

**Questions Concerning the Relationship between Members and Citizens in Multi-Member Wards.**

*Also referred to as the Member/Ward link.*

Professor John Curtice and Professor Bill Miller, when giving evidence to the Local Government Committee, both questioned the existence of some easily definable, simple phenomenon which can be labelled as the member ward/link.

What is being referred to is a complex set of psychological relationships which will vary from individual to individual and from case to case. Any difficult thing to define is, of course, a difficult thing to measure. Following extensive literature searches there appears to be very little previous work done on such a broad concept as the member/ward link. It seems likely that it would be difficult to design any qualitative model to measure such a thing. There is probably scope for a great deal more qualitative work in this area.

However, those of us in favour of electoral rules that bring about more proportional representation think there is an intuitive argument for a member ward/link based on the citizen taking the action of voting for their representative. This fundamental democratic action of voting is not only important in expressing the initial choice of candidate by the citizen but can also be the main factor in forming the psychological link. The vast majority of people have no direct contact with their representative; the only action these people take that has anything to do with their representative is to vote for or against them. The importance of voting, therefore, can not be underestimated in analysing the ward/member link.

Here follow selected references and quotes, highlighting the strong body of opinion that exists in favour of multi-member seats in this context.

The submissions to the McIntosh Commission, all available on the Web at the URL quoted below, will provide further anecdotal evidence.

85% of councillors in England are elected in multi-member wards. Research is currently underway<sup>1</sup> with a view to analysing how effectively these wards operate. This will be available early in 2003.

**Example of a Submission to the McIntosh Commission**

[www.scotland.gov.uk/mcintosh/submissions](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/mcintosh/submissions)

• **Thomas Gray:** -

‘Systems which use single-member constituencies (AV, SV, AMS and its variations) are supposed to maintain a strong link between member and representative. My experience is that this is so much humbug. I have very rarely been represented by either a Councillor or an MP that I actually voted for, so there is an immediate lack of confidence that my views are going to be accurately represented in the decision-making context. I have occasionally made direct contact with ‘my’ MP or Councillor to make my view or problem known. Where the matter is non-controversial in a Party sense, the opinion has been often been fairly represented- especially when the

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<sup>1</sup> By the Electoral Reform Society, probably in conjunction with the New Local Government Network.

member in question happens to be in opposition. On most occasions, however, there has been no action. Even if there does not seem to be a party-political issue at stake, one finds that party solidarity and avoidance of 'fouling the nest' creeps in. In any case, the size of single-member wards in Council areas is so small that very few people have much idea which ward they are in, much less who their Councillor is. The STV system is based on multi-member wards and this may give rise to an impression that voters will not know who their Councillor is, as the typical size of such a ward would lead to 4 or 5 members. This is a false assumption, in theory and in practice. Most voters will have a much clearer idea of who their chosen representative is, for the very good reason that they voted for him or her as a first choice. The only criticism I have heard of the STV system, as it operates in the Republic of Ireland, is that senior politicians have to spend too much time listening to their constituents. This hardly seems like a valid criticism in the context of local government.'

### **The experience of councillors in England**

- "As we are all doing this job [being a councillor] part-time, it helps to spread the load among three councillors – otherwise we wouldn't be able to offer such a high level of service to our constituents. It also means we can get together and discuss issues that affect the ward, and come up with more innovative and creative solutions to problems that we might if we had been trying to tackle it on our own. People are used to having more than one councillor – they just speak to the one they feel most comfortable with." Cllr Mike Rodger, Northcroft Ward, Newbury, Berkshire. November 2002
- In my view the three-member ward gives the people better representation. We work as team for the area. We all bring a different set of skills to the job so the voters get a better mix of skills in their representation. If, due to pressure of work, we can't always attend every meeting, we know there will be a representative of the area in attendance. We help each other out. Although I have never represented a single ward constituency, I feel the disadvantages would outweigh the advantages. Cllr Nargis Khan, (Labour) Hackney, London. November 2002

