



## Reducing the size of the House of Commons

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This briefing is no longer being updated. It has been replaced by another Library briefing paper: [Constituency boundary reviews and the number of MPs](#).

The Coalition Government announced on 20 May 2010 that it would bring forward a Bill on electoral reform which would make provision for the creation of fewer and more equal sized constituencies as well as for a referendum on the introduction of the Alternative Vote system for Parliamentary elections. The Deputy Prime Minister subsequently gave further details about the Bill on 5 July 2010.

The *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill* was introduced on 22 July 2010 and introduces new Rules for Redistribution which make provision for the number of constituencies to be reduced to 600. This note looks briefly at the current Rules for Redistribution and at recent calls for the Rules to be changed; details of the length of time it has taken to carry out periodical reviews of Parliamentary constituencies are also given. A summary of the Bill's main provisions is also included.

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## 1 The size of the House of Commons

The number of MPs in the House of Commons is currently 650 (England 533; Northern Ireland 18; Scotland 59; Wales 40). This was an increase of 4 following the fifth periodical review of Parliamentary constituencies which came into effect at the 2010 general election.<sup>1</sup>

The number of MPs elected at general elections from 1832 to 2005 can be found at the end of this note.

## 2 The Boundary Commissions

The *Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986* as amended by the *Boundary Commissions Act 1992* requires the Commissions to keep the Parliamentary constituencies under continuous review and periodically (every 8 to 12 years) to conduct a general review of all the constituencies at the same time. The four Commissions, one each for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, are independent, non-political and impartial bodies. The ex-officio Chairman of each Commission is the Speaker.

### 2.1 The Rules for Redistribution

The Rules for Redistribution are set out in Schedule 2 of the *Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986*:

1.- (1) The number of constituencies in Great Britain shall not be substantially greater or less than 613.

(2) The number of constituencies in Scotland shall not be less than 71.  
[Repealed by the *Scotland Act 1998*]

(3) The number of constituencies in Wales shall not be less than 35.

(4) The number of constituencies in Northern Ireland shall not be greater than 18 or less than 16, and shall be 17 unless it appears to the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland that Northern Ireland should for the time being be divided into 16 or (as the case may be) into 18 constituencies.

2. Every constituency shall return a single member.

3. There shall continue to be a constituency which shall include the whole of the City of London and the name of which shall refer to the City of London.

3A. A constituency which includes the Orkney Islands or the Shetland Islands shall not include the whole or part of a local government area other than the Orkney Islands or the Shetland Islands.

4.- (1) So far as is practicable having regard to rules 1 to 3 -

(a) in England and Wales, -

(i) no county or any part of a county shall be included in a constituency which includes the whole or part of any other county or the whole or part of a London borough,

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<sup>1</sup> For further information about the fifth review see Library Standard Note SN/PC/3222.<http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/briefings/snpc-03222.pdf>

(ii) no London borough or any part of a London borough shall be included in a constituency which includes the whole or part of any other London borough,

(b) in Scotland, regard shall be had to the boundaries of local authority areas,

(c) in Northern Ireland, no ward shall be included partly in one constituency and partly in another.

(1A) In sub-paragraph (1)(a) above "county" means, in relation to Wales, a preserved county as defined by Section 64 of the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994.

(2) In sub-paragraph (1)(b) above "area" and "local authority" have the same meanings as in the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973.

5. The electorate of any constituency shall be as near the electoral quota as is practicable having regard to rules 1 to 4; and a Boundary Commission may depart from the strict application of rule 4 if it appears to them that a departure is desirable to avoid an excessive disparity between the electorate of any constituency and the electoral quota, or between the electorate of any constituency and that of neighbouring constituencies in the part of the United Kingdom with which they are concerned.

6. A Boundary Commission may depart from the strict application of rules 4 and 5 if special geographical considerations, including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency, appear to them to render a departure desirable.

#### General and Supplementary

7. It shall not be the duty of a Boundary Commission to aim at giving full effect in all circumstances to the above rules, but they shall take account so far as they reasonably can -

(a) of the inconveniences attendant on alterations of constituencies other than alterations made for the purposes of rule 4, and

(b) of any local ties which would be broken by such alterations.

