

# **The Redrawing of the Omagh Urban District Council Ward Boundaries in 1934-35**

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## **Introduction**

The Omagh Urban District Council was one of a number of areas whose ward boundaries were alleged by Nationalists to be gerrymandered. This term is applied to districts where ward boundaries are drawn in an unnatural and unfair way so that a party with a majority of votes across a district ends up with a minority of the seats. However, under modern British standards for drawing up ward boundaries for first-past-the-post elections, there is no guarantee that natural and fair methods will award victory to the “right” party.

In Northern Ireland, there is the additional complication that after 1920 Nationalists very rarely put up candidates against Unionists in council elections, so it is much harder to establish just how many votes each party could attract in such elections. Analyses of electoral registers can be misleading. That issue in relation to the Omagh Urban District and the Londonderry Corporation is addressed elsewhere <sup>1</sup>. In this paper we shall see how under modern British Standards for first-past-the-post elections, developed in England, objective standards such as the community of interest principle are given prominence. Taking account of potential political outcomes is impermissible, because fiddling boundaries to make sure the “right” party wins is seen as a form of political corruption.

To put the Omagh story in context, we have to go back a little earlier than 1934.

## **The Previous Ward Scheme in 1904**

A new ward scheme was drawn up for the Omagh Urban District Council in 1904. It consisted of three wards: the North Ward was Unionist, the West Ward was Nationalist and the South Ward was marginal. Each would return seven councillors. Denis Henry KC, for the council, told the inquiry into the ward scheme that the numbers of voters in the new wards were North Ward 305, West Ward 314, South Ward 311 <sup>2</sup>. Thirty years later, Mr William Beattie KC, acting for a group of the larger ratepayers at another inquiry into a later ward scheme, provided exactly the same figures <sup>3</sup>.

Thus the 1904 scheme provided a pretty level playing field. It was confirmed in a letter from the Local Government Board for Ireland in December 1904 <sup>4</sup>. An earlier letter to the Tyrone County Council ruled that in view of difficulties in drawing up a new electoral register, the scheme would not operate until after the next local government elections in January 1905 <sup>5</sup>.

The Unionists did not receive this news well and took the extraordinary step of refusing to nominate any candidates in January 1905. The Omagh Urban District Council was left in the hands of 21 Nationalists, elected unopposed <sup>6</sup>.

The councillors served for three years. At the last meeting of the council before the elections of 1908, the Nationalist Chairman, Michael Mullan, said “it was very undesirable to have a public body transacting the affairs of a town such as Omagh

composed of men of one political feeling. I would be healthier and more conducive to better management to have the body composed of representatives of the different political and religious feelings”<sup>7</sup>.

The Unionists seemed to agree, because they contested all three wards in 1908. From this point onwards it became clear just how marginal the South Ward was. Remember that the top seven candidates in each ward were elected, and their names are shown in bold in the tables which follow<sup>8</sup>.

**Table 1: Omagh Urban District Council Election Results January 1908**

<b>NORTH WARD</b>		
<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Votes</b>
<b>K.Houston</b>	Unionist	156
<b>T.Johnston</b>	Unionist	156
<b>J.Anderson</b>	Unionist	155
<b>W.Henderson</b>	Unionist	154
<b>H.Kirk</b>	Unionist	154
<b>J.Cadden</b>	Unionist	152
<b>W.Orr</b>	Unionist	152
J.Loughran	Nationalist	97
D.Hackett	Nationalist	96
J.Hughes	Nationalist	95
J.McSorley	Nationalist	95
P.O’Kane	Nationalist	95
E.Phillips	Nationalist	95
P.McLoughlin	Nationalist	93

<b>WEST WARD</b>		
<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Votes</b>
<b>J.Devlin</b>	Nationalist	201
<b>A.Donnelly</b>	Nationalist	195
<b>P.McGlinchey</b>	Nationalist	195
<b>M.Patton</b>	Nationalist	193
<b>C.Morris</b>	Nationalist	190
<b>T.McCarron</b>	Nationalist	185
<b>J.McGillion</b>	Nationalist	183
R.Doyle	Unionist	73
J.Montgomery	Unionist	72
J.Glass	Unionist	69
B.McCausland	Unionist	69
W.Allen	Unionist	64
J.Marshall	Unionist	63
R.McGrew	Unionist	62

