

The New Electoral Bill.

The Attorney-General Explains It.

A public meeting of citizens of Hobart, called by the Mayor in response to a requisition, was held last evening at the Town-hall, to hear an address from the Attorney-General of Tasmania, the Hon, A.I. Clark, M.H.A., on the proposals of the Electoral Bill for modifying the representation for the cities of Hobart and Launceston.

Alderman J.G. Davies, M.H.A., presided and amongst those present were the Hon, W. Moore, M.L.C., Chief Secretary; Messrs. Alderman Bradley, M.H.A., Mulcahy, M.H.A., Urquhart, M.H.A., McWilliams, M.H.A.; R.M. Johnston, Government Statistician; Alderman Dillon; W.T. Birch, Town Clerk; Alderman Hiddlestone, M.H.A., Alderman Smith and Seabrook. About 200 persons were in attendance.

Mr Clark said he was there at the request of a number of his fellow-citizens to explain the proposed alteration in the representation of Hobart and Launceston in the House of Assembly. The system which it was proposed to adopt was what was known as the Hare system, and also the single transferable vote. He mentioned this, because it was not the invention of Hare only - or of any one man, but the result of the thoughts of a large number of men who looked towards it at different times. Long before Hare, a man in Philadelphia, in 1844, wrote a pamphlet on the subject. A Dane also dealt with it, and the people of Denmark were more ready to adopt it than the English people, for Denmark had actually demonstrated the value of the system, the elections in that country having been conducted under it during the last 25 years. The system had also been applied partially in some of the states of America, notably Illinois; and to come nearer to ourselves, the Church of England Assembly and the Council of the University in Victoria had used it for many years past. He did not stand there before them to advocate the system in order to make them become supporters of it, and advocate and adopt it in due time. What he was there for was, in the first instance, to explain the object of it; the reasons which supporters put forth as those which ought to commend its adoption; and to explain how it was worked. No man could say a thing was good or bad till he knew what it was. Many thought they did not understand it, and did not know how it would work. He was there to explain, and after he had done so, he wanted his hearers to turn it over in their own minds and form an opinion upon it. He did not want them to say that night to say what they thought of it, but to go home when they had heard him and think it over. The object which the advocates of the system had in view, was to make representative government a reality in the full sense of the word. They said we had not now full and perfect representative government. Parliament was supposed to be chosen by the whole body of the people, but, under the present system, there was a large numbers of voters for both Houses who, every year, had no part whatever in returning members to Parliament. They had come year after year to the poll, and yet their voices had no part in putting members in Parliament. The Parliament was merely a representation of part of the people. They were now going to make the Parliament representative of all the people. At present, representative government was the government of the majority. They might have one of the most grinding governments ever seen under a majority. There was tyranny from despots, oligarchies and autocracies, but it could also be had by a majority.

That was what the system proposed now to be adopted was meant to prevent; the Hare system was not the government of the majority, but of the whole people. Let him take an instance. Hobart was divided into three electorates—North, South and West—each returning two members. Generally, at an election, there were double the number of candidates that could be elected—four for two seats. There were 1,000 electors in each district, or at least that number voted. Now if 550 voted for two candidates, those two went in. The other 450 voted for the two candidates who were defeated, and these 450 might well as have stopped at home. All the thought that they might have given to the political questions of the day, and all the energy they might have expended in trying to get the other two men elected, was all wasted and gone. There were, in the strictest sense of the word, unrepresented in the Legislature. He was not now dealing with any fanciful Legislature; the thing had happened for many years in other colonies. He knew a gentleman living in Victoria who, for a whole decade of years, or more, had never had the good fortune to vote for the person who was elected; and the man he voted for always came very near the man elected. At the time of the great excitement in Victoria, when a war was being waged between the two Houses of Parliament and the Berry Ministry were in office, Collingwood always returned three members to support the Ministry of the day, and these got in by a majority of 20. The other electors who did not vote for these three were unrepresented in the Assembly. That was not full and perfect representative government. The present Government of Tasmania wanted to alter that state of things, and have the benefit in the Assembly of the intelligence, energy, zeal, and patriotism of the people, who at the present time voted for defeated candidates. Some of the hearers might think the present system was the best, that the majority should govern, and the minority ought not to be heard. Now for the manner in which the system tried to accomplish its object. It could not be applied to constituencies that returned only one member, but it could be adopted for places like Hobart, which returned six members to the Assembly, and Launceston, which returned four. Some might say, why not apply it to the whole of the island? The answer was that it was always bad in reform to attempt too much at one time. It was best to give people a modicum of reform, and see how they liked it. If they did like it, they could always get more of it. The Government selected Hobart and Launceston because they afforded compact constituencies to work upon. One presented a population of 4,000 and the other one of 3,000, in areas which could be walked over in a day. If the system were to be applied to the whole colony, they would have to cut up Tasmania into some very large districts. Some of the electorates were too large already for the candidates to go over, or for the people to meet and confer with one another. In some districts, people in different quarters acted independently of one another in political matters. But bad as things were now in regard to the country districts, if two or three of them were put together they would become too large and unwieldy. People would be put together who had different interests, had never seen one another, and formed distinct corporate bodies. The sparseness of the population, and the wide extent over which the electors were scattered, rendered it undesirable that the system should be applied to the rural districts. However, if, later on, the country people desired it, they could have it. He already told them that one of the names of the system was the single transferable vote, because every elector voted in the first instance for only one, before whose name he put the figure 1 in the ballot paper. But in order that no vote should be wasted by giving it to a single man who did not want it, the elector was allowed to

transfer it by putting the figure 2 before the name of another candidate, 3 before another, and so on. Thus the votes given for men who did not want them, or had no chance of election were used. His (the Attorney-General's) democratic friends who had been advocating one man one vote had the principle adopted here in the purest form. The first question was, How many votes would put a man in? The system was to take the number of electors and divide it by the number of candidates, and the result was called the "quota". If there were 3,000 voters in Hobart and six members were returned, the quota would be 500, and each of these 500 had as good a right to be represented as any other 500 in the 3,000.

The Attorney-General and the Government Statistician then counted the ballot papers of an election under the Hare system, which was supposed to have taken place that day. The number of electors was 200, and there were six candidates for four seats—Messrs. Douglas, Collins, Grant, Hart, Lord, and Page. The voting was as follows:—Page, "first votes," 20; Lord, 22; Hart, 16; Grant, 56; Collins, 24; Douglas, 62. Mr. Douglas and Mr. Grant having more than the quota of votes (50) were therefore returned. But Mr. Douglas had 12 surplus votes, and Mr. Grant 6, and these were taken apart and the number 2's given to the next highest two on the poll. If No. 2 in the paper was already elected, No. 3 was taken. The result of this operation was that the numbers of Page, Collins and Lord were increased, and Hart remained at 16. Still none of the remaining four had the quota. Hart's name was then struck out as being the lowest, and his No. 2 votes distributed, and this gave the quota to Collins and Page. Lord was then struck out as superfluous, and the elected four were Messrs. Douglas, Grant, Collins, and Page.

Mr. Clark pointed out that if 200 persons in each of the present Hobart electorates were in favour of denominational education the whole 600 could not return a member, but under the Hare system they could return two.

Messrs. G. Clark, G.S. Crouch, Russell Young, and D.C. Urquhart, M.H.A., urged objections or asked questions, which the Attorney-General answered. He added that it must be certain that if any defects existed in the system they must have been discovered long ago by the people of Denmark.

A vote of thanks to Mr. Clark was proposed by Mr. Crouch, seconded by Mr. Young, and carried unanimously.

Source: The Mercury, 11 August 1896.