

Welsh Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Implications of the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill for Wales](#), HC 734

Thursday 24 September 2020

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Members present: Stephen Crabb (Chair); Simon Baynes; Virginia Crosbie; Geraint Davies; Ruth Jones; Ben Lake; Robin Millar; Rob Roberts; Beth Winter.

Questions 1 - 64

Witnesses

[I:](#) Professor Charles Pattie, Professor of Politics, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield; Dr David Rossiter, former Research Fellow; and Professor Robert McNabb, Emeritus Professor of Economics, Cardiff University, and Commissioner, Boundary Commission for Wales.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Charles Pattie, Dr David Rossiter and Professor Robert McNabb.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning, all. Welcome to Committee Room 6 in the House of Commons for a meeting of the Welsh Affairs Committee. This morning, we are taking evidence on the implications of the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill for Wales. We are delighted to be joined by a prominent panel of witnesses. We have three academics with particular knowledge and expertise in this field: Professor Charles Pattie, Dr David Rossiter and Professor Robert McNabb, who also serves on the Boundary Commission for Wales.

Before getting into any of the questions, I invite the panellists to say a few words of introduction about themselves. Professor Pattie, would you like to go first?

Professor Pattie: Yes, indeed. I am Charles Pattie. I am a professor of politics at the University of Sheffield. With Dave Rossiter and my late colleague Ron Johnson, I have been researching elections and boundary review processes for quite some time now.

Dr Rossiter: Good morning. Dave Rossiter. I am now retired from the academic world, but I will carry on intervening as and when Boundary Commission reports raise their ugly heads. I have been doing work on the Boundary Commission for the best part of 40 years now, always with the late Professor Johnson and nearly all that time also with Professor Pattie.

Professor McNabb: Good morning. I am Robert McNabb. I am, until the end of this month, the Boundary Commissioner for Wales. I stand down at the end of September. I undertook, with colleagues, the 2013 and 2018 boundary reviews in Wales. Previously, I was a professor of economics and dean of the Business School at Cardiff University.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you. I will kick off the questions this morning by asking you a very general question on the theme of overrepresentation and the idea of Wales being overrepresented within the Westminster parliamentary system. What do you understand by that term "overrepresentation", how do you think we should understand it and are there any other observations you would like to make?

Professor Pattie: It is not going to be a surprise to anyone on the Committee that the average Welsh constituency is rather smaller than the average constituency elsewhere in the UK and that disparity has grown over time. To my mind, that is the nub of your question about overrepresentation. If we believe in a world where every vote carries equal weight, it is a bit problematic if there are consistent patterns such that some parts of the country have more voting power than others. Smaller constituencies give Welsh voters a bit more bang for their voting buck than voters in the rest of the country.

Dr Rossiter: The only thing I would add to that is—I don't know if you want to get on to this later—how this has evolved. If you go back right to the unreformed House of Commons prior to 1832, Wales had 27 constituencies then. The number was determined effectively by the number of counties in Wales and by the small numbers of boroughs that had separate representation and that has just gradually grown. The Great Reform Act increased that to 32 and successive pieces of legislation in the 19th century reflected the growth in the population of Wales.

That continued through to 1945 when the pre-existing system of boundary redistributions was basically put into law. At that time, Wales was given 36 seats in the initial review. That was simply a reflection of where we had more or less reached at the end of the 1940s. That continued through to the third review of the Boundary Commission for Wales, where it increased the representation by two. The reason it cited there was special geographical considerations in north Wales and west Wales. The problem that arises with that is that as soon as you increase the number of constituencies then the— *[Inaudible.]* — are determined country by country.

As soon as you have gone from 36 up to 38 seats, which happened in the third review, when the fourth review came around the quotas that you were trying to fit had become smaller and, therefore, Wales was entitled to more seats. This is something the Parliament recognised through the 1980s, 1990s and so on. But about half the overrepresentation—in numerical terms now, you would argue that an equal representation across the nations of the UK would more or less reduce Wales to 32 constituencies—has grown during the 1945 to 2011 process and the rest of it simply reflects demographic change.

Q3 **Chair:** From an historical perspective, when were the first rumblings of discontent expressed within the House of Commons about overrepresentation of certain nations within Parliament? Is this just a relatively new feature of constitutional discussions since the devolution era began or has it been a feature of discussions about numbers of constituencies since the periods that you were talking about in your answer, Dr Rossiter?

Dr Rossiter: Charles may have a different view. I think we are talking about 30 years now that it has been apparent, particularly because of the increase in the size of the House of Commons and the way in which you could try to stop this ever increasing size. People say, "What are the reasons for that?" and obviously the increase in Welsh representation is part of it.

I think there was also a feeling that something needed to be done to address Scottish MPs in particular being able to vote on UK legislation. The period of devolution sort of tackled that—I suspect you will come on to this—because it had implications on Scottish representation that were not followed through for Welsh representation.

Q4 **Chair:** Professor Pattie, do you want to add anything to the historical

perspective before I bring in Professor McNabb?

Professor Pattie: Only to amplify something David said about how the issue has grown over time because of how populations have changed. If we go back to the 1950s, the first election under a relatively modern system of boundary review, part of the issue was that the 1944 legislation set a minimum number of seats for Wales and for Scotland, so that could tie the representation to a lower threshold of MPs. But there was the relative disparity in constituency size. What was there wasn't terribly big, but over time the population change has moved at different paces, and in different parts of the country that disparity has widened. Clearly, the population of England has grown faster than the population of Scotland or Wales.

The Scottish issue was partly dealt with as part of the devolution settlement in 2005, where there was a special review of the Scottish seats that led to the reduction in the number of Scottish seats. That brought Scotland rather closer to parity with England, but, of course, no such adjustment was made in Wales and that means that the relative disparity is a function of change in different rates of population and electoral growth in the constituent countries.

Q5 **Chair:** In a sense, the reduction in the number of Welsh seats is a bit of unfinished constitutional business?

Professor Pattie: I would say that is a fair way of discussing this, yes.

Q6 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Professor McNabb, I am very conscious that in your role as the Boundary Commissioner for Wales you perhaps do not want to talk about some of the wider political issues of this subject. From that position of knowledge and expertise, are there any observations that you want to make about the idea of Welsh overrepresentation within the Westminster parliamentary system?

Professor McNabb: No. As you say, being an independent and non-political body, we don't really comment on anything that Parliament establishes or the rules that it sets. But as Dr Rossiter said, the issue has been around for quite a few years now and in 1987 the disparity as to the size of the electorate in Wales constituencies compared with the size of the electorate in English constituencies was raised as an issue. No change was recommended then and so it has come to the fore now.

Q7 **Chair:** That is interesting. Being raised in 1987 prior to devolution, was it a question of the equality of the worth of someone's vote in different sized constituencies or was it a feeling that because of smaller sized constituencies it would lead to distorted policy outcomes in voting patterns over time in the House of Commons?

Professor McNabb: At the time, the inquiry just noted that there was a significant difference in the size of the electorates—70,000 in England compared with 50,000-odd in Wales. It did not take it any further than that. It is an issue that has been there. Going back to the end of war period, there are probably questions about equality of electorates, but

things tend to drift. It has come to the fore now, though, in a significant way.

Q8 Virginia Crosbie: Good morning, everybody. I want to drill down a little bit about Welsh representation. Professor Pattie, you mentioned unfinished business, that after the 2005 Scottish devolution settlement Scotland readjusted its seats. What were the reasons Wales did not go the same way?

Chair: I think we have lost the connection with Professor Pattie. Perhaps one of the technical team could investigate that. Virginia, do you want to direct your question to—

Virginia Crosbie: Perhaps Professor McNabb or Dr Rossiter could come in here.

Dr Rossiter: My understanding—it is no more than my understanding—is it is a reflection of the lesser powers granted to the Welsh Assembly at the time, as to the Scottish Parliament, but beyond that I have no further knowledge.

