
Richard Wilson: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It is now four minutes past ten and I formally declare this public hearing open. My name is Richard Wilson and I have been appointed by the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland to chair this hearing into its provisional proposals for Northern Ireland Parliamentary constituencies.

I should stress that I am independent of the Commission. The purpose of this hearing is to enable representations to be made about the Commission's proposals. It is not my function to defend them. All I would say is that, in producing its proposals, the Commission was constrained by the rules set out in the legislation and so any counter-proposals put forward will also need to comply with those rules which you will find at the back of the Commission's report.

We have up to two days available for this hearing and I intend to start at ten a.m. each morning, break for lunch between twelve-thirty and one-thirty, and finish about four-thirty each evening.

Although the hearing is scheduled to last for two days, we may, depending on progress, conclude the proceedings today or we may need to run on beyond four-thirty p.m. The hearing will only continue into a second day if it has not been possible to hear all those who have registered to speak.

Copies of all the relevant documents and maps are available at the back of the room for your information.

This hearing will be recorded and a transcript will be published by the Commission after the end of the consultation period on 2nd December.

The purpose of this public hearing is to hear your representations about the Commission's provisional proposals for Northern Ireland's Parliamentary constituencies. Unlike previous public inquiries under the old rules, I am not required to provide a report or recommendations to the Commission. My role is to conduct the proceedings as efficiently and effectively as possible. If you have a view on the Commission's proposals this is your opportunity to be heard. I will not be able to hear representations about issues outside the scope of this hearing, such as the possible impact of the Commission's proposals on future election results.

Speakers will be called up to the table at the front to speak into the microphones provided. Please begin by stating your name and whether you are speaking in a personal capacity or in a representative capacity. Please speak clearly for the benefit of the transcript.

I intend to conduct the hearing in a relatively informal manner so formal cross-examination is not appropriate. However, I am happy for people to put questions to the speakers through myself. That will happen at the end of each presentation where appropriate. I may also have some questions or points for clarification.

Your submission will be of particular assistance if you are able to explain the reasons why you have taken a particular position and any counter-proposals you wish to make and the reasoning behind them. I should, however, be grateful if speakers would try not to repeat points already made by other speakers and try to back up their statements with some evidence if possible.

It would be very helpful if you leave a copy of your representation with my staff, who will be happy to make a copy if necessary. If you do not get a chance to speak at this hearing or if you wish to add to your submission you can make written representations to the Commission up until 2nd December.

Please feel free to approach any of the support staff with any queries that you may have and they will be pleased to help you or to draw the matter to my attention.

I would now ask the Secretary to the Boundary Commission, Liz Benson, to make a brief presentation of the Boundary Commission's provisional proposals.

Liz Benson:

Thank you. For the record, I am required to make a short presentation of the Commission's proposals and then I will hand over to the speakers to make their submissions.

The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland is an independent public body responsible for reviewing Parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland every five years. The Chairman of the Commission is the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Right Honourable John Bercow. The Deputy Chairman is the Honourable Mr Justice McLaughlin who is a judge of the High Court of Justice in Northern Ireland,

and the Commissioners are Mr Richard Mackenzie CB and Dr Bill Smith.

There are four Boundary Commissions in the United Kingdom; one each for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and this current review is being carried out simultaneously by all four Commissions.

For the current review the Commission is required to review the Parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland and to report to the Secretary of State before 1st October 2013. They are required to reduce the number of constituencies from 18 to 16, to construct constituencies using the UK electoral quota of 76,641 electors, based on the electoral register of 1st December 2010 and they are required to ensure that each constituency has an electorate that is within 5% of the UK quota, that is within a range of 72,810 and 80,473 electors. The Northern Ireland Commission has the discretion to lower the minimum threshold to 70,583, but only if it is satisfied that using the UK minimum threshold would unreasonably impair its ability to consider other factors, such as geography and local ties.

The Commission has the discretion to take into account certain other factors provided they do not interfere with the requirement to meet the +/- 5% target. For this review, these factors are special geographical considerations, particularly the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency, current local government ward boundaries, boundaries of existing constituencies and any local ties which would be broken by changes to the constituencies.

The Commission tried a number of starting points beginning in the North West, the South West, the South and in Belfast and the models produced a similar overall pattern. All of the proposed constituencies are within +/- 5% of the UK electoral quota ranging from 72,903 electors in Belfast South East to 78,664 electors in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The Commission did not consider that the use of Rule 7 was necessary.

The proposals take account of other discretionary factors such as special geographical considerations and the impacts on identifiable local ties, within the confines of the +/- 5% range. However, the loss of two constituencies, together with the tight electoral range, has meant substantial changes to the existing constituencies.

Nine of the existing constituencies continue with only incremental adjustments. Newry and Armagh and South Down required the movement of only one ward. Lagan Valley required the movement of only two wards and Belfast North, Upper Bann and Foyle required the movement of three wards. North Down, Fermanagh and South Tyrone and South Antrim required relatively small adjustments of five or six wards.

