public hearings in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986.

Hon. Members may be interested in the schedule's reference to Blackpool, which I can explain, should the Committee be interested. No doubt the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood is agog to talk about Blackpool, so I will cover it briefly. There was a mistake in an amendment to the 1986 Act in the European Parliamentary Elections Etc. (Repeal, Revocation, Amendment and Saving Provisions) (United Kingdom and Gibraltar) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018.

The amendment made by that SI was intended to maintain the current position, that the BCE may take into account the boundaries of the European parliamentary electoral regions in England if it wished to do so, despite the repeal of the European parliamentary elections legislation. The regulations provided for newly defined English regions that correspond to the make-up of the existing European parliamentary electoral regions. The Bill adds the county of Blackpool to the description of the north-west region, which was erroneously omitted. Let the celebrations ring out around Blackpool for us having done that this morning in this Committee.

The schedule also ties up the drafting in previous related legislation, including the 1986 Act and the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. As they are very minor, I will not set them out in detail, although I would be happy to if hon. Members wish. The minor and consequential changes made by the schedule are important for tidying up the statute book and making the legislation easier to understand for the reader.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 11 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I beg to move amendment 14 in the schedule, page 7, line 16, leave out “for “596” substitute “646”” and insert “leave out “596” and insert “645””.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 11 in the schedule, page 7, line 17, leave out “646” and insert “645”.

This amendment is consequential to NC6, which would add an additional protected constituency.

New clause 6—*Ynys Môn to be a Protected Constituency*—

After Rule 6(2)(b) of Schedule 2 to the 1986 Act (protected constituencies) insert—

“a constituency named Ynys Môn, comprising the County of the Isle of Anglesey.”

This new clause adds Ynys Môn to the four protected constituencies

New clause 10—*Protected constituencies*—

(1) Schedule 2 to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 is amended as follows.

(2) In rule 6(2), after paragraph (b) insert “;

(c) a constituency named Ynys Môn, comprising the area of the Isle of Anglesey County Council”.

(3) In rule 8(5)—

(a) in paragraph (b), for “6(2)” substitute “6(2)(a) and (b)”, and

(b) after paragraph (b) insert “;

(c) the electorate of Wales shall be treated for the purposes of this rule as reduced by the electorate of the constituency mentioned in rule (6)(2)(c)”.

(4) In rule 9(7)—

(a) after “6” insert “(2)(a) or (b)”, and

(b) after “2011” insert “, and the reference in rule 6(2)(c) to the area of the Isle of Anglesey County Council is to the area as it existed on the coming into force of the Schedule to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020.”

This new clause adds the parliamentary constituency of Ynys Môn to the list of protected constituencies in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 and makes other consequential changes to that Act.

Mrs Miller: These amendments and new clauses would effectively create an additional protected constituency of Ynys Môn comprising the area of the Isle of Anglesey County Council. The new clauses seek to amend schedule 2 to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986, specifically the rules for the distribution of seats, resulting in Ynys Môn being included as a protected seat in rule 6. Consequential and necessary changes to rule 8 and rule 9 of the same schedule are needed to bring that fully into effect. Amendment 14 is a consequential amendment looking at the total number of constituencies.

There is an acknowledged principle in the 1986 Act that in our great British Isles, a collection of islands under our sovereign, Her Majesty, there are instances where the parliamentary constituency system needs to acknowledge challenges and limitations of building a constituency boundary system that adequately recognises island-based communities. Existing legislation does do that for two seats in England, neighbouring my own county in Hampshire, and for two seats in Scotland, but for none in Wales.

At this point I declare an interest. Although I was born in England and represent an English constituency, I was brought up in Bridgend, Wales. My maiden name is Lewis. My two brothers were born in Bridgend Hospital and my two nieces, Isabella and Olivia, attend a bilingual Church in Wales school in Llangattock. Yes, when England plays Wales in rugby, I support Wales. I am aware of the Welsh identity and the powerful role that communities play in Welsh life. When parliamentary boundaries were last debated, the move to 600 seats made it difficult to secure protection for the constituency of Ynys Môn. Given the return to 650 seats, I will attempt to turn the Minister's head in the hope that she might be persuaded by arguments of both the head and the heart.

