[TC – Ulster Unionist Party]

Thursday 15 DECEMBER 2022

**2023 PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY BOUNDARY REVIEW – REVISED PROPOSALS**

**RESPONSE FROM THE ULSTER UNIONIST PARTY**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the importance of ensuring that Parliamentary constituencies should be of roughly equal size in terms of the number of voters, and thereby ensuring votes have equal value.

Of the 18 current Northern Ireland Constituencies, the largest is Upper Bann with 83,028 electors, which is just over 18,000 more than our smallest constituency East Antrim, which has 64,907, a difference of over 18,000.

The Electoral Quota for the 2023 Review is 73,393, and the permissible range is from 69,724 to 77,063.

Any attempt to modify constituency boundaries in Northern Ireland must operate within geographical constraints. Twelve of our 18 constituencies – two thirds - have boundaries with the border and/or the sea and we recognise that this obviously restricts the Commission’s room to manoeuvre.

**KEY ISSUES TO BE RESOLVED IN THIS REVIEW**

We identified three key areas that needed to be addressed.

Firstly, West Tyrone is currently 3,385 electors below the number permissible, but its neighbouring constituencies of Fermanagh & South Tyrone, Mid Ulster and Foyle are all within the acceptable range, whilst East Londonderry is only 365 below the lower limit.

Secondly, East Antrim is 4,817 below the number permissible and needs to gain electors, with the only realistic options being from either North Antrim or South Antrim.

Thirdly, the three largest constituencies in terms of electors (Upper Bann, Newry & Armagh and South Down) are neighbours, and whilst all three need to be reduced in size, it is clear that some kind of shift of electors to the east will be required. Room to manoeuvre is limited due to the presence of the border to the south and the sea to the east.

**THE COMMISSION’S REVISED PROPOSALS**

**1 THE WEST**

At previous stages of this Review, the Ulster Unionist Party voiced its opposition to the Commission’s proposals to cause major disruption to Fermanagh & South Tyrone in particular, and which would result in the constituency stretching from the Donegal border to the edge of Armagh City and the loss of the Dungannon area to Mid Ulster.

Given that the existing **Fermanagh & South Tyrone** constituency is already within the permitted range (with 72,945 electors), this makes the proposal to stretch it into County Armagh even more incomprehensible.

We therefore proposed that Fermanagh & South Tyrone should be retained on its existing boundaries. As we stated in our previous submission, this is a long-established constituency which local people easily understand and identify with. It is rural in character with two main centres of population Enniskillen and Dungannon.

The Commission’s Revised proposals for Fermanagh & South Tyrone are certainly an improvement on its Initial proposals in that the Dungannon area is to remain within the constituency.

We note that the Boundary Commission has not withdrawn its proposal to transfer the ward of Blackwatertown into Fermanagh & South Tyrone from Newry & Armagh.

We cannot support this because it will create a constituency that crosses three of Northern Ireland’s six counties, stretching for 77 miles from the most westerly point on the Donegal border at Belleek to the edge of Armagh City.

The Revised Proposals would also see Fermanagh & South Tyrone lose the ward of Killyman to Mid Ulster and gain the northern part of Ballygawley ward from Mid-Ulster.

**Mid Ulster** would also lose the ward of Pomeroy to **West Tyrone** and gain The Birches ward (part) and Loughgall (part) from Upper Bann. It would also gain part of the Slievekirk ward from Foyle.

**Foyle** would also lose the ward of Eglinton to **East Londonderry**.

A stated previously, of the five wards covering the West of the Province, three - Fermanagh & South Tyrone, Mid Ulster and Foyle - are all within the acceptable range, East Londonderry is only 365 below the lower limit and the only real issue of significance relates to West Tyrone which is currently 3,385 electors below the number permissible.

We do not believe that the situation in the West of the Province requires wholesale change on the scale proposed by the Commission and therefore **we reiterate our stance that Fermanagh & South Tyrone should be retained on its existing boundaries and that as little change as possible be made to the other four constituencies in the West of the Province.**

**2 THE NORTH EAST**

As stated earlier, **East Antrim** is the smallest constituency of the 18 in terms of electors at 64,907, which is 4,807 below the lower accepted number. It borders **North Antrim** which with 77,156 electors is 94 above the acceptable upper limit.

The Boundary Commission’s Revised proposals have restated its initial proposals to transfer the ward of Glenravel from North Antrim to East Antrim along with the split wards of Glenwhirry and Slemish whilst the split ward of Torr Head & Rathlin would transfer to North Antrim from East Antrim.

We opposed these moves on the grounds that the loss of Glenravel, Slemish and Glenwhirry would have a negative effect on local community identity in the area, given that these wards form the eastern hinterland of Ballymena and look to the town as their natural focus and consequently we proposed that these three wards should remain with North Antrim.

