

REINVENTING THE YO-YO? A COMMENT ON THE ELECTORAL PROVISIONS OF THE SCOTLAND BILL

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One of the few surprises in the white paper published in July 1997 which outlined the government's plans for Scottish devolution (Scottish Office 1997) was a commitment to eliminate the guarantee that Scotland should have at least 71 MPs at Westminster. The white paper intimated that this would eventually result in a reduction in the number of Scottish MPs, thereby eliminating the existing over-representation of Scotland at Westminster relative to her share of the United Kingdom electorate. Moreover, this change would also have implications for the proposed Scottish parliament. As the constituencies used to elect the directly elected members of the Scottish parliament were intended to be the same as those used in Westminster elections, the number of MSPs in Edinburgh would also eventually fall from the 129 envisaged for the parliament when it is first elected in 1999.

This paper argues, however, that the detailed provisions of the Scotland Bill designed to bring this policy into effect are flawed. They will not in the long run ensure that Scotland is not over-represented at Westminster. Moreover, far from securing a permanent reduction in the size of the Scottish parliament, the provisions are likely to result in a parliament which, after a once and for all cut, is likely to start gradually increasing in size such that by the middle of the next century it could well have returned to its original size. It suggests that if ministers are to succeed in achieving a permanent end to Scotland's over-representation at Westminster then not only will more radical changes be needed to the rules for the creation of House of Commons seats than are provided for in the bill, but the Scottish parliament will need a set of rules for the creation of Scottish parliament seats that are independent of those for Westminster.

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POLICY OBJECTIVES

Labour of course dominates Scottish representation at Westminster. So it was not surprising that hitherto a reduction in the number of Scottish parliamentary seats had been resisted by Labour even if some analysts had suggested that the party would have less to lose than widely believed (see for example, **The Economist**, 1995). Trouble was, whatever justification there might be for Scottish over-representation at Westminster when a devolved Scottish parliament did not exist (a case which, as McLean (1995) pointed out, was by no means as strong as many believed), there appeared to be none at all when such a body was in existence. After all, once a parliament was in place in Edinburgh, Scottish MPs at Westminster would appear to have less onerous duties than their colleagues south of the border, and so it is not at all clear why they should need to represent fewer constituents.

Most importantly, maintaining Scotland's over-representation at Westminster gave an additional cutting edge to what remained the most intellectually cogent argument against the introduction of devolution to one part of the United Kingdom but not to others: that is Tam Dalyell's famous West Lothian question. It was awkward enough that, after Scottish devolution, an MP for West Lothian would be able to vote on English education while his counterpart from West Bromwich would no longer have any say in Scottish education. It was even worse if, at the same time, the MP for West Lothian also represented fewer constituents than the MP for West Bromwich. In short, maintaining Scotland's over-representation exemplified for the critics of devolution one of their central charges, that it was an attempt by Scots to have their unionist cake and eat it.

Labour's change of mind suggested they recognised the force of this criticism. It appeared to acknowledge that Scotland could indeed no longer legitimately claim to be treated more favourably than any other part of the United Kingdom in the allocation of seats to the House of Commons. In so doing, the government helped to counter one of the most forceful arguments of those who wanted Scotland to vote 'No' in the devolution referendum.

But alongside these considerations the government also had another policy objective it was trying to achieve. One of the principal arguments commonly deployed in favour of the creation of a Scottish parliament is that the country needs a set of political institutions that can more effectively reflect and respond to what are seen as Scotland's distinctive needs. Thus, for example, in this spirit the White Paper stated that 'the electoral arrangements for the Scottish parliament should reflect the will of the Scottish people' (Scottish Office 1997, p.27). This would appear to imply that not only should the

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method for electing the parliament be determined by what is thought to be most appropriate in the Scottish context, but so should the size of the parliament be as well.

