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L-Orizzont daily

Translation

THE PHANTOM CANDIDATE AND A VOTE FOR THE PARTY

In Jane Austen Balls, during a particular dance, dancers have to dance with a phantom! During a coreography made up of three groups, any two dancers at the end of the line have to pretend that there is a third dancer not to disrupt everybody else. Ironically, the inclusion of a phantom also applies to local politics!

Only a small percentage of the population vote from top to bottom. The first vote to the first candidate because he is the first one on the list and right down to the bottom according to the alphabetical order.

But a far more significant percentage of voters vote for their favourite three candidates according to trust, ability and sympathy. But then vote for the rest of the candidates from top to bottom pretty much like the same group.

That means voting 1 for the candidate in the sixth row of the ballot paper, the second vote to the candidate in the third row and third vote for the candidate in the tenth row. Then, to avoid any mistakes, they still start from top to bottom with the first candidate on the list getting a number 4, the second a no. 5 and so on.

The former group (voting from top to bottom according to the alphabet all the way) wouldn't amount to more than 5% of the electorate. But the second group (who vote for their first three favourite candidates meaningfully and the rest of the candidates according to the alphabet) could make up to more than 70% of the electorate. Whether they vote meaningfully until they choose their 4th favourite candidate or their 5th favourite candidate is pretty much irrelevant in fact.

For such an injustice to be addressed I think that there are two things that can be done.

Firstly, the phantom candidate! How and why? Many of us know that according to our electoral system the number 1 vote is worth much more than any of the other preferences. If the first candidate on the list literally does not exist, it is the party that benefits from the vote and none of the actual candidates would benefit absolutely and unfairly due to the first letter of his/her surname. And if voters want to vote no. 1 for a particular candidate they would be much more wary! On the other hand, those who don't bother who they give their first preference to, would be voting for the party and not for a particular candidate.

Secondly, if the numbers corresponding to the alphabetical order (which I will call the corresponding numbers) count/have the same weight as 2, the system would be much fairer. In other words, if every no. 5 preference which is next to the fifth candidate in the list has the same weight as a 2 (because the assumption is that the 5 was given haphazardly by the voter) and the same applies to the 8th, the 13th and all other preferences, each and every number on the list will have the same weight as 2 once it corresponds to the alphabetical order of the candidate in the list! This means, that instead of the assuming that 90% of the voters vote meaningfully when in fact they are voting haphazardly, we should assume that 90% of the voters vote haphazardly instead of meaningfully!

It might be that for most of you this is Greek or seems to be unfair. But how unfair is it that certain candidates are always favoured and others are always put at a disadvantage?

We are too used to lotteries! However, if one wants more women in Parliament, it might be that one should think twice. In English one says 'to throw the baby out with the bathwater'. Amongst the female candidates that have been thrown out with the bathwater over the years there were Spiteri Debono Miriam (ex-Speaker of the House), Vella Monica (presently a Magistrate), Vella Cuschieri Joanne (presently a Magistrate) and of course me: Vassallo Lorna.

Tua Rachel and Zammit Alamango Nikita also risk being wasted.

Amongst the candidates that haven't been re-elected there were Deborah **S**chembri and Paula **M**ifsud Bonnici.

Obviously, men at the bottom of the list also struggle to be elected or have to resort to by-elections and co-options. Amongst these, Manuel **M**allia (ex-Minister for Justice), Edward **Z**ammit Lewis (ex-Minister for Tourism), Stefan **Z**rinzo Azzopardi (candidate) and Alfred **S**ant (ex-Prime Minister).

Through a system which puts the party itself as No. 1 on the list (where LABOUR PARTY could be written instead of a candidate's name), whoever votes 1 in this box would be actually voting solely for the party itself (considering that victory goes to the party with most No. 1 votes locally) and whoever votes 1 next to a candidate's name would be voting for a particular candidate (as well as the party). With such a system whoever votes from top to bottom would be also giving the equivalent of a No. 2 preference to all the candidates. Most probably, this would also put the party at an advantage – because a candidate who got a few actual twos after a winning candidate would be giving the party these few twos as well as all the 'corresponding votes' just as much as the candidate who got many more 2nd preferences since more votes would have been transferred onto the candidate before s/he is eliminated. This is due to the fact that a candidate that has been eliminated at the second, third, fourth round would have 'inherited' even if he got a 7, 8 or 9 after the party or a winning candidate.

The only alternative to introducing such a system would be to draw candidates by lots (which wouldn't do justice to anyone).

Whatever the case, it is a no. 1 on the list representing no one in particular that can ensure more fairness at least to guarantee more equity in the distribution of votes which are ticked haphazardly.

