Towards a fair and democratic parliamentary system

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abstract *The present representative parliamentary system is not democratic. We propose a new non-political parliamentary system where the parliamentarians are randomly chosen from the public, using computer technology, and there are no elections. In this 'random' parliament, government is by ordinary people with proportional representation by all groups including women, men, workers, managers, old people, young people, and so on. The random parliament is the closest thing to true democracy that is currently attainable.*

Introduction

Contrary to popular belief and propaganda, the present representative parliamentary system, where we vote for candidates, is not democratic or fair. In the present system we are essentially represented by only a few political parties. In an ideal democracy a country would be governed by all of its citizens, and there would be no politics. This situation is presently unattainable but a very close approximation to this state can be achieved by randomly selecting the parliamentarians from the public by what virtually amounts to a giant lottery. In this system the parliament will consist of a uniform cross-section of the public, and is comprised of ordinary citizens. In this 'random' parliament, anyone who is eligible to vote under the present system may be selected to be a parliamentarian. In what follows we will reserve the name 'politician' to refer to a parliamentarian in the present political system.

In ancient Greek democracies[1], women and slaves were disfranchised, but all other citizens could become involved in all aspects of government. This system became unmanageable when the population of the ancient cities and their rural surrounding became too large. A system where officials of government were chosen by lot, was later used in Sparta, where an assembly of citizens (the 'ephors') was chosen to oversee the powers of the king. In Athens the idea of representation by lot was applied to the selection of judicial bodies. As far as we can ascertain the present representative candidate system was never used by the ancient Greeks yet we frequently refer to this period as the root of our own 'democracy'.

The advent of computers enables us to now circumvent the problems experienced by the ancient Greeks with random selection procedures. Computers allow us to generate random numbers and at the same time to handle very large population databases.

One of the main problems with the present electoral system stems from the fact that the marginal winner receives all of the spoils of victory. In many countries it is almost impossible to hold fair elections and the narrow losers may find it difficult to accept the result of the election. As is frequently observed, elections rarely eliminate civil conflicts. Minority groups are also unrepresented in this system. These problems might not occur in the random parliament where there is no single winner and all groups are proportionally represented.

Problems associated with the present electoral and political system
In many modern 'democracies', including Australia, two main political parties dominate parliament. For simplicity and clarity our discussion will be centred around the current Australian parliamentary system.

To illustrate the unfairness in the present representative system let us consider the following hypothetical example: Let us suppose that in an election for a particular seat there are five candidates one from each of the five 'main' political parties in Australia, that is the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Liberal Party (LP), the National Party, the Australian Democrats (AD), and the Green Party (GP), and that they receive the following percentages of the total vote as a first preference: ALP 39%, LP 40%, NP 7%, AD 5%, GP 5%, informal 4%. Let us further suppose that after preferences the ALP wins the seat, with 49% of the vote and the LP has 47% of the vote. This situation is unfair in a number of respects. The ALP receives all the spoils of victory, even though the LP was preferred by almost as many voters as the ALP. In this system the losers receive absolutely nothing, no matter how close they come to winning. The smaller parties are further hampered by the fact that in the preferential voting system the first preference of the voter is not considered, unless it corresponds to one of the two main political parties. The only thing that matters in the end is the relative order of the two main political parties.

This situation also applies to the entire federal election where the winning party gets to form government and the losers get practically no power. Also, although the Greens and Democrats may receive up to 10% of the national primary vote, as in this example, they are not guaranteed any representatives in the lower house of parliament. In a fair system, one in every ten members of parliament would belong to the AD or the GP. In short, the present system is completely dominated by the two main political parties. It is also often the case that the winning party may have less than 50% of the national primary vote, yet they form government. This is not democracy.

Another problem that can arise in the present system is where the balance of power is held by a small political party or even by an individual, since the two main parties are in direct

opposition to each other. In Australia this problem frequently arises in the Upper House or Senate.

