



House of Commons
Scottish Affairs Committee

**Response by the
Government to the
First Report (Session
2003–04) on the
Coincidence of
Parliamentary
Constituency
Boundaries in Scotland
and the Consequences
of Change**

Session 2003–04

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 1 April 2004*

HC 514
Published on 7 April 2004
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£0.00

The Scottish Affairs Committee

The Scottish Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Scotland Office (including (i) relations with the Scottish Parliament and (ii) administration and expenditure of the office of the Advocate General for Scotland (but excluding individual cases and advice given within government by the Advocate General)).

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Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/scottish_affairs_committee.cfm. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Parliament is at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Mike Clark (Clerk), Diane Nelson (Committee Assistant) and Joanne Larcombe (Secretary).

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1 First Special Report

The Scottish Affairs Committee published its First Report¹ of Session 2003-04 on 3 February 2004. On 29 March 2004 we received a memorandum from the Scotland Office which contained a response to the Report. The memorandum is published as an Appendix to this Report.

1 First Report from the Scottish Affairs Committee, Session 2003-04, *Coincidence of Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries in Scotland and the Consequences of Change*, HC 77

Appendix

This memorandum provides a response to the conclusions and recommendations in the Scottish Affairs Committee's report 'Coincidence of Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries in Scotland and the Consequences of Change' (HC 77), which was published on 3 February 2004.

The terms of reference of the Committee's review were:

“Following the Government's decision to retain the current number of MSPs and the provisional proposals of the Boundary Commission for Scotland to reduce the number of Scottish constituencies represented at Westminster from 72 to 59, the Scottish Affairs Committee will undertake an inquiry into the consequences for Scotland's governance and political life, including the implications for voters, of the creation of different constituency boundaries in Scotland for the UK and Scottish Parliaments.”

The Committee's conclusions and recommendations (page 11 of its Report), with the Scotland Office's response to these, are set out below.

The Size of the Scottish Parliament

“During its evidence sessions, the Committee was not made aware of any good case for the current number of MSPs to be either reduced or increased. We are satisfied, therefore, that the number of MSPs should remain, for the time being, at 129.”

The Government agrees with this recommendation. The Scotland Office's consultation on the size of the Scottish Parliament, which was undertaken between December 2001 and March 2002, showed that there was only very limited support for cutting the number of MSPs.

Coterminosity of Constituency Boundaries

“The Committee considers the convenience of the electorate to be paramount. Based on the evidence we have received, we recommend that, in order to avoid possible confusion, the constituency boundaries in Scotland for elections to the United Kingdom and to the Scottish Parliament should remain coterminous.”

This will be an issue for the independent commission on boundary differences and voting systems to consider. The commission will examine, inter alia, the consequences of having different boundaries between Westminster and Scottish Parliament constituencies for voter participation and representation of constituents by different tiers of elected members. The Government has an open mind on these matters and would not wish to pre-judge the commission's conclusions and recommendations.

“The Committee expects the Electoral Commission to produce proposals in time for the election to the Scottish Parliament in 2007 to be conducted under the new arrangements. It is, therefore, imperative that the Commission starts its work without delay, and that it presents its findings to the Secretary of State for Scotland who should take the final decision based on all available information.”

The Government wishes to see the review of boundary differences and voting systems starting as soon as possible. The commission will be required to report as quickly as it reasonably can, subject to having sufficient time fully to address its remit.

Voting Systems and Methods

“The Committee considers that, as well as looking into the matters of coterminous boundaries, the Electoral Commission should look also at the implications for the electoral process of Scotland having four different voting systems. There may well be good reasons why, for example, elections to Westminster need a different system than elections to the Scottish Parliament, but we are not convinced that every type of election needs a different voting system.”

This will be a central part of the review to be carried out by the commission on boundary differences and voting systems.

The Commission will examine the consequences of having four different systems of voting in local and Parliamentary elections in Scotland and different boundaries between Westminster and Scottish Parliament constituencies for:

- voter participation;
- the relationship between public bodies and authorities in Scotland and MPs/MSPs; and
- representation of constituents by different tiers of elected members.

The commission will make recommendations on whether these consequences require action to be taken in respect of:

- arrangements between elected representatives, to ensure that constituents and organisations receive the best possible service;
- the pattern of electoral boundaries in Scotland;
- the relationship with other public bodies and authorities in Scotland; and
- the method of voting in Scottish Parliament elections;

and will make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Scotland and to the First Minister on the form of any action, while respecting the principles of the devolution settlement. The Secretary of State will then decide on the Government’s response, taking into account the Executive’s views.

The Scottish Parliament (Constituencies) Bill

“We agree with the Secretary of State for Scotland that, as the Scottish Parliament (Constituencies) Bill is a constitutional measure, both its second reading and its committee stage should be taken on the floor of the House, and we so recommend.”

This has been accepted by the Government and the House authorities. Second reading of the Bill took place on the floor of the House on 9 February 2004.

Scotland Office

March 2004