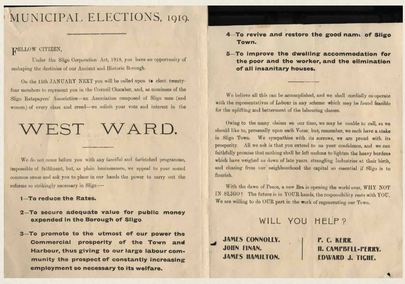
PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

On 15 January 1919 political theory became practice when the citizens of Sligo town went to the polls and wrote a new chapter in political history becoming the first electorate in Ireland or Britain to vote under the proportional representation (P.R.) system.

Election Count in Town Hall from Kilgannon Foley Collection



MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, 1919.

FELLOW CITIZEN,

Under the Sligo Corporation Act, 1918, you have an opportunity of reshaping the destinies of our Ancient and Historic Borough.

On the 15th JANUARY NEXT you will be called upon to elect twenty-four members to represent you in the Council Chamber, and, as nominees of the Sligo Ratepayers' Association—an Association composed of Sligo men (and women) of every class and creed—we solicit your vote and interest in the

WEST WARD.

We do not come before you with any fanciful and fantastical programme, impossible of fulfilment, but, as plain businessmen, we appeal to your sound common sense and ask you to place in our hands the power to carry out the reforms so strikingly necessary in Sligo:—

1—To reduce the Rates.

2—To secure adequate value for public money expended in the Borough of Sligo

3—To promote to the utmost of our power the Commercial prosperity of the Town and Harbour, thus giving to our large labour community the prospect of constantly increasing employment so necessary to its welfare.

4—To revive and restore the good nam. of Sligo Town.

5—To improve the dwelling accommodation for the poor and the worker, and the slimination of all insanitary houses.

We believe all this can be accomplished, and we shall cordially co-operate with the representatives of Labour in any scheme which may be found feasible for the uplifting and betterment of the labouring classes.

Owing to the many claims on our time, we may be unable to call, so we should like to, personally upon each Voter, but, remember, we each have a stake in Sligo Town. We sympathise with its sorrows, we are proud with its prosperity. All we ask is that you extend to us your confidence, and we our faithfully promise that nothing shall be left undone to fighten the heavy burdens which have weighed so down of late years, strangling Industries at their birth, and closing from our neighbourhood the capital so essential if Sligo is to flourish.

With the dawn of Peace, a new Era is opening the world over, WHY NOT IN SLIGO? The future is in YOUR hands, the responsibility rests with YOU. We are willing to do OUR part in the work of regenerating our Town.

WILL YOU HELP?

JAMES CONNOLLY.
JOHN TINAN.
JAMES HAMILTON.

P. C. KERR.
H. CAMPBELL-FERRY.
EDWARD J. TIGHE.

Municipal Election 1919

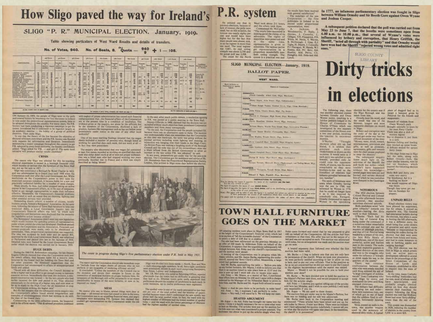
The background to the use of P.R. in the Sligo borough election of January 1919 lay in the poor financial condition of Sligo Corporation. In August 1917 a Local Government Board inquiry into the corporation's financial affairs blamed the poor financial situation of the corporation on 'the neglect of proper administrative procedures'.

The ratepayers decided to make an organised effort to remedy the finances of the borough and in November 1917 they formed the Sligo Ratepayers Association (S.R.A.).

The well-known Protestant and unionist businessman Arthur Jackson was elected as chairman of the S.R.A. At the first meeting the S.R.A. decided that it could achieve more by putting pressure on the corporation rather than challenging it directly.

The corporation had to accept that some kind of action was necessary and in January 1918 the corporation and the S.R.A. came to an agreement and they arranged to have a parliamentary bill drafted and submitted to the House of Commons which would increase the powers of the corporation and a new system of election to Sligo Corporation would also be introduced. The new system of election agreed upon was P.R. with Single Transferable Voting (S.T.V.) and quota counting.