In Belfast, the existing four constituencies amount to 3.2 new seats. To maintain a four-constituency Belfast would require substantial extensions of the existing Belfast constituency boundaries into surrounding rural areas and settlements, and the import of some 22 wards. The Commission proposes three constituencies for Belfast with the transfer of 12 wards to the adjacent constituency of Strangford; six from Belfast South and six from Belfast East.

The five western constituencies of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, West Tyrone, Mid Ulster, Foyle and East Londonderry amount to 4.2 seats. The Commission proposes four seats for this part of the region, mainly through the reconfiguration of West Tyrone, Mid Ulster and East Londonderry into two new constituencies, Glenshane and Mid Tyrone.

The only split ward, Derriaghy, was already split at the last review of Parliamentary constituencies in 2008 between Belfast West and Lagan Valley and the Commission saw no reason to depart from this.

The Commission published provisional proposals on 13th September 2011 for a 12-week consultation period up until Friday 2nd December 2011. During the consultation period the Commission is holding three public hearings - in Belfast, Omagh and Ballymena - and this hearing in Ballymena is the last one.

After 2nd December, the Commission will publish the representations received and the transcripts of the public hearings for written comment on them during a second consultation period of four weeks. After considering all the representations and transcripts, the Commission may amend its provisional proposals. Any revised proposals will be published for an eight-week public consultation period; there will be no further public hearings.

After considering any representations on the revised proposals the Commission may further modify its proposals. These modifications will not be subject to further consultation. The

Commission must submit its final report to the Secretary of State before 1st October 2013. Thank you.

Richard Wilson: I would now like to call upon our first speaker, Mr Jim Allister.

Jim Allister: Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. I am Jim Allister. I am MLA for the present North Antrim and I am the leader of Traditional Unionist Voice.

When I first saw the proposals, and my primary interest is the existing North Antrim constituency and what has become of it, I must express the fact that I was amazed at the emasculation that was proposed for North Antrim. My surprise is added to this morning by the opening presentation of the Secretary, when she tells us that the Commission looked at how to tackle the Northern Ireland distribution by starting at the North West, starting in the South West or starting with Belfast. I would respectfully suggest that there is a glaring error there in that, if you take a map of Northern Ireland and look at it, an obvious starting point could equally be the North East. So why was that ruled out as a starting point? Of course, if the starting point had been the North East, you would have discovered that already in existence is a constituency dominating the North East called North Antrim, which has the almost precise electoral quota that is being sought, in or about 75,000; and with no, or very slight adjustment, that would have been and could have been an obvious and sensible starting point.

Instead, it seems that the Commission started at all other parts and worked through Northern Ireland until it came to the North East and simply truncated it in whatever way was necessary to do the maths. The consequence is a most incongruous proposition in respect of North Antrim.

North Antrim existing constituency is, I would respectfully suggest, a homogeneous whole. It hangs together. It has a sense of place. It has historical cogency. It has geographical cogency which perhaps arises from the fact that it has that natural spine - the A26 - running right up through it, and it is that which ties it all together. Therefore, for generations there has been a North Antrim binding together the boroughs of Ballymena, Ballymoney and a good part of Moyle and these proposals utterly devastate that historical, geographical and indeed political entity that was and still is North Antrim. In its place they provide two most incongruous conglomerations.

There is no sense of place in the new North Antrim or the new Mid Antrim. There is nothing that causes them to naturally hang together. Let us look at the new North Antrim. I dare to suggest that most of its electors will in fact not be residents of Antrim at all; they will be residents of County Londonderry, because the biggest portion of it is the town of Coleraine. We have this crazed system whereby what we are going to call North Antrim will in the main have people within it who do not live in County Antrim at all. It has no sense of place because how could one say there is an affinity, a commonality between Broughshane and Coleraine, between Cullybackey and Coleraine, between Portglenone and Coleraine? Their natural affinity is, as they presently hold, with Ballymena, yet they are to be jettisoned from the Ballymena borough. The Ballymena borough of course, although it is the largest borough in all of these areas, is to be devastated. It is to have the top half, as it were, above the town and slightly to the northwest, sliced off and simply cut adrift and cast in with Coleraine. That is so incongruous as to be nigh unbelievable.

Then what are we left with? We are left with Mid Antrim which is this bizarre combination of most of Ballymena, with Carrickfergus. Ballymena, instead of being associated in Parliamentary terms with its natural hinterland of Ballymoney and Moyle and being the gateway to all of that in respect of the North coast, is suddenly to be aligned most uncomfortably and inappropriately with Carrickfergus.