### **The experience of Scottish councillors**

- "The best evidence of how well multi-member wards work is right here in Scotland - the period from 1975 -1995/6 - when we had two-tier local government, that required Regional and District councillors to work together. Of course, it is accepted that on the surface, these two tiers of local and regional government were responsible for different services, but in practice, the regional and district councillors - regardless of political affiliation - had to liaise over day-to-day issues as constituents, and more importantly their problems, didn't respect these administrative boundaries. A few examples from my own case book follow (as a Regional Cllr I covered three District wards, represented by one Tory, one Nationalist and one Labour councillor - I'll not say which one I got the most/least co-operation from!);
  - 1 roads maintenance(region) in housing schemes(district)
  - 2 school football(r) on recreation(d) pitches
  - 3 schools swimming(r) in public(d) poolsand many, many more including the infamous "crisp bag" problem of responsibility, as it blows from a council housing estate(d), onto the footpath(r), onto the grass verge(?), into the road(r), and back onto a play park(d), and into the local housing association estate(ha) and eventually onto the trunk road(central govt.). The Labour Party defended the two-tier system against its abolition as it recognised,

amongst other considerations, that the multi-member system was good for the electorate as it gave the voters real, ongoing - every 2 years or so - choice and kept the parties on their toes.”

Ross Martin, former Lothian Regional Councillor and West Lothian Councillor, 1990-1999

**Lakeman Enid, Power to Elect: the case for Proportional Representation,** London: Heinemann c1982.

- “ ‘I believe the myth of the single-member constituency being of special value is best tackled by vigorous advocacy of the benefit to the constituent of having several MPs representing the same constituency. Since I was first elected in 1966, I have been well aware that a significant number of constituents are most unlikely to approach me personally except perhaps in the direst emergency. They imagine, rightly or wrongly, that a person of my age, sex and background will not understand their problem, or that I will not advocate what they want. It seems to me quite wrong that they should only have one MP to turn to, rather than a choice. I am afraid that the imagined advantages of the single-member constituency have been propagated...without sufficient contradiction.’”  
Richard Wainwright, MP letter, 22 July 1981.
- ‘How serious are the drawbacks of much larger constituencies? They cannot be fatal, for constituencies far larger than any proposed for the House of Commons already operate successfully.’
- ‘Whatever the disadvantages of size, as regards personal contact, they are far outweighed by the advantages... the act of voting by STV is far more personal: the voter can no longer vote just for a party, but must decide which of its candidates he prefers to the others. Nearly every voter finds himself with a representative whom he has actually helped to elect.’
- ‘The member with a high reputation is very unlikely to lose his seat, for if his party suffers a setback the members it loses will be those least esteemed by the voters. There is sometimes advanced the rather childish objection that an elector with several MPs will not know which of them to approach with his problem. Most of us have several local Councillors; does that prevent anybody from seeking the help of one of them? ...They are more likely to be able to serve him well because they will almost certainly be local men or women, well acquainted with local problems...Under the present British system a large number of MPs have no roots in the constituencies they purport to represent.
- ‘Multi-member constituencies have some positive advantages, especially the avoidance of frequent revisions, liable to have serious effects on the result of an election, and the openings they offer to people unlikely to be selected as a party’s sole candidate anywhere.’

**Voting Behaviour and Electoral Systems, Robinson Chris,** London: Hodder & Stoughton Educational 1998.

- ‘Constituents would be able to choose from perhaps 5 MPs when it comes to seeking help for a particular problem. It is probable that within any constituency there could be MPs from two or three political parties.’
- ‘The system [by this he refers to the Irish system, i.e. STV] does appear to overcome one key criticism of the list system in that the link between the voter and the MP is

maintained while at the same time providing a proportional result...on the other hand, it may be argued that the nature of representative government would be transformed out of all recognition and that the traditions or our existing arrangements would be lost forever.'

**Democratic Dialogue Papers, Elections in Northern Ireland; systems for stability and success**, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/dd/papers/elections.htm>

- 'STV...in theory [allows] no 'wasted votes.' ...Voters are given considerable control over the way their vote is used, they can influence the direction in which their party will develop, they can highlight issues which they consider important and it is much less disproportional than the single-member plurality system.'
- 'As Gallagher puts it, PR systems affect...the representation of parties and also the "profile of the individuals who sit on the parliamentary benches."