

## BYE-BYE PROFESSIONAL POLITICIANS

# A modest proposal for a citizen Legislature

By COLLEEN O'CONNOR  
AND JOAN PALEVSKY

As Freud once puzzled about women, so now do political observers worry about voters. "What is it that voters really want?" they ask. "Why are they so alienated?" Only now it is not a whimsical query — the question has taken on ominous overtones. There is great fear that non-voting is but a prelude to the demise of democracy, and that without participation in elections there will soon cease to be elections.

The topic of voter alienation has so fascinated and alarmed political scientists that exploration of the subject now constitutes its own mini-industry. Books, articles, newspapers and television are all pondering the same questions: "Why have the non-voters replaced the Republicans as the second major party in the United States?" "Why, with increasing consistency, have non-voters tallied the highest percentage points in local and state elections?"

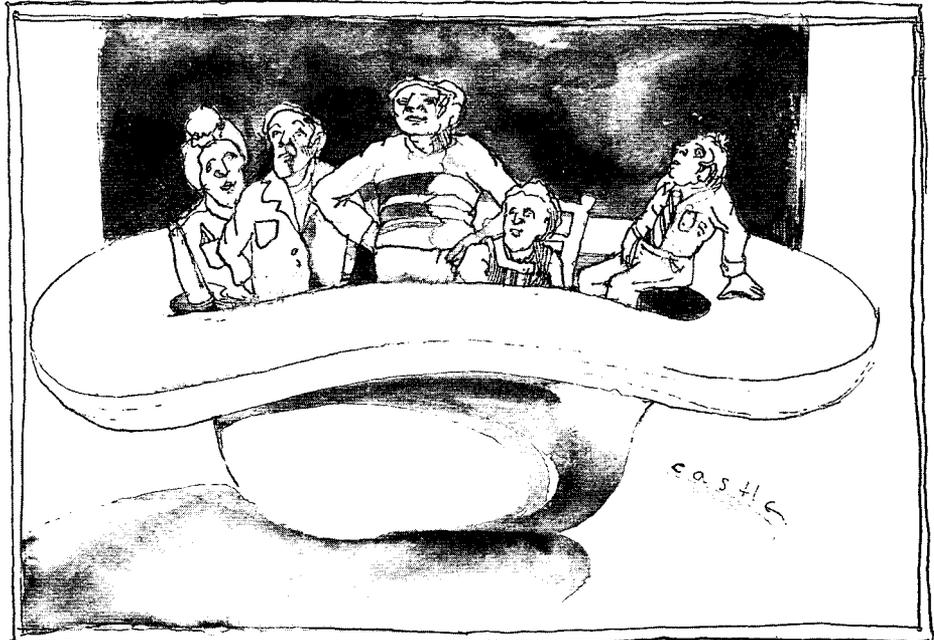
When queried directly, the stay-at-home citizen shrugs and complains of corruption among politicians, of disinterest in the dirty world of politics. Then he or she grudgingly admits the real source of discontent: a sense of futility. "What's the use? My vote doesn't matter anyway."

Perhaps a simple proposal would correct the situation by a straightforward increase in democracy: Eliminate the present system of electing the state Legislature. In its place, substitute a Lottery System — that is, representation via the current jury selection procedures.

Here is how it would work: All registered voters' names would be dropped into a hopper in their respective Assembly districts. The first name drawn

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in each district would automatically become the district's representative in Sacramento for one term. The entire process would be administered by the secretary of state's office every evenly numbered year. The state Senate would be abolished.

### Reaping the benefits

Each person chosen would be expected to serve. As Thomas Paine put it, "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must . . . undergo the fatigues of supporting it." Each representative chosen (barring serious illness or an incapacitating situation at home, such as a dying spouse) would be obliged to serve and to complete one full two-year term in Sacramento. No excuses. No age limit, except that he or she be of voting age. No discrimination based on sex, race or religion. The legislator's job would be protected, difficult as this may be. And at the end of two years, he or she would be required to give a full accounting to the district of his or her tenure in office.

In exchange for this sacrifice, each representative chosen via the lottery

would receive all the benefits now accorded state legislators. Annual salary, \$25,555; \$35 a day expense allowance for each day the legislature is in session (free of state income tax); a leased car; a free gas credit card; free telephone credit card; plus staff in both the district and the Sacramento offices. For many, being chosen through the lottery would be like winning the Irish Sweepstakes.