<b>SOUTH WARD</b>		
<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Votes</b>
<b>M.Mullan</b>	Nationalist	190
<b>M.Lynch</b>	Nationalist	188
<b>F.O'Connor</b>	Nationalist	188
<b>T.O'Kane</b>	Nationalist	186
<b>H.McGale</b>	Nationalist	185
<b>M.Devlin</b>	Nationalist	182
<b>J.Pollock</b>	Unionist	178
W.Doak	Unionist	177
C.Riley	Nationalist	177
C.Hutchinson	Unionist	176
A.Leitch	Unionist	175
P.Cruickshank	Unionist	172
W.Osborough	Unionist	168
D.Wylie	Unionist	168

It can be seen from the South Ward result that the voting was so tight that the most popular Unionist candidate (Pollock) overtook the least popular Nationalist candidate (Riley). This phenomenon would be more common in some present-day English councils. Close or not, the Nationalists ended up with a 13-8 majority on the council.

The next elections were due in 1911. They began to follow what would be a predictable pattern in Northern Ireland, with Unionists and Nationalists declining to put up candidates in wards where they believed they could not win. Seven Unionist candidates were elected unopposed in Omagh's North Ward. In the West Ward, the seven Nationalist candidates were unsuccessfully opposed by an Independent. It was in the South Ward that the real battle for the council took place<sup>9</sup>.

**Table 2: Omagh Urban District Council Election Results January 1911**

<b>WEST WARD</b>		
<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Votes</b>
<b>F.Cunningham</b>	Nationalist	212
<b>C.Donegan</b>	Nationalist	169
<b>T.McCarron</b>	Nationalist	166
<b>M.Lynch</b>	Nationalist	165
<b>P.McLaughlin</b>	Nationalist	163
<b>J.Hughes</b>	Nationalist	161
<b>J.McGillion</b>	Nationalist	156
E.Thompson	Independent	100

<b>SOUTH WARD</b>		
<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Votes</b>
<b>W.McConnell</b>	Unionist	194
<b>K.Houston</b>	Unionist	191
<b>T.Quigley</b>	Unionist	190
<b>J.Cadden</b>	Unionist	190
<b>J.Devlin</b>	Nationalist	189
<b>M.Mullan</b>	Nationalist	189
<b>T.O’Kane</b>	Nationalist	187
A.Donnely	Nationalist	185
H.McGale	Nationalist	181
F.O’Connor	Nationalist	179
W.Doak	Unionist	177
J.Henderson	Unionist	177
M.Devlin	Nationalist	172
A.Leitch	Unionist	170

The South Ward had what was truly a knife-edge election. The outcome between Unionists and Nationalists was so close that their candidates’ votes overlapped to an unusual extent. Four Unionists and three Nationalists were elected, giving the Unionists a majority of 11-10 on the Omagh Urban District Council.

In 1914, there were again contests in all three wards, but Unionists and Nationalists declined to confront each other in the North and West Wards. The competition came from Labour and Independent Labour candidates. Both main parties came to an arrangement with a single candidate who came from outside their ranks. In the West Ward, Nationalists nominated just six candidates for the seven positions, leaving a space for the Labour candidate to be elected. In the South Ward, both the Unionists and the Nationalists did the same to accommodate Dr.E.Thompson as an Independent candidate <sup>10</sup>.

**Table 3: Omagh Urban District Council Election Results January 1914**

<b>NORTH WARD</b>		
<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Votes</b>
<b>T.Johnston</b>	Unionist	157
<b>W.Orr</b>	Unionist	149
<b>J.Anderson</b>	Unionist	146
<b>W.Doak</b>	Unionist	146
<b>H.Kirk</b>	Unionist	146
<b>W.Henderson</b>	Unionist	145
<b>C.Hutchinson</b>	Unionist	141
W.Townsend	Labour	102

<b>WEST WARD</b>		
<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Votes</b>
<b>T.McCarron</b>	Nationalist	181
<b>J.McElroy</b>	Nationalist	181
<b>P.McLoughlin</b>	Nationalist	181
<b>M.Lynch</b>	Nationalist	179
<b>C.McGinn</b>	Nationalist	178
<b>J.McGillion</b>	Labour	169
<b>P.Starrs</b>	Nationalist	161
J.Golligy	Independent Labour	70

