

National Assembly for Wales

Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill October 2010

This paper provides a background briefing on the Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill, which was presented to the UK Parliament by the Rt. Hon Nick Clegg MP, the Deputy Prime Minister, on 22 July 2010.

The Bill includes two key provisions which both directly apply to Wales. It aims to provide for a referendum on a choice between First Past the Post (FPTP) and the Alternative Vote (AV) as the system for electing the House of Commons, and change the electoral system for the Commons to the Alternative Vote if the result of the referendum supports this. The Bill also aims to provide for a reduction in the number of seats in the House of Commons from 650 to 600 and to introduce more equally sized constituencies.

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National Assembly for Wales

Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill
October 2010

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Summary

This paper provides a background briefing on the [*Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill*](#), which was presented to the UK Parliament by the Rt. Hon Nick Clegg MP, the Deputy Prime Minister, on 22 July 2010. The Bill was debated at Second Reading on 6 September 2010 where the House of Commons voted for the Bill to be considered by a Committee of the Whole House.

The Bill includes two key provisions which both directly apply to Wales. These are:

- To provide for a referendum on a choice between First Past the Post (FPTP) and the Alternative Vote (AV) as the system for electing the House of Commons, and change the electoral system for the Commons to the Alternative Vote if the result of the referendum supports this; and
- To provide for a reduction in the number of seats in the House of Commons and more equally sized constituencies, through changes to the rules for boundary reviews to enable the Boundary Commissions to draw up the new constituencies during the current Parliament. By doing this, the Bill aims to decouple the constituencies of the UK Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill : Key provisions	2
2.1. Part 1 : Voting System for Parliamentary Elections	2
2.2. Part 2 : Parliamentary Constituencies	3
3. Reaction to the proposals	6
3.1. Referendum Date	6
3.2. Reduction of Constituencies	8
3.3. Timing	9
4. Implications for Wales	11
4.1. Referendum Date	11
4.2. Decoupling of Welsh constituencies	11
4.3. Reduction in the number of Welsh constituencies	12
5. The Second Reading Debate	14
5.1. Principle of the Bill	14
5.2. Referendum Date	15
5.3. Reduction of Constituencies	17
5.4. Devolution	19
5.5. Turnout Threshold	21
5.6. Abolition of Public Inquiries	22
5.7. Voter Registration	22

Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill

1. Introduction

On 5 July 2010, the Rt. Hon Nick Clegg MP, the Deputy Prime Minister, made a statement to the House of Commons on *Political and Constitutional Reform* in which he announced the government's intention to publish a Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill.¹

The Bill is a product of the coalition agreement between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats which was published following the UK General Election in May 2010. The agreement states the UK Government's intention to:

... bring forward a Referendum Bill on electoral reform, which includes provision for the introduction of the Alternative Vote (AV) in the event of a positive result in the referendum, as well as for the creation of fewer and more equal sized constituencies.²

These proposals represent a major compromise for both coalition partners. The position of both parties on the issue is summarised by Professor Robert Hazell below:

The Conservatives are staunch supporters of First past the Post (FPTP) and see no need for change. The Liberal Democrats have long supported the Single Transferable Vote (STV), and will see AV as a very poor substitute, since it is not a proportional system. Hence the provision that after being whipped to support a referendum on AV in Parliament, the parties will be free to fight on opposing sides during the referendum campaign. Ironically the one party which does formally support a referendum on AV is the Labour party, although in practice the Labour party are divided on the issue.

The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are closer together in wishing to reduce the size of the House of Commons: the Conservatives to 585, the Lib Dems to 500. This is a more difficult proposal to implement, because it involves a wholesale redrawing of all constituency boundaries, which is difficult to do inside one parliament.³

This Bill, along with the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill⁴, is a key component of the UK Government's package for parliamentary and constitutional reform.

¹ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c24](#)

² [UK Government, *The Coalition : our programme for government*, May 2010, Section 24](#)

³ [Hazell, Robert \(2010\) *The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Agenda for Constitutional and Political Reform*, The Constitution Unit : University College London, June 2010](#)

⁴ See [MRS research paper 10/066](#)

2. Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill : Key provisions

2.1. Part 1 : Voting System for Parliamentary Elections

Clause 1 of the Bill states that a referendum on the AV system will take place on 5 May 2011; the same day as elections to the devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and local elections in England. It also provides that the following question will appear on the ballot papers, along with a Welsh translation in Wales:

Do you want the United Kingdom to adopt the ‘alternative vote’ system instead of the current ‘first past the post’ system for electing Members of Parliament to the House of Commons?⁵

Clause 7 of the Bill outlines the electoral system that would come into force should a majority vote in favour of adopting such a system in the referendum. Under the form of the alternative vote specified in the Bill, candidates must achieve more than 50 per cent of the votes in the count – either at the initial stage or, if necessary, at a further counting stage – in order to be elected.

University College London’s Constitution Unit has provided a description and summary of the alternative vote system, and it is included below for information:

AV is a preferential voting system which ensures that each MP is elected by more than half the votes in their constituency. Voters rank the candidates, and losing candidates are successively eliminated until one gets more than half the votes. It is not proportional. If AV had been used in the 2010, the results would not have been hugely different, but would have hurt the Conservatives most. The Electoral Reform Society estimates the Conservatives would have got around 280 seats, Labour 260 and the Lib Dems 80 seats under AV.⁶

In a statement to the House of Commons on 5 July 2010, the Deputy Prime Minister announced that changing the United Kingdom’s electoral system would “help to correct the deep unfairness in the way we hold elections in this country”.⁷ He added that the purpose of the referendum would be to give the UK’s electoral system a new legitimacy by giving “people their own say over something as fundamental as how they elect their MPs”.⁸

Although the Deputy Prime Minister acknowledged MPs’ concerns over holding multiple polls on one day, he stated that this proposal would save an estimated £17 million.⁹

⁵ [Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill](#)

⁶ [Hazell, Robert \(2010\) *The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Agenda for Constitutional and Political Reform*, The Constitution Unit : University College London, June 2010](#)

⁷ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c24](#)

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*

2.2. Part 2 : Parliamentary Constituencies

This part of the Bill proposes a reduction in the number of Parliamentary constituencies from 650 to 600 and the fixing of the number of MPs to that number.