These constituencies are meant to be homogeneous wholes and they are meant to have regard to size, shape and their natural identities. In representing a constituency you want to have an area which has a commonality and common cause within those who make it up. I mentioned the A26 being a spine that holds together the existing North Antrim. Consider how you get from Ballymena to Carrickfergus; you either go down the M2, through South Antrim, North Belfast and back up into the new Mid Antrim at Carrickfergus, or you take the tortuous route over the Collin, as locals will understand it, towards Ballyclare, turning in at Ballynure, and so again you go out of the constituency to come back into it. I make that point simply to demonstrate that there is nothing which causes the constituency as proposed to hang together. These are rural constituencies and yet we have the amalgamation of Carrickfergus, part of the Greater Belfast area, with a rural hub which is the market town of Ballymena.

I would respectfully suggest it makes no sense whatever and therefore the counter-proposal is that we retain North Antrim

as it is, a proven, homogeneous whole with a sense of place, with a historical and geographical affinity and that we make that the starting point for looking at how we address these constituencies. It has exactly, or in or about, the number of constituents you want, it has been in this existence and shape for decades and there can be no definable, justifiable reason for the mutilation of it, for that is what it is, by these proposals.

So that, in essence, Mr Chairman, is my proposition. Thank you.

Richard Wilson: Has anyone any questions? There being no questions, thank you very much, Mr Allister.

If Mr Noel Williams would care to come forward to make a presentation.

Noel Williams: Chairman, Secretary, good day to you. I am Wing Commander Noel Williams. I am head of operations for the East Antrim constituency of the Alliance Party. I have been nominated by the executive of the Alliance Party to make this submission to this hearing. We will also make a detailed written submission in due course.

Many of the initial comments have concentrated on what is described as "which two constituencies will be lost?" In the first instance it is entirely proper to judge how many seats Belfast should have. It is absolutely clear that there can be only three Belfast constituencies after the review concludes. To provide the additional electorate to justify a fourth Belfast seat would require the addition of all the remaining wards of both Castlereagh and Newtownabbey, the five Lisburn wards between Lisburn town and Carryduff and more. A so-called "Belfast" which stretched from three miles north of Ballyclare to Saintfield would clearly be a suboptimal outcome for all the residents of Belfast, of Ballyclare, of Saintfield and elsewhere. It would be nonsensical and have a seriously detrimental effect on other constituencies.

Once it is accepted that Belfast can only have three seats, the Alliance Party accepts the specific recommendations for the boundaries of the three constituencies. Given the significance of the lower Lagan, there is no realistic alternative in our view.

Further, the Alliance Party accepts the provisional recommendations for the remaining constituencies largely as published, subject to the following minor adjustments; in

County Tyrone the six wards of Torrent District Electoral Area lie naturally to Dungannon and were previously in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. We believe they should return to that constituency and the six wards of Omagh district should not transfer into Fermanagh and South Tyrone, but remain in Mid Tyrone.

In County Antrim, the three Greenisland wards of Gortalee, Greenisland and Knockagh should not be separated from Carrickfergus which they abut and to which they have been linked since the creation of East Antrim and since 1973 in local government terms; they should be transferred to Mid Antrim. To compensate, Grange ward, which has some links with Randalstown and Toome, should be transferred to South Antrim. This would make both South Antrim and Mid Antrim more coherent, both geographically and socially. We really do feel strongly that the Greenisland wards should remain with Carrickfergus.

We recommend consideration of two changes to constituency names. First, Coleraine is now the largest town in North Antrim, so therefore that name is inaccurate. We would suggest Dalriada or possibly Coleraine and North Antrim.

Mid Antrim is associated with Ballymena rather than Carrickfergus or Larne so the name might be changed to Mid and East Antrim.

This concludes the Alliance evidence this morning. Thank you very much for your attention.

Richard Wilson: Thank you very much. Mr Williams, could I ask; I notice that you were proposing six wards in Tyrone in and out and also in respect of the adjustments you are suggesting in Greenisland and at Grange, at Randalstown, have you checked the ripple effect of those on the quota?

Noel Williams: We have done our due diligence on this, Chairman and I will make sure that we revisit that in our written submission to double-check for you.

Richard Wilson: Thank you very much, Mr Williams. Would Mr Ian Stevenson like to come forward and speak now? Could you indicate the capacity in which you are here?

Ian Stevenson: My name is Ian Stevenson. I am the Mayor of Ballymoney. I am here in the capacity as a representative of people who have spoken to me within Ballymoney about the issue. Most of

what I was going to say has already been said by the TUV leader, even though I am not a member of TUV.

The concerns which were raised with me were in relation to coterminosity in relation to councils and even the breakup of councils as they exist at the moment. How does that really fit in with coterminosity, particularly in Coleraine and Ballymena? That would be one of the things that that would affect them.

They are also wondering if, when you were drawing up these proposals for constituency boundaries for Westminster, you had been aware of the 11 or 15 council model and whether that was taken into account at all. Those were the main points.

There is an elephant in the room which I am not allowed to mention, about the makeup of Glenshane and the North Antrim constituency, but everything else was said.

