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Fiona Bagnell: Good morning ladies and gentlemen. It is now one minute past ten and I now formally declare this public hearing open. My name is Fiona Bagnell 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; 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 o'clock each morning, break for lunch between around twelve-thirty and one-thirty and finish around 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. The hearing will only continue into a second day if it has not been possible to hear all of those who are 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 2<sup>nd</sup> December. The purpose of this hearing is to hear your representations about the Commission's provisional proposals for Northern Ireland's Parliamentary Constituencies and 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 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. I will shortly adjourn the hearing, if it is necessary, so that anyone who wishes to make representations can be added to the programme of speakers. As things presently stand I would intend that we just go on into the substantive hearing.

As for the order of speakers, I would ask everyone to be as flexible as they can and I will try to accommodate speakers as far as reasonably possible. That said, I propose to adopt the custom of past hearings, which is to hear first from members of Parliament and Assembly members, followed by local councillors and council officials, followed by representations of groups and organisations and thereafter members of the public. 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 speakers through myself and 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, 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 would leave a copy of your representation with 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 2<sup>nd</sup> December. Please feel free to approach any of the support staff with any questions that you may have and they will be pleased to help you or to draw the matter to my attention.

In the circumstances I do not think there is a need to take an adjournment at this stage and therefore I would call upon Liz to make the initial presentation.

Liz Benson:

The legislation requires that each hearing should begin with an explanation of the proposals with which the hearing is concerned so I will, as briefly as possible, give you an outline of the Commission's proposals and then I will hand over to the audience here today to make their own submissions.

The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland is an independent public body responsible for reviewing Parliamentary Constituencies in Northern Ireland and

reporting to the Secretary of State 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 the current review is being carried out simultaneously by all four Commissions.

The Commission is required to review the Parliamentary Constituencies in Northern Ireland and to report to the Secretary of State before 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013. They are required to reduce the number of constituencies from 18 to 16 and to construct constituencies using the UK electoral quota of 76,641 electors, based on the electoral register at 1<sup>st</sup> December 2010.

They are required to ensure that each constituency has an electorate that is within 5% of this UK quota. That means within a range of 72,810 electors and 80,473 electors. Under Rule 7 of the legislation the Northern Ireland Commission may define constituencies with electorates as low as 70,583 electors, but only if it is satisfied that the application of the UK bottom threshold would unreasonably impair its ability to consider other factors such as special geographical considerations or local ties.

In applying the rules the Commission has the discretion to take into account certain other factors that are set out in Rule 5 of the legislation, provided this does not interfere with the requirement to meet the +/- 5% target. For this review the factors are special geographical considerations, particularly the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency, the current local government ward boundaries, the boundaries of existing constituencies and any local ties which would be broken by changes in those constituencies.

As to the Commission's proposals themselves, 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 each time. All of the proposed constituencies are within the +/- 5% of the UK electoral quota and they range 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. Within the confines of the +/- 5% range, the proposals take account of the other discretionary factors such as geographical considerations and impacts on identifiable local ties where possible. However, the loss of two constituencies, together with a 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 adjacent rural areas and settlements and the import of some 22 wards. The Commission, therefore, 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 table shows you the span of the constituencies, the size of their electorates and their variance from the UK quota. As you can see, they go from the smallest, Belfast South East with 72,903 voters to Fermanagh and South Tyrone with 78,664 electors.

And finally, the consultation process: the Commission published its provisional proposals on 13<sup>th</sup> September for a 12-week consultation period up until Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> December. You can view the report and the maps on our website, in public libraries, at council headquarters, area electoral offices and at our own offices in Forestview. During the consultation

period the Commission is holding three public hearings, this one in the Ramada Plaza today and tomorrow, on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> October in the Silver Birch Hotel in Omagh and on 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> October in Tullyglass House Hotel in Ballymena.

After the end of the consultation period on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, the Commission will publish all the representations received and the transcripts of the public hearings for written comment for a further consultation period of four weeks. The Commission will then consider all the representations and transcripts and they may amend their provisional proposals. Any resulting revised proposals will be published for an eight-week public consultation period but there will be no further public hearings.

The Commission will consider any representations on the revised proposals and may make further modifications to its proposals. The final modifications will not be subject to further consultation and the Commission's final report has to be with the Secretary of State by 1<sup>st</sup> October 2013 for laying before Parliament. It will also be published for information. Thank you.