Because East Antrim needs to gain electors, we proposed that the wards of Torr Head and Rathlin (2,659) and Ballycastle (2,407) should transfer to East Antrim from North Antrim, a total of 5,066. This would unite the Glens area in the East Antrim constituency which would be linked by the Antrim Coast Road. Unfortunately the Boundary Commission did not agree.

We also note that the Commission’s proposals would leave the villages of Cushendun and Cushendall in separate Constituencies. This would be a particularly retrograde step and one that should be avoided.

The Ulster Unionist Party still believes that the wards of Slemish, Glenwhirry and Glenravel – comprising the villages of Clough, Moorfields and Martinstown – should remain in North Antrim to better respect and reflect local community identity and therefore they should not form part of a revised East Antrim constituency. .

**We therefore urge the Boundary Commission to revise its proposals for North Antrim and East Antrim accordingly and instead should modify them in line with our previous proposals.**

With regard to **South Antrim**, we previously endorsed the Boundary Commission’s proposals for that Constituency and that remains the case.

**3 THE SOUTH**

As stated above,**Newry & Armagh, South Down and Upper Bann** are all neighbouring constituencies and are deemed to be too large and as a result, all three need to lose electors to reduce in size. The options to rectify this are limited by a number of factors, not least geography with the border restricting what can be done to the west and south, and the sea restricting options in the east.

Significant changes have been proposed for **Upper Bann** - the largest constituency in Northern Ireland **-** which currently has 83,028 electors, almost 6,000 above the upper limit permissible, so clearly change of some form is unavoidable.

As stated earlier, the Commission’s Revised Proposals proposed that The Birches ward (part) and Loughgall (part) would be transferred from Upper Bann to Mid Ulster which would obviously reduce Upper Bann in terms of electorate. The Commission also proposed that the northern part of Loughgall ward should be transferred into Upper Bann from Newry & Armagh.

The Commission’s Revised recommendations also proposed that the wards of Aghagallon and Magheralin should be transferred from Upper Bann to Lagan Valley and that part of Loughbrickland ward be transferred from Upper Bann to South Down.

Upper Bann would also gain a small part of Mahon ward from Newry & Armagh.

These changes would result in an Upper Bann constituency of 76,989 electors.

We ask the Commission to look again at Upper Bann. **The transfer of the wards of Aghagallon and Magheralin would reduce Upper Bann by 7,303 electors. This move alone would create an Upper Bann of 75,725, which is within the accepted limit.**

With regard to **Newry & Armagh** (81,329 electors currently and the second largest constituency in Northern Ireland) we opposed the Commission’s proposal to transfer the wards of Loughgall and Blackwatertown to Fermanagh & South Tyrone on the grounds that both these wards look to Armagh City and to retain them in Newry & Armagh would, we believe, better reflect local community identity and ties.

We are therefore disappointed that the Commission’s Revised proposals recommend that Blackwatertown should transfer to Fermanagh & South Tyrone and that the northern part of Loughgall ward should be transferred to Upper Bann. We still believe these two wards should remain within Newry & Armagh.

We understand that the Commission needs to reduce Newry & Armagh in size, but rather than the moves the Commission has suggested, we restate our suggestion that serious consideration be given to looking at those electors being transferred into Newry & Armagh from South Down. Whilst it is not ideal to split an urban area, given the need to reduce Newry & Armagh in size, and the lack of room to manoeuvre to the west and south, it must be considered.

**South Down** currently has 79,295 electors (the third largest constituency in Northern Ireland) and is therefore 2,233 above the permissible range. South Down is constrained by the sea to the south and east so any room to manoeuvre will have to involve the neighbouring wards of Newry & Armagh, Lagan Valley and Strangford.

The Boundary Commission initially proposed major changes to South Down affecting numerous wards and included a very strange configuration whereby the Downpatrick area was placed in a much-modified Strangford constituency.

As we pointed out at the time, this seemed rather a lot of disruption just to reduce one constituency in size by in size by 2,233 electors, which is the equivalent of one ward, and we welcome the fact that the Revised proposals have addressed this matter.

We are therefore broadly content to endorse the Commission’s proposals for South Down subject to one amendment.

We are aware of significant local community opposition to the Commission’s plan to transfer the northern part of Gransha ward to South Down from Lagan Valley.

We agree with local opinion that to remove this area from Lagan Valley would breach long-standing local ties and community identity, separate the area from Dromore and Dromara and create avoidable disruption.

The Ulster Unionist Party therefore proposes that the Gransha ward should remain split as is the case for other wards in the area – namely Donacloney and Banbridge East and **that the northern portion of Gransha ward should remain in Lagan Valley and not be transferred to South Down.**

**Strangford** currently has 66,990 electors and is therefore 2,734 below the permissible range. The Commission initially proposed major changes to Strangford and South Down including the transfer of five wards in the Downpatrick area to Strangford from South Down, a move which appeared to us to be totally disproportionate to the problem the Commission is trying to address.