8. In the application of rule 5 to each part of the United Kingdom for which there is a Boundary Commission -

(a) the expression "electoral quota" means a number obtained by dividing the electorate for that part of the United Kingdom by the number of constituencies in it existing on the enumeration date,

(b) the expression "electorate" means -

(i) in relation to a constituency, the number of persons whose names appear on the register of parliamentary electors in force on the enumeration date under the Representation of the People Acts for the constituency,

(ii) in relation to the part of the United Kingdom, the aggregate electorate as defined in sub-paragraph (i) above of all the constituencies in that part,

(c) the expression "enumeration date" means, in relation to any report of a Boundary Commission under this Act, the date on which the notice with respect to that report is published in accordance with section 5(1) of this Act.

9. In this Schedule, a reference to a rule followed by a number is a reference to the rule set out in the correspondingly numbered paragraph of this Schedule.

The Boundary Commission for England has itself called for a review of the Rules for Redistribution. In Chapter 6 of the report of the Fifth Review the Commission commented on the need for legislative change:

6.33 On more than one occasion in the past, including in previous periodical reports, we and our predecessors have not only recommended that the legislation by which we work should be changed but we have also suggested how it should be changed. For example, in 1986, our predecessors gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee about the difficulties in applying the legislation. In 1995, following an internal study of the conduct and outcomes of the fourth general review, our predecessors were invited by the Home Office to submit their findings. In 1999, again at the invitation of the Home Office, we submitted our views on the changes that we considered should be made to the Rules for Redistribution of Seats and to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986.

6.34 The introduction of new legislation over the years has provided a number of opportunities to amend the current, unsatisfactory rules and procedures (e.g. the Boundary Commissions Act 1992 and the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 to name two). However, the statutory rules and procedures remain unaltered.

6.35 In view of the difficulties in applying the Rules that we have outlined above, the change to the representation period also considered necessary, and other matters of concern, we recommend that the Electoral Commission should consider conducting a full review of the legislation by which general reviews are undertaken, as they are empowered to do by Section 6(1) of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. Such a review would benefit from input from all four United Kingdom Boundary Commissions as well as from those academics who have studied our work over the years.<sup>2</sup>

## **2.2 The electoral quota**

The Boundary Commissions have to ensure that the new constituency electorates are as close to the electoral quota as practicable. The electoral quota is the average number of electors in a constituency and is found by dividing the total number of parliamentary electors in each country by the existing number of constituencies for that country. There is a separate quota for each constituent part of the UK, apart from Scotland. The electoral quotas for the fifth general review were 69,935 for England and Scotland; 55,640 for Wales and 60,969 for Northern Ireland. Section 86 of the *Scotland Act 1998*, which established the Scottish Parliament, abolished the separate quota for Scotland for the next review, substituting the electoral quota for England.

## **2.3 The Fifth Periodical Review of Parliamentary Constituencies**

The Boundary Commission for England completed its fifth general review of the Parliamentary constituencies in England. The *Parliamentary Constituencies (England) Order 2007* came into force on 27 June 2007 and the new constituencies came into being at the 2010 general election.

The Boundary Commission for Scotland had submitted its final report to the Secretary of State for Scotland on 30 November 2004 and the new constituencies came into being at the general election on 5 May 2005. Usually the recommendations of the Boundary Commissions' periodical reviews come into effect at the same time; this was the first time

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 6, *Fifth Periodical Report*, Boundary Commission for England, Cm 7032, 2007. Available at <http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm70/7032/7032.pdf>

that a review was implemented at an earlier general election to the reviews of the three other countries.

The Boundary Commission for Wales submitted its final report on 31 January 2005; the Order was made on the 11 April 2006. The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland submitted its final report on 14 September 2007 and this was approved by Parliament in 2008.

For further information about the Fifth Review see Library Standard Note, SN/PC/3222.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.4 Length of time taken by each review

The Boundary Commission for England took six years to complete the fifth review of seats in England; the other Boundary Commissions (with fewer constituencies to review) took about three years each. The table below gives the commencement date of the fifth review for each Commission, the date the final report was submitted to the relevant Secretary of State and the date the Order in Council was made to implement the Commissions' recommendations.