Fiona Bagnell: Thank you very much. In the circumstances I am happy to ask Mr Douglas if you would like to come forward to make your presentation at this stage. Could I ask you to put the microphone on and state your name, and your capacity for speaking, for the record.

Stephen Douglas: My name is Stephen Douglas. I am General Secretary of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland and I have been nominated by the Executive of the Alliance Party to make a preliminary submission to this hearing. We will make a more detailed written submission at a later date.

Given the constraints within which the Commission is obliged to operate by statute, the outcome of this review is largely as good as can be expected. Many of the initial comments in the blogosphere, in the media and elsewhere on the provisional recommendations have concentrated on what is described as "which two constituencies will be lost". In the first instance it is entirely appropriate to judge how many seats Belfast should have. It is absolutely clear there can be only three Belfast constituencies after the review concludes. This is determined by our interpretation, which we share with the Commissioner, of the statute which gave rise to this review of the constituencies in Northern Ireland. To provide the additional electorate to justify a fourth Belfast seat would

require the addition of all the remaining wards of Castlereagh and Newtownabbey, the five Lisburn wards between Lisburn town and Carryduff and then some more. A so-called Belfast which stretched from three miles north of Ballyclare to Saintfield would clearly be a sub-optimal outcome for all residents of Belfast, Ballyclare, of Saintfield and elsewhere. It would, in our interpretation, be nonsensical and have a seriously detrimental effect on other constituencies.

Once it is accepted that Belfast can only retain three seats, the Alliance Party accepts the specific recommendations for the boundaries of the three constituencies. Given the significance of the Lower Lagan and given the statutory constraints within which the Boundary Commissioner and the Boundary Commission operates, there really is no realistic alternative.

Furthermore, the Alliance Party accepts the provisional recommendations for the remaining constituencies largely as published, subject to the following minor adjustments. We will expand on the details at the relevant local hearings in Omagh and Ballymena.

In County Down we believe that there is no need to transfer Loughbrickland into South Down from Upper Bann. However, we recognise that not transferring Loughbrickland from South Down would render South Down below the electoral quota range. We also recognise that while it might be going too far to say it is impossible for the Rule 7 discretion to be exercised by the Boundary Commission, given that the Boundary Commission has included a wider range of characteristics it must bear in mind when determining the constituency boundaries as part of its general principles, it is certainly very difficult to imagine a situation where the Boundary Commission, having so generously allocated these general principles, can go outside of the range. We make that point about Loughbrickland in the spirit of the connections between the people living in Loughbrickland and Banbridge rather than towards Downpatrick or Newcastle in South Down. However, we recognise that to a large extent the Boundary Commission is tied and we recognise the reasoning which led to Loughbrickland leaving Upper Bann.

In County Tyrone, the six wards of Torrent District Electoral Area lie naturally, in our view, to Dungannon and were previously in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. We believe they should return to that constituency. There are 10,836 electors in the six wards of Torrent District Electoral Area, according to

my calculations, and were they to go into the proposed Fermanagh and South Tyrone that would render Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency close to the upper limit of the range at 79,815 electors; however, it is within the range. Furthermore, we believe the six wards of Omagh district should not transfer into Fermanagh and South Tyrone but in fact remain in Mid Tyrone. There are 9,685 electors in the six wards of Omagh District which the Boundary Commission is proposing transferring into Fermanagh and South Tyrone. If they were to remain in Mid Tyrone and the Boundary Commission was to accept our proposed amendment to the Boundary Commission's provisional recommendations, agreeing that the six wards of Torrent District Electoral Area should transfer into Fermanagh and South Tyrone, then Mid Tyrone would include a total of 76,562 electors, which again is safely within the range. It is our view that effecting this slight alteration to the Boundary Commission's recommendations would have a neutral impact on the overall capacity of the proposed Fermanagh and South Tyrone and the proposed Mid Tyrone constituencies to remain within the allowable electoral range.

In the Ballymena hearing we will go into more detail about our proposals for County Antrim. However, we would like it noted that the three Greenisland wards - Gortalee, Greenisland and Knockagh - should not, in our view, be separated from Carrickfergus. They abut Carrickfergus and they have been linked to Carrickfergus since the creation of East Antrim and indeed, since 1973 in local government terms. We believe they should be transferred into the proposed Mid Antrim constituency. However, we recognise when making counter-proposals it is incumbent upon us to suggest solutions to the potential knock-on effects of the changes which we propose.

