

THE FOURTH GENERAL REVIEW OF PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES IN SCOTLAND

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Separate Parliamentary Boundary Commissions for Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland were established in 1944, and under subsequent legislation they are required to conduct a general review of constituency boundaries at least every fifteen years. The fourth general review was begun by the Scottish Commission in February 1992 and its final report, proposing new constituency boundaries, was presented to the Secretary of State in December 1994. In the absence of unforeseen circumstances, the next general election will be fought on the basis of these new constituencies. This article reviews the work of the Commission and analyses its proposals.

THE CONTEXT

The context within which the Scottish Boundary Commission operates differs from that of the English Commission in three respects - the rules for redistribution which apply, the physical and human geography of the country and the structure of the local government system.

The rules for the redistribution of constituency boundaries in Scotland, as in England, are generally vague and allow a great deal of discretion, but there are two specific differences. First, it is specified that the number of constituencies in Scotland must not be less than 71. As opponents of Scottish devolution frequently point out, this is a greater number than would be

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appropriate on the basis of a British-wide division of the electorate - and, indeed, the Third General Review raised the number of seats in Scotland to 72 - so that the Scottish electoral quota (54,569 in the current review) was more than 20% smaller than the figure for England (69,281). Second, whereas rule 4 explicitly states that constituencies in England shall not cross county or London borough boundaries (albeit that this is qualified in rule 5) it merely provides that 'in Scotland, regard shall be had to the boundaries of local authority areas'. In this respect, then, the Scottish Commission has an additional weapon in its discretionary armoury.

Geography creates special difficulties for the Scottish Commission. The largely mountainous area north of a line from the Tay to the Clyde covers almost 70% of the land mass but contains only about 25% of the population; the Borders and Dumfries and Galloway Regions house 5% of the population in 14% of the area. Problems are compounded by the fact that even in these sparsely populated areas there is a concentration of population in a few towns - Dumfries and Inverness, for example. In the latter case, the town was divided between two vast constituencies as a consequence of the Third General Review, and the division in the proposed new constituencies is even more striking. For the purposes of parliamentary representation some citizens of Inverness will find themselves linked with voters in Fort William, some 55 miles down the Great Glen, while others will be in the same constituency as voters in Gairloch, 60 miles over the mountains in another direction. Finally in this respect, there is the perennial problem presented by Orkney and Shetland and the Western Isles. By any reckoning these are too small to justify separate constituencies, but they are so remote from anywhere else that it is difficult to know how to deal with them.

While the current review was in progress the structure of local government in Scotland was relatively simple. Excluding the Islands authorities there was a uniform two-tier structure comprising nine large Regions containing 53 Districts. The task of reporting for only nine Regions is of a different order of magnitude from that facing the English Commission, which had to make recommendations for 39 counties and also deal with unitary local authorities in 32 London boroughs and 36 metropolitan districts. The size of the Scottish Regions also means that, in principle at least, it should be easier for the Scottish Commission to avoid recommending constituencies which cross Regional boundaries. In addition, the boundaries of the electoral units at the two levels of local government in Scotland normally fit together perfectly - Regional electoral divisions were themselves divided into a number of entire

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District wards. This potentially allows great flexibility in combining electoral divisions and wards to produce parliamentary constituencies.

PRINCIPLES

In establishing the electoral quota - the number of electors there would be in each constituency if they were equal in size - the Scottish Commission took an early decision of principle, although it may not have been recognised as such. They simply followed rule 8 - 'dividing the electorate ... by the number of constituencies ... existing on the enumeration date'. This inevitably meant that there would continue to be 72 Scottish constituencies, rather than the 71 which had been the case before the 1983 election, and that Scottish over-representation in the House of Commons would be slightly greater than strictly required.

