

METHODS OF VOTING

Minutes of the spring meeting 1985 (Extracts)
(Lomé — Togo)

Topical debate introduced by Mr. Desrosiers (Canada)

The *Vice-President* reminded the Association that at the beginning of its session in Lomé, it had decided to hold a spontaneous topical discussion on subjects raised by Secretaries General in the list of current topics notified to the President. The first topical discussion was to be on voting methods. He invited Mr. Desrosiers (Canada) to introduce the subject which had been mentioned by several Secretaries General.

Mr. Desrosiers noted that the spontaneous topical discussion was a new working method for the Association. Looking through the list of current topics of interest notified by Secretaries General to the president he had seen that several other members of the Association had listed voting methods as a matter of current interest in their parliaments. It was certainly a matter of importance in Canada and he was keen to seek information from colleagues on their experience in dealing with electronic voting methods. The Canadian voting system was very old and could only be compared with that in the House of Common in London. Five Members could demand a vote and the bells would ring until Whips from both the government and opposition signified that they were ready for the vote to be held. The fact that one of the Whips could use this procedure as a delaying tactic had given rise to interest in other voting procedures. He was particularly keen to learn which other parliaments had electronic voting and what problems they had encountered in using it.

Mr. Guthrie (USA) said that the voting system in the House of Representatives in the United States was fully electronic and although there had been problems at first, the system had now been operating for some ten years. There was also a back-up electronic system in case the first one failed and, if all electronics, failed manual roll-call voting could be used. Several problems had been encountered. First, Members often forgot their voting cards. If this happened they had to come into the well of the House to sign their name on a card and the Clerk would then put in their vote in the electronic voting system. On one occasion a Member had been shown as voting while he was known to be holding a hearing of his committee outside Washington. His vote was recorded... but he was not re-elected to the next Congress. A second problem was that dust would often fill up the holes on the voting card. For this reason, and because they were often lost, it was necessary to re-issue cards frequently. Funds had been allocated for a new electronic voting system. The panels on the walls which showed up which way each Representative had voted needed to be replaced. The current practice was that each Member had a

personal voting card with holes punched on it to indicate his number. There were forty-four voting positions in the chamber where Members could vote.

Mrs. Nersesian (USA) said that the United States Senate did not have an electronic voting system. The voting procedure was similar to that in Canada with a fifteen-minute delay from the time of the vote being called for people to come to the chamber to vote. The presence of Senators in the chamber enabled the leadership to persuade them to vote a particular way immediately before they cast their vote. If an electronic voting system was introduced, this opportunity for the leadership would be lost.

Mr. Amiot (France) said that in the French National Assembly the normal way to vote was by a show of hands. If there was any doubt about the result a vote by sitting and standing would be taken. A formal vote would be held at the request of the government, a committee chairman or the leader of a political group, and in this case an electronic voting system would be used. The deputy would have to use a key to open a box on his desk and would then be able to vote. Warning bells would ring to notify deputies who were in offices elsewhere. The votes of individual deputies showed up on wall panels. Under the constitution, each deputy had an individual personal vote but there had been occasions when the number of votes recorded was greater than the number of deputies present in the assembly. If there was a breakdown of the electronic system a roll-call vote would be held.

Mr. Jacobson (Israel) said that the Knesset was interested in this subject. At present they had a five-minute limit on voting time. He was keen to gather more information on this subject.

Mr. Guthrie added to his previous remarks that although representatives had to vote within a fifteen-minute time frame they could only switch a vote already cast within the first ten minutes.

Mr. Mo (Norway) said that in Norway electronic voting had been used since 1968 and no problems had been encountered. Members had to press a button indicating whether they were for or against a proposal and there was no provision for abstention. The details of the Norwegian system were contained in Mr. Bradshaw's report on voting systems. Bells rang to warn Members of a vote but there was no time limit. Only on one occasion had a vote had to be cancelled and this was before electronic voting had been introduced.

Mr. Tumangan (Philippines) said that in the Philippines electronic voting had been considered but the parliament had decided against it in view of all the difficulties encountered in other countries. His parliament preferred to wait till the experience of others had reduced the problems involved. Voting was normally held by calling for the ayes and the noes but voting by tellers could be requested. In this case one teller from each side would count the vote by roll-call.

Mr. Hjortdal (Denmark) said that details of the Danish voting system were also contained in the Bradshaw report. An electronic system had been introduced three years ago and everyone concerned seemed very happy with it. There had been no long-lasting technical problems, and initial problems had been traced, not to electronic faults, but to the air in the chamber. Since then the humidity had been increased and there had been no further problems. Each member's vote was

shown up on the wall of the chamber. He stressed the wide support the electronic voting system enjoyed in Denmark.

Mr. Blake (Australia) said that in the Australian House of Representatives electronic voting had been considered but had not yet been adopted. It was possible that it would be introduced when the new parliamentary building was brought into use in 1987. There was a feeling in Canberra that the right of no more than two backbenchers to call for a vote should be preserved because this was a vital tool for the opposition to bargain for more time for debate on the floor of the House. Current practice was for the bells to ring for three minutes and for divisions to take place on the floor of the House. The voting procedure took some six or seven minutes. If no debate occurred between two decisions being made, only one minute was allowed between two votes.

Mr. Desrosiers (Canada) thanked all the participants for the information they had given.

The *Vice-President* thanked Mr. Desrosiers for introducing the topical discussion and all those who had participated for their contribution.