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Letters to the Editor

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Reading through the Bahá'í Council election results a thought came to my mind of how selective we Bahá'ís can be at times. The thought was 'Universal participation' – with 58 votes recorded for the Scottish Council, I wonder?

Another thought, looking at the results, was of how many of the Bahá'ís who live in remote country areas [the home of the spirit?] are to be eliminated from the process of electing the Council? As far as I can make out most Assembly members live in towns and therefore qualify to elect the councils and as this is the opposite to the country [spirit?] then what does this manifest?

Scott Murray
Braco

National Assembly member Dr John Parris responds:

To cover these important themes adequately it is necessary to highlight four key concepts.

Firstly, the 58 votes cast in Scotland represent 81% of the electorate (72) which is a good response. So saying, the National Spiritual Assembly always hopes for a 100% vote in Bahá'í elections. The training programme entitled "Your voice in God's Kingdom" can be of great assistance in developing an understanding of the sacred nature of the election process. One small point worth noting is that the Universal House of Justice uses the phrase "universal participation" in four specific contexts[1] – but this does not include participation in Bahá'í elections. The National Spiritual Assembly would prefer that its usage is confined to the original meanings.

Secondly, the current ratio of urban to rural local Spiritual Assemblies in Scotland is 5:3.[2] The process of boundary changes for local Spiritual Assembly areas, completed in the UK last Ridván, would appear to be part of a wider international move to harmonise structures according to the guidance from the Beloved Guardian: "[I]t is of the utmost importance that in accordance with the explicit text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy Book, in every locality, be it city or hamlet, where the number of adult (21 years and above) declared believers exceeds nine, a local 'Spiritual Assembly' be forthwith established." [3]

The tendency in the past had been to have rural assemblies covering much larger areas than for example, a "hamlet". Recently the National Spiritual Assembly of the Republic of Ireland met with representatives of our National Spiritual Assembly, at the suggestion of the Universal House of Justice, to discuss the application of almost identical boundary changes in that country.

Thirdly, although it is true that across the UK as a whole the boundary changes have led to an initial reduction in the number of rural local Spiritual Assemblies, the potential number has been enormously increased. Looking to the future it will give the rural areas a disproportionately greater influence in the running of the Cause: consonant with the Bahá'í view of their being more spiritually in tune than urban areas.

Consider, for instance, the relative populations of the village of Tillicoultry and the city of Glasgow. If in the (hopefully) not too distant future there were to be perhaps one or two

dozen believers in Tillicoultry and say a hundred in Glasgow: in each case there would be nine members of the local Spiritual Assembly but those from the rural area would have disproportionately greater effect on the outcome of the election for the Bahá'í Council for Scotland (relative to the size of the Bahá'í population). Not only that but the total number of more rural local Spiritual Assemblies would be anticipated to be vastly greater than the more urban ones: again contributing to a “rural shift”, so to speak.

In this time of transition, it is worth reflecting on the fact that an identical process has already occurred on a bigger scale within the Bahá'í world. At the time of the first election of the Universal House of Justice (in 1963) there were 56 National Spiritual Assemblies, drawn primarily from the more populous and influential countries. Today there are more than 180 National Assemblies, the majority of which represent the smaller nations – often small islands not much more than dots in the ocean. Hence over a period of less than 40 years the balance has shifted significantly in favour of the smaller, less densely populated and more rural countries.

The importance of seeing the “end in the beginning”[4] becomes apparent.

Fourthly, the most effective ways of speeding this process, here and now, are by teaching and home front pioneering.

In summary, the universally applied system for the election of Bahá'í Councils established by the Universal House of Justice[5] would be anticipated, in the long run, to give proportionately greater influence to rural than urban communities throughout the UK.

References:

1. The Universal House of Justice, Wellspring of Guidance, pp. 37-9, September 1964: “In addition to teaching, every believer can pray ... fight their own spiritual battles, and contribute to the Fund.” p. 38
2. Rural:Kirkwall East (Orkney), Lerwick (Shetland), Skye Central Urban:Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness
3. Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 37
4. Bahá'u'lláh, excerpt from the Valley of Knowledge, The Seven Valleys and Four Valleys, p. 15
5. The Universal House of Justice, The Establishment of Regional Bahá'í Councils in Certain Countries, 30 May 1997, section 2.2.1.

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Editor: Patrick Morrissey, e-mail: p.morrissey@ntlworld.com, fax: 0870 136 3730

