



**RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW OF NORTHERN IRELAND LOCAL
GOVERNMENT BOUNDARIES REVISED RECOMMENDATIONS REPORT**

APRIL 2009

Response by the Ulster Unionist Party to the Revised Recommendations Report (February 2009) of the Local Government Boundary Commissioner for Northern Ireland

As stated in our submission of November 2008, the Ulster Unionist Party welcomes this Review of Local Government Boundaries - the first since 1973 - and recognises that the changes being proposed will set the course for local Government in the Northern Ireland for a generation.

That is why the Ulster Unionist party is so disappointed with the Commissioner's Revised Recommendations which we believe are fundamentally flawed throughout for reasons which we will outline later, and which will artificially constrain the City of Belfast.

Background

Also in our submission of November 2008 we highlighted our concerns that there was a fundamental flaw running through the entire Review, namely the complete lack of any legislative requirement on the Review to explicitly take account of local community identities in the drawing up of new wards, unlike the situation in the rest of the United Kingdom.

This point was raised in both the Stormont Assembly, at the Public Hearings and in our November 2008 submission. Our position was made explicitly clear on this point and the lack of such a requirement weakens both the Review and its findings. **This Commissioner acknowledged this point at 1:10 (page 4) of the Revised Recommendations Report (February 2009).**

Indeed, not only was the Commissioner not required to take account of local community identities, he was also limited in the scope of his powers by the actions and arrogance of the Environment Minister.

As we stated in our Submission of November 2008, it was clear from the debates in Stormont in April and May that there was a major difference of opinion between the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP regarding the extent of the powers available to the Commissioner.

In an attempt to give the Commissioner more flexibility, we sought to amend the Local Government Boundaries Bill to increase the powers of the Commissioner to enable him to take account of local community identities, as is the case in England, and to amend Section 1 Clause 2 of the Act so that the word "major" was removed and the clause should read "The 11 local government districts shall incorporate respectively, the whole or part [not **major** part] of the following former local government districts."

No fewer than two DUP Environment Minister failed to grasp the seriousness of they situation. In April 2008, the then DUP Environment Minister, Arlene Foster MLA,

stated “The Local Government Boundaries Commissioner can make small **or larger** changes to boundaries.”

She also stated “as the legislation stands, I do not accept that the commissioner will not have the ability to make meaningful change. The legislation provides the commissioner with that ability – it is certainly not a straitjacket.”

“The legislation allows the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to consider the different areas and to decide which needs to be moved to other council areas.

“The last commissioner regarded “major” as a spatial term. That does not mean the new commissioner will regard it in the same way ... It will be up to the new commissioner to determine what “major” means when he or she considers areas.” (Assembly Hansard 29/04/08).

The Ulster Unionist Party did not accept this and sought to amend the Local Government Boundaries Bill to explicitly provide the Commissioner with greater flexibility, but this was opposed and subsequently defeated by the DUP and Sinn Fein.

It therefore came as no surprise to the Ulster Unionist Party when the Commissioner’s Provisional Recommendations Report (September 2008) stated in section 4:3 under the heading “General Approach” that “Section 1 (2) of the Act does not define the meaning of “the major part” in relation to existing local government districts. I took the view that this was essentially a spatial term rather than a reference to population or electorate.”

This view has been re-iterated by the Commissioner at 1:8 (page 4) of the Revised Recommendations Report (February 2009).

We are in no doubt that this, coupled with the lack of any direction to explicitly take account of local community identities, has un-necessarily restricted the Commissioner’s latitude in conducting this Review and has resulted in the farcical situation with which we are now faced, particularly with regard to the City of Belfast.

Local Community Identity

We reiterate our commitment to the concept that electoral areas should be drawn to reflect the interest and identities of local communities.

This is the case in Great Britain and we believe that the people of Northern Ireland are entitled to the same. In April and May 2008 The DUP and Sinn Fein refused to support us in our attempts to amend the Local Government (Boundaries) (Northern Ireland) Act 2008 to permit the Commissioner to take account of community identity and give the people of Northern Ireland the same rights and privileges as are afforded to their fellow citizens in Great Britain, and this is partly why we have the mess we are now faced with.

As we pointed out in November 2008, even the legislation governing Parliamentary Boundary Reviews in Northern Ireland permits the Parliamentary Boundary Commission to take account of “any local ties”, a fact which the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner would be well aware of, being a member of the Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland at the time of his appointment in June 2006.

