

THE BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR SCOTLAND

PUBLIC HEARING

2018 Review of UK Parliament Constituencies

Held at:

The Town House

High Street

Inverness

IV1 1JJ

on

Monday, 5 December 2016

SHERIFF PRINCIPAL PYLE

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Isabel Drummond-Murray (Secretary)

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SHERIFF PRINCIPAL PYLE: May I welcome you all to this event today, which is part of the public consultation by the Boundary Commission for Scotland. I am Sheriff Principal Derek Pyle, Sheriff Principal of Grampian, Highland and the Isles, and I am here as an independent party. I have a statutory responsibility in terms of the Act on appointment to conduct the hearing today. To my right is Isabel Drummond-Murray, the Secretary of the Boundary Commission for Scotland. She will shortly give a brief statement explaining in broad terms the statutory basis for the consultation and how the consultation will be dealt with. There are several ways for members of the public and other interested parties to provide information to the Commission during the public consultation period but this is the opportunity for interested parties to say what they want to say in a public forum.

Given the numbers that are here the intention that I would have is to keep matters fairly informal this morning. In other circumstances if we had vast crowds then I would be saying to parties that they have to speak within certain time limits but given the numbers here I do not think it will be appropriate for that to be the position today. What I would normally do is invite qualifying parties to speak first. The only qualifying party here in the technical sense is Mr Murray Tosh for the Conservatives and I understand that he is on his way but has not arrived yet so my intention would simply be to go down the list of other people here who want to speak. When you sit over here could I ask you, please, to speak into the microphone and before you speak would you say who you are and who you represent. With those introductory remarks I will pass on to Isabel Drummond-Murray to make a statement.

MS DRUMMOND-MURRAY: Thank you very much. I am just going to speak for about 10 minutes to give you an overview of the legislation, policies and procedures, and explain our initial proposals for this area. The legislation governing the review is the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986. The 1986 Act has been substantially amended by the Parliamentary Voting System Constituencies Act of 2011 and as a result of the change in legislation there will be a UK parliament of 600 constituencies,

down from 650. In Scotland that means there will be 53 constituencies instead of the current 59. Two Scottish constituencies are specified in the legislation and so are not subject to review; these are the Western Isles and Orkney & Shetland. Each of the other 51 constituencies must have an electorate within 5 per cent of the electoral quota which is 74,769.2 for this review. This means that each constituency must have no fewer than 71,031 electors and no more than 78,507 electors. There is an exception to this when the constituency's area exceeds 12,000 square kilometres and it may then have an electorate lower than 95 per cent of the electoral quota if it is not reasonably possible for it to comply with that requirement. No constituency can exceed 13,000 square kilometres.

In 2011 we commenced our sixth review of UK parliament constituencies. However, parliament amended the legislation governing that review in January 2013 and as a result we stopped work and did not complete it. This is therefore the first review at which specific numerical limits have been applied to the electorate or the geographical area of constituencies.

The legislation states that we may take into account factors other than the electorate, namely special geographical considerations, including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency; the boundaries of council areas and electoral wards; existing UK parliament constituency boundaries; and any local ties that may be broken by changes. We are aware that the Scottish government has introduced new ward boundaries in many council areas in Scotland. However, the legislation requires us to have regard to the ward boundaries that were in use at the last local government elections. We cannot therefore take account of the new ward boundaries but we can of course take account of local ties. When designing constituencies we have aimed to design as many as practicable that do not cross a council area boundary. We have also tried to avoid breaking local ties. We have taken into consideration local geography such as transport links, electoral and administrative boundaries, and natural features, and we have taken into consideration special geographic considerations where appropriate.

As part of the review we must also recommend a name for each constituency and designate it as either a county or a burgh. That is a designation that affects expenses payable at elections. The guidelines we have adopted when proposing names are as follows: to use an existing constituency name where a successor is recognisably similar; to prefer short names rather than attempt to describe an area exhaustively; to ensure the names of UK parliament constituencies in general differ from those of the Scottish parliament where an appropriate and distinct alternative is available; not to place compass points at the beginning of a name unless it is used as part of the name of a council area or town such as East Kilbride or East Lothian; and not to use the same name for a constituency and a council area unless the two are coterminous. We have published a booklet setting out the policies and procedures for the review which can be found on the website, and I think there are some copies at the table on your way in.

