

ANSWERS to the QUESTIONS proposed by his Excellency the Governor.

NEWFOUNDLAND.

No. 1.

St. John's, 29 January 1842.

Sir,

I HAVE the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 24th instant, accompanied by certain heads of inquiries, conveying at the same time his Excellency the Governor's wish that I should answer the questions therein contained.

After giving the subject all the consideration in my power, I beg respectfully to say, first, with regard to voters, that it may be laid down as a general proposition, that a household franchise is most suitable to the peculiar circumstances of the inhabitants of this colony.

Under this circumstance, it is my opinion, that a rent or property qualification, to supersede the present unlimited system of household suffrage, would, in effect, 'disfranchise a large portion of the inhabitants.

In framing a ground-work for a Representative Assembly in Newfoundland, it should always be kept in view that a great portion of the inhabitants are employed in the fisheries, many of whom, in the possession of property in boats, craft and tackle to a considerable amount, occupy such a description of houses as would be difficult to place a value upon in the form of rent or otherwise. Many of these persons move, in the summer or fishing season, to the Labrador and other distant parts of the colony, for the convenience of carrying on the fisheries, leaving their houses vacant until they return in the fall; others reside in small houses adjoining their fishing stages; for these fishermen's houses the occupiers pay no rent.

A rental qualification of 10 £ in St. John's, would have the effect of preventing a large portion of the householders from voting, particularly fishermen, who occupy tenements, paying a rent of from 5 £ to 8 £ per annum, in the back streets of the town. A rent of 5 £ and upwards would, in my opinion, comprehend the whole of the householders, with very few exceptions; under a rental of 5 £ per annum, few, if any, of the householders of St. John's would be debarred from voting.

It may be said that a rental qualification of 40s. in the towns of Harbour Grace, Carbonear, Brigus, Trinity, Bonavista, Burin, Bay Bulls, Placentia, Trepassey, and other outports, would have the effect of disfranchising the principal part of the householders in these places who are exclusively engaged in the fisheries.

The residents in the country districts, both in the neighbourhood of St. John's and in all other outports of the island, who have cleared land and turned their attention to agricultural pursuits, would be entitled to be classed as freeholders of from 40s. to 50 £, provided their present title, that of occupancy, be confirmed by the Crown.

Persons coming under this description are rapidly increasing, and in a few years will form a decided majority of the householders and freeholders throughout the island.

Under these circumstances, it is that most valuable portion of the inhabitants who are exclusively engaged in the fisheries that would be affected by rent or property qualifications; and it is merely to secure to them their just portion of political rights that I am decidedly averse to any but a simple household franchise. There could be no reasonable objection to the term of occupancy being extended to two years instead of one, the present limit.

To a rental or property qualification for voters may also be objected the difficulty of establishing under it a suitable system of registration; the town would have to be separated from the country districts; there would be various classes of voters; the legal machinery to put the system into operation would be both complex and expensive, and quite unsuited to the present circumstances of the country.

In reply to the second head of inquiries, I cannot, for the reasons already stated, suggest any amount for a rent or property qualification for voters.

In reply to the third head, I have to say, that I would not recommend any increase in the number of electoral districts. I do think the divisions made on the promulgation of the royal charter, and under the proclamation of his Excellency Sir Thomas Cochrane, are the best that can be made. A subdivision almost in any way that could be contemplated, giving certain portions of the various districts the right of electing members, would be open to the objection made against the old small borough system. The objections to the present extent of electoral districts would have been effectually remedied by the Election Bill of last session, had it passed into a law. By that Act polling places were to be established in the most convenient positions; the voting was to be simultaneous; every voter would have an opportunity of exercising his franchise in his own immediate neighbourhood.

Instead of increasing the number of districts, I would recommend an election law in principle similar to the Bill that passed the House of Assembly in the last session.

As respects an increase in the number of representatives, I strongly recommend it. The present number of 15 are not adequate to the discharge of the public business. Under the present system, the Speaker and five other members form a quorum; notwithstanding, they had frequently to adjourn for want of a sufficient number. I could, from my own experience in the House, adduce many other reasons for an increase; the necessity of it is so obvious, and so universally admitted, that I consider it unnecessary to urge further arguments in support of an increase. The mode I would recommend would be, to double the number in each of the electoral districts. Thirty members would, in my opinion, give a fair proportion of representatives to all parts of the island.

On the subject of the fourth and last head of inquiry, the *minimum* amount of qualification for a member of the House of Assembly, if it should be decided that a property qualification be necessary, I must say that it should not exceed a freehold of 25 £, a rental of 50 £, or the possession of chattel property to the amount of 400 £; a qualification somewhat similar to