Q9 Virginia Crosbie: There was no particular reason at the time?

Professor McNabb: As David has said, I think it was due to the fact that the Scottish Parliament had legislative powers—and some tax-raising powers—that the devolved Government in Wales did not have. That led to Scotland acting and the number of constituencies changing or being reduced in Scotland. In a sense, it was “no taxation without representation”. You do not give Wales tax-raising legislative powers so the representation in Westminster should still be there.

Professor Pattie: I was going to make the same point as Robert has just made before my internet cut out. My apologies, but I think the answers you have just heard are my understanding as well.

Q10 Virginia Crosbie: Following the Internal Market Bill and the Welsh Government having additional powers, how do you think representation should be reflected, then, and as we move to post Brexit at the end of this year, with Wales on the global stage?

Professor Pattie: I don’t know, is the frankly honest answer. One way of looking at this—I think this gets us beyond the current Bill—is that in some respects Wales has the potential to punch above its weight because of the Welsh Assembly. The Assembly gives Wales an extra voice in those discussions. I don’t think that a reduction in the number of Welsh MPs would necessarily be terribly consequential for the ability of Wales to be heard in those debates and conversations.

Q11 Virginia Crosbie: What is the impact on Westminster?

Professor Pattie: Obviously, you will see slightly fewer Welsh MPs, but one could run that for another part of the country and say, “Should other parts of the country have fewer MPs to accommodate overrepresentation in Wales?” I think one risks robbing Peter to pay Paul if one maintains the current Welsh representation.

Q12 **Virginia Crosbie:** I would be interested in Professor McNabb's thoughts on that, please.

Professor McNabb: As an independent, non-political commissioner, it would not be appropriate for me to comment.

Q13 **Virginia Crosbie:** It was worth asking you. Okay, David?

Dr Rossiter: Nothing to add to what Charles said.

Q14 **Chair:** Geraint Davies wants to ask a supplementary on this, but before I bring in Geraint, can I come back to Professor Pattie's comment about robbing Peter to pay Paul? Have there been any expressions of discontent or resentment around Welsh overrepresentation? How much of this was to do with the size of Scottish representation prior to devolution?

Professor Pattie: That question can be broken down into two steps. First, how much public discontent has there been? There is probably not very much. To a large extent, the things we are talking about today aerate the people in this discussion, but I am not sure it is such a big deal for the general public.

It is certainly true that the Scottish situation has had a bit more purchase over time than the Welsh overrepresentation. That is partly because there are more Scottish MPs. It is partly because up until 2005 the extent of the disparity between the average Scottish seat and the average seat in England was larger than the average disparity between Wales and England. That is partly because the Scottish Parliament, as we have just heard, was originally given more powers than the Welsh Assembly. Scotland has, until recent times, dominated that concern. To my mind, that is not germane to the issue of principle, which is, should there be overrepresentation or not? Whether people are concerned about it is different from, is there an issue of principle here?

Q15 **Geraint Davies:** I should mention that my father was, in fact, the Secretary of the Boundary Commission for Wales in the early 1970s.

Do you feel that some of the arguments that have been used historically have any value? Other than the one about geography and community that has been mentioned, there is the argument that Wales is a very small nation alongside a very large nation and, therefore, to have a voice it needs to have disproportionately more people. The argument for devolution, of course, is the power has come to the Welsh Assembly, but to get the money for devolution you need the voice in Parliament. What we have found in the covid episode in our evidence is that we are half a billion pounds underfunded as to the money we need, given our demography. The internal market will mean less devolution and Brexit will mean more work for MPs in relation to Wales. Historically, we see problems with things like rail investment, where we have 1.5% of the investment and 5% of the people.

If we believe in the Union as we Brexit, and not a divided kingdom, there is a case that there should be a Welsh voice, given that there are so few of us—5%, in the United Kingdom. Would you give any salience to those

arguments in an historical context? Professor McNabb first.

Professor McNabb: Again, it is very difficult for me to comment as a commissioner. I don't think it is appropriate for me to comment.

Q16 **Geraint Davies:** Do you recognise those arguments, because nobody has sought to mention any of them?

Professor McNabb: The work of the Boundary Commission is that we apply the rules as set down by Parliament and those rules do not include some of the issues you have raised. They include the issues you raised about geography and so on. They are the rules that we would apply. The key one is the disparity in electorate size.

Q17 **Geraint Davies:** Do you think that the impact of community and geography has as much relevance as has been given in the past? Historically, the Boundary Commission would not want to split up communities and would recognise rivers and mountains and so on. Do you think that having many fewer seats will mean that we will have difficult constituencies to manage? I know an exception has been made for Ynys Môn, but that is the only exception.

Professor McNabb: Those factors play a very significant role now. As you reduce the number of constituencies and you have a fixed number—we have gone from 40 to 31 or 32—you have to have a reason for breaking up existing consistencies and putting them together with other parts of existing constituencies. Factors such as geography, language and so on then come into play far more than they probably did in the past.

Q18 **Geraint Davies:** Professor Pattie, do you feel that any of these arguments about Wales being a small country, so overshadowed by a very large one, with not enough money as we Brexit and having the Internal Market Bill, have any saliency in this argument that we should have slightly more seats per head than England?

Professor Pattie: As a native son of another small country in the UK, I can feel the allure of the argument, but it is tricky. It has been used several times through the years for both Wales and Scotland. The catch is, if one thinks about it from the point of view of some of the regions—if one thinks, for instance, of the north-east of England, the people from the north-east see themselves as a very distinctive community and are even less well represented in the number of MPs in the Commons than either Scotland or Wales. The same argument could be made for regions like that.

My worry with that argument is it becomes difficult to draw the line. Where does one define the point at which one has a particular part of the country one wants to protect? I come back to the point I made earlier that the situation we face now is rather different from the situation that was faced back in 1944 when the modern boundary review process was set in train. Back then, Westminster MPs were where it was. Of course, now, with devolution, Scotland and Wales have that extra voice, which is a powerful voice given by the Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. In

my mind, the traction that argument has is rather less powerful than it used to be.

- Q19 **Geraint Davies:** Dr Rossiter, do you also see Wales as just another region with equal rights to the north-east, or whatever it is, or do you think there is a risk here to the Union in particular, given what has happened in the Internal Market Bill? Do you think Parliament should say, "That doesn't really matter; we wanted everything equal whatever the consequence."?

Dr Rossiter: For the period before devolution there was quite clearly an argument for a higher level of representation for Wales and Scotland. As Charles has said, it is very difficult—I speak now as an Englishman perhaps—to explain to somebody in England why there should be greater representation in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, given there is that additional representation available to the citizens in those countries.

In a lot of these issues, references to international norms and guidance, so far as they exist, are quite helpful. Something I might refer to later is a code of good practice in electoral matters, which is recognised by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe as being something that should be followed. That argues that non-equal representation, for lack of a better phrase, should be confined to the protection of a concentrated minority or sparsely populated administrative entity.

- Q20 **Geraint Davies:** Like Wales, yes?

Dr Rossiter: You can argue that.

Geraint Davies: I would, yes.

Dr Rossiter: Of course, that was the case all the way through from 1944 to the—interestingly, it was not simply applied in Wales in that period of time; it was also applied in Scotland and England. For a large period of time following 1944, English rural constituencies were significantly smaller in electorates than their urban counterparts. The argument was used that it was more difficult to service a rural constituency than an urban one.

An awful lot of these arguments have diminished, the strength of them diminished at the time, as people communicate in very different ways. I am not saying it is not more difficult for an MP to cover a sparse rural constituency; I am sure it is. I just happened to look up the sizes in area of constituencies in Wales. If you then said that Wales should have more than 32—it shouldn't be reduced on a par with the rest of the United Kingdom—you then get into the issue of, what would you say about Scotland? Should Scotland then get an increase to reflect the fact its constituencies are even more sparsely populated?