	<b>Commencement of fifth review</b>	<b>Final report submitted to Secretary of State</b>	<b>Date of Order in Council</b>
<b>England</b>	17 February 2000	31 October 2006	13 June 2007
<b>Scotland</b>	29 June 2001	30 November 2004	9 February 2005
<b>Wales</b>	16 December 2002	31 January 2005	11 April 2006
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	16 May 2003	14 September 2007	11 June 2008

## 2.5 The Sixth Periodical Review

The fifth periodical review was finally completed for all four countries in 2008 and, unless there is a change to the procedures, the reports of the sixth review will have to be submitted between the following dates:

**England** – fifth report submitted on 31 October 2006. Report of the sixth review will have to be submitted between 2014 and 2018.

**Scotland** – fifth report submitted on 30 November 2004. Report of the sixth review will have to be submitted between 2012 and 2016.

**Wales** – fifth report submitted on 31 January 2005. Report of the sixth review will have to be submitted between 2013 and 2017.

**Northern Ireland** – fifth report submitted on 14 September 2007. Report of the sixth review will have to be submitted between 2015 and 2019.

## 2.6 Costs of the periodical reviews

The costs of the Fifth Periodical Review were given in response to a Lords Written Question on 11 November 2009:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/briefings/snpc-03222.pdf>

To ask Her Majesty's Government further to the Written Answer by Lord Bach on 3 November (*WA 49—50*), what is the estimated cost of a full review of parliamentary constituencies in the United Kingdom.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Justice (Lord Bach):** The cost of the last general review of parliamentary constituencies in each part of the UK was approximately as follows:

England	£10.8 million
Northern Ireland	£1.2 million
Scotland	£957,120
Wales	£649,498
UK total	£13,606,618

The cost of the Fourth Periodical Review in England was estimated at £4,953,000; the figure is given at Appendix K of the Boundary Commission for England's report. The operating costs of the Boundary Commissions during the period of the Third Periodical Review, between 1976 and 1983, were given in a series of written questions asked in April 1983, following the publication of the report of the Third Review in February 1983:

**Mr Tom Ellis** asked the Secretary of State for the Home Department what costs have been incurred since the previous boundaries revision by the Boundary Commission for England and Wales in preparing its recent parliamentary boundaries reports in respect of (a) salaries and fees, (b) other administrative costs and (c) appeals including legal costs.

I understand from the Parliamentary Boundary Commission for England and Wales that the information cannot be made available in the form requested without incurring disproportionate cost. The information available—which includes costs incurred in reporting in 1978 on European Parliament constituencies—is as follows: Salaries Other Expenditure, Total.

	Salaries	Other Expenditure	Total
	£ (cash)	£ (cash)	£ (cash)
1974–75	9,160	—	9,160
1975–76	30,473	52	30,525
1976–77	39,178	4,418	43,596
1977–78	50,679	9,060	59,739
1978–79	52,280	168,990	221,270
1979–80	71,519	36,487	108,006
1980–81	142,816	99,552	242,368
1981–82	138,802	151,839	290,641
1982–83	144,423	146,055	290,478
	679,330	616,453	1,295,783

(HC Deb 27 April 1983 c324-5W)

<sup>4</sup> HL Deb 11 November 2009 cWA 174

The Second Periodical Review was published in 1969, having started in 1965. An estimated total cost for all four Boundary Commissions was given in a Parliamentary Question answered in November 1969:

**Mr Worsley** asked the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is the total cost to date, including public inquiries, of the Parliamentary Boundaries Commission for England;

(2) what is the total cost to date, including public inquiries, of the four Parliamentary Boundaries Commissions for the United Kingdom.

**Mr. Merlyn Rees:** £95,238 of which the estimated cost of the Commission for England is £79,700.

(HC Deb 10 November 1969, c27W)

### 3 Conservative Party policy

In 2004 Andrew Tyrie MP wrote a pamphlet in which he called for a 20% reduction in the number of constituencies and for constituencies to be of equal size.<sup>5</sup> A paper written in 2006, also by Mr Tyrie, revealed that the Conservatives were considering a small reduction in the number of MPs and noted that “even a modest reduction of, say, 10%, would bring annual public expenditure savings of £10-15 million”.<sup>6</sup>

In his speech on political reform on 26 May 2009, David Cameron said that a Conservative government would reduce the number of MPs:

Today, we've got far too many MPs in Westminster. More people sit in the House of Commons than in any other comparable elected chamber in the world. This is neither cost-effective nor politically effective: just more people finding more interfering ways to spend more of your money. I think we can do a better job with fewer MPs: we can, to coin a phrase, deliver more for less. So at the election we will include proposals in our manifesto to ask the Boundary Commission to reduce the House of Commons, initially by 10 per cent. And while they're at it, to get rid of the unfair distortions in the system today, so that every constituency is the same size in each of the nations of the UK.<sup>7</sup>