Secondly, the Commission decided at the outset that it would use Regional electoral divisions as the basis for forming constituencies, with District wards to be used 'exceptionally'. There was a complication here, however. A statutory review of Regional electoral division and District ward boundaries was also in progress. The Commission decided to base their recommendations on the newly created divisions, even though the relevant reports were in the process of being presented to the Secretary of State during 1992 (and that for Strathclyde was not presented until April 1993) and the new divisions were not due to come into operation until the Regional elections of 1994. This must have caused an enormous amount of work for the Commission's staff and for electoral registration officers, since the latter were required to provide details of the size of the 1992 electorate in divisions which were not then in existence. It also certainly led to some errors. For example, at the public inquiry into the proposals for Central and Tayside it was announced that the original electorate figures used for Central Region contained inaccuracies. Later, it was found that 1,298 electors had been allocated to a wrong electoral division in Strathclyde.

The last two operating principles of the Commission were hedged around with qualifications. It was announced that they would prefer to create constituencies that did not cross Regional boundaries, but recognised that this might not always be possible; they aimed to produce 'constituencies which lie wholly within one District or comprise whole Districts', but admitted that 'the electorates of many of the Districts are not of the right size

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to facilitate the achievement of this result' (Boundary Commission for Scotland Explanatory Memorandum, JAT02222.023).

PRACTICE

The Commission stuck rigidly to its aim of using electoral divisions as the bases of the new constituencies. Despite the fact that strong representations were made at two public enquiries in favour of transferring District wards from one proposed constituency to another, no Regional division has been split between constituencies. It would appear, however, that this is largely a consequence of practical constraints. The review of the boundaries of electoral divisions had demolished the neat relationship between wards and divisions; the review of ward boundaries was still in progress and there was no prospect that it could be completed in time for the Commission to complete its work by December 1994, the deadline prescribed by the Government. Thus, in rejecting representations made with regard to Edinburgh constituencies the Commission stated that it 'would be unable to achieve its statutory deadline if it were to delay the review until arrangements for revised district wards were in place' and that it did not 'consider it feasible to propose constituencies based on a mix of new regional divisions and current district wards which are based on the old regional electoral divisions' (Boundary Commission for Scotland News Release, JAT03001.054).

The fact that District wards could not be used in the construction of constituencies certainly denied the Commission a small but significant element of flexibility. In the previous general review the Commission had similarly sought to use entire electoral divisions to make up constituencies but, in the event, they split eight electoral divisions in order to cope with some difficult cases.

On the other hand, while the previous review respected Regional boundaries the latest has created two constituencies which cross Regional boundaries. This happened because the Commission agreed at an early stage 'to consider schemes which would involve the amalgamation of those pairs of local authority regions which would produce, for the area, a rounded joint theoretical entitlement of one less than the aggregate of the rounded separate entitlement of the two regions' (Boundary Commission for Scotland News Release, JAT05804.033). The intention of this approach appears to have been to avoid increasing the total number of Scottish constituencies beyond

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72, and two pairs of Regions were involved - Tayside and Central, and Lothian and Borders. In each case one constituency crossed boundaries - Ochil, and Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale respectively. The crossing of Regional boundaries was explicitly challenged at the public enquiry into the Lothian/Borders proposals but the Commission pointed out that it only had 'to have regard to' local authority boundaries and that in Scotland this means 'having in view'. Consequently, the Commission may cross boundaries at its discretion.

Crossing local authority boundaries at District level is much more difficult to avoid and, as table 1 shows, the Commission were slightly more willing to do this than was the case in the last review. Fifty of the old constituencies did not cross District boundaries as compared with 47 of the new. In addition, among those constituencies which do cross boundaries the pattern of the new constituencies is slightly more complex.

Table 1

District composition of Scottish constituencies

	Old	New
One entire District	11	7
Two entire Districts	4	1
Wholly within one District	35	39
Entire District(s) + part 1 other	10	9
Entire District + part 2 others	1	3
Parts of 2 or 3 Districts	11	13

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EFFECTS

Most interest in the effects of constituency boundary changes - especially on the part of the media, politicians and the parties - centres on the partisan consequences. Electoral analysts concerned with the operation of the electoral system are also interested in the more esoteric matter of the effect upon the sizes of constituency electorates. Before considering these questions, however, it is useful to investigate the extent of the changes wrought by the review.