I understand to a large extent—in fact, to a very large extent—and I appreciate the spirit behind the 2011 Act. My issues with the 2011 Act are much more about the mechanics, rather than the overriding philosophy of it.

Q21 **Geraint Davies:** You don't think the argument about threatening the Union and undermining Wales's voice at a time of change—in particular when we have internal markets given joint competence for certain things that previously were the Welsh Assembly's in what our objectives are—means that we might not have a United Kingdom to have an equal seats in?

Dr Rossiter: I recognise the concern, but it is probably one of the issues that is above my pay grade to express an opinion on.

Geraint Davies: Thank you.

Q22 **Rob Roberts:** I will move away from political points for a moment and come back to Professor McNabb briefly. We talked about different issues and demographics and geographical features that were coming into play. How important are local authority boundaries in determining where constituencies lie and is that a very important aspect of your work?

Professor McNabb: The 1986 Act set down a series of things that should be considered, and local government boundaries and the boundaries of existing constituencies should be recognised when we are putting together new constituencies, parliamentary constituencies. You do not want to cross over too many local government boundaries, so they are very relevant factors. Certainly, it does come into play when we are looking at it, yes.

Q23 **Beth Winter:** Thank you, panel, for coming to speak with us this morning. I want to focus on the boundary review process and dig a bit deeper into how the process works and what sort of issues the commission have to pay attention to in drawing up its proposals. Professor McNabb, please.

Professor McNabb: David mentioned earlier that from the creation of the Boundary Commissions in 1944 up until 2011, the reviews that the commissions undertook were primarily to ensure that there was equality of constituency size within Wales, Scotland and England. In 2011, the rules changed significantly and the size of constituency you are looking at in Wales now is not the average size of a Welsh constituency. You are looking at the average size of a UK constituency. The review process now starts with the crucial rule that we have to apply, which is that constituencies within Wales have to be, plus or minus 5%, around the UK average size of electorate.

That has enormous effects within Wales; it is major. The average size—as has been talked about before—of constituencies in Wales will be 54,000 or 55,000. The figure they have to be now is 74,000 or 75,000. There is one constituency in Wales that falls within the range, Cardiff South and Penarth. Every other constituency is much smaller than the number that it now has to be. The review process has to say, "How do we go from 40 constituencies to 30, 29, 31, 32?" or whatever it is. Every constituency is affected. It is not possible to say, "Right, just stick these two together." Some are affected very significantly. That is the crucial rule for the way the process works.

There are other considerations that the Act tells us to take into account, such as geographical considerations, local ties and so on, which you use to form your new constituencies. In the process, we put together different maps. One good starting point, for example, would be Anglesey, or Ynys Môn. The constituency of Ynys Môn is too small; therefore, something has to be added to that to make it the appropriate size. We would look at our building blocks of the electoral districts and put together a new constituency, because you come across into Bangor and that meets the crucial consideration of the plus or minus UK electoral quota.

When you are doing that, you are looking at those other factors. You may look at, for example, the fact that these areas are very much Welsh language areas; people's first language is Welsh. If we put these electoral districts there, we may be watering that down. If we put in these others, we can maintain the integrity, so we would do that. When you come to south-east Wales, you have valley areas. Some people say, "Put the constituency across the heads of the valley; that will do," but normally what we have done is go down the valleys and try to keep those constituencies. You put together these different maps. What we do then—this is the crucial part in the process we undertake—is publish our initial proposals and we have public hearings about those. Based on the submissions that are made about the decisions we make, we then revise those proposals. Once we have done our revisions, we again put it out to public consultation to see what people think.

Going from the initial proposals to the revised proposals, we changed the structure of something like 18 of the 29 or 30 constituencies. Sometimes you would not be aware of something. For example, people would say, "You have put us in that constituency, but the high school that all our kids go to is another place over there. We look that way; we don't look this way." That part of the process is crucial because it is giving us local information that we may not have. A lot of information goes into creating the constituencies, but we may not have that basic on-the-ground information. We use that and then at the end of the day we produce our final recommendations, and, from my point of view, it sits nicely on the shelf now because they have never been implemented, but they are fine pieces of work.

Q24 **Beth Winter:** Thank you. That is useful. Obviously, there is an extensive consultation process and it is probably very difficult, but it sounds as if there is subjectivity around it and objectivity in the decision-making process. Would that be a fair comment? I appreciate the difficulties you have, but it is—

Professor McNabb: For a truly scientific, objective way, you could say, "We have a number here and that number tells us that we should do X," but we don't have that. If we go back—which may be of interest—to the 2013 review, the way the numbers were stacking up in south-east Wales, we could not keep whole the four valley areas that we could define that had their own constituencies. We had to break up one of the constituencies. In our initial proposals, we were going to break up the

Cynon Valley and there were a lot of arguments against doing that, very strong arguments not to do it. You could say, yes, it is a subjective decision on our part, but we try to consider those arguments and do something, as much as we can.

Another example would be Montgomeryshire, which is one of the oldest constituencies in Wales—1540-something or other. It is a very big area geographically; it is a very small area in its electorate size. The people of Montgomeryshire—or a significant number of them, anyway—want Montgomeryshire to stay as a constituency, but it is just not possible. We try to maintain the integrity of it as much as possible by not breaking it up into four or five pieces or three pieces, but maybe breaking it up into two parts. There is an element of subjectivity, but at the end of the day we are going to the public, or the electorate, who decide what they think of our decisions. The 2015 and 2018 reviews would have gone for parliamentary scrutiny as well, which would not be the case going forward.

- Q25 **Beth Winter:** Picking up on a previous question, do you consider things like the Welsh index of multiple deprivation for level of need and so on in the areas? You mentioned Welsh language, but do you take demographics and age into account?

Professor McNabb: We would not consider the extent of social deprivation. We would consider, for example, if areas were very much tourist areas compared with rural areas. We would try to maintain those sorts of thing. The socioeconomics would be quite difficult in the sense there is no reason for us to say, "That is a very socially deprived area. Let's stick it with another socially deprived area." We would not do that.

- Q26 **Beth Winter:** Thank you. Professor Pattie, did you want to add anything?

Professor Pattie: I will add one thing. Perhaps what Robert cannot say, given his position as a neutral Commissioner, is that he has covered very nicely the process of consultation. One of the dark secrets of the boundary review process—I am sure not secret to people in this room—is that the consultation process is politically charged. In some places you will see genuine local discontent or concern from local populations. In other places, what appears as local representation through the inquiry process, the hearing process, is brought up by political parties using arguments about community to try to persuade the commission to lean more in a direction that will help that particular party.

I will give you a couple of examples—not in Wales, I am afraid—of both those situations in the 2013 review. In the Gloucester area in 2013, there was a proposal for a new constituency that removed the centre of Gloucester from the Gloucester constituency, which obviously kicked off a huge fuss locally, and quite rightly so. That was a genuine expression of local community interest.

Take a different example: I lost two days of my life sitting in the South Yorkshire inquiry in Sheffield. There were some very big changes in South Yorkshire in that review, some of which crossed the boundaries of

northern Sheffield, Barnsley and so on. If you know this area, Sheffield and Rotherham are cat and dog in comparison, but nobody came into the hearing, apart from one couple who wandered in at one point. We all sat up and were feeling very excited: "Goodness me, people." They came in to hide from the rain. There was no public concern. The reason was the parties had no interest in the South Yorkshire area; it was a done deal.

Professor McNabb: Could I comment? As Charles says, sometimes you get a group who will try to influence. Sometimes they are not very subtle and send in the same letter with exactly the same wording. Also, what we have done in Wales at the public hearings—I am not sure what happens in the other commissions—is the first session is given over to the political parties, who will tell us what they think of our proposals and make alternative suggestions. Sometimes it is quite nice. In 2015, we had quite a lot of letters from the Women's Institute members in Montgomeryshire. They were all the same wording, but they were all very nice and very pleasant and told us we were doing a good job, but do not dare touch Montgomeryshire or they will be after us.