Indeed Page 13 of the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland – Fifth Periodical Report on Parliamentary Constituencies (March 2008) stated that the Commissioner’s recommendations “*reflected concerns about the need to maintain a fair balance between the aim of achieving electoral equality by reducing disparity between the number of electors in each constituency and the requirement, where possible, to preserve long established ties.*”

We recognise that the Parliamentary Boundary Review was a separate review, but make no apology for referring to it. There is absolutely no doubt that in terms of the process, there is every justification for citing comments made by the Parliamentary Boundary Commission as part of this review, not least because the wards created by this review will form the building blocks to be used by the next review of Parliamentary Boundaries. Furthermore, when the RPA was established, ‘co-terminosity’ was said to be a major feature of the Review. This concept has disappeared from the present proposals.

Belfast

In our submission of November 2008, we highlighted a number of concerns with regard to Belfast, the Capital City of Northern Ireland.

Sad to say, these concerns have not been salved by the Revised Recommendations, and we say this much more in sorrow than in anger.

We feared that the complete lack of any explicit requirement on the Review to take account of local community identities would come back to haunt this Review, particularly with regard to the proposals for the Dundonald area, and we also warned that as a result, the City of Belfast would still be constrained by outdated Victorian boundaries to the east and north, some of which date back to 1892.

This is exactly what the Commissioner has done, and as we warned, the issue is most obvious in the Dundonald area, which is to be linked with Lisburn, in an arrangement that can only be described as bizarre, and at worst as an attempt to gerrymander Belfast.

We said in our November 2008 submission that we were at a loss to understand the boundary which the Commissioner had recommended to the east of Belfast, *“where he did half a job and as a result left the urban Dundonald area as a “salient” and part of a geographically bizarre Lisburn Council arrangement.”*

Nothing we have seen or heard since has persuaded us to move away from this view.

Belfast and Dundonald

As we stated in our submission of November 2008, *“If one looks at a map of the proposed “Lisburn City & Castlereagh District Council” it is immediately apparent that the Dundonald area is an anomaly, out on a limb at the north-east of the proposed Council. There are absolutely no ties between Dundonald and Lisburn, and not even the semblance of a major transport link. Anyone wishing to travel between the two urban areas will have to travel into Belfast to do so. This fact alone highlights the absurdity of the proposals contained in the Provisional Recommendations.”*

The Commissioner’s Revised proposals do not address the problem created by the Provisional Recommendations, and complete ignore the identities and interests of the local community in the Dundonald and Ballybeen area.

As we stated in our previous submission, *“It is immediately obvious to anyone with even a basic knowledge of the Dundonald area, that it is an extension of east Belfast, comprised mainly of people who have migrated along the main arterial route of the Newtownards Road. They look to east Belfast for family ties, Church ties, shopping patterns, social and sporting links. They are east Belfast to the core and in no way whatsoever could they be said to look to Lisburn and no-one could retain any credibility by seeking to argue otherwise.”*

Our views were supported by the findings of the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland – Fifth Periodical Report on Parliamentary Constituencies (March 2008), which spoke of proposals, which were discarded because they *“posed substantial difficulties ... in particular with regard to inconvenience to electors and the significant disruption of local ties.”*

The Ulster Unionist Party’s proposals that the proposed wards of wards of Dundonald, Carrowreagh, Graham’s Bridge, Enler, and the urban portion of Ballyhanwood should be incorporated into Belfast City Council would merely have reflected the proposal of the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland – Fifth Periodical Report on Parliamentary Constituencies (March 2008) which proposed that these wards should form part of the East Belfast Parliamentary Constituency.

It is bizarre in the extreme that the Commissioner has proposed that areas of Castlereagh such as Hillfoot, Lower Braniel, Upper Braniel, Gilnahirk and Tullycarnett be transferred into Belfast, when they are actually further south – and indeed closer to Lisburn in geographical terms – than the wards in the Ballybeen and Dundonald area which the Commissioner is proposing should join with Lisburn. (We do however believe that these wards should be in the Belfast Council Area.)

We warned that if the Dundonald and Ballybeen areas were not incorporated into the Belfast City Council area, to reflect the reality of their position as part of the wider east Belfast community then all credibility would be removed from the view.

Sadly, this situation has come to pass.

Belfast and Newtownabbey

We also stand by our November 2008 proposals regarding the northern boundary of Belfast city, where we sought to incorporate the proposed wards of Valley, O'Neill, Rathcoole and Whitehouse to Belfast, using a boundary based on the main dual-carriageway linking the M2 and the Shore Road at Whiteabbey.

