

Submission to the Constituency Commission concerning 24 DEDs in Lower Ormond, Tipperary currently in the Offaly Constituency

Please find below my comments, observations and recommendations with regard to your role to produce a report for the Minister under the terms of reference provided;

- My submission relates to the decision of the previous Constituency Commission in 2012 to move 24 District Electoral Divisions (DEDs) from the then North Tipperary constituency to the new Offaly constituency.
- I submit that the aforementioned decision to move the 24 DEDs in North Tipperary to the new constituency of Offaly was a poor and ill-thought out recommendation for many reasons which has impacted negatively politically and practically on the population of the affected 24 DEDs and should be reviewed and reversed.
- In the first instance I acknowledge the constitutional restraints (Article 16.2.2) and the parameters set down in the terms of reference under which you must operate but it is the duty of this Constituency Commission to review previous recommendations which have consequences on the electoral participation and democratic representation of citizens. I do regret the fact however that the terms of reference does not provide for 6 or 7 seat constituencies as this may have assisted you to address some of the conflicting objectives which you are currently presented with and seek to resolve. The limit on constituency seat numbers is perhaps something the Commission should refer to in your final report, with a view to the terms of reference of future Constituency Commissions.
- In relation to terminology I would like to note that the previous Commission report in 2012 referred to these 24 DEDs as "*North West Tipperary*". As a native of this area, I have never heard of this description before. I would have to say this could only have been decided by someone who does not know the area. It only confirmed the view held by local people that this recommendation was taken with little knowledge or understanding of the area. Many local people would instead refer to this area as Lower Ormond, originating from the Barony of that name. I would acknowledge that Nenagh town and environs are also part of the Barony of Lower Ormond but are in the Tipperary constituency, but for the purposes of this submission, I will refer to the 24 DEDs by that name.

- At the outset I would like to note and stress that the previous decision to move most of Lower Ormond into Offaly breached not only a county boundary, but also breached a provincial boundary between Munster and Leinster.
- I note that county boundaries have been breached elsewhere in the past, but these have had a historic precedence, such as in Kerry/Limerick (there was a Kerry/Limerick West constituency in the 1920s) and Roscommon/Leitrim (constituencies 1920s, 1960s-1980s). The electorate in the 24 rural districts of North Tipperary have since the foundation of the State voted in either a North Tipperary or a Tipperary constituency.
- I appreciate that looking at a map it may appear that these 24 DEDs in Lower Ormond are all quite close to the Offaly border and that this decision would not make much difference to the population in that area. That assumption would be a mistake, the natural affinity of the vast majority of the population in this area is to Tipperary, they listen to Tipp FM, they buy the Nenagh Guardian, they support Tipperary in both hurling and football etc.
- County identity is strong in Ireland, and as someone who has lived outside Tipperary for many years, I would argue it is very strong in Tipperary. This has practical implications in that in many constituencies it is a well-known fact and reality that votes tend not to cross county boundaries.
- In terms of commercial, administrative or social activities the vast majority of people in this area apart from that conducted in the local towns of Borriskane and Cloughjordan, would go to the local larger towns of Nenagh and Roscrea in Tipperary.
- As an example, my family home is in Uskane (one of the 24 DEDs transferred) about 5 miles from the Offaly border. We are closer to Birr in County Offaly (about 18km) than to Nenagh (21km) or Roscrea (23km), but my family historically and still would conduct most if not all their local retail/administrative/banking activity in Nenagh or Roscrea rather than Birr.
- I would be concerned at the impact of this decision on voter turnout and engagement. In 2011, the voter turnout in North Tipperary at 77% was the 2nd highest in the country. Anecdotally I know that turnout in the rural areas of Lower Ormond is very high and probably exceeds 77%. However prior to the last General Election many people were very confused and frustrated by the prospect of going to the polls to vote for a slate of candidates they had never heard of before.

