

Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform
Electoral systems and boundaries
ESB 03 Peter Varley

To: SeneddReform@assembly.wales

1. I write to submit a response to the Inquiry into Electoral Systems and Boundaries.
2. This is a personal response, based largely on my previous personal responses to the 2017 consultation on local government reform and the 2018 consultation on "A Parliament which Works for Wales".
3. I stress that this is a personal response, as I currently hold the office of Elections Coordinator for Wales Green Party. My response is partly based on personal experiences both in that office and while using STV to conduct internal elections within Wales Green Party. While I have confirmed with my party colleagues that my response is compatible with Wales Green Party policy, It is nevertheless my response, and not a Wales Green Party response, and any controversial opinions should be attributed to me, and not to Wales Green Party.
4. Please also note that I am on the mailing list of the Make Votes Matter campaign, and I anticipate that their recommendations will be close to my own personal opinions.
5. In my response, I stress two topics:
 - 5a The importance of cooperation between parties, and how best to achieve it;
 - 5b The importance of a diverse National Assembly, and how best to achieve it.
6. My interest is in Electoral Systems. I have few if any comments to make on Boundaries. In the terms of reference of the inquiry I address:
 - 6a Examining the implications of the electoral systems and boundaries recommended by the Expert Panel for democratic representation in Wales, and considering how the principles identified by the Expert Panel might be weighted to ensure that the Assembly's electoral arrangements are appropriate to the Welsh context;
 - 6b Exploring public sentiment and understanding of the Assembly's current electoral arrangements and boundaries and the options recommended by the Expert Panel;
 - 6c Considering the implications for political parties in Wales of changing the electoral system and boundary models.
7. I do not address:
 - 7a Exploring the principles and practicalities of establishing boundary review arrangements for Assembly electoral areas;
 - 7b Considering the cost and resource implications of reforming the electoral system and Assembly boundaries.
8. The last two are, in any case, a job for politically-neutral civil servants, and not for politicians.

The importance of cooperation between parties, and how best to achieve it

9. Under voting systems which do not include vote transfers (e.g. FPTP or closed party lists), parties endeavour to maximise turnout of their own voters, while minimising turnout of other parties' voters. "Best play" is therefore to demonise other parties, by emphasising how they get everything wrong, and only the "one true faith" will do.
10. Under voting systems which do include vote transfers (AV and STV), "best play" is to emphasise the points which parties have in common, in order to attract second-preference votes.

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11. Parties and their agents will inevitably try to game the system, so it is important to have a system which encourages cooperation and not demonisation.
12. As an example of how emphasising points in common works in practice, I cite the recent Irish General Election. The Green Party candidates prospered largely through transfer votes from Sinn Fein. This could well lead on to further cooperation between the two parties, and even to them working together in coalition.
13. As an example of how proportional representation without vote transfers fails to provide stable government, I cite the 2019 Spanish General Elections, where each of four parties typically obtains about a quarter of the vote, and none of them has any history of cooperation with any other. The April election resulted in a short-lived single-party minority government, and the subsequent November election resulted in a coalition between two parties both losing ground to a common enemy.
14. Thus, both theory and practice confirm that voting systems with vote transfers encourage cooperation and stable coalition governments, whereas voting systems without transfers encourage mutual antagonism and unstable single-party minority governments. It is vital that the voting system should include vote transfers.
15. For this reason: I support Single Transferable Vote, and oppose any system (FPTP, AMS, closed lists) without vote transfers.
16. A secondary benefit of STV is that it allows voters to choose between candidates of the same party. Voters get the representation they want, not the candidate imposed on them by the party closest to their views. Voters cannot do this with FPTP, AMS or closed lists, and it is only theoretically possible with flexible lists.
17. It is not unknown for political parties to parachute candidates in to constituencies with which they had no previous connection. This should be discouraged, and by allowing voters to choose local candidates in preference to parachute candidates from the same party, STV would be a very effective method of discouraging parachute candidates.
18. On the question of the number of constituencies, either 17 to 20 constituencies would give about the right balance between localism and proportionality, and either alternative would be entirely acceptable. My personal preference would be the 20-constituency model.

The importance of a diverse National Assembly, and how best to achieve it

19. Most of the "diversity" in the 2018 consultation document refers specifically to gender. There are a few general references to disability, age is only considered in the section on reducing the minimum voting age, and I cannot find anything relating to ethnic or religious diversity. This is a serious weakness in what was otherwise an excellent document. Diversity should be more diverse.
20. Diversity, while welcome, is not to be pursued for its own sake. The objective is good legislation.
21. Diversity is important because it will result in an Assembly with a wider range of experience and knowledge, thus leading to good legislation. Increasing the size of the Assembly is also important, for the same reason: a larger Assembly will have a wider range of experience and knowledge. Similarly, job-sharing should be permitted.
22. In considering how to widen the range of experience and knowledge in the Assembly, we should look at what is currently missing.

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23. For example, as far as I can tell from information in the public domain, only five of the sixty AMs have a degree in a STEM subject, only two have worked in manufacturing industry, and none are chartered engineers. Asking this group of people to create an industrial policy for the years to come is absurd—they do not have the required expertise.
24. Other expertise is also missing. Cultural funding is determined by AMs who have neither produced nor appeared in a feature film nor released an album. Sports funding is determined by AMs who have not represented Wales in any international sporting contest.
25. Wales is famous for its actors and singers. Their fame is the source of our "soft power", our influence in the world. Since it is likely that, in future, the Welsh economy will depend even more on our cultural exports, we shall need creative artists, not paper-pushers, in the National Assembly.
26. Wales is known for punching above its weight in international competitions, and positive role-models are found on the rugby field, not in the Assembly. Indeed, it is the lack of positive role-models in the Assembly that is the source of the problem.
27. The stereotypical politician is a middle-aged white man in a badly-fitting suit. He speaks political gobbledegook, and on the rare occasions that he speaks plainly, he is lying.
28. This negative stereotype is presumably the source of the opposition to expanding the National Assembly. We do not need more stereotypical politicians—we have more than enough of them already.
29. Obviously, this stereotype discourages women from entering politics. It also deters those from minority ethnicities, and also (in no particular order) the fashion-conscious, the young, the old and the honest.
30. Thus, the problem to be addressed is that politicians are not positive role-models. It is this, not the voting system, which puts people off entering politics. And it is thus the public perception of politicians which we must change.
31. As a first step, more should be done to spread the idea that politics is for everyone, including women and minority groups. Until this idea takes root, artificial measures to promote diversity in politics are unlikely to succeed.
32. The 2018 consultation recommended STV with quotas. As noted above, I am strongly in favour of STV, so much so that I will accept quotas if that is what it takes to introduce STV. Perhaps quotas are worth trying, but there are reasons to believe that they will not succeed.
33. Of the many problems with quotas, the most serious is that of intersectionality. Diversity is not simply a matter of gender, and enforcing gender quotas while doing nothing for other underrepresented groups could lead to an Assembly where "all the women are white, and all the black people are men".
34. There are also technical difficulties in implementing quotas. Experts on STV have considered STV with quotas—see the papers in Voting Matters by:
 - Hill (<http://www.votingmatters.org.uk/ISSUE9/P1.HTM>)
 - Hill responding to Kitchener (<http://www.votingmatters.org.uk/ISSUE10/P3.HTM>)
 - Otten (<http://www.votingmatters.org.uk/ISSUE13/P3.HTM>).
35. Hill's recommendation is "don't do it".

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36. A further objection is that requiring a party to stand at least two candidates (one male, one female) in any constituency which they wish to contest discriminates against small parties. It is hard enough finding £500 for one deposit; finding £1000 for two deposits is too much to ask. (But a flat deposit which was the same whether the party put up one candidate or two would avoid this objection.)
37. Other suggested methods of addressing the problem are also unlikely to succeed. Leaving gender balance to political parties is unlikely to help much, as the first priority of any political party is to get its candidates elected, and they do this by selecting candidates on the basis of voter appeal. Zipping lists doesn't work for smaller parties, as only the head-of-list candidate has much chance of being elected, so the ordering of any remaining candidates is irrelevant.

Other comments

38. I am pleased to see that some of the recommendations of the 2018 report have already passed into law: 16-year-olds can now vote in Assembly elections; prisoners can vote if they will be released before the expected end of the lifetime of the body being elected; and those with incompatible jobs can stand for election to the National Assembly, only relinquishing their previous jobs if elected. Thank you.
39. I am happy to be contacted in the future in relation to this consultation and my submission, and I am happy for you to retain my contact details and contact me for these purposes

With best wishes,

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