Q27 **Beth Winter:** Finally, Dr Rossiter, did you want to add anything?

Dr Rossiter: I don't think I do. That was a brilliant description of how the process works by Robert. All I had written down was "and add that there is political pressure in this". For anybody who has attended inquiries as a citizen, I think political parties have acquired much too large a role in what used to be a more independent process. If you go back to the early redistributions in the 19th century, they were basically very party political, Disraeli and Gladstone and all the rest of it. They were trying to arrange the boundaries to suit them.

Then we had a period during the war when, effectively, a Speaker's Conference was set up, with equal representation according to the representation in Parliament, to come up with a neutral set of rules that could be agreed as being fair. I think the concern is that that era, which probably lasted from the 1930s to the 1980s—with the exception of the unfortunate incident when the parliamentary orders were not laid during 1969, during Callaghan, when the Home Secretary did not place the orders in front of the Commons and then got the party to vote them down, which was rather unfortunate if we are talking about neutrality in these issues.

By and large, that way of approaching these things as being neutral managed to last through until the late 1980s. I think that the process in the boundary reviews themselves and the public inquiries is part of professionalisation, what you have described of the process. It has become something whereby the political parties recognise that there is a significant amount to gain or to lose, depending on where the boundaries are drawn. It would be naive to assume that they are not going to try to play some role in all this. The Labour party did that very effectively in 1990s; the Conservative party responded in the 2000s.

What I fear we are getting into is an era where it is perceived to be in one political party's interests to have the rules written in a certain way and the inquiry process or the hearing process now is going to be used as an adjunct to that to try to also increase party advantage. The role of the rights of the elector is not given very much weight in all this. What I would go back to is the example where I attended one of the public inquiries in the West Midlands where there was a large number of people, which, as Charles said, you often don't see, but they came from Bilston. They found that under the proposals that were being put forward by the English Commission, Bilston was going to be split in two and they were very upset about this. A lot of that is confected, but there was certainly a genuine feeling among people that place matters; the place that their MP represents has meaning.

We can discuss this later. The very tight arithmetic restriction that there is now, which has basically taken away a large part of the Boundary Commission's discretion as to where to draw boundaries, has gone too far. The evidence of the two reviews that have taken place under the 2011 legislation has shown that there is quite a bit of disquiet as to the nature of the constituencies that are resulting from the new rules.

Q28 Geraint Davies: I want to ask Professor McNabb how he would describe how the boundary review process itself has been changed by the Bill, or whether it has. I think he mentioned something about a parliamentary review as well as the community review. Obviously, the Bill is about to go through. What can be done in the Bill to make it a bit more flexible? I suppose the key issue is the plus or minus 5% or whatever. My first question is how the review process itself has been changed by the Bill, or hasn't it?

Professor McNabb: Given that the crucial rule about changing the size of an electorate is still there, I think this process going forward will be very similar to the process that has already taken place in the previous two reviews in 2015 and 2018, simply because the enormous change in Wales is cutting the number of constituencies. That is the key thing. There is no way around that; constituency numbers will have to change.

David mentioned earlier that one of the important factors in the process is the level of tolerance around the average electorate figure that you have. When the commissions started doing this, they had a level of tolerance of plus or minus 25%, so you had a lot of flexibility then. That has been reduced. Plus or minus 5% makes the decisions that you take more limited than if it was plus or minus 10%. You would have a greater flexibility and there would be more options for you to take. What I would—

Q29 Geraint Davies: Specifically, in your role, which is not political, as you have said, but it does involve quite difficult decisions—dividing pupil catchments from schools was one of your examples, and other natural communities, go-to-work areas, mountains, rivers and this sort of thing—presumably when you are considering all these factors that you are meant to consider, it is much easier for you to do your job if you have a

wider tolerance to work in. If it is 10% instead of 5%, or indeed if it is 25%, you would be able to not compromise Montgomeryshire or whatever. Is that right?

Professor McNabb: Yes. There is an increased level of flexibility, but with that increased level of flexibility you will have a more complex process because now if you have a limited number of options that you can consider, that is fine. If you widen the tolerance range, there will be more options to consider and, therefore, as you are considering more options, there are more knock-on effects. The crucial thing about the electoral map for Wales is that when you change something about Bangor, it ends up changing something in Swansea because it is a domino effect; it goes all the way around and you cannot stop that anywhere. This increased complexity has to be traded off with the flexibility.

We have been asked quite a few times—or I have been asked quite a few times—about this, but when you are doing the review, you apply the rule. Sometimes you think, “If we had greater flexibility, we would have done this.” You do sometimes think, “We are stuck,” but normally you are just applying the rule rather than thinking, “What if? What if we had a different set of rules?” As a commissioner, I would not be able to say the map would look completely different because putting one electoral district or one community into a particular constituency may have taken place, irrespective of what the Government’s rules were. There are certainly cases—a number of them come straight to mind—where we had a situation where we made the decision that you thought, “We would not want to put that there, but there is no other option. We can’t think of a different way of putting together those two constituencies without putting that electoral ward there.”

Q30 **Geraint Davies:** Can we be clear on one thing? If the rule was plus or minus 10%, it would not logically follow that there would be more constituencies, would it, because obviously with constituencies, one where it was plus 10% and next door it was minus 10% because there was a mountain in the way—if we end up with 10% more or 10% less aggregate, a lot of these things would even out, wouldn’t they?

Professor McNabb: Yes. At the end of the day, the number of constituencies is determined simply by the size of the electorate in Wales and the UK average size of electorate in a constituency. If you have a 2 million electorate in Wales, a 70,000 UK electoral quota, which is the average size of a constituency in the UK, you simply divide the 2 million by the 70,000. That gives you a number, 30, and that is the number of constituencies within Wales. What the flexibility allows you to do, for example, is that if you are considering Cardiff North and it does not quite get there under the plus or minus 5%, therefore you think, “Let’s put in Rudry, which is just up over the hill, that would look quite nice,” but you think, “Rudry does go into Caerphilly and we don’t really want to do that. If we had plus or minus 10%, we would not have to do it.” Changing the tolerance affects the composition of the constituencies, but not the number of constituencies.

Q31 **Geraint Davies:** That is very clear. This is quite a technical question, but does David Rossiter have any very brief point about this? I think it is a clear arithmetical issue, isn't it?

Dr Rossiter: Yes. I think one of the advantages Wales has—the legislation probably impacts less upon Wales in one respect—is that ward sizes are significantly smaller, by and large, than they are in England. The problems that were very evident in the reviews that the English Commission conducted, where you had ward sizes in Leeds of 16,000, you put four of those together and you get to 64,000, you put five of them together and you get to 80,000 and neither of them works. There are technical ways of getting around this. You can split a ward. The English Commission has more difficulty than the Welsh Commission in this because you have community boundaries in Wales that do not exist in England in the same way. That means that the legislation enacted in 2011 impacts less upon Wales than otherwise.

The bigger issue is the difficulties of creating constituencies. South Wales is probably relatively straightforward to deal with, as is north Wales. It is whether there is a section in between that does not quite fit the numbers very well. That is when you get into the difficulties of having very stretched constituencies that do not necessarily make an awful lot of logical sense. In fact, that is where I think a lot of the differences came under the previous reviews.

Q32 **Ruth Jones:** Thank you, Professor McNabb, for your very interesting timeline of how it all rolled out. That is useful. I am not going to ask this question of you; I am going to ask the other two panellists, if I may. Obviously, for the first time, the removal of the parliamentary role in approving the commission's proposals has been legislated for. As people outside the parliamentary process, how welcome is this? Perhaps if I start with Professor Pattie.

Professor Pattie: Partly as a citizen, partly as someone with a professional interest in this, my take on it is that in some respects it is quite welcome. Parliament has stepped in in the past; I think it happened in the 1950s—David may correct me on this—and something happened in 1969, and we heard about the Callaghan experience in 1969 when Labour acted to delay the implementation of the review— Is my sound still working? The issue is, where parliamentary approval has been brought into action—has been used to do something—it has been done for party reasons. I think removing that option, removing that risk of contaminating the process, is a good thing.

