

Pursuing a passion for parity, the coalition government is axing one in every 4 MPs in Wales, but less than one in 14 in England. How the UK draws its electoral map will never be the same again

Nov 3 2010

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat government's Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill will completely change the UK's electoral map, in the cause of making all Westminster constituencies exactly the same size. Yet the political and community impacts of seats cuts and redistributions are enormous. And [Ron Johnston](#) finds a worrying gap in the accountability of the new system for boundary review.



Within a democracy, no principle seems more obvious than that of 'one person, one vote', with each person's vote counting equally. If citizens vote for constituency MPs, then the principle of 'one person, one vote' suggests constituencies of equal size. If this were the only criterion for determining constituency boundaries, then all parliamentary constituencies should have an equal number of voters.

Although equality of electorates is one of the criteria used by the Boundary Commissions when recommending new constituencies in the UK since 1944, it was not the major factor that they have had to take into account. Others have included fitting constituencies within major local authority boundaries, respecting communities when suggesting changes, and taking 'special geographical considerations' into account. Within this framework, the Commissions were required to make constituencies as equal in their number of electors as is practicable. But the quotas that they used were different for each of the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom. As a result, even after a review of all constituencies (undertaken every 8 to 12 years) there was considerable inequality both between those constituent parts. The average constituency in Wales currently has some 56,000 voters, for example, compared to 72,000 in England. There were also differences in sizes within each country.

The [Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill](#), currently before Parliament, is designed to change this situation. This is largely because the Conservative party believes (rightly) that the operation of the electoral system has been biased against it at recent elections. But in particular they also believe (wrongly) that this is because the areas where Tories win seats tend to have larger constituencies (in terms of the number of electors) than those where Labour is strong. Creating greater equality of constituencies is believed to remove this bias and create a fairer set of outcomes, which should benefit the Conservatives, but not their coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats. The Bill will achieve these ends by:

- Making electoral equality the predominant criterion to be applied by the Boundary Commissions;
- Requiring with two exceptions (both in Scotland), and the possibility of one or two more (also in Scotland) that no constituency has an electorate that is more than 105 per cent and less than 95 per cent of the UK quota (i.e. average number of electors per constituency on the date when a review commences);
- Making all other criteria subsidiary to the equality requirement; and
- Increasing the frequency of reviews to once every five years, with the next to report by October 2013, that is, 18 months before the scheduled next general election.

Such a review will start as soon as the Bill has passed. It would have a substantial impact on the constituency map for many (if not most) parts of the UK. Its impact will be even greater, however, because the Bill also reduces the total number of MPs at Westminster from the current 650 to a forever fixed number of 600. (Previously, each review increased the number of constituencies, though more slowly than the increase in the electorate).

This reduction has been proposed in part as a reaction to the 2009 Parliamentary expenses scandal. It will supposedly reduce the costs of Parliament by the not very huge sum of some £12 million per annum. It also

reflects a more general appreciation that there are too many MPs with perhaps not enough to do. As a consequence, virtually every one of the current constituencies will disappear, and a totally new map will have to be drawn up by the Commissions over the next three years.

Implementing the new rules for redistribution will have a major impact everywhere, but in some places more than others: for example –

- Although the number of MPs overall will be reduced by 7.7 per cent, there will be a 25 per cent reduction in Wales (from 40 to 30);
- There will be particular problems in some areas – the Isle of Wight, for example, will have to be divided for the first time since 1944, with around 40 per cent of its electors in a constituency which contains part of Hampshire.

In addition:

- There will be many more constituencies that cross local government boundaries (e.g. those of counties and London boroughs) than heretofore, because of the need to meet the equality rule; and
- In some areas (including the whole of Scotland) local authority wards – previously used as the building blocks for constituencies – will have to be split, again in order to meet the equality rule.

Under the previous rules, when a Boundary Commission published provisional recommendations for new constituencies in an area the public could make representations about these, and if there was a substantial body of negative views a Public Inquiry would be scheduled. This was conducted by an Assistant Commissioner (AC), who heard views about both the Commission's recommendations and alternative configurations for the area suggested by interested parties. The AC's published report recommended to the Commission either that its provisional recommendations be sustained or that changes be made to them (some small – even just the name of a constituency; some substantial). If the Commission changed its recommendations as a consequence these had to be published and consulted on again – and a second Inquiry was possible (though rare). This procedure now will be very significantly changed if the Bill is enacted. Provisional recommendations will still be published and representations submitted, but there can be no Public Inquiries. If the Commission changes its recommendations, these must be published and representations can be made.

The Bill is currently before Parliament, with a large number of amendments laid down. It may still be changed substantially, but it seems most likely that the relevant sections will pass through the House of Commons largely unaltered. It then has to pass through the House of Lords. If all these tests are passed, the UK's constituencies, and our system of constituency-drawing, will never be the same again – unless a new Labour government were to revert to elements of the older system after the next general election in 2014 or 2015.

Ron Johnston will be speaking at the Electoral Reform Society for the [6th MacDougall Trust lunchtime workshop on Political Representation Issues](#) on 4 November, with his presentation, 'Equal Votes for (Nearly) All: drawing a new map of UK Parliamentary constituencies'.

This entry was posted in [Electoral and constitutional reform](#), [Party politics and elections](#), [Ron Johnston](#) and tagged [boundary review](#), [elections](#), [electoral boundaries](#), [Electoral Reform](#), [government](#), [politics](#), [UK](#), [uk government](#), [uk politics](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). [Edit](#)