

A Town, Plus Another Town, Plus A Village Somewhere - East

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Forget all the speculation. We already know what the highlight of election night will be. It'll be hearing people trying to read out the names of the new Scottish constituencies - and going horribly wrong. It's not just that non-Gaelic speakers who had no problem with Western Isles are going to struggle with Na h-Eileanan an Iar. It's also that as a result of the verbosity of the Boundary Commission many of the new constituencies are the electoral analyst's equivalent of tongue-twisters.

Devolution may have resulted in a reduction in the number of constituencies in Scotland – as they were reduced to roughly the same size as those in England – but it has also resulted in a staggering increase in the length of their names. Whatever other criteria the Boundary Commission were applying when they came up with the new constituencies, brevity does not appear to have been one of them.

The Boundary Commission seem to have worked on an excessively inclusive basis, as if no one should be left out, a bit like the Dodo's mantra in *Alice in Wonderland* that all shall have prizes. As far as the Boundary Commission are concerned, all shall get mentioned. Almost any town appears to be worth a mention; sometimes even parts of towns (Kirkintilloch East is about to become famous, although the rest of Kirkintilloch doesn't get a look in). This leads to constituencies such as the not terribly elegant East Kilbride Strathaven and Lesmahagow. Or Inverness Nairn Badenoch and Strathspey.

Since the new constituency names were first announced, there have been a few moans about the clumsiness of their titles – but no one had produced any evidence that constituency titles today were actually any longer, or more verbose, than, say, 50 years ago – probably because no one had been sad enough to go back and work out the length of all the constituencies in 1955.

Except that now someone has. We *are* sad enough to do it – and we can show conclusively that the Scottish constituency names have been getting progressively more cumbersome over the last fifty years.

We started with the period from 1955-1970, when the Scottish boundaries were first changed after the Second World War. Back then it took an average of 14.9 characters to describe each constituency in Scotland. Each boundary change then brought about an increase in size: between 1974-1979 it took 15.1, between 1983-1992 the figure was 15.7, and between 1997-2001, the seats that have been in use during this Parliament, it had risen to 16.5. The new constituency titles, however, use an average of 19.8 characters. So, in the 50 years since 1955, the length of constituency names in Scotland has increased by a full third, with the last set of boundary changes responsible for nearly all of the increase.

(Just in case anyone wants to replicate what we've done – perhaps the paint has dried and you are looking for something else to do?), we removed all commas, used 'and' instead of '&' but included spaces).

Scotland used to boast the shortest constituency name in the UK: Ayr. No longer. Ayr has now been lumped in with Carrick and Cumnock, and so the shortest names are now either Angus or Moray, both with five characters. At the same time, there's been a clear increase in the longest names. Between 1955-

1970, the lengthiest Scottish constituency was Clackmannan and East Stirlingshire (34 characters); it then dropped to 32 between 1974 and 1979 (Stirling Falkirk and Grangemouth), and stayed at 32 between 1983-1992 (with two seats sharing the honour: Tweeddale Ettrick and Lauderdale, and Renfrewshire West and Inverclyde). 1997-2001 saw it climb to 37 (Caithness Sutherland and Easter Ross), but the Boundary Commission have now broken the 40 barrier, with the mighty Cumbernauld Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East - the psephologist's equivalent of Peter Piper Picked A Pickled Pepper - coming in at a staggering 42 characters in length. So again, almost a 33% increase in size - from 34 in the 1950s, to 42 now.

And whereas hideously long names used to be very rare, they are now much more common. Between 1955-1979 there was just one constituency which had 30 or more characters in its name; that had climbed to three between 1983-1992 and six by 1997-2001. But from this year onwards there will be ten constituencies with 30 or more characters in their names. The overall impact of this means that in 1955 it took 1060 characters to describe all of Scotland; despite a decrease in constituencies (from 71 then to 59 now), it now takes 1169.

Does it matter? Aren't these the self-serving complaints of electoral anoraks, who are already dreading the prospect of reading out some of these names at 4am on 6 May? Well, yes, to be honest. But we'd also argue that it does matter. Brevity and clarity are as important in political matters – perhaps more important – as elsewhere. And there's precious little brevity here.

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