Q33 **Ruth Jones:** Dr Rossiter?

Dr Rossiter: I have nothing to add. I entirely agree with Charles on that.

Ruth Jones: Thank you both. That is very helpful. I will hand back to the Chair.

Q34 **Simon Baynes:** How disruptive do you think the revision of boundaries will be as a result of this Bill? Will the entire constituency map in Wales need to be redrawn? Perhaps Dr Rossiter could start by answering that.

Dr Rossiter: Certainly. I will be surprised if more than one or two seats in Wales emerge unscathed from this. In fact, I don't think they can. That is a function of two things. First, it is a function of reducing the number of MPs, and therefore, nearly every constituency now is outside the permitted range. Also, going forward, there is always going to be the danger that at each subsequent review if the total number of seats that Wales is entitled to changes by just one, most constituencies in Wales will have to be redrawn as a result.

This is quite a difficult concept to grasp in some respects, but for most of the last 15 years, if you use the latest electoral data, and therefore you define them at the UK quota on that basis, Wales, under the rules as proposed, would be entitled to 32 seats. That is true for a long period, but during that period its entitlement has gone very close to 31.5 and very close to 32.5. Had Wales's entitlement been around 32.5 for those 15 years, you could see that year on year it could flip between an entitlement to 31 and an entitlement to 32. This review is going to be very disruptive, but the review after this one has a 50:50 chance that Wales's entitlement will have changed by one seat. The problem then is that each of the individual constituencies may look more or less the same in its total electorate, but because the entire country is entitled to one less seat you have to start reallocating electors.

You have to start somewhere, and you are going to have to start probably somewhere in the middle, because that is going to be the least disruptive. You are going to have to pass the electors out from either the abolished seat or you have to create a new seat, whichever way it goes, and pass these electors out successively across the country. The difficulty is that because you have only a 5% tolerance either way, you can pass one or two wards. You would have to pass a certain number of wards, then you have to pass a slightly fewer number of wards, and a slightly fewer number of wards to do that.

The end result would be that it is almost impossible when you get a change in the national allocation to affect fewer than 20 constituencies. That is true whether it is a country, or it is an English region. Obviously, that is a function of the tolerance level and that will apply across any English region that is entitled to a different number. It will mean quite significant disruption every eight years. Wales may escape in the first review; it may not. The idea, which I think has gained some traction, that this is a one-off disruptive review—yes, this is a very disruptive review, not least because we are looking at 20 years of demographic change in this and added to that we have the reduction in the number of seats. But I am afraid that the idea that the rules will then settle down and it will not be disruptive after that is mistaken.

Q35 **Simon Baynes:** I want the other two panellists to come in on that, but to be clear, we had the draft recommendations on the basis of 600 seats and that is now going back to 650 seats. What is now being worked on or will be worked on is altering that draft review. Presumably 650 seats are an easier task to deal with than 600. There are lots of changes to be

made and thought about. I am not saying that the whole process is not devilishly complicated, as you have all made clear and we all know that ourselves, but it is easier to try to cut up the cake 650 ways than 600 ways.

Dr Rossiter: The depressing thing is it is fractionally so, very little difference. It is quite odd, because if you look at the review—I am going to go outside Wales now and look at England—and the south-east of England, the reduction from 650 to 600 worked very well for the Boundary Commission because the south-east of England was experiencing population growth. That acted as a sort of counterbalance to the fact we were going down to 600 seats. When we look at the next review, which will work on 650 seats, basically every county in the south-east of England is going to have to be redrawn, whereas that was not the case when the commission looked at it last time.

It makes a small amount of difference. I say this on the basis of that five years ago Charles, Rob and I undertook some computer modelling of how different rules would apply with 650 or 600 seats, how they would affect constituency redrawing with different levels of tolerance and with or without the splitting of wards. If there were two salient findings from that, they were that 650 and 600 made relatively little difference and that the most effective way of reducing the disruption would be by a relatively small increase in the tolerance to around 7% or 8%. You get diminishing returns after you increase the tolerance from 7% or 8%, but the difference between 7% or 8% and 5% is quite significant.

Q36 **Simon Baynes:** That is very interesting. Would Professor Pattie like to comment next, please?

Professor Pattie: Yes. First, I will pass a compliment to David. David said a lot of what I was going to say and said it much better than I possibly could have.

There is one other thing to think about and this skips on a bit to something that we may come to later. Part of the current Bill extends the period between reviews from five years to eight. On your question about disruption, that has a good side and a bad side. The good side is that on a five-year cycle you are looking at potentially major disruption to the constituency at every single election, which is quite a prospect for voters and for MPs. On an eight-year cycle, you have a rather longer lifetime for each constituency, so rather less immediate disruption. However, on an eight-year cycle, population changes, which will be that bit more extensive over eight years than over five, when the seats change, they may change rather more than they would under a five-year cycle. It is partly about the tolerance, but it is also about the length of time between reviews.

Q37 **Simon Baynes:** I was looking back, ahead of this meeting, to the transformation of my own seat of Clwyd South. It has been quite extraordinary when you look at it over a long period. I suspect that is the nature of these things. If you look at a lot of seats, they had quite a

complicated evolution over the years. If Professor McNabb could comment, please.

Professor McNabb: I do not have much to add to what David and Charles have said. Certainly, the crucial thing is the size of the electorate, rather than the number of seats, so going from 650 to 600 or going back from 600 to 650 will not make a great deal of difference to the number of seats that will be available in Wales, so it is the size of it.

In the 2015 review, Wales was allocated 30 seats. In the 2018 review, Wales was allocated 29 seats, so there was only a difference of one. You think, "We can just take the last review off; we will sit back and scrub out a few things and submit that." We could not. The map was very, very different. The problems that arose just by changing one were different problems, different issues. Some issues were solved, the Cynon Valley issue was solved, Cardiff North and Rudry was solved, but there were other issues that were created. Again, it is this quite amazing domino effect that once you push one button, it starts spinning around and it is very difficult to take things in isolation and say, "We will just change this bit."

- Q38 **Simon Baynes:** Is there a sense in which Wales is more complicated? Obviously, in the south there is a higher density of population, but in mid-west and north Wales you have often, as you were citing earlier with regard to Montgomeryshire, this tension between the historical shape of the constituency, rurality, which is a major issue and a major problem, as you say, with the tolerance level, and the nature of population development. Is it more complicated in Wales or is it pretty much the same everywhere across the UK?

Professor McNabb: I am not sure if it is necessarily more complicated. I think there are different issues. The complicating factor for Wales was the disparity in size of electorate. That was the crucial thing that affects what will happen in Wales and then what will happen in the future. It will continue to be disruptive in the sense that it will always involve major changes.

Simon Baynes: Thank you very much indeed.

- Q39 **Ruth Jones:** I would like to ask a small question about the 16 and 17-year-old voters. In Wales now, 16 and 17-year-olds will be able to vote in the Senedd election and of course they will be on the electoral roll. What impact, if any, will that have on the numbers within the seats and the allocation of electorates? Can I ask Professor McNabb first?

Professor McNabb: I do not know, to be honest. One of the things that was different between 2015 and 2018 was the shift to the way the electoral register was put together. In Cardiff, Swansea, Aberystwyth, Bangor there were significant drops/falls in the size of the electorate because students were not registering to vote in those areas, although there were attempts by the universities to encourage people to do it. It happened in Cambridge and everywhere else. You will have bigger

electorates and it depends how they engage, but I would not like to predict how that will affect the electorate map, sorry.

Q40 **Ruth Jones:** No, that is fine, thank you. Dr Rossiter, do you have anything to add?

Dr Rossiter: No, I have no particular knowledge of it.