Could this system work? We believe it could. First, the obligation to represent one's neighbors might bring out the best in one's commitment to public service. Knowing that this would be a unique chance to solve the knotty problems of present-day society, the randomly chosen representatives might truly ponder the general good and not the expedient. Since they would not be indebted to special interests through campaign donations nor threatened by them in future elections, they might well exercise the office in an independent and responsible way.

An attractive corollary of the Lottery System would, in fact, be the elimination of not just one, but two sets

of costly legislative campaigns: those for the Assembly and those for the state Senate. Some persons might object to eliminating the state Senate and choosing only Assembly members because political options would become very limited. But nothing would prevent an Assembly member from running for statewide office. Furthermore, the result might be fewer professional politicians and more citizen office holders.

True, there might be some strange people in the Assembly representing us. That is a chance we would have to take. But would it be so different than it is today with elected representatives? With the Lottery System, at least there would be assurance that at the end of two years the district and the Assembly would have a new representative with new concerns, new ideas and new energies.

By far, the lottery's greatest appeal is its simple fairness. Currently, one percent of Californians are attorneys, but they constitute 49 percent of the state Legislature. Random selection would redress that imbalance quite easily, and other inequities as well. Women, now 53 percent of the population, are less than seven percent of the legislators. Similar statistics can be cited for Blacks, Chicanos, young and old.

But even more serious is the total absence of scientists, waitresses, truckers, tellers, bookkeepers, clerks, professors and artists in the Capitol. Who better knows the problems of their respective professions than they

themselves? They could bring an expertise to government not now in evidence. These people feel deeply about other problems, too, such as tax reform, school desegregation, energy conservation, the economy, health insurance — a whole host of problems with which the government is not now dealing adequately. Most people, given the opportunity, are willing to share their expertise and to learn from others. In short, who has more experience with society's problems than society itself?

#### A fresh pool of talent

Consider the fresh pool of talent that would be available. The very people whom we should want in government are the ones most repulsed by politics. The qualities considered important for successful campaigning for elective office — egoism and arrogance — are exactly the opposite of those traits requisite for good governing, humility and diligence. The lottery could pull into government service those talented and less flamboyant individuals who have much to contribute.

Furthermore, the Lottery System would mitigate the feeling that politics is a dirty business, that it is something apart from "us," that it really doesn't concern us. With the lottery *we* would be politics, *we* would be the government, and *we* would be responsible.

The lottery would certainly improve the political consciousness of everyone. Knowing that we might someday be in the Assembly might

make us more informed critics of government, and — if not more tolerant of other opinions — at least more understanding of the complexities of political and social problems.

At worst, two years with randomly selected representatives might produce some mediocre or bad legislation. This probably would be corrected later, as happens now. At best, the example of a conscientious representative would inspire his or her successor to serve the public good as well or better. The state probably would get a pretty good group of legislators who would come up with some novel solutions.

If democracy is that form of government which believes the people are best able to govern themselves, then the Lottery System is a logical consequence of that belief. Given adequate information, we really are and should be our own best representatives. What better reason to become informed and concerned than to exert some positive influence over the governing of our lives? Al Smith said it best when he remarked, "All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy."

Late last year, a Pennsylvania congressman named Gary A. Myers announced he would leave Congress when his second term ends in 1979. "Any guy next door can make a good legislator," Republican Myers said. "I look at my colleagues . . . and I just don't see there's much difference between them and the people back home." 

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# Commuter Computer

By ROBERT MCGARVEY

Breaking up the love affair between California drivers and their private automobiles is no easy assignment. In the recent past, car-pooling schemes have produced more apathy than activity. And politicians backed off quickly last year when the public screamed at the Diamond Lanes experiment on a Los Angeles freeway.

But now there is a modest model for pooling that is attracting renewed attention: Commuter Computer, a five-county, Southern California program with private and public backing. Started two years ago by Atlantic Richfield Company, it now has several sponsors, a non-profit organization with a 30-member board of directors — and the blessing (plus funding) of the California Department of Transportation.