In the present system ordinary people who are not politically inclined cannot compete effectively in elections against the well oiled financially secure party machines. Another problem that often presents itself is that the voter can only chose from a handful of political candidates, preselected by their own parties, and on many occasions the voter may perceive them all as unworthy. Combined with the fact that the two main political parties eventually pick up the vote, this can lead many voters to cast an informal or protest vote in sheer frustration.

The fact that the marginal winner gets all the spoils of victory may also play a significant role in the persistence of many international civil conflicts. In many counties it is almost impossible to hold fair elections because of problems associated with distances, coordination, interference and vote rigging. This is especially significant since the winner, no matter by how much, receives all the power in government. A small shift in the votes can completely reverse the result of an election. Given this instability in the electoral system, the different political groups involved are usually suspicious of each other and in many cases they may refuse to accept the verdict of the election. Small ethnic groups are confronted with the additional problem that they do not receive proportional (if any) representation in the parliament under the present system, since they are outnumbered by the larger groups and the present system tends to favour the larger groups as highlighted by the Australian example. Under our proposal the parliament represents the people and every political group, or otherwise, is proportionally represented in the parliament. The random parliamentary system may eliminate many of these conflicts since the power of government is fairly shared by all, and there is no single winner, or for that matter, loser as well. The random parliament may be particularly useful in places like Bosnia where there are many different ethnic groups.

The United Nations (UN) has been largely unsuccessful in its efforts to gain peace in many troubled regions around the world. In our view this may be largely due to the 'false' democracy that is offered to these countries and the problems associated with this, as outlined above. It is ironic that in some cases the UN tries to physically impose this western 'democracy'. Admittedly it may be difficult to initially generate databases of citizens in some of these countries, to implement the random parliament, but once this has been established it should be relatively easy to maintain. These difficulties are nevertheless quite trivial compared to the constant maintenance required in the present system.

Politicians are generally driven by their love of power, and often aspire to be like their predecessors. they specifically relish the thought of arguing their party's position, with their opponents in the parliament. They do not seek to work in any collaborative manner with the opposition party, and in most cases will argue against each other simply for the sake of argument. In recent years the shift of the ALP towards the right has driven the LP further to the right even if many of the new policies adopted by the ALP were previously

acceptable to the LP. In many respects the leadership qualities of an individual are also determined by their 'theatrical' performance in the parliament. Politicians who mean well are hampered in the present system. The present use of the parliament to argue the party position is unproductive. Each party is preaching to its own converted, and it is highly unlikely to convince the other party. Supported and encouraged by the media, this nonsense also proceeds outside of the parliament.

In the present system the will and desires of a few politically motivated people is imposed on the majority. The people who are most likely to become politicians are those who join the main political organizations at a very early age. In Australia, the policies implemented in such a system are those of the trade unions and the commerce and industry groups. The power is not equally and proportionally distributed to all community groups. Smaller groups are generally swamped by larger and more powerful groups and receive no power in government. The present parliament predominantly consists of older and generally prosperous men. There is not a proportional representation of woman, or young people for instance.

The random parliament
Under our proposal, the members of parliament should be chosen randomly from the public. Every eligible citizen (over some specified age) is assigned a number and if this number is chosen by a computer program that person will be selected (as opposed to elected) to represent the country in parliament. Every person is equally likely to be selected and hence all groups in the community are proportionally represented in the new parliament. Just how this selection process can be implemented is discussed in more detail below. In many ways this system is like jury service or a giant lottery. The option for a selectee to decline an invitation to join parliament should be included.

In the random parliament there will be a proportional representation of all community groups, including women, men, workers, managers, young people, old people, middle-age people, poor people, rich people, middle-class people, heterosexuals, homosexuals, Christians, Catholics, Anglo-Saxons, aborigines, immigrants, and so on. The more even distribution of power to the public should result in a much fairer society for all groups. The random parliament is of the people, by the people and for the people. The system is as fair and as democratic as can possibly be achieved at present.

