

The business of England

On Tuesday in the Commons we were asked to go into English Grand Committee to approve the Rating Bill that has been making its way through Parliament.

This is a modest measure, allowing higher rates to be charged on empty property, and allowing contiguous properties that can be properly considered as one property to be charged tax as one. The measure only applies to England.

Under the partial reforms England gained in the last Parliament, any Bill relating just to England can be debated in an English Grand Committee comprising all the MPs representing English seats, and has to be approved by a majority of English MPs on a vote. This procedure prevents the Union Parliament forcing a new law on England which England does not want.

This falls well short of the powers Scotland enjoys through its own Parliament. Not only can they prevent the UK Parliament passing a law on a devolved matter they do not like, but they can also propose and enact measures which the rest of the UK does not like. In England's case if we want a law but there is no majority in the UK Parliament for it we are prevented from passing it.

On Tuesday the SNP decided to make an issue out of this. They spoke with contradictory intention. They both argued that England should have its own Parliament to settle such matters, and objected strongly to English MPs having a veto over such legislation. They decided to force a debate on the Bill where English MPs saw no need to. The Bill met with general agreement – or lacked any English opponents.

The settlement of the English issue was only ever a partial and I trust temporary one. England should of course have the same right to propose as well as to block on devolved matters, as Scotland enjoys. The modest proposals so far incorporated in Standing Orders does something to address the unfairness in the lop sided devolution settlement Conservative governments inherited from Labour. The SNP did themselves harm by mocking a modest improvement to our constitutional arrangements.