

Majority Calling and Value Bidding in Auction Bridge; a little bit of history

By Tony Hall

I have long been fascinated by the story of how the centuries-old game of Whist – for so long the parlour and gambling game of choice in the 18th and 19th Centuries – mutated through various stages into Contract Bridge as we know it today in a little over thirty years. The overall story is told very well by American maths professor Julian Laderman in his recent book “Bumblepuppy Days”. He tells how the first, limited attempt at a single round of bidding before play was called “Bridge” (later re-named Bridge-whist); how Bridge-whist was overtaken by a rapidly evolving game of Auction Bridge between 1908 and the late 1920s, before settling down into the more-or-less familiar game of Contract Bridge as it is currently played under a single set of International rules. Understandably, Professor Laderman focuses primarily on events in the United States. My purpose here is to describe and contrast one small, but significant, stage in the process as it evolved differently on the two sides of the Atlantic.

Before I can do so, I have to spend a little time explaining the scoring system for Auction Bridge as it had evolved by 1914. In short, 6 points were awarded for each trick (over six) when Clubs were trumps, 7 for diamonds, 8 for hearts, 9 for spades and 10 for no trumps. But in bidding, there were essentially two systems being used in different places. The first system was Value Bidding in which scores were calculated by the number of tricks won multiplied by the value of the suit being played. A game was won by the first partnership to reach 30 points. Thus 4 clubs was worth 24 points, four spades 36 points and so on. However, in the auction using Value Bidding, 3 spades (27 points) outbid 4 clubs (24); 2 No Trumps (20) outbid three clubs (18) and so on. (The discrepancy was even worse a few years earlier when spade tricks were only worth 2 points and 5 spades (10 points) was outbid by 2 hearts (16), and a successful bid of 7 spades (14) – a Grand Slam – was not even enough for game!)

To deal with the apparent anomalies in the auction round, a new system of bidding was devised called Majority Calling. Under this system, any suit or No Trump bid of three outbid any call of two – exactly as we have today in Contract bridge.

What I love about this story is how the debate of Value Bidding versus Majority Calling was played out differently in the US and in Britain. In the United States, the dominant Club which set the standard by which whist and related games were played was the Whist Club of New York; in Britain, the lead was taken by the

Portland Club, a “gentleman’s club” in the Mall whose Card Committee played a similar role in the card-playing world as the MCC had for cricket.

In the States, the dominant character in the Whist/Bridge world was a gentleman by the name of Milton C. Work who was chairman of the Whist Club of New York at this crucial time. Before 1914, various codes and versions of the Laws were produced by The Whist Club and the Portland Club for their respective countries. Some of the Portland Club rules appealed to some players in the US and a variety of practices developed in different clubs. By 1914, Milton C. Work was frustrated by this variety and resolved to attempt to rationalise and standardise the way the game should be played. He chaired a Committee, consulted with other significant American Clubs, and produced a set of Auction Laws which was formally endorsed by the Whist Club of New York in July 1915. This set of Laws was promoted across the States and it appears that all the main clubs and players rapidly fell into line with the new Laws.

A central feature of the 1915 laws was the adoption of Majority Calling as standard, and Value Bidding quickly became a thing of the past.

In Britain the story was rather different. Here, under the 1913 Portland Club Rules, Value Bidding was the standard. The gentlemen of the Portland Club’s Card Committee clearly had other, more important things on their minds between 1914 and 1918, but it was not until 1924 that the question of Value Bidding versus Majority Calling was raised as a major concern, and – even so – nothing was done until 1927 when the Club took an initiative to resolve the matter. (Here, I draw heavily on the account in 1931 by A.E.Manning Foster, author of “Auction Bridge Made Clear”.) The Club decided, in time-honoured fashion, to take soundings from other London and provincial clubs before attempting a new version of the laws. The consultation results having been assembled, The Portland Club invited eleven of the leading card playing clubs in London to a conference to review the responses. The list of clubs involved is in itself a joy: Almack’s, Baldwin, Bath, Carlton, Conservative, Devonshire, National Liberal, St. James’s, St. Stephen’s, Turf, White’s and Portland. And hardly a woman in sight!

At its first meeting of the Conference, it was decided to adopt Majority Calling. However, there were “representations” from unspecified sources as a result of which it was decided at a second meeting to request all clubs to give Majority Calling a four months’ trial after which a vote of the London Clubs would be taken.

This was important news not only in Britain but also in the ex-colonies! In a lengthy article in the Melbourne Argus of 13 July, 1927, the full extent of the heated debate over the two systems of bidding was laid bare. There was even dispute about whether the term “numerical” should be used instead of “majority”. According to information gathered by the Argus

“of 170 clubs voting in the Portland Club plebiscite, 87 clubs favoured the American system as against 68 whose delegates preferred the English System. There was obviously no overwhelming desire on the part of the English clubs to alter the English system of bidding but at the conference (apart from the Portland Club delegates) nine voted in favour of and two against the American system. While the Portland Club card committee, by three to two, favours majority or American bidding, the club itself definitely favours “no change”.”

After the four months trial period, there was a second vote by the London Club delegates who concluded “that there is not a general desire to adopt Majority Calling in place of Value Calling”. And, consequently, it was resolved by a unanimous vote “to retain Value Calling in the Revised Laws of Auction Bridge”.

And thus the matter was resolved?

Well not exactly. It was decided, in addition, for the convenience of players who may desire to continue or experiment with Majority Calling, an alternative Law be included in the Book of Laws of Auction Bridge, as an appendix! The Appendix reads as follows: In Law 14 (2) for “Value” read “Number of Tricks” and for “Number of Tricks” read “Value”.

You couldn't make it up!

The difference in the Auction Bridge Laws between The USA and Britain were not resolved until a universal set of Laws was finally agreed by an international conference in 1932, by which time most clubs and players were playing a version of the game called “Contract”!

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