

## Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

### Response to Provisional Proposals of Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland November 2011

#### Summary

While having significant reservations about the rules which the Commission is obliged to follow under the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011, Alliance is broadly content with the Commission's Provisional Proposals. In particular, the decision to reduce Belfast to three seats and the three western counties to four seats are appropriate ways of reducing the total from 18 to 16 seats. We make suggestions for minor changes to the boundaries between Mid Antrim and South Antrim and between Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Mid Tyrone and for some name changes.

#### Belfast

With the overall reduction to 16 constituencies in Northern Ireland, it is no longer possible to maintain four seats in Belfast. To justify four constituencies would require more than the whole of Castlereagh and Newtownabbey, as well as the rural area between Lisburn and Carryduff, to be added to the city itself. A concept of 'Belfast' which included Saintfield as well as extending three miles north of Ballyclare would be meaningless, as well as causing unacceptable knock-on effects on adjacent constituencies.

The existing four Belfast seats contain more than three electoral quotas, so require some adjustment to their external boundary. No solution is perfect, but the existing boundaries between Belfast West and Lagan Valley and between Belfast North and South/East Antrim are fairly well defined. Retaining them allows the return of Dundonald and Carryduff/Beechill to Strangford. Without those areas, Newtownards town would be largely cut off from the rest of Strangford, given the need for North Down to be enlarged. We therefore accept the proposals for the external boundary of the three Belfast seats.

Internally, the inclusion of all five Shankill wards in Belfast North is logical. While it is unfortunate that the river Lagan is crossed, there is insufficient electorate east of the river and there are three bridges (Governor's, King's and Ormeau) within the proposed Belfast South East, the latter being a key communications route. We therefore agree that the proposed boundaries of Belfast North, Belfast South East and Belfast South West are the best available compromise.

#### The South East

Having supported the proposed transfer of parts of Castlereagh to Strangford, we accept that the transfer of the Ards peninsula to North Down provides logical boundaries for both these constituencies.

The remaining constituencies in this sub-region all have electorates close to the quota. It is regrettable that minor changes have had to be proposed to the boundaries of Lagan Valley, Newry and Armagh, South Down and Upper Bann because of the reduced tolerance now allowed. We respectfully suggest that the Commission revisit its decision to not apply Rule 7 to see whether there is any scope for not moving Aghagallon, Loughbrickland and Tandragee (though there is logic in returning Glenavy to Lagan Valley).

## **The West**

It is clear that the three western counties cannot sustain five constituencies, but their electorate is more than four electoral quotas. Since the constituencies of Upper Bann and Newry and Armagh are already close to the quota, it is logical to make the boundary adjustment in the Coleraine area.

Fermanagh and South Tyrone needs to be enlarged, but we submit that this should be done by adding the six wards of Torrent DEA from Dungannon, rather than the fringe wards of Omagh. This would maintain the current local government links in both Omagh and Dungannon.

Similarly, it would be possible to maintain the integrity of both Derry and Strabane Districts by adding Claudy and Banagher to Foyle, in place of the three Strabane wards. This is, however, likely to have unacceptable effects on Cookstown, where there would need to be a net transfer from Mid Tyrone to Glenshane. While acknowledging that all of the proposed Mid Tyrone seat is in County Tyrone, there might be logic in retaining the traditional name of 'Mid Ulster'.

## **The North East**

The proposed North Antrim is one of the larger constituencies and does not need to include the ward of Carnlough, which should be returned to Mid Antrim to retain the integrity of Larne Borough. As the largest town is Coleraine, the proposed name is not entirely appropriate. We recommend either 'Coleraine and North Antrim' or an historic name such as 'Dalriada'.

The Commission's proposals include three Carrickfergus wards (Gortalee, Greenisland and Knockagh) in South Antrim. This breaks the established Council and constituency links between Greenisland and Carrickfergus and is inappropriate, as there is an established boundary between Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus Boroughs. We recommend that the Greenisland wards should remain in Mid Antrim and instead the rural ward of Grange, which has links with the Randalstown/Toome area of Antrim should transfer to South Antrim.

The result of these changes is that North Antrim would have an electorate of 74,206, Mid Antrim an electorate of 76,780 and South Antrim an electorate of 71,823. We submit that the maintenance of community and Council links justifies the use of Rule 7 in this respect. If the Commission does not accept this premise, then the transfer of Ahoghill to South Antrim would give electorates of 74,067 and 74,536 for Mid and South Antrim respectively. The Commission's proposals already divide Ballymena and it is submitted that, on that basis, the transfer of either Grange alone, or Grange and Ahoghill together, in order to maintain the integrity of both Larne and Carrickfergus, is reasonable.

As 'Mid Antrim' is traditionally used to refer to the Ballymena area, the name 'Mid and East Antrim' would be more appropriate.

## **Northern Ireland Assembly**

The Rules imposed by the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 will result in more frequent redrawing of Parliamentary boundaries, within tighter margins. It is entirely possible that the number of constituencies in Northern Ireland will change again within five years. While separate consideration of Assembly constituencies is outwith the responsibility of the Commission at this stage, it is appropriate to consider a different basis for Assembly constituencies, perhaps based on the district councils, with different numbers of MLAs dependent on the total electorate.