

REVIEW OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARIES IN N. IRELAND:
RECOMMENDATIONS OF DISTRICT BOUNDARIES COMMISSIONER, 2008.

Dear Commissioner,

I advance my views on your recommendations..

I object to your Conclusions under `General approach: paragraph 4.6` i.e to the conclusion saying: "I am not persuaded....to exercise the discretion to increase or decrease the number of wards. That the presumptive ward numbers should apply". That means that Belfast District has 60 wards and each of the 10 non-Belfast Districts has 40 wards each.

(a)Ward numbers across the 11 Districts.

(THE AVERAGE WARD ELECTORATES ARE UNEQUAL)

Your ward recommendations have serious implications for electoral fairness and electoral results and will affect N. Ireland`s Westminster constituencies. Your ward numbers recommendations should be changed and I object to them on these grounds: IT IS A FUNDAMENTAL DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLE THAT A VOTE IS OF EQUAL VALUE IN EACH WARD. i.e. THAT TO BE ELECTED, EACH COUNCILLOR NEEDS ROUGHLY THE SAME NUMBER OF VOTES.

Your recommendations do not produce that.

This is because YOUR WARD ELECTORATES are unequal. The AVERAGE WARD ELECTORATE in each of the 11 new Districts shows great disparity: The highest average ward electorate is Belfast`s with 3173 (total electorate of 190,373 divided by 60) - while the lowest average ward electorate is Fermanagh & Omagh`s with 1860 (74,414 divided by 40).

The 2nd highest average ward electorate is Armagh City & Bann with 3125 (124,996 divided by 40). That raises another instance of electoral unfairness. (See (c) below). Why should Belfast with a total electorate of 190,373 HAVE 60 COUNCILLORS when Armagh City & Bann with total electorate of 124,996 (ONLY c. 65,000 less than Belfast) ONLY HAVE 40 COUNCILLORS?

You have used, you say, the `2008 Ward Electorates` (but have NOT used `population` (see (d) below). Even taking `ward electorates` as a measure you have discretion to make the ward electorates more equal and, therefore, fairer.

You have the power to increase or decrease each Districts ward numbers by 5.

Because of the disparity and unequal size of the average ward electorates you SHOULD allocate more than 40 wards to some Districts and less than 40 in others.

One example of a District that should get more wards is `Newry City & Down`.

It`s average ward electorate of 2680 is the 3rd highest and this justifies it getting up to 5 more wards. With 40 wards it is treated less favourably than `Fermanagh & Omagh` whose average ward electorate is 1860 yet both have 40 councillors. I object to that.

Logically is `Fermanagh & Omagh` not an example of a District that should have less than 40 wards? Also why have its wards been so little affected by your recommendations- unlike other Districts?

(b) Parliamentary(Constituencies) Commissioner`s recent report

In your deliberations did you use his boundaries` recommendations?

(c) Belfast District's Wards number and Belfast's Average Ward Electorate.

The decision to give 60 Wards to Belfast was the Stormont Executive's, I realise. However, that decision is puzzling and unfair. It abolishes an age old democratic principle for local government – that wards (and therefore councillors elected) are linked to population. That principle should continue. In any case, Belfast's average ward electorate is unreasonably high. That was caused by the commissioner moving so many wards into Belfast from Lisburn and Castlereagh. Those ward moves are also puzzling and have significant results: they produce an average ward electorate for Lisburn and Castlereagh District of 2064, which is the 2nd lowest of the 11. So why move so many of Lisburn's and Castlereagh's wards into Belfast? Will that give political advantage to some group?

(d) Rules... (binding) (Local government boundaries) Commissioner (2008 Act)

Rule 17(a) says 'in determining numbers ..of wards WITHIN A DISTRICT, regard shall be had to (a) ..population ..of the district. That is why above, I mentioned population as a measure. It seems the Commissioner has not used 'population' (but has used '2008 Ward Electorates') and, therefore, has not abided by that part of Rule 17(a). Has not using 'population' as a measure, changed the number of wards that would be in each District? Would using 2007 'Population estimates' from the Statistics and Research Agency for each of the 10 non-Belfast Districts still produce 40 wards each?

(e) Rules. .binding Parliamentary (i.e. Constituencies) Commissioner.

Schedule 2 (Rules for re-distribution of seats- paragraph 5) from Parliamentary Constituencies Act (1986) states 'the electorate in any constituency shall be as near the Electoral Quota as practicable'. This vote equality rule applies to Constituency boundaries - but Local government boundaries commissioners' decisions affect –and in this Report - CROSS constituency boundaries. So that Electoral Quota equality rule should apply also to Local government Boundary Commissioners' and therefore to District wards and Districts' average ward electorates. So my point at (a) above –that there should be near equality ACROSS DISTRICTS is valid. Equality WITHIN DISTRICTS is NOT sufficient.

(f) Recommendations for Newry City and Down`.

Your name `Abbey` - for Newry City's ward 9 - I strongly object to on these grounds: The name `St. Patrick`s` was accepted by the last Commissioner. I know criteria for naming are recognisability and visibility but `St. Patrick`s` meets those because of existing buildings there. The St. Patrick`s and St. Colman`s R.C. Cathedral and the 1578 Protestant church of St. Patrick in Church Street are visible and recognisable in that ward. Thus `St. Patrick`s` is a cross-community name. That ward name has existed in Newry for centuries . I recommend the name `St. Patrick`s`.

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I submit my views as an elector of Newry and Mourne .

P.A. HOBEN