We suggest that Grange ward could be transferred to South Antrim to compensate for the loss of these three wards, but we recognise that even with this, the proposed South Antrim constituency would fall outside of the electoral range. We are working on a number of alternatives and in our written submission we will provide an alternative which renders the proposed South Antrim within the electoral range. We would like it to be noted here that, while respecting the constraints within which the Boundary Commission must operate by statute, these three Greenisland Wards - Gortalee, Greenisland and Knockagh - should not be separated from Carrickfergus if at all possible. We would like it noted that whatever changes to bring the adjacent proposed

constituencies within the relevant electoral range should in fact be adopted by the Boundary Commission. We chose Grange ward because it has some links with Randalstown and Toome and if Grange ward moved into South Antrim and those three Greenisland wards moved into Mid Antrim, more geographically and socially coherent constituencies would result. However, we recognise the constraints by statute within which the Boundary Commission operates and we will go into more detail on our counter-proposal at the Ballymena hearing and in our written submission.

We recommend consideration of two changes to constituency names; as Coleraine is now the largest town in the proposed North Antrim constituency, we believe the name "North Antrim" is inaccurate given that very few, if any, people in Coleraine would consider themselves geographically as part of North Antrim. We suggest looking back into history, Dalriada, or possibly Coleraine and North Antrim.

We suggest that Mid Antrim as a proposed constituency name is associated mainly with Ballymena rather than Carrickfergus or Larne, so we would be in favour of changing the proposed Mid Antrim constituency name to East and Mid Antrim or Mid and East Antrim.

I would just like to conclude by expressing our support for the Boundary Commission's proposals in toto and, given the constraints that they were operating within by statute, they have done the best, in our view, that they could, aside from these relatively small and coherent suggested changes we make today.

That concludes my evidence.

Fiona Bagnell: Thank you very much, Mr Douglas. I appreciate you coming this morning and making your representation to the meeting.

As there are no other speakers at this stage of the morning, we will take a short break and then reconvene in ten minutes to see what the position is. Thank you very much.

*[10 minute break]*

At the present time there are no other speakers who have made themselves known and want to make presentations or representations. I appreciate there are people here to hear

what is to be said. We will not start again until a quarter past eleven.

Fiona Bagnell: We did expect more than just one speaker, but I think if we get to a quarter past eleven and there still is not anybody who has made any expression of interest or any contact with us, we will start to think as to whether we just close down for the day. We do not want to deny anybody the opportunity to speak but at the same time we cannot indefinitely sit waiting. We will see at lunchtime if anybody else has appeared. Thank you very much.

*[proceedings adjourned until 11.15am]*

Fiona Bagnell: It is a quarter past eleven and apparently there are no other speakers at this stage so we will adjourn for lunch now. We will reconvene at half past one. If there is nobody else expressing any interest or who wishes to speak at that stage, then by two o'clock we will finish for the day. That is as far as I can take it for today. Thank you very much.

*[hearing reconvened at 1.30pm]*

Fiona Bagnell: It is now one-thirty and we are ready to resume the afternoon session of the meeting. We have had further requests to speak from Mr Paul Hoben and Mrs Margaret Hoben.

Mr Hoben, if you would just like to come forward to the seats. Everything is being recorded today so if you would just put your microphone on, press the red switch and when you start your presentation if you would just give your name.

Paul Hoben: Thank you. I hope this is worth waiting for by the way, Judge. I am Paul Hoben. I am in the SDLP and I am representing Newry and Mourne District Executive of the Party. I have submitted to you a two-page argument and two documents; one which is a table of Parliamentary Constituencies of 2010, the second one to support an argument I am going to make later, a map of the Belfast City Wards.

I have taken as my reference chapter four of the report which is called the Delineation of the Constituencies and it claims earlier on in the document that it gives the rationale behind the proposals for the constituencies. I dispute that. I think it gives very little rationale at all and I will explain why.

The proposals need justifying, and I am relying on the Judge here for fairness.

The fact is that this report is a construct. Somebody wrote this report so it is not the Bible; it can be challenged. I think in the introductions, there is a very big absence of explanation about the methods and the procedure used in this report if you look at chapter four. In my document, I explain why I say that.