We opposed this on the grounds that Downpatrick’s identity and linkages are more to South Down than north towards Newtownards and we welcome that the Commission has taken our arguments on board in its Revised Proposals.

Whilst we welcome the Commission’s Revised proposals for the boundary between Strangford and South Down we have concerns at the proposed transfer of three Strangford wards into South Belfast, namely Saintfield, Carryduff East, and Moneyreagh.

The situation is not ideal for all three of these wards but even a cursory glance at a map will tell the reader that it is particularly problematic for Saintfield. Consequently, in our submission in response to the Commission’s Initial Proposals in December 2021 we proposed that Saintfield should not form part of South Belfast but should remain in Strangford.

If Rule 5 - taking account of ‘any local ties that would be broken by changes in constituencies’ – is to mean anything, then it needs to be applied here.

**The Ulster Unionist Party strongly urges the Commission to revisit its proposals regarding Saintfield and to retain it in Strangford.**

Given the need to reduce the size of two of **Lagan Valley’s** neighbouring constituencies - Upper Bann and South Down - it is impossible to avoid some changes to the wards that make it up in terms of some being transferred in and others needing to be transferred out to compensate.

It is extremely unfortunate that such large-scale changes are proposed for Lagan Valley, which currently has 75,884 electors and is therefore within the permitted range.

As mentioned earlier,the Boundary Commission’s Revised Proposals for Lagan Valleywould see the wards of Aghagallon and Magheralin be transferred in from Upper Bann to Lagan Valley.

Also as mentioned earlier, we are aware of significant local community opposition to the Commission’s plan to transfer the northern part of Gransha ward to South Down from Lagan Valley. **To preserve local community linkages and better reflect community identity, we therefore propose that the northern part of the Gransha ward should remain in Lagan Valley and not be transferred to South Down.**

The Commission’s other proposals for Lagan Valley would see the ward of Drumbo form part of South Belfast, Derriaghy join West Belfast and the southern part of Glenavy join South Antrim.

There is no doubt that the transfer of Drumbo – which is rural in character – to South Belfast is far from ideal, and it would be much more preferable to retain Drumbo in Lagan Valley .

**4 BELFAST AND NORTH DOWN**

Under the Revised Recommendations **East Belfast** (currently 66,273 electors) would see Knocknagoney ward transferred to **North Down** (currently 67,109 electors)to bring North Down within the acceptable range at 70,412.

As a consequence East Belfast now needs to gain electors and the most logical place is from neighbouring **South Belfast.** TheCommission proposed that the wards of Cregagh, Merok and Woodstock should transfer from South Belfast to East Belfast.

This of course presents a problem for South Belfast, which the Boundary Commission sought to resolve by expanding that Constituency to incorporate several large rural wards to the south and east from Strangford and Lagan Valley.

Earlier in this submission we stated that we have concerns at the proposed transfer of three Strangford wards of Saintfield, Carryduff East, and Moneyreagh, and the Lagan Valley ward of Drumbo into South Belfast. We understand why this is being proposed – due to the transfer of electors from South Belfast to East Belfast - but it really is a most unsatisfactory arrangement to include such a large rural area in a Belfast City constituency.

**In particular we would urge the Commission not to include Saintfield in South Belfast but instead to retain it in Strangford where it has strong links and ties.**

The Boundary Commission’s Revised Proposals for **North Belfast** and **West Belfast** are unchanged from the Initial Proposals. We were content to support the Initial Proposals and we see no reason to change that position now.

**CONCLUSION**

The Ulster Unionist Party recognises that Boundary Reviews are no easy task and that it is quite literally impossible to please everyone.

Fixing one constituency in terms of numbers often leads to consequential and sometimes unintended effects elsewhere. This point is particularly highlighted in Chapter 4 of the Commission’s Initial Proposals and at points 4 and 5.

We support the intent of creating a pattern of constituencies across Northern Ireland which produces electoral equality in terms of votes being of equal value as far as possible and at the same time respecting and reflecting community identities and local ties.

We believe the Boundary Commission’s Revised Proposals for the 2023 Review go some way to improving the situation, but we have also highlighted instances where we believe the Revised Proposals can be improved or require amendment.

As stated in our previous response, we have approached this review with an open mind and in those constituencies where we believe the Commission’s proposals will work, we have endeavoured to support them.

Where we take issue with the proposals, we have sought to provide workable solutions and alternatives that better reflect community identities and local ties and which would be better understood on the ground.

It is essential that we arrive at solutions that can command local support and buy-in and that is more likely to be achieved where the Commission not only listens to the views of local people and their elected representatives, but takes them into account and acts accordingly.