

My intervention to the Minister in the Lords Amendments debate for the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that, if we dismiss Lords amendment 1 today, the courts will not have a role in fixing the dates for elections, because, surely, that is matter for us, answerable to the electors?

Michael Ellis, Paymaster General, Minister of State, Cabinet Office: My right hon. Friend is quite right that it is not productive, and, in fact, it would not be in the interests of the judiciary themselves, for the courts to have such a role.

We committed to repealing the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, as it had led to paralysis at a time when the country needed decisive action. In a similar vein, the Labour manifesto said that the 2011 Act

“stifled democracy and propped up weak governments.”

A vote in the Commons could create paralysis in a number of contexts, including minority Governments, coalition Governments, or where our parties, Parliament or even the nation, at some point in the future, were divided.

As a majority on the Joint Committee on the Fixed-term Parliaments Act noted, a Commons vote would have a practical effect only where Parliament were gridlocked. The problem is that if the Government of the day had a comfortable majority, a vote would be unlikely to make any difference; it would have no meaningful effect, beyond causing unnecessary delay and expense. However, when Parliament is gridlocked, a vote could mean denying an election to a Government who were unable to function effectively. We witnessed the consequences of such a vote painfully in 2019, so let us not repeat that mistake by devising a system where those events could happen again. Lords amendment 1 is, therefore, with the greatest possible respect, without merit.