The people of Ynys Môn are rightly proud of their island and its unique history. While the boundaries of most other counties might be considered somewhat arbitrary—although not in Yorkshire and Lancashire, as we have heard—the boundary between Ynys Môn and the mainland is physical, perhaps indivisible and immovable.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): There is something I fail to understand in this argument. Is Ynys Môn not connected by a bridge that was built around 100 years ago and is readily used all the time? How is it different from any other bridge in this country over rivers? The Isle of Wight argument was pretty thin, because the ferry is quite effective. Here you have a well-established bridge.

Mrs Miller: The right hon. Gentleman brings me straight on to my next point. It is as if he was reading my notes in advance—I am sure he was not. The Menai strait may be narrow enough to travel over by bridge, unlike travelling to the Isle of Wight, which he will be well aware is not connected by any bridges. However, the bridges were built very recently, and the people of Ynys Môn continue to have a strong sense of independence—born from many centuries of separation from the mainland—and have not changed. There are countless examples of Ynys Môn’s deeply held identity as an island community both physically and sometimes constitutionally annexed to the mainland. The island is environmentally and economically distinct from the mainland, being flat and fertile, with its rugged coastline and deep harbours standing in stark contrast to the mountains of Snowdonia.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion will, I am sure, tell me that my pronunciation is not good, but the area is known as Môn mam Cymru—Anglesey, mother of Wales. That is rooted in its history. Countless windmills still stand on the island as testament to the fact that it kept north Wales fed during the middle ages.

John Spellar: The right hon. Lady’s definition of “recent” must slightly differ from mine. The Menai suspension bridge was built in 1826, at just about the time we were getting any sort of franchise and about 100 years before we had universal franchise. This is a pretty thin argument, is it not?

Mrs Miller: I am sure the people of Ynys Môn will listen carefully to interventions made by Labour Members, which I am not sure necessarily reflect the arguments made over many years by others who have looked at this very carefully. The right hon. Member has a point that can be made, but this is not just a river or arbitrary boundary. This is a significantly sized island, which I think is actually almost double the size of the Isle of Wight. It is significantly larger than the Isle of Wight, so I think a bridge, however long it has been there, does not take away from its sense of identity. Indeed, there is clear and direct precedent for Ynys Môn to be treated as an exception. I hope, more generally, that the Labour party will support this proposal. Certainly, the evidence given to the Select Committee suggested that there was cross-party support. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman is just making a little bit of mischief along the way.

There is clear precedent. The Isle of Wight’s two seats make an electorate of more than 110,000, Orkney and Shetland has an electorate of 23,000, and the Western Isles has an electorate of 15,000, so this is not about the number of people on an island but about the islands themselves, because they are geographically separate, with fractured populations. They have a tradition and identity that tend to override those numerical imbalances, which has rightly been recognised by this place over many years.

Ynys Môn possesses all the same exceptional qualities geographically, but also in its heritage. With an electorate of more than 50,000 registered voters, it is a sizeable community, as well as geographically sizeable. No other constituency I am aware of, or that Members have brought up so far in our consideration of the Bill, is in a similar situation to Ynys Môn. Its nearest comparators have all been granted protected status. While I know

and understand the arguments made by some in Cornwall, I hope the boundary commission heeded the issues raised by Devonwall. That is a very different issue from those faced by island communities, and I do not think that the two arguments should merge.

We heard no dissent in our evidence sessions when the notion of protected status was put forward. As an island nation, UK citizens do not need to be told about the unique identity that results from living on an island. Recognising a plurality of identities is part and parcel of the geography of our British Isles and needs to apply to the Welsh island of Ynys Môn. There is a strong depth of feeling on Ynys Môn that the island should have this recognition. In our evidence session, Dr Lerner, who is a research associate at the Wales Governance Centre at Cardiff University, was very clear:

“Obviously, Ynys Môn is not as isolated geographically as some of the Scottish constituencies, but, when you consider that the Isle of Wight is involved in these protections, it is reasonable to suggest that Ynys Môn should be too.”—[*Official Report, Parliamentary Constituencies Public Bill Committee*, 18 June 2020; c. 131, Q251.]