<b>SOUTH WARD</b>		
<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Votes</b>
<b>R.Rogers</b>	Unionist	190
<b>T.Quigley</b>	Unionist	189
<b>W.McConnell</b>	Unionist	189
<b>J.Cadden</b>	Unionist	188
<b>K.Houston</b>	Unionist	187
<b>W.Boyers</b>	Unionist	185
<b>H.McGale</b>	Nationalist	177
A.Donnely	Nationalist	173
M.Mullan	Nationalist	172
J.Devlin	Nationalist	171
F.O'Connor	Nationalist	171
T.O'Kane	Nationalist	171
E.Thompson	Independent	164

The Unionists had continued their modest progress in the South Ward, and this was sufficient for all six of their candidates to be elected. The seventh seat went to a Nationalist when Dr.Thompson failed to attract enough votes to be elected. The composition of the Omagh Urban District Council in 1914 was therefore thirteen Unionists, seven Nationalists and one Labour. Because of the Great War, there were to be no more elections until 1920.

### **After the Great War**

At a time when the whole of Ireland was still in the United Kingdom, the British Government became concerned about the progress of Sinn Fein in the South and West of the country. It therefore imposed proportional representation for local government elections. Only two MPs in the whole of Ireland voted for this measure at Westminster, and the Unionists vowed to get rid of it as soon as possible <sup>11</sup>. What English MPs would not tolerate in their own councils, they were prepared to impose on Ireland.

At the Omagh Urban District Council elections in 1920, the results were not entirely easy to interpret. The local Nationalist newspaper, the *Ulster Herald*, wrote this:

“The local Comrades of the Great War, a body which is supposed to be non-political, nominated a number of candidates, including two gentlemen who were Unionist members of the outgoing Council, and another so-called Nationalist was nominated by them for the North Ward in the hope that he might secure some of the Nationalist votes in that ward, and in that way destroy the Nationalist chance of success.” <sup>12</sup>

The election resulted in ten members of a Nationalist-Sinn Fein coalition being returned, seven Unionists, two Comrades (those who had been sitting as Unionist councillors), and two Labour candidates <sup>13</sup>. The first preference votes cast are shown in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Omagh Urban District Council First Preference Votes 1920**

	North Ward	South Ward	West Ward
Nationalists	193	231	247
Unionists	208	114	72
Comrades	17	130	46
Labour	22	91	93

The South Ward elected one official Unionist, two Comrades from the Unionist community, three Nationalists, and one Labour candidate. The result confirmed that the ward was still marginal at the time of the 1920 election <sup>14</sup>.

By 1923, proportional representation had been abolished and the first-past-the-post system had been restored. The Comrades association no longer put up candidates. There were no contested elections, leaving the council with thirteen Nationalists and eight Unionists. Rodgers and Duncan, previously elected as Comrades in the South Ward, would now sit as official Unionist councillors in the North and South Wards respectively. The *Ulster Herald* praised the Nationalists for a “magnanimous” gesture in allowing the Unionists to take one seat in the South Ward <sup>15</sup>.

At the next election in 1926, there was no contest in either the West or South Wards. In the North Ward there was dissatisfaction among Unionists about the deselection of two candidates, Messrs.T.Johnston and F.Crawford, who subsequently stood successfully as Independent Unionists <sup>16</sup>.

**Table 5: Omagh Urban District Council Election Results January 1926**

NORTH WARD		
Candidate	Affiliation	Votes
<b>T.Johnston</b>	Independent Unionist	287
<b>F.Crawford</b>	Independent Unionist	283
<b>G.Anderson</b>	Unionist	245
<b>D.Clements</b>	Unionist	244
<b>J.Anderson</b>	Unionist	235
<b>A.Blair</b>	Unionist	231
<b>A.McPherson</b>	Unionist	227
R.Rogers	Unionist	202
T.Henderson	Unionist	188



That left Nationalists in control with a 14-7 majority. There were no contested elections in 1929, leaving the political balance the same. In 1932, there were again no contests in the North and South Wards. In the West Ward, it was the Nationalists' turn to have Independent candidates dispute the choices of the selection meeting<sup>17</sup>. "At the opening of the meeting excitement was at fever heat by reason of the fact that a large section had vowed vengeance on former Nationalist members of the Council who more than a year ago voted for a Protestant being appointed foreman at the electricity works...In the course of the discussion vigorous attacks were made on the Nationalist members of the Council"<sup>18</sup>.

