

## Realities of Democracy

*Enid Lakeman of the Electoral Reform Society, writes . . .*



TO SAY as Fred Harrison did in his first article (*LAND & LIBERTY*, July/August), that "there are times when even holding a general election is not an adequate substitute for a referendum" is an understatement. Under our existing system, it can hardly ever be an adequate substitute, and that would be so even if nobody's vote were affected by his class. An elector usually makes up his mind that, on the whole, because of one thing and in spite of another, he prefers such and such a party to form the government. To promote that, all he can do is to vote for the one candidate that party has nominated in the constituency where he happens to live; he has no means of showing whether, on the Common Market or on any other particular question, he agrees or disagrees with that candidate personally or with his party. Very seldom will, for instance, an anti-Common Market Conservative go to the length of voting Labour to express his disagreement with his party on that issue—and if he does, he will be counted, quite falsely, as giving a "mandate" for the whole Labour Party programme.

Therefore, even if it were a straight fight between pro-Common Market Conservatives and anti-Common Market Labour, a British general election under our present system could not show how many voters were in favour of our joining and how many against—besides which, the side with the fewer votes might win, and I am afraid it would still claim a mandate for its policy. With each party divided on the subject, the verdict must be still more uncertain. Does one count a Conservative vote in Wolverhampton SW (Enoch Powell) and a Conservative vote in Bexley (Edward Heath) as on the same side or on opposite sides?

But a general election under the system used in the Republic of Ireland could really serve as a referendum on the Treaty of Rome, as

their election in 1922 did serve as a referendum on whether to accept the Treaty offered by Britain.

Under that system, each constituency elects several representatives and any large party must therefore nominate more than one candidate. The elector votes by numbering candidates in his order of preference, so that an Irish voter could, if he wished, give full support to any party but would have to choose among its candidates and thus could give preference to the pro-Treaty or the anti-Treaty side as the case might be. It turned out that the majority of voters wished to accept the Treaty, and this gave a corresponding pro-Treaty majority in the Dail.

If this system had been applied in the general elections we have had since the EEC project was first mooted, we should have had a similar choice. Candidates would have been obliged to discuss this important matter, so that we should all have been much better informed than most of us now are, and the voters' opinions would have been reflected faithfully in the resulting House of Commons.

It is of course too late for this now, but this will certainly not be the last occasion on which it is desirable to have the people's verdict on a particular question, and we should therefore press for it to be made possible in an election. A referendum too, perhaps, but that would work much better if combined with a fair electoral system, as it does in Switzerland. Under our present system, we might run into serious difficulties through having a government whose major policies are contrary to the wishes of the majority of the voters and which therefore would find itself repeatedly frustrated by defeat in referenda.

We should also remember that the Treaty of Rome requires the European parliament eventually to be elected "by direct universal suffrage, in accordance with a uniform pro-

cedure in all member states." Direct election is pointless unless it gives the citizen a direct say in how he is to be governed; we should therefore if we eventually join the EEC, use whatever influence we have to see that the "uniform procedure" is one that will really reflect the voters' wishes about matters they feel to be important in the European context.

Fred Harrison's second article calls for further comment. It would have been valuable if he had pointed out that what we mean by proportional representation is the Single Transferable Vote form, which is very different from the Continental forms which are all based on voting for a party (with or without some subsidiary choice between individual candidates).

While a party list system may favour a multiplication of parties (though there is very little sign of this happening in practice), the single transferable vote is likely to have the opposite effect, since it enables different shades of opinion to find representation *within* a single party. This also means that a general election could become, what it cannot be under the present system, a real test of public opinion.

Mr. Harrison says France has had seven elections on "variations of proportional representation." But four of those seven were on systems which, although they allotted some seats on a proportional basis, made the total result far from proportional; the 1951 system was deliberately weighted to give the government coalition far more than its proportional share of the seats. The French parliament has never



been elected by a proportional system except in 1945 and 1946, and then it was a rigid party list system with no choice between individual candidates.