

Friday 02nd DECEMBER 2011

Review of Parliamentary Boundaries (November 2011)

Introduction

The Ulster Unionist Party is mindful of the fact that under the new legislation, Northern Ireland's representation at Westminster is to be reduced from 18 to 16, and that each constituency should have an average number of electors of 76,641. A five per cent variance is permissible, meaning that all seats must fall between 72,810 to 80,473 based on the Electoral Register of 1st December 2010.

We noted the Commission's Provisional Proposals Report provided for a comprehensive re-drawing of the boundaries of Northern Ireland's Parliamentary Constituencies, with a reduction of one seat in Belfast and one in the west of the Province.

We understand that in suggesting any alterations to the Provisional Proposals (published September 2011), properly thought out alternatives must be presented.

We are therefore faced with the choice of proposing a comprehensive re-drawing of all 16 Constituencies or proposing fairly minor amendments to the Provisional Proposals. In the end we chose the latter option.

Community Identity

The General Principles outlined in the Provisional Proposals Report which guide the process of identifying and assessing options for the future pattern of constituencies includes the line, "where possible, reasonable account would be taken of any clearly identifiable local ties which would be broken by the proposed changes."

The Ulster Unionist party has long believed this to be a crucial consideration in establishing electoral boundaries. We must not lose sight of the fact that elected representatives represent people not geographical areas.

With this in mind, we have concerns about a number of the proposed constituencies.

Even a cursory glance indicates that a number of towns such as Coleraine, Cookstown, Ballymena and to some extent Omagh to name but four, would be cut off from their natural hinterlands, clearly breaking “clearly identifiable local ties.”

Fermanagh & South Tyrone and Mid-Tyrone

We are broadly content with the proposals for Fermanagh & South Tyrone and Mid-Tyrone,. Subject to some fairly minor modifications. We believe that the wards of Drumquin and Dromore fit more naturally with the town of Omagh than Enniskillen and as a result we propose that these two wards should be transferred from Fermanagh & South Tyrone to Mid-Tyrone.

In order to compensate for this we believe that the wards of Altmore and Donaghmore should be transferred from the new Mid-Tyrone constituency to the revised Fermanagh & South Tyrone constituency. We believe that these wards form the northern rural hinterland of Dungannon and tend to look south to Dungannon not northward.

Glenshane and North Antrim

We are broadly in agreement with the proposals for Glenshane although we recognise that many people will regret the fact that Coleraine, if transferred into North Antrim, will be is separated from its natural hinterland to the west. Short of a comprehensive re-drawing of constituency boundaries there is no ready-made solution here, but at the very least serious consideration should be given to including the ward of Macsoquin with Coleraine in the new North Antrim constituency.

We also propose that Broughshane should be transferred from the new North Antrim constituency to the proposed Mid-Antrim constituency – see below.

North Antrim and Mid Antrim

Under the Provisional Proposals the town of Ballymena is being transferred from North Antrim to Mid-Antrim and in the process is being cut off from its northern hinterland. In order to take more account of local community ties we propose that Broughshane ward should remain tied to Ballymena and therefore

form part of the new Mid-Antrim constituency rather than the revised North Antrim. The people of Broughshane feel very much part of Ballymena and in terms of community identity, this is where they would look to. Certainly if Broughshane were to be transferred from North Antrim to Mid-Antrim, this would offset the addition of Macosquin ward into North Antrim from Glenshane.

Other Constituencies

We do not propose any other changes to the Boundary Commission's Provisional Proposals for the remaining Constituencies of South Antrim, East Antrim, Lagan Valley, North Down, Strangford, Belfast North, Belfast South East, Belfast South West, Newry & Armagh, South Down and Upper Bann.

Conclusion

The Ulster Unionist Party notes that the proposals will not be universally welcomed in a number of constituencies, particularly where towns are separated from their natural hinterlands. We have therefore attempted to try to mitigate the worst effects of this, but we appreciate that we have not been able to arrive at solutions which will satisfy all local people. There will be particular disquiet in Coleraine, Cookstown and Ballymena, which will be cut off from areas and communities which have previously looked to those towns as their focal point. This cannot be helpful, but as the Commission strives to establish a pattern of 16 equal-sized constituencies, we understand there is limited room for manoeuvre.

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