As an independent and politically impartial body we do not take into account patterns of voting or the results of elections when reviewing constituency boundaries nor do the political parties' views on where boundaries should be have any more weight than those of members of the public. To assist with design and with minimising the number of constituencies crossing council area boundaries we designed for groups of council areas which can be exactly covered by a whole number. The strict limits on the number of electors in each constituency mean that the design of

each may affect the design of a number of others across a wide area. We have considered whether to design any in Scotland larger than 12,000 square kilometres to which the exception to the minimum electoral rule would apply and we have not applied that exception to any in these initial proposals.

In our initial proposals 35 constituencies are contained within a single council area and the remaining 18 combine parts of two council areas. Thirty wards out of 353 are divided between constituencies. There are 13 constituencies which contain only whole wards, 23 containing a number of whole wards and part of one ward, 14 containing parts of two wards, two containing parts of three wards and one which contains parts of four wards. Where wards have been split we have generally tried to do so using community council boundaries, major transport features and other recognisable geographical and community boundaries.

The council areas that form the geographic focus of this public hearing are Argyll & Bute, Highland and Moray. However, you are welcome to comment on any part of our initial proposals at any public hearing. In our initial proposals this set of council areas is exactly covered by four constituencies. Moray and Nairn contains all of Moray council area and Highland ward 19 (Nairn). Argyll, Bute & Lochaber constituency contains all of Argyll & Bute council area, Highland ward 22, which is Fort William & Ardnamurchan, and Highland ward 12, Caol & Mallaig, which is divided along community council boundaries east of Mallaig and along the Caledonian Canal between Caol and Corpach.

Inverness & Skye constituency lies wholly within Highland council area and contains Highland wards 11, 14-18, 20 and 21 in their entirety as well as three divided wards - ward 6, Wester Ross, Strathpeffer & Lochalsh; ward 12, Caol & Mallaig; and ward 13, Aird and Loch Ness - which are divided along community council area boundaries and physical features.

Highland North constituency also lies wholly within Highland council area and contains wards 1-5 and 7-10 in their entirety as well as two divided wards, 6 and 13.

This public hearing is one of five being held around Scotland where you have an opportunity to voice your opinions and suggest alternative constituency designs. In addition to comment about a public hearing you can write or send an email to us with your comment or you can use the consultation area of our website which includes interactive mapping. Details of how to submit your comments are available on our website and of course at the end if you want to get any advice about submitting then please let us know. We have arranged for a transcript of today's proceedings to be made and we will publish that on our website. We also request that anyone wishing to comment in Gaelic do so in writing. Our privacy policy is that we will publish names of individuals and organisations commenting on our proposals but we will not publish personal contact details such as address, phone number or email address. We have already published on our website minutes and meeting papers from our meetings leading up to the publication of our initial proposals. These include information about alternative constituency designs which we have considered before deciding upon our proposals.

The public consultation closes on Wednesday 11 January. In early spring we will publish on our website all the comments we have received and the transcripts from the public hearings. There will then be a further scrutiny period of four weeks during which you can scrutinise and remark upon any

comments. After that scrutiny period we will consider all the comments and remarks received, and where appropriate produce revised proposals later in 2017 for further consultation. We must submit our report containing final recommendations to the Secretary of State before 1 October 2018. That concludes my statement.

SHERIFF PRINCIPAL PYLE: Thank you for that. I understand that Mr Murray Tosh has now arrived and as he is one of the qualifying parties I will invite him to speak first.

MR TOSH: Good morning, Sheriff Principal, ladies and gentlemen. My apologies for the late arrival. I did rise at 5 am to get here for 11 and looked forward to a leisurely coffee before the hearing began but traffic told me otherwise. It is a great pleasure to be back in this building. I was here for the last boundary review. It is a sad point, actually, because that was the only time when I ever met the late Charles Kennedy whose personality and humour filled this room.

