

THE STRAIGHT VOTE

Some Questions and Answers

(1) **In what way will the change to the Straight Vote improve the position ?**

A general election is held in order to select a Government. Under the Constitution the people are given the power at election-time to decide on the broad lines of national policy, and to indicate what the Government should be.

Under P.R. the people often lose this power, as the multiplicity of Parties which P.R. causes means that Coalitions must be formed of groups each professing completely contradictory policies.

Governments are then no longer chosen by the people at elections. This power passes—after the election—to a small group of men who bargain behind closed doors.

It is, in fact, the greatest single defect of P.R. that it leads to the creation of Governments by small and unrepresentative minorities.

Once created, such Coalition Governments are in constant danger of being brought down by the defection of some small group. The last Coalition here dissolved the Dáil immediately after the tabling of a 'no confidence' motion by a "Party" of two !

Under P.R., in fact, Governments are created by minorities and are put out of office by minorities.

The great advantage of the Straight Vote is that it preserves for the people their power of choosing a Government. It enables them to make a selection between opposing policies, and to return a Party to office with sufficient strength to allow them to carry out their policy.

Then, if the people so wish, they can replace it at the following election with an alternative majority Government. **For there is no stronger weapon than the Straight Vote available to the people for the purpose of**

throwing out an unpopular Government and electing a new one.

The Straight Vote, in fact, leads to strong, efficient and united Government, and ensures that Government policy should be in close accord with the wishes of the majority of the people.

(2) **What is the basic objection to P.R. ?**

This question could not be better answered than by quoting from a speech in 1937 by Deputy J. A. Costello :

"We always understood that the real defect under any system of P.R., and particularly the system of the single transferable vote, was that it led, in circumstances where there are no big economic issues before the country, to a large number of small parties being returned, making for instability in Government.

"That is inherent in the system of P.R. and the single transferable vote."

(Dáil Debates, June 1st, 1937).

(3) **Why has this moment been chosen to change the election system ?**

There are two main reasons. In the first place, the redistribution of constituencies which, under the Constitution, must take place every twelve years, is due next year.

It is obviously desirable that any alterations in the electoral system should be made at the same time.

The second reason for amending the Constitution now is that, for the first time in ten

years, there is a Government with an over-all majority, able to carry such a proposal through the Dáil.

While the Constitution can be amended at any time by vote of the people at a Referendum, a Bill must first receive a Dáil majority before the electorate can be asked to vote and decide.

Since the small splinter Parties which P.R. has created have a vested interest in its preservation, it is only when one Party has an over-all majority that such a Bill could be passed.

(4) Would it not be better to try to improve the country's economy, rather than spend all this time discussing P.R. ?

The two matters are, in fact, very closely bound together. Nothing is more vital for a nation's economic development than a stable and efficient political system.

During the past ten years Ireland has already twice been brought close to bankruptcy as a result of weak and unstable Coalition Governments brought into being by P.R.

During the past year a quite new atmosphere has been brought about. The Government's White Paper setting out a long-term programme for economic expansion has met with the approval of all Parties and of all sections of the community.

Already a great number of steps have been taken by the Government for the purpose of restoring the national economy: the solution of our balance of payments problem; the sound Budgetary position which has made possible the recent reliefs in taxation; the new agricultural credit and cheap fertiliser schemes; the expansion in the activities of the Industrial Credit Company; the many new industries now being set up; the new scheme of oil exploration; the increased provision for tourist development; the re-organisation of C.I.E., all these and many other Government measures have brought about a complete transformation in the economic outlook of the country.

What the nation now requires is an assurance that, no matter what Government may be in office during the next ten years, the economic progress now being made will not again be interrupted by a period of political instability.

In the words of an Independent Deputy (Dáil Debates, 2/12/58) :—

"The psychological effect which the abolition of P.R., and its substitution by the majority vote would have, would be good for the country.

"It would be a necessary prerequisite to tackling our problems of emigration, unemployment and the other national problems that beset us now."

While the debates on the Straight Vote proposals have not in fact prevented the Government and the Ministers concerned from pressing ahead with their programme of national development, this reflects no credit on the Opposition, for both in Dáil and Seanad the discussions on the proposed Constitutional amendment were dragged out to quite an unreasonable length.

In the Dáil, for example, the proposed Amendment was debated for a total of no less than 96 hours—yet the entire 1937 debates on the Constitution itself took up only 68½ hours of the Dáil's time.