WHY SCOTLAND'S PARLIAMENT WILL GET SMALLER

The proposed electoral arrangements for the Scottish parliament provide for a variant of the so-called Additional Member System of proportional representation. One MSP will be elected for each Westminster constituency, except that Orkney and Shetland will each have their own MSP. This means that, under the current pattern of Westminster constituencies, 73 MSPs will be elected in this way. But then in addition 56 further MSPs will be elected from regional party lists, with seats allocated in such a way that the combined total of constituency and regional party list MSPs won by each party is as proportional as possible to the vote they have received. These provisions are fully in line with an agreement on the details of the new parliament's electoral system that was hammered out between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the Scottish Constitutional Convention (Scottish Constitutional Convention 1994).

What of course these provisions mean is that the government's decision to tackle Scotland's over-representation at Westminster has direct consequences for the likely future size of the Scottish parliament. If one MSP is to be elected for each Westminster constituency, then if the number of Westminster constituencies is reduced the number of members elected to the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh will automatically be reduced too. But the impact does not stop there. The proposed electoral arrangements for Edinburgh also provide that if there is a reduction in the number of constituency MSPs, then there should be a proportionate reduction in the number of regional party list MSPs as well. In the words of the bill itself, 'So far as reasonably practicable, the ratio which the number of regional member seats bears to the number of constituency member seats shall be 56 to 73.' (Schedule 1, Clause 7 (1) 3).

HOW WESTMINSTER REPRESENTATION WILL BE REDUCED

To understand how the bill will reduce Scotland's representation at Westminster requires us to acquaint ourselves with some of the rules for the redistribution of Commons seats (for a full account see Butler and McLean 1996). When the Boundary Commission for Scotland sets out on the task of redrawing Westminster boundaries, it calculates an 'electoral quota'. This quota is simply the total number of voters on the electoral register on the day

the review of boundaries commences, divided by the current number of seats in Scotland. The commission then tries to draw up a set of constituencies that are 'as near to the electoral quota as is practicable' (Boundary Commission for Scotland 1995, Appendix A), bearing in mind a number of other considerations to which we shall turn later in this paper.

Two features of this procedure are important for our purposes here. First, the electoral quota for Scotland is determined entirely independently of the electoral quota for England. Second, as the denominator for the quota is the current number of parliamentary constituencies in Scotland, it becomes almost impossible for the boundary commission to recommend any reduction in the number of constituencies, even if it were not also obliged to create a minimum of 71 seats. Together the two features mean that if England's electorate increases more rapidly than Scotland's (or diminishes more slowly) then Scotland will gradually become more over-represented relative to her population. This is precisely the process that explains why Scotland has increasingly been over-represented since 1918 (McLean 1995).

The bill clearly recognises this. For it does more than abolish the rule which guarantees Scotland a minimum of 71 seats. It also provides that, at the next boundary review, the Boundary Commission should use as its electoral quota the same electoral quota as in England. The impact of this can be seen if we look at the numbers on the 1997 register. This contains 36,806,467 electors in England (ONS 1997), distributed amongst 529 constituencies. Dividing the former figure by the latter produces a 'quota' of 69,577. If this quota were then applied in Scotland, with its 3,984,406 electors, then, leaving all other considerations aside, we could anticipate that the boundary commission would draw up just 57 Scottish constituencies.

WHY SCOTLAND COULD STILL BE OVER-REPRESENTED

The bill does then provide a clear mechanism for reducing Scotland's over-representation at the time of the next review. With that review due to be completed between 2003 and 2007, it should ensure that Scotland has no more than its 'fair' share of MPs by the time of the next election after next. And it should result in a reduction in the size of the Scottish parliament at the next Scottish parliament after next as well.

So why might there be a problem? Why might Scotland be over-represented again in future? What has to be appreciated here is that the bill will only require the Boundary Commission for Scotland to apply the 'English' electoral quota at the next boundary review. In subsequent reviews the commission

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will resort to the use of a Scottish quota, calculated by dividing the number of electors in Scotland by the number of Westminster seats then in existence. So if, between the next two reviews, England's electorate were to have grown more rapidly (or fallen more slowly) than Scotland's, then the electoral quota used in Scotland at the review after next will be smaller than the quota used in England, and Scotland will once again begin to be over-represented. And according to official population projections, this is precisely what is expected to happen (Govt. Actuary's Dept. 1996).

