

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

Submissions from academics

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Dear Lord Jenkins,

I am sorry that I did not previously make a submission to your Commission on Electoral Reform. I did write and send a copy of my book, which I thought would be sufficient. But it struck me, after attending the very interesting hearing at Church House the day before yesterday, that some important points needed to be made. I accordingly enclose a submission: I apologise that it is so late, and hope that it is not too late for it to be considered.

Yours sincerely,

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Michael Dummett

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Submission to the Independent Commission on Electoral Reform

(1) The dual vote (one vote as between the local candidates, the other as between the parties) makes no sense without the device of additional members of Parliament. These together form the best mechanism for achieving PR.

But this mechanism is wholly independent of the means adopted for electing MPs to represent the constituencies. Many of those at the hearing on 1st July assumed that the dual vote/additional member device is tied up in a package with the use of First-past-the-post for constituency elections; the assumption is reinforced by the use of the phrase "the Additional Member System" or "AMS". The commission will be aware that it does not need to choose between systems already in use, but can combine ingredients from various systems, or devise its own.

(2) The dual vote/additional member device is also independent of the formula used to determine, from the share of the second vote gained nationally (or better regionally) by each party, its share of seats in the House of Commons. The formula is best used to secure approximate equiproportionality; but it could be devised to guarantee a majority in the House to the best-supported party, and can be aimed at any other deviation from strict proportionality thought desirable.

Objections to PR are always directed at its political effects. These are unpredictable, depending sensitively on the prevailing political situation. Though many such objections are misguided, they should not be wholly dismissed: some countries,

such as Italy, have found good reason to depart from strict PR. When a need to depart from it arises, it is inconvenient to change the entire electoral system. Rather, if the dual vote/additional member device is adopted, the formula for calculating the division of Parliamentary seats between the parties should be made capable of alteration according to circumstances. Such a change could be in the hands of an electoral commission, when authorised by Parliament or some section of Parliament.

(3) When voters rank candidates according to their true preferences, the Borda count (see note at end) is by far the best way of estimating the degree of a candidate's general acceptability to the electorate, which is the relevant factor in determining who will best represent that electorate. For this reason, it ought to be an ingredient in any system for use in multi-member constituencies.

STV has a great defect (which it shares with AV) and a great merit (which it does not). Its merit lies in protecting minorities: if, in a constituency returning five members, a minority forming more than one-sixth of those voting shows solid support for a set of candidates, it is guaranteed to get a member of that set elected. By "solid support" I mean that all the voters in that minority rank all members of that set higher than all other candidates, though not necessarily in the same order among themselves.

The defect of STV is that it is quasi-chaotic, in the sense that a small change in the preferences of just a few voters can

have a great effect on the final outcome. This is because it may affect which candidate is eliminated at an early stage, and thus which votes are redistributed, this then affecting all subsequent stages of the assessment process.

It is perfectly possible to retain the first feature of STV without using the mechanism of elimination and redistribution. The scrutineers can first mark as elected any candidate ranked highest by a sufficiently large minority (one-sixth of the voters in a five-member constituency, etc.). Then, having calculated the Borda counts of all remaining candidates, they can discover whether any set of from two to five candidates receives solid support (in the sense explained above) from a sufficiently large minority: if so, that candidate in the set with the highest Borda count is marked as to be elected. The remaining seats will be filled by the candidates most generally acceptable to the electorate as a whole, i.e. those with the highest Borda counts.

This system has never been in use, but was voted the best at a conference on electoral reform held in Belfast with representatives of all parties.

For single-member constituencies, AV is preferable to First-past-the-post, since it prevents the election of a candidate to whom each other candidate is preferred by a majority of voters, which can easily happen under First-past-the-post. It is not a good system, both because it shares the quasi-chaotic character of STV, and because a candidate preferred to each other candidate by a majority of electors may be eliminated at an early stage as having a smaller number of first preferences. The Borda count system is far fairer if voters vote sincerely. It can be argued

that the pure Borda count system gives too great an incentive to tactical voters. I do not know how far this is true; certainly widespread tactical voting will distort the outcome. A remedy would be to calculate a candidate's score by adding to his Borda count a bonus for each other candidate to whom he is preferred by a majority of the electors.

Note on the Borda count. Electors rank candidates in order of preference, as under STV. Candidates are awarded a score, as follows. A candidate ranked lowest by a voter receives 0 points. One ranked lowest but one receives 1 point. One ranked lowest but two receives 2 points, and so on up. If a voter does not rank all the candidates, those he does not rank are treated as if he had ranked them all equal lowest, and awarded the average they would then receive (if he leaves out three candidates, each receives 1 point from him). The total score of any candidate is his Borda count.