(5) Why did Fianna Fáil never object to P.R. until now ?

For over twenty years Fianna Fáil have been warning the public about the possible dangers of P.R. It has been suggested that only the election defeats of 1948 and 1954 turned Fianna Fáil against P.R., but, in fact, at every general election since 1937, Mr. de Valera and other Fianna Fáil speakers have raised this issue.

So well-known has been the attitude of Fianna Fáil, that at the 1951 general election one national newspaper urged its readers to vote against the Party, on the grounds of its declared hostility to P.R.

(6) Did not Mr. de Valera himself speak in favour of P.R. ?

No one has ever denied that P.R. has many theoretical advantages. But, to quote Deputy John A. Costello (Dáil Debates, 1/6/37) : **"Proportional representation on paper is a perfect system, but when you come to practice you run up against all sorts of difficulties.**

Mr. de Valera's attitude has frequently been made clear. Speaking at Kilrush, Co. Clare, for example, in 1938, he said :—

"The more the national fight appears, the more the sectional fight begins ; and then you will have little groups trying to get representation in Parliament and in the Cabinet and you will have the type of Cabinet you have in France. I think that would be a bad thing for this country.

"I have always supported P.R., so much so that I have put it into the Constitution ; but I am seriously concerned with results there are likely to be."

(7) Is it not true that all Parties other than Fianna Fáil have always supported P.R. ?

On the contrary, Fine Gael has for many years given public support to the principle of the Straight Vote and against P.R.

As long ago as 1927, Mr. William Cosgrave and several of his Ministers told election meetings that proportional representation would have to be done away with.

When the present Fine Gael Party was formed in 1933, Point Seven of its Declaration of Policy read :—

"The abolition of the present proportional representation system so as to secure more effective democratic control of national policy and to establish closer personal relationship between parliamentary representatives and their constituents."

Four years later Deputy Patrick McGilligan told the Dáil (25/5/37) **"it was always held that with regard to proportional representation, which this country adopted, we had adopted the worst possible system."**

Deputy James Dillon (Dáil Debates, 12/11/47) said that **"proportional representation is a fraud and a cod, and ought to be abolished."**

He thought that P.R. was **"the child of the brain of all the cranks in creation,"** and that **"it was foisted upon us by a collection of half-lunatics."** He looked forward to the day when **"we may provide our people with**

an opportunity of getting sick of this fantastic system and hasten the day by which we will return to a normal system devised to ascertain the will of the people."

Mr. J. A. Costello's criticisms of P.R. have already been set out at Questions 2 and 6 above.

(8) Has not P.R. worked well in other countries ?

The whole purpose of P.R. is to enable small groups to obtain representation in Parliament ; the more successfully this purpose is achieved, the more difficult it becomes to form a stable and democratic Government.

At its worst, this process can lead to the collapse of the whole Parliamentary system. Between the two World Wars, in **Austria, Germany, Greece, Poland and Italy**, Coalition democracy was in each case overthrown and replaced by a military dictatorship.

Five other pre-war P.R. democracies, **Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Jugoslavia, Latvia and Rumania**, have now been taken over by the Communists.

Since the war, the weakening process of P.R. has continued. In **Greece, Italy and France** (until de Gaulle took over and ended P.R.), great numbers of Parties have contested elections and Governments have been short-lived and frequently powerless. Under P.R. the Communists have gained many seats and formed a grave threat to democracy.

In other P.R. countries, **Finland, Iceland, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands**, prolonged Government crises have taken place during the past year or so. The multiplicity of Parties in these countries has made it increasingly difficult for any group to obtain a parliamentary majority.

It is not suggested that P.R. makes good government quite impossible. But the experience of many countries (including our own) has shown clearly the dangers inherent in this system of election.

(9) Why should P.R. be called a difficult or complicated system ?

Because so few people really understand how it works. There are probably not more than

a few hundred people in the whole country who could describe accurately, for example how a surplus is transferred.

(10) Is it not true that the percentage of spoiled votes under P.R. is very small ?

A P.R. vote is only regarded as spoiled if there is no No. 1 preference on the paper. A more reliable guide to the efficiency of P.R. voting would be the proportion of ballot papers not filled up completely.

