

To: The Richards Commission (CRC)  
From: Dr. John Cox FRSA  
Date: 31-May-03

## **National Assembly of Wales: electoral arrangements**

This personal submission was written at the request of the Parliament for Wales campaign. It stands on its own and is independent of whatever may be proposed in respect of the powers of the National Assembly.

I have read some other submissions to the Commission on electoral arrangements and attempted to limit my own to matters not dealt with elsewhere. For the record, I give my opinion on issues covered by others - but only develop my arguments if they differ or if the topics received only brief mention elsewhere.

The specific topics covered herein are:

1. Voting turnout – how FPTP and AMS contribute to public apathy
2. How the size of the National Assembly influences government
3. The divisive effects of AMS within the National Assembly
4. Advantages of STV in respect of all these identified issues

I have added an Appendix showing how, by using County Authority boundaries or pairing parliamentary constituencies, STV constituencies would not need legislative or boundary amendments arising from population movement or changes at Westminster.

### **1 Voting turnout**

Lower turnout is a long-term trend, due in part to our first-past-the-post election system. FPTP encourages parties to focus on ‘marginal’ constituencies and ‘floating’ voters and, effectively, to ignore 90% of the electorate. I live in Torfaen, where one party has dominated politics for over 80 years – and continues to do so even with its voting share now way below 50%. The result is:

- (a) During all of the past 30 years, no one has ever come to my door to ask for my vote at an election.
- (b) During the recent National Assembly election, I did not see even one party poster displayed anywhere in Torfaen.
- (c) One-quarter of Torfaen councillors have never faced election.

This is not just a local problem (though Torfaen typifies much of Wales). Far more insidious, many socio-economic groups feel isolated as all parties deploy similar policies all aimed at middle-income middle-opinion middle class voters. This leads ‘core’ supporters of both major UK parties to feel ‘taken for granted’. Few take their disillusionment so far as to vote for a traditional ‘enemy’ but, increasingly, more and more are staying at home at election time.

What Wales needs is an election system that *values every vote equally* and so *obliges* all political parties to campaign with equal intensity in all constituencies and across all socio-economic groups. *This is my primary argument for advocating STV.*

## 2 Size of National Assembly

I support an increase in the number of Assembly Members to 80-100. In addition to reasons advanced elsewhere, I believe 60 is too low a number for fruitful three-way interaction between the government, its 2½ oppositions and, equally important, the effectiveness of the government's own backbenchers.

Good government requires well briefed but not over-worked **ministers**, vigilant and effective **opposition** and a reflective and independent **backbench** that keeps the government in touch with its own supporters and trends in public opinion. Not one of these three elements of good government is operating effectively.

2.1 From my observations, the nine Welsh **ministers** have a significantly greater workload than their counterparts at Westminster and in Scotland and have fewer or no junior ministers and no PPSs. Moreover, insofar as not having executive powers must require extra liaison, this adds to their relative workload. I believe all ministers need at least one full-time junior minister and that all need adequate support staff.

2.2 Unlike at Westminster, the **opposition** is split 2½ ways and even the largest has fewer AMs available for shadowing than there are ministers and junior ministers. So virtually every opposition AM is a front-bench shadow (and necessarily less well briefed and without adequate support). Whereas at Westminster five or six MPs often work as a team shadowing one single ministry, the ministers in the National Assembly only have to respond to 2½ poorly briefed and mutually antagonistic shadows.

2.3 Whereas at Westminster, backbenchers far outnumber the ministerial teams, here in the National Assembly the ratio is roughly 50:50. This reduces the influence and independence of the **backbenchers** relative to the so-called 'pay-roll' vote. With 80 AMs, backbenchers would outnumber the 'payroll vote' by 2-to-1 – a healthy ratio for productive government-opposition-backbench interaction.

2.4 This is why the National Assembly should have at least 80 and preferably 100 members. For *pro rata* parity with Scotland, the number would be 80 and to achieve parity with Northern Ireland it would exceed 150! These comparisons confirm that the **number of AMs should be not less than 80**.

2.5 The present formulæ (of one constituency AM for every seat at Westminster and 4 regional AMs for every former seat in Europe) may not survive the next report from the Boundary Commission or change in our representation at Westminster. It is prudent (whatever the number of AMs) to decide on a system that will be unaffected by future external changes over which the National Assembly can have no control.

2.6 If the Commission were to recommend (and legislation were enacted to create) multi-member STV constituencies, boundaries could be frozen. Legislation then could specify a total number of AMs and leave the calculation for each constituency to (say) the Electoral Commission, using the latest figures from the electoral register\*.

2.7 With (about) 18-20 **STV Constituencies**, it is feasible to have any number of Assembly Members from 60-100 – including odd numbers!

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\* The Appendix gives examples of the calculation.

### 3 Divisive effects of AMS

The existing system has many shortcomings. Of these, its divisive impact on day-to-day working relationships within the National Assembly is, in my opinion, more of a problem than any transient irritations at election time. These divisive effects concern the responsibilities of and tensions between Assembly Members, the potential misuse of the election system and the exaggerated and destructive hostility between parties.

