



Chloe Smith MP
Minister of State
Cabinet Office 70 Whitehall London SW1A 2AS

William Wragg MP
Chair
Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs
Committee
House of Commons
London, SW1A 0AA

Our reference: MC2020/02678

By email:

20 April 2020

Dear William,

Updated and equal parliamentary boundaries

I am writing to you in response to your correspondence of 30th March, regarding the Written Ministerial Statement (HCWS183) of 24th March, entitled *Update: Strengthening Democracy*.

I welcome your support for updating and equalising UK parliamentary constituencies, as set out in the Government's manifesto in December's general election.

I agree it is vital that legislative changes are discussed and decided upon early by Parliament, and, as you note, the second reading of the Private Members' Bill by the Hon. Peter Bone MP was postponed until 24th April. Since setting out the Government's thinking on these issues in the ministerial statement, I have written to members across the House, including parliamentary committees and counterparts in all parties. The Government has also engaged with representatives from political parties (through the Parliamentary Parties Panel) in order to test our policy and seek input on a variety of the technical measures. These include provisions relating to the length of time the Boundary Commissions have to conduct their reviews within the boundary review cycle and the process involved in the reviews, such as public hearings and consultation.

The Government is minded that once the Boundary Commissions make their recommendations for new constituency boundaries, these should be brought into effect automatically by an Order in Council. This change would provide certainty that the recommendations of the expert and independent Boundary Commissions - developed through a robust and impartial process that is open to extensive consultation - would be implemented without interference. This is in line with practice in Parliamentary democracies such as Canada, India and New Zealand. Parliament, of course, remains sovereign and can amend

the primary legislation underpinning the parameters for these reviews as it sees fit. This will strengthen the independence of the boundary review process.

Your letter made mention of the rationale behind the number of constituencies. Legislation currently provides that, on implementation of the 2018 Boundary Review recommendations, the number of constituencies in the UK shall be 600. The Government is minded to make provision for the number of parliamentary constituencies to remain at 650.

We have opted to maintain 650 for a number of reasons:

- so that MPs can represent the UK's growing population effectively (based on the 2018 register of electors (the most recent ONS published data available), we calculate that with 650 seats, the average electorate would be 70,424, as opposed to the 74,270 under the 2018 recommendations on the basis of 600 seats);
- to manage the additional work previously covered by Members of the European Parliament;
- to respond to representations from colleagues on all sides of the House, the former Political and Constitutional Reform Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC), and the Private Members' Bill from the 2017-19 parliamentary session from Afzal Khan MP, which proposed maintaining 650 seats; and
- to reflect that a Parliament of approximately 650 seats has been the norm for several decades; Parliament grew to 650 seats (for the first time since before the Second World War) in 1983 and has stayed at around that number ever since (with a small reduction to 646 in 2005-10).

This Government has made quite clear that this is a change of policy from the legislation originally passed under the Coalition Government.

You have raised the issue of the additional work that will arise for MPs now we no longer have MEPs and have left the European Union. I note that PACAC's 2018 report on parliamentary boundaries commented that a number of MPs have suggested that the decision to leave the European Union calls into question the desirability of reducing the number of MPs owing to the responsibilities that are now due to be repatriated to the UK Parliament.

As a result of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union and recovering its economic and political independence, we are regaining control of our own trade; migration policy; laws and courts; fishing and farming policy and the power to set our taxes. These matters will be debated and decided by the people's representatives in Parliament and the devolved administrations. Without this legislation, the UK would be reducing the number of parliamentarians, at a time when Parliament's workload – both scrutiny and legislation – will doubtless increase. It would therefore not be sensible to proceed with a reduction in the number of MPs. The Government has published extensive documentation on our withdrawal from the European Union.

Your letter also mentioned devolution and questioned what steps the Government has taken to consider the effect of devolution. We have already made progress on our programme of devolution in England – one of the largest in recent decades – including eight mayoral

devolution deals and one non-mayoral devolution deal in Cornwall. We want to do more such deals; the Queen's Speech affirmed the Government's commitment to an English Devolution White Paper, further details on which will be made available in due course.

However, the UK Parliament will continue to legislate for the whole of the Union on matters that are not devolved. This includes matters such as UK Parliamentary elections, tax, immigration and defence which affect Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish constituents, just as they do English electors. Therefore, MPs who represent these constituencies still need to be able to vote on matters which affect their constituents. We are committed to equal representation across the United Kingdom, and within the constituent nations of the Union.

The Government's manifesto and the Queen's Speech programme set out the Government's plans to repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. As you have noted in your letter, the current provisions of the 2011 legislation place a statutory duty on the Prime Minister to make arrangements for a committee to undertake a review of the operation of the Act. The Government is giving careful consideration to how this committee will be formed, and the technical detail of the policy to repeal the Act. In making this written ministerial statement, it was my intention to make clear that once the Act is repealed, there will be a departure from fixed-term Parliaments and therefore it is not appropriate for the boundary review cycle to continue to be based on the fixed Parliamentary cycle. This statement was not an indication that there would be a shortening of the maximum length of Parliamentary terms, rather, it was merely to acknowledge that with a slightly longer period between reviews, it will be possible for there to be two general elections before new constituencies come into effect.

I would highlight that PACAC's 2018 report on parliamentary boundaries proposed that amending the current legislation to facilitate a boundary review process that would command broader support in Parliament was worthy of serious consideration. This Government has listened to the sensible points that PACAC has made.

I look forward to discussing this with you when the House returns and as the Bill progresses through Parliament, when parliamentary time allows.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Chloe', with a horizontal line underneath it.

Chloe Smith MP