In early July 1918 Thomas Scanlon, M.P. for north Sligo introduced the bill to the House of Commons and on 30 July 1918 it received the Royal Assent and the Sligo Corporation Act of 1918 came into operation allowing the use of P.R. in Sligo Borough elections.

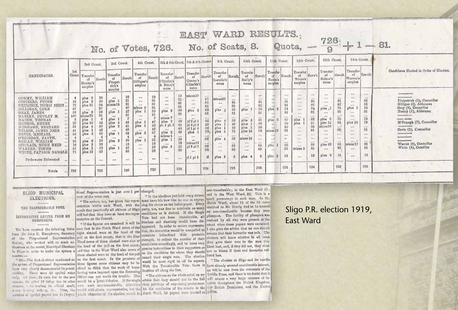


How Sligo paved the way for Ireland's P.R. system

Dirty tricks in elections

TOWN HALL FURNITURE GOES ON THE MARKET

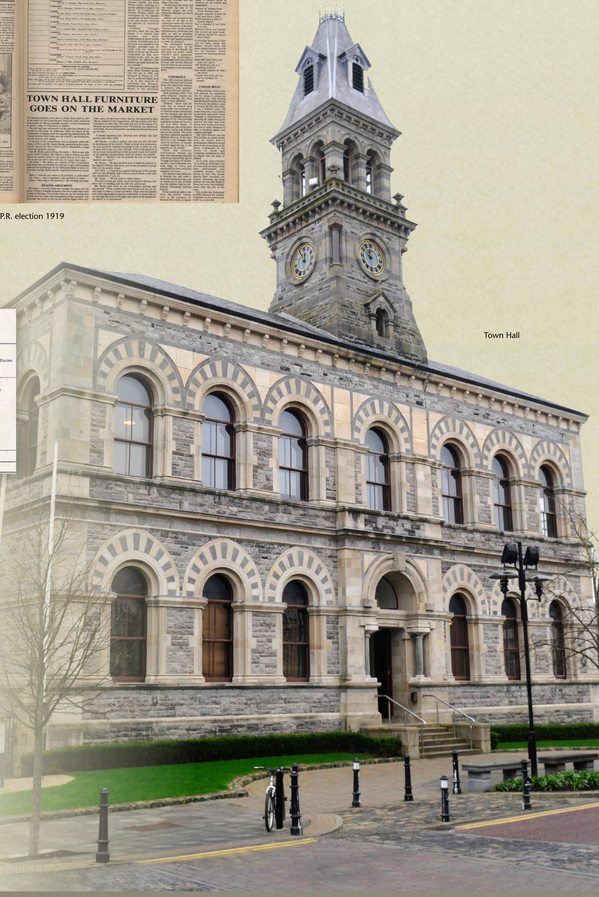
Sligo P.R. election 1919



EAST WARD RESULTS.

No. of Votes, 726. No. of Seats, 8. Quota, $\frac{726}{9} + 1 = 81$.

Sligo P.R. election 1919, East Ward



Town Hall

As a result of the media hype, the turnout for the election had been very high. The S.R.A. had done very well at the polls and had received 823 first preference votes in all three wards, securing thirty-seven per cent of the total vote and gaining eight seats for the party, five Protestants and three Catholics were elected. Sinn Féin got seven seats, Labour secured five seats while the independents gained four seats. Sinn Féin and Labour along with one pro-Sinn Féin independent held thirteen seats on the new corporation, while the S.R.A. and the other independents had eleven seats between them.

Since the Sligo Corporation elections were the first to use P.R. in Britain or Ireland the election results attracted plenty of interest. The newspapers of all shades and opinions were quick to applaud the success of the new electoral system. *The Sligo Champion* declared that 'the system has justified its adoption … and it is absolutely fair'. *The Sligo Independent* proudly stated that 'Sligo has the honour of being the first municipality in Ireland to adopt the principle, and everyone agrees that it was a great success'. The extraordinary success of the Sligo election was quickly followed by the adoption of P.R. at national level.

The first use of P.R. for the Sligo borough election of January 1919 was a significant milestone for democracy in Ireland. However, importantly for Sligo the use of P.R. and the crisis created by the poor financial condition of the borough provided an ideal opportunity for Protestant and Catholic businessmen to come together outside the divisive politics of unionism and nationalism.