**Table 6: Omagh Urban District Council Election Results January 1932**

<b>WEST WARD</b>		
<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Votes</b>
<b>W.Nugent</b>	Nationalist	390
<b>F.Kearney</b>	Nationalist	371
<b>F.Nugent</b>	Nationalist	351
<b>P.Starrs</b>	Nationalist	351
<b>J.Gunn</b>	Nationalist	337
<b>J.Devine</b>	Nationalist	329
<b>J.Given</b>	Nationalist	309
W.Townsend	Independent Nationalist	236
W.McConville	Independent Nationalist	230
P.Connolly	Independent Nationalist	214
G.Shannon	Independent Nationalist	170

### **The Retreat from the South Ward and the Evidence About Housing**

The question arises as to why Unionists went from holding a slim majority in the South Ward to feeling that it was no longer worth putting up candidates. A clue came in the Unionists selection meeting in 1929. "Several Unionist working men vigorously protested against the action of the Nationalist majority on the Council in refusing to allow Protestants a fair share of the working class houses erected by the Council from public funds, notwithstanding that the Unionist members had given the utmost assistance in the erection of the houses. A resolution was passed directing the Unionist members to oppose any further building schemes unless they got an undertaking that they would obtain a reasonable proportion of the houses for Protestant tenants, and to insist on getting a majority of houses erected in the North Ward, in which the Unionist population predominates"<sup>19</sup>. As we shall see, this had electoral significance.

In 1934, a group of Unionist business ratepayers brought forward a memorial requesting a change in the Omagh District Council ward scheme. An inquiry was held that same year, chaired by Vice-Admiral Archdale. The evidence presented to that inquiry throws some light on the nature of the complaint by the Protestant workers.

Omagh Urban District Council was one of the few local authority areas to build council houses between the two world wars. When Nationalists were in control of Londonderry Corporation from 1920-23, the Nationalist Lord Mayor, Hugh O'Doherty, said "They required money, and had not got it. The Act of Parliament which was passed to enable municipalities to erect houses did not commend itself to any municipality in Ireland. If houses were erected under it the burden that would fall on the rates would be very heavy"<sup>20</sup>. In a report by the Omagh Town Surveyor in the 1960s, he put the number of houses erected by the council before the Second World War as 201<sup>21</sup>.

Robert Parke was Secretary of the local Unionist Association and Editor of the *Tyrone Constitution*. In evidence to the inquiry into the new ward scheme he estimated the number of dwellings in each ward as North Ward 322, West Ward 332, South Ward 510<sup>22</sup>. Building efforts had clearly been focused disproportionately on the South Ward. Why would that be significant?

### **Houses and Voters**

In local government, Northern Ireland, together with the rest of the United Kingdom at this time, had a ratepayers' franchise. The ratepayer (whether owner occupier or tenant) and the ratepayer's spouse had a vote, but other adults in the house did not. In a previous study on the significance of the growth in the local government vote, I came up with two slogans<sup>23</sup>:

"No house = no vote"

"If you got a vote, you must have got a house".

The building of additional houses would normally result in the creation of additional ratepayers, and hence additional voters under the local government franchise. This could be expressed in the slogan

"Extra houses create extra voters".

This is significant in the light of other evidence given to the inquiry by John McGale, the Omagh Town Clerk.

"Cross-examined he said that there was a rule since he became town clerk that one-third of the houses erected by the Urban Council should go to the Unionist Party, but admitted that Unionists got more of the higher rented houses [houses with more expensive rents] than the others"<sup>24</sup>. McGale repeated the point elsewhere in his evidence. "There was an unwritten law that the Nationalists got two-thirds of the houses and the Unionists one-third"<sup>25</sup>. Alexander Donnelly, Nationalist MP for West Tyrone at Stormont and member of the Omagh Urban District Council, confirmed this. "In regard to the allocation of council houses it was standing practice to allot one-third of the houses to the Unionists and two-thirds to the Nationalists"<sup>26</sup>. The basis for the Protestant workers' complaint can now be seen.

During his own cross-examination, Parke said that matters had come to a head the previous February when 25 council houses were being allocated. Initially, only four of

these were offered to Protestants, but after representations from himself and Captain Fyffe, a Unionist solicitor, this was increased to six. He added that people had been imported into the South Ward to get votes for political purposes<sup>27</sup>.

The inquiry was told by Charles Henderson, who supported the ratepayers' scheme, that he "did not consider the working men of his party got a fair show in the new houses; in fact, they had not one-third of them. The houses were not allocated on a fair basis – it was on a purely political basis. The only houses Unionists got were let at 9/- [9 shillings] and 12/- per week; they got no show at all in the cheaper houses...The Council had houses let at 4/6 [four shillings and sixpence] per week down to 2/3 [two shillings and threepence]"<sup>28</sup>.