In fact, only a small proportion of Irish voters give a preference to each of the candidates on their ballot paper. This is hardly surprising, since a voter faced with ten names has no less than **9,860,000** ways open to him of marking his paper !

Yet the supporters of P.R. (in Britain and elsewhere) have always stressed that the full marking of ballot papers is essential if this system of election is to work satisfactorily.

(11) Does not P.R. give every voter a second chance ?

In theory, yes ; in practice, no. At the last general election, **17%** (one-sixth) of the voters had their second or later preferences handed on at their full-value, and a further **21%** (one-fifth) had their preferences given a fractional value.

But **62%** (almost two-thirds) of all votes cast at the 1957 election were treated exactly as under the Straight Vote system, only the first preferences being counted.

(12) Is it not true that the boundaries of the new single seat constituencies will be manipulated to suit Fianna Fáil ?

Until now the settling of constituency boundaries has always been a function of the Dáil—which meant, in effect, the Government majority. This is now being changed.

It is proposed, as part of the amendment of the Constitution, to set up an all-Party Commission under a neutral Chairman to form the

new constituencies. This will make it impossible for Fianna Fáil or any other Government to manipulate constituency boundaries to suit themselves.

(13) Under the new Straight Vote system is it not true that in many areas candidates will be returned on a minority of the votes ?

Experience elsewhere under the Straight Vote does not support this suggestion. At the last general election in Britain, for example, in 1955, only in **37** constituencies out of **630** were candidates returned on a minority of the total poll—one in seventeen.

This compares favourably with the position in Ireland under P.R., where many Deputies are returned at elections without reaching the quota. In 1948, **43** out of **146** Dáil seats (almost one-third of the Dáil) were filled without the quota having been reached.

The essential factor with regard to the Straight Vote is that **every person elected must be at the head of the poll**. Under P.R., the candidate who tops the poll can be defeated (as happened in Galway in a recent general election) while the candidate at the bottom of the poll can be elected.

It is, in any event, a complete fallacy to suggest that, because one candidate does not obtain an over-all majority of the votes cast, all the other votes were therefore cast against him.

In the Dublin (South-Central) bye-election last June, the Fianna Fáil candidate headed the poll with **6,000** votes. **11,000** votes (all cast "against" Fianna Fáil) went to the four other candidates. Yet, under P.R., Fianna Fáil gained the seat.

(14) Could a Government be elected under the Straight Vote with a minority of the total poll ?

It is rare for a Government under any system of voting to obtain a clear majority of the votes cast at an election. Only three times in Europe during the past forty years has any

Party obtained such a majority—in Britain, in 1931, Ireland, in 1938, and Germany, in 1953.

Experience has shown that the percentage of support obtained by Governments at elections has been almost exactly the same in Britain (under the Straight Vote) as in Ireland (under P.R.).

(15) How many countries have our system of P.R. ?

The system of the single transferable vote, as used in Ireland, has been adopted only for the subordinate legislatures of Gibraltar, Malta, and the island of Tasmania. With the solitary exception of Ireland, it has never been adopted by any national Parliament.

(16) With only one T.D. per constituency, will this not mean that only those voters who support his Party will be able to make representation or have their grievances remedied ?

In Straight Vote countries, each Member of Parliament is regarded as the representative of **all** the people of his constituency, irrespective of their political opinions.

(17) Under the Straight Vote, will not Fianna Fáil remain in office for ever ?

No Government, under any system of election, can remain in office when the people turn against it. In the United States, Canada, Britain and other Straight Vote countries, changes of Government take place regularly in accordance with changes in public opinion.

Is it suggested that Fianna Fáil will be able to obtain a permanent measure of support such as no Party has ever been able to obtain in any country ?

(18) Will the Straight Vote mean that there will only be a very weak Opposition ?

The great advantage of the Straight Vote from the point of view of an Opposition is that it enables it to attain the position of an alternative Government.

While the Straight Vote will normally put into office a Government with a majority sufficient to enable it to carry out its policy, it also creates a united Opposition ready at any time to take office in its turn.

The strength of such an Opposition lies not so much in the exact number of seats it may hold at any particular time in Parliament, as in the public recognition of its position as an alternative Government.

Single member constituencies and straight voting in fact tend to build up an opposition, since every Opposition knows that sooner or later under that particular system it will come into office.

(19) Should not every section of opinion be represented in the Dáil ?