According to these projections, Scotland's population will be 4.9% lower in 2034 than it was in 1994. In England in contrast, the total population is expected to grow by 4.4% over the same period. If over the next forty years the English and Scottish electorates were also to change at these rates, that would mean an extra 1,619,485 electors in England and 195,236 fewer ones in Scotland. If the electorates of English and Scottish Westminster seats are still to be equal in the face of such a change, then (assuming England still had 529 seats) the number of seats in Scotland would need to be as low as 52. With 57 seats still in place, the average Scottish constituency would instead have more than 6,000 fewer electors than the average English one.

In short, the provisions of the bill will not ensure that Scotland is not over-represented at Westminster once the Edinburgh parliament is in place. It will eliminate the over-representation that has developed over the course of the twentieth century. But it leaves in place to be repeated once again during the twenty-first century the very same process that generated the existing over-representation in the first place.

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Even so, nothing that we have said so far implies that Scotland's parliament will change in size again after 2007. If the boundary commission recommended 57 Westminster constituencies at the next review, then it might be expected to succeed in sticking to that number thereafter. Given the requirement to maintain a ratio of 73 directly elected seats to 56 regional ones in the Scottish parliament, we might expect that the boundary commission would reduce the number of regional seats to 44, producing a Scottish parliament of 102 members. (There would be 58 constituency members as Orkney and Shetland would still each have their own MSP.) That might mean Scotland was still over-represented at Westminster, and the Edinburgh parliament rather smaller than envisaged by the Constitutional Convention, but at least it would provide for some stability in Edinburgh.

However, we have so far ignored a potentially important factor. We indicated earlier that the boundary commission was required to create seats as close to the electoral quota as was reasonably practical, subject to a number of other stipulations. One such stipulation is that 'regard shall be had to the boundaries of local authority areas'. A second is that the commission is empowered to recommend seats that depart from the electoral quota 'if special geographic considerations, including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency, appear to them to render a departure desirable' (Boundary Commission for Scotland 1995). And a third is introduced in the Scotland Bill itself which provides that 'a constituency which includes the Orkney Islands or the Shetland Islands shall not include the whole or any part of a local government area other than the Orkney Islands and the Shetland Islands', a provision which in effect enshrines the existing Orkney and Shetland seat into law.

The new requirement that Orkney and Shetland must remain a constituency on their own, despite containing (on the 1997 register) just 32,670 electors, is on its own likely to mean the commission would recommend 58 seats rather than 57.¹ But even if that provision were not included in the bill, the commission might well have been expected to continue to invoke, as it has hitherto, the 'special geographical considerations' rule to create such a seat together with an even smaller separate constituency for the Western Isles. But that is not all. The commission might well also decide to invoke this rule in the Highlands. With 164,711 electors on the 1997 register, the local authority currently contains 2.37 'English' quotas. Normally, this would entitle the area to just two constituencies. But it is only just below the threshold which would entitle it to three seats. (At least as interpreted hitherto by the Boundary Commission for England, the requirement that each constituency be as close to the electoral quota as practicable means that an area becomes entitled to three seats once it has 2.4 quotas (and not only when it has 2.5): for an explanation see McLean and Mortimore (1992)). And in any event the commission could well decide that two large constituencies of over 80,000 voters would provide inadequate representation for the area. It might even

¹ Note that the electorates quoted in this paragraph for individual local authorities are the total numbers of persons entitled to vote in local government elections rather than parliamentary elections. Slightly more persons are eligible to vote in the latter than in the former, but the discrepancy has no impact on the conclusions reached here.

