

Letters to the Editor

MAXIMUM CHOICE IN THE VOTING SYSTEM

SIR, - I should like if I may to add a postscript to Fred Harrison's article in the November/December issue.

Mr. Harrison is of course quite right in saying that PR guarantees fair representation to both the majority and any important minority but there is another point which, in the Northern Ireland context, is at least equally important. That is that PR (in its single transferable vote form, that is) breaks down the rigid division between what we call the majority and the minority, doing away with the pretence that the majority on the one question consists of the same people as the majority on some quite different question.

The trouble in Northern Ireland has been not that the Catholic minority has been under-represented (in local government it certainly has been, but not seriously so at Stormont) but that it has always been represented solely on the opposition side. Catholics who support the Union exist and at least two of them sought to become Unionist candidates in their last general election, but none has any chance of succeeding as long as there exists an electoral system which forces the Unionist to select only one candidate in each constituency. No Unionist constituency organisation is ever likely to select a Catholic as its one and only candidate, but if it had to select several candidates, as it would under PR, it would no longer be out of the question for it to include a Catholic along with Protestants. That is why the religious minority in the Republic has always been able to secure fair representation through any of the parties.

The mere act of voting under PR contributes greatly to pacification,

for the voter is no longer obliged to vote as if he thought candidate X was perfect and there was nothing to be said for any of the others: he is forced to consider the fact that, among the candidates of his own party, some are better than others, and he is invited also to look at candidates of other parties and consider whether some of them may not be worth supporting - whether some are at least not so bad as others!

I think Mr. Harrison is a little unfair to the British Government on the matter of the plebiscite. For one thing, the demand for this came from opposition quarters in Northern Ireland. That the result is a foregone conclusion does not mean that it is a useless exercise. The whole point is to transfer the decision on the future constitutional position of the Province from the Stormont Parliament to the electors: so long as the decision rested with Parliament, people wishing to preserve the Union felt obliged to vote for the Unionist candidate however strongly they might disagree with him on other matters, but if an anti-Unionist majority in Parliament could no longer change the constitutional position against the wishes of the majority of the electors, that compulsion would disappear. Of course, if PR had been maintained, the demand for a plebiscite would probably never have arisen.

It is certainly to be hoped that the rest of the United Kingdom will follow Northern Ireland's example in adopting PR. It would certainly greatly increase the real participation of those who feel now with only too much reason, that their vote has no influence on the course of events, and it would enable Scots and Welshmen who feel that they ought to have more control over their own affairs to get this view properly voiced in Parliament.

Yours faithfully,
ENID LAKEMAN
London, S.E.1.

A WINTER HARVEST

SIR, - In Northumberland a stock-rearing farm of 320 acres was purchased in March of this year, apparently for Estate Duty purposes, for the sum of £52,000. During the summer of this year the house and buildings stood empty and the land was let for summer grazing. In November the same farm was offered for sale and realised £120,000.

The situation of this farm appears to rule out any possibility of building except perhaps by way of change of use of the farm buildings.

Yours faithfully,

J. P. PICKERING

Hexham, Northumberland.

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The Right to Trespass

IN Sweden the individual's free access to nature is a right with very old traditions. We regard it as self-evident. It is known as the "Right of Common Access". Very few countries have anything resembling this right. The "Right of Common Access" is only partly codified, and is principally consuetudinary.

It involves the right to trespass and temporarily stay on land belonging to others. Water and water areas belonging to other persons may be used for boating and bathing. Berries, mushrooms and flowers may be picked in nature.

There are, however, certain restrictions to be observed. Certain flowers and plants protected by law must not be picked. Neither is it permitted to take trees or to break branches or twigs. It is not permitted to walk over growing crops or plantations, or to enter a private residential site.

The "Right of Common Access" provides ample recreational opportunities for the growing urban population.

From *Environment Protection* 1972 (Sweden)