[TC - Sinn Féin]

General comments on the Commission's revised proposals

Sinn Féin submitted an extensive proposal to the Westminster Parliamentary Boundary Commission on the 13th of December 2021.

In our submission we referred to the dual function of Westminster constituencies which also affect Assembly constituency boundaries. We noted that this is not the case in Scotland.

We had asked for this anomaly to be considered by the boundary commission, and while understanding the remit of this commission to be limited in this matter, to at least make ancillary comments highlighting this issue.

It is disappointing however that the revised proposals published on the 17th of November 2022 missed the opportunity to identify the dual purpose of Westminster constituencies when it comes to the delivery of democratic structures in the North of Ireland.

We have studied the revised proposals and feel that the dominant motivation appears to be reinforcing established constituency structures in the East of the 6 counties particularly with the insistence to stay with 4 constituencies in the Belfast region, which does not add up either geographically or demographically.

The creation of the constituency ‘Belfast South and Mid-Down’ which runs from Royal Avenue in front of Belfast City Hall to the Ballynahinch Road at Saintfield in rural county Down has exposed a disregard for coterminous, or any attempt to match like for like.

To emphasise this point, the splitting of 9 of the ‘2012 Council wards’ which were intended to be the new baseline building blocks for all electoral constituencies into the future to allow for joined up planning – exposes a crude effort simply to make up the numbers.

In contrast to the proposals for the Belfast region, the expansion geographically of the new Fermanagh South Tyrone constituency where it will now take a person 1 hour and 45 minutes to drive from Belleek in the west, to the Loughall road at Armagh City in the east, of the proposed constituency, the same time it would take a person to drive from Belfast to central Dublin. The natural link up between Fermanagh and Omagh council area has been ignored.

The practice of using an historic election register, in this case March 2020, to determine constituency boundaries 10 to 12 years into the future in our opinion is a flawed one and we had drawn attention to this in our submission on the 13th of December 2021. The commission’s revised proposals identify constituency electorate numbers that are already, less than 2 years later grossly out of line with what the commission is stating, notwithstanding where they will be this time next year when the proposals go live, or in the next decade.

In Newry & Armagh the report tells us that there are 74,585 electors in the restructured constituency, yet the November 2022 register identifies 79,752 electors, likewise FST 74,643/81,917 - Foyle 69,890/73,883 – South Down 74,370/79,896 and Mid Ulster 70,094/75,831.

Other systems across the world use the latest census data as their baseline to determine constituencies into the future and we would strongly contend that this is where we also need to go.

Sinn Féin is disappointed with the revised proposals published on the 17th of November and will continue to monitor the work of this commission as it progresses.