In the random parliamentary system, politically motivated people may still influence policy by joining the public service or by becoming advisers, but at least the final decisions will not be politically motivated. If desired, the random parliament can scrutinize the appointment of senior public servants, but in our view this may not be necessary. The drive for politics may be a direct result of the present system which encourages political aspirations. A non-political random parliamentary system should quash such ideology.

In the random parliament proposal there are no elections. This itself represents an enormous saving to the community, not to mention the relentless media bombardment during an election campaign (and the waste of such resources), and the constant work

required to shift electoral boundaries to ensure the 'pseudo-equity' of each vote. In the random parliament proposal there is equal representation for all communities and townships in proportion to their population. The larger their population the larger the probability that they will have a representative in parliament. It should also be noted that many politicians do not even live or work in their electorates.

In the random parliamentary system there is no need for parliamentarians to receive large salaries, since parliamentarians are randomly chosen from the public and there is no need to encourage people to choose politics as a profession.

In the present system almost all politicians are in debt to their party because the party funded their election campaign. They are obliged to toe the party line or they may not be preselected for candidacy in the next election. In the random parliament the parliamentarians will be free to vote according to their own conscience.

Once a random parliament has been formed with say 1000 parliamentarians, they could be replaced on a semi-continuous basis. An average term of office of approximately four years can be achieved by deselecting 20 parliamentarians every month and replacing them with 20 new people randomly chosen from the public. The term of office for each selectee can vary. Someone may be so unlucky to only be in parliament for one month, while others may remain in parliament for well over four years. The uncertainty in the term of office would reduce the likelihood of corruption and bribery since parliamentarians may be deselected in the next month. The gradual replacement of parliamentarians ensures that there are always people in parliament with experience in government.

The initial incorporation of this type of parliamentary system could be achieved by selecting people from the community to join the present elected parliament, and then allowing the process to evolve by deselection and selection as outlined above. This should ensure a smooth transition from the present system to the new random parliament.

Once the parliament has been chosen, the parliament can then itself elect its president and the ministers (say around 30 people in all) who will be more directly involved with the running of the country. Parliamentarians could nominate themselves for such positions and could present their qualifications to the parliament. There is no reason why one should not expect to find at least 30 very capable and talented people in the 1000 selected parliamentarians who could competently manage these tasks. In the present system the appointment of ministers is not based on merit. It is often remarked in America that "anyone can become the president", but in the random parliamentary system that statement takes on an almost literal meaning. The other members of the random parliament would vote on new legislation and can themselves propose legislation either individually or through self-appointed working groups.

In essence, the 1000 parliamentarians can be thought of as a statistical sample of the general public. Consequently, any decision reached by the parliament will in all probability reflect the desires of the public, but to guarantee this, it may be prudent to

insist on a safe majority in the parliament (of say 60%) before any new law or act is passed.

An interesting feature of our proposed random parliament is that all parliamentarians will be on the same side, working together towards the unified principle of governing the country in the best interests of all. The parliament will not be split into two opposing halves as in the present system, where in most cases each side takes the opposing view just for the sack of argument. In the present system not only is half of the talent languishing in the opposition but it is obsessed with hindering the talent in government. This is not a productive system. In the random parliament the talent of every parliamentarian will be utilized in a collective and creative manner.

Ordinary citizens are more aware of the problems that affect real Australians. Politicians are generally not in touch with reality and obtain such information through popular polls. Since the random parliamentarians will have experience in other professions, the random parliament will have a greater diversity. Politicians on the other hand are generally of the same mould. Also since the random parliament is constantly changing, this allows for a more dynamic opinion to evolve in the parliament.

To safeguard the parliament against the selection of undesirable citizens, rules my be incorporated so that people with a criminal record are ineligible. It may also be desirable to have a mechanism whereby in a large majority the parliament (say 90%) can expel, if necessary, a parliamentarian who is found to have abused his/her power or to have acted improperly.