Richard Wilson: Thank you very much, Mr Stevenson.

As there is no-one else present at the moment who wishes to make any representation, we will adjourn the hearing at this stage. It is ten thirty-five.

Richard Wilson: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It is now ten minutes to two and I formally declare this public hearing reconvened. I would invite Mr Michael Savage to make his presentation.

Michael Savage: My name is Michael Savage. I am Chief Executive of the SDLP. We will be making just a few observations today. Given the nature of where we are politically at the moment - we are in the midst of a leadership campaign and the run-up to our party conference - I would point out that we found the lead-in time in relation to being able to make meaningful presentations at the hearings quite short, given what we believe to be the radical nature of the proposals that have come from the Boundary Commission and the scale of the changes. Obviously resource-wise, we would not compete with the Commission in having the capacity to analyse and dissect and we would need considerably more time to do so.

That said, we will not be giving this presentation as our final contribution to the consultation; we will be putting together a

full-strength legal document supported by political and scientific research, which we will have by the close of consultation in early December.

The general point that the Party would like to make at this stage is that we are very much in favour of the maintenance of four seats in Belfast. We believe that strategic planning and everything else of a government nature is drawn towards creating Belfast as a metropolitan centre in Northern Ireland. From a constituency basis we therefore believe that the urban centres in the Greater Belfast area lend themselves to four parliamentary constituencies. On a wider point we believe that it maintains the inclusivity of the current political process as a result, given the demographics. There is a greater sense of belonging to Belfast in the Greater Belfast area, as opposed to areas known as Strangford or anything else.

I would also like to point out that four seats in Belfast are feasible. I will show here a map that was drawn up with very little time to do so, but I would point out that even just taking the natural expansion of Belfast into the peripheral country areas, four seats are available.

I have also looked at what we believe to be the dilution of local sense of identity west of the Bann, in that the Mid Tyrone constituency, as it was in your original proposals, runs from Castlederg on the boundary with Donegal, right to the shores of Lough Neagh and Ardboe, the Loup and that area. Having spoken at length to representatives in both the Mid Ulster and the West Tyrone constituencies, they believe that the sense of belonging and the sense of place simply does not exist from the far west of West Tyrone to the shore of Lough Neagh. This is just a very early draft; we will be putting more definitive proposals to you. It is not our job to draw the boundaries; that is the Commission's job, but it was just a point, as a simple example. Now I have not labelled any of these constituencies, but you will see the horseshoe-effect constituency around Greater Belfast, south of Belfast and east and west of it, and I would refer to it in any numbers here as being Lagan Lough, which would be an amalgamation of Lagan Valley and Strangford.

I have also looked at the last two additional constituencies that were added to the Northern Ireland parliamentary constituencies - Strangford and East Antrim - and looked at removing those and trying to expand the old boundaries beyond where they are. I understand the difficulties in relation to the 5% threshold which, given the population size in

Northern Ireland and its spread, makes it extremely difficult to move even one electoral ward; it has a knock-on effect in the jigsaw puzzle that is the parliamentary constituency makeup of Northern Ireland.

You will see that by trying to maintain the number of current constituencies west of the Bann to try and promote sense of belonging is a semi-contradiction in itself, in that you would end up with a constituency where the focal point is Lough Neagh. I would refer to that as being Lough Neagh and where formerly West Tyrone and part of Mid Ulster would become what I would classify as being Mid-West-Ulster. Then, in what was formerly known as the East Derry constituency, part of it and then encroaching onto the old North Antrim, I would have created a constituency known as Causeway, which maintains a lot of the local sense of identity along the north Antrim and north County Derry coast.

What basically I am showing by this is that I believe that the starting point for the Boundary Commission here should have been around maintaining the approach to strategic planning in relation to the Greater Belfast area and working out from there. I believe that by moving in the way that they have, taking each constituency by constituency, it has had the detrimental effect of in fact reducing Belfast by its very nature. We firmly believe that the population, emphasis on forward-planning and sense of belonging mean that there is a strong case to be made for four constituencies in Belfast.

That was just to give you an idea where literally, in a very short space of time, we were able to put together a fairly rough example of how the constituencies can be expanded beyond the four of Belfast.

I am now going to touch on some of the areas where I believe that there are some constituencies that do not make sense in relation to sense of belonging. Your Mid Antrim was a long, narrow strip that effectively stretched from the shores of Lough Neagh right over to Carrickfergus, and I believe there is a need to compact that constituency to maintain a sense of belonging in three centres.