This suggestion implies that the Dáil is merely a debating chamber. But there is no use in a Dáil that does not take decisions : and you cannot take decisions in the Dáil, unless there is a solid majority behind the Government. There is no use debating, if you do not do anything.

When a person votes for a particular candidate, he is really voting to see that the policy he has in mind **will be implemented** when the candidate goes to the Dáil.

Under the Straight Vote the people are given a clear choice between two alternatives ; whichever one they choose, they are likely to have an effective Government with a good majority behind it.

It is only in that way that the true purpose of an election can be achieved—the selection of a Government to do the nation's work.

(20) Is not this Referendum an example of the dictatorial tendencies of Fianna Fáil ?

It is hard to see any sense in this suggestion. The Constitution provides that any of its terms may be amended by the people voting at a Referendum. In accordance with this provision, Fianna Fáil are now asking the people whether they wish to alter the election system.

Which is the more democratic—the Opposition, who do not want the people to be allowed decide this question, or Fianna Fáil, who are asking for the people's decision ?

(21) Why did Fianna Fáil put P.R. into the Constitution ?

The issues at stake in 1937, when the Constitution was enacted, were of fundamental importance. Ireland was being taken out of the British Empire, and a new Republican Constitution was being put through, with no Oath of Allegiance, Governor General, Appeal to the British Privy Council, nor any of the other imperial trappings imposed by Britain in the Free State Constitution.

A desperate attempt was being made by Fine Gael to prevent the Constitution going through. It was vital, therefore, to avoid confusing the issue. The establishment of a republican form of Government was clearly of more importance than the details of the election system.

The existing system of P.R., therefore, was preserved unchanged. Mr. de Valera, while expressing grave doubts with regard to the system, pointed out that the people could amend the Constitution if at any time this became necessary.

(22) Why not set up a Commission to study the electoral system ?

The Dáil itself is the most effective Commission to discuss a completely political matter of this kind. The 146 Deputies are far better qualified to consider the detailed machinery of elections than any group of academic experts.

A Commission is normally set up, in any event, when a Government is uncertain of the policy it ought to pursue in the national interest, or wishes to shirk its responsibilities. Neither of these considerations applies in this case.

(23) Does not the plea for strong Government really amount to a plea for virtual dictatorship ?

By strong Government is meant a Government which does not live in daily fear of defeat through the illness or absence or death of one or two members, or through the defection of a Party group supporting it.

Such a fear kills all possibility of long term planning, and makes unpopular but necessary legislation almost unthinkable.

A strong Government is one which can look forward with confidence to four or five years in office, during which it can develop its policy and produce some at least of the results.

If, at the end of its statutory period, such a Government can produce no satisfactory record of progress, the verdict of the electors can be much more clear and decisive with the Straight Vote than under P.R.

(24) Why not delay taking drastic action until the defects in the present system have had time to take effect ?

Because then it would be too late. The ultimate effect of P.R. in many countries has been the multiplying of Parties to such an extent as to make the formation of a Government either very difficult or impossible.

At that stage the only action which could be taken would be the passing of a Bill such as has recently been before the Dáil and Seanad.

This was precisely what happened in pre-Hitler Germany ; and, though the party leaders agreed with Hindenburg that the proportional system

must be ended, they were unable to persuade their members to consent, as, by that time, a strong vested interest had been created in its maintenance.

By the time a dangerous situation has arisen, it is already too late to deal with it by normal parliamentary action.

(25) Will the Straight Vote damage the interests of minorities ?

P.R. in Ireland has never in fact given representation to minorities. Of the seven Parties in the Dáil to-day, not one represents minorities.

Clann na Talmhan may claim to represent farmers, but there are more farmer Deputies in both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil than ever were in that Party. Labour claims to represent Trade Unions, but in fact Fianna Fáil has always had the support of the bulk of Irish workers.

There is, indeed, no need for Parties in this country representing minorities as such. There is no section of this community which, because of language, because of race, or because of some other characteristic of that kind, is set apart from the rest of the country. We have a homogeneous population.

Where one small group wants some particular thing achieved, the best way of achieving it is by working through one of the larger Parties.

RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

With regard to religious minorities, there are at present only four Protestant T.Ds. Of these only one (Deputy Sheldon of Donegal) lays claim to election by Protestants, and he has already spoken and voted in favour of the institution of the Straight Vote instead of P.R.