- Unlike urban areas, voters in rural areas such as Lower Ormond would expect to see and know their local politicians from attending local events, the local paper such as the Nenagh Guardian and from hearing them on Tipp FM. Some of the Offaly candidates did make a late effort in the months before the election to engage but this had a limited impact.
- While there had been some local and national coverage of this issue, many local people were not aware that they could no longer vote for Tipperary candidates until the election was called and posters were put up. More needs to be done in future to advise voters when radical changes such as the sundering of a county and provincial boundary takes place as was the case for the voters in Lower Ormond in 2016.
- In December 2015, a sitting Independent Councillor from Kilbarron in Lower Ormond, Joe Hannigan declared as a candidate. It is my view from talking to family and friends locally that had he not decided to enter the race, that many people in Lower Ormond would either have not turned up to vote or would have spoiled their vote. I believe the Commission has to take into account the impact of the current boundaries when it leads to the political alienation of voters.
- In the event, this candidate from Lower Ormond did extremely well and received 5,188 1st preferences. It is clear that he received the vast majority of the votes cast in Lower Ormond (Population of 10,953 excluding those under 18 years and with circa 77% turnout). However he failed to attract sufficient preferences in further counts and was not elected.
- Even where a candidate based in Lower Ormond does extremely well as was the case in 2016, it is virtually impossible in my view for that candidate to win a seat in the now 3 seat Offaly constituency when the population of Offaly is 76,687 and the population of Lower Ormond in the Offaly constituency is just 10,953 (Based on the 2011 census). As I outlined earlier it is a well-known phenomenon that votes generally do not cross county boundaries and therefore as Tipperary voters want to vote for Tipperary candidates, it makes sense that Offaly voters will likewise want to vote for Offaly candidates.
- The worst case scenario is that future potential Lower Ormond located candidates may make an assessment that their local electoral base is too small to give them any prospect of winning a seat and they will not run. In addition Offaly candidates may determine that it is not worth their while investing too much time or energy in Lower Ormond given the electoral return. The consequences of this is that turnout in Lower Ormond will decline and the people in this area will not be properly or fully represented in Dáil Éireann. I believe the Constituency Commission has a duty to

take into account the impact of the current boundaries on the electoral participation and democratic representation of citizens in Lower Ormond.

- I make these comments as no disrespect to the people of Offaly or the public representatives from Offaly, indeed my Doorley ancestors came from Cloghan in County Offaly to Uskane in Tipperary over 250 years ago. However the reality is that people in this area in great numbers want to vote for politicians who are based in Tipperary as most people in Offaly want to vote for Offaly based candidates.
- In other constituencies the balance between the populations in the counties comprising the constituency tends to at the very least make it possible for candidates to be elected from both counties in the constituency. With a 76,687 and 10,953 population split for Offaly and Tipperary voters respectively, the prospect of a candidate based in Tipperary being elected is in my view very slim.
- I would acknowledge that some voters going to the polls do so to vote for a Government or have a party loyalty or affinity and this is also the case in Lower Ormond. However from my discussions with people in Lower Ormond, even where they support a particular party or grouping, they also want local representation. Also as party loyalty declines, more voters are taking into account the views, track record and still importantly in rural Ireland, the accessibility of the candidate. For a voter in Terryglass or Cloughjordan a candidate based in Tullamore is a lot less accessible than one based in Nenagh. This is particularly important in a rural area with limited public transport and poor broadband coverage.
- I have not developed or proposed an alternative map/scheme on how this issue can be resolved as frankly I believe this is your role. However as a Commission I would call on you not to look at the present arrangements in Tipperary and Offaly and determine they meet “the numerical requirements”. It is important that you look at the map “de novo” to determine the best configuration. Therefore I call on the Commission to review the constituency map as a whole to examine other alternatives and where any breach in a county boundary is necessary to recommend only those where such breaches are along the lines of natural hinterlands between areas and regions.
- A final note I would like to point out is that in making their recommendation in 2012, the previous Constituency Commission decided to name the new constituency Offaly, despite the fact that it comprised 24 DEDs from Tipperary. On previous occasions where significant parts of a county comprised a constituency, it was referred to in the title. When parts of West Limerick were included in the North Kerry constituency, the name of the constituency was changed to Kerry North-West

Limerick. The omission of any reference to North Tipperary or Lower Ormond in the title of the new constituency further enforced a view that there was little concern for the population of the 24 DEDs.

Recommendations

- The Constituency Commission taking into account the political, social and practical negative impact of the recommendation of the previous Commission to transfer the 24 DEDs in Lower Ormond to the new Offaly constituency should review and reverse this decision;
- The Constituency Commission should re-examine the constituency boundaries with a view to limiting breaches of county boundaries to areas where a natural hinterland exists;
- Where the Constituency Commission has no option but to breach county boundaries any such breach should at least ensure the balance of electors in both/all counties in the constituency, so that there is a reasonable chance that both/all counties can elect TDs;
- Where the Constituency Commission includes parts of any county in a constituency, the name of that county or part of a county should be referred to in the title of the constituency.

James Doorley, Co. Tipperary
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