As with our proposal for east Belfast, this proposal would also have reflected the Parliamentary Boundaries in this part of the world.

It is strange, if not downright sinister, that the Commissioner saw fit to unite the west Belfast Parliamentary Constituency and ensure that it formed part of Belfast City Council, yet chose to follow another path with regard to east and north Belfast.

Outdated Boundaries

All of the above leads us to the conclusion that the Commissioner has shied away from the opportunity to do the right thing by Belfast, and establish a City Council area which would reflect the geographical realities of what local people would regard as the City in the 21st Century, and set the template for the City for decades to come.

In Page 58 of the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland – Fifth Periodical Report on Parliamentary Constituencies (March 2008), the Assistant Commissioner stated; *“It is my view that the City boundary has clearly expanded by radial redistribution of its inhabitants who continue to hold a perception that they are, and remain ‘Belfast people’.”*

In an even more devastating critique he said *“I would consider it an unnecessary constraint to regard Belfast as being bound by historic designation of its local government boundary. Clearly the present LGD boundary is not recognised in terms of definition of the City nor its existing constituency boundaries.”*

Sadly, the Commissioner in this Local Government Review, has chosen to follow a different path, and we are left with the mess that he has created in both the north and particularly the east of the City. As we warned, we have indeed been left with a halfway house, hamstrung by political sensitivities and boundaries agreed in the Victorian era. As we said in November, *“The People of Belfast deserve better.”*

In **Derry City & Strabane** - we would strongly re-iterate our proposal that the Council be named City of Londonderry & Strabane (or at the very least “Foyle”), as a name which could command cross-community support and recognise the city’s historic heritage.

In **Antrim & Newtownabbey District Council** we have already outlined our proposals on the wards in the Newtownabbey area.

We are bemused that the Commission has seen fit to still propose the Carnmoney Hill in spite of its ludicrous shape, which makes no sense to people living in that area.

We are pleased to see the Commission’s response to our request for a complete re-assessment of the proposals for a number of wards in the proposed **Ards & North Down District Council**,

The issue of a lack of Electoral Equality and over-representation of wards in the former Ards area has been addressed, and although some wards are still not ideal, we believe a honourable compromise has been achieved.

In the proposed **Causeway Coast District Council**, we have no issue with the new name of “Causeway Coast & Glens”.

We are disappointed at the lack of a more coherent boundary to the south and east of Limavady town, but welcome the decision to support our proposals in the Ballymoney area.

We are still concerned at the pattern of ward boundaries in the Portstewart area, with particular regard to the boundary between the wards of Portstewart and Dundooan, which we feel fail to take account of the huge amount of development, and expansion which has taken place since the last review of electoral wards.

The town will be divided into three wards and much of the south of the town will form part of a huge rural ward Dundooan, stretching from Portstewart to the edge of Ballymoney and on to Bushmills.

We are also disappointed that the opportunity was not taken to re-draw the ward boundaries between Portstewart and Portrush and to rename Atlantic as Portstewart East, and Portstewart ward as Portstewart West, with the electors in the Portrush portion of the proposed Atlantic ward being transferred to the proposed Hopefield ward so that they are included with fellow Portrush residents.

We endorse the move to rename Portrush ward as Portrush & Dunluce.

In **Mid-Antrim** we endorse the proposed name of “Mid & East Antrim District Council”.

We welcome the Commission’s adoption of our proposal that the village of Broughshane be included in one ward and not be split between two, and that all of the village of Cairncastle should be included in a single ward.

CONCLUSION

We are extremely frustrated that we were unable to persuade the DUP and other parties at Stormont to amend the Local Government Boundaries Bill so as to make clear that the Commissioner has the option to have regard to local community identities and community ties, and to remove the confusion which remains with regard to the term “major” in terms of areas/populations to be transferred.

The ludicrous situation which has been created in the Dundonald and Ballybeen areas to the east of Belfast, where these areas have been joined with Lisburn will not be easily understood by any reasonable bystander. Even a cursory glance at a map would be enough to tell anyone that this area is an extension of east Belfast, and the residents are part of the modern City of Belfast, no matter what artificial boundaries are created.

It is natural, that due to Urban development, some boundaries may appear outdated or strange after a number of years, as the old-field boundaries are built over or streets re-developed. These proposals do not even have that excuse. They are outdated even before they are implemented.

We are deeply disappointed that the proposals for Belfast reflect neither community identities nor the modern City, but instead are a botched halfway house, constrained by Victorian boundaries and political expediency.

This is simply not good enough.