The Conservative party manifesto 2010 subsequently said that a Conservative government would reduce the number of MPs by 10 per cent.<sup>8</sup>

#### 3.1 The *Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill 2009-10*

A Conservative amendment was tabled to the *Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill 2009-10* on the sixth day in Committee (9 February 2010) which outlined their plans to reduce the size of the House of Commons by 10 per cent. The amendment, which was not called, was as follows:

Mr David Cameron  
Mr Dominic Grieve  
Mrs Eleanor Laing

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<sup>5</sup> *Pruning the Politicians: the case for a smaller House of Commons* by Andrew Tyrie MP, Conservative Mainstream, 2004

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Tyrie, *The Conservative Party's proposals for the funding of political parties*, March 2006, p7

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/05/David\\_Cameron\\_Fixing\\_Broken\\_Politics.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/05/David_Cameron_Fixing_Broken_Politics.aspx)

<sup>8</sup> Conservative Party manifesto 2010, p8  
[http://media.conservatives.s3.amazonaws.com/manifesto/cpmanifesto2010\\_lowres.pdf](http://media.conservatives.s3.amazonaws.com/manifesto/cpmanifesto2010_lowres.pdf)



To move the following Clause:—

1 '(1) The Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 is amended as follows—

(2) For Schedule 2 of the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 substitute—

“SCHEDULE 2

The rules

1 (1) The number of constituencies in the United Kingdom shall be reduced by 10 per cent. from the figure existing on 1 July 2010.

(2) A constituency shall be located wholly within one of—

(a) England,

(b) Wales,

(c) Scotland, or

(d) Northern Ireland.

(3) The electorate of any constituency—

(a) shall be as near the electoral quota as is practicable, and all other special geographical considerations, including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency, shall be subordinate to achieving this aim,

(b) and shall in any case be no greater than 103.5 per cent. and no less than 96.5 per cent. of the electoral quota, except where this makes it impossible to meet the provisions of clause 2 of this schedule.

(4) In accordance with rules 1 to 3, the Commission may have regard to—

(a) local authority boundaries in England, Wales and Scotland, and

(b) the boundaries of wards in Northern Ireland.

(5) In the application of rule 3—

(a) the expression “electoral quota” means a number obtained by dividing the electorate of the United Kingdom by the number of constituencies in it,

(b) the expression “electorate” means in relation to a constituency, the number of persons whose names will appear on the register of parliamentary electors in force on the enumeration date under the Representation of the People Acts for the constituency.

(c) in calculating this number, the Boundary Commission shall have regard to—

(i) the number of persons whose names appear on the register of parliamentary electors in force, under the Representation of the People Acts for the constituency,

(ii) official local authority population forecasts provided by the Statistics Board, and

(iii) any change in the number or distribution of the electors likely to take place within five years from the review,

(iv) in all cases, the most up to date official electoral and statistical data available.

(d) the expression “electorate” means in relation to the United Kingdom, the aggregate electorate as defined in subsection (b) above of all the constituencies in the United Kingdom.

(e) the expression “enumeration date” means, in relation to any report of the Boundary Commission under this Act, the date on which the notice with respect to that report is published in accordance with section 3 of this Act.

(6) In this Schedule, a reference to a rule followed by a number is a reference to the rule set out in the correspondingly numbered paragraph of this Schedule.

2 Each Boundary Commission shall, within eighteen months of the passage of this Act submit a report to the Secretary of State under section 3(1)(a) of the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986.

3 Section 3A of the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 shall not apply to a report required under section (2).<sup>9</sup>

## **4 Labour Party policy**

Labour has proposed a non-partisan Parliamentary Boundary Review to examine the rules for the redistribution of seats, together with a referendum on introducing the Alternative Vote (AV) system for elections to the Commons. The party’s 2010 manifesto stated:

The cost of politics to the taxpayer must be minimised, but we reject using this as an excuse to gerrymander constituency boundaries in the interests of one political party. We will establish a non-partisan Parliamentary Boundaries Review to examine the rules for constructing parliamentary constituencies.<sup>10</sup>