As well as providing a more equal system (all constituencies will have about 75,000 voters) the proposals also aim to cut the costs associated with a greater number of MPs thus saving an additional £12 million a year. This proposal also aims to bring the House of Commons into line with the size of other legislatures across the world.¹⁰

The Bill will also reform the process for conducting boundary reviews. At the moment boundary reviews are conducted by four Parliamentary Boundary Commissions, one for each constituent part of the UK. They are advisory Non-Departmental Public Bodies funded by the Cabinet Office and their operation is governed by the *Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986*¹¹ (a consolidation measure) as amended by the *Boundary Commissions Act 1992*¹² and the *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000*.¹³

Under current legislation all four Boundary Commissions are required to keep their parliamentary constituencies under continuous review and periodically (every 8 to 12 years) to conduct a general review of all constituencies in their area and to submit to the relevant Secretary of State a report showing the new constituencies they recommend.

The current position is that each Boundary Commission is required to publicise its provisional recommendations for a local authority area in a notice placed in at least one newspaper circulating in each constituency in that local authority area. The proposals are also made available on the Commission's website and copies of the notice sent to all interested parties, including local authorities and MPs. Written representations about the provisional recommendations have to be made within one month of the date of publication of the notice. Those who make representations are asked to say whether they approve of, or object to, the Commission's proposals, and objectors are advised to submit counter-proposals.

A local inquiry to ascertain the views of the public must be held if representations are received from an interested local authority or a body of 100 or more electors objecting to a Commission's provisional recommendations. The Commission also has the discretion to order a local inquiry if it thinks there would be benefits from

¹⁰ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c24](#)

¹¹ [Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 \(c.56\)](#)

¹² [Boundary Commissions Act 1992 \(c.55\)](#)

¹³ [Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 \(c.41\)](#)

holding one. Local inquiries are conducted on behalf of the Boundary Commissions by Assistant Commissioners (independent lawyers). If the Boundary Commission decides to hold a local inquiry this is publicised six weeks ahead by the publication of a notice of the inquiry in the local press. The Boundary Commission will issue a statement giving the reasons for their provisional recommendations and issues likely to be raised at the inquiry. No statutory procedure is prescribed for the conduct of a local inquiry; this being left to the discretion of the Assistant Commissioner.

At the end of the inquiry the Assistant Commissioner prepares a report and submits it to the Boundary Commission; he / she may recommend that the proposals should be accepted with or without alterations, or he / she might recommend that a counter-proposal should be adopted, with or without modifications, provided that it conforms to the rules and appears to him /her to command greater support locally than the Commission's proposals.

Following a local inquiry the Boundary Commission will consider the written representations, the Assistant Commissioner's report and the verbatim transcript of the matters discussed at the inquiry. If the Boundary Commission then decides to revise its provisional recommendations, revised recommendations are published, a news release issued and comments invited, again within one month of publication of this notice. A further local inquiry may be held but generally the Boundary Commissions wish to avoid the expense of a second local inquiry and hope that these will only be held in exceptional circumstances.

Only when a Boundary Commission has decided the final recommendations for the whole of the relevant country does it submit its final report to the Secretary of State for Wales.

This Bill aims to introduce new provisions that will ensure a quicker review process that must also take into account the number of electors in each constituency in order to avoid the large variations that currently exist between constituencies. These proposals were introduced by the Deputy Prime Minister as important in ensuring 'that people's votes carry the same weight, no matter where they live'.¹⁴

Part 2 of the Bill also replaces the existing Schedule 2 to *the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986*¹⁵ with a new set of rules for the distribution of seats. These new rules will:

- Fix the size of the House of Commons at 600 members;

¹⁴ [Ibid, c24](#)

¹⁵ [Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 \(c56\)](#)

- Provide for the number of constituencies in each part of the United Kingdom to be determined by reference to the size of the electorate in each part of the UK;
- Place a limit on the permitted variation in the number of registered electors for a constituency recommended by a Boundary Commission. In particular it requires the Boundary Commissions to recommend constituency boundaries that ensure that the electorate of each constituency is not more than 5% more or less than the electoral quota for the UK (which currently stands at around 75,000).
- Provide for two preserved constituencies in Scotland¹⁶ as exceptions to this principle of electoral parity;
- Place a limit on the geographical size of a constituency;
- Make provision to address the potential impact of rounding to a whole number when apportioning constituencies to Northern Ireland;
- Reform the process for conducting boundary reviews; in particular ending the practice of holding local inquiries and extending the consultation period from the present one month to twelve weeks (these reports are due from the Commissions under this legislation before 1 October 2013 and every five years from that point); and
- Break the present link between Westminster constituencies and constituencies of the National Assembly for Wales.

¹⁶ These constituencies are 'Orkney and Shetland' and the 'Western Isles'.

3. Reaction to the proposals

3.1. *Referendum Date*

Responding to the Deputy Prime Minister's statement on behalf of the Opposition, the Rt. Hon Jack Straw QC MP argued that the UK Government's proposals to hold a referendum on voting reform on the same day as other polls did not follow the precedent of previous referendums held in the UK:

Will he [the Deputy Prime Minister] confirm that none of the four previous referendums held in the United Kingdom – the EU referendum in 1975, and the more recent Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland referendums – has been held on the same day as elections? What is the argument for not following that precedent? Would it not have been altogether more sensible to consult widely on the best possible date and then to add the date to the Bill in due course? What is the argument against that?¹⁷

Forty four Conservative MPs also signed an Early Day Motion calling for the referendum to be moved because it clashes with the devolved elections in Scotland and Wales.¹⁸

On this point, the Deputy Prime Minister replied:

Is he seriously suggesting that people are incapable of taking more than one decision in a day, or of filling in an extra box to answer yes or no to a straightforward question? That is misleading and patronising at best.¹⁹

Other MPs were opposed to this proposal on the grounds that holding the referendum on the same day as the devolved elections could lead to differential turnouts across the UK. For example, Gavin Barwell MP said:

... to look again at one issue - the timing of the referendum. I understand his [the Deputy Prime Minister] arguments on cost and convenience to electors, but a further consideration is the perception that the referendum is fair. Holding it on a day when my constituents in London have no local elections, but people in Scotland and Wales are electing their national Parliaments, could lead to a skewed result.²⁰

In response, the Deputy Prime Minister told MPs that:

I do not think it contemptuous to ask people - wherever they live in Wales, Scotland, England or whatever part of the United Kingdom - to have their say on the electoral system that elects Members to this House, and to ask them to do so on a very simple yes or no basis at a time when they are voting in any event. It underestimates the people of Wales, Scotland - the United Kingdom - to suggest somehow that they are incapable of deciding more than one thing on the same day.²¹

¹⁷ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c26](#)

¹⁸ [44 MPs want vote moved, BBC News Website, 27 July 2010](#)

¹⁹ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c28](#)

²⁰ *Ibid*, c39

²¹ *Ibid*, c39

In evidence to the Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform, the Hansard Society argued that:

...a referendum held on the same day as the other elections scheduled for May 2011 offers the prospect of important administrative efficiencies and cost savings.