My name is Murray Tosh. I am representing the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party in all five of the local hearings. I do not want to appear here in the Highlands under false pretences. I was able to speak with I think considerable knowledge of many of the constituencies in question at the Glasgow and Ayr hearings but I do not claim knowledge and depth of the constituencies in this part of Scotland. I know the geography of the area reasonably well, I have been virtually everywhere in these constituencies as a visitor. I have climbed all of the Munros in Argyll and the Highlands and I can even have a stab at pronouncing a lot of the Gaelic names. However, I do not claim to know about the interrelationships of Highland communities and much of what I say is going to be general. Today I am giving an interim response from the Scottish Conservatives to the proposed constituencies which are the focus of this hearing. We are still consulting on the initial proposals. We will want to assess the reaction from the public, local authorities and other political parties before lodging a final formal response which we will do by the deadline of 11 January. It is good to see so many people here today because I think this has maybe been the best attended hearing of the four that we have had so far.

We are aware that the grouping of councils proposed for Argyll & Bute, Highland, and Moray is exactly that proposed in the sixth review which was a few years ago but was uncompleted. We agreed with that grouping in the sixth review and while we are considering counterproposals and alternative groupings in some areas we are proposing no changes at present in this grouping. We acknowledge also that the Commission's initial proposals for the proposed constituencies before this hearing conform with Schedule 2 of the 1986 Act which lays down the rules for the distribution of seats. These rules require the Commission to take into account local government boundaries and we agree that these rules have been followed in the allocation of the constituencies in such a way as to keep to a minimum the crossings of council boundaries, and also dividing the electoral wards.

We do think that the proposed Highland North constituency is appropriate. It is essentially the same constituency which was included in the Commission's initial and revised proposals in the sixth review and we believe that the report which was prepared in that review by the Commission's secretariat for the Commissioners' final meeting did recommend that it should also be included in the final proposals. Essentially that constituency has been validated by having passed through the whole process in the previous review and, while the current Commission has looked at the map of Scotland entirely afresh in this review, it is difficult to and we cannot envisage any other model for a constituency in the northernmost part of the Scottish mainland.

The entitlement to constituencies in this grouping was 4.11 which does not sound a lot but it does mean that the average electorate is relatively high. With four constituencies 4.11 gives you an extra margin and with the electorate of Highland North being slightly below the quota there is some pressure therefore on the other three constituencies whose electorates are necessarily close to the top of the allowable range around the quota.

I looked back to the 1983 general election to identify trends over the last 30 to 40 years and I noted that in that time the electorate of Highland Council has risen from 143,000 to 172,000 mostly around Inverness. Moray's electorate has risen from 61,000 to over 69,000 in the same period. The challenge to the Commission has been that even since the unconcluded sixth review growing electorates around Inverness and Moray mean that parts of southern Inverness-shire have to be moved south to a constituency based on Argyll & Bute Council, adding large, sparsely inhabited areas to a constituency which while not the largest in area now has a very large electorate, much of it living on a significant number of inhabited islands. We think that the member of parliament for the Argyll & Bute constituency already has possibly the most difficult constituency to represent given the islands and the distances and it is unfortunate that yet more territory must be added to the constituency.

The Commission looked at two options and it had to include either essentially the Ardnamurchan peninsula or Badenoch & Strathspey, and we agree that it has made the correct choice in looking west. I stand to be corrected but it appears to the Conservatives that most of Badenoch & Strathspey being aligned along the A9 trunk road look more to Inverness whereas Ardnamurchan, Morvern, Sunart, Ardgour and Moidart clearly relate to Fort William which will go in with Argyll & Bute. All these areas were in the former Lochaber district from 1975 to 1996 and today Highland Council's management areas and all the related committees include these areas in the Ross, Sky & Lochaber division within Highland, whereas Badenoch & Strathspey are included with Inverness. Ardnamurchan, Morvern, Sunart and Ardgour are all historically part of Argyll. I do not know about this for the Highland area but my experience of other parts of Scotland is that there is still a lingering identification with the old historic counties. It is possible therefore, because I know there is in other areas, that there is still a sense today of a wider cultural Argyll than the administrative unit of Argyll & Bute Council. Indeed we discovered in looking at the Commission's proposals for Ayrshire that it has a predilection for reviving ancient names and a policy of presenting and preferring short names.

