

Response to the provisional proposals of the 6th Westminster constituency boundary review

David McWhinney,

On 13th September the Boundary Commission published preliminary proposals for the redrawing of Northern Ireland's Westminster parliamentary constituencies in accordance with the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 as amended by the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. This stipulated that the number of constituencies will be reduced from 18 to 16, each with an electorate within legally defined limits.

The commission's primary decision to abolish both a Belfast and a western constituency is logical due to the current significant undersize in the electorate of 3 of the 4 Belfast constituencies and the fact that all 5 constituencies in the west of Northern Ireland are below 5% from the UK electoral quota necessitating some movement eastward.

However the proposals show one obvious incongruity; one constituency Fermanagh and South Tyrone is significantly above 5% from the Northern Ireland electoral average. I would urge the Commission to extend the principle found in the Act of equal sized constituency electorates nationally to a local level to ensure that each constituency within Northern Ireland falls within 5% of the local electoral average. While the commission is not bound to do so it will appreciate that each constituency at present elects 6 assembly members in addition to a Member of Parliament and the importance of maintaining parity in the ratio of voters to electoral representatives across Northern Ireland. Relatively minor adjustments to the Commission's proposals could easily achieve this electoral equality.

Some proposed boundaries also appear geographically odd with little regard to strong local ties. Although the Act gave discretion to vary Northern Irish electorates by more than 5% of the UK electoral quota, the Commission states that the conditions allowing this were not met. As the Northern Ireland electoral average is over two thousand less than the UK electoral quota I would encourage a little leniency on the rigid application of this rule to permit the creation of constituencies of a cohesive size, shape and identity.

I would therefore like to draw the Commission's attention to the following suggestions for a fair and equitable redistribution of seats, each within 3.5% of the Northern Ireland electoral average.

Fermanagh and South Tyrone

The addition of only 4 wards to the present constituency, namely Dromore, Trillick, Fintona and Newtownsaville, would bring the electorate within both 5% of the UK quota and the NI electoral average at 75,534.

Foyle

An electorate of 74,204 is achieved by the transfer of 3 wards to the existing seat; Banagher and Claudy from East Londonderry and Slievekirk from West Tyrone. This proposal restores the integrity of Derry City Council by returning 2 rural wards with much stronger traditional ties to the city than either Artigarvan or Dunnamanagh in north Tyrone. To maintain the electorate within the prescribed limits the addition of Slievekirk forms a coherent unit of Derry and its immediate environs.

Glenshane

A viable new seat of comprising of market towns and surrounding farming communities can be created from the bulk of Mid Ulster and rural East Londonderry but unlike the commission's proposals it should be extended southwards to include Cookstown. A total electorate of 77,033 is formed by encompassing the entire of Limavady and Magherafelt Councils, the 6 rural wards of the Bann district electoral area of Coleraine Council (Macosquin, Castlerock, Ringsend, Garvagh, Agivey and Kilrea) and the Cookstown Council wards of Lissan, Moneymore, the Loop, Oldtown, Newbuildings, Tullagh, Gortalowry, Killymoon and Coagh.

Mid Tyrone

The final rural western constituency with an electorate of 75,660 is comprised of Strabane Council (excluding Slievekirk), Omagh Council (except Dromore, Trillick, Fintona and Newtownsaville) and the addition of the 6 Torrent district electorate wards of Dungannon Council (Altmore, Donaghmore, Coalisland West and Newmills, Coalisland North, Coalisland South and Washing Bay) together with the remainder of Cookstown Council (Dunamore, Pomeroy, Oaklands, Sandholes, Stewartstown, Ardboe and Killycolpy)

Newry and Armagh

As proposed.

Upper Bann

The loss of Loughbrickland to South Down and the transfer of Tandragee from Newry of Armagh produces a more geographically coherent constituency of Craigavon and its hinterland than the current boundaries. However problems arise from the proposed transfer of Aghagallon to Lagan Valley which displaces not only the village of that name but housing estates close to Lurgan town centre which should naturally remain within Upper Bann. Unless the rural and urban parts of this populous ward could be divided I suggest maintaining it within its current constituency giving a total electorate of 76,252.

Lagan Valley

The return of Glenavy and the addition of Beechill and Minnowburn on the southern fringe of Belfast increases the electorate of this constituency to 74,447.

Strangford

An electorate of 72,967 is formed by the return of Carryduff East and West together with the transfer of the neighbouring wards of Cairnshill and Knockbracken from South Belfast to the current constituency. I also propose the transfer of Crossgar from South Down given this ward's close association with the settlements of Killyleagh, Saintfield and Ballynahinch. The Commission's provisional idea to incorporate the Peninsula within North Down is a geographical anomaly ignoring long standing ties to Newtownards.

North Down

By adding 5 wards of the Castlereagh East district electoral area from East Belfast – Dundonald, Carrowreagh, Enler, Graham's Bridge and Ballyhanwood - the constituency's largely suburban composition on the eastern edge of Belfast is maintained with a total electorate of 72,456. This is lower than the national quota limit by a mere 354 electors (-5.5% from UK quota and -2.6% from the NI electoral average).

