**Beyond Brexit and binary choices**

Dear Sir,

Just before the Brexit vote and in the wake of the murder of Jo Cox MP, Stephen Collins, political editor of the Irish Times (Respect for democracy needed now more than ever, June 18th) provided an unsparing critique of the referendum as a decision-making method (<https://tinyurl.com/jgjldtm>). 'Referendums are calculated to fuel the irrational side of political debate and encourage mob rule', he wrote, 'people vote on the basis of fears that had nothing to do with the issue in question' and they 'so often involve logic going out the window'. He suggested that 'the hysterical nature of the debate' contributed to Ms Cox's death.

His views were prescient and accurately described the many flaws and limitations of the UK's EU referendum process and its continuing fallout. The criticisms have been echoed by many commentators in the wake of the Brexit debacle. The appropriateness and efficacy of the majoritarian referendum as a means of deciding complex political, social and moral issues have been challenged by various authorities in the intervening six weeks.

However, no commentator has proposed an alternative method or even suggested that a better one might be sought.

There is a blind acceptance that an either-or, dichotomous procedure is the only and best method available. The conviction that this is the ultimate form of direct democracy results in the ubiquitous and ridiculous assertion that 'the people have spoken' when 48% of them disagree. All that may be said with any certainty is that 'the people have disagreed'. As a way to discern the collective will on any topic the referendum is inept. At its worst it can foment violence and its deadly consequences.

Having promoted an alternative - the multi-optional preferendum based on the Modified Borda Count (MBC) - for many years in all relevant fora and through many publications, this Institute questions why commentators such as Mr Collins, political scientists and politicians continue to accept such a crude decision-making instrument while bemoaning its flaws but never proposing that something better should be found and used.

The Borda Count has been used in an Irish elected chamber. In 2013 Dublin City Council used the method to choose the name of a Liffey bridge. It was not a decision of earth-shaking importance but it was a breakthrough in terms of method.

The MBC allows the complexity of an issue to be captured in a series of options which are agreed and then ranked by voters; it escapes the divisive and adversarial features of the referendum; it allows gradations of opinion to be reflected and expressed and at best it gives a result which is the highest average preference - the collective will of the community of voters.

Had it been used in the Oireachtas Inquiries vote we would now have a modified inquiry system; there would have been a clear outcome to the age of eligibility for the presidency; the Scottish Independence referendum result would have been 'devo-max' and we would have reformed the Seanad.

 A mature and sophisticated decision-making procedure must allow the people to choose from amongst a range and not just be corralled into Accept or Reject.

The referendum is an inherently flawed instrument that conveys a dangerous illusion of democratic accountability. There are better options.

Yours etc.,

Phil Kearney,