If you look at the proposal we have here, Carnlough was the only Larne Borough Council ward that was excluded from the Mid Antrim area. I believe that it is part of the lower Glens and the lower rural area that would link in towards both Larne, the Carnlough area, Glenarm, Carncastle and in towards Broughshane and Ballymena through the Slemish ward. I also

believe that the other wards of Knockagh and Greenisland should have been included within that and those are the simple proposals I would make to take into consideration where you would actually compact the sense of belonging. You would have to remove the Galgorm and Ahoghill Wards into North Antrim as a result of that, but the bottom line is, given the nature of the challenge that the Boundary Commission was faced with, you are going to have anomalies like that in some areas. Ahoghill and Galgorm were formerly part of the old North Antrim anyway. As you can see, these are more compact and less spread out wards where you have centres of belonging, where, for example, you have the greater Portglenone, Ahoghill, Cullybackey area, Galgorm area in the southern end of the constituency, then you are into the natural hinterland of the Glens and then the greater Coleraine area and the greater Ballymoney area. You are not therefore splitting up local communities to the same extent.

The challenge that you face no matter where you turn in this exercise is that you are going to have overspills in certain fringes of the area. I have tried to maintain them around the periphery of the boundaries, so that if we come to a stage where boundaries are only being tinkered with, at least I believe they should be tinkered with in a way that resembles a sense of belonging.

I believe that the other wards of what were previously the old South Antrim should be returned there, because they have a sense of connection with that constituency. That takes in the Glebe, Ballyhenry, etc. I have also added in Grange and Kells in the Northern end. Again, this is a much more compact constituency and focuses on the greater Mallusk area, the greater Antrim town area, the greater Crumlin area and also the greater Ballyclare/Ballynure area. You have four communities there effectively. This is where I believe should have been looked at in the four Belfast areas; if you are going to look at four constituencies in Belfast, Belfast North should have been expanded northwards towards the Mallusk area. We believe they have a huge scope to do that. These are very early calculations and they are nothing that we would be, at this stage, hanging our coat on. Mallusk and the greater Newtownabbey/ Glengormley area are seen as very much part of the natural Belfast hinterland, but I am just making these points and some observations on the boundaries that you had put forward.

That potentially is what Belfast South East could look like if it was expanded in relation to a 50/50 split between Belfast East and Belfast South, in places like Carryduff, Beechill, Minnowburn, Cairnshill, all of which see themselves as part of Greater Belfast and gravitate towards the South Belfast area.

Belfast West would remain relatively unchanged. There may be an overspill along some of the periphery or in Upper Malone, Windsor or Shaftesbury, but ideally we would see Belfast West, with maybe the exception of some of the North Belfast areas like Ardoyne, New Lodge or Shankill maybe coming in there in a Belfast four-seat constituency.

The Strangford area we would look at, for example, areas like Tullycarnet, Gilnahirk and other areas that would gravitate more towards the greater Dundonald area than places like Carryduff, for example. The main population centres there are Dundonald and Comber. Those areas of the far east of Belfast are closer geographically and would gravitate more towards those centres like Dundonald than places like Carryduff. We would like that to be factored in as well.

Lagan Valley we have looked at and this is linked in with Upper Bann, in that we feel that Aghagallon is very much Craigavon Council area. I think Mr Mackenzie outlined in a ruling to our MLA Dolores Kelly for Upper Bann previously and accepted an argument that Aghagallon was very much a Craigavon/Upper Bann ward. As a result of that previous ruling, we would be saying that Aghagallon should remain part of Upper Bann and possibly Magheralin because it seems that the local connection with Moira there is very strong. That could come in to compensate in Lagan Valley. The map shows Aghagallon in what would be a new Upper Bann, which we believe is more reflective of the community and effectively takes into consideration the constituency's affinity with the Lough Shore.

In my view, the West Tyrone constituencies of Dromore, Trillick, and Fintona are very much part of, and gravitate towards, Omagh. On a peripheral look, if you are only looking at tinkering with the boundaries, Sixmilecross is the only Mid Tyrone ward within that District Electoral Area that has not been included in your new Mid Tyrone. At the very least, Sixmilecross should be included because again, it is very much part of the greater Omagh sense of place. However, as you can see from that constituency, you are running effectively from the far reaches of Castlederg on the border with Donegal, right over to Ardboe. We simply believe that is

not a workable scenario as far as trying to justify a sense of belonging and sense of place. We also feel that it does somewhat dilute that sense of place that maybe the constituency that was West Tyrone very much embodied.

In the Glenshane area, to compensate for moving Sixmilecross, we would look at moving the Coagh ward into Glenshane because it is closely linked with Moneymore and there is very much a sense of community there. This is the number crunching element of it. This is only if things are to be tinkered with; we would be advocating in our main presentation to you in writing that we go for a more radical approach with four Belfast constituencies.

Fermanagh and South Tyrone is as is there, but as you can see in the northern end, coloured off in the blue of my map, those are the areas that we believe should be included, maybe with the exception of Trillick, in a new Mid West Ulster constituency that would factor in what was most of West Tyrone and the western end of Mid Ulster. I think that would deal with your problem of sense of belonging across that narrow strip. I think if you look at the proposals that have been put forward, there are too many narrow, long strips which may work in Great Britain in areas of dense population, but in Northern Ireland they simply do not factor in the sense of belonging where so many provincial towns have been cut off from their natural hinterlands. I think that has been done very much so in the big, rural constituency that was West Tyrone, to take the likes of Fintona, Newtownsaville, Drumquin and Dromore and even Trillick, which are seen as natural places. Trillick is probably the only one that would sort of semi-gravitate towards Enniskillen or between Enniskillen and Omagh. Those four or five wards there give us further cause for concern west of the Bann.