## **5 Liberal Democrat policy**

The Liberal Democrats have a long standing policy of electoral reform, preferring the Single Transferable Vote system. The Independent Commission on the Voting System, chaired by Roy Jenkins, recommended a system of Alternative Vote Plus in its report of 1998, which also recommended a single electoral quota for the UK. Under this scheme, 15-20 per cent of MPs would have been elected on a list basis.<sup>11</sup> The Liberal Democrat manifesto in 2010 stated that the Party would:

Change politics and abolish safe seats by introducing a fair, more proportional voting system for MPs. Our preferred Single Transferable Vote system gives people the

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<sup>9</sup> Committee of the Whole House, Sixth Day Remaining Clauses, 9 February 2010

<sup>10</sup> <http://www2.labour.org.uk/uploads/TheLabourPartyManifesto-2010.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> See [Library Research Paper 98/112](#) for background

choice between candidates as well as parties. Under the new system, we will be able to reduce the number of MPs by 150.<sup>12</sup>

## **6 The Coalition Government's policy**

The Coalition Government announced its programme on 20 May 2010.<sup>13</sup> The section on political reform promised 'a Referendum Bill on electoral reform, which includes provision for the introduction of the Alternative Vote in the event of a positive result in the referendum, as well as for the creation of fewer and more equal sized constituencies.'<sup>14</sup>

### **6.1 Deputy Prime Minister's statement on 5 July 2010**

On 5 July 2010 the Deputy Prime Minister made a statement on the Government's proposals for Parliamentary reform.<sup>15</sup> Mr Clegg announced that a bill would be introduced before the summer recess to provide for a referendum on the Alternative Vote system and for a review of constituency boundaries in order to create fewer and more equally sized constituencies. The number of MPs will be reduced from 650 to 600. Mr Clegg indicated in his statement and in subsequent questions that the main provisions in the bill would be as follows:

- The referendum on AV will be held on 5 May 2011, the same day as elections to the devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and local elections in England.
- The referendum will be decided on the basis of a simple majority
- The Boundary Commissions will be required to report on more equally sized constituencies by the end of 2013 so that the 2015 general election can be held on the new boundaries.
- The number of MPs will be capped at 600.
- The new constituencies (with the exception of two constituencies in Scotland, Orkney & Shetland and Na h-Eileanan an Iar) will have to be within 5% of a target quota of registered electors. This quota will be around 75,000.
- No new constituency will be geographically larger than the size of the current largest constituency, Ross, Skye & Lochaber, which is just under 13,000sq kms.
- The boundary review will be based on the electoral register to be published in December 2010.
- The Boundary Commissions will be required to redraw boundaries according to the principle of equality of electorate; this will be the predominant requirement and it will have greater weight and importance than any other considerations.
- The new constituency boundaries may cross regional boundaries.
- Wards will continue to be the building blocks of constituencies.
- Future boundary reviews will be held more frequently.

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<sup>12</sup> [Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2010](#)

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409088/pfg\\_coalition.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409088/pfg_coalition.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p27

<sup>15</sup> HC Deb 5 July 2010 c23

- Every stage of the bill will be taken on the floor of the House.

## **6.2 The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill 2010-11**

The *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill* was introduced on 22 July 2010. As the Deputy Prime Minister announced on 5 July 2010, the Bill legislates for the next general election to be held under the AV voting system, provided that a majority of those voting in a referendum support the use of AV rather than First Past the Post for Parliamentary elections. The referendum is to be held on 5 May 2011.

The Bill also creates new Rules for the Redistribution of Seats which require 600 constituencies in the Commons rather than 650 at present. The Rules will also give priority to numerical equality as a principle, in that there is to be a uniform electoral quota for the UK, and seats may not vary by more than 5 per cent from the quota, with some limited exceptions. The Parliamentary Boundary Commissions are to conduct reviews by the end of September 2013 with subsequent reviews every five years.

Each constituent part of the UK would be allocated a set number of whole seats under the quota, using the Sainte-Laguë formula. There would be very limited separate arrangements in Northern Ireland, the smallest part of the UK, to allow more variation around the quota. Provisions in the Bill would require the constituencies for the National Assembly for Wales to be decoupled from those for Westminster, as the new quota is expected to lead to a substantial reduction in seats in Wales and would otherwise reduce the Assembly to around 45 seats. Reductions can also be expected in Northern Ireland, but there are no plans to decouple its Assembly seats which would presumably be reduced in number to around 90, as they are also based on Westminster constituencies.