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come to the same conclusion in the Scottish Borders which, with 86,051 electors, currently contains just 1.24 English quotas.²

But have not the boundary commission always had such discretion? Yet has it not only resulted in the creation of just one extra seat over the last fifty years? Why should it make more difference now? The answer is that the Boundary Commission for Scotland's use of the 'special geographical considerations' rule has hitherto been constrained by the fact that Scotland had a guaranteed minimum level of representation of 71 seats. It has argued that one of the reasons why Scotland was guaranteed this minimum (and thus was over-represented) was because 'Scotland has special geographical and topographical characteristics of mountains, lochs and islands which create sparsity of population and difficulties of accessibility which are not found on a comparable scale elsewhere' (Boundary Commission for Scotland 1995, p.13). In short, Scotland's guaranteed minimum representation already took account of 'special geographical considerations' amongst other factors and, as a result 'an increase in Scottish representation ... could not be justified' (Boundary Commission for Scotland 1969).

Consequently, the practice of the Boundary Commission for Scotland has been different from that of its English and Welsh counterparts (Curtice 1996). The Scottish commission has taken a view of the number of seats that it was desirable to create at the outset of a review, and has then by a variety of stratagems worked towards the achievement of that target. So, for example,

² *The commission might alternatively decide to combine the Borders with another local authority area in order to avoid creating two relatively small constituencies. This was the action it took in the last review (in contrast to the 1983 review when it created two constituencies). But it only did so because, as explained below, it felt under an obligation to avoid creating more than 72 constituencies (see Curtice 1996). However one key uncertainty about how the next review is likely to be conducted is how much attention the boundary commission will pay to the requirement to have regard to the boundaries of local authority areas. Hitherto it has interpreted this rule as a requirement normally not to cross regional boundaries but not as an inhibition to crossing district boundaries. The reorganisation of local government in 1996 however abolished the regional tier while creating a smaller number of councils than there were districts before. It will be impossible for the commission to avoid crossing some of the new council boundaries if gross disparities in constituency sizes are to be avoided, and it can only be a matter of conjecture as to which they will decide to respect. We have assumed that the commission will be disinclined to cross the boundary of Highland council as this is coterminous with that of the former region whose boundary it has previously respected, and that it might also revert to its previous policy in respect of the Borders.*

the creation of two small constituencies in the Islands because of special geographical considerations has in effect been counterbalanced by creating one less seat than might otherwise have been done on the mainland. The English and Welsh commissions, in contrast, have not established a target number of seats for themselves at the outset of their reviews. If they recommended an extra seat, whether because of special geographical considerations or for some other reason, no attempt has then been made to counterbalance this by creating fewer seats elsewhere. As a result, while the number of seats in Scotland rose by just one between 1950 and 1997, the number in Wales increased by five, and in England by 23.³

But with the abolition of Scotland's guaranteed minimum the Scottish Boundary Commission might well feel that it is no longer under an obligation to match any creation of an extra seat in one part of the country for special geographical reasons by an equivalent reduction elsewhere. Rather, it might argue that it was now under an obligation to adopt the same policy as its English and Welsh counterparts. Certainly, this appears to be what it is being encouraged to do by the government, for the devolution white paper argues that 'Other statutory requirements, notably the need to give due weight to geographical considerations and local ties, will continue to apply to reviews for Scotland *in the same way as they will apply to reviews for other parts of the UK*' (Scottish Office 1997, p.13, emphasis added).

So, in practice we might expect that Scotland will have rather more than 57 Westminster seats after the next boundary review. A more likely figure seems to be 59 or 60. Indeed this is precisely the outcome that the government itself has suggested would be likely in briefings to journalists. That of course means the Edinburgh parliament will also have more than 102 MSPs. But not just three more, for creating more Westminster seats means that the parliament will also have more regional party list seats in order to maintain the 73:56 ratio. If there were 61 directly elected MSPs, the ratio would appear to require the commission to recommend at least 47 regional members. In these circumstances it might in fact opt to recommend 48 on the grounds that each of the eight regional constituencies could then have the same number of party list seats. That would mean a parliament totalling 109 members.

³ *The 'special geographical considerations' rule is not the only factor which has contributed to an increase in the number of parliamentary seats. For further details see Curtice 1996, Home Affairs Committee 1986-7; Boundary Commission for England 1983, Appendix B; McLean and Mortimore 1992. But the Scottish commission has equally worked to resist these pressures as well.*

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Still none of this seems to raise any particular problem. It means in fact that the Scottish Parliament will be rather closer in size to what was envisaged by the Constitutional Convention. And while it might mean that there are a few more seats in Scotland than would be expected given her population, at least the number will have been determined by the same principles and procedures as apply in England. All in all we appear to have a neat piece of parliamentary drafting.