South Down

The gain of Loughbrickland and loss of Crossgar produces a total electorate of 71,816, also just fractionally below quota (-6.3% from the UK quota and -3.5% from the NI electoral average). Like the situation in North Down this remains consistent with the enabling Act and does not compromise the principal of uniform constituency electorates.

North Belfast

As proposed.

South West Belfast

With the loss of Glencairn, Highfield and Shankill to North Belfast this new constituency can be brought within the quota by the addition to West Belfast of all 6 wards of the Balmoral district electoral area (Blackstaff, Musgrave, Finaghy, Upper Malone, Malone and Windsor) and the inclusion of Stranmillis instead of Shaftesbury as proposed by the commission. Stranmillis shares many more demographic similarities to the neighbouring Balmoral wards than Shaftesbury and placing it within another constituency would cleave this homogenous area of southern Belfast incongruously through the Malone road. The new seat has an electorate of 74,408.

East Belfast

By transferring Woodstock, Ravenhill, Ballynafeigh, Rosetta, Botanic, Shaftesbury, Galwally, Hilfoot, Wynchurch and Newtownbreda to the existing East Belfast constituency after the loss of 5 Dundonald wards to North Down, the total electorate reaches 74,394.

Unlike the commission's proposals, the largely urban ward of Upper Braniel should not be severed from its long standing association with east Belfast by its sole transfer into Strangford but remain part of this city constituency.

Also the addition of Shaftesbury instead of Stranmillis to East Belfast allows a natural continuity along the full length of the Ormeau road into the city centre. The current proposals when viewed on the map show truncated Botanic and Stranmillis wards isolated on city side of the river Lagan.

Most of the additional new wards have always looked eastwards geographically, it therefore makes sense to keep the constituency's present name.

Coleraine and North Antrim

Almost as proposed by the Commission but without the transfer of Carnlough from East Antrim which has traditional ties to Larne. An electorate of 74,206 is created with Ballymoney and Moyle councils in their entirety, Portglenone, Dunminning, Craigywarren, Cullybackey, Broughshane, Glenravel and Slemish from Ballymena and Dunluce, Dundooan, Royal Portrush, Hopefield, Atlantic, Portstewart, Strand, University, Ballysally, Cross Glebe, Central, Mount Sandel, Knocklynn, Waterside, Churchland and the Cuts from Coleraine.

I also suggest an appropriate name change. The retention of the North Antrim alone when a substantial part of the new constituency is in a neighbouring county would be absurd.

East Antrim

The core of the old East Antrim constituency could be retained with additional wards added from the remaining northern suburbs of Belfast bringing the electorate within the quota.

A total of 74,831 is formed by incorporating the entire of Carrickfergus and Larne Councils with 10 wards from Newtownabbey - Jordanstown, Rostulla, Monkstown, Burnthill, Mossley, Carnmoney, Ballyduff, Hawthorne, Ballynure and Mallusk.

Mid Antrim

A new constituency based around the towns of Ballymena and Antrim makes better geographical sense than the Commission's own preliminary idea for a seat of that name. The inclusion of all the wards of Antrim Council together with 4 from Newtownabbey (Ballyclare North, Ballyclare South, Doagh and Ballyrobert) and 17 from Ballymena

(Glenwhirry, Kells, Grange, Ballee, Moat, Ballykeel, Castle Demesne, Summerfield, Fair Green, Dunclug, Harryville, Ardeevin, Park, Ballyloughan, Academy, Galgorm and Ahoghill) gives an electorate of 73,772.

Constituencies	Electorate 01/12/10	Variance from UK Quota	Variance from NI electoral average
East Belfast	74,394	-2.9%	0.0%
North Belfast	74,783	- 2.4%	+0.5%
South West Belfast	74,408	-2.9%	0.0%
North Down	72,456	-5.5%	-2.6%
Strangford	72,967	-4.8%	-1.9%
Lagan Valley	74,447	-2.9%	0.0%
South Down	71,816	-6.3%	-3.5%
Upper Bann	76,252	-0.5%	+2.5%
Newry and Armagh	73,872	-3.6%	-0.7%
East Antrim	74,831	-2.4%	+0.6%
Mid Antrim	73,772	-3.7%	-0.9%
Coleraine and North Antrim	74,206	-3.2%	-0.3%
Glenshane	77,033	+0.5%	+3.5%
Mid Tyrone	75,660	-1.3%	+1.7%
Foyle	74,204	-3.2%	-0.3%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	75,534	-1.4%	+1.5%
Total	1,190,635		

Lastly, it is unfortunate that a redrawing of ward boundaries had not preceded the current Westminster constituency review. Many wards, last defined in 1993, are evidently outdated. While I recognise that wards do not enter the Commission's current remit, it does leave many parliamentary constituencies with irregular or untidy borders. To illustrate, consider that between Dunmore and Ballymaglave which meanders through Ballynahinch or Gilnahirk and Ballyhanwood on the outskirts of Belfast, both leaving a small part of the town or city on the wrong side of its natural constituency.