This hearing is a democratic process, so we are expecting fairness. There are a lot of people in Northern Ireland who are going to be affected by the change from 18 to 16 constituencies. I am not objecting to the reduced number, of course.

If we take my points in order, starting with modelling, which is in paragraph one of chapter four. I quote what chapter four says. "The Commission modelled a number of options; irrespective of the starting point, these models produced a similar overall pattern." What models were used? What was the overall pattern? We are not told and we should be told.

The second heading is "The Method and Procedure of the Commission." Paragraph one again says, "The Commission concluded that the transfer of seven or fewer electoral wards would be required in nine existing constituencies." Now, I am presuming what is meant by that, because it does not clearly state it. I am presuming that it means the nine biggest constituencies would need extra wards added to them to create the new constituencies. I am also presuming that the reason they stated that was that they were implying that their method was that the best starting point would be the largest constituencies, because less work would be required. If you just have to add things onto a big constituency there is less work involved. I presume that was the method that was being argued in paragraph one. I have said in my written piece that I am assuming that the method that the Commission is using is to start with the largest constituencies because that is what it implies. It does not state it, but that is what it implies. They mention nine constituencies that needed extra wards, but in actual fact if you look at the table they omit from this list some of the largest constituencies. I cannot understand that. For instance, North Antrim, Mid Ulster, East Londonderry and West Tyrone are larger than the ones in their list, yet they are not mentioned, without any explanation.

We now come to point three which is the Commission's starting point for review. Paragraph three of chapter four says, "The starting point for the review should be Belfast." Why? It has not explained that. It told us in paragraph one that they were using models which all produced a similar pattern and then they jump straight on to a decision that the starting point should be Belfast. Maybe it should, but I think the Commission is duty-bound to explain why. If they were arguing earlier on that the method was to start with the largest constituencies, they should have started with the largest constituencies in the North, which are Upper Bann and Newry and Armagh.

Regarding the Belfast constituencies - again I quote from Paragraph three - it says, "The first constituency to be delineated in a three seat Belfast configuration should be North Belfast." Well, within Belfast that is reasonable because North Belfast, with an electorate of 66,000, is the biggest and that goes along with their previous method. That is fine. However, the next thing that I find strange is that in paragraph four they just go straight firing on, again without explanation; "After the delineation of three constituencies in Belfast the Commission proceeded ..." and so on. It has not told us what method they used to delineate the three constituencies in Belfast. This is basic stuff surely and it should be there. We should be told. I mean, we are not just accepting statements that are not justified.

I know that they have said on the internet that it is not enough to just complain about what somebody else has done, which I suppose is what I am doing, but to make alternative suggestions. So seeing that the Commission did not tell us the sequence of events in Belfast, I will make a suggestion. They started with North Belfast, which is justified as the biggest constituency, but they should have gone to the second biggest, which is South Belfast, and then they should have gone to West Belfast, which is the third biggest and finally to East Belfast which is the smallest. We are not actually told what they did. I think that it is really unforgiveable that there is a serious absence of explanation for things.

There is a very strange statement also in paragraph three which says, "There are two reasons for starting with North Belfast." That is fine, that is accepted. But the first one they say is "The geographical layout of the City around Belfast Lough argues against combining elements of Belfast North and Belfast East." Why? If you look at the map that you have, Belfast North and Belfast East already lie side by side. In North

Belfast there is Duncairn – that is the most easterly ward of North Belfast and it touches the Belfast East Island ward. Now, the argument may be something to do with difficulty of communication. I am just assuming that, as it does not explain that. In any case, there is an implication in that statement that I read out about the geographical layout, that Belfast Lough separates the two constituencies. That is misleading. There is easy access between them. There are three bridges over the River Lagan and there are many roads, including the M3. So I think that is an invalid starting point to claim that you cannot join up North and East Belfast and I wonder why that statement was put in. I am afraid that I am a bit suspicious about that. It looks to me as if somebody thinks Belfast East is a protected species. In actual fact, statistically, if we are talking about numbers of wards, numbers of population, Belfast East has the lowest electorate in Belfast and also in Northern Ireland. If any constituency is to go, surely it is the smallest one, which is East Belfast. So I am very, very suspicious about the explanation of that and I think the people of Northern Ireland are entitled to be told why that statement was in, how it was justified, if it was justified. The people of Northern Ireland are also entitled to be given a proper rationale in chapter four and in fact if it is not done, I would regard that as a very undemocratic process. We are here in a democratic process today so I am relying on the Judge to help us with that, as an independent person, to ask for an explanation. There may be a valid explanation, but for God's sake let us have it. Thank you very much.