The Foyle constituency, we could live with, if that is the way that people feel that it needs to be carved up, but we would have made the case - and I think our colleagues in Foyle have made the case - that Claudy and Banagher wards are wards that, as part of Derry City Council, would have a natural affinity with Derry and the greater Derry City area. The proposal that we will probably put into our detailed plan would be that those would be factored into the greater Foyle area, with maybe one or two of the lower Strabane District Council areas of Artigarvan and Dunnamanagh included within a new constituency west of the Bann.

Newry and Armagh is relatively unchanged, given the electorate numbers there. We believe that Tandragee moving towards Upper Bann is a positive move, in that the Tandragee area gravitates more towards Portadown and the greater Upper Bann area.

South Down is relatively untouched. Loughbrickland would be probably a natural extension there too. In the whole area of Donaghmore and the Derryleckagh ward there is a natural hinterland and fits reasonably well. It also, to be frank, leads to a continued inclusivity in South Down from a political perspective and while we would be making very criteria-based points, politically scientific points in relation to our response to this, which I know is the Boundary Commission's point, we will also be making very strong political points on the need to maintain political inclusivity in Northern Ireland, taking into consideration where we are in the current political process at the moment.

North Down again would remain relatively unchanged and I would welcome the connectivity of the Ards Peninsula right up into Newtownards and Bangor area.

I know Ray wants to talk more about Belfast, but I just want to point out what I believe to be some levels of confusion in relation to criteria-based arguments, in that because of Northern Ireland and its makeup, the application of the criteria is very much in the eye of the beholder. Thank you.

Ray Kennedy: You will be pleased to know I do not have a presentation. My name is Ray Kennedy from the SDLP and I do not want to go over what my colleague, Michael Savage, has gone through. Michael has concentrated very heavily on working through all of these and as he has already stated, it is a very difficult exercise for us amateurs without the skills, the resources, the IT, the software packages and everything else, to do maps and drawings. Most of our work is done by hand and by very hard work. Of course, whenever we are moving and looking at constituencies and how we can re-analyse them, then we are at a very distinct disadvantage from the Boundary Commission. Perhaps a point here should be that, in future, it may be worthwhile to facilitate some of the political offices who want to make representations with some of the software that might be available, perhaps on a short-term licence basis. They can then look at the constituencies and look at how to re-draw the maps and see the impact it may have on neighbouring constituencies, because that is obviously the great difficulty that we have.

We believe in principle that we should have a four-seat Belfast and I think when we look at Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, everything takes into consideration Belfast as a bigger metropolitan area. In relation to the recent boundary review of local government and on previous Boundary Commission reviews, we had made the case that, for example, Belfast does not stop at Forestside. People who live in Belfast do not believe it stops there. To put someone in who lives 100 yards away from Forestside and say, "You are not part of Belfast, you are part of Strangford," or other similar areas is, I believe, highly inappropriate. It avoids actually looking at the greater conurbation area. When you are deciding how to break down constituencies and representation, and if you are going to re-draw the boundaries, then the greater urban conurbation is much more appropriately represented by an urban MP in an urban constituency. Instead, what we have is chunks of Belfast being taken out to try and balance the books in some of our rural constituencies and I think that is a demeaning of Belfast. It demeans it as a major city in the UK to try and reduce its size, whenever we are trying more than ever to expand the impact and the role of Belfast. I know that is not necessarily the responsibility of the Boundary Review to look at that.

I will make another point that I know is not your responsibility to look at, and that is the numbers of people who actually live in constituencies. I believe it is an error, but for the record, I would like to make the point that in South Belfast roughly 35% of the residential properties have no one registered to vote. Now if we take that into consideration on the workload of a constituency office, that is a phenomenal number. When we take the Holy Land out of it, for example, in South Belfast, it becomes somewhere between 22% and 25%. That is still a huge number of people not registered. I have tried, as has the MP for the area, Dr Alasdair McDonnell, to work with the Electoral Office. We have made significant representations to the Electoral Office to address this problem. We have also raised this before with the Electoral Commission and to date, we have still not got an appropriate mechanism for getting people on the register. If and when we do, and it does start to work, then we are going to have a situation later where the constituency boundaries are going to have to be redrawn because it will exceed the number of electors and be outside the tolerance level.

If I can go on; we seem to be avoiding build lines when we have drawn the boundaries. If we take the Greater Belfast

area, there is enough there for four seats. We believe that we should start from that premise, because that is obviously the greater conurbation area, the greater urban area of Northern Ireland, and then work around the other constituencies. We believe that is the role of the Boundary Commission to look at that very seriously and not dismiss it out of hand and say, "Well that is not really what we are here for; this is what we have done."

