

A malaise of trepidation and unease descends upon Westminster whenever the Parliamentary Boundary Commission publishes its proposals, as it did last week. The recommendations the Commission finally settle upon can, after all, make or break careers.

Although subject to three rounds of public consultation, new legislation last year means proposals on constituency boundaries no longer require parliamentary approval to be implemented, and paying no attention to voting patterns, election results or the prospective fortunes of political parties, from Prime Minister to backbencher, none are immune from having their seat culled or drastically altered.

To those less concerned about the job prospects of politicians, that might invoke the sound of the world's smallest violin, but be in no doubt, changes to constituency boundaries have the potential to impact how the residents we all serve are represented.

The current number of seats – 650 - is staying the same, but given the degree of population churn since the last set of boundaries were formulated, big changes were inevitable. Indeed, under the initial proposals announced last week, a large number of constituencies, including mine, will be broken up and redesigned.

In London and other big conurbations, one of the results will be more seats spanning borough boundaries. Of course, that is not in itself unheard of, but it can undoubtedly make the job of a Member of Parliament more challenging. On one level it means simultaneously working with, and supporting, two or more authorities that may have different outlooks and ways of operating. It also involves representing the interests of constituents who may live in dissimilar areas with disparate attributes. The priorities of a resident in a borough that has a more inner-city make-up will vary with, and sometimes compete against, those of a constituent at a more suburban address. That is the unenviable juggling act more MPs will now find themselves contending with. It's not one that makes for effective representation.

While it may seem sensible to carve up seats along fault lines like roads and railway tracks that stand out on a map, no matter how well intentioned their proposals and earnest their research, it's impossible for commissioners to pick up on all of the nuances of local communities or the ties that bind them together. That necessitates a deeper understanding of what constitutes a particular "place" and the history that helped form its identity. It's never clear from their publications how much time the Commission have actually spent "walking the ground" in the areas they are looking at. Maps, and even Google Earth, can on their own be misleading without and on the ground reality check.

This process of regular consultation and amendment can also create real confusion. I have already received numerous emails from constituents questioning whether the proposals will mean their address or postcode will change, none of which is helped by the fact that in my constituency the Commission's proposals are already outdated as they do not take into account forthcoming changes to a number of ward boundaries. The reality is many people do not know who their Member of Parliament is and remain confused as to who represents them, which given how opaque and convoluted this process can be, shouldn't come as a great surprise. For all but the most dedicated of anoraks, it can be difficult to follow.

The job of the Commission isn't an easy one and those wishing to critique their proposals can find themselves open to accusations of political motivation or sour grapes, but there must be room for reflection and honest debate.

Back in 2015, Parliament's now abolished Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, which I was proud to be a member of, put forward a series of proposals with the aim of creating less disruption during boundary reviews. They included encouraging greater flexibility around the arbitrary equality constraint whereby constituencies must have an electorate within 5 per cent of a quota (currently set at 73,393 voters) and advocating the splitting of wards if it ensured seats could be kept more homogenous, something the Commission remains reluctant to do.

The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 removed the right of local authorities to trigger an inquiry on proposals brought forward by the Commission, in part to stop objections being raised purely on the whim of a council's controlling party. Nonetheless, I believe these sort of conversations would strongly benefit from the input and knowledge of local authorities who, although not entirely removed from the machinations of Westminster, have, in effect, far less skin in the game, and are therefore able to make sensible suggestions, based on their unrivalled understanding of their communities, with less suspicion of gerrymandering. That includes on where boundaries should lie and what constituencies should be named, another source of confusion.

I hope the sector will pick up that mantle, to improve outcomes for all of us, over the coming weeks.