I have to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) put it best when she said: “Ynys Môn is unique. It is very special. The people have a strong sense of identity and community, unlike any I have experienced on mainland Britain. The countryside is rich and fertile, the coastline rugged and rural, and there is a very real sense of being an island standing alone from the mainland, despite the connected bridges. There is a commitment to protecting and promoting local business, the Welsh language and the culture and traditions of Ynys Môn. This is an island community that deserves to be recognised and protected.”

10.45 am

Ben Lake: Diolch yn fawr, Mr Paisley. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller). I echo a lot of the points that she made in support of the principle of ensuring that Ynys Môn is retained as a unique and integral part of Welsh political history, and indeed the UK’s political history. Some of the points that I will make support her arguments.

There is a bit of consensus in the Committee on the fundamental argument about whether Ynys Môn deserves to be its own constituency, but it is fair to point out that we have received a few pieces of written evidence questioning, and raising some valid points about, whether Ynys Môn is enough of an island and deserves to be one of the protected constituencies, along with the Western Isles, for example. Some of the points in the most recent piece of written evidence—forgive me, Mr Paisley, but I have forgotten the name of the individual who submitted it. [*Interruption.*] Mr Aaron Fear, that’s it! Mr Fear made the valid point that, whereas the remoteness of the Western Isles makes its own argument for that constituency, the proximity of Ynys Môn to the mainland means that it should not benefit from similar consideration.

We have had the opportunity in this Committee to look back at history, and we have covered many historical events. On the point about Ynys Môn being close to the mainland, the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) will attest to the fact that the Menai strait is a significant natural barrier—just ask the Romans, who had an issue with it. It is one of the most treacherous

stretches of water, certainly along the British Isles. Despite the transport links that modernity has bestowed upon the island, when we come to the point about Ynys Môn having its own distinct community, we probably find ourselves in a similar position to the Romans looking across the Menai to the druids. The people of Ynys Môn consider themselves to be a very distinct community from that of the mainland, and that is something that we should bear in mind.

I do not have much more to add to the points that were very well made by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke. I will summarise as follows: when we consider whether islands should have protected status, it is valid to ask whether they are big enough geographically and in terms of population, whether they are remote enough, and whether they have a distinct sense of community. I have dealt with the remoteness issue. Yes, at the narrowest width, the Menai is only a couple of hundred metres, but the community of Ynys Môn is so distinct from that of the mainland that it deserves recognition.

When it comes to the island's size, perhaps it is not so big in global rankings, but it is more than 700 sq km. The right hon. Lady mentioned a few islands. It is only 5 sq km smaller than the island of Singapore, to put it in context. It is the 51st largest island in Europe, if Madeira is considered to be a European island; it is the 50th if it is not. In terms of geographical size, it has a sound argument and pretty good credentials. The resident population is about 70,000, which again is not insignificant. If we consider some of the geographical areas on the mainland, it is quite a sizeable unit. Administratively speaking, it is the ninth largest local authority in Wales by population. Again, that speaks to why it should be considered its own entity.

I mention community again at this point. If the local authority point is not enough then it should be considered that Ynys Môn fielded a team for the Island games, competing with islands across the world in different sporting events. The team is proud to represent their island, not some sort of appendage to north-west Wales. To encapsulate everything, the point made by Mr Geraint Day during the first day of the evidence sessions is a humorous but important one. History is on the side of Ynys Môn being a distinct constituency too. Since the 16th-century Acts of Union, Ynys Môn has always sent its own Member of Parliament to London, and indeed—apart from the Barebones Parliament—has always had representation in this place.

Mrs Miller: I point out that my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn is with us today, although unable to take part in proceedings because of her role in the Government.

