



PROPORTIONAL MISREPRESENTATION?

by Peter Hain and Geoff Hodgson

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Proportional Misrepresentation?

by Peter Hain and Geoff Hodgson

Introduction

At the heart of the case for proportional representation is an appeal to 'fairness'. It is a compelling appeal, and people respond to it. Why shouldn't smaller parties get a share of MPs more directly proportional to their national vote? Doesn't the first-past-the-post system mean rough justice?

It is easy to be swept along by the moral fervour of the PR campaign. For it is essentially a moral appeal, full of righteous indignation at the alleged iniquities of the British electoral system.

But, in fact, advocates of PR do not have a monopoly of moral righteousness. Fundamentally, the issue is not a moral one. The case that PR is clearly more democratic, or 'fair', has not been made. PR has certain advantages, but it also has certain disadvantages. It helps some but discriminates against others. It has its own inbuilt political 'bias'. It would be a great help if the moral evangelism was removed from the debate over PR, so people could take a sober look at the technical, democratic, and political issues involved.

Indeed, it could be argued that PR is a positive diversion from the real democratic reforms that are needed in our society. Tinkering with electoral arrangements is no substitute for programmes and reforms to improve the quality of democracy, to increase individual democracy (including over economic and social questions which ordinary people, hitherto, have little or no say), to decentralise power, and to remove social inequalities.

Our enthusiasm for radical reform does not stop short at the portals of Parliament. Along with Labour Party policy we support the abolition of a hereditary-based House of Lords. We support the mandatory re-selection of MPs by political parties, and the election of leader and (shadow) cabinet by the political party concerned. Furthermore, we would revive an old labour movement demand to shorten the maximum period of office for a government, from five to, say, three years. When it comes to the actual electoral system we would be some of the first to admit that not all is perfect. For that reason we would consider the

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introduction of the Alternative Vote in the existing, single-member, constituencies. But we oppose PR, for it is, in terms of democracy in a country such as Britain, a regressive step.

However, many of the arguments that we use against PR in the British context do not necessarily apply elsewhere. For example there may be a case for introducing PR in the direct elections to the EEC (given the fact that no MEP is able to represent a small and manageable constituency) — but only if it were not to be used as a Trojan Horse for PR in Westminster.

Our case against PR should be considered in its context. We believe that in Britain PR would weaken the link between the MP and the community and strengthen the central bureaucracies of the political parties. Furthermore, whilst electors under PR may be able better to influence the composition of *Parliament*, they would have much less influence on the political colour of the *government* itself.

A Panacea

Partly perhