

(Madam) (Deputy) Vice Chancellor,

May I begin on a positive note by thanking the Voting Review Committee for meeting with me to discuss the issues raised by the evidence I submitted, particularly with regard to the voting systems which might be considered to be optimal in different circumstances. Unfortunately, the resulting Report now before us contains little to suggest that my carefully thought out points, either written or verbal, were taken much to heart by the Committee. I have a few comments to make concerning some parts of the Report, followed by a major point which sums up the fundamental lack of understanding of the underlying issues by the Committee.

Paragraph 3.1 states that the STV system has proved to be ‘generally satisfactory’, while paragraph 3.2 attributes any divergence from this general satisfaction to the way in which issues have been presented, rather than to any deficiency in the voting system. The theme returns in stronger form in section 6, where all the blame for strange results is lain at the door of poor presentation of options, while STV is completely exonerated. This is a nice theory, and one that is convenient for the University, but not one which has much concrete basis in fact. It is true that, on the most recent occasion that bizarre results were achieved, the issues were presented in rather a perverse fashion, thus exacerbating the problems. The same cannot, however, be said of the previous occasion (in 1990). When the voting on the number of signatures required to call for a Ballot gave a result that met with outrage, being widely perceived to be counter-intuitive, the issue had been presented in an extremely simple and clear-cut fashion.

Furthermore such complacent dismissal of STV’s potential problems is dangerous, particularly due to the inherent instability of its single-winner version. One could perhaps describe it in engineer’s terms as ‘imperfection-sensitive’ – a small change in initial conditions (how the votes are cast) can lead to a large change in resultant behaviour (the outcome). I should hope that most people realise that this is far from ideal; an example of such can be seen if one attempts even a cursory analysis of the results of the Ballots on Graces 5 and 6 of 20 November 2002 – see also the evidence I submitted to the Committee<sup>1</sup>.

Moving on now to paragraph 4.2: ‘Nor is there any evidence that this method of voting has caused difficulty in relation to decisions on legislative issues’. This statement galls on two levels. Firstly, as just stated, there have been occasions on which people have considered the results to be counter-intuitive. That this in itself does not provide *hard evidence* of real problems leads to the main reason for my annoyance: there is no hard evidence (within the University at any rate) because no-one has cared to look for any. To dismiss the possibility of such investigation as too time-consuming, and then to reject the offer of help from people who, while acknowledging the time-consuming nature of the task, were nevertheless willing to expend (unpaid) time on it, and then, further, to claim that there *is* no evidence seems to me to be disingenuous in the extreme. In an academic environment such as this, one might expect people to have an understanding of appropriate research methods, and how to draw useful conclusions; this statement in paragraph 4.2 appears to give the lie to such an expectation.

I shall return to the discussion of different voting systems presented in section 5 in due course, as this is where much of the misunderstanding is concentrated, but first wish to make a few extremely brief points about the rest of the Report.

---

<sup>1</sup><http://www.chiark.greenend.org.uk/~galletly/university/evidence.pdf>

Recommendation 11(a) appears innocuous but conceals a double-edged sword, which could be interpreted as attempting to reintroduce by the back door the proposal that 50 signatures be required for an amendment to a Grace. Firstly, the proposers of an amendment will also have to request a Ballot for fear their amendment be deemed inadmissible, and thus swept under the carpet. Alternatively, it might be deemed to be a Grace originating from the Regent House – for which 50 signatures are already required. This requires clarification – and surely the assurance that if 25 people support an amendment to a Grace, there must be sufficient discontentment with it that a Ballot should automatically be called without their having to protest in duplicate. The issue of who should be responsible for deeming amendments inadmissible, and for their redrafting, I expect to be tackled adequately by others.

I turn now to the major point that typifies the lack of understanding of the Committee. Paragraph 5.2 provides abbreviated definitions of different voting methods, but fails sufficiently to emphasise the crucial points (please take note; this is the most important thing I shall say this afternoon):

1. STV is useful for filling multiple positions so as to represent the *breadth* of views of a diverse population (so is good when electing committees);
2. Condorcet tries to find the *common ground* amongst the same diverse population (so is good when one option only may be chosen, for instance when electing the Chair of a Committee – or the Chancellor of a University – or when enacting legislative reform).

The natural conclusion from this is that we need to use different voting systems for different types of ballot. This is not just my conclusion; the wider psephological community (and indeed the first economist to be awarded the Nobel Prize – one of our own experts who failed to make it onto the Committee, despite having published on the subject<sup>2</sup>) concur. Paragraphs 5.4 and 5.5 consider and reject this conclusion, using as justification that people would not wish the voting system to become any more complicated than it already is. The premise is sound, but the conclusion is not, particularly given that the two voting systems in question are STV and Condorcet, as the manner in which voting papers are filled out is identical for these two systems. The difference comes at the point of tallying the votes, and thus only the Returning Officer would be required to understand the mechanics of the systems – and were electronic voting/counting not considered anathema, even his job would be simplified greatly, even from its current state.

Thus there is no valid justification for the conclusion reached by the Committee that we should stick with the status quo. A possible indicator of why they concluded as they did is given in Appendix B, where they suggest that a consensual legislative solution might not be desirable. There is no evidence or justification presented for this view, and it runs counter to the current emphasis on goodwill and trust. Surely in a community of scholars such as this, the best solution is one that antagonises the fewest people, *not* one which commands almost equal liking and loathing. The latter almost guarantees instability (as injured parties decide to stand for Council to re-fight past battles); the former (while perhaps slowing the pace of reform a little) ensures that rash changes and reverses are minimised. It is often considered wise to move at the pace of the more cautious members of a community.

---

<sup>2</sup><http://www.econ.cam.ac.uk/dasgupta/MajRuVot.pdf>