The extent to which a constituency is changed as a result of boundary revisions can be measured by a simple index of change, calculated as the sum of the number of electors leaving and joining a new constituency expressed as a percentage of the total electorate of the old base constituency - the base constituency being the one which contributes most electors to the new constituency. Although the index itself is simple, and its meaning easy to grasp, calculating it for the new Scottish constituencies is exceedingly complex. This is because the new constituencies are based on revised electoral divisions whereas the old constituencies were made up of unrevised divisions and wards. (The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the reports of the Scottish local government boundary commission and the subsequent statutory instruments make no reference to the boundaries of old electoral divisions and wards when describing the new arrangements.)

To determine the flow of electors between old and new constituencies, therefore, it is necessary first to determine the flow between old and new electoral divisions. Moreover, electoral registers relating to the new divisions and old wards - which are essential for accurate calculations - did not become available until 1994 whereas the Commission used specially prepared figures for 1992 electorates in its calculations. For these reasons, the index of change scores for Scottish constituencies should be treated as estimates, although they should be reasonably accurate.

Overall, there has been less change in the current review than in the one which came into force in 1983. The mean index of change score then was 48.3 while on this occasion it is 27.8. The difference is not surprising, since the previous review had to take account of the very radical change in local government structure introduced in 1974. The average new constituency in the current review has gained and/or lost a number of electors amounting to 28% of its old electorate. This average conceals wide variations, however, and in fact very extensive redrawing of boundaries this time has occurred

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only in Glasgow (which loses a seat), the Aberdeen area (which gains a seat), and in parts of Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire. In these cases, 21 constituencies produce an average index of change of 61.1 whereas for the remaining 51 seats the average is only 14.1.

Another way of summarising the extent of change is shown in table 2. It is, of course, a somewhat arbitrary decision as to where the line between 'minor' and 'significant' changes, and so on, should be drawn, but it is clear that the changes made on this occasion are less radical than those made in 1983. Nine constituencies have survived unscathed and a further three (East Kilbride, Eastwood and North East Fife) have been altered slightly only because of minor adjustments to the boundaries of local authorities. Nonetheless, on the categorisation adopted, the great majority of Scottish constituencies (47) have been changed significantly or to a very major extent.

Table 2

Extent of Change in Scottish Constituency Boundaries

	Previous Review	Current Review
No Change	3	9
Minor Change (0.1-9.9)	10	16
Significant Change (10-24.9)	7	19
Major Change (25.0-49.9)	17	14
New Constituency (50.0+)	35	14

Note: The figures in brackets refer to scores on the index of change. In the current review the Commission proposed no change to the composition of three constituencies which nonetheless will have very minor changes in their electorates due to revisions of the boundaries between local authorities. These constituencies are categorised here as 'minor change'.

One of the major purposes of the general reviews by the Boundary Commission is to equalise electorates across constituencies. Underlying this

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purpose is an elementary notion of fairness. In order to avoid votes in different parts of the country having different values, it seems better, on the whole, to have constituency electorates that are as equal as possible. In line with this point of view, the rules under which the Commission operates prescribe that 'the electorate of any constituency shall be as near the electoral quota as is practicable' and the Commission may depart from other rules in order to avoid 'an excessive disparity between the electorate of any constituency and the electoral quota'. On the other hand, the Commission may depart from the requirement to produce reasonably equal electorates if 'special geographical considerations including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency' apply, or if they believe that alterations to boundaries would give rise to 'inconveniences', or break local ties. In short, despite the initial statement in favour of equal electorates, the rules for redistribution allow the Commission almost unlimited discretion.