3.1 The first problem arises from having two types of Assembly Member, with different duties, responsibilities and workload. Whereas every government AM has duties that overlap locally with an MP, all 20 regional AMs are from the opposition and feel free to roam. With the government AMs all in one category and most of the opposition in the other, this exacerbates tensions between Assembly Members.

3.2 The second problem is geographic. Despite being the leading party (with 37% of the votes), the government is unrepresented over most of Wales! By contrast, in the smaller but more populated areas of Wales, where the government won 30 seats, the combined opposition parties obtained more votes but were rewarded with only two constituency seats. AMS has not ended the anomalies of the first-past-the-post election system – it has added a few extra!

3.3 Concerning the election system as such: this is open to abuse and, at the recent election, there was at least one party trying to woo voters into (what I would submit to be) unprincipled tactical vote switching. Although this strategy failed for this election, with familiarity it is inevitable that Labour supporters will realise the futility of voting Labour on the second ballot and, instead, vote tactically for a next-to-Labour Party.

3.4 My fourth complaint concerns its effect on how parties view each other and, as a corollary, how politics is conducted and, in response, how politics is perceived by voters. I will make my case in just a few sentences – well aware that an erudite political writer might fill many columns of the Sunday Times on this topic.

As noted earlier, with FPTP there has been a long-term trend towards political parties targeting the same people and offering similar sounding policies. This means *inter alia* that the major threat to any party comes from the party closest to it in policy and targeting the same socio-economic groups. In Wales, this has led to an irrational antagonism between the Labour Party and Plaid Cymru, with both parties spending far more time denigrating the other than arguing for (what they won't admit are) their broadly similar policies on most issues where the National Assembly has any power.

In consequence of this broad agreement on essentials, the parties are reduced to fierce encounters on trivialities (encouraged, I concede, by the media who much prefer sound-bites to serious in-depth debate and are only too willing to trivialise any subject by personalising any dispute). The electorate, whose experience of politics is nowadays primarily obtained from the media, responds by distrusting all politicians and becomes less and less inclined to participate – or even vote.

3.5 No electoral system for Wales can by itself reverse a trend of several decades. However, it would be better to have a system that eliminated the divisions of ¶3.1 and ¶3.2, was not open to the abuse feared in ¶3.3 and, rather than encouraging inter-party tribalism as noted in ¶3.4, actually conferred benefits to a party acknowledging any points of agreement. I submit that STV satisfies all these requirements.

#### 4 Advantages of STV

As the Commission must be well aware of the mechanics of STV and the general arguments in its favour, this summary is confined to aspects that directly relate to the National Assembly or have specific relevance for Wales.

In respect of the issues raised in this submission, these are the salient points:

- a) There are NO ‘safe’ seats with STV: even in Blaenau Gwent and Methyr Tydfil, there would be a genuine contest for at least the last seat. This must oblige all political parties to campaign in all constituencies.
- b) Political parties cannot risk taking their core vote for granted and must have policies that appeal to all their supporters, not only the ‘wobblies’.
- c) All AMs are equal and have the same constituency responsibilities.
- d) All parties are likely to be represented throughout all regions of Wales.
- e) STV encourages political canvassers to highlight points in common - to win second preference votes from supporters of parties with similar policies. This would be a marked departure from current practice and could be the beginning of a process leading to the replacement of “yah-boo” politics by the more constructive politics that the public evidently would prefer.

Three additional points of relevance for Wales are:

- f) The legislation creating STV constituencies and defining the total number of Assembly Members will not need periodic revision for future population movements or future changes to the Westminster constituencies. With the boundaries defined (see Appendix), the National Assembly (or perhaps the Electoral Commission) merely has to determine the entitlement of each constituency against the latest electoral register.
- g) The tradition of non-party participation in local government in many parts of Wales is easier to uphold if votes are cast for individuals and candidates of parties competing on a more equal basis.
- h) The 10% of the electorate that currently votes for various minor parties (UKP, SLP, Greens, etc) tend to feel isolated from the political process. If their second preference vote helped elect someone (albeit of another party), this sense of isolation could be lessened.

Two further points are worth considering:

- i) Unless someone wants to argue that the Irish are smarter than the Welsh, ranking preferences on a single ballot paper by STV produces fewer spoilt votes than FPTP and, clearly, must be much simpler than voting firstly for a candidate and a second time for a party.
- j) With STV, voters have the opportunity to decide between the candidates of their preferred party. Bearing in mind that less than 1% of the electorate are members of any of the political parties in Wales, this would be a welcome and beneficial extension of democracy. Hopefully also, as has been proved in Ireland, this will improve the quality of the Assembly Members elected.

## APPENDIX      STV constituencies

3-6 members is generally agreed to be the best size for an STV constituency. If the number of Assembly Members is 60-100, about 20 STV constituencies will be needed. The obvious arrangement is to pair the 40 Westminster constituencies and decide the number of seats on the basis of strict parity in voters/member<sup>\*\*</sup>.

