

Renewing Local Democracy: The Next Steps

Fairshare welcomes the publication of the Scottish Executive's White Paper and the opportunity to give evidence to the Local Government Committee on those aspects of the White Paper that relate to electoral reform for Scotland's councils.

Fairshare believes that to be fully effective, councils must be properly representative of the communities they serve and that councillors must be democratically accountable to their local electorates.

Fairshare agrees with the five principles recommended by the McIntosh Commission to determine the most appropriate voting system for future local government elections.

Fairshare also agrees with the priority the Kerley Working Group gave to the first two of those principles, ie proportionality and the councillor-ward link.

Fairshare strongly supports the Kerley recommendation of the Single Transferable Vote system of proportional representation (STV-PR) as the voting system that best meets the needs of local government.

The Executive's Position

In the White Paper the Executive reiterates its commitment to making progress on electoral reform in line with the principles of the Kerley Report and sets out the key factors Ministers will take into account when considering the introduction of a new electoral system.

Retention of the councillor-ward link (para 32.1)

The retention and, if possible, the enhancement of a strong, identifiable and direct link between the councillor and his or her constituents must be fundamental for local government. It is the link that gives the councillor legitimacy as an elected representative and makes him or her accountable to the local electorate. However, maintaining that link does not require single-member wards. The overwhelming majority (85%) of councillors in England are elected from multi-member wards (2 to 5 members), and there is nothing to suggest that they are any less strongly linked to their constituents than those elected from single-member wards.

STV-PR would not weaken the councillor-ward link. With STV-PR there would be only one kind of elected member and all would be ward representatives. The ward link would be strengthened with STV-PR because councillors would owe their positions to the support of those who had voted for them individually in the local ward. STV-PR would also strengthen the link because it maximises the number of votes that contribute to the result of an election and therefore maximises the number of voters who feel they have contributed directly to the election of a councillor. Flexible and sensitive implementation would ensure that these benefits were not compromised by inappropriately large wards in rural areas.

Clear reflection of voters' preferences and fair to all types of candidate (para 32.2)

As a system of proportional representation, STV-PR will ensure that voters' preferences will be clearly reflected in the result of an election, both at ward level and across the council as a whole. Political parties and other groups would be represented in the wards and on the council in proportion to their support among those who voted. This will encourage parties

and other groups to put up candidates wherever they have significant support and so enfranchise more electors.

Because STV-PR uniquely allows voters free choice among all the candidates within a multi-member ward, it can give PR of political parties or of other 'communities of interests' or of both, depending entirely on the preferences of the voters. The McIntosh Commission attached considerable importance to the 'communities of interests' other than political parties to which electors might belong. Some of these 'communities of interests' may be non-party or cross party boundaries, but others may exist within parties. STV-PR thus encourages parties to offer their supporters choice among their sponsored candidates so that voters can, if they wish, rank candidates on the basis of gender, religious affiliation, locality, ethnicity or policy issues.

STV-PR is a candidate-based voting system that treats all candidates alike no matter whether they are nominated by large parties, small parties or local interest groups, or they stand as independents.

Usable throughout Scotland and responsive to the needs of urban and rural areas (para 32.2)

STV-PR could be implemented flexibly to allow for the geographical diversity that exists across Scotland, both between and within local authorities. The numbers of members elected from each ward can be varied to suit local circumstances, with larger numbers in the more densely populated areas and smaller numbers where the population is sparse. There is, however, a trade-off between proportionality and the geographic size of the wards.

The adoption of STV-PR would make it much easier to devise wards that did not divide natural communities. With STV-PR both the numbers of electors and the numbers of elected members within wards can be varied to maintain equality of representation. This offers great flexibility in the determination of locally acceptable wards boundaries.

Clear support for the voting system (para 32.3)

The Executive will find there is substantial and widespread support for the view that a change to a PR voting system would be beneficial for local government as reported by the McIntosh Commission which consulted in depth and very widely.

A poll carried out by System Three in February 2000¹ demonstrated that Scottish voters back a fairer voting system for electing their local councillors by a margin of almost six to one. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: '*Local councils would be more representative of the interests of local communities if the shares of seats won by the parties broadly reflected their shares of the votes*', 70% of respondents said they agreed. Just 12% disagreed, while 18% said that they did not know. These views were consistent across supporters of all political parties.

The poll also asked for views on the statement: '*A voting system which encourages councillors of different parties to co-operate more is likely to lead to better local government*'. In response, exactly three-quarters of respondents (75%) agreed with the statement and just one in ten (10%) disagreed. Again, these views were consistent across supporters of all political parties. To ensure that voters were not simply agreeing with any statement put in front of them, the poll asked for views on the statement: '*We get better local government*

1. System Three interviewed 1,030 adults in their homes at 40 sampling points across Scotland during the period 24 - 29 February 2000. The sample was representative of the adult population in terms of age, sex and social class.

when one party gets a large majority of the seats, even if it does not have a large majority of the votes'. Voters disagreed with this statement by around two to one.

In the Rowntree Reform Trust State of the Nation 2000 Survey, 68% of Scottish respondents strongly agreed or tended to agree with the statement '*Elections for local authorities should use a new voting system that would give parties seats on local councils in proportion to their share of the vote.*' Only 7% disagreed.²

Fairshare, campaigning for STV-PR for councils since January 2001, has support from members of all political parties and none.