I think so far none of the communications that have come from the Boundary Commission have actually stated that "we looked at the four and we have rejected them and these are very good reasons why we have rejected them". That has not been forthcoming and maybe there are good reasons there, but I do not believe that they have had sufficient explanation.

The political representation also needs to be balanced in this and we should be looking at how people should be represented. One example of segregation in the boundary, for example, is to use the Peace Line as a way of segregating one community from another at a time when we are trying to knock the peace lines down and get people to integrate more freely. We are actually politically defining them in different constituencies and I do not think that is very helpful to how we move forward in a shared society.

Belfast is a major city and we do need to ensure that we look at urban representation; how we best manage that and not take chunks of Belfast out so that we have an urban representation, and not have someone in Strangford or North Down representing parts of Belfast. I think you may be aware in the past when I have given presentations on this, Belfast was always considered way back in the early 1900s as Belfast one to fifteen, before any postcodes ever came in. Northern Ireland only had districts. Belfast eight, Carryduff for example, was part of Belfast; it was seen as part of Belfast and we have put Carryduff into Hillsborough, we have put it into Strangford, we have recently put it into South Belfast and now we are putting it back into Strangford again under the proposed recommendations. The people who live there that I have been talking to on a regular basis believe they have finally got the right representation of being identified as part of Belfast.

In a previous Boundary Review we put forward evidence to show that the vast majority of people in Cairnshill, Beechill, Knockbracken and Galwally wards want to be part of Belfast and saw themselves as part of Belfast, not part of any other

constituency or even Council area. I think this has been ignored, looking at people's identity, where they feel they should be represented from. I think if you go up into parts of East Belfast and parts of South Belfast, the parts that are being segregated off in chunks, the people who live there should be consulted more specifically because they actually do believe they are part of Belfast. If they were to be part of Belfast, that would give us the opportunity to bring back the situation where we have four seats in Belfast.

I do not want to go into any more at this stage. As Michael, my colleague said, we have a leadership competition and we have a conference to prepare and by 5th November that should all be over. We will present our case after that but before the deadline of 2nd December. Thank you very much.

Richard Wilson: Thank you very much indeed. You have made quite a number of proposals; you may not be in a position at this stage to answer, but have you considered what we would call the "ripple effect?" I appreciate you are starting off with Belfast as the major starting point, the conurbation, the major city in the Province, but have you considered the ripple effect on the other constituencies at this stage or not? I was not quite clear whether you have.

Michael Savage: I have looked at the other constituencies and yes, there is a ripple effect, but I believe it is a manageable one, based on the fact that if you look at the two constituencies that I made reference to in the brief presentation, i.e. East Antrim and Strangford; they were the last two constituencies, from memory, that were added to the Parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland. West Tyrone was potentially the other one, but it emphasises the fact that these were greater Belfast constituencies to make up the numbers of the representation at the time when the threshold was lower and you had 650 members of Parliament. The West Tyrone constituency reflected the sheer size of the geographical area of County Tyrone and the greater County Tyrone area.

I believe you run into a problem ripple effect and that is why I showed just a very simple example, let us say a rough guide, in that the South Belfast constituency goes out as far as Ballygowan, so that was just a natural expansion going south eastwards. What I was suggesting was that we would need to look at the expansion further north of North Belfast, feeding down into West Belfast and West Belfast feeding into South, which would eliminate the need to go geographically into the rural area and would potentially minimise the horseshoe

effect of running from Ballinderry in the west end of Lagan Valley through to Comber East in the east end of Comber. Now, being somebody who lives, who was born and reared in Ballynahinch, I know the connectivity between that area and the Lagan Valley. For example, whenever Ballynahinch and Ballymaglave wards were moved recently into the Strangford constituency, there was disbelief in the Ballynahinch area as to what connectivity there was with the Ards Peninsula, other than potentially Comber. Comber was as far really as our connection would have gone; Saintfield, Ballygowan and Comber would have been the natural run up along there. Likewise the eight mile stretch to Lisburn, which is effectively all that Ballynahinch is from Lisburn. What I was looking at with that horseshoe around greater Belfast, of the four Belfast seats, was linking that connection, with Ballynahinch being the link between those areas. Yes, you are going to have a certain degree of isolation potentially at the periphery of every constituency, but certainly, the numbers just are not there outside of Belfast to make another two compact constituencies below that. I believe that the big issue here is in relation to the threshold and that is what causes the difficulty for the Northern Ireland constituencies. Maybe deviating to 8% in Northern Ireland would have been more appropriate at this stage in the population's development in that I think we have 5% deviation across Northern Ireland, allowing maybe one or two constituencies to hover slightly above that.

