

ROYAL COMMISSION ON SYSTEMS OF ELECTION.

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

TAKEN BEFORE THE

ROYAL COMMISSION

ON

SYSTEMS OF ELECTION.

Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of His Majesty.



LONDON:

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1911

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LIST OF WITNESSES.

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ELECTORAL SYSTEMS COMMISSION.

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

TAKEN BEFORE

THE ROYAL COMMISSION

ON

SYSTEMS OF ELECTION.

FIRST DAY.

Thursday, 1st April 1909.

PRESENT:

LORD RICHARD FREDERICK CAVENDISH (*Chairman*).

The Right Hon. LORD LOCHEE OF GOWRIE, LL.D.
The Honourable EDWIN S. MONTAGU, M.P.
Sir FRANCIS J. S. HOPWOOD, G.C.M.G., K.C.B.
Sir COURTENAY LEBERT, K.C.B., K.C.S.I., C.I.E.

Sir CHARLES NORTON ELIOT, K.C.M.G., C.B., LL.D.,
D.C.L.
The Honourable WILLIAM PEMBER REEVES.
Mr. JOHN WALLER HILLS, M.P.

Mr. CHARLES D. ROBERTSON (*Secretary*).

LORD COURTNEY OF PENWITH called and examined.

1. (*Chairman*.) You are Chairman of the Committee of the Proportional Representation Society?—I am.

2. The Commission are in possession of the memorandum which you have drawn up, and I think it would be most convenient if you put that in as evidence, but it will be necessary perhaps in one or two instances to rather alter the wording of it, as it is not in a form actually to be taken as evidence. I think we might ask you some general questions before going through this memorandum in detail?—The memorandum is not drawn up as a paper to be put in and printed as it stands. It is not fitted for that purpose. It is really a brief or an abstract from which I thought I could give evidence in answer to questions founded on that brief. Unless the Commissioners decide otherwise I would submit to them that that is really a convenient mode of procedure.

3. We wish rather to suit your convenience?—What I would also press upon the Commission is this: The question of proportional representation has now passed out of the sphere of craziness, to which it was at one time supposed to belong, and it has attracted attention more or less all over the world. For instance, the last news we have is that a Select Committee has been appointed in the House of Commons of Canada on the subject. After some debate the Ministry agreed to the appointment of a Select Committee to inquire into the whole question of proportional representation. What I think is, that the Inquiry being made by this Commission will be studied in our Colonies and abroad as well as at home, and it is well to take it in a serious and even in an ample way. I do not want to flood the Commission with evidence on details, but, at the same time, I would put it to the Commissioners that you cannot very well slur it over now.

4. You suggest that we should go through this summary or memorandum?—Yes, and using it as a barrister's brief, ask me questions upon it.

5. There are a certain number of preliminary or leading questions I should like to ask. First of all, are you quite convinced of the desirability of a change in the present electoral system?—I am, and have been for a good many years.

6. You do not think the present system in practice really secures the representation of every important section of the community?—No, I do not think it does

of every section; but still more am I convinced that it does not represent anything like a real and trustworthy representation of their strength.

7. How do you mean?—They may have casual representation, but not adequate representation, and even the leading divisions I think now, as is confessed by everybody, are mostly misrepresented.

8. You do not think the creation of representations from all sections will tend to introduce a system of groups into Parliament?—I think the introduction of groups, as a matter of fact, exists already, and is an essential development of democratic institutions; but the groups within Parliament will not interfere in any serious way with the maintenance of the two great groups in Parliament (more or less loosely formed of those subsidiary groups), which will maintain their present relations for a long time to come, if not for ever, for as long as there is the two-party system. It will be modified and seriously modified, and its rigidity will be a good deal modified, but the two-party system really exists in the fundamental conditions of human nature, and will survive all your changes of form, although you will have greater liberty.

9. You do not think the majority will be so reduced that effective government will be difficult to carry on?—I think the experience of the present House of Commons and its immediate predecessors—especially the present House of Commons—shows that a phenomenally big majority is not necessarily an element of great strength. One does not trace things too much to existing party means and party rules, but it is quite obvious that with respect to the two great questions which have agitated the present House of Commons—the education question and the licensing question, but primarily the education question—that the Government do not know how strong they are and what support they have in the country. They do not dare to appeal, even if they wished to, to the country on the issue of the education question. They have an immense nominal support in the House of Commons, but a most uncertain support in the country.

10. Of the various methods which have been suggested, do you consider the single transferable vote is certainly the best?—I think so. There is a good deal to be said for the list system which has been adopted

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