**INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON REFERENDUMS**

**http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/electionsandreferendums/ICR\_Final\_Report.pdf**

The de Borda Institute has been campaigning for multi-option decision-making, ever since, one week after that day in 1985 when Ian Paisley stood outside Belfast City Hall and shouted, “Ulster says ‘NO’!” six of us stood at the same venue in silence, with a banner which read, “We have got to say ‘yes’ to something.”

A few months later, at our first of many cross-community conferences, preferential voting was put into practice; and it worked.  The participants included everything from SF to the UDA  —  and this, still eight years *before* the IRA cease fire  —  yet their consensus was for NI to have power-sharing and devolution, under a tripartite Belfast-Dublin-London agreement  —  a sort of mini Belfast Agreement, if you like, just 12 years ahead of its time.

So it was that in 1990, at a press conference (in Russian) in Tbilisi, I campaigned for multi-option voting in the Caucasus.

Next, at a cross-community public meeting in Belfast in 1991 (when we used electronic multi-option voting for the first time), one of the guest speakers was from Sarajevo.  Thus we warned of the dangers of any two-option referendum, in Bosnia of all places, for its population was divided into three  —  Moslem:Orthodox:Catholic, 40:30:20  —  so there was no majority anyway.  The Badinter Commission disagreed, a binary referendum was held, and it started the war.

On a return visit to East Africa in 2003  —  I also speak some Kiswahili  —  I warned against any referendum for South Sudan.  What more need be said?

Back to the UK.  At the time of the 2011 referendum, I argued that, for any supporter of PR, asking the question  —  "AV or FPTP?”  —  was like asking a vegetarian, “beef or lamb?”

The referendum in Scotland was also a bit of a nonsense.  The winner was ‘devo-max’ but nobody voted for it; it wasn’t on the ballot paper.

Brexit.  As I explain in my TEDx talk  —  <http://www.tedxvienna.at/ontheedge/>  —  that two-option referendum was also illogical.  There were at least four options on the table  —  the UK in the a) EU, b) EEA, c) CU or d) WTO.  But we had a vote on only one of them, a), and it got 48%.  But a binary vote on any of the other options would probably have lost as well, with maybe only 17% each.  So a) was the winner!!??!!

In February 2016, I issued a press release to say that if the Brexit question is to be ‘yes-or-no?’ (‘remain-or-leave?’), that then the answer will be ‘no’.  Ask a silly question…  <http://www.deborda.org/home/2016/2/5/2016-1-eu-referendums-britishdutch.html>

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So what is wrong?  Why are so many people in Britain obsessed with what the late Professor Sir Michael Dummett called “the mystique of the majority,” which is also so evident in your own questionnaire?  Why, in 2011, could the British people not have had a multi-option referendum on the electoral system, just as New Zealand did in 1992?  But no.  And when the Jenkins Commission met to look at the question of the electoral system, they even sent some commissioners down to the antipodes, but in his subsequent report, there was not one mention of their five-option ballot.  And at his commission's public meeting in Belfast, he did not approve of me raising the topic!

Likewise, when BBC Radio 4 did a 60-minute documentary on referendums, shortly before the 2011 poll, there was not one word about multi-option voting, and this despite the fact that I had written to the programme before hand, not least to mention the New Zealand experience.  As I mentioned to the presenter, Shaun Ley, afterwards, he still has a debt to the truth.

But good news is at hand.  As you may have seen, the Irish Citizens’ Assembly voted in favour of multi-option voting.  I can honestly say that that decision was the result of over 20 years’ worth of campaigning, first with the 1996 Constitution Review Group, next with the All-party *Oireachtas*Committee on the Constitution at the time of the first abortion referendum, and then with fairly constant campaigning as in various letters to the *Irish Times* and a visit to *Áras an Uachtaráin* in 2012 to present President Michael D Higgins with a copy of our book *Defining Democracy*  —  he had been our guest speaker at the 1991 public meeting mentioned above.

We have also been campaigning in Britain, of course, not least in a House of Lords launch of the same volume, with Lord Paddy Ashdown as our guest speaker.  Many guests were in attendance of course but, for some reason, ICL had chosen to decline.

Basically, my message is simple.  You cannot get the average height of a group of people by asking a binary question of the “Option ***A***, yes-or-no?” variety,  —  “Is your average height 5’ 8”, yes-or-no?” or even of the “Option ***A*** or Option ***B***? type  —  “Is your average tall or small?”  You could get it in a multi-option poll, however  —  “Are you > 5’4”, > 5’6”, > 5’8”, > 5’10”, > 6’ ?”  Like wise, with opinions; if the option which gets the highest average preference gets a high enough level of support  —  its consensus coefficient\* as it is called  —  then it will be the most popular option.  And you can identify this most popular option if and only if you have enough options on the ballot paper; from 4 to 6 is normally considered adequate to represent the debate  —  maybe four for Brexit as suggested above, or five for the electoral system, as in New Zealand; Guam had six in their 1982 constitutional debate, and even a 7th option left blank, so if someone(s) wanted to (campaign and) vote for something else, they could do exactly that.  Multi-option referendums are perfectly possible.  It’s all a part of might be called pluralism.

So will the Independent Commission on Referendums please consider multi-option referendums, or better still, preferential ones?  The two best counting methodologies are the Borda and Condorcet rules, the former now called the MBC.  Alas, they are not often referred to in the media.  Maybe your commission can redress the balance.

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[www.deborda.org](http://www.deborda.org)

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