Table 3 indicates the distribution of electorates for the old constituencies when they were first created in 1980 and in 1992, and for the provisional and final recommendations of the current review. It is clear, first of all, that within the relatively short space of 12 years the electorates of the old constituencies became significantly more unequal. The range between the largest and smallest rose from just over 41,000 to 58,000 and the standard deviation increased from 7,768 (14.5% of mean) to 9,565 (17.5% of mean). The provisional recommendations of the Commission sharply reduced this inequality of constituency electorates, but subsequent revisions almost all tended to increase it. Indeed, to take one example, in Dumfries and Galloway the provisional recommendations of the Commission reduced the disparity between the two constituencies concerned whereas revised recommendations made for a greater disparity than had previously existed. As a consequence of changes of this kind, the standard deviation of constituency electorates crept up to 6,894 (12.6% of the mean) for the final recommendations. In terms of ensuring equality this is better than was achieved in 1980 and means that the wide divergences in the electorates of the old constituencies that had arisen by 1992 will be substantially reduced when the new constituencies come into operation.

Table 3

Distribution of Constituency Electorates

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	Old Constits 1980	Old Constits 1992	Prov. Constits 1992	Final Constits 1992
Mean	53,527	54,567	54,570	54,569
Standard Dev.	7,768	9,565	6,561	6,894
Minimum	22,971	23,015	23,015	23,015
Maximum	63,981	81,097	67,001	67,001

Note: The slight variations in the mean electorates of constituencies in 1992 reflects errors in the figures used by the Commission referred to elsewhere in this note.

An alternative view of variations in the size of constituency electorates is given in table 4, which shows the number of constituencies in which the electorate deviates from the mean by the amount shown. By 1992 only 15 of the 72 Scottish constituencies were within 5% of the mean electorate, but the Commission's proposals will increase this to 28. On the other hand, the number deviating from the mean electorate by more than 20% has been reduced from 13 to 5 (these five extreme cases being Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland, and Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross on the low side, and Eastwood, and Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley on the high side).

The inequality between constituency electorates has, then, been reduced by the current review - although it might well have increased again by the time that the constituencies are used in a general election. Whether or not the inequality that remains is tolerable remains a matter of judgement.

Table 4

Deviations of Constituency Electorates from Means

Old Constits 1980	Old Constits 1992	Prov. Constits 1992	Final Constits 1992
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+/- 0% - 5%	25	15	28	28
+/- 5.1% - 10%	20	15	25	22
+/- 10.1% - 20%	21	29	16	17
+/- more than 20%	6	13	3	5

PARTISAN CONSEQUENCES

Finally, constituency boundary revisions clearly have important implications for the parties. In the first place, their constituency organisations have to be reconstituted to fit the new boundaries. More important, however - although this is a matter of which the Commission take no cognisance - there are, inevitably, electoral implications. During the review process only two of the Commission's recommendations appeared to excite partisan controversy - the transfer of a regional electoral division from Stirling to Ochil and the transfer of Alloway from Ayr to Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley. In both cases this involved moving areas of strong Conservative support out of highly marginal constituencies into strongly Labour seats, and in both cases the Commission stuck to its guns. (Most objections concerned the names of constituencies, the location of small villages and the splitting of towns (as in Hamilton). Representations concerning the fate of the strongly Conservative village of Kilmacolm in Renfrewshire may have had a partisan motive but it is not clear that its inclusion or exclusion would have a significant effect on the electoral status of either of the two constituencies concerned.)

Table 5

Actual and 'Notional' Outcome of 1992 Election in Scotland

	Actual Outcome	'Notional' Outcome	Change
Con	11	11	0

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Lab	49	50	+1
Lib Dem	9	8	-1
SNP	3	3	0

An estimate of the overall partisan effect of the boundary changes is shown in table 5, which compares seats actually won in the 1992 general election with seats that would have been won under the new boundaries. The allocation of individual seats under the new boundaries is given in the Appendix. The 'notional' results are based on estimates of the outcome in each seat had voters voted exactly as they actually did in 1992. It must be emphasised, however, that in many cases electors would *not* have voted in the same way had the new boundaries been in place, so that these notional results are in no sense predictions. Rather, they form a basis for estimating the extent of electoral change in constituencies at the next general election. This qualification applies with particular force in Scotland, where the distribution of support for the four parties makes for very different tactical situations in different constituencies. Under the new boundaries new tactical situations and different opportunities for tactical voting would have applied in 1992 and will apply at the next election.