Ben Lake: I referred to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn earlier on, and I am confident that she would agree with us if she were able to contribute. Ynys Môn has had continuous representation in this place, apart from the notable exception of the Barebones Parliament. Further to the points that have been made, if one needs to think about how Ynys Môn is considered within Wales, Môn man Cymru is probably the best way of putting it, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke said. In her remarks on an earlier amendment, the Minister mentioned that the Boundary Commission for

Wales agreed to the Welsh language convention of place names that run north to south and west to east. If that logic is applied, Wales starts in the north-west. What is the north-west? It is Ynys Môn. I do not have anything further to add. If the hon. Lady wishes to push the amendment to a vote I will support her.

Christian Matheson: It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. I think an amendment that I have tabled is similar in effect to those tabled by Conservative Members. Anglesey, which I knew as a child, is a great place. I remember we used to go there on holiday every year, staying at Red Wharf Bay at Benllech and visiting Llangefni market and Llanfair PG. I will not go any further than that. We still go there, and not so long ago I visited Newborough Warren. It is a wonderful place, and is a fantastic place to visit. The hon. Member for Ceredigion talked about the history of the Romans and the druids, and I was aware of that. He might want to correct me, but I think I am right that eventually the Romans got round their problem by fording the Menai strait at low spring tide, resolving their difficulties with the druids in, unfortunately, the fashion in which Romans resolved such problems.

Chloe Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman explain what the Romans ever did for the druids?

Christian Matheson: I am looking at the clock.

The Chair: I will assist by saying: will you please move on?

Christian Matheson: I am sure, Mr Paisley, that you would not want me to start listing aqueducts, currency, safety in the streets, law and order and so on. The Opposition have tabled a similar amendment—I am not sure of the procedural mechanism for resolving the fact that there is more than one amendment on the same issue. I will take guidance from you on that, Mr Paisley.

I make two points in relation to the debate. First, I ask Committee members to bear in mind the knock-on effect on the rest of the Wales, if and when they agree the amendment. We will be discussing that matter later. Right hon. Members have made good, sound arguments as to why we should accept the amendment. However, that has an effect on the rest of Wales, and I ask hon. Members to park that.

Secondly—I have to make this point, unfortunately, from a political point of view—never since St Paul took a trip to Damascus has such a great conversion been seen as that of Conservative Members deciding that perhaps Ynys Môn does need to be a protected constituency. Other parties, our own included, have called for that change in several reviews. Something has obviously changed, if Conservatives are all of a sudden in favour of the proposal. I invite members of the Committee to decide, in their own time, what circumstances have changed such that the Conservatives are, all of a sudden, in favour of it. Let us be clear: we have called for it in several reviews. We are, therefore, pleased that Government Members have seen the light, whatever the motivation that drove them to that point.

May I be indulged briefly, Mr Paisley, to pay tribute to the former Member for Ynys Môn, my good friend Albert Owen, who like you was a member of the Panel

[*Christian Matheson*]

of Chairs? I miss him greatly as a person and as a mentor and adviser, but I know he still maintains a full role.

Chris Clarkson: As a Romanophile, I thank the hon. Member for Deva Victrix. I very much enjoyed the talk of Rome. On the political considerations, Ynys Môn is one of only two constituencies in the United Kingdom to have been represented by all three major parties and the local nationalist party, so the hon. Gentleman's argument does not stand. Talking about north Wales, possibly combining Ynys Môn with Bangor would be particularly unfair to some mainland parts of Wales, which have distinct identities. I support the amendment: Ynys Môn is a distinct part of Wales, with a unique culture and identity, and has a perfect case to be a protected constituency.

Christian Matheson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. In fact, my argument stands because only now has the Conservative party changed its opinion—again, I leave him to come up with the reason why.

Ben Lake: I echo the hon. Gentleman's sentiments and words about the former Member for Ynys Môn, Albert Owen. I do not think we could find a more doughty champion for the island than Mr Owen.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful. I am sure that Albert will be following this debate and will be most grateful as well.

We support the amendment and welcome the conversion of Government Members. We will work with them to see this through. We await the Minister's response.