Other cities are following suit: San Diego recently unveiled its own Commuter Computer, which shares name and techniques with LA's program but is otherwise unrelated. Marin County is joining the movement, too, with the help of more than a half-million dollars in Urban Mass Transit Administration funds earmarked for easing congestion on the Golden Gate Bridge.

But LA's Commuter Computer was there first and, so far, is the most ambitious program. Billing itself as "the better way," Commuter Computer's focus is elementary: Promote putting more people in each car, but otherwise leave the sanctity of the vehicle unmolested. Computers are used to match riders to van routes, and anyone unable to use public transportation may sign up for a seat on a van regardless of whether he or she works for a sponsoring corporation.

With a 1977-78 fiscal year budget of \$1.1 million, Commuter Computer has benefited from CalTrans' backing. In addition to funding, CalTrans has loaned employees for temporary stints in the group's Los Angeles offices. To reduce the risk for car owners, CalTrans will pay a major portion of any loss suffered by the owner if the pool is not successful within a year. Federal Aid to Urban Highway Project funds have been provided by the five counties Commuter Computer serves: Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and Ventura. The Southern California Association of Governments and the City of Los Angeles, which lends the computers, have also pitched in.

## Two lures for solo drivers

What distinguishes Commuter Computer from many similar government ventures is the extent of its private sector backing. Crocker Bank, Security Pacific Bank, Atlantic Richfield Company, the Auto Club of Southern California and other corporations have anted up, and ARCO has loaned several executives to work on a full-time basis for Commuter Computer.

With these resources, Commuter Computer offers two approaches for luring drivers away from solo-commuting:

standard car pooling and a newer van pool concept. The car pool program is typical fare, where would-be ride sharers are informed of their mutual interests and nature is allowed to take its course thereafter. Van pooling — where riders share a 10- or 12-passenger van on the daily commute to and from work — is the more innovative. There are 86 vans now operating, with a projected fleet of 200 by mid-1978. A van pooler's average monthly cost is \$70, and exact fares are based on mileage. The driver commutes free-of-charge and is permitted to use the van for personal business, paying only a nominal rate per mile.

A passenger's fare may seem steep, but Commuter Computer points out the alternative: That \$70 van trip would, it figures, run about \$160 for a driver commuting alone. And the amenities of van pooling — door-to-door service, radio headsets, bucket seats, individual reading lights — make it an attractive alternative to Southern California's feeble, if inexpensive, public transportation system.

Does van pooling have a prayer of success in Los Angeles? In assessing the odds, Commuter Computer marketing director Dave Jones reflects both optimism and caution. Noting that the concept's 1976 birth may have been premature, Jones says that there still isn't enough public awareness of van pooling. "As a private, non-profit agency, we lack the money for mass advertising," he says, "but we've found that our most successful advertising is word of mouth."

An increasing number of Los Angeles area companies are responding to the van pool idea. Commuter Computer staffers are being invited to meet with management and employees; free or cut-rate parking for vans is being offered in many company-owned lots. In some cases companies are providing direct subsidies of employees' van pool fares. Others are investigating underwriting the full cost, with advertising decals qualifying the project for tax-deduction as an advertising expense.

## Two big clouds

Despite these successes, there are two big clouds on Commuter Computer's horizon: insurance and accidents. Although van drivers are trained by the organization and a "perfect driving record" is cited, a major accident — particularly one involving death — could well chill any chances of growth. Even barring that sort of disaster, insurance rates already stand at \$1,200 annually per van, and only recently were as high as \$1,700. A change of carriers resulted in the reduction, but underwriters tend to view this transportation innovation with suspicion. Further increases could force significant fare hikes which, in turn, just might curb expansion.

Other underwriters voice concern over the level of insurance, which now stands at \$1 million per van occupant per incident. Escalating medical costs, coupled with a trend toward skyrocketing accident settlements, could wipe out even this high level of coverage. Who would be left holding the bag? Since no pertinent legal cases have been decided, there is no answer, but a common guess is the driver. If a legal battle set that precedent, unpaid drivers — the key to the program's feasibility — would likely become an endangered species.

And yet expansion fever reigns at Commuter Computer. The bullish attitude assumes that gasoline prices are sure to maintain their upward climb. And President Carter's call for energy conservation, when added to proposed stiff taxes on petroleum, will likely goad more commuters into finding alternatives to the increasingly expensive practice of driving alone to and from work.

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