Liz Benson: It is Liz Benson, the Commission Secretary speaking. The law requires us to keep all constituencies within plus or minus 5%, except for the use of Rule 7 of course.

Michael Savage: Yes, but I think in the initial discussions that Northern Ireland MPs had around the time that the legislations were going through, the point was made of "up to 8%" because of what I believe has been applied here. This is where the narrow constituencies come into play in that those are fine in high-density residential areas in high population areas in England and large conurbations around the rest of Great Britain. Northern Ireland is unique and outside of Belfast and Derry it is a largely provincial town and rural hinterland based area. That is why, when you apply the 5% you are going to have a ripple effect no matter where you go. I believe that, based on the strategic area plan for Belfast, which refers to Belfast as "developing a metropolitan centre for Northern Ireland", this does not allow for that development to take place. It also does not allow, as Ray has outlined, for tackling the real problem of voter registration in the Greater Belfast area and particularly what was the South Belfast constituency. I know

for a fact that no other party in the South Belfast area has made efforts to work with the Electoral Commission to tackle that problem. We have been very active in trying to tackle that discrepancy in relation to the Electoral Register and the Electoral Commission can verify that. If the area plan is going in to grow Belfast and a real challenge is met by the Electoral Commission in the Electoral Office to deal with the lack of voter registration in certain areas, then you are going to bust three seats at the seams in a very short period of time. I think that needs to be factored in, in relation to the demographics in the area, the growth in population and also the growth of the Electoral Register.

In relation to the ripple effect; because of the geographical layout of Northern Ireland in that we have a big lump of water in the middle of it called Lough Neagh, it is very hard to factor in a sense of belonging around that Lough other than using the Lough as the area that they gravitate to. That is why you do end up with a rather awkward looking, narrow, crescent moon-shaped constituency in and around Lough Neagh. If we had had more time, resources and certainly the software available to the Boundary Commission, we would have been able to deal with the ripple effect in that it would not impede the sense of belonging in some way.

I take an example of the Mid Antrim one where you have effectively run a strip along literally the Ballymena town boundary as the guide and it runs as a narrow strip right out, I think to Islandmagee. The whole rural farming hinterland of the greater Ballymena area, which sees Ballymena as its market town and provincial town, has been sadly neglected with that. I believe there is scope to look at two larger, compact constituencies in County Antrim where North Belfast would gobble up a lot of the lower County Antrim - the most southern point of County Antrim. I believe that is where really the work should have started in relation to the Belfast area, because the ripple effect there could be a positive one in relation to solving the urban problem around the Belfast area and adding the numbers to Belfast South that at the minute seem to be lacking - those 12,000 or 15,000 voters that needed to be found. You have big swathes of vote in around the Mallusk area; people in Mallusk gravitate towards Newtownabbey, the Greater North Belfast area and that is where I think the work on the four Belfast constituencies should really have been done. Then, rather than having to try and pull Belfast South out into a south eastward direction out as far as Ballygowan, if you were able to have a positive ripple effect coming from the lower end of what would have

been traditionally the southern south eastern end of the South Antrim constituency. This is effectively a built-up, urban area which runs the length of the M2 and the Belfast foreshore, where I believe there could be a positive ripple effect that would solve a bigger ripple effect in the rural areas beyond that.

Ray Kennedy: Can I just add something? When we talk about the ripple effect we also have to understand the ripple effect of not having the four Belfast constituencies, because when we start looking at all the other constituencies, the ripple effect seems to have sort of finished at South Belfast so that we can take the chunks away from it to balance up everything else. Belfast, I think, should have been looked at, as I said earlier, in its greatest conurbation. As far as the City Council is concerned, the whole of Belfast is not covered by Belfast City Council. Take Castlereagh Council, for example; the majority of people who live in Castlereagh Council actually live in Belfast, so we should be looking at Belfast as an entity on its own. If the Boundary Commission had tried an example with four Belfast seats so we can have urban representation and then looked at the ripple effect beyond that. We still believe on a point of principle that we should have started with the greatest urban area, using even maps that we take from the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan and start working around those. We need to be looking at Belfast as a greater entity and not as a very narrow entity.

If we look at the map of the constituencies, it looks totally lopsided when we take Belfast South and Belfast East and look at the District Electoral Areas and the wards that have been removed out of there to help balance elsewhere. An example in North Down too; I have friends who live in Newtownards who actually believe "well, why can we not be in North Down? We are North Down so why are we being taken out of it?" So the ripple effect is affecting lots of different people, but I think we have to work on a principle and our principle starts from the premise that there should be four Belfast seats because there are enough people living in the Greater Belfast area to make that happen and to create four urban constituencies for appropriate urban-based representation and looking at the more rural provincial town-type representation that Michael has talked about earlier here. It makes it easier and more consistent for democratic representation.

Richard Wilson: Thank you very much indeed. As there are no questions, I therefore adjourn this hearing until ten o'clock tomorrow.

ENDS