The boundary reviews are to be completed by September 2013. Local inquiries are to be abolished, in favour of a consultation period of 12 weeks. Boundary reviews would take place every five years thereafter; given that fixed term Parliaments are to be introduced in a separate bill, this would mean that reviews would take place in the first three years of every Parliament.

## **7 Westminster Hall debate on island constituencies 15 June 2010**

Andrew Turner, MP for the Isle of Wight, which has the largest electorate in the UK, raised the issue of constituency boundaries for islands in a Westminster Hall debate on 15 June 2010. Mr Turner said that whilst the intentions of the Coalition Government to create fewer and more evenly sized constituencies was to be lauded, the practicalities of such a policy, especially in relation to islands, needed to be examined.<sup>16</sup> If the electoral quota was 77,000 the Isle of Wight constituency would have to be divided to form one constituency of this size and the remaining electors would have to be combined with electors in a mainland seat.

Andrew Turner argued that the special consideration which had been given in the past to island communities when deciding constituency boundaries should be continued. Angus MacNeil, MP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, which has the smallest electorate, also argued for special consideration for island communities. Mr MacNeil pointed out that his constituency was the length of Wales and that if it was combined with Skye it would be almost impossible to represent the area because of its geographical size. Responding to the debate, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, Mark Harper, said that the government was

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<sup>16</sup> HC Deb 15 June 2010 c131WH

considering carefully the extent to which considerations such as the island nature of constituencies and geography would be allowed to override numerical equality.<sup>17</sup>

## 8 Background

Changes in the size of the House of Commons are summarised in a passage from *The Boundary Commissions: redrawing the UK's map of parliamentary constituencies* by D.J. Rossiter et al (Manchester University Press, 1999) as follows:-

Each country was allocated a number of seats in the House of Commons when it joined what eventually became the United Kingdom. Scotland, for example, was allocated 45 by the Act of Union of the English and Scottish Parliaments in 1707...and this was raised to 53 in 1832, 72 in 1885 and 74 in 1918. Ireland was allocated 100 seats by the Act of Union in 1800; this was increased to 105 in 1832 but reduced to 103 in 1885; when the Irish Free State left the UK, 12 were retained for Northern Ireland, which was a less than proportionate number relative to either population or electors because a separate Assembly was established for Northern Ireland. Wales initially had 24 seats: including Monmouthshire it had 27 before the 1832 Reform Act and 31 after, and the number was increased to 33 in 1868, 34 in 1885 and 37 in 1918.

The above is concerned only with bald figures for numbers of seats and does not take into account moves during this period and after to align the *distribution* of seats with the distribution of the population, to equalise the numbers of electors within seats and to replace multi-member seats with single member seats.

During the past and present centuries there has been a steady increase in the number of parliamentary constituencies from 615 in 1922 to 625 in 1950, 630 in 1955, 635 in 1974, 650 in 1983, 651 following the splitting of Milton Keynes in 1992 and 659 from 1997. [The disruption to the sequence shown for the period 1945 to 1950 was caused by a special wartime review which subdivided a number of abnormally large constituencies in time for the 1945 election. The newly-established Boundary Commissions subsequently undertook the first large scale redistribution of seats in 1947/48 and this was implemented at the 1950 election together with other changes such as the abolition of university representation.]

The reasons for the incremental growth in the number of seats and the concerns that were voiced by the Home Affairs Committee in its report of February 1987<sup>18</sup>, are discussed in chapter 3 of the guidance booklet from the Boundary Commission for England<sup>19</sup>. Chapter 3 also sets out the present numerical constitution of the House of Commons and outlines the impact of the *Scotland Act 1998* in reducing Scottish representation.

There have been many calls for a restriction on the number of seats in the House of Commons. Robert Blackburn stated in *The electoral system in Britain* (Macmillan, 1995):-

This cumulative increase in the number of seats should not be allowed to go on, above all because there must be a limit to the number of MPs who can belong to and participate in the proceedings of the House of Commons. The Commons Home Affairs Committee recommended in 1987 that the then existing number of 650 should be 'stabilised' and the 1986 [Parliamentary Constituencies] Act amended so that maximum figures were imposed for the purposes of future boundary changes. Their

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<sup>17</sup> HC Deb 15 June 2010 c136WH

<sup>18</sup> *Redistribution of seats*. Home Affairs Select Committee second report with proceedings & appendices. HC 97 1986/87