CONSTITUENCY PAIRINGS	VOTERS (2003)	<u>Allocation of seats for each size of Assembly</u>									
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Newport East/West	117801	3	3	4	4	<b>4</b>	4	5	5	5	
Monmouth/Torfaen	123715	3	4	4	4	<b>4</b>	5	5	5	6	
Caerphilly/Islwyn	119322	3	4	4	4	<b>4</b>	5	5	5	5	
Blaenau Gwent & Merthyr&Rhymney	108695	3	3	3	4	<b>4</b>	4	4	5	5	
Cardiff Central & South & Penarth	127976	3	4	4	4	<b>5</b>	5	5	5	6	
Cardiff North & Cardiff West	125051	3	4	4	4	<b>5</b>	5	5	5	6	
Pontypridd & Vale of Glamorgan	132151	4	4	4	4	<b>5</b>	5	5	6	6	
Cynon Valley & Rhondda	94936	3	3	3	3	<b>3</b>	4	4	4	4	
Bridgend/Ogmore	112105	3	3	4	4	<b>4</b>	4	5	5	5	
Aberavon & Neath	106967	3	3	3	4	<b>4</b>	4	4	5	5	
Swansea East/West	116001	3	3	4	4	<b>4</b>	4	5	5	5	
Gower & Llanelli	117951	3	3	4	4	<b>4</b>	5	5	5	5	
Carmarthen West & S Pembs/Preseli	111598	3	3	3	4	<b>4</b>	4	4	5	5	
Carmarthen East & Dinefwr/Ceredigion	107050	3	3	3	4	<b>4</b>	4	4	5	5	
Brecon/Radnorshire &Montgomeryshire	99337	3	3	3	3	<b>4</b>	4	4	4	4	
Clwyd South & Wrexham	103960	3	3	3	4	<b>4</b>	4	4	4	5	
Alyn & Deeside & Delyn	114944	3	3	4	4	<b>4</b>	4	5	5	5	
Clwyd West & Vale of Clwyd	103782	3	3	3	3	<b>4</b>	4	4	4	5	
Meirionydd Nant Conwy & Conwy	88185	2	3	3	3	<b>3</b>	3	4	4	4	
Caernarfon & Ynys Môn	97171	3	3	3	3	<b>3</b>	4	4	4	4	
<b>Number of seats</b>		<b>60</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>100</b>	
Votes/member quota		36600	34000	31911	29700	27767	26200	24853	23524	22407	

<sup>\*\*</sup> This calculation (of votes/member) ignored the tradition of weighting for sparsely populated areas.

The second illustration uses Local Authority boundaries. It is a more complicated because electorates vary enormously and Cardiff has to be subdivided to give two not-too-large constituencies. The end result requires 18 constituencies with more variable electorates than one based on the Westminster constituencies.

Its justification would be political – by identifying Assembly Members with Local Authorities (rather than Westminster), this might concentrate attention on issues and, as a corollary, Local Authorities might relate more closely to the National Assembly.

Number of seats	VOTERS (1999)	Allocation of seats for each size of Assembly									
		60	65	70	75	80	85	90	95	100	
Newport	104,240	3	3	3	4	<b>4</b>	4	4	4	5	
Monmouthshire & Torfaen	137,429	4	4	4	5	<b>5</b>	5	6	6	6	
Caerphilly	132,864	4	4	4	4	<b>5</b>	5	5	6	6	
Merthyr Tydfil / Blaenau Gwent	96,345	3	3	3	3	<b>3</b>	4	4	4	4	
Cardiff 1	119,447	3	3	4	4	<b>4</b>	5	5	5	5	
Cardiff 2	119,447	3	3	4	4	<b>4</b>	5	5	5	5	
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	162,323	4	5	5	5	<b>6</b>	6	7	7	7	
The Vale of Glamorgan	88,994	2	3	3	3	<b>3</b>	3	4	4	4	
Bridgend	101,675	3	3	3	3	<b>4</b>	4	4	4	5	
Neath Port Talbot	107,566	3	3	3	4	<b>4</b>	4	4	5	5	
Swansea	177,105	5	5	6	6	<b>6</b>	7	7	8	8	
Carmarthenshire	134,487	4	4	4	5	<b>5</b>	5	5	6	6	
Pembrokeshire & Ceredigion	142,252	4	4	4	5	<b>5</b>	5	6	6	6	
Powys	100,371	3	3	3	3	<b>4</b>	4	4	4	4	
Wrexham	96,835	3	3	3	3	<b>3</b>	4	4	4	4	
Flintshire	114,932	3	3	4	4	<b>4</b>	4	5	5	5	
Denbighshire & Conwy	154,899	4	5	5	5	<b>6</b>	6	6	7	7	
Isle of Anglesey & Gwynedd	141,991	4	4	4	5	<b>5</b>	5	6	6	6	
<b>Number of seats</b>		<b>60</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>100</b>	
Votes/member quota		37220	34357	31903	29776	27770	26273	24813	23507	22332	

Many other options could be suggested for multi-member constituencies: these two tables merely illustrate that the task is not difficult mathematically.

Once the decision on the total number of seats has been made, the calculation of the seats for each constituency is its electorate divided by the national “quota of votes/member”. If the total number of seats is not equal to the number legislated, the quota is adjusted up or down as necessary until the target total is achieved.