It might be tempting to go back to the late 500s when the Argyll, Bute & Lochaber constituency's area was contained in the ancient kingdom of Dal Riata. While that might be a name to fire the Commission's imagination we are content with Argyll, Bute & Lochaber, being quite descriptive, and also with the names Highland North, Inverness & Skye, and Moray & Nairn but we will be interested to see if anyone has any other alternative. Inverness & Skye appears to us to be a logical constituency with a very long pedigree and the proposed Moray & Nairn constituency renews a long historic association between those old counties. My colleague Douglas Ross MSP will make some further comment on Moray & Nairn but for now I will conclude simply by registering the support of the Scottish Conservatives for the grouping of the three council areas, the four constituencies proposed and the names which the Commission has recommended for them.

SHERIFF PRINCIPAL PYLE: Thank you very much, Mr Tosh. Are there any questions which anybody wants to put to Mr Tosh? (Negative) Thank you very much, Mr Tosh. I now call upon Lyn Kilpatrick.

MS KILPATRICK: Thank you. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Lyn Kilpatrick, I am representing Kilmallie Community Council which is in Lochaber. I am here with my colleague Christine Hutchison who is the chairperson of Kilmallie Community Council. We understand that your main focus today is likely to be on the Inverness area but wish to emphasise that we have travelled almost 70 miles to highlight the situation that Kilmallie will potentially find itself in if this review is allowed to go ahead as currently proposed.

On a general note we share the public desire to reduce the number of MPs. We accept that the methodology of parity by population size is reasonable in general terms and in this general sense we also understand the tolerance of plus or minus 5 per cent. However, we have two main issues with the proposals. The first is around the methodology for the proposed new boundaries. We note that the summary of initial proposals booklet notes the Commission's intention to be sensitive to existing community council boundaries or to other natural boundaries and equally it notes the Commission's desire to maintain existing ward boundaries. Sadly none of these guiding principles have been followed in relation to Kilmallie. More specifically, the proposals do not reflect the Kilmallie community council boundary but instead separate the electorate between two proposed new Highland constituencies. Some Kilmallie residents will join with Argyll & Bute to form Argyll, Bute & Lochaber while others will join Inverness and Skye. We have provided a production map for that.

Furthermore, the proposals divide the electorate of Highland Council's ward 12 and, further still, the proposals separate the electorates of ward 12 and ward 22 which jointly and collectively define the existing community of Lochaber. In particular, referring to the previous speaker, the Highland Council's administrative boundaries across Skye and Lochaber currently include the whole entire community of Kilmallie within that boundary. While the Boundary Commission may regard the name Lochaber as being a recent administrative construct for local authorities now gone, the name is steeped in history, not necessarily going back to the fifth century but, just as a hearrach is someone from Harris so, too, an abrach is someone from Lochaber. The current Boundary Commission proposal gives away the Lochaber name to a constituency substantially centred on Argyll & Bute, and at a stroke removes the sense of identity from the geographical expanse of Brae Lochaber, Bad Abrach, Lochaber Shinty Club and Lochaber Rugby Club, which will all be in the Inverness & Skye constituency. It is felt in our community through sounding boards that our fundamental right of community identity and civic pride is being challenged here.

The area of greater Fort William, the 11,000 strong community around the head of Loch Linnhe from Corpach to Fort William, has embraced a shared identity for generations.

In this point we have the support from each of the communities of Caol, Inverlochy & Torlundy, and Fort William who also believe we should stay together. We therefore recommend that the Commission reviews the proposals as they affect Kilmallie in the interest of demonstrating their commitment to and application of their own brief in relation to community council and ward boundaries, and in this respect we request that the existing Lochaber communities be retained within a single constituency. This would respect Kilmallie community council boundaries, Highland Council ward boundaries and consequently existing community identity over administrative construct.

