



**DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER  
70 WHITEHALL, LONDON SW1A 2AS**

September 2010

*Dear Andrew,*

Thank you for your letter of 11 August about the proposals in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies (PVSC) Bill. I am very sorry that you have not had a reply sooner: the letter appears not to have been processed effectively by the correspondence unit, and I apologise for that.

Let me begin by saying that I take the question of allowing for effective scrutiny for the proposal in the Bill very seriously: that is why we have programmed five days for Committee stage on the Floor of the House.

You raise a number of points in your letter about the criteria for the very limited exceptions to the principle of equality underpinning the proposals in the Bill. The overall approach we have taken is to seek to apply this principle of electoral equality uniformly across the United Kingdom. The two named exceptions – Orkney and Shetland, and the Western Isles – have, as I said in my appearance before the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee on 15 July, been excluded from this principle on the basis of their highly exceptional nature. Both are groups of islands that are additionally some distance from the mainland of Great Britain: Orkney and Shetland has been explicitly recognised as an exception in legislation since 1998; and both constituencies have been recognised as such in practice since 1918.

I do recognise and appreciate the strength of feeling that exists that the Isle of Wight should also be exempted from the requirement for electoral equality given the prospect of a constituency being formed by a part of the island and a part of the mainland. Allowing any exceptions will always be difficult, since there will inevitably be communities in parts of the United Kingdom who feel that some form of exception is merited. There are other constituencies – for example those such as Argyll and Bute where the constituency is comprised of a number of islands as well as a portion of the mainland - where I do not doubt that the issue may also be keenly felt. However, we felt that it was the right approach to allow only these two exceptions to what is intended to be a clear principle. I am sorry that the balance that we have struck in the Bill does not meet with your agreement. But I hope that you will understand why we have approached the issue in this way.

You ask about discussions in relation to the named exceptions, and also about the proposed rule 4 at clause 9 of the Bill that would prohibit the Commissions recommending a constituency of greater than 13,000km<sup>2</sup> in size. As I made clear in front of the Committee on July 15<sup>th</sup>, I did not speak to Charles Kennedy about this proposal before that decision was taken and nor did any civil servants. I can also confirm those points in relation to the two island groups named as exceptions in the Bill. Regarding the more general question of representations, you will know, of course, that the member for the Western Isles made a number of arguments on the issue at the Westminster Hall debate that you secured on these issues.

There is, however, an apparent misperception that I should clear up. The effect of the limit of the geographical size is not to somehow “preserve” the Ross, Skye and Lochaber constituency, or any other current seat. The significance of that constituency is only that it is the largest seat in geographical area in the UK at present, at 12,715km<sup>2</sup>. It is already a significant outlier – half as large again in area as the next largest seat in the United Kingdom. We have taken the view that it would be undesirable for any seat in the future to be significantly larger than that size, so that the constituencies proposed by the Boundary Commissions should be practical both for their representative and for those he or she serves. But the current constituency is afforded no special protection by this rule. Having a cap on the maximum size of future constituencies for reasons of geography is entirely consistent with the approach we have taken in excepting only two named constituencies from the requirement for electoral equality. On the subject of how many constituencies might be affected by rule 4, it is not for me to predict exactly how it might operate: but it seems self-evident that, given the fact that the current largest seat is one and a half times larger than the next, it is likely that the rule will only be applied, if at all, very sparingly.

You have noted that the two exceptions made for the Scottish islands will lead to a degree of over-representation for Scotland relative to the rest of the United Kingdom. If those exceptions were not made, using 2009 data the UK quota would be 75,862 rather than 75,701 – 161 electors does not significantly affect other constituencies. The latter quota of course applies equally to other Scottish constituencies as it does to those in other parts of the UK.

You also raise a number of points relating to the choice of 600 seats as the size of the House of Commons, including the question of why the number of constituents that an MP serves should not be higher than the approximately 76,000 that would be the case (using the December 2009 electoral register as a guide).

I entirely accept that there is room for a range of opinions about what the optimum size of the House should be. Before the election, the Conservatives proposed a figure of 585, and the Liberal Democrats an even lower figure. In the event, the Coalition Government decided to settle on pragmatic grounds for a higher figure. Our proposals are designed to ensure that the House does not continue to increase gradually in size, and to deliver a modest reduction in the size of the House consistent with the numbers of MPs being able efficiently to carry out the functions of serving their constituents and holding the executive to account, as well as forming the pool from which the majority of Ministers are drawn. We have formed the judgement – which I accept is subjective – that a permanent reduction of 50 MPs achieves this aim. As I said in my appearance before the Committee, around one third of MPs currently represent constituencies that would (again, taking the December 2009 figures as a guide) fall within the margin of tolerance from a single quota permitted under new rules. That should, I hope, give a degree of confidence that MPs across the House will be able to serve their constituents effectively if this becomes the norm. That does not mean that some representatives might not be able to represent larger numbers of constituents than that - as you have yourself demonstrated.

Finally, thank you for your invitation to visit the Isle of Wight. Either Mark Harper or I will do so, subject to other diary commitments. Cabinet Office officials will be in touch to discuss.

I hope that this reply is helpful. I am copying this response to the Chairman and Committee Clerk of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee.

  
**NICK CLEGG**