Robert Parke testified to the inquiry that the numbers of voters in each ward at that time were North Ward 599, West Ward 623, South Ward 840 (although Alexander Donnelly believed the South Ward total was 839). This meant that the South Ward electorate had grown to reflect the growth in the number of houses, and was, in terms of the number of voters, much bigger than the other two wards.

Parke "had made a careful census of the dwelling-houses in the Urban District and found that since the last ward scheme [in 1904] the number of new houses built by the Urban Council and by private enterprise was 277, and since the memorial was presented to the Ministry, 25 houses had been erected, or were in the course of erection making 302 new houses. Of these, 231 had been erected in the South Ward...Of these 231, 171 had been built in the area between Kevlin Road and Dromore Road, and all these were of the artisan class"<sup>29</sup>. This area is often referred to as Fairmount.

"In the North Ward only 52 houses had been erected since the last ward scheme, or were in course of erection, while in the West Ward there had been little building during the past thirty years – not more than 18 houses, but three old houses had disappeared"<sup>30</sup>. This meant that houses for predominantly Catholic tenants had not been built in the Catholic West Ward, where the tenants would bestow no electoral advantage on Nationalism, but in the South Ward, where they would. Parke believed that "a large number of tenants were brought into the South Ward from the West Ward" to achieve this electoral advantage<sup>31</sup>.

In the evidence to the inquiry there is this rather cryptic reference. "Robert Rogers, a [Unionist] member of the Urban Council, said a number of houses were built in the South Ward by a syndicate for political purposes"<sup>32</sup>. There is a later, slightly less cryptic, statement in a *Tyrone Constitution* editorial. It referred to "political building schemes by Nationalist combinations and the Nationalist Urban Council", thus identifying syndicates and combinations as something separate from the council house building programme<sup>33</sup>.

There is a likely explanation of what this means. The Northern Ireland Government offered a subsidy of £60 (later rising to £100) to private builders to construct small houses for rent to those on modest incomes. Omagh Urban District Council decided to supplement this sum with a £40 subsidy of its own<sup>34</sup>.

To qualify for the subsidies, private builders would need the approval of the Nationalist controlled council for their schemes. There was scope, therefore, for politicians to come to informal arrangements with builders under which they would get subsidy approval if the houses were in the right location and tenancies were to be granted to people with the right community background.

Robert Henderson, one of the witnesses in favour of the ratepayers’ memorial, said that “The objective in building houses in Fairmount was entirely for votes; in fact a syndicate built fifteen houses, not one of which was let to a Unionist”<sup>35</sup>.

We can see here the outline of the Unionist case for the prosecution, so to speak.

1. Since Omagh Urban District Council fell under Nationalist control in 1920, council house building had been concentrated in the marginal South Ward.
2. The Town Clerk had testified that the policy was to give two-thirds of council houses to Catholics.
3. The effect of this would have been to add two Catholic voters for every Protestant to the local government electoral register in the South Ward.
4. It was probably not a coincidence that this turned the South Ward from being electorally marginal into a ward which Unionists did not feel was worth contesting.

We can also see this transition from marginal seat to one which was not worth the Unionists fighting in the Omagh electoral area of the Tyrone County Council. This division returned just one member and was a little bigger than the area covered by the Urban District Council, but it does show trends in the wider Omagh area.

**Table 7: Omagh Seat of the Tyrone County Council – Votes Cast**<sup>36</sup>

<b>Election Year</b>	<b>Nationalist</b>	<b>Unionist</b>
1905	824	810
1908	804	776
1911	730	815
1914	797	769

In the 1920 proportional representation election, Omagh was included in a large division with the Plumbridge, Donemana and Newtown Stewart electoral areas, and so the results are not comparable<sup>37</sup>. In 1924, Nationalists boycotted the county council elections. By 1927, Unionists decided it was not worth contesting the Omagh seat, and a Nationalist was elected unopposed. The same thing happened in 1930 and 1933. This transformation of a marginal division would undoubtedly have been influenced by the housebuilding policy of the Omagh Urban District Council.