Our second issue relates to parity. The Boundary Commission website offers a sample calculation which appears to us to centre on postcode units and it leaves us with the impression that numbers

have been used as the sole method of assessment, given the circumstances just outlined, and that adjustment for the claimed sensitivities of community and natural boundaries have not been taken into account. It is these traditional and social aspects that are important to individuals and are the very essence of how communities identify themselves. More specifically, the three proposed Highland constituencies are the three top ranked by electorate size in Scotland, each approaching the upper margins of the 5 per cent tolerance level. This leaves little if any flexibility for adjustment within the existing proposals nor does it seem to have regard to current population trends or population projections for the Highlands which indicate a steady increase.

However, we do note that for pragmatic reasons the Boundary Commission has relaxed the parity level for the Islands. It is clear to us that adhering to the tolerance has trammelled consideration of the social and cultural matters that we have highlighted, meaning that the Commission may have misdirected itself away from the community values it has claimed to be important. We therefore recommend that, similar to their island counterparts, the three Highland constituencies be allowed a tolerance level of 10 per cent to allow for the combined effect of sparse population, traditional settlements, communication patterns, and the vast geographical area.

Finally, a small point as more general feedback, we suggest that the use of a canal as in the case of Kilmallie to form a dividing boundary is discontinued in favour of the use of watersheds as a more useful and appropriate method of identifying a community boundary. Thank you.

SHERIFF PRINCIPAL PYLE: Thank you for that. Are there any questions for Ms Kilpatrick? (Negative) Thank you. I now call upon Douglas Ross who is the member of the Scottish parliament for Highlands & Islands and is a Scottish Conservative.

MR ROSS: Good morning. Thank you very much, Sheriff Principal. I am here largely to speak in favour of the proposed seat of Moray & Nairn. To give some background, I was elected to the Scottish parliament earlier this year in May for the Highlands & Islands which includes Moray and I have since 2007 been an elected member of Moray Council, and continue to be an elected member on ward M4 which is on page 53 of your documents. Really I think there have been close links with Moray and Nairn going back many decades. Up until the 1980s it was a parliamentary seat for almost 60 years and that association, despite being lost in the 1980s review, has actually continued. Many people still refer to Moray & Nairn. and I will go into that in a moment. I want to focus mainly on community ties and also transport links, and if I can begin with transport links clearly Nairn and much of Moray is formed through the A96 corridor. Both communities look forward to the improvements of the A96 moving forward in years to come but it is a particular link between the two communities, the A96 corridor for car travel but also for bus travel, and many of the problems and experiences we have in Moray are shared by our neighbours in Nairn when we have issues with bus links. Also, if I can move that on to the rail network, clearly the link between Inverness and Aberdeen goes directly through Nairn and Moray, and that link is something that I think can be strengthened with a combined seat of Moray & Nairn.

If I could move on to community ties, I mentioned how the seat has not existed for over 30 years but a number of organisations still maintain the name Moray & Nairn. It is something that is referred to in the old county days and continues with a number of voluntary groups and charities still having Moray & Nairn as their title. and indeed having a cross border link with the two communities. A



number of organisations continue to do that and see the benefits of including both communities in their organisational structure.

If I could also further speak about community ties, people who live in Moray are within the NHS Grampian area and people who live in Nairn are clearly within the NHS Highland area. However, there have been a number of examples of cross border healthcare issues. Indeed I raised one with the cabinet Secretary for Health in parliament just last week where people in Moray more closely associate themselves with Raigmore for treatment and therefore I think the people particularly to the west of Moray would find a commonality with their friends and neighbours in Nairn to use health services within the NHS Highland area.

Both communities of Moray and Nairn are rural in their nature. If we look at Highland Council area H19, despite the main population living in Nairn as you move westwards it is a highly rural area, as is Moray, well known for its farming communities, but both also have a very significant coastal population which I think ties them in both nicely as well. If I can finish by saying there are no direct education links between Moray and Nairn, we have very separate education departments within both authorities yet there still remains all these years on the Moray & Nairn Educational Trust, which was set up in the old county council days, that maintains that structure even in 2016 where we as a Moray local authority provide grants to pupils in Nairn and in Moray to further their education in further and higher education. I think that shows how a link which was established decades ago remains today and is one we are proud of, and I think it would be a useful link to maintain in this new proposed seat. Thank you.

