

## Back page: Unfamiliar territory



Cutting the number of TDs to 158, not population changes, has defined the proposed constituency boundaries, writes Adrian Kavanagh.

Speaking during a House of Lords debate on potential boundary changes in the UK on 12 July 2012, Lord Campbell-Savours stated: "Despair and anxiety have become the hallmarks of many a political household in the land. While spouses fret, long-term political friendships have become clouded in suspicion...at the stroke of a commissioner's pen their lives, careers, family ties, political organisations and loyalties are to be disrupted, leading to widespread insecurity. It is all so unfair."

While his reaction to recommended boundary changes in the United Kingdom may seem somewhat extreme, it reflects the impact of the rule changes brought about by the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. The legislation has effectively acted to concertina into one revision what has taken place across the equivalent of two or three such revisions in Ireland.

Will part of a politician's local bailiwick be moved into a different constituency? Will the changes enhance the electability of constituency rivals? Will the politician's constituency lose a seat? Will voters find themselves on the 'wrong side of the line' if part of their county is moved into a different constituency? Boundary changes may also place added stresses on administrators who may have to significantly redraw constituency polling schemes and even locate new polling stations following a revision.

Concerns about the political impacts of boundary changes will be at their highest probably since the 1974 'Tullymarder' revisions following the recent publication of the 2012 Constituency Commission report. It proposes the most significant level of changes to Dáil constituency boundaries since the 1980 revisions (which involved a significant increase in seat numbers from 148 to 166 and perhaps offered more in the way of opportunity than threat to sitting and aspirant deputies).

While significant population changes leading up to the 2011 Census have impacted on this report, the main driver of change this time was the decision to reduce Dáil seat numbers from 166 to 158. The number of constituencies has been reduced by three. Only 11 constituencies have been left unaffected by these changes, while 15 of the 'old' constituencies have either gained or lost a seat (with the 'old' Dublin South constituency losing two seats) and territory transfers involving populations of 15,000 or greater have impacted on 16 of these.

Boundary changes of this extent have the potential to alter a political party's seat-winning prospects. Indeed, separate analyses of what results would have emerged had these boundaries been in place at the last election by Seán Donnelly and this author suggest that Fianna Fáil may have succeeded in retaining two or three more seats while Labour and independents may have won two or three fewer seats. Generally, boundary changes will work in favour of parties with momentum (e.g. gains by Fianna Fáil in Kildare North and the Meath constituencies in 2007) and against parties experiencing significant losses nationally (e.g. seat losses by government party candidates in Limerick City and Dún Laoghaire in 2011).

The most fundamental impacts are felt by individual candidates, however. Most candidates tend to win their biggest vote shares in areas close to their home base, with these vote shares declining as one moves further away from this area: what political geographers term the 'friends and neighbours' effect. If part of this home base is moved into a different constituency, candidates stand to lose thousands of first preference votes, possibly in sufficient numbers to effectively end their Dáil career, and may even have to consider changing constituencies.

All hope need not be lost and changes need not be terminal. For example, having taken the final seat in that constituency in 2007, Kieran O'Donnell looked vulnerable when the Limerick City constituency lost a seat, but in 2011 he comfortably retained this seat.

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