### **British Standards and the Numbers on Electoral Registers**

Throughout this period there were arguments about the numbers of each community on the electoral register. At its crudest, a popular view could be expressed as “We have more voters than you on the electoral register and therefore we deserve to be in control”. It is, of course, completely contrary to modern British standards of how ward boundaries should be drawn up. Bodies such as the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) are specifically forbidden from taking into account the possible outcome of elections in decisions about ward boundaries. Instead they must apply objective criteria like grouping people according to their community of interest, and having councillors represent roughly equal numbers of voters. This is discussed at greater length elsewhere<sup>38</sup>.

But the argument about numbers on the electoral register was particularly problematical under the ratepayers' franchise in places like Omagh. Alexander Donnelly testified at the inquiry that the breakdown of the current South Ward local government electorate was as follows:

**Table 8: Omagh Urban District Council Voters in the South Ward 1934**

	<b>Nationalists</b>	<b>Unionists</b>	<b>Total</b>
South Ward	477	362	839

As always at that time, “Nationalists” on the electoral register were Catholics and “Unionists” were Protestants. No-one was claiming they knew for certain how people voted, but they did know their community background. The argument about numbers on the register would suggest that Nationalists “deserved” to be in control in this ward. But given that this was once a marginal seat, how did they come to have a majority, at least on paper? We now know that this majority was substantially an artefact of the Nationalist council’s choice of where to build houses and to whom they should be allocated. New houses created new votes.

It seems clear that part of the Unionists’ position was that the argument about numbers lost its moral force because of the way the paper majority in the South Ward was manufactured. But, note that under modern British standards such as those administered by the LGBCE, all arguments about possible political outcomes are illegitimate. So when Alexander Donnelly argued that “Any fair scheme proposed for the urban district would have the result of giving the Nationalists control”, he would, under modern British standards for first-past-the-post elections, simply have been told he was wrong and been asked to bring forward legitimate reasons in support of a ward scheme <sup>39</sup>.

Mr William Beattie, KC for the memorialists said that before the housebuilding programme in Fairmount, the South Ward had consisted mainly of large houses. “At present the largest property owners and ratepayers in the South Ward, who paid the greatest proportion of rates, had almost no say or representation on the council at all, and they came before them to try and get proper representation” <sup>40</sup>. The argument here is that the largest ratepayers, who were predominantly Protestant and Unionist, were represented by Nationalists in the South Ward, who were not sympathetic to their interests.

Robert Parke had made an analysis of the valuation (rateable value) of property occupied by Unionists and “all others”. His conclusion was that Unionist property had a rateable value of £8566 and others £5721 <sup>41</sup>. The two groups would therefore pay rates in the same proportion as the valuations. This was a sore point among Unionist businessmen, who felt that Nationalists were happy to spend the rates income, most of which was contributed by their political opponents.

Robert Henderson argued at the inquiry that those who paid the most rates should get the most representatives, but he was not asking for each councillor to represent the same amount of valuation. Alexander Donnelly, for the Nationalists, conceded that valuation had to be taken into account, and the council’s counter proposal had tried to do this <sup>42</sup>.

In terms of modern British standards this is probably just as illegitimate an argument as “We deserve to be in control”. However, under the provisions of the legislation of

the day, since the Local Government Act 1922 councils were meant to take into account valuation (rateable value) when drawing up boundaries. This was designed to minimise inequalities in the amount of rates which each ward paid. It is not clear that this legal requirement was always observed.

If we look at two other modern criteria, the community of interest principle, and the idea of having each councillor represent a similar number of electors, the memorialists would have been on stronger ground in front of a modern boundary commission. LGBCE guidance on community of interest is as follows:

“If you are making a submission to the Commission, you should ensure that the wards and boundaries you propose reflect, as far as possible, the interests and identities of your area’s communities.... The best evidence for community identity is normally a combination of factual information such as the existence of communication links, facilities and organisations along with an explanation of how local people use those facilities”<sup>43</sup>.

Examples of things which will be taken into account by the LGBCE are:

“**Community groups** – Is there a residents group or any other local organisation that represents the area? What area does that group cover? What kind of activities do they undertake and are there any joint-working relationships between organisations that could indicate shared community interests between different geographical areas?

**Shared interests** – Are there particular issues that affect your community which aren’t necessarily relevant to neighbouring areas that might help us determine where a ward or division boundary should be drawn?”<sup>44</sup>.

