

Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System: Volume 2

Submissions from academics

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INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON THE VOTING SYSTEM
EVIDENCE ON THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND THE
ELECTORAL SYSTEM

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Although it is possible in theory to secure fair representation of women under any electoral system in which they are eligible to vote and hold office, in practice women have been less well represented under majoritarian systems using single member constituencies, best represented under proportional systems using party lists. This is both a matter of political will and of arithmetic. Once the political decision is made that society needs a socially representative legislature, it is easier to balance the composition of a party list than it is to devise mechanisms to ensure the presence of underrepresented groups in systems in which a voter's choice may be credited only to one representative. In other words, the problem with majoritarian systems is they typically use single member constituencies. Evidence of the fortunes of women under different electoral systems supports such contentions. In the mid 1990s in Western Europe women generally had the highest levels of representation in the systems that offered the highest levels of proportionality. Thus women share of parliamentary seats under such systems in 1995 was 41 per cent in Sweden, 39 per cent in Norway, 33 per cent in Denmark, and over 20 per cent in Austria and Iceland. In countries in which levels of proportionality are moderate or low, women's share of representation in the legislature was normally below twenty per cent and often below 10 per cent.¹

We understand that the Commission is giving serious consideration to the Alternative Vote system. (AV) AV is a majoritarian system that will fail to address most of the problems of disproportionality in the current Westminster system. Currently it is used only in Nauru and for the

¹. Gallagher, Laver and Marsh 1995 ; P. Norris 1997 'Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems' INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW, Vol. 18, No. 3, 297 -312.

Australian House of Representatives. The proportion of women in the Australian House of Representatives is well below the world wide average. In 1993 there were 13 women out of 147 members (8.8 %). In that year women were 11.3 per cent of all parliamentary chambers and 11.6 per cent of members of lower chambers. In the 1993 Australian election women took 21.1 per cent of the Senate seats (elected under STV.) This pattern has persisted over time, it was not an idiosyncratic result. The likelihood is that the adoption of AV would probably have worse implications for social representativeness than the present system. Under such a system women, ethnic minorities and other underrepresented groups would have to be geographically concentrated and vote in a highly organised fashion to ensure their representation.

Accordingly we advise the commission that the best way to enable the fair representation of women (and other excluded groups) is by the adoption of a proportional system using party lists. Failing that a mixed system such as AMS would better facilitate balanced social representation than any majoritarian system under consideration.