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Dear colleague

I want to complement you on the launch of your *Draft Research Programme 2024-26*, which sets out a clear and comprehensive agenda of research. This letter refers primarily to your proposed Strand B. I entirely agree with you that continuing population growth raises the question of considering constituencies larger than 5, and therefore welcome your prioritization of research on this. The purpose of this letter is to suggest a somewhat wider reflection on the implications of a move to larger constituencies, on the grounds that such a move would have an impact on the process of counting votes, and also on the voting act itself.

Taking the count process first, there is the fact that larger constituencies will result in longer counts. This could be a good time to re-open the question of the electronic counting of votes. Given the past experience with computer-based voting, I can see why there would be no desire to re-open that debate, but there is no reason why we could not explore the use of electronic voting, such as used in other STV jurisdictions. This would speed up the process of counting. It would also enable us to adopt a better system for transferring surplus transfers. The practice here of transferring (randomised) surplus ballots at their full value can have important implications in later counts, particularly when the results between two candidates are very close. Depending on which ballot papers were selected from the pile at an earlier stage in the counting process, in a close finish the fate of a candidate could be sealed by the pattern of preferences which predominated in those ballot papers. In other words, there are random effects involved in the counting process.

There are other options to resolve this problem, such as the ‘weighted-inclusive Gregory method’ (WIG) that Scotland uses (as do a number of Australian

jurisdictions, and I believe would also have been introduced here, had we proceeded with computer-based voting). But in order to use this method the counting would need to be carried out with the aid of a computer. I am taking the liberty of attaching a paper my colleague, Ian McAllister, and I published some years ago setting out the merits of WIG.

Larger constituencies will also impact on voters, for the simple reason that they will lead to longer ballot papers. This adds to the burden on voters, increasing the potential for them to take voting short cuts, such as manifested through alphabetical voting. This might be a time to consider changing the design of our ballot papers. As your CEO will know, some years ago the Convention on the Constitution proposed the removal of alphabetical voting (e.g. following the practice in some Australian jurisdictions of randomizing the ballot paper). An easier option might be to consider a new ballot paper design such as used in Australia and Malta. I attach examples of recent ballot papers to give you a sense of the potential.

I would be happy to discuss these points further if it helps.

Yours sincerely



David Farrell
Encl.