However, it noted that there are no elections in London and a number of other areas in England and “here it is likely that turnout will be disproportionately lower”²². In light of this it warned:

If turnout proves to be on a par with, or lower than, average local election turnouts in recent years then this could raise serious issues about the legitimacy of the vote that the Government and Parliament will need to address.²³

The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) also submitted evidence, in which it stated:

The AEA continues to be concerned about the trend for holding different electoral events on the same day, particularly where there are different voting systems and franchises in operation. Whilst we recognise the political and economic interest in doing so, the impact on voters and on the administration of polls should not be underestimated and careful consideration of these should inform the planning and the delivery of the various electoral events.²⁴

The Electoral Commission however have stated that “it should be possible to deliver the polls for the referendum on the same day as scheduled elections to the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly”²⁵ providing that the UK Government addresses the following risks:

- The Government must support the [Electoral] Commission in putting in place a robust process to ensure that planning for 5 May 2011, across the whole of the UK, takes full account of the implications of the different polls due to take place on that date.
- The rules on how the referendum will be conducted must be clear from at least six months in advance. Adequate provision must be made for appropriate public awareness activities to support understanding of the elections and referendum processes by voters.
- Appropriate levels of funding must be made available for the delivery of the referendum and the scheduled elections together.
- The legal framework for the referendum must make provision for formal combination of the referendum poll with the scheduled elections.²⁶

²² [HC Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform, Written Submission of Evidence from the Hansard Society, VPR05, 7 September 2010](#)

²³ Ibid

²⁴ [HC Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform, Written Evidence from AEA, VPR 06, 7 September 2010](#)

²⁵ [The Electoral Commission, Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill : House of Commons Second Reading, 6 September 2010](#)

²⁶ Ibid

3.2. *Reduction of Constituencies*

Mr Straw criticised the UK Government's proposals to reduce the number of Westminster constituencies, and indicated that the Labour Party would not be willing to support a Bill that included "outrageously partisan proposals' that would 'gerrymander the boundaries of this House of Commons'".²⁷ He also argued that the current situation did not require reform, stating that:

There never has been an issue about the need for constituencies to be broadly equal in size. That principle has been embodied in legislation for decades and has all-party support.²⁸

In response, the Deputy Prime Minister defended the Government's proposals as being "based on a simple principle of fairness".²⁹

The Labour Party subsequently confirmed their decision to oppose the referendum on the basis that the Bill also aims to reduce the number of constituencies³⁰. This view was also endorsed by prominent candidates for the Labour leadership³¹ and the former Secretary of State for Wales, Peter Hain MP.³²

Several commentators have also suggested that the reduction in the number of MPs will be likely to lead to serious anomalies. Professor Ron Johnston of Bristol University believes that under the current proposals, the Isle of Wight (with an electorate of 110,000) will almost certainly have to split, with part of the island forming a constituency with parts of Hampshire.³³ A point further emphasised by the MP for the Isle of Wight, Andrew Turner MP, in response to the Deputy Prime Minister's statement.³⁴

Professor Johnston has also indicated that the three years provided in the Bill to review the current boundaries in the UK will not provide sufficient time for the Boundary Commissions to report, unless the Commission's staff and resources are increased or that the period for public consultation is significantly shortened³⁵

The Hansard Society expressed a number of concerns about proposals for equalisation to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee noting that

²⁷ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c26](#)

²⁸ [Ibid.c26](#)

²⁹ [Ibid](#)

³⁰ [Cameron: Labour 'opportunistic' in opposing AV vote, BBC News Website, 28 July 2010](#)

³¹ [Labour supports electoral reform – but not this unfair bill, The Guardian, 29 July 2010](#)

³² [Tories sandbagged Clegg on electoral reform, The Guardian, 28 July 2010](#)

³³ [Johnston, R \(2010\) Redrawing the constituency map – with a change of rules, Constitution Unit Seminar, 23 July 2010](#)

³⁴ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c25](#)

³⁵ [Johnston, R \(2010\) Redrawing the constituency map – with a change of rules, Constitution Unit Seminar, 23 July 2010](#)

“the proposed new size of the House of Commons appears to have been plucked from thin air”.³⁶ It continued:

Although an understandable response to the expenses scandal and the recession, it is not axiomatic that cutting the cost of politics will enhance and be to the benefit of Parliament and our wider democracy. Prior to the emergence of these proposals there was already concern about a mismatch between the scrutiny mission of Parliament and its capacity to carry out that mission. The Hansard Society therefore recommends that, before proceeding with the reform, an audit of an MP’s key roles and functions should be performed to assess what impact, if any, the reduction in numbers will have on key areas of activity: for example, on public bill committee membership and workloads; on select committee activity etc.³⁷

It also observed that:

Unless a move to reduce the number of MPs is accompanied by a parallel commitment to reduce the size of the Government’s payroll vote, it will merely enhance the executive at the expense of the legislature by reinforcing the power of the frontbench in proportion to the overall size of the House of Commons.³⁸

3.3. *Timing*

The House of Commons Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform criticised the lack of time available for the UK Parliament to effectively scrutinise the UK Government’s proposals.³⁹ The Chair of the Committee, Graham Allen MP, stated in a letter to the Deputy Prime Minister:

Your legislative timetable has put me and my committee in an extremely difficult position. When the House agreed to establish the committee, it did so, in the words of the Deputy Leader of the House, “to ensure that the House is able to scrutinise the work of the Deputy Prime Minister”. In the case of these two bills you have denied us any adequate opportunity to conduct this scrutiny.⁴⁰

Similar views were expressed by the Director of University College London’s Constitution Unit, Professor Robert Hazell:

Constitutional change is too important to rush in this way. These bills⁴¹ have been introduced with no consultation, no Green or White Paper, and the government now wants to push them through Parliament at equally reckless speed. Both bills raise important constitutional issues, which demand proper scrutiny in both Houses of Parliament.⁴²

The House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee decided at its meeting on 27 July to scrutinise the impact of the Government’s proposed legislation on Wales in

³⁶ [HC Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform, Written Submission of Evidence from the Hansard Society, VPR05, 7 September 2010](#)

³⁷ *Ibid*

³⁸ *Ibid*

³⁹ [MPs 'denied enough time to study electoral reform bill', The Guardian, 2 August 2010](#)

⁴⁰ [HC Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform, *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill: 1st Report*, 2 August 2010](#)

⁴¹ These two bills are the Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill and the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill ([see MRS Research Paper 10/066](#))

⁴² [University College London : The Constitution Unit, *Political Reform bills face stormy passage, says Constitution Unit*, 22 July 2010](#)

respect of the referendum date and the reduction in the number of Welsh seats. It has invited views in writing on these matters from the general public as well as academics and other commentators. David Davies MP, the Chair of the Committee, said:

The Government's proposals for constitutional reform would have a profound impact on how Wales is represented at Westminster. Some commentators have also questioned whether the people of Wales should reasonably be expected to participate in a referendum and an Assembly election on the same day. The Committee is keen to hear the Government's case for reducing the number of MPs in Wales and is equally keen to hear from the widest number of people about the merits of the Government's proposals.⁴³

The closing date for submissions was 17 September 2010.

⁴³ [*HC Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, The Welsh Affairs Committee announces an inquiry on the Implication for Wales of the Government's Proposals for Constitutional Reform, 29 July 2010*](#)

4. Implications for Wales

4.1. *Referendum Date*

The Deputy Prime Minister has stated that the proposed AV referendum will take place on 5 May 2010, the same day as elections to the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish devolutionary bodies and local elections in England.

There has been widespread criticism of the decision to hold numerous polls on different issues on the same day. For example the Rt. Hon, Carwyn Jones AM, the First Minister, has indicated that he wants the Assembly elections to be put back to June 2010 to avoid both polls taking place on the same date.⁴⁴

Under section 4 of the *Government of Wales Act 2006*⁴⁵ ('the 2006 Act), the Secretary of State for Wales can vary the date of an ordinary general election either no more than one month earlier or one month later than the first Thursday in May. In response to the Deputy Prime Minister's statement, Kevin Brennan MP asked whether the Government would consider using this provision to alter elections to the National Assembly in the future:

... if the Government received a request from the Welsh Assembly under the Government of Wales Act 1998 [sic] to delay the Welsh Assembly elections by a month, as is allowed under regulations, what will the Government's response be? Is the Deputy Prime Minister ruling that possibility out?⁴⁶

In response, the Deputy Prime Minister stated that:

I will of course consult the Secretary of State for Wales, and indeed, the Secretary of State for Scotland. I know that the Secretary of State for Wales is in Cardiff today. If that request is made, we will of course have to take a decision at that time.⁴⁷

4.2. *Decoupling of Welsh constituencies*

Section 11 of the Bill makes specific provision in relation to the National Assembly for Wales. This section amends section 2 (in addition to Schedule 1 and paragraph 1 of Schedule 11) of the 2006 Act to specify that the Assembly constituencies are the constituencies specified in *the Parliamentary Constituencies and Assembly Electoral Regions (Wales) Order 2006*⁴⁸, as amended. The effect is that any future changes to Parliamentary constituencies made under the new rules introduced by this Bill would not change the Assembly's local and

⁴⁴ [Vote change ballot set to clash with assembly elections, BBC News website, 2 July 2010](#)

⁴⁵ [Government of Wales Act 2006 \(c32\)](#)

⁴⁶ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c40](#)

⁴⁷ [Ibid, c41](#)

⁴⁸ [The Parliamentary Constituencies and Assembly Electoral Regions \(Wales\) Order 2006](#)

regional constituencies and that the number of Assembly Members will remain at 60.

A similar provision to decouple the Scottish Parliament and UK Parliament constituencies is already in place in Scotland. The *Scottish Parliament (Constituencies) Act 2004*⁴⁹ amended the *Scotland Act 1998*⁵⁰ by replacing Schedule 1 of that Act with a new schedule which removed the statutory link between the constituencies for the Scottish Parliament and those for the House of Commons and retaining the present regions and number of regional MSPs. This ensured that the number of MSPs remained at 129.⁵¹

4.3. *Reduction in the number of Welsh constituencies*

The Bill's proposals to cut the number of MPs throughout the UK will affect Wales disproportionately. The average size of a constituency in Wales is 56,600. Of the current 40 Welsh Parliamentary constituencies, none reach the average of 75,000 voters as specified by the Bill. In the 2010 General Election, Cardiff South and Penarth had the largest electorate in Wales with 73,700 electors, whilst Arfon had the smallest with 41,200.⁵²

As Wales has a number of constituencies which are currently below the median figure for the UK as a whole, it is likely that the Welsh representation at Westminster will be reduced from 40 to 30 MPs. By reforming the process for conducting boundary reviews, the current rule which states that Wales shall have no less than 40 MPs will also be abolished.⁵³

The size and number of the new Parliamentary constituencies for Wales won't be known until after the Boundary Commission for Wales submits a boundary report to the Secretary of State for Wales. Clause (8) (3) of the Bill states that this has to be done by 1 October 2013, and every five years subsequently.