Q41 **Ruth Jones:** Professor Pattie, you mentioned the interesting public consultations and the numbers who do or don't attend. Is it a case of he who shouts loudest gets the answers? If you get lots of requests in a particular area, does that sway people's thoughts and opinions, whereas other places that may appear slightly apathetic do not get the same consideration?

Professor Pattie: Under the old system, when hearings were basically county by county, there is probably some truth in that. Where we did hear a lot of noise in the county at a hearing, things would be changed. Where there was no real concern, things wouldn't change. Since 2011, however, it is not as simple as that any more. If we take the Welsh situation, where Wales is treated as one large unit for the hearing process—whereas previously it was not; it was broken down on a county basis—you may have areas where there is a lot of public discussion and a lot of representation to the commission during the hearing process and other areas where there is very little. With the domino effect that Robert very nicely described, to accommodate the concerns in areas where there is a lot of public concern in the hearing process, you may still have to change constituencies in areas where there was very little public concern because of that domino effect through the entire region. I do not think it is as simple any more as saying, "It is the squeaky wheel that gets the oil." The oil—if we push the metaphor to breaking point—is splattering all over the place now.

Professor McNabb: Charles is right, but some people become very abusive. Some MPs, for example, become very abusive in the emails and the letters they send, but we do not respond to that, in the same way that we did not treat the submission from a particular bishop—who may be representing the view of his flock, I don't know—differently from that of any person. As Charles says, you have to be wary of the fact that someone has complained about something and plenty of other people are quite happy about it. When you respond to the changes that you think are the way public opinion is going, you may be upsetting other people and it is not going the way they want. But you hope to draw something from the consultations. That depends on the public engaging, which does not always happen unless it is raining, and they turn up to the public hearing.

Q42 **Rob Roberts:** It is a pleasure to have such an excellent and distinguished panel answering our questions. We are very grateful. My question goes back to something that Dr Rossiter said earlier about disruption when Mr Baynes asked the question. Is the potential disruption likely to be just a one-off event or should we be expecting significant

changes to the boundaries and significant disruption every time there is a review? Let's start with Dr Rossiter and go around from there.

Dr Rossiter: There is a single thing that will determine the answer to that question and that is whether Wales's allocation remains. Let's assume it is going to be 32; it looks very likely it is going to be 32 at this review. If in eight years' time the numbers are such that Wales is still entitled to 32, it should be relatively straightforward, a few alterations here or there, I would hope, unless you saw a significant increase in population in one part of Wales as opposed to another, but assuming that the population movements are broadly the same across the country, if the entitlement falls or increases, which in all probability it would only be to 31 or 33, as I explained before, most constituencies in Wales would have to change at that review simply to allow for the creation of the 33rd or the removal of a constituency to take it down to 31.

It would have to be disruptive because, by and large, most constituencies would be more or less around the electoral quota. Let's assume it was an abolished constituency—let's assume it was going down to 31 because, if anything, that is the trajectory we are looking at—there would have to be a decision as to where to abolish that constituency because that is effectively how a Boundary Commission has to work. You could say, "Right, we need to start with a completely blank sheet of paper," in which case you would do that, but then you would have to superimpose it upon the previous map. The truth of the matter then is that there is going to be a number of constituencies that are effectively going to be made up of parts of two previous ones. Then as you move away from that, you are going to get a lot of constituencies that are going to have pass on one ward and accept two wards and so on.

In the end, there is a rule of thumb that we have worked on. If any country or English region changes its entitlement by one seat, that is going to cause significant change to a minimum of 20 seats in that region or country to compensate for that. That is why I would say that most Welsh seats would have to be altered if its national allocation varied from what it had been at the previous review.

Q43 **Rob Roberts:** That makes sense. I appreciate that. Do either of the other two have anything contrary, or indeed supplementary, to add to that?

Professor McNabb: No, I don't.

Professor Pattie: No. It was very clearly put, I think.

Q44 **Rob Roberts:** Fabulous stuff. We mentioned the cycle and previously we have talked about changing from a five-year to an eight-year review. That seems to ring an alarm bell in my head. If we are having general elections broadly every five years and the Fixed-term Parliaments Act still exists—so it is set at particular intervals—if we have a time period that is different from that of the Parliaments Act, in some years the review will be taking place in the same year as an election. That would seem to be an added problem and an added confusion. I am interested to know what

your thoughts are on the rationale for a change from five years to eight and whether in fact if we want a longer period it should be a nice round 10 years so that it will never fall in the same year as an election. If we could start with Professor McNabb, that would be a great place.

Professor McNabb: The period between reviews has varied over time. Certainly, when the commissions were set up it was argued that there should be a review once in the life of each fixed-term Parliament. It then became every eight years. What always used to be—and it should be—mandatory, you had to have it not less than eight but not more than 10 and so on, so it varied a bit. The five-year thing came in with the five-year fixed-term Parliament, so in a sense it made sense to fit with that. As you are saying, going away from that does not quite fit in with the way it was organised before. It will depend. You have a number of conflicting things going on. If you did go to eight and, as David said, there is a change of one seat, that would make a major change to the map in between Parliaments. I am not sure that it would be beneficial to go from five to eight.

Q45 **Rob Roberts:** Would it make more sense to change the wording to something similar to how it was before, with “it must be done within a certain period of time” rather than a set eight years?

Professor McNabb: You had the general review, but you also had discretionary local reviews, so you could look at two or three constituencies, depending on how their electorate sizes were changing. That would be my view, not my colleagues’ view. It is not based on any academic basis at all. All I am saying is that they are probably better at answering the question than me.

Chair: Right on cue, Professor Pattie is about to come in on that very point.

Professor Pattie: The buck has been passed, yes, absolutely. I take your point, but, as Robert said though, prior to 2011 there was no meshing—there was no gearing of the length between reviews and the electoral cycle at all—but of course, given the discretionary power of Prime Ministers to call elections, it was impossible to have that gearing. The system has trundled on with that arrangement. My concern would be a slightly different one. Given how the Fixed-term Parliaments Act has run in practice, and we have had two elections that have not formed a five-part Parliament in fairly short order, that notion of an automatic lock-in between the boundary review and the life of a Parliament has already been breached. That is already gone, so I am not sure that that review helps.

A slightly different way around from Robert: the point about greater disruption because of the longer time between reviews is absolutely right, but I see this from the point of view of MPs and constituents, and a bit more stability over time in the areas they work with will probably help them. One could argue it should be eight years; it should be 10 years. One could argue will the Fixed-term Parliaments Act ever really do what it was meant to do? That is a question for people like you, for MPs, and is

above my pay grade, but I am not sure it is quite as consequential as you might think in the lock-in between the parliamentary cycle and the review cycle.

Q46 **Rob Roberts:** I appreciate that. Dr Rossiter, any final comment on this one?

Dr Rossiter: Ten years makes a fair bit of sense in other countries. Whenever it is time to census—which should be on a 10-year basis and they use population figures from those—appears to be a common procedure in other countries. I think the real danger about being as little as five years is the one; I referred to it earlier. If you have a fractional entitlement that is very close to the 0.5, if you are having these reviews done on a five-yearly basis you could have a situation where Wales went from 32 to 31 and then five years later back up to 32 again. I think at that point people would start saying, “What are we doing this for? This is unnecessarily disruptive.”

If you want to have an interesting time looking around *Hansard*, have a look at the debates in 1954 when MPs first came to realise that their constituencies were being changed on a five-yearly basis. They were jumping up and down and saying, “Who voted for this?” before they realised it was them.

Rob Roberts: That does not surprise me. Best that we go and check that record, which sounds very interesting. Chair, I recognise that my good friend Mr Lake and others will be chomping at the bit to come in and ask this panel questions, so I shall yield the rest of the time. Thank you.

Q47 **Ben Lake:** I also thank the panellists for their time this morning. To ask a further question on the potential for continued disruption in future boundary reviews, it seems to me that the most important factor here is the national allocation for Wales. What is the primary driver for any changes to the national allocation? Is it aggregate population growth or relative rates of growth between different regions and countries? Dr Rossiter first.