On the face of it, there seems to be an argument that the residents of Fairmount did not have a community of interest with the predominantly middle class residents in the rest of the South Ward. On the other hand, many of the tenants in Fairmount had come from the Catholic community in the West Ward, and therefore probably had a community of interest with them. Let us look at the proposed schemes. There are minor differences in the figures provided by different people, but nothing of great significance. Firstly, the situation current at that time:

Mr.A.E.Donnely MP gives the current religious breakdown as follows<sup>45</sup>:

**Table 9: Omagh Urban District Council Religious Breakdown of Voters 1934**

Ward	Nationalists	Unionists	Total	Seats
North	251	348	599	7
West	479	144	623	7
South	477	362	839	7
Totals	1207	854	2061	21

**Table 10: The Large Ratepayers' (Memorialists) Proposal** <sup>46</sup>

Ward	Voters	Valuation (£)	Seats
North	568	5004	6
West	623	3174	6
South	530	6581	6
Fairmount	341	1097	3

In answer to a question, Robert Parke confirmed that he believed that of the 344 voters who would be in the new Fairmount Ward, 274 would be Nationalists <sup>47</sup>. (Tyrone Constitution 12 October 1934). Of the 218 houses in the proposed ward, only 47 were in existence in 1904 <sup>48</sup>. This confirmed that the recent house building programme had been significant in altering the political composition of Fairmount.

**Table 11: Omagh Urban District Council Counter-Proposal 1934**

Ward	Voters	Valuation (£)	Seats
East	653	5358	7
West	721	4757	7
South	645	4664	7

The Nationalists on Omagh Urban District Council saw no need for a change, but sensing that the inquiry would recommend one they submitted the above scheme (Table 11) <sup>49</sup>. It is not without its merits. The valuations of the three wards are roughly equal, which would take account of the Local Government Act requirements. The numbers of voters in each ward were also similar. It would have produced a 14-7 Nationalist majority.

However, the Nationalists' scheme took no notice whatsoever of the community of interest principle. It was only able to equalize the valuations by grouping together quite disparate areas which had little in common. At the end of the day, the boundaries were arranged to bring about a pre-conceived political result with Nationalists controlling two out of the three wards. It was the very charge which was so often levelled against Unionists.

The memorialists had some objective arguments in their favour. The Fairmount area was getting its own ward, leaving the South Ward with something approaching its previous character. It took account of valuation to a modest extent, with the voters per councillor being only slightly higher in the wards paying the least rates, namely the West and Fairmount Wards. This failure to take valuation too seriously meant that the voters per councillor figures were quite equitable. Under this scheme, Unionists were likely to gain a 12-9 majority.

## The Approved Scheme

When the Ministry of Home Affairs gave its verdict after the inquiry, its solution was to combine what would have been the West and Fairmount Wards under the memorialists' proposal into a new West Ward. This would have nine councillors, and the new North and South Wards would have a reduced representation of six each <sup>50</sup>.

The effect of this amendment of the memorialists' proposal was to make the new West Ward less unequal with the other wards in terms of valuation. This was probably a better implementation of the requirement to take valuation into account. At the same time, the numbers of voters per councillor were kept very similar.

The approved scheme was also a better application of the community of interest principle than the Nationalists' proposal. The linking of the population of Fairmount with that of the old West Ward was not controversial in terms of this principle. The controversy arose not from the application of fair public administration principles, but from the fact that Unionists would have a 12-9 majority on the new council. Given the way that the Nationalist majority had been created in the South Ward, Unionists may have seen this as a form of restorative justice.

In spite of the old council's efforts, Catholics were naturally more concentrated in certain areas. They tended to waste votes piling up a large majority. Modern British standards offer no protection against such natural concentrations, which have bearing on a phenomenon known to some modern academics as vote efficiency <sup>51</sup>. Omagh Nationalists were never again to put up a candidate in the North or South wards, thus establishing an impressive record of not once opposing Unionist local government candidates in 50 years of the Northern Ireland state's existence.

In view of the criticism aimed at Omagh Unionists in the past, perhaps it is appropriate to leave the last word with the *Tyrone Constitution*.

“The scheme now approved is perfectly equitable and just, but we recognise that it is not a scheme which will commend itself to the various sections of Nationalists nor can it find support from advanced Republicans or Socialists. These classes, however, do not look for mere fair play or equality, but seek to dominate every public board with which they are associated. They are not concerned with the good of the community so much as Party interests which they make the paramount consideration, and evidence of this is not wanting in the administration of the Nationalist Party in Omagh during the past fifteen years” <sup>52</sup>.



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