

# RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION. (14)

**Foreword by the Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland**



Since I took up office as Secretary of State, I have identified a number of areas in which primary legislation will be required to implement important changes. These include bringing forward legislation to implement proposals for greater transparency arising from the consultation on political donations and to improve the administration of elections. I am also keen to implement commitments made earlier this year during discussions on the appointment of a Northern Ireland Justice Minister to bring forward legislation to provide for greater security of tenure for this Ministerial position.

Although these are important matters in themselves, I would like to take the opportunity if primary legislation can be secured to make other changes to the institutions where there is broad support to do so in Northern Ireland.

This consultation therefore highlights four key areas about which there has been debate in recent years in Northern Ireland. The current Parliamentary Boundary Review is taking place on the basis of the number of Parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland being reduced from 18 to 16. This would automatically result in the size of the Northern Ireland Assembly at the next election going down from 108 members to 96. In addition, I have always made clear that I would seek to bring forward legislation to provide for a reduction by a different number if there is broad agreement for this. There have been calls for the length of term of the Assembly to be extended to 5 years, including the current term; the consultation paper seeks views on this. I have always made clear my opposition to elected representatives holding office at both Westminster and Stormont. Although good progress has been made, the consultation paper seeks views on how best to phase out this practice in line with commitments I made at the general election. Finally, the paper seeks views on whether the Assembly would be more effective if it had both an inclusive government and effective opposition and if so how this can best be achieved. SO

Hearing the views of as many people as possible will greatly assist the policy formulation process for these important issues. I hope everyone with an interest plays their part and can respond by the 23 October 2012 deadline.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Owen Paterson'.

**Rt Hon Owen Paterson MP**

## CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY - NUMBER OF SEATS IN THE NI ASSEMBLY

### Question 1

What should the future size of the Northern Ireland Assembly be?

I welcome the Parliamentary Boundary Review for Westminster and regret that it may not take place during this current parliament. It is necessary to redress the current imbalance.

In NI I think the links between the Assembly constituencies and the Westminster Constituencies should continue.

If the no. of Westminster seats remains at 18, then I think the number of Assembly seats should reduce to 90 - 5 members being elected for each constituency.

If the Boundary Review takes place and the no. of Westminster seats are reduced

to 16, then I think the number of Assembly seats should reduce to 80 - 5 members per constituency.

I consider there to be too many MLAs for the size of this province - it is an unnecessary expenditure.

5 members per constituency provides opportunities for members from minority parties to be elected.

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Westminster and move to 5-year terms on a permanent basis. It could be argued that 5-year terms allow incumbent administrations time to deliver more. Others may feel that 4-year terms are adequate. The Government does not believe that there needs to be uniformity across the Parliaments and Assemblies of the UK on this matter. We seek views on what would be the best approach for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

**CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY – LENGTH OF ASSEMBLY TERMS**

**Question 2**

Do you believe that there should be combination of Parliamentary and Assembly elections in 2015 or should these be decoupled?

*Combination of elections should take place*

**Question 3**

Do you think the term of the current Northern Ireland Assembly should be extended from 2015 to 2016?

*NO, definitely not.*

**Question 4**

Should the Northern Ireland Assembly move to a fixed 5-year term permanently?

*Yes*

*MLAs and Peers*

3.8 We also seek views on whether any legislation to ban 'double-jobbing' between MPs and MLAs should also extend to MLAs and members of the House of Lords. Many, if not all, of the above considerations relating to holding both MP and MLA offices will also apply.

**CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY – MULTIPLE MANDATES**

**Question 5**

Do you believe that representatives should be prohibited from holding the offices of MP and MLA at the same time?

*Yes*

**Question 6**

Should MLAs also be prohibited from being members of the House of Lords?

*Yes*

**Question 7**

Is it better to use primary legislation to ban such practices outright at the earliest opportunity or to take a power to do so at a later date to allow space for agreement to be reached?

*There has already been prerogative.  
Primary legislation may be required*

so, how can this system best be achieved?

I think the Assembly would operate more effectively with a system which provides for a government and an effective opposition. Currently I consider that there is insufficient scrutiny and challenge to government policy.

Under the current system each Minister in reality has charge of his own portfolio freedom and <sup>in general</sup> runs it with an eye to his party political agenda. That is why it is often so difficult to reach consensus about a programme for government.

Difficult or controversial issues are often deferred or swept under the carpet.

I recognize the importance of power-sharing but it should be possible to have a government based on a power sharing coalition and an opposition which also had a loose coalition and a shadow programme of government.

This would enable the people of N.I. to be able to vote one coalition into power and another out of power. This is fundamental to democracy.