Numbers of councillors and boundary changes (para 32.4)

Implementation of the recommended STV-PR voting system would not require any changes in the numbers of councillors. Ministers have concluded that they do not wish to reduce the number of councillors at this time (para 8). They have, however, indicated that they will consider sympathetically any proposals by individual councils for such reductions. Where a council wishes such a reduction, STV-PR would facilitate that change because it would not be necessary to redraw boundaries for single-member wards.

For the first STV-PR elections the existing single-member wards could be amalgamated into appropriately sized multi-member wards, as was done in Northern Ireland in 1973 when STV-PR was re-introduced for local government elections there. With 26 District Councils, the whole process, including local consultations, took only three months to implement. Full advantage was taken of the flexibility of STV-PR to accommodate the needs of the diverse local communities in both the urban and rural areas.

The Executive's Questions

The Executive sought views on three aspects of the issues raised by its proposals for electoral reform for local government.

The principles recommended by the McIntosh Commission

Fairshare agrees with the McIntosh Commission that the five criteria set out in its Report are the most appropriate to determine which system of proportional representation should be used for future local government elections in Scotland.

Proportionality is essential to ensure that most votes count and that most voters have a councillor for whom they voted. This will ensure that the seats won by groups contesting an election will be broadly proportional to the support each has within the community. 'Proportionality' must not, however, be defined solely in terms of PR of political parties and other formally registered groups. As the McIntosh Commission stated: '*The essence of the case for proportional representation is that it produces a result which more fairly represents the spectrum of opinion within the electorate*' (Report para 82). The Commission reported in its Consultation Paper 2 that many electors identified with communities defined by ethnic origin, religious affiliation and a range of common interests (para 56). Such 'communities of interests' typically cut across political party boundaries, but they are no less deserving of proportional representation if councils are properly to represent the spectrum of opinion within they electorates they serve.

2. ICM Research interviewed a UK quota sample of 2,401 adults in the street between 23 - 28 October 2000

The councillor-ward link is fundamental to the very concept of **local** government. Because of the current structure of local government in Scotland, based only on single-member wards, this link is often viewed solely in geographical terms. However, as pointed out above, this link is more appropriately seen as the link between the elected councillors and those who voted for them. To maintain this central link, all councillors must be elected on the same basis and all must be directly accountable to an identifiable local electorate.

Independent councillors play an important part in local government in many parts of Scotland and it is essential that the voting system does not discriminate against them. Equally it should not favour them at the expense of other candidates, but rather treat all candidates the same.

Allowance for geographical diversity is essential to ensure effective representation in both the densely populated conurbations and the sparsely populated rural areas.

A close fit between council wards and natural communities will help electors relate to the councils that serve them and engender a more fully participative local democracy. With any voting system based in whole or in part on single-member wards, it is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the artificial division of natural communities. These problems will be most easily overcome if the system adopted permits flexible implementation so that ward boundaries can be drawn without the need for natural communities to be divided.

The priority the Kerley Working Group attached to the first two principles

Fairshare agrees with the priority the Kerley Working Group gave to the first two of the five criteria recommended by the McIntosh Commission, ie proportionality and the councillor-ward link. It is clear from our own discussions with councillors, political activists and ordinary electors that these are the two aspects of the voting system of greatest general concern.

Proportionality is important to ensure that all significant views in the local community are represented. This means that proportionality must not be limited to proportionality for registered political parties.

Local representation is the essence of local government, from the electors' point of view, so the link between the electors and their local councillors is important. For proportionality to be achieved, several members must be elected together. However, if the voting system ensures that each councillor elected is the personal choice of a constituency of local voters, the local link would be strengthened despite the use of multi-member wards.

The Kerley recommendation of STV

Fairshare strongly supports this recommendation because we believe, on the basis of our own analysis, that STV-PR is the voting system that will best meet the needs of local government in Scotland. By offering electors real choice, ensuring that parties and independents are represented in fair proportion to their local support and allowing flexible implementation to match local circumstances, STV-PR will make an essential contribution to the renewal of local democracy.

Removing Barriers and Widening Access

In Chapter 2 of the White Paper, Ministers have set out their proposals for implementing many of the recommendations in the Kerley Report concerning 'widening access'. While Fairshare has no policy on these specific recommendations (though it does support the underlying objectives), we would draw the Committee's attention to an important linkage between these recommendations and the recommendation of STV-PR as the future voting system.

Institutionalised discrimination is built into the present FPTP voting system. The system forces each party to nominate only one candidate in each single-member ward. (If a party does otherwise, it risks splitting the vote and giving the seat to an opposing party.) Each party must choose the one candidate it believes will have the widest appeal to its potential supporters and so have the best chance of winning the seat. In making this choice, it is inevitable that minorities, of all kinds, will be discriminated against. This discrimination is institutionalised in the system.

In contrast, with STV-PR each party has to nominate a team of candidates in each multi-member ward. So the institutional obstacle is immediately removed. Parties can now offer their supporters a range of candidates: men and women; ethnic minorities; different religious affiliations; differing local interests. But this advantage of STV-PR goes beyond simply removing the discriminatory institutional obstacle. Because STV-PR is a preferential voting system, it positively encourages party managers to ensure that their teams of candidates do, indeed, have the widest possible appeal to their potential supporters. It is then for the voters to decide who shall be elected. If significant minorities want direct representation, they would have the power to achieve that.

The adoption of STV-PR would thus be an important step in the practical implementation of the 'widening access' that the Kerley Working Group recommended and the Executive has accepted.