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/psc/general\\_info.asp](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/psc/general_info.asp).

view was that England should be allocated 'not substantially more than 523', Scotland 'not substantially more than 72', Wales 'not substantially more than 38', and Northern Ireland 'not substantially more than 18'. These rules would be an improvement on the existing written provisions, but they allow for a total figure that is still too high and far exceeds most legislatures in the Western world. For example, in the USA there are 435 seats, and in France 577. An excessive number of MPs diminishes the importance of the individual Westminster politician, and reduces the impact of general debates in the House when there are so many participants who may wish to speak, and from whom the Speaker has to make a very restricted choice in the time available.

Blackburn called for legislation to provide that "the House of Commons shall be composed of not more than 525, and not less than 475, members." He further stated: "the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 should be amended accordingly to reflect these maximum and minimum numbers of constituencies, allowing constituency reviews a limited but perfectly sufficient discretion for fluctuation within a margin of fifty seats across the United Kingdom".

### 8.1 Attempts to reduce the size of the House of Commons

The issue has been raised on a number of occasions in the past within the House. In March 1986, Robert Rhodes James introduced the *Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill 1985/86* 'to provide for a reduction in the number of parliamentary constituencies to 500, with a minimum constituency population of 100,000, and for connected purposes'. Sir Peter Emery presented a Private Member's motion on 8 March 1991 calling for a reduction of 100 in the number of Members (HC Deb 8 March 1991 cols 635-40). In February 1995, Spencer Batiste sought unsuccessfully to introduce the *House of Commons (Distribution of Seats) Bill*, designed to fix the electoral quota throughout the UK at pre-1958 levels. This would have reduced the total number of Members to 629 and he proposed that that figure should henceforth be the maximum allowed (HC Deb 28 February 1995 cols 853-7). On 14 June 1995, during the debate on the draft order approving the Boundary Commission's fourth periodical report, a number of Members called for a reduction in the membership of the House. In January 1998, Richard Page introduced a ten minute rule bill - the *Parliamentary Boundary Commissions (Amendment) Bill*. He proposed a gradual reduction in the number of Members to about 400 to 450 with 100,000 people per Member of Parliament (HC Deb 20 January 1998 cols 818-9).

On 15 October 2003 Andrew George introduced a Ten Minute Rule Bill, *Representation of the People (Consequences of Devolution)* on 15 October 2003.<sup>20</sup> He also secured a Westminster Hall debate on the size of the Commons on 22 June 2004.<sup>21</sup>

In 2005 John Maples introduced a ten minute rule bill, the *Parliamentary Constituencies (Equalisation) Bill 2005-06*, which sought to equalise the size of all Parliamentary seats.<sup>22</sup> John Maples argued that

...the quota must be paramount. There should be a United Kingdom quota, and the boundary commission should be instructed that it may not deviate by more than 5 per cent. in either direction. There should be a single boundary commission for the whole United Kingdom, so that the same rules are seen to apply everywhere. Secondly, boundary reviews should happen more frequently. I suggest at least one review every

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<sup>20</sup> [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmhansrd/vo031015/debtext/31015-03.htm#31015-03\\_head1](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmhansrd/vo031015/debtext/31015-03.htm#31015-03_head1)

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmhansrd/vo040622/halltext/40622h03.htm#40622h03\\_head0](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmhansrd/vo040622/halltext/40622h03.htm#40622h03_head0)

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo051207/debtext/51207-04.htm#51207-04\\_spnew0](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo051207/debtext/51207-04.htm#51207-04_spnew0)

four years—one for each Parliament. That would allow more frequent, but necessarily smaller, adjustments.<sup>23</sup>

In December 2004 Andrew Tyrie MP (Conservative) published a pamphlet, *Pruning the politicians*.<sup>24</sup> Tyrie argued that the number of Westminster constituencies should be reduced by 20%, in two tranches about ten years apart. He also argued that the constituencies should be made a more equal size. Shortly after the publication of Andrew Tyrie's pamphlet, Lord Baker of Dorking introduced a Private Member's Bill, the *Parliamentary Constituencies Bill (Amendment) Bill [HL] 2006-07*, in the House of Lords on 5 February 2007. During his speech in the second reading debate Lord Baker said that the provisions in his Bill would mean that

...an average size of constituent electorate for all the United Kingdom would be 76,000 per constituency, which would have the following effect: under a general reduction to 581 MPs, England would have 486, 43 fewer than now; Wales would have 29, 11 fewer; Scotland would have 51, 8 fewer; and Northern Ireland would have 15, three fewer. All countries would lose some seats, but they would be a standard electorate size, which is only just and fair. Votes are worth the same wherever they are throughout the United Kingdom. It has always been said that we should overcompensate for Wales and Scotland. I do not think that that is fair, and there is always the issue of very large constituencies. One MP in Western Australia represents a constituency which is the size of the whole of western Europe, although I am not suggesting anything quite so radical for Scotland.

