

## Democracy's curiosity shop (II)

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As the country's savings are squandered by the government and its ministers and the resultant deficit grows larger and larger every year, ministers are invited to resign by stakeholders and the question over whether Parliament will move into a new building remains unanswered.

Shouldn't the government employ the best of talents in its efforts to better the economy?

Our single transferable vote system is arguably a system which gives the electorate much more choice and possibilities than the first-past-the-post and other European electoral systems do. However, it hardly shows up as the perfect system as it may end up giving a seat in Parliament to candidates on the basis of the first letter of their surname or, as we shall see in this article, their place of birth/residence rather than the virtues they should be endowed with. The notion that the larger a candidate's place of birth/ residence the better the chances of election holds water. This is also the case in local council elections. In my observations I refer to the results of the local elections held closest to the 2003 general election occurring in the place of abode of a given candidate.

Only a few candidates are elected from districts where the number of voters supporting their party does not at least amount to half the quota. As an example let us take the first district in the 2003 election. The quota stood at 3,379. One of the successful candidates was Austin Gatt whose place of birth and abode is Valletta. In the 2002 local council elections the PN won 2,257 votes in Valletta alone.

We can also take the number of votes obtained by candidates contesting more than one election.

Labour candidate Anglu Farrugia contested the district of his place of birth and residence - Mosta (part of the 11th district in the 2003 election) - and also the 12th district. The quota in the 11th district was of 3,744 and Dr Farrugia obtained 2,057 first preferences. The number of MLP sympathisers in Mosta alone in the 2004 local council election totalled 4,769.

If we had to compare the first count votes won by Dr Farrugia in the 12th district, where he does not reside, we will find that here he obtained 1,244 first preferences where a quota of 3,771 votes was required for a candidate to be successful.

The same could be said with regard to Michael Farrugia, another Labour candidate. In the 2003 general election he was elected from the 12th district where he resides, while he only obtained 830 first count votes in the 10th district with which he has no birth or residence connections. This shows that, notwithstanding the popularity of a candidate and his national standing, the majority of the Maltese electorate is bound to electing representatives in Parliament living in the same localities as themselves.

Obviously, this places candidates coming from smaller localities at a very big, possibly insurmountable, disadvantage.

A quick look at the place of residence of MPs shows that if we had to take into account, firstly, the place of residence itself, and, secondly, the number of sympathisers of that candidate's party in a locality, we would discover that only a few MPs can be singled out for a mention.

Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici lives in Xghajra, where his party enjoyed a minimal support of 177 votes in the 2003 local council election results. However, Xghajra is not Dr Mifsud Bonnici's place of birth.

One good trick is therefore to make the best of the demographic advantage provided by one's place of birth as a springboard for electoral successes even if this is not the locality where one resides.

On the other hand, Labour MP Evarist Bartolo stands out as the only candidate who managed to obtain the quota although residing in a locality (Swieqi) where his party only won 647 votes in the 2004 local elections. In fact, Mr Bartolo won a striking 2,072 first preferences in the 2003 general election, when the quota stood at 3,591 votes. Perhaps, this occurs because the 10th district is quite a compact district and, despite the demographic limitations of Swieqi, geographically and physically the 10th district is composed of a number of localities situated one next to the other with their borders touching.

Mr Bartolo is the exception to the rule in this regard although other factors, such as national popularity as mentioned before, and television appearances, as well as the lack of other successful candidates may come into play to make up for demographic disadvantage. At this stage, one can also state that Mr Bartolo's place of birth is not his place of residence and this adds up to making him quite an exception to the rule.

All in all, our Parliament is, for better or for worse, constituted in a parochial, demographically determined manner, and it is rather difficult for any given candidate, even if his national presence is boosted through TV exposure, to be successful if his place of birth and/or residence happens to be the wrong one.

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