The Chair: For clarity, this debate is about amendment 14, in the name of Maria Miller. I said at the commencement that it would also be convenient to consider amendment 11, new clause 6 and new clause 10. If amendment 14 is agreed to, the subsequent one, namely amendment 11, will not be called.

Cat Smith: The grouping of amendments and new clauses on Ynys Môn gave me cause to think about the nature of island communities. I have enjoyed hearing the exchanges across the Committee Room this morning. Indeed, my father was born on an island and my mother was raised on one—the Isle of Walney, which was only connected to the mainland by a bridge in 1908 so, arguably, has a stronger case for special consideration even than Ynys Môn. The arguments about identity apply to any island community in the British Isles. For anyone born or raised on an island, that sense of community runs so deep that unless someone has lived or experienced it, it is hard to explain how that can forge identity.

Ynys Môn also has a strong Welsh identity, which we have not really touched on so far in this debate, but with a 57% prevalence of being able to speak Welsh, it has the second highest proportion of Welsh speakers by local authority in Wales. That just adds to the evidence that Anglesey is indeed a special place, which is why we believe that it should be awarded protected status. It

also has the village with the longest place name in Britain—if anyone wishes to make any intervention to tell us what that is, I would be happy to give way.

Ben Lake: I am sure that it is in *Hansard* somewhere, but just so it is on the record, it is Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogoch.

Alec Shelbrooke: I cannot do that, but I will tell the hon. Lady who can: my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who was born there.

11 am

Cat Smith: Unfortunately the hon. Member for Pudsey is not taking part in proceedings. The amendments are about recognising the fundamental and distinct identity of Ynys Môn and awarding it protected constituency status. Although the Labour party will certainly support that, it throws up a debate about the potential conflict between the idea of protecting communities and identity, and equally sized constituencies. Creating another protected constituency makes it more difficult to have equally sized constituencies right across the British Isles.

I find many of the ideas that the Committee has discussed very contradictory. On the one hand, hon. Members argue for equally sized constituencies, and on the other, they argue for more protected constituencies, which ingrain unequal size. I am very clear that we should respect community ties and acknowledge that some constituencies will be larger than others to reflect those ties, but as far as possible, we should try to have constituencies that are as equal as they can be. The amendments highlight the challenge that that throws up, in recognising that communities should be included together when it comes to parliamentary constituencies.

Chloe Smith: I am really pleased that we have had this discussion, which, in formal terms, complements my opening remarks on clause 11 stand part.

Following on from the arguments articulated by the hon. Members for Ceredigion and for City of Chester, as well as by the shadow Minister, I can confirm that the Government will accept amendment 14, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, and give Ynys Môn protected constituency status. I will go through the reasons for that.

I will pray in aid the hon. Member for Glasgow East, who occasionally helps me out in this respect. He was so kind to say earlier that I am a considered Minister who takes arguments on merit, which is what I am seeking to do today. That starts with reflecting on what the current legislation sets out. It sets out four protected constituencies, the boundaries of which are fixed and do not change at boundary reviews. They are all islands: Orkney and Shetland, Na h-Eileanan an Iar, and the two constituencies on the Isle of Wight. Currently, there are no protected constituencies in Wales.

During debate on the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011, arguments were made that Ynys Môn should also be a protected constituency. Those arguments centred on the fact that the constituency covers a relatively large island geographically and has a sizeable electorate—and they still have merit today. Indeed, we heard witnesses and hon. Members of all stripes make the case for Ynys Môn, including Tom Adams

of the Labour party, Geraint Day from Plaid Cymru and Chris Williams from the Green party, in addition to the parties represented on the Committee. Dr Lerner from the Wales Governance Centre added his thoughts to the argument, too. Of course, hon. Members outside the Committee have also joined the argument via amendment 14, including the hon. Member for the Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), whose support is, I think telling.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn, who is sitting in the Public Gallery. She has campaigned and worked very hard on this matter, on top of being a most assiduous constituency MP on other matters. If I remember rightly, her swearing in to the House was done in Welsh, which shows her commitment to the characteristics of her constituency. Since she entered the House, she has argued that local people sent her here to do just that, and I am glad that she is here to listen.