In fact, just as with the issue of over-representation, the problem lies not in what will happen in the next review but in subsequent ones.

Bear in mind that at the next review but one, Scotland will revert to having her own quota, and that that quota will be the number of electors in Scotland divided by the number of Westminster seats in existence in Scotland at that time. So, if the boundary commission creates 60 rather than 57 seats at the next review, the quota at the review next but one will be correspondingly smaller. As a result the commission will in effect start with a minimum baseline of 60 seats. If, as is likely to be the case, the commission then still finds itself under pressure to take account of special geographical considerations in the Highlands and Borders, any extra seats that are created as a result will be in addition to those 60. That of course would mean yet a further reduction in the electoral quota in the subsequent review. And so on. In short, the commission would be under slow but unrelenting pressure to increase the number of Westminster seats, review after review. This in fact is precisely the predicament the Welsh boundary commission already finds itself in (Boundary Commission for Wales 1995).

One implication of this of course is that it is even less likely that the provisions of the Scotland Bill will provide a permanent solution to Scottish over-representation at Westminster. But it also means that having reduced the number of Edinburgh seats by 20 or so in 2007, the number will start increasing again. And of course, every time the commission creates more directly elected constituencies, so also will it be under an obligation to create more regional party list seats as well. Typically, for every three extra directly elected seats that it creates, the commission is likely to create two more regional seats, making five extra Edinburgh seats in total.

As we noted earlier, the boundary commission is required to conduct a review once every eight to twelve years. Let us assume that it reports on average every ten years. Assume also, as we have shown could well be the case, that each review after the first results in five more Edinburgh seats. Then in just forty years, that is by the middle of the next century, the Edinburgh parliament will have yo-yoed back to its original size. Devolution may be the

settled will of the Scottish people, but the proposed electoral arrangements for the Edinburgh parliament do not ensure a settled means for the expression of that will in future.

SOLUTIONS?

We have argued then that the provisions of the Scotland Bill are both unlikely to ensure that Scotland is not over-represented at Westminster in future, and are likely to see the size of the Edinburgh parliament oscillate down and up. Can these problems, in fact, be avoided?

One solution might appear to be to amend the bill so that, rather than requiring the Scottish boundary commission to use the 'English' quota only at the next review, it would stipulate that it should do so at all future reviews. That would certainly avoid the re-emergence of Scottish over-representation at Westminster. But if, as might be expected, this resulted in further reductions in the number of Scottish MPs at Westminster, it would also mean further reductions in the size of the Edinburgh parliament. This would mean the extent to which the Edinburgh electoral system produced a proportionate outcome, and thus reflected the will of the Scottish people, would also be further eroded (leaving aside the possible implications of diminishing size for the status and effectiveness of the parliament). Moreover, it would in effect mean that the size of the Scottish parliament would be directly influenced by the work of a wholly English body, that is the Boundary Commission for England. Such a situation would hardly seem compatible with the spirit of devolution.

True, it would be possible to avoid the size of the Edinburgh parliament being affected by changes in the number of Scottish MPs at Westminster by changing the provisions for the number of regional party list members. Instead of requiring that any decrease in the number of directly elected members be matched by an equivalent reduction in the number of party list seats, the bill could instead stipulate that any reduction in the number of directly elected seats should be matched by a matching increase in the number of regional party list seats. This would guarantee that the parliament would remain at 129 seats.

Other arguments point in the same direction. In particular, it can be suggested that the existing provisions are not consistent with the aim of ensuring that 'the Scottish parliament should reflect the will of the Scottish people'. In general, we can expect that the fewer the number of directly elected constituency members there are, the more disproportional the outcome of the

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first past the post election is likely to be in terms of the relationship between constituency seats won and votes cast (Curtice and Steed 1986). As a result, if anything, more, not fewer regional party list seats will be required to ensure that the overall distribution of seats is still reasonably proportional once the number of constituency seats is reduced. But even if we leave this possibility to one side, any reduction in the number of regional party list seats is in itself likely to reduce the proportionality of the overall outcome (Lijphart 1994).