It may be expected that the two main political parties in Australia, the trade unions and business groups will bitterly oppose the random parliament proposal since it completely erodes their power base and the inequity they are enjoying under the present system. However if one thinks about it logically each special interest group will receive fair treatment and they will not have an opposing faction as in the present system. For example, employers will no longer have the capacity to influence parliament and elections by their financial means. This will reduce the power base of this group and subsequently the need for a union representation in parliament. By the same token employers will not need to have such a strong representation in the parliament if the power of unions is also curbed. Political groups may also argue that the random parliament may select uneducated or unintelligent citizens. In our view, if these people represent the general population then so be it, they should be represented in the parliament.

We have not addressed the question of state governments, or whether there is need for a senate to protect the rights of the smaller states. If desired these bodies can also be implemented with a random selection procedure. In our view, however, the senate is an outdated idea and in many respects is even less democratic than the Lower House.

One may also apply the random selection idea to local government, which may be an ideal place to trial the ideas of random selection. This will certainly eliminate many people who run for such office for selfish and corrupt reasons.

Critics of the random parliament proposal may suggest that the present parliamentary system is more stable since the government is guaranteed power for a fixed term in office of 3 or 4 years in which time they can implement their policies. However, one should bear in mind that the other political party is constantly opposing the implementation of these policies and when they come to power they generally undue most of the policies of their opponents and start to implement their own, only to have them in turn unravelled by their opponents later. In the random parliament everyone is on the same side, and there is a collective stability in the system.

The role of computers
The feasibility of our proposal rests on the ability of computers to be able to handle large databases and to be able to generate genuine random numbers. The question of security is also quite important.

It is difficult to imagine how computers can generate truly random numbers since they involve deterministic algorithms, but there a number of ways to circumvent this. One could couple a computer algorithm with a system that is quite genuinely random, such as a quantum mechanical device, or a biological, physical or neural system that is beyond our present understanding and is in the sense of chaotic dynamics essentially random. We will argue, however, that there is no need to resort to nature to provide us with randomness, so long as the algorithm cannot be determined or exploited.

In computers, random numbers are generated by running a program where an initial number (referred to as a seed) is used to generate another number by a specific rule or algorithm. The new number is then used as a seed to generate the next number and so on and so forth. The numbers generated in this way can be arranged to uniformly cover any range of numbers, say from 1 to 10 million, if it is to be used to select the random parliamentarians from a total of 10 million eligible citizens. There are many different possible algorithms.

The simplest way to implement a random number generator is to use a very powerful computer, perhaps the most powerful available, which is continually running the random number program. Every now and again, at semi-regular intervals the current random number can be drawn from the computer and this can be used to select or deselect a random parliamentarian. One may even perceive televising these selections to inform the public who has been selected or deselected, and to give some background to each new parliamentarian. The deselection of parliamentarians can also be done by a more simple lottery system.

A computer generally performs tens of millions of operation each second and a slight shift in the precise moment when a random number is drawn from the computer will lead to a

completely different selection. In only a few seconds every eligible citizen is cycled through by the computer. Even if someone knew the algorithm that was used it would be difficult, if not impossible, to predict the random number that would be selected from the computer. the algorithm used by the selection computer could also be randomly changed or chaotic imperfections in the design of the computer may be included so that the calculations are not performed at a fixed rate.

All eligible citizens could be labelled by some number, for instance from 1 to 10 million. There is no need for people to be informed about their number. The random parliamentarian could be chosen from this list by the random number generator. If someone dies their number can be reassigned to someone else who may have just come of age or has recently arrived in the country. Alternatively the individually associated numbers can be reassigned or randomly varied every so often. One group could even generate the random numbers while another could randomly shuffle the assignment of numbers to individuals.

Other protective measures can be taken to secure the random number selection system. the possibilities to safeguard corruption in the selection of random numbers are really quite endless and it can quite safely be assumed that the process can be maintained in a completely and virtually incorruptible manner.

In a more futuristic setting, we may all be interconnected to each other by telecommunication networks and we can all vote on all issues if we so desire. That would be a true democracy.