In May 2010 however, the Electoral Reform Society analysed the options available for reorganising and reducing the constituencies in Wales from 40 to 30.⁵⁴ A table summarising these options is included below:

⁴⁹ [Scottish Parliament \(Constituencies\) Act 2004 \(c.13\)](#)

⁵⁰ [Scotland Act 1998 \(c.46\)](#)

⁵¹ [House of Commons Library, *The Scottish Parliament \(Constituencies\) Bill, Research Paper 04/12, 3 February 2004*](#)

⁵² [Members' Research Service, *Research Paper 10/1373, 2010 General Election Results, May 2010*](#)

⁵³ Representation for Wales was set at the 1944 Speaker's Conference as a minimum of 35 and now stands at 40. Further information is available in [House of Commons Library, *The Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill Research Paper 10/55, 1 September 2010, Section 4.8.*](#)

⁵⁴ [Electoral Reform Society, *'Reduce and Equalise' and the Governance of Wales, May 2010*](#)

New seat	Main predecessor	Other principal areas of new seat
MID AND WEST WALES		
Brecon & Montgomery	Brecon & Radnorshire	Montgomeryshire (main part)
Carmarthen	Carmarthen East & Dinefwr	Half of Carmarthen West & Pembrokeshire South
Ceredigion & Rhaedr	Ceredigion	Western Powys, Northern Pembrokeshire
Gwynedd & Machynlleth	Dwyfor Meirionnydd	Arfon (Caernarfon area), Montgomeryshire (Machynlleth area)
Llanelli	Llanelli	Gower (Pontarddulais area), Carmarthen E & Dinefwr (Ammanford area)
Pembroke	Preseli Pembroke	Half of Carmarthen West & Pembrokeshire South
NORTH WALES		
Conwy & Abergel	Clwyd West	Aberconwy (Conwy area)
Denbigh, Llangollen & Vale of Conwy	Clwyd South	Clwyd West (Ruthin area), Vale of Clwyd (Denbigh area)
Flint & Rhyl	Vale of Clwyd	Delyn (Flint area)
Mold & Shotton	Alyn & Deeside	Delyn (Mold area)
Wrexham	Wrexham	Clwyd South (Broughton area)
Ynys Mon & Bangor	Ynys Mon	Arfon (Bangor area)
SOUTH WALES CENTRAL		
Barry & Penarth	Vale of Glamorgan	Cardiff South & Penarth (Penarth)
Cardiff Central	Cardiff Central	Cardiff South & Penarth (Bute Town and Splott), Cardiff North (Gabalfa area)
Cardiff North East	Cardiff North	Cardiff South & Penarth (Llanrumney area), Cardiff Central (Cyncoed area)
Cardiff West	Cardiff West	Cardiff North (Whitchurch area), Cardiff Central (Grangetown)
Pontypridd & Aberdare	Cynon Valley	Pontypridd (Pontypridd town area)
Vale of Ely	Pontypridd	Cardiff West (Ely area), Vale of Glamorgan (Cowbridge area)
SOUTH WALES EAST		
Blaenau Gwent & Tredegar	Blaenau Gwent	Islwyn (Tredegar area), Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney (Rhymney area)
Caerphilly	Caerphilly	Islwyn (Risca area)
Newport	Newport West	Newport East (urban core)
Merthyr Tydfil & Ystrad Mynach	Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney	Caerphilly (Ystrad Mynach area)
Monmouth	Monmouth	Newport East (Llanwern and Caldicot)
Torfaen	Torfaen	Newport West (Caerleon and Malpas)
SOUTH WALES WEST		
Bridgend	Bridgend	Ogmore (Aberkenfig and north)
Rhondda & Ogmore	Rhondda	Ogmore (Ogmore Vale area), Pontypridd (Tonyrefail)
Neath & Aberavon	Aberavon	Neath (Neath town), Ogmore (Maesteg)
Swansea East & Vale of Neath	Neath	Swansea East (St Thomas area), Brecon & Radnorshire (Ystradgynlais area)
Swansea North & Loughor	Swansea East	Gower (Loughor area), Swansea West (Cockett)
Swansea West & Gower	Swansea West	Gower (Gower peninsula)

Please note that this table represents the findings of the Electoral Reform Society only and may not reflect in any way the future findings and recommendations of the Boundary Commission for Wales.

5. The Second Reading Debate

5.1. *Principle of the Bill*

The Second Reading debate on the Bill took place on Monday 6 September 2010. Opening the debate for the Government, the Rt.Hon. Nick Clegg MP, the Deputy Prime Minister, reiterated the key objectives of the Bill:

There are two major issues that we have to face. The first is the big difference between the sizes of many parliamentary constituencies, which has the effect of making some people's votes count more than others, depending on where they live. The second is the widespread concern about first past the post as the means by which MPs are elected. Therefore, the Bill will require the independent boundary commissions to redraw constituency boundaries so that they are more equally sized, and it will pave the way for a referendum next May on whether to change the voting system for the House of Commons from first past the post to the alternative vote.⁵⁵

Responding for the Opposition, the Rt. Hon. Jack Straw QC MP explained that Labour remained in favour of a referendum on AV and the dispute about the date was something that could have been further debated at committee stage. However, the Opposition was strongly opposed to Part 2 of the Bill. Mr Straw said:

Part 2 of the Bill is one of the most partisan proposals we have seen in recent years. It proposes arbitrarily to cut the number of Members to 600, to redraw parliamentary boundaries according to inflexible new arithmetical rules based on an electoral register from which millions of eligible voters are missing and, extraordinarily, as we have heard, under clause 10 public inquiries by the Boundary Commission into the Government's preliminary proposals are explicitly to be prohibited.⁵⁶

The Opposition put down an amendment which argued that the Government should decouple the proposals into two separate Bills: one on the alternative vote referendum and one on constituencies. Summing up for the Opposition, the Rt. Hon. Peter Hain MP said:

In the constituency one, they should ensure that the original, fairer, more transparent and consensual boundary review system is restored, and that new boundaries are not applied in such a dogmatic, rigid and politically discriminatory fashion. They should ensure that Wales is treated fairly and not punitively, and statutory automatic registration from other public databases must be included in the legislation. That way, we might get two better reform Bills, based on consensus; we might even get the alternative vote, which I have supported for decades.⁵⁷

A number of speakers, including the Chair of the Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform, expressed concern about the haste with which the Bill

⁵⁵ [HC Debates, 6 September July 2010, c35](#)

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* c47

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* c124

was being introduced and the lack of opportunity for pre-legislative scrutiny and the failure to build consensus. Mr Hain stated in his summing up:

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen), the distinguished Chairman of the Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform, made the point that not only has there been no consultation across the country or with the elected Governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but there has been no consultation with this House. There has been no pre-legislative scrutiny or any recognition of the need to build constitutional reform Bills by consensus—a point also made powerfully by the right hon. Member for Belfast North and my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Paul Murphy). With his Northern Ireland experience, my right hon. Friend made the point about the importance of taking forward constitutional change on the basis of consensus rather than simply imposing change, as this Bill is doing.⁵⁸

The Bill was passed by 347 votes to 254 and will be scrutinised by a Committee of the Whole House.