I believe that this is a sensible suggestion. It was put forward in 1988 by Roy Jenkins in his report, which is still revered somewhere in the Liberal party, on electoral reform; namely, that there should be a single electoral quota, 76,000. The comparison with the size of other constituencies around the world is interesting. The United Kingdom, with a population of 60 million people, has 646 MPs; Germany, with a population of 82 million, has 600; Japan, with a population of 127 million—twice the size of ours—has only 470; Russia, with a population of 144 million, has 450; and America, with a population of 293 million, has 430 Congressmen. By any standard internationally we are massively over-represented.

I hope that this Bill will be a constructive contribution to the debate and the major national review that the Boundary Commission has asked for. A review is well overdue because the last one was in 1944 and it was based very much on the 1917 arrangements.<sup>25</sup>

## 9 Size of the electorate and numbers of Members since 1832

Research Paper 10/36 *General Election 2010: preliminary analysis* sets out examples of the variation in electorate for different constituencies at the 2010 election in part 6.1. It also gives the UK parliamentary electorate at 6 May 2010 as 45,533,536. This excludes the 77,000 voters at Thirsk and Malton where the election did not take place until 27 May 2010. The following tables show the electorate at each election from 1832 to 2005 and the number of Members elected during this period. 650 Members were elected in 2010.

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<sup>23</sup> HC Deb 7 December 2005 c874, [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo051207/debtext/51207-04.htm#51207-04\\_spnew0](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo051207/debtext/51207-04.htm#51207-04_spnew0)

<sup>24</sup> <http://conservativemainstream.org.uk/downloads/pruningpoliticians.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> HL Deb 18 May 2007 c399. Available at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200607/ldhansrd/text/70518-0001.htm#07051825000003>

**Members elected at general elections,  
1832-2005**

Election	Total number of Members elected
1832	658
1835	658
1837	658
1841	658
1847	656
1852	654
1857	654
1859	654
1865	658
1868	658
1874	652
1880	652
1885	670
1886	670
1892	670
1895	670
1900	670
1906	670
1910 J	670
1910 D	670
1918	707
1922	615
1923	615
1924	615
1929	615
1931	615
1935	615
1945	640
1950	625
1951	625
1955	630
1959	630
1964	630
1966	630
1970	630
1974 F	635
1974 O	635
1979	635
1983	650
1987	650
1992	651
1997	659
2001	659
2005	646

Source: Railings, C. And Thrasher, M. *British  
Electoral Facts 1832-1999*; HC Library Standard  
Note SN/PC/02411



### The electorate at General Elections 1832-2005

<b>Election</b>	<b>Electorate</b>
1832	812,938
1835	845,776
1837	1,004,664
1841	1,017,379
1847	1,106,514
1852	1,184,689
1857	1,235,530
1859	1,271,900
1865	1,350,404
1868	2,484,713
1874	2,753,142
1880	3,040,050
1885	5,708,030
1886	5,708,030
1892	6,160,541
1895	6,330,519
1900	6,730,935
1906	7,264,608
1910 (J)	7,694,741
1910 (D)	7,709,981
1918	21,392,322
1922	20,874,456
1923	21,283,061
1924	21,730,988
1929	28,854,748
1931	29,952,361
1935	31,374,449
1945	33,240,391
1950	34,412,255
1951	34,919,331
1955	34,852,179
1959	35,397,304
1964	35,894,054
1966	35,957,245
1970	39,342,013
1974 (F)	39,753,863
1974 (O)	40,072,970
1979	41,095,649
1983	42,192,999
1987	43,180,753
1992	43,275,316
1997	43,846,152
2001	44,403,328
2005	44,245,939

Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher,  
*British Electoral Facts 1832-2006*, pp85-92