



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Electoral boundaries in Scotland and Wales

1 Introduction

This briefing note has been prepared for the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. It provides information on issues arising from a presentation on paper NIAR 899-11 including further detail on electoral boundaries in Scotland and Wales.

2 Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales

Issue: Status of Boundary Commissions in Scotland and Wales

Scotland

The Boundary Commission for Scotland is responsible for reviews of:

- Scottish Parliament constituencies and regions; and
- UK Parliament constituencies in Scotland

The Commission's website states that it is "an Advisory Non-departmental Public Body sponsored and wholly funded by the Scotland Office. It is independent and non-

political. The Commission's constitution, duties and powers are detailed in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986, and in Schedule 1 to the Scotland Act 1998.

The Commission reviews UK Parliament constituencies every five years and Scottish Parliament constituencies every 8 to 12 years”.

It goes on to outline the rationale for the current Westminster/Scottish Parliamentary boundaries:

The 73 Scottish Parliament constituencies were defined in the Scotland Act 1998 to be the same as the Westminster constituencies at that time, with the exception that Orkney and Shetland should each form a separate constituency. These 73 constituencies had resulted from the Commission's Fourth Periodical Report on Westminster constituencies which was submitted to the Secretary of State for Scotland in December 1994.

Since the original definition of the existing Scottish Parliament constituencies, the number of Westminster constituencies in Scotland has been reduced from 72 to 59. The current Westminster constituencies were brought into force following the Commission's Fifth Periodical Report in November 2004. As the number of Westminster and Scottish Parliament constituencies now differ, it is not generally possible for Scottish Parliament constituencies to have the same boundaries as Westminster constituencies.

Wales

The Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Wales is “an advisory Non-Departmental Public Body funded by the Cabinet Office. The Commission are required by the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 (as amended) to periodically conduct a review of all constituencies in Wales and submit to the Secretary of State a report showing the constituencies they recommend”¹.

The UK Parliamentary and Assembly constituencies were decoupled as a result of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. There is currently no mechanism to review Assembly boundaries. Any proposal to create such a mechanism would be the responsibility of the Wales Office/coalition Government².

Issue: Original boundaries for the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales

The original White Paper produced in advance of the Scotland Bill envisaged that the use of the Additional Member System for Scottish Parliamentary elections – 73 Members for individual constituencies and 56 additional Members from each of the eight (then new) European constituencies. However, once these European

¹ Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Wales website accessed 8 February 2012

² As above

constituencies were abolished by the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999 they became known as regions.

Following the decoupling of Scottish Parliamentary and UK Parliamentary boundaries in 2004, the Arbuthnott Commission was established to look at how these changes might impact on voters. The report found “no evidence to suggest that having multiple voting systems or different boundaries confuse citizens to such an extent that they act as barriers to electoral involvement”³. The report also found that it was not a major issue of concern among the electorate:

- Respondents tended to be unsure about where the constituency boundaries lay for Westminster and the Scottish Parliament
- The level of interest in where boundaries were located was low. Although some thought this was important, most claimed not to care
- The location of the boundaries was not an issue which would dissuade them from voting
- Where there was a preference for having the same boundaries, this was mostly based on a gut feel of “it just makes sense” rather than any strongly held opinion⁴

In Wales, the prospect of multi-member constituencies was considered before the Assembly was established, but was ruled out by the then Welsh Secretary, Ron Davies. In evidence to the Richard Commission he stated: “One of the issues that we considered way back in 1995-96 was the question of multi-member constituencies, of creating new constituencies. Had we done that of course we would have had to have had a Boundary Commission and that process would have taken forever and a day and that would have frustrated our overall political timetable. So we had to settle on the existing constituency arrangements, parliamentary constituencies and European Constituencies”⁵.

Issue: Can a candidate contest a constituency and a region at the Scottish Parliamentary or National Assembly for Wales’ elections?

In Scotland a candidate can stand as both a constituency candidate and a regional candidate. If a candidate succeeds in a constituency this takes priority and their name will be removed from the regional list so they cannot be elected twice⁶.

³ <http://www.scotlandoffice.gov.uk/scotlandoffice/files/Final%20version%20of%20report.pdf>

⁴ As above

⁵ <http://www.richardcommission.gov.uk/content/finalreport/report-e.pdf>

⁶ http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/SPICeResources/Research%20briefings%20and%20fact%20sheets/Scottish_Parliament_Electoral_System.pdf

The Government of Wales Act 2006 specifies that candidates cannot stand for election in a constituency and a region at the same time. Candidates may not stand for election in more than one Assembly constituency or more than one region.

In Scotland there are eight regions: Highlands and Islands, North East Scotland, Mid-Scotland and Fife, West of Scotland, Central Scotland, Glasgow, Lothians and South of Scotland. Each of these regions elects seven members.

In Wales, these party list votes are divided into the country's five electoral regions: North Wales, Mid and West Wales, South Wales East, South Wales West and South Wales Central. Each of these regions elects four members.

Issue: Voter satisfaction relating to constituency and regional boundaries in Scotland and Wales

Although the research could not locate evidence of satisfaction with the boundary arrangements, research undertaken on behalf of the Electoral Commission for the 2011 devolved elections showed high levels of satisfaction with the voting system. This could act as a useful indicator of overall satisfaction with the boundaries in Scotland and Wales:

For most voters, the voting process was relatively straightforward. Despite having to vote in multiple elections, 96% of combined electoral event voters across the UK say they found it easy 'to fill in more than one ballot paper on the same day'. This was also true in Scotland (96%) and Wales (96%), where multiple ballot paper elections were taking place in addition to the referendum.

A large majority of voters in Scotland and Wales say they found it 'very' or 'fairly' easy both to find the candidate they wanted to vote for on the constituency ballot (96% Scotland, 94% Wales) and to find the name of the party they wanted on the regional list ballot (96% for both Scotland and Wales)⁷.

⁷ http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/141263/Post-polling-day-public-opinion-report-for-5-May-2011.pdf