

The Secretary
Dublin and Cities Electoral Area Boundary Committee and
Electoral Area Boundary Committee,
Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government,
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Submission on behalf of the Labour Party

Dear Secretary,

This submission is made on behalf of the Labour Party centrally and deals with general issues relevant to the review of local electoral area boundaries by both your committees. Local Labour Party branches and constituency organisations may make additional submissions in relation to their local areas.

It follows that this submission is not aimed at the redrawing of LEA boundaries in general or of any particular boundary. It addresses itself to some of the first principles which we submit should inform the committees in their task.

As our starting point, we believe it is of course appropriate that the boundaries of LEAs should be reviewed with a view to ensuring a reasonable relationship between the 2006 census of population and representation within each local authority.

But we insist that the huge disparity between representation ratios in relation to different local authorities is also a matter of major concern. Indeed, the recently highlighted rate of attrition in terms of membership of Dublin City Council just goes to prove again that the workload expected of members of the major urban authorities is excessive and is completely out of kilter with the levels of work that might be expected of a rural counterpart.

There is also a huge disparity in the level of representation between different rural parts of the country.

Among the facts worth highlighting are the following.

- The national ratio is one councillor (city and county councils) to every 4,802 of the population.
- The electoral area with the lowest ratio is Ballinamore, Co Leitrim, of 1: 1,122.
- The highest in the country is Mulhuddart in Fingal, of 1: 13,327.
- Swords with a population of 58,400 has five councillors, while Granard, Co Longford with a population of 7,800 also has five councillors.

- Blarney, Co Cork, with a population of 42,300 has four councillors, as has Ballaghadreen, Co. Roscommon with a population of only 8,300
- Lucan with a population of 50,000 has four councillors, as does Lismore, Co Waterford with a population of 9,400.
- Borris, Co Laois, with a population of 6,000 has three councillors, as does Ballymun/Whitehall with a population of 27,300.

Such a level of disparity is indefensible. It is simply not reasonable that a councillor in Mulhuddart should be expected to represent more than 13,000 residents, while a councillor in Leitrim has to represent less than one tenth of that number.

This disparity can also, of course, give rise to skewed results in regard to elections to Seanad Eireann, where councillors form the overwhelming majority of the electorate. For instance Leitrim with a population of less than 30,000 has 22 Seanad votes, while Dublin City, with a population of more than 16 times greater, has just 52 votes.

In summary on this point, it is virtually impossible for a part-time councillor to meet the needs of more than 13,000 residents. While in a small rural electoral area, virtually everyone will know their local county councillor, in a large urban electoral area most people will never even have a chance to meet their local councillor.

If this issue is not addressed before the next local elections in 2009, it will be another five years at least before there is another opportunity to deal with it - a period during which the level of disparity is likely to widen even further.

Our second submission is that we entirely support the desirability, where possible to do so, of aligning local electoral area boundaries with Dáil constituency boundaries. Indeed, we see this as just one stage in the ultimate objective of aligning as closely as possible the boundaries of all administrative units in the State – HSE, Garda, and so on.

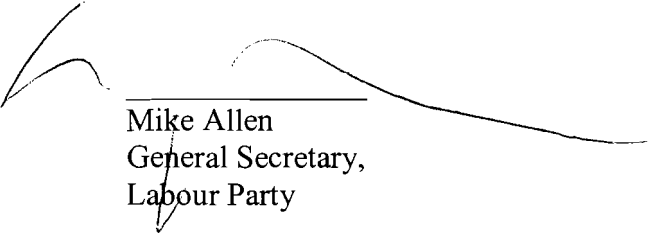
Third, we support the view that 3-seat local electoral areas should not be the norm and should be recommended in exceptional circumstances only, where otherwise the geographic size of the area would be disproportionately large. We repeat our observation to the Constituency Commission dealing with Dáil constituencies, borrowed from the recent judgment in *Murphy*, that “the larger number of deputies per constituencies the more likely that a proportionate result will ensue”. The observation is of course as applicable to local as to Dáil elections and our submission is the same: your committees’ preference should be for the configuration best calculated to produce a proportionate result – simply because the proportionality of the results it produces is the reason why PR/STV was adopted by the People and incorporated into our Constitution.

In other words, given that the primary purpose of PR/STV is to return a body the makeup of which closely mirrors the first preference votes cast at the election, both committees should attempt to achieve configurations that are best calculated to achieve that outcome. The fact that other practical considerations, to do with geography and demography, must also be taken into account means that recourse to smaller constituencies is occasionally necessary. But the initial leaning should be in favour of the larger ones.

Fourth, we submit that the maintenance of continuity is a consideration that should be very much subsidiary to the foregoing considerations.

In practical terms this means that, on our submission, if there are two or more possible configurations for LEAs in a particular locality, due regard being had to all relevant factors, then a committee's leaning should be for the one that provides for a smaller number of constituencies returning a greater number of members rather than for a multiplicity of three seat constituencies.

Yours sincerely,



Mike Allen
General Secretary,
Labour Party