5.2. *Referendum Date*

The decision to hold the referendum on 5 May 2010, as seen in Section 3, had already attracted opposition from two main groups prior to the debate. Many of these issues were raised again. The Deputy Prime Minister put his case for holding the referendum on the same day as the devolved elections and the local elections in England.

Let me turn to a crucial issue which I know has elicited some controversy. The date of the poll is set for 5 May 2011. There are a number of reasons for that. First, the coalition agreement set out a commitment to hold a referendum, and it is right for us to move swiftly to meet that commitment. People have been promised the chance to decide, and they should not now be made to wait. Secondly, it makes sense to combine the referendum with the other elections that are already happening on that day.

Several hon. Members *rose* -

The Deputy Prime Minister: May I explain the issue first, and then give way?

About 84% of the United Kingdom's electorate will already have a reason to go to the polls for either local elections or elections to the devolved Assemblies. I believe that if we can avoid asking them to return to the ballot box more times than is necessary, we should. As Members will recall, we were elected just two months ago in a poll that was combined with local elections in many parts of the country.

Thirdly, combining the referendum with other elections will save a great deal of money. We estimate that across all polls on 5 May, the overall savings might be in the order of £30 million. Those savings will be shared between the referendum and the other polls. We will strive to keep costs down, and we are exploring whether further savings can be made.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c122](#)

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* c42

The decision to hold the referendum was opposed by politicians from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in that it was felt that it would interfere with the campaigns and was symptomatic of a general disregard for the sensibilities of the devolved countries. The SNP MP Angus Brendan MacNeil suggested that it had “blown the respect agenda [of the Government] to smithereens.”⁶⁰

DUP MP Nigel Dodds stated that:

... it would be unconscionable to hold a referendum and two sets of elections on the one day. Something needs to be done about that, but certainly not at the expense of the elections; in my view, the referendum should be moved to a different date.⁶¹

In responding on behalf of Plaid Cymru, Jonathan Edwards MP stated:

We are concerned about the date for the referendum indicated in the Bill, as it would clash directly with elections for the devolved Parliaments. Two separate reports, from Gould and Arbuthnott, pointed to the difficulties with holding multiple elections on the same day. There is no reason why the voting reform referendum needs to be held on the same day as elections to form the Celtic Governments. It is, at best, insensitive for the UK Government to proceed with 5 May 2011 as the date. It would make much more sense to hold the referendum on part 4 of the Government of Wales Act 2006 on that date, which was ruled out by both UK coalition governing parties.

We will argue that a new date should be set on which no other election is taking place, to avoid the accusation that the Government in London are riding roughshod over the interests and concerns of the devolved countries.⁶²

Simon Hart MP outlined what he saw as the practical difficulties of holding the referendum on the same day as the elections:

...the Deputy Prime Minister said some time ago that the referendum campaign would not be party political. However, it is hard to imagine how that could be so, when he and the Prime Minister are travelling in slightly different directions on the subject. In Wales, we will hold the referendum on the same day as a very party political Welsh Assembly vote. We cannot possibly claim that that will not have some impact on the result. For example, what can the media legally say about the campaign? What can Welsh Assembly candidates say? What can Members of Parliament, who will be asked to comment, say about the AV referendum when we are bound by party political restrictions and will be involved in a party political campaign at the very same time? Will the measures simplify or simply complicate matters for voters? None of these questions have been properly dealt with today.⁶³

Another angle of concern about the date of the referendum taken by some MPs was that turnout would be uneven in different parts of the UK, as the devolved elections would increase turnout in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. A leading exponent of this argument was Bernard Jenkin MP. In the debate he chose to quote the Electoral Commission:

⁶⁰ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c44](#)

⁶¹ *Ibid.*c84

⁶² *Ibid.*c101

⁶³ *Ibid.*c119

Why the rush to hold the referendum on 5 May 2011? I return briefly to the Electoral Commission, not in its rather supine form that we see today but as it used to be in 2002, when it faced down Tony Blair, who wanted to have a referendum on the euro at the same time as the Scottish and Welsh elections in 2003. It stated:

"Referendums on fundamental issues of national importance should be considered in isolation"

and that

"the turnout of combined polls can have varied results. As such, the benefits do not appear so great or definitive as to automatically over-ride any potential problems".

It continued:

"It is hard to avoid the conclusion that combining an election and a referendum can have a distorting effect on the conduct and outcome of both polls. Specifically, a combined poll may be perceived as being an extension of the political process as well as being for the sake of turnout. By not disengaging the referendum from the political process the Government risks jeopardising the integrity of the result".

It also warned of the dangers for broadcasters:

"Distinguishing between election and referendum activities will be extremely difficult, if not impossible in some instances."

If we are to have a referendum on an unwanted voting system in this country, let us at least have a fair referendum on a fair, separate date.⁶⁴

Summing up for the Government, the Rt. Hon Mark Harper MP, the Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform, replied that as "most of England will be voting on the same date, I foresee no problems with differential turnouts, and I think that Members who are concerned about that can be reassured".⁶⁵ He further stated:

I believe that, far from disrespecting the devolved Administrations-as was suggested by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil), who speaks for his party on this matter-we are treating the voters of those countries with respect. We think that they are perfectly able to vote in their devolved elections and in a simple yes-no referendum on the same day. I think, if I may say so, that the hon. Gentleman underrates his fellow Scots and their capacity for decision making.⁶⁶

5.3. Reduction of Constituencies

Members from all parties commented on the proposals to "reduce and equalise" constituencies. Roger Williams MP spoke in support of the proposals in the Bill:

⁶⁴ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c85-86](#)

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*c126

⁶⁶ *ibid*

We all represent constituencies that are unique and every one of us could argue that because of deprivation, geography or demography our constituency should have greater representation or fewer electors so that we, as Members of Parliament, can do the work that we need to do. Indeed, I represent a very rural constituency; it is about 80 miles from north to south and about 40 miles from east to west - it may be the largest constituency in England and Wales, although I know that a number of Members would contest that - but I do not think that that should be a reason to have fewer electors electing somebody from that part of mid-Wales. Indeed, I am a bit of a purist on this subject and I would like no exceptions to the way in which constituencies are set up.⁶⁷

Jonathan Evans MP also expressed support:

There is to be a 25% reduction, but I shall just point out why that is. Of the 10 MPs who are likely to go under this legislation, eight would go if there were no reduction elsewhere in the UK. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire - I am delighted to call him that now, given that we have spent so long fighting one another in that constituency over the past 20 or so years - rightly said, it is essential that every vote in the United Kingdom should have equal value. It is of some interest to see that the only part of this House in which that proposition has opposition is on the Opposition Benches.