Nonetheless, the figures in the table suggest that the net effect of the boundary changes is very slight. Labour would have gained one seat and the Liberal Democrats lost one had the new boundaries been in place. It should be said, however, that one constituency - Stirling - is really 'too close to call'. It has been allocated to the Conservatives (with a majority of 236) but, given the nature of the estimates involved, could easily have produced a similarly small Labour majority. Overall, however, it seems clear that the boundary review in Scotland has not produced the bonus for the Conservatives that was widely expected to result in England.

CONCLUSION

One cannot help but feel some sympathy for the Scottish Boundary Commission. Quite apart from the difficulties created by the peculiarities of

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Scottish geography, their deliberations were made much more complicated by the fact that local government electoral units were being reviewed contemporaneously. In addition, however, even before the final report of the Commission was presented to the Secretary of State it was rendered immediately outdated. The Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1994 redrew the map of local government, replacing the nine Regions and 53 Districts with 29 unitary authorities, and eleven of these authorities involved adjustments to pre-existing District boundaries. The principle of aligning constituencies and Districts has thus been seriously breached. Worse was to follow, however, as a series of orders defined new electoral units for the new authorities, sweeping away the Regional electoral divisions which were the basic building blocks of the new constituencies.

One would guess that the members and staff of the Commission - and even more so electoral registration officers - looked on in some frustration. When the time comes to analyse the next review of Scottish constituencies the frustration of the analyst will be even greater.

APPENDIX: 'NOTIONAL' 1992 WINNERS IN NEW CONSTITUENCIES

The notional Scottish results were calculated by me as part of a British-wide analysis of boundary changes, directed by Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher of Plymouth University, which has been undertaken on behalf of the BBC, ITN and Sky Television. In broad terms, Regional and District election results were used to estimate the 1992 general election vote in the component parts of old constituencies and these were then 'reassembled' to form the new constituencies.

Labour Wins

Aberdeen Central	Glasgow Anniesland
Aberdeen North	Glasgow Baillieston
Airdrie and Shotts	Glasgow Cathcart
Ayr	Glasgow Govan
Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley	Glasgow Kelvin
Clydebank and Milngavie	Glasgow Maryhill
Clydesdale	Glasgow Pollok
Coatbridge & Chryston	Glasgow Rutherglen

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Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	Glasgow Shettleston
Cunninghame North	Glasgow Springburn
Cunninghame South	Greenock and Inverclyde
Dumbarton	Hamilton North and Bellshill
Dundee East	Hamilton South
Dundee West	Kilmarnock and Loudoun
Dunfermline East	Kirkcaldy
Dunfermline West	Linlithgow
East Kilbride	Livingston
East Lothian	Midlothian
Edinburgh Central	Motherwell and Wishaw
Edinburgh East and Musselburgh	Ochil
Edinburgh North and Leith	Paisley North
Edinburgh South	Paisley South
Falkirk East	Strathkelvin and Bearsden
Falkirk West	West Renfrewshire
Fife Central	Western Isles

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Conservative Wins

Aberdeen South	Gordon
Dumfries	Perth
Eastwood	Stirling
Edinburgh Pentlands	Tayside North
Edinburgh West	West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine
Galloway and Upper Nithsdale	

Liberal Democrat Wins

Argyll and Bute	Orkney & Shetland
Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross	Ross, Skye and Inverness West
North East Fife	Roxburgh & Berwickshire
Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber	Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale

SNP Wins

Angus
Banff & Buchan
Moray

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