But increasing the number of regional party list seats to compensate fully for any reduction in the number of directly-elected members might also be felt to have a disadvantage. Say the number of Scottish MPs at Westminster did fall to 52, and thus there were only 53 directly elected MSPs in Edinburgh. If the parliament were to retain a fixed total of 129 members, this would mean no less than 76 would be regional party list members. One of the virtues of the Additional Member System in the eyes of its advocates is that it combines a broadly proportional outcome with the benefit of having as many members as possible still directly accountable to the voters of an individual constituency. If well under half the parliament consisted of directly elected constituency MSPs, that latter benefit might be thought to be lost.

So perhaps the government might be better off trying to tackle the problem from a different angle. It might seek to change the rules for the redistribution of seats to avoid any prospect of a continuing upward drift in the number of Scottish seats at Westminster. This it might do by requiring that in all future reviews the denominator used in calculating the electoral quota for Scotland should be the number of seats to which Scotland proves to be entitled in the next review after the application of the English quota but before any seats are created because of special geographical considerations or any other reason. Thus, if by the time the next review actually commences Scotland is still entitled according to that calculation to 57 seats, then 57 would become the denominator in all future reviews. The total number of Westminster seats might still move up or down slightly from review to review, but for the most part it would mean that the Edinburgh parliament could look forward to a reasonably settled size. However, what this change would not do is ensure that Scotland would not once again become over-represented at Westminster in future.

In short, it is difficult to conceive of any satisfactory solution to our problem for so long as it is envisaged that the constituencies that are used to elect the directly elected members of the Scottish parliament have to be the same as those which are used to elect Scotland's MPs to Westminster. So long as this is the case it appears that if Scottish over-representation at Westminster is to be avoided, the Edinburgh parliament must look forward to the prospect of

ever diminishing in size. On the other hand, if the Edinburgh parliament is to remain reasonably constant in size, Westminster appears destined to have to accept Scottish over-representation. In the event, the provisions of the Scotland Bill fail to ensure either that Westminster over-representation is avoided or that the Edinburgh parliament will remain reasonably constant in size.

In any case, tying the electoral arrangements for the Scottish parliament to the existing provisions for Westminster might well prove to be short-sighted. The government is after all committed to holding a referendum on what electoral system should be used to elect the House of Commons in future once the Jenkins commission has determined what it considers to be the best alternative to the existing system. If the electorate were to vote in favour of changing the Westminster system, then it is highly likely that the pattern of constituencies used to elect Scotland's Westminster MPs under the new system will not provide an acceptable basis for implementing an Additional Member System for Edinburgh. For example, if the Jenkins commission recommends and the electorate vote for the introduction of an Additional Member System to elect Westminster MPs, that might well mean that Scotland would elect fewer than 40 constituency MPs. Unless the Edinburgh parliament were to be reduced to half its currently envisaged size, the umbilical cord tying Edinburgh and Westminster constituencies would then have to be broken.

But even if we leave this to one side, it is evident that when it comes to details of the electoral arrangements considered here, the Scotland Bill provides a short-term fix, not a long-term solution. It will indeed help take some of the sting out of the West Lothian question at the time of the next review. But thereafter, it leaves the problem of Scotland's over-representation at Westminster just where it was, and meanwhile invites the Boundary Commission for Scotland to implement north of the border procedures for drawing up Commons seats that experience south of the border has already shown to be flawed. And at the same time it exposes the Edinburgh parliament to the prospect of yo-yoing in size. Better perhaps to have persuaded the Home Secretary to take a proper look at the rules for redistributing Commons seats. And meantime to have drawn up a set of electoral arrangements for Edinburgh designed to suit the needs of Scotland rather than the constraints of Westminster.

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February 1998