Fiona Bagnell: Thank you very much indeed.

Now, good afternoon.

Margaret Hoben: Good afternoon.

Fiona Bagnell: Again, if I could just ask you to state your name so that we have that on record.

Margaret Hoben: Yes. My name is Margaret Hoben and I would like to come here today to speak to you about how the new constituencies of Belfast affect the established community vote in South Belfast. It is something on the same lines as the former speaker, but with a different slant on it. I welcome the opportunity to respond to your proposals for the 16 new constituencies in Northern Ireland. Your Constituency Composition Table for the new Belfast constituencies and Strangford constituencies reads as follows; "The proposed North new constituency gives Belfast North 100% of its

electorate into this new constituency." Consequently, it gives them 89.4% of the overall vote in the new constituency, the majority vote in the constituency which rests, I assume, with the best chance of getting your MP into the constituency. Belfast South East new one also gives Belfast East a 65% majority in the new constituency. In Belfast South West, it gives Belfast West 70% of the majority in the new constituency. Then, strangely enough, it also gives Strangford, with only 48,893 votes, a 65% majority in the remainder of South and East Belfast votes, which leaves Belfast South as it exists today – the community vote in South Belfast, the established South Belfast vote where everyone knows who their MLA and MP for Westminster is, where there is quite an even composition of electorate. There is a good chance maybe one time Ulster Unionists will get in and another time SDLP will get in. There is quite a community and, though it is not important for Westminster, there is very good, vibrant community and an ethnic community there, like the Chinese community. I will not dwell on that.

Fiona Bagnell: I appreciate you were not here at the start of the meeting when I made my initial remarks, but you need to understand that I am not able to hear representations about issues outside of the scope of the hearing, such as the impact of the Commission's proposals on future election results.

Margaret Hoben: Oh, no, it was more the effect on the existing community I am talking about.

Fiona Bagnell: It is not a matter that can be taken into consideration; so long as you are aware that if you make submissions on that basis then they cannot be taken into consideration.

Margaret Hoben: Can you take them on the basis of an established community?

Fiona Bagnell: Well, if you confine them on that basis, but not on the electoral impact.

Stephen Douglas: Could we establish what Mrs Hoben means by community?

Fiona Bagnell: Well, I think that is a fair point. If you can just outline what you understand by community and then go on. Any other questions can come at the end.

Margaret Hoben: In South Belfast, East Belfast and all the four places in Belfast, there is an established know-how of who you are voting for in

a sense, in a community, among each other. South Belfast, for example, has the largest number of established institutions who are a community in their own right. I just feel that it is the effect on the established community. They have a right to have a vote; I know you can't take that into account. I am not talking about political parties in this instance. I am talking about the right that you have to vote for who you want to be in Westminster. Every community has that right and they encourage us to go out and vote and in this instance, North Belfast has been allowed as a community to exist as they are at the minute, as a constituency. The community are allowed there. I do not care who, or even know who, they vote for because I am not from here. South Belfast has its own community. East Belfast has its own community, who are entitled to vote in Westminster.

Now, the crowd of people in North Belfast have been entitled to vote, have been given 100% of the community, just talking about who they belong to, and they have been put lock, stock and barrel into the new Belfast North constituency. So, the way they thought about everything, you know, politics, one way or the other, it is not confused. It is established the way they are there, in that particular constituency. That is their business. Belfast South and East are the same. I did not make this table up. You gave this table of existing constituencies and you are saying that Belfast North has 89% of this new constituency. Well, that is fair enough if they want to do that, it is the largest one. Then they come and say Belfast East has 65% of them being kept together to go into this new constituency. Put it that way – you have been kept together as a unit. Then Belfast West has been kept together as a unit and 70%. But Belfast South has not come into consideration at all, because they give six wards away to Strangford, although we were told Strangford cannot be added into Belfast because it is not urban and yet they can give the six ones from Belfast into Strangford and it is not urban. It does not make sense. They take six from Belfast East because of the overflow and they have put them into Strangford and all in all they put 26,000 people into Strangford from Belfast. We are supposed to be talking about dividing up Belfast City or Belfast urban areas. We cannot go in anywhere else because we would be taking in the rural community, but we can put you into the rural community, out of the way. The main crux of what I am saying is that Belfast South has no majority vote anywhere. I will not say majority vote, but the unit of Belfast South, as a unit of community, has no majority anywhere in the new constituency.