As the hon. Member for Ceredigion explained, Ynys Môn, which covers 715 sq km, is the fourth largest island in Great Britain in terms of geographical size, excluding the mainland—to be precise, that is including Holy island to the west. With an electorate of approximately 50,000, based on 2019 data, Ynys Môn is comparable to other islands that enjoy protected constituency status.

I am of course mindful that each additional exception slightly chips away at the underlying principle of equally sized constituencies—I will bring that argument into my own remarks before anyone else makes it. It is a consideration that we have to include in this decision. However, I am persuaded that the creation of Ynys Môn as a protected constituency would address an anomaly. It is the only island in the UK whose electorate and geographical area fall squarely within the range of the currently protected constituencies. It has a considerable electorate, sitting between those of the other protected constituencies: Na h-Eileanan an Iar is at one end, with an electorate of just over 21,000, and the Isle of Wight is at the other, with 111,000. The argument that Ynys Môn belongs among the protected constituencies is compelling.

Amendment 14 also responds in part to something else we have heard in this Committee, which is that Wales is likely to see a reduction in the number of its constituencies. For a variety of historical reasons, which we have discussed already and may discuss later when debating other amendments, Welsh constituencies are slightly smaller on average than most UK constituencies. Given that the next boundary review will seek to create constituencies that are equal in size, it is likely to result in fewer constituencies in Wales. It is relevant to note that the creation of an appropriate protected constituency on Ynys Môn will mean that the electorate of that island will not be included in any calculation relating to the number of constituencies in Wales.

This amendment also means that there will be at least one protected constituency in each part of Great Britain, which helps demonstrate the importance with which we regard those component parts of the Union, and that we think these are important, relevant considerations. We believe that Ynys Môn, with its sizable electorate and particular geography, would make an appropriate protected constituency to sit alongside the others. As I have already confirmed, we intend to accept amendment 14.

John Spellar: Can we have some clarity on how the arithmetic works? Will Wales be taken as a block and allocated a number of seats, from which the protected seat would then be abstracted and its quota spread among the other seats? Alternatively, will Wales's population be included with England's and Scotland's, so that all the protected seats are taken completely out of the equation and the basic figure for constituencies will be decided quite separately from the protected constituencies?

Chloe Smith: I believe it is the former; indeed, that is what the consequential amendments in this bundle go on to do. We can complete that argument when we discuss the tolerance and the way in which the quota is arrived at.

I will now deal with the fact that a couple of amendments are grouped together, and other Members have already asked questions about the procedure. I assume it would be in order for me to indicate that I would like to accept amendment 14 and new clause 10, but not new clause 6 and its associated amendment. That is for the very good reason that consequential changes to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 are required to fully implement this protected constituency, and we need to ensure that those consequential changes are made by the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, not those tabled by the hon. Members for Ceredigion and for Glasgow East. That is not to say that those Members have not made good arguments today—they have—but I intend to accept the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke. I hope that is in order, Mr Paisley. I think I have answered all the points raised.

Mrs Miller: I thank the Minister and also the hon. Members for Ceredigion and for City of Chester for their kind words and support for this approach to achieve what we all want. The Minister has indicated that she will accept amendment 14 and, when we come to it, new clause 10 as well. It is my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn who has campaigned for this change, this protection, and today's debate reflects her assiduous hard work and the understanding that she has of the community that she represents.

Amendment 14 agreed to.

The Chair: An historic day, colleagues! The next amendment on the paper is amendment 10, but that was debated last Thursday and David Linden indicated that he did not wish to press it to a Division. Unless Mr Linden has changed his mind, which could happen, we will move on.

Schedule, as amended, agreed to.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Paisley. It would probably be more appropriate if we pause and continue our deliberations this afternoon. I therefore beg to move that our deliberations be now adjourned.

Ordered, That further consideration be now adjourned.—(Eddie Hughes.)

11.12 am

Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.