SHERIFF PRINCIPAL PYLE: Thank you, Mr Ross. Does anyone have any questions for Mr Ross? (Negative) Thank you very much. I have a note here, Steven Brown and John O'Leary for Ian Blackford MP. I am not sure whether both gentlemen intend to speak or only one of them.

MR BROWN: Thank you, it is just me. Good morning. My name is Steven Brown and I am the office manager for Ian Blackford MP. He has asked me to come along and represent him this morning, and to make a statement on his behalf.

Ross, Skye & Lochaber is a parliamentary seat and in its current form has a land mass of 12,000 square kilometres. It is 15 per cent of the land mass of Scotland. Whilst it is desirable that there ought to be a relationship between the number of electors in each seat there also has to be a recognition of the geographic factors. The Boundary Commission gives some cognisance to this in so far as the constituency covering the northern and western isles was protected given their particular status. Under 2.3.7 of the legislation it is stated that, "Every constituency must have an electorate that is no less than 95% and no more than 105% of the United Kingdom electoral quota, with the exception of the island constituencies listed above, and any constituency larger than 12,000 square kilometres which may have an electorate lower than 95% of the electoral quota if it is not reasonably possible for it to comply with that requirement".

I would contend that as Ross, Skye & Lochaber currently covers 12,000 square kilometres the constituency should have been left as it currently is given the determination under 2.3.7. It cannot reasonably comply with the requirement of the quota obligation and ought to have been protected from the boundary review process based on its current geographical size. There is the practical situation that this is not just a mainland constituency but one with a number of populated islands:

Canna, Eigg, Muck, Raasay, Rhum, Skye as well as Soay which has a small population. If it is the case that the island status of the two Scottish seats are being protected why has this not applied to Ross, Skye & Lochaber and indeed that of Argyll & Bute which has a population of 26 islands?

The issue of democratic accountability and accessibility are important requirements alongside arguments on equalisation of the number of voters. In the case of Ross, Skye & Lochaber the constituency office is based in Dingwall and there are a number of constituents who visit the constituency office on a daily basis. These constituents are primarily from Dingwall and the surrounding area. It is a near two hour drive to Fort William and three hours to the north of Skye. Voters in all parts of the constituency deserve to have local access to their member of parliament. I am grateful that I have been able to secure additional financial support to open a second office in Fort William which is essential to fully serve the electorate in the area. This allows a conclusion to be drawn that larger seats bring additional expense in terms of travel and accommodation.

It brings into question that there are legitimate additional costs that are necessary to serve a large rural constituency. Creating these proposed three larger rural constituencies would incur additional costs perhaps in additional offices being required but also in terms of cost of travel for any MP to get around their constituency. Distance from Westminster and travel time to parliament is also a factor as it limits the amount of time that any MP can spend in a Highland constituency. Many MPs have the opportunity to return to their constituency within a few hours; it takes over eight hours to get from the north of Skye to parliament. This means that any rural Highland MP is spending less time in their constituency than members from elsewhere. Creating larger constituencies with even greater travel time within the constituency limits further the opportunity for contact with the electorate. There is in my opinion a democratic deficit in terms of representation as a result of this.

We are told it is all about population, each seat must produce seats with a certain number of electors. Geography as it affects democratic representation also matters. The Highland Council area together with Argyll & Bute today has four parliamentary constituencies. Under the proposals this will come down to three, this for a land mass of 33,382 square kilometres, 40 per cent of Scotland's land mass of 80,223 square kilometres, 40 per cent of the land mass but just 5 per cent of Scotland's MPs.

Let us look at some of the practicalities. Ross, Skye & Lochaber as well as Argyll & Bute have a number of islands. It is not just the issue of land mass, it is a long coastline that twists and turns up the beautiful west coast of Scotland. I have seven islands in Ross, Skye & Lochaber with a resident population.