In the new Belfast North constituency the existing North Belfast electorate have been kept 100%. That is fair enough. They can do that. To give all the electors in Belfast a level playing field, or all the community I should say in this instance, a level playing field, and using the formula used in North Belfast, South Belfast, as the second largest constituency in Belfast, should have been the next constituency in Belfast to be kept intact as a constituency. That is the way I am putting it.

They have given us the lists. They are making the percentages, so they cannot say we cannot talk about it. Why did this happen or why did this not happen? Why has South Belfast, the largest constituency in Belfast with an electorate of 60,726, been divided into an electorate of 25,324 in South East Belfast, 21,707 in South West Belfast and 13,000 in Strangford? Why anything to Strangford? I mean, it is silly. This means that the South Belfast unit of constituency, the second established community in Belfast has been denied the opportunity of ever having a big enough majority to influence who speaks for them at Westminster. There is no doubt about it. They have given the opportunity, they have told us who, where they are going, where this unit of people from South Belfast have gone, yet Strangford, which is a new constituency with an electorate of only 48,000 from Strangford, will get one in Westminster because it has been propped up by the South Belfast electorate and East Belfast electorate to make sure that Strangford gets a new Westminster MP. You cannot say one minute, you cannot talk about the votes and then you give us a table like that and say this is what we have done, because they are dividing votes, so you have to talk about votes.

Alternative suggestions that I have, as you have asked for, Belfast North constituency should be complete, as you have said, plus three wards from West Belfast, as proposed. Belfast South constituency is complete plus six wards from East Belfast, instead of transferring them to Strangford. So we are keeping them all in Belfast. Belfast West constituency, the majority of them, plus Belfast East, the majority of them, because they are the smallest electorates in the whole of Northern Ireland, a majority of each of them in a new Mid Belfast constituency, with equally balance electorate so there is no overall control being given to any old established communities. Now, as a constituency South Belfast needed only six more wards to reach the new constituency quota. These six wards could easily have been taken from the Belfast East Constituency instead of transferring the six East Belfast wards to Strangford. Then the remaining two smaller

communities of West Belfast and East Belfast could then amalgamate into the third remaining new constituency of Belfast. West Belfast already need more electors than South Belfast, even before three of its wards were moved to North Belfast, which meant Belfast West needed at least nine more wards to reach the quota of 74,415. Now, I can speak about wards, I know, because they use the term ward, and said Belfast North needed three more wards, so I assume I am allowed to use this, because I am giving an alternative.

Fiona Bagnell: The issue which the Commission will not take into consideration and therefore is not relevant for representation is the impact of the proposals on future election results. That is where the limitation is as to what your representations can cover.

Margaret Hoben: I understand that. So what do they mean by their table, where they are saying that in the new constituency Belfast North will have 89.4%? Why did they do that if they are saying we cannot do that, but we can do it? Maybe you would ask them that. They were the ones who produced this.

The method used to allocate wards has to be seen to be consistent across Northern Ireland. The method of allocation used in Belfast is not. It is very unfair and undemocratic to the established electorate and established diverse communities in urban South Belfast. The electorate in South Belfast will lose their Member of Parliament and six MLAs if this proposal to fracture the South Belfast constituency into three parts goes ahead. The South Belfast electorate must be treated fairly and on an equal basis with Belfast North, Belfast West and Belfast East and the three other urban constituencies within Belfast whose established majority constituency electorate was retained as a unit.

In conclusion, you ask how the ripple effect will be contained if any alternatives are suggested for three Belfast constituencies; perhaps using the nine District Electoral Areas in Belfast City Council could be a starting point for the proposed three new constituencies. Each new constituency for Belfast could contain three Belfast District Electoral Areas. This could be added to with wards from the surrounding Council areas in the present constituencies until the quota is reached for each new constituency. This would retain the established community patterns and give some continuity to the new constituencies for Westminster, similar to the way it is organised in Belfast City Council. Belfast City Council has, as you know, nine constituencies. That, to me, would be a fairer

way of doing it, each of them with three District Electoral Areas, and then that would overcome any of the, we cannot go into South and East Belfast, we cannot go here, we cannot go there. Just take it as it is at face level, you know, just with that map that you have with the District Electoral Areas in it. Thank you. I know I diverted to votes but they do it so why can't I?