Dr Rossiter: The answer is that it is the relative growth. By fixing the size of Parliament at 650, you then have to say that is your electorate quota across the top and then you work it out, using the rule that is laid out in the legislation. This has not had any discussion, but it is a decision as to whether you have a fixed-size Parliament. The introduction of that fixed size is one of the things that is creating some of these difficulties. If you did not have a fixed size, you would have a lot more wriggle room. But it is that and it is the relative size of the different nations.

Q48 **Ben Lake:** May I ask a follow-up question on that? Given that it is relative growth that is the major factor and appreciating that none of us have crystal balls and can foresee what will happen in the future, if we were to take current estimates and ONS population projections, I know that barring some discovery of gold in the Montgomeryshire hills, the population of Wales is still projected to grow but at a slightly slower rate than that of the south-east of England. Has there been any work

undertaken to project what that might mean for Wales's allocation in the next boundary review under this current Bill?

Dr Rossiter: Not that I am aware of. One of the difficulties here is that the change in population is clearly the major driver in this, but you have to bear in mind that there are issues with registration as well. These can be quite significant if you look back over electoral statistics and you see the variation in constituencies. They can go up and down quite markedly, depending upon the approach of the electoral registration officer. I think when you are looking at the national allocation, that is much less likely to be the reason for a tipping point, but somewhere down the line I have this feeling that you are going to find an allocation going one side or the other of 31.5 or 32.5. I am going to be sitting around thinking, "Are we going to go through all this for 1,000 people?" It is the practicalities of these things. When you introduce a set of rules, there are always unintended consequences. I think we are coming up against some of the unintended consequences from something done for a perfectly sensible reason.

Q49 **Ben Lake:** During the Committee debates on this Bill, there was a brief evidence session with an individual from New Zealand. As I think Dr Rossiter mentioned in an earlier answer, they base a lot of their boundaries on the basis of population as opposed to registered electors. This is perhaps an unfair question, but are you aware of any work that has been done on what the boundaries might look like, or the allocations for the different nations might look like, if we based it on population as opposed to registered electors?

Dr Rossiter: I am going to defer to Charles on that one. Sorry, Charles, it is just you are much more likely to be up to date on that.

Professor Pattie: I will get even later, David, just you wait. I am not aware of any formal work on this. However, my instinct would be that if you went to a population basis—there are perfectly good arguments for sticking with electorates and there are perfectly good arguments for moving towards population as the basis; I do not want to adjudicate on which is right—that would tend to increase the number of people being considered in areas with large populations who were not UK citizens, for example in London and parts of the south-east, perhaps Birmingham, part of Manchester and so on. That then has knock-on consequences for other parts of the country where populations are more exclusively UK citizen-based. It does not take much to work out that would mean more seats in areas where we had a relatively large non-UK citizen population and relatively fewer seats in areas where the population was much more UK citizen-based.

Q50 **Robin Millar:** Gentlemen, this is absolutely fascinating, and I could listen to you for hours on this subject. I represent Aberconwy in north Wales. In fact, that was part of the seat that I grew up in as a child, but at that point the seat included parts of Bangor. Over my lifetime, now to be the MP, it is fascinating to see how these shifts in boundaries occur. The seat of Aberconwy also represents some of these tensions, so 90% of the

population is along the coast in Llandudno, Conwy and so on, but the geography of the seat captures an important divide within Wales. It is the start of the Snowdonia National Park, the natural barrier of the Conwy River and the Carneddau Mountains. That has a cultural reflection too in, for example, the spread of the Welsh language and the fact it is a very bilingual seat. All those are important features and characteristics of this area, but obviously only some of them are given any weight or consideration in the reshaping of seats. I do not wish to make this conversation about Aberconwy, but I think the principles are helpful.

My wife is American, so I have followed American politics for some time and in particular the creation of their political areas, their districts and so on. It is quite extraordinary to me how they have lost any sense of natural community. It is a much more political calculus and openly political calculus. I do not think it works as well. I think what you have managed to do in this country is much better and I am quite excited by this particular set of changes that are coming through. The question for you is quite a general one. What are the key qualities of what we do here in the UK that have led to us having this more robust, more objective approach to shaping our seats and political representation?

Professor Pattie: I am quite happy to comment on that. Your American example is fascinating. Like you, American politics fascinates and appals me—quite extraordinary. The biggest difference is something that Robert has commented on several times in his evidence, which is the combination of neutrality and the professionalism of the Boundary Commissions in the UK. Compared to the US, there is immense professionalism. The amount of technical expertise that goes into the redistribution process in the US is astonishing, but it is highly politicised.

If you look at the exercise that took place after the 2010 census in the US, in some states—because the power to redistribute is in the hands of the state government and because of the partisan composition of the state governments—the boundary review process itself became highly partisan, with the effect that in some parts of the country perhaps the vote might break 40% Republican, 60% Democrat, but the seats break two-thirds Republican, one-third Democrat. That is not accidental.

It seems to me that our ability to have a system that is both professional and genuinely neutral is to our immense advantage. The way it has become politicised in America is one of the factors behind some of the ills we currently see in American politics. Before I get into deeper water, perhaps I will leave it there.

Robin Millar: I missed that last comment. Your line broke, I think, Professor.

Professor Pattie: I am sorry, yes. My last comment was that, to my mind, some of the ills we currently see in American politics of intense polarisation and so on are partly a function of the ways in which the American boundary process has created a highly polarised, politicised situation. We just do not want to go there, it seems to me. I think our neutrality is to our huge advantage.

Q51 **Robin Millar:** I do not have anything further, but do Dr Rossiter or Professor McNabb have a comment on that?

Dr Rossiter: I will make two comments. I think the primary quality is the independence of the Boundary Commissions, the fact that they are independent and act independently. MPs may send offensive emails, which obviously the rest of us do not, but the commissions appear very good at resisting those entreaties.

The other thing that is perhaps under some pressure at the moment is, given that we have a first-past-the-post electoral system, one of the major strengths, if not the major strength, is the constituency link that comes with that, the link between the MP and a community defined in some way. The commissions were doing a very effective job over quite a long period of bringing about a smaller degree of arithmetical variability in constituencies. If you look back at the period from 1950 all the way through to the early 2000s, at each review the commissions were managing to produce much closer electorates to the quotas in their individual regions, in their individual countries.

There is a clear danger now that by elevating arithmetical considerations to the degree to which they have, that community recognition— It is also reflected, to digress slightly, in the length of names of some constituencies now, and the difficulty of producing a name for a constituency that adequately reflects its rather disparate parts is becoming very obvious in the two reviews we have gone through. I think that endangering that link between a recognisable community and the MP who represents it, which is one of the major strengths of our electoral system, is something that MPs need to be very aware of.

Professor McNabb: The only thing I would add is that I think it has been very important and it is important that the Boundary Commissions are independent and impartial. That is benefited by the fact that the deputy chair of each commission is a High Court judge. I think we have benefited significantly from that. I have worked with four High Court judges and they are wise counsel and have always been enormously beneficial to the workings of the commissions.

Robin Millar: I will add my thanks for the work that you are doing because I think this is one of the key steps and key changes the country is going through to be able to produce a democracy that is fit for the 21st century and all the other changes alongside it. This is foundational. Your point, Doctor, about the separation from community is quite an important one, but at the same time it is an adjustment that has been made arithmetically now, which is probably, on balance, for the benefit. I come down to the fact that, within a democracy, it is not just the quantity, but the quality of argument that matters also.

Q52 **Virginia Crosbie:** I think you mentioned some of the longest names of constituencies. I certainly have one of the longest-named towns in Ynys Môn, Llanfair PG. I am Virginia Crosbie. I am the MP for Ynys Môn and as you can see behind me, we have the best flag of any constituency.