I live on the island of Skye. I can travel 165 miles from my home and still be in my constituency. My constituency office is in Dingwall and it is 125 miles from where I live. It takes me three hours to get to my constituency office, sometimes even longer. On average seven constituents per day visit the office, almost all from the local area. Fort William where my second office is located is 73 miles from Dingwall but a two hour drive. Arguably I should also have an office on Skye. Where I live on Skye is also a three hour and near 130 miles distance to Fort William. Much of Wester Ross, places like Ullapool and Gairloch, are considerable distances from Dingwall. We should not be talking about reducing Highland seats, we should be increasing them to at least five from the current four. There are more unelected members of the House of Lords living in the Highlands than elected MPs.

Let us look at the new proposed Argyll, Bute & Lochaber seat. Argyll & Bute has 26 inhabited islands. Adding in Lochaber would push that number to over 30 inhabited islands. It is 189 miles from the Mull of Kintyre to Mallaig and it is suggested that the journey time is four hours and 45 minutes, and Mallaig is the jumping off point for Canna. For the current member for Argyll to get to Canna from his home would take him longer than it would for him to go south to Glasgow and fly to New York.

Highland North would increase in size to 12,985 square kilometres. This would take you from John o' Groats to Applecross, a distance of 176 miles, and take four and a quarter hours. In the new Inverness & Skye seat from Nethy Bridge to Neist Point on Skye is 169 miles and would take four hours. These proposals for the three Highland seats need to be revisited. Thank you.

SHERIFF PRINCIPAL PYLE: Thank you, Mr Brown. As only the representative of Mr Blackford I assume you are not in a position to take questions but has someone got a question? (Negative) Thank you very much. That brings this event to a close and I thank you all for your attendance here this morning. Yes, sir, by all means come forward. Would you please state your name and if you are from any particular organisation please state that, too.

MR ESCOTT: Trevor Escott, I was called last evening to attend by the Inverness Liberal Democrats. Very briefly, their opinion is that the best of the options we were given was option 1, basically, which would contain the Skye, Badenoch and Inverness postcode; their opinion is that this would be the best option for Inverness. Thank you.

SHERIFF PRINCIPAL PYLE: Thank you for that. Is there anybody else who wants to make a contribution? Yes, by all means come forward.

MR CHEYNE: My name is Peter Cheyne from Easter Ross. I am not speaking for anybody else apart from myself. This is a public meeting held at 11 o'clock on a Monday morning. That is ridiculous. It is an important meeting and if it is called a public meeting it should be held at a time when the public can be represented. Looking round here at the people who are here, probably there are one or two who are here because they have to be here. The members of the public are probably all just pensioners and there are not many of them here, either. That is my first criticism, it is a shocking disgrace for a democratic country to hold a public meeting at this particular time.

The second point I would make is, the remit by the government is flawed. Making a set population standard for the whole country is totally ridiculous when you have sparsely populated areas and huge or relatively huge land masses, so the remit is flawed and I am very cross about that.

The government says this is the independent Boundary Commission and that is fine. Yes, they are completely, independent. The Commission says, "We are given a remit, this is what we've been told to do and we have to come to decisions within the remit". The whole thing is ridiculous. The government hides behind the Commission and the Commission hides behind the government. That is another point I would like to make strongly. The new name for, is it North Highland or Highland North, a few years ago, quite a number of years ago we had local government reform and they made a mess of it so the government had another go, and they made another mess of it. We have now Highland Council which is in itself far too big and we have all these nice county names that people like to be associated with. If you are changing a name, for goodness' sake bring in your old traditional Highland names and do not just say North Highland or Highland North. It is meaningless,

there is no South Highland, and so I would say that it is flawed. Thank you. I am afraid I am not very well prepared and I just have to leave it at that.

SHERIFF PRINCIPLE PYLE: Thank you, Mr Cheyne, for that. I take it there is no-one else wishing to speak? (Negative) Therefore I will bring matters to a close and thank you all for your attendance today.