Fiona Bagnell: I appreciate you coming. Now, just before you leave, are there any other questions anybody wants to ask? Yes, Mr Douglas. There is just, I think, one question from the floor.

Stephen Douglas: Which wards would you propose adding to the current Belfast East in order to bring it up to quota and are you envisaging that the wards from the current Belfast West which you suggest might be added to, or my understanding of what you suggest, which might be added to the current Belfast East; which wards are they and would, would they interrupt the contiguity of the proposed ...

Margaret Hoben: Of the flow across.

Stephen Douglas: Would they be joined?

Margaret Hoben: Yes. Where would they be joined?

Stephen Douglas: So first, which wards are you suggesting adding to Belfast East and, specifically, which Belfast West Wards are you proposing to add?

Margaret Hoben: All of the Belfast wards with Belfast, all of the ones in Belfast East, all of them. It may need one from South Belfast, up at the top to join them across where they meet at Island and at Belfast City Centre, Shaftesbury I think it is called. I am only going by memory here, sorry.

Stephen Douglas: But the current Belfast East would be quite below quota.

Margaret Hoben: It is beside Island, sorry. The current Belfast East is Island.

Stephen Douglas: It would be way below quota. It would be outside the range.

Margaret Hoben: No, they will not be out of the quota because they cannot be out of the quota because there is only enough for three. They can do what they did with them now. I have added six of the Belfast East into Belfast South and three of Belfast West have gone up to Belfast North, because I did not propose that, but they have.

Stephen

Douglas: But that leaves the current Belfast East way below quota because it is losing under your proposals.

Margaret Hoben: Belfast East and Belfast West should join together because they are the smallest ones, both in the whole of Northern Ireland and in Belfast. They are minus three in West Belfast and minus six in South Belfast already; the six that have been sent to Strangford from Belfast East should go to Belfast South to be completed.

Stephen

Douglas: So, you are aware that those wards were actually in Strangford until the last boundary review?

Margaret Hoben: Yes, but at the last boundary review Mr Mackenzie had proposed they go into Belfast to make it a greater, bigger Belfast for the 11 Council model.

Stephen

Douglas: Through the Chair, obviously the Boundary Commission is specifically unempowered to take into account the possible implementation of RPA which is going to make all of our lives a lot easier.

Margaret Hoben: No, I am not saying that. They were prepared to move them in then, and you said, "but what effect would it have?".

Fiona Bagnell: Well, I think we have come to the conclusion of the discussion as far as this matter is concerned. I am very grateful to you for coming this afternoon. Thank you very much indeed.

Margaret Hoben: Thank you.

Fiona Bagnell: Now, are there any other people who wish to speak and make any representations today? No?

Paul Hoben: Could I just ask a question from the Chair?

Fiona Bagnell: Well, no. This is not a dialogue of question and answer, certainly not with the Chair as far as this matter is concerned.

You are here to make representations. There is the opportunity for the floor to ask questions of those who have made representations but there is no opportunity or no facility for other questions to be asked. I appreciate you were not here at the start of the meeting but I did set out what the terms of the public meeting are and what my role is, which is a purely independent role merely to take the representations and to have no other function or position in respect of it. I do not think it is appropriate to take questions at this stage.

Paul Hoben: Just of procedure, a 'what happens next' type question; nothing specific.

Fiona Bagnell: No, I do not think it is appropriate at this stage. Those questions can be sent to the staff who can be asked if there is something that needs to be done.

Liz Benson: When you say the procedure, do you mean what happens after the public hearings?

Paul Hoben: What happens next after this?

Liz Benson: I can give you a paper on that. There is a guide on the seat where you are sitting, a guide to the sixth review which covers what happens next.

Fiona Bagnell: So are there any other people who wish to speak? Well, on that basis then I will close the meeting for today. Once again thank you everybody for coming and for their representations which have been made. Thank you.

*[Day 1 of the hearing closes at 2.07pm]*

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**ENDS**

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