The Parliamentary Constituencies Bill was amended by a Conservative amendment to give Ynys Môn protected status. You mentioned the jumping up and down of MPs in the 1950s, and there was certainly lots of jumping up and down when that happened. Now we will have two protected seats and protected status in Scotland and two in England with the Isle of Wight, and then we will have one in Wales. My question is, why did Ynys Môn not have protected status before? Dr Rossiter.

Dr Rossiter: I had been warned that this would be a question, so I did some digging.

Virginia Crosbie: Excellent.

Dr Rossiter: The answer comes back to the fact that on 15 February 2011 the Government were pushing through the legislation, and at that point Mark Harper MP was being pressed as to what was the definition of a protected constituency. In response to the MP from St Ives, who I suspect has an interest because of the Scilly Isles, he said, "We have defined the difference. Both constituencies constitute groups of islands which, owing to their challenging geography, are not readily combinable with the mainland". At that point, he laid down the constituencies that qualified, from his point of view. Presumably, at that point he felt that Ynys Môn did not have sufficiently challenging geography. I do not think it has changed over that time. I have been over the Menai Bridge many times and I do not think it constitutes a challenging crossing. It is up to the Government to explain what the difference is, but that is what was laid out at the time and was the understanding when the Act came in.

Q53 **Virginia Crosbie:** Are there any additional comments from Professor Pattie?

Professor Pattie: I would not want to add or object to that because I think David has described it very well.

Q54 **Virginia Crosbie:** That is fine. Professor McNabb, what are your thoughts?

Professor McNabb: I was appointed just after the legislation in 2011 was implemented, so we were not told why Ynys Môn was excluded. Going back over time, Orkney and Shetland were always excluded. They had to be self-contained constituencies, so they were already there. I was told there were two reasons. One is the reason that David gave, the bridge between Anglesey and Bangor, so that is different from the others.

Virginia Crosbie: There are two bridges.

Professor McNabb: Two bridges—there we are. The other explanation was that there was a lot of representation from the Isle of Wight to be treated separately. There was not the same level of representation from Anglesey to be treated differently. Certainly, in the submissions that we got, a number of people do say, "We should have been treated as an exemption," and what we say is, "We can't; you weren't," but they will be going forward. Was that the case, as Charles said earlier—if you shout loud enough, you will get your way? Maybe that is what happened in the

Isle of Wight, because there are two constituencies there and they are both protected, rather than saying, "Put them together and create one. You are one island; you are one constituency now."

Q55 **Virginia Crosbie:** You are putting the recent change down to the representation?

Professor McNabb: No, I think I would put it down to the two bridges, that there is a link that does not exist between the others. This is speculation.

Q56 **Virginia Crosbie:** No, the recent change that it has protected status. I thought you would put that down to representation.

Professor McNabb: Through the two reviews, an issue that was raised many times was why Anglesey has been treated differently from the Isle of Wight. I think increasing representation, increasing submissions arguing that it should be treated as an exemption, yes, that had some effect.

Q57 **Virginia Crosbie:** What was different this time around with the Bill?

Professor McNabb: If there was not the representation in 2011—

Virginia Crosbie: But there was the representation this year?

Professor McNabb: You do not want to open a can of worms and have too many exemptions. Cornwall should be an exemption. If you are looking for some sort of geographical explanation, which is quite useful—historically, Shetland and the Orkneys were treated differently—that is a sound basis for saying, "We can treat the Isle of Wight differently," but if no one was making a case at that time, pre-2011, for Anglesey, the constituency of Ynys Môn was treated the same as any other constituency in Wales.

Q58 **Virginia Crosbie:** It was the Conservative amendment to the Bill that resulted in it having different status.

Professor McNabb: I am sure people in Anglesey are very pleased.

Q59 **Virginia Crosbie:** Brilliant, thank you very much. Ynys Môn is unique in geography, the language and communities, but there are other constituencies that are also unique in their rural nature and sparse populations. What are your thoughts on other constituencies having protected status going forward? Professor Pattie.

Professor Pattie: I will pick up a comment that Rob just made. You do not want too many exemptions. The more exemptions you have, the further you drift from the intention of the legislation and I think that is problematic. If you are thinking in particular about extra exemptions in rural Wales, a further exemption in rural Wales would instantly open up a debate about exemptions in the Scottish Highlands, where the constituencies are even larger, even more diverse, spread-out populations and so on. You get into a sort of rolling question of where

you stop, how you stop the exemptions. I think it probably has to mean exceptional. I would not be encouraging more exemptions.

Q60 **Virginia Crosbie:** Thank you, Professor Pattie. Can we have Professor McNabb's thoughts, please?

Professor McNabb: I do not think you can have that many exemptions. As Charles says, it undermines what you are trying to achieve. I think where it does come in for treating this differently is that if you are going to reduce the number of constituencies, some constituencies would like to stay whole and just be added to. For example, in the 2018 review, Ynys Môn stayed whole. We did not break Ynys Môn up; we added to it. Where you get the cases being made, it is, "Don't break us up, keep us whole. Break those up and add those to us." There was even a case for keeping Montgomeryshire whole, with the constituency that went from the English borders to Cardigan Bay. They said, "You don't have break up Montgomeryshire because you can get the right number of people by going from there to there." It is quite a sizeable constituency. I think rather than exemptions, it is keeping us within a bigger constituency. That is where the issues will be.

Q61 **Virginia Crosbie:** Thank you very much. Dr Rossiter?

Dr Rossiter: I think what needs to be looked at is the other aspect of having another protected constituency. The point is that the original two island constituencies—Orkney and Shetland, and Western Isles—were the only two that were in the original legislation. It was a House of Lords amendment that introduced the Isle of Wight and, having two additional ones there, this amendment passed through and was introduced in Ynys Môn.

The question comes as to if you represent Argyll and Bute or Ross, Skye and Lochaber, where you have countless islands and you have square kilometrages of 7,000 and 12,000 compared to 700 in Ynys Môn, what is the logical response to somebody who says, "Why is there protected status here and my constituency is way more difficult?" It may be bigger and so on. That is one of the issues. Another, perhaps more practical issue is that assuming that this goes through and protected status is given to it as well, it is unlikely to affect the total number of MPs that go to Wales in total. It is still likely to be 32. There is a possibility, depending on how the electoral registers come out, that by conferring protected status, because of the way the arithmetic works, this could push Welsh representation up to 33. It would be quite unlikely, but it is just possible because of the way in which the arithmetic then works, because the quota changes. As soon as you create another protected constituency the Welsh quota is calculated and the divisor becomes different, as does the numerator.

What will happen is that difference between the electorate of Ynys Môn of around 50,000 and the quota of around 72,000 or 73,000 will have to be redistributed around the remaining Welsh constituencies. By conferring protected status on Ynys Môn, basically each other Welsh constituency is

going to have around 700 additional electors, on average, so there is a consequence.

Q62 **Virginia Crosbie:** Dr Rossiter, would you ever see a future where Ynys Môn would not have protected status?

Dr Rossiter: I understand that you represent Ynys Môn, so I do not want to upset you, but to me, certainly from what was explained as the rationale for giving constituencies protected status, I am surprised that this is happening. Let me just stop there.

Q63 **Virginia Crosbie:** No, that is absolutely fine. Professor McNabb?

Professor McNabb: I have nothing to add to David's comments.

Q64 **Virginia Crosbie:** We will end with Professor Pattie.

Professor Pattie: I would quite agree with that. Of course, I could envisage a situation where even if the protection was granted, it could then be removed by future legislation. Parliament can always change legislation, so yes.

Virginia Crosbie: Thank you, gentlemen. You have been very helpful.

Chair: We are going to bring this session to a close now just before 11.30 am. Can I say again a huge thank you to our panel, Professor Charles Pattie, Dr David Rossiter and Professor Robert McNabb from the Boundary Commission for Wales? We really appreciate the time that you have spent with us. It has been a fascinating session and I hope you all have a great day. Thank you.