The other three are all Party members who stood as Party candidates, and in none of their constituencies (nor anywhere in the country, for that matter) are there enough Protestant voters to give the quota which is necessary to secure election under P.R.

Apart from Donegal, therefore, there is no Protestant representation as such, but only Protestant T.Ds., and it is right that this should be so.

In the United States or Britain, for example there is no agitation for Catholic or Jewish representation as such. But members of these Churches take an active part in politics as Party members, and express their own particular point of view whenever necessary.

In Britain, under the Straight Vote, religious minorities have a representation in Parliament far beyond their numerical strength in the population. In Ireland, under P.R., the opposite is the case.

(26) Is it not true that the Straight Vote has kept the Six County Unionists in power for over 30 years ?

No. The election system has had nothing to do with it. The Stormont Government abolished P.R. some 30 years ago, but, so far as the Nationalist minority were concerned, this made no difference whatever.

At the time P.R. was abolished, the Unionists had 35 seats in Stormont, the Nationalists had 11, Labour 4, and Independents 2.

At the election which followed, under the Straight Vote, the Unionists got 37 seats, the Nationalists kept their 11, Labour got 1, and Independents 3.

The **system of voting**, therefore, has nothing to do with the unfairness of Six County elections. That is due solely to the large-scale gerrymandering which has taken place with regard to the boundaries of the constituencies.

(27) Will not the ending of P.R. make it more difficult to end Partition ?

This is now being suggested by some Opposition politicians, but none of them has given any reasons why, or even explained how the two matters can be connected. As Mr. Seán Lemass said in the Dáil :—

"How it is conceived to be in the interests of ending Partition that we should continue to saddle ourselves with an unsatisfactory electoral system, I cannot, for the life of me, understand."

(28) Why do we not adopt the Swiss system of election ?

The political system in use in Switzerland no doubt suits the Swiss, but it is very doubtful if it would work satisfactorily in Ireland.

The Swiss election system is based on the 'Party List.' In an election each Party sends out its Party List and this can be used as a ballot paper. Only 3% of Swiss voters make out their own ballot paper completely. The candidate has no contact directly with the electorate, and has no local affiliations or responsibilities.

Ministers of the Government (or Members of the Federal Council) are automatically re-elected, and may thus hold office for life without having to stand for re-election. Women are not given the vote at all. No Party can ever get a majority, and therefore legislation is never attributable to any Party but only to the Coalition which forms the National Council.

That this system should be recommended to Ireland only shows how unrealistic many of the theoretical supporters of P.R. have become.

(29) Has not the Straight Vote resulted in South Africa in the return, with a large majority, of Governments which obtained fewer votes than the main Opposition Party ?

No. The voting system has nothing to do with these results. In South Africa the number of voters on the register for each rural constituency has for many years been substantially less than in the urban constituencies ; in several cases the number is as low as half.

The Nationalist (Government) Party gains a great part of its support from these rural areas, and therefore can win more seats, with less votes, than the Opposition.

(30) Why not have P.R. in single-member constituencies ?

This would be quite futile, and even the English P.R. Society does not recommend it.

The theory of P.R. is that it enables minority interests to gain representation ; but since the quota in a single-member constituency would be half the total poll plus one, it is obvious that this system would be of no help to small groups, but would merely form an unnecessary complication.

(31) Will not the abolition of P.R. do away with the right of the people to choose between candidates ?

The people have never regarded an election as merely an opportunity for them to vote for particular individuals. They prize highly the far more important right of **voting for a Government.**

P.R. may place the emphasis on **personalities**, but the Straight Vote lays the stress on **policies**, and these are of far greater importance.

The crucial issue facing a voter at an election is—how is the country going to be governed during the next five years ? That question is of far more interest to him than the number of names that may appear on his ballot paper.

The only real consideration, then, in the choice of an election system is, which system gives to the voter the best chance of **choosing between Governments.**

On that test, the Straight Vote wins on every count.

(32) Why did Fianna Fáil not make P.R. an issue in the general election ?

Because the Constitution does not provide for any such procedure. It lays down clearly that all Constitutional amendments must be put before the people as a separate issue at a Referendum.

Even if Fianna Fáil had asked the people their wishes at the general election, and had obtained an enormous majority for the Straight Vote, nothing would have been gained, as the Referendum would still be necessary before any change could be made.