

The virtues of changing to the STV electoral system

THE CASE FOR QUOTA-PREFERENTIAL PR (SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE)

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4

ALL too frequently I am asked which of the electoral systems included in next month's referendum I prefer. My response is always prefaced by my answer to the question, "Why change?"

The first-past-the-post electoral system is very good at producing clear-cut single-party governments. Parliaments elected by this method, however, have very great difficulty in holding those governments to account, especially when party discipline is as strong as it is New Zealand.

For more than 50 years successive governments have been able to do pretty much whatever they wanted. I believe that if future governments are to become more responsive to the range of views held by significant groups of electors within our country, some form of proportional representation is necessary.

Proportional representation does not preclude the possibility that one party could win sufficient parliamentary seats to form a government by itself — in fact, if this did occur, the victorious party would be able to govern in the knowledge that it did so with the support of a clear majority of electors. More commonly, however, elections decided by proportional representation are likely to result in no single party winning an overall majority of parliamentary seats. If coalitions or minority governments occur it will be because the collective wisdom of electors has decided that this should be the case.

Opponents of electoral change point with horror to the prospect of coalition governments. They suggest that PR systems lead to reduced accountability, back room deals between parties and, therefore, political instability. The evidence from many countries which use PR systems does not support these claims.

In the third of five articles in which advocates of the various electoral systems explain the way they will be voting in the referendum on September 19, ALAN McROBIE, a lecturer in political science, puts the case for the single transferable vote system.

It is true to say, however, that parliaments elected by some form of proportional representation function in very different ways to our own Parliament. A government formed by a party that does not have an absolute parliamentary majority will need to be more responsive to the wishes of electors. They will find it necessary to build coalitions of support across party lines for their programmes — and if they have to do so for each single piece of legislation, so be it.

This will mean that politicians from all sides will have to talk with, rather than past one another, they will have to listen to a range of views and weigh one up against the others before voting. In turn, this fundamental change in attitude will encourage electors to watch the performance of their MPs more closely and they should therefore be in a better position to hold them accountable at the next election.

Of the four reform options included in the referendum ballot only two — MMP and PR-STV — are fully proportional electoral systems capable of bringing about an attitudinal change of this kind. Of these two I prefer the single transferable vote option. It is not perfect — there is no perfect electoral system — but PR-STV addresses a number of weaknesses to be found in MMP without compromising the overriding goal of electing a parliament in which all substantial shades of opinion are fairly represented.

The main difference between PR-STV and MMP is in the way that the votes cast are turned into seats in the parliament. As proposed by the Royal Commission, an MMP electoral system would have one-half of the MPs coming from single member constituencies and the other half being elected from national lists of candidates chosen and rank-ordered by political parties. The "party vote" is the more important of the two votes each elector has: it will be used to determine the final number of parliamentary seats each party will have and which candidates from the party lists will become MPs.

STV, on the other hand, is centred on local electorates. Although much larger than the single-member electorates we are used to, they will be represented by several MPs, not all of them from the same party. Over-all proportionality of party representation results from an aggregation of the results in each electorate and not from the "manufactured" proportionality of MMP.

The significant differences between MMP and STV that should be considered are:

- The ratio of electorate MPs to electors will be considerably higher under MMP than STV. Based on the Royal Commission's proposal for 60 MMP constituencies each electorate MP would represent about 56,000 people, nearly double the present number. Although the multi-member STV electorates will be geo-

graphically much larger, the MP:elector ratio will be about the same (or better if there is an increase in the number of MPs) than at present. Under MMP there is no guarantee that MPs who win seats from the party list will associate themselves with particular electorates.

- MMP will result in the presence of two classes of MPs, electorate MPs and party-list MPs. STV does not divide its MPs into different classes. The accountability of MPs is, therefore, much more direct with STV.

- The "closed" party list at the heart of MMP gives tremendous power to party organisations to decide who shall enter parliament. As MMP has been proposed voters will not be able to change, or even influence, the decision of parties (taken before the election) as to the order in which party-list candidates will be declared elected. Under STV, while parties will still select and rank-order their candidates for each electorate, voters will be able to approve or vary the order proposed by each one.

- With its focus on local representation STV gives groups that, traditionally, have been under-represented in parliament (Maori and women were the prime examples given) a better chance than MMP of achieving fair representation. The Royal Commission believed that political parties would want to use the party list to make sure that people from groups such as these were selected and placed high up

on the party list to ensure their election. Unfortunately the track record of the major parties in particular does not promote any real confidence that they will place Maori and women high enough on the party list for this to happen with certainty. Labour, for example, has never selected a candidate of Maori descent for a safe Labour seat, and although four National MPs of Maori descent have been elected to represent general electorates in recent years all have had to wrest their seats in the first instance from Labour incumbents. An STV electoral system would force parties to select candidates that closely reflected the characteristics of the electorates they were chosen to contest.

- Above all, STV promotes and encourages voters to exercise individual choice because it allows them to discriminate between different parties and between individual candidates both across and within party groupings. While parties would still select candidates and indicate the order in which they would like to see them elected, the final choice rests with voters because they are able to vary the parties' preferred order — or even reject one or more candidates nominated by parties — if they wish to do so. This means, too, that independent candidates who can muster sufficient voter support to reach a quota will stand a very good chance of being elected.

STV is not the perfect electoral system. It will not, by itself, cure New Zealand's political, economic and social malaise. It is likely, however, to promote much greater political and social integration because electors will know that their vote will count towards electing a candidate that they support.

Some people say that MMP gives too much power to parties. Others say that STV gives too much power to voters. Which do you prefer?