

Hansard

18 December 2002: Columns 859-60

Scottish Parliament

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Helen Liddell): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the future size of the Scottish Parliament.

In the White Paper, "Scotland's Parliament" published in July 1997, the Government acknowledged that the special statutory provisions that stipulated a minimum number of Scottish seats in this House would no longer apply. The average Scottish constituency represented here comprises around 55,000 electors, whereas the average for English constituencies is around 70,000. One factor in this increased representation had been the need to recognise the additional requirement for Scottish MPs to scrutinise separate legislation unique to the Scottish system.

The Scotland Act 1998 provides that any reduction in the number of MPs representing Scottish constituencies at Westminster will cause a reduction in the number of MSPs in the Scottish Parliament. The boundary commission for Scotland published in March this year provisional recommendations that would lead to a reduction in the current number of Scottish Westminster constituencies from 72 to 59. The consequence for Holyrood would be a fall in the number of MSPs from 129 to around 104. During the passage of the Scotland Act, the Government made it clear that if the Parliament took the view that its workings would be undermined by a reduction in numbers, representations could be made to the Government of the day to amend that section of the Act. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton, North and Bellshill (Dr. Reid), then Secretary of State for Scotland, reiterated that view in September 2000. I have made similar public statements to that effect.

Honouring that commitment, I launched last year a consultation to seek views on retaining or adjusting the current statutory link between Westminster and Holyrood parliamentary constituencies. In particular, the consultation paper sought views on three issues: the consequence of the reduction required by the Scotland Act for the operation of the Scottish Parliament; the practical effect and issues that might arise between MPs, MSPs and councillors if boundaries were not coterminous for Westminster and Holyrood constituencies; and the implications of non-coterminous boundaries for electoral administrators and local authorities in relation to the registration of voters and conduct of elections and for the structure and operation of political parties. Almost 800 copies of the consultation document were issued, and the Scotland Office website page recorded 1,300 hits. More than 230 replies were received from civic bodies, individuals, electoral administrators, councils, the Scottish Executive, MPs, MSPs and political parties.

The purpose of the consultation was to seek to proceed on the basis of the sort of consensus born out of the Scottish Constitutional Convention's scheme for the Scottish Parliament. That broad-based convention was made up of political parties including the Scottish Labour party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats, as well as trade unions, local authorities, Churches, the voluntary sector, business groups and civic Scotland. I made it clear that if the Government

were ever to consider amending the Scotland Act, any proposal should seek the same sort of consensus as that which emerged through the convention.

Two strands emerge from the consultation. First, there is the need for stability. Among the civic and representative bodies that responded, the overwhelming view was that the Scottish Parliament should continue to operate with the present number of MSPs. The argument was put that a reduction would cause difficulties, especially to the Committee system, and that it would be unwise to destabilise the Parliament so early in its life by reducing its numbers. The respondents stated that a reduction would adversely affect the Parliament's scrutiny of legislation and the Executive's capacity to conduct inquiries or initiate legislation. They claimed that any reduction in the numbers of list MSPs would reduce proportionality and that the current structure should be maintained to give a proper balance of representation.

Secondly, it was acknowledged, not least by electoral administrators, that difficulties could arise if the boundaries for Westminster and Holyrood were not coterminous. Confusion could be caused to voters and there would be problems for political parties in relation to their organisation.

A summary of those responses has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. I have weighed up carefully all the responses, and in view of the overwhelming body of opinion in favour of maintaining the current number of MSPs, I propose in the interests of stability to seek to amend the Scotland Act accordingly. However, I also take very seriously the concerns about the operation of different boundaries for Westminster and Holyrood. I therefore propose that an independent commission should be established to examine and make recommendations on issues caused by different boundaries for Westminster and Holyrood constituencies.

I expect that, subject to Parliamentary approval, any order giving effect to revised Westminster boundaries should be in place for the next general election, no later than June 2006. Consequently, the new commission, which has the approval of the Scottish Executive and is referred to in their submission, would sit after the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections. Any changes that it might propose to the Scotland Act would be a matter for this Parliament.

Retaining the present number of 129 MSPs requires an amendment to the Scotland Act by way of primary legislation. It will also be necessary to provide for the routine review of Scottish Parliament constituency boundaries. I will be seeking agreement to introduce legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows. Let me make it clear that any change to the Scotland Act will be narrowly drawn. The Government believe that the spirit of the constitutional convention must guide any changes to the legislation. This announcement acknowledges the fact that, as it approaches the end of its first term, the Scottish Parliament is a hard-working and effective institution committed to serving the needs of the Scottish people. It underpins the stability and success of the constitutional settlement in Scotland, which has strengthened the United Kingdom. I commend this statement to the House.