It is not as though this problem is only one within Wales. We know that all the analyses carried out on the results of the past three general elections have shown that Labour would have had a disproportionate advantage had there just been a replication of votes between the Conservatives and Labour. In other words, if both parties had received exactly the same number of votes, the Labour party would have had majorities in every one of those elections. Any democrat should find that situation insupportable and it is one of the reasons that I support these changes.⁶⁸

However, other Members expressed concern about the scale of the reduction in Wales and the nature of the new constituencies.

Wayne David MP said:

A 20% reduction is unfair for Wales, especially when we consider that Wales has only 5% of the UK population. Some say that Wales is over-represented, but I would query that very strongly, and point out that Wales is a nation. It is an integral part of the United Kingdom - it has been joined to England since 1536 - but let us not forget that it is a distinct country, with its distinct language and history, and social and political priorities. That has been recognised historically. That Wales has the representation it has is not the result of some Labour fix in the past, but because the British Parliament has historically recognised that Wales is a distinct nation with distinct needs. That must be addressed properly.⁶⁹

Summing up for the Opposition Mr Hain stated:

In the vast rural areas of mid and west Wales, the four constituencies - none Labour-held - including Brecon and Radnorshire, Montgomeryshire and Ceredigion, cover hundreds of square miles, yet under the Bill those four large seats will become two monster ones, each thousands of square miles in size. Until this Bill, every Parliament and every boundary

⁶⁷ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c54](#)

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*c67

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*c90

commission has accepted an elementary verity about the Welsh valleys. In former coal mining constituencies, it is impossible to visit the next valley by the shortest route, because that happens to be over the top of a mountain. The only way to do so is by travelling either down to the bottom of the valley or up to the top of it and right around to the next one.⁷⁰

Simon Hart MP commented:

In Wales in 2011 - I can hardly wait - we have a referendum on AV and one on further powers for the Welsh Assembly, and a Welsh Assembly election, at what cost I do not know. Yet the principle of reducing Welsh MPs by 25%, to which many hon. Members have referred, could be agreed, at least in principle, without any reference to the Welsh nation by 10 o'clock this evening.⁷¹

Although in favour of the principle that every vote in the United Kingdom should have equal value, Jonathan Edwards MP believed that the proposed constituency changes would disproportionately affect Wales:

Wales, more than any other part of the UK, will be seriously affected by the proposed changes. As many right hon. and hon. Members from my country have pointed out, Wales will probably have about 30 seats following the changes—a cut of 10 seats or 25%, compared with 5.5% in England, 9% in Scotland and 17% in Northern Ireland. We do not agree with those changes, which will strongly affect the Welsh voice at Westminster. We will table an amendment to prevent such a massive loss of representation.⁷²

Summing up for the Government Mr Harper responded:

A number of Members, including the right hon. Member for Neath, referred to a likely reduction in the number of seats in Wales from 40 to 30, as did the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Paul Murphy) and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams). That simply corrects the fact that at present Wales is over-represented in this House. Once the measures in the Bill come into force, Wales will be treated in exactly the same way as England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It will be represented in exactly the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom, which, it seems to me, is extremely fair.⁷³

5.4. *Devolution*

Some Members pursued lines of argument that related the proposals to reduce the number of MPs with the devolution settlement in Wales. One of these was a former Secretary of State for Wales, the Rt. Hon. Paul Murphy MP who argued that:

... when people voted for the devolution settlement in 1998, they voted for a package. That package was not simply the establishment of the Assembly, but the continuance of Members of Parliament, at that level, here in the House of Commons to protect the interests of the people of Wales and their nation. If we have a referendum, and there are greater powers, that might change, but at least people would have voted on it. However, in 1998, they voted for the opposite - the retention of Members of Parliament.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c123](#)

⁷¹ [Ibid.c119](#)

⁷² [Ibid.c101](#)

⁷³ [Ibid.c127](#)

⁷⁴ [Ibid.c72](#)

Wayne David MP argued that Welsh MPs have “a critical role before powers are passed down to Cardiff bay”, adding that:

As a result of devolution, the role of Welsh MPs has increased and become more important. That is why the reduction in representation for Wales is fundamentally wrong and unfair.⁷⁵

Mark Williams MP also alluded to “the spectre of Wales losing a quarter of its representation in the House” and noted that concern was felt beyond “the chattering classes”. He suggested that the time to reduce MPs was if the referendum on Assembly powers was won:

I have always taken the view, as has my party, that the time when powers are shifted from the House to the National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff is the time when we should be articulating the case for reducing the number of Members of Parliament at Westminster.⁷⁶

Mr Williams also expressed support for clause 11 which “decouples” constituencies for Assembly elections from those for Parliament thereby retaining the Assembly at its current size.

Intervening in a speech by Jonathan Edwards MP, Guto Bebb MP asked:

On the reduction in the number of Welsh MPs from 40 to 30, does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in the eyes of the Welsh public, an unintended consequence of that change will be an enhancement of the powers of the Welsh Assembly. We can debate the powers of the Welsh Assembly, but my view, which I suspect he shares, is that the people of Wales should make a decision about the powers of the Welsh Assembly. Does he agree that by reducing the number of Welsh MPs from 40 to 30, and reducing the voice of Wales in the House, we are, in effect, increasing the powers of the Welsh Assembly by default?⁷⁷

Mr Edwards replied:

The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, which was also made by the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Paul Murphy). A case could be made for reducing the number of Welsh MPs, but such a reduction would have to follow a further transfer of powers and a plebiscite in Wales, following a referendum. Part 4 of the Government of Wales Act awards sovereignty over current devolved fields only, so that would not justify a reduction in Welsh MPs either, even if a referendum was won in March.⁷⁸

Whereas there is specific reference to “decoupling” in respect of Wales, there is no such reference to Northern Ireland in the Bill, although similar existing arrangements pertain. Nigel Dodds MP expressed concern:

On the relationship between the Bill and the devolved legislatures, clause 11 makes special provision for Wales and will ensure that the constituency boundaries for the Welsh Assembly continue. However, the Northern Ireland Assembly constituencies are tied to the parliamentary constituencies. Therefore, a reduction in the number of constituencies there would have a knock-on effect on the composition of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Has the Northern Ireland Assembly or any party therein been consulted thus far? Have the First

⁷⁵ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c90](#)

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* c79

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* c101

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Minister, Deputy First Minister or any of the Executive parties been consulted? No, they have not, yet there is a major implication for the make-up of the Assembly, which came about only after much intricate, complex and delicate negotiation. At the very least there needs to be a proper consultation and dialogue with the Northern Ireland Assembly parties. Their views on what affects the composition, operation and good functioning of the Assembly need to be taken into account.⁷⁹

Responding to this point for the Government Mr Harper stated:

The right hon. Member for Belfast North and the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) talked about the linkage between Westminster seats and those for the Northern Ireland Assembly. They will both know that the Assembly is under a statutory duty to consider its operation by 2015, including the size of the Assembly.

The Government are committed to bringing forward further legislation during this Parliament to reflect the wishes of the Assembly. The Government have no intention of dictating the size of the future Assembly. We will work closely with the devolved Administrations.⁸⁰

5.5. *Turnout Threshold*

Some Members raised the issue of imposing a threshold on turnout such as that applied to the 1979 devolution referendums in Scotland and Wales. Eleanor Laing MP stated:

The second improvement that the Bill needs is in relation to the thresholds. Is it right to bring about constitutional change if only about 15% of the electorate vote for it? The status quo is the status quo because it is the status quo, and changing it should require far more than 15%. That would be wrong. The result of the referendum and the consequent constitutional change will not command respect unless a significant proportion of the electorate support it.⁸¹

Iain Stewart MP said:

I, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Mrs Laing), will seek in Committee to introduce a turnout threshold, so that we do not end up with the preposterous situation whereby a tiny turnout of 35% or 40% and a tiny majority in favour of AV could somehow result in the constitutional changing of the country. In such circumstances, a change would be endorsed by only one in five of the electorate, and that does not provide a mandate.⁸²

Mr Harper, summing up for the Government, replied:

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and my hon. Friends the Members for Epping Forest (Mrs Laing) and for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) suggested a turnout threshold. Such a system would make an abstention effectively a "no" vote. It would give people an incentive to abstain from voting, and the Government do not believe that that can be right. As for the issue of turnout and legitimacy, I should point out that in the 2005 election only three Members of Parliament received the support of more than 40% of their registered voters: my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill

⁷⁹ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c83](#)

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*c127

⁸¹ *Ibid.*c92

⁸² *Ibid.*c107

Wiggin), the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the hon. Member for Belfast West (Mr Adams), an interesting combination. Members who suggest that voting is legitimate only if turnout is above a certain level should think carefully about where the logic of that argument takes them.⁸³

5.6. *Abolition of Public Inquiries*

As seen in the comments from Mr Straw and Mr Hain in Section 5.1 of this paper, the Opposition is strongly opposed to the proposals to end public enquiries in determining constituency boundaries. Some Members from other parties also expressed concerns.

Summing up for the Government, Mr Harper rejected the Opposition's objections, citing academic opinion in his support:

Boundaries will continue to be drawn by the independent boundary commissions in each part of the United Kingdom. As the Deputy Prime Minister said, we will replace local inquiries with a much longer period-increased from one month to three months-for local people to be able to make written representations. The academics' opinion on this is very clear. They have described oral inquiries as

"very largely an exercise in allowing the political parties to seek influence over the Commission's recommendations-in which their sole goal is to promote their own electoral interests."

They also say that

"it would be a major error to assume that the consultation process largely involves the general public having its say on the recommendations."⁸⁴

However, Mr Murphy made a particular point in respect of the status quo remaining for the devolved bodies:

We are now abolishing that right for local people, although it seems.... that when we are looking at boundaries for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly or the Northern Ireland Assembly, there will still be a right to hold public inquiries in all those countries, but not for our mother of Parliaments in Westminster.⁸⁵

5.7. *Voter Registration*

Opposition Members, in particular, were concerned about unregistered voters not being factored in when estimates were made of constituency size.

Chris Ruane MP was concerned that there was "no reference to any action on under-registration" in the Bill.⁸⁶ He reflected that:

⁸³ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c126](#)

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*c128

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*c73

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*c79

Individual registration is opposed by many Labour Members because we know that when it is introduced the electoral register goes down by 10%, as it has in Northern Ireland, and that the people who come off the register are the poorest in society. We were prepared to accept that because the previous Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw), said that individual registration would go hand in hand with increasing the register.

I predict that the Government parties will blow a hole in the consensus and go for rushed individual registration, taking another 4.5 million people off the register in addition to the 3.5 million who are already off it. That bipartisanship will be lost for a long time unless they get those 3.5 million people back on to the register. The Deputy Prime Minister can talk in high-falutin' language about the Reform Act of 1832, but if they are going to take 8 million of the poorest people off the register, and keep them off, they know that they are doing wrong.⁸⁷

Summing up for the Opposition Mr Hain also alluded to voter registration:

Most outrageously, the Government have said that they intend to redraw the boundaries based on the December 2010 register, when they know that the current register is missing more than 3.5 million eligible voters, predominantly the young, poor and black and minority ethnic social groups.⁸⁸

Mr Harper, for the Government, responded:

Electoral registration was raised by a number of Members, including the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) -who, I know from the number of written questions of his that I have answered, takes a great interest in the subject. He will know that the registration rate in the UK is about 91 or 92%, which is broadly in line with that of comparable countries. The boundary review will use the electoral register, as it always has in the past. As the Deputy Prime Minister acknowledged, there are issues with the registration system. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that when we announce our plans for speeding up individual registration he will find that the fears that he expressed this afternoon are misplaced. The Government have no intention of worsening the situation - quite the reverse; we plan, by the measures that we will introduce, to reduce the number of people who are not registered to vote and to improve the system.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ [HC Debates, 5 July 2010, c80](#)

⁸⁸ [Ibid.c124](#)

⁸⁹ [Ibid.c129](#)