

To: Strand One Participants

From: Strand One Secretariat

PAPER FROM THE DE BORDA INSTITUTE

Mr Murphy met representatives from the De Borda Institute recently. At that meeting he agreed to circulate a short paper they had prepared to the Strand One participants for their information. That paper is now attached.

THE DE BORDA INSTITUTE

DECISION-MAKING AT LOCAL AND PROVINCIAL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

A number of voting methodologies can be used to facilitate decision-making, and the most common are as follows:

- i simple (or relative) majority voting,
- ii absolute (or weighted) majority voting,
- iii consociational majority voting or 'sufficient consensus',
- iv two-round majority voting,
- v the alternative vote, using STV (the single transferable vote),
- vi the Borda count, preference score or the Borda preferendum,

The first three voting procedures usually involve a straight 'A versus B' or 'A versus status quo' two-option question. They can be used in a multi-option vote, and this is the only format applicable to the second three methods. A brief appraisal of all six is as follows.

SIMPLE (OR RELATIVE) MAJORITY VOTING

1A In a two-option setting, this method may leave up to 49% of those voting alienated by the decision, and a greater number by the process. Indeed, in many instances, it merely encourages the minority to abstain, as in Northern Ireland in 1973 and Croatia in 1991. Furthermore, this methodology allows those in power to dominate the agenda. In the 1995 constitutional referendum in Quebec, the premier focussed the question on an Anglo-Franco axis, and ignored all other peoples. In a second instance, Mrs Thatcher promoted the poll tax, and other equally valid options - local income tax, property tax, etc. - were not even on the agenda.

1B In a multi-option setting, other options can be included. If the count is still that of a simple (or relative) majority, however, there will usually be only two 'favourites'. On those occasions where there are three or more, the 'winner' may have only the largest minority, with subsequent misgivings as to how much was tactical voting, and so forth.

ABSOLUTE (OR WEIGHTED) MAJORITY VOTING

2A These two incur all of the disadvantages of para 1A. Then, in a multi-option poll, insisting on a minimum of 50% may lead to an *impasse*. Such is even more likely in any weighted majority voting, and what's more, any corresponding minority can then exercise a veto.

CONSOCIATIONAL MAJORITY VOTING OR SUFFICIENT CONSENSUS

3A This too may also lead to an *impasse*, as happened with the variations used in Czechoslovakia and Bosnia. Secondly, its very use tends to enforce the very division it is supposed to heal. Thirdly, it may disenfranchise any who do not wish to be too closely identified with one or other 'bloc'.

TWO-ROUND MAJORITY VOTING

4A This was used in 1948 in Newfoundland (but the winner got an absolute majority in the first round), in 1992 in New Zealand, and in 1982 in Guam when the voters had seven options to choose from. While a definite improvement, this method tends to boil down to (not two but) three 'favourites'.

ALTERNATIVE VOTE (STV)

5A As was recognised by the Plant commission, this methodology is not 'monotonic', that is, it may lead to some unfair results according to which option gets eliminated first.

THE BORDA PREFERENDUM

6A This method is the only non-majoritarian voting procedure yet devised. Furthermore, it lays down certain guidelines for the conduct of the debate which precedes the vote. Firstly, it requires the participants to agree to elect a team of three, independent, non-voting consensors whose task, on any contentious issue, is as follows:

- i) to establish which proposals comply with the UN Declaration on Human Rights or some other previously agreed norm;
- ii) to draw up a list of options to represent these proposals; and then, the chair having confirmed that all concerned agree that their particular aspiration has been fairly represented either verbatim or in composite...
- iii) to conduct and then analyse the vote.

6B On a ten-option ballot, a voter may cast 10 points for her/his most preferred option, 9 points for her next favourite, 8 for her third choice, and so on, as she wishes, and hand in either a complete or partial ballot paper. The consensors add up the points received by each option* and express this total as a percentage of the theoretical maximum as that option's 'level of consensus'. If two options are very close first and second, the consensors may composite any mutually compatible aspects of the second with the first. If the final option has an overall level of consensus of at least 75%, it may be enacted. If not, the debate will be resumed based on the most popular options, and the process repeated.

CONCLUSIONS

7A In all forms of the majority vote, some win and others lose. In the more inclusive methodology of the Borda preferendum, the outcome is that option which is the highest average preference of every voter. Its advantages are most likely to be apparent in any new Assembly or local council structured on a power-sharing executive.

* For details of how partial votes are to be counted, see "The Politics of Consensus" available from this Institute.