

Positive Action Group

29th December 2006

FAO Mrs Caroline Mallon
Chief Secretary's Office
Government Office
Bucks Road
Douglas IM1 3PN

Dear Mrs Mallon,

Comments on Boundary Review

We respond to the public notice inviting comments to the Boundary Review Committee on the above.

We set out various considerations on issues raised by the Committee in the Appendix to this letter.

Bearing in mind such considerations, PAG believes that the Boundary Review Committee should adhere to the following 4 principles in recommending any amended National Election Constituency boundaries:

1. **National Constituency Boundaries must reflect a primary purpose of facilitating the fair and unbiased election of National Representatives to govern the Island in a National Assembly.**

Local Authority boundaries are not material in defining boundaries for a National Assembly Election - except to assist administratively in organising the vote.

2. **Voting Equality for all citizens must be enshrined in the electoral system for National Assembly elections.**

The basic democratic principle of voting equality is enshrined in the old adage "One man, One vote". No system should bestow on any particular group of electors the right and power to send more representatives to their National Assembly than their fellow electors.

3. **The number of potential voters in each Constituency should be comparable.**

This enables successful candidates equal opportunity to demonstrate the strength of popular support for their mandate from the people.

4. **National Assembly Constituencies should be drawn as large as possible.**

This supports and strengthens the national nature of the elections, as well as reducing the potential for local bias and manipulation of the electoral voting process.

Based on the 4 Principles above and considerations in our Appendix, PAG recommend to the Committee:

1. **The creation of 4 National Election Constituencies of comparable size.**
2. **The right of all electors to vote for an equal number of representatives in each of the National Election Constituencies.**

In submitting this recommendation, PAG takes into account :

- In the UK, a population of 70,000 people would comprise 1 single constituency. However, only 1 parliamentary seat would be at issue - with voters only required to cast 1 vote.
- The concept of 1 similar sized National Constituency for the Island is seen as impractical. Under the Manx system, the same population casts votes for 24 seats in the Manx national assembly; potentially rising to 32 if MLC Appointees are popularly elected in future.
- The PAG proposal of 4 National Constituencies bridges the gap between these two systems.
- Reducing the number of constituencies from 15 to 4 should focus more debate on important external and national issues facing the Island and less on purely parochial or transient local issues.
- If possible, it is considered desirable to have a representative mix of rural, village, urban and Douglas voters within each national constituency boundary. To achieve such a mix of representation is problematic. However, one possible approach might be for each of the 4 national constituencies to draw with each of them radiating out in an arc from Douglas as the nation's capital.
- A structure based on 4 national constituencies adheres to the Voting Equality principle for any multiple of 4 (including the existing number of 24 or potential number of 32). It also allows for smooth modification of future numbers of elected national representatives - if any review of Government Structure leads to certain functions becoming the responsibility of a revised Local Authority structure etc.,

We ask that serious consideration is given to our proposals in the interests of allowing improved debate on issues of fundamental national importance at the time of national elections.

Yours sincerely

W Roger Tomlinson

Chair - Positive Action Group

Comments on Questions raised by Boundary Review Committee

1. The existing constituency boundaries, in our opinion, do not often appear to follow a logical community or geographical boundary – although presumably the intention was to do so. Historically the current constituency boundaries may have made some sense but they now seem misplaced. For example, the boundary between Malew & Santon and Glenfaba in Foxdale appears neither to follow community nor geographic boundaries.

Due to a combination of a change in the nature of the Island's communities, the mobility of the population and too much emphasis given to local issues during a national parliament election – it is essential changes are made.

2. If the question related to local authority boundaries then it would be important to respect community boundaries as much as possible. We would suggest it is much less of an imperative when setting out the constituency boundaries for national representation.

In fact it would perhaps be better to ignore community boundaries as much as possible in order to try to make a break from the over-emphasis on the community 'credentials' of candidates and to encourage national policy driven voting patterns. Whether this can be achieved, or necessary, with even distinct 'geographical' boundaries is debatable.

3. In a place as small as the IoM the ideological answer to Q3, 4, 5 & 6 is that the optimum number of constituencies is ONE! This would resolve the question of the size of each constituency/number of voters/number of seats.

This would be the preferred solution if the IOM retained the non-party politics/consensus government form of parliament. In this way the voters could vote for whom they thought would form the best government and not just one, two or three individuals. It would also enable voters throughout the island to indicate their pleasure or displeasure with the performance of executive government.

With the current arrangement voters in Peel, Micheal, East Douglas, Malew & Santon, North Douglas & Garth (unless there are changes in the Council of Ministers between now and 2011) will have little or no influence in whether the 'government' is defeated or returned at the next election.

4. However, being pragmatic it is difficult to imagine that Tynwald is ready or willing for such a dramatic change. Therefore, the next best option is to divide the island as equally as possible to enable as democratic a representation as possible. The size of constituency is not critical – but it should not be so small as to render the idea of 'national' representation as almost meaningless.

Currently there are large variations in size between the rural and urban constituencies and it will be difficult to completely resolve this issue - even with fewer constituencies – but where possible it should be attempted.

5. Trying to achieve an equal number of voters per representative is a very important factor in ensuring the democratic process is seen to be fair. Whether it should be the sole guide to constituency size is debatable and, if it was, then perhaps it could be a bit too restrictive. It could also lead to attempts to gerrymander voters if boundaries had to be modified on a regular basis.

6. One man – one vote is widely regarded as the true democratic principle. However, provided each voter had an equal number of votes and an equal number of representatives then it is not so important to have single seat constituencies. Multi-seat constituencies do have the possible advantage of allowing voters/constituents more choice in representation – especially where personalities can sometimes create difficulties. It can also reduce the likelihood of the 'loss' of constituency representation, particularly at Question Time, if the sole member is also a member of COMIN.

7. As alluded to in the answer to Q5, in respect of multi-seat constituencies, provided representation is equal, then whether the answer is two, three or more representatives is, to a point, immaterial.

On balance PAG prefers to move to 4 National Constituencies (with 6 votes per elector or 8 votes if MLCs added).

However, PAG acknowledges 8 National Constituencies might create less resistance to change (with 3 votes per elector or 4 votes if MLCs added) and this supports the bill passed by the Keys during the last parliament. If change must to be achieved in stages, then 8 constituencies is the absolute maximum PAG would wish to see.

Please note that although the Bishop's vote/position is not addressed here, the status quo should not be regarded as supported by PAG. This requires further consideration.

8. One of the major issues of the recent election was the 'loss' of voters from many constituencies. As voter numbers is considered to be an important factor in deciding constituency size and representation then the issue of enforcing the existing registration legislation needs to be properly addressed.

9. During the recent election, the media often referred to the 'loss' of a Ramsey representative owing to the decision of Leonard Singer to resign his seat in Council and to contest the Key's elections.

This raises the controversial issue of whether an MLC Members' role includes being an unofficial additional constituency member for the area in which they live – or previously represented.

Whether this happens in reality or not – there is obviously a perception in some minds that this is part of their role. This clearly is an unacceptable situation – and further distorts a system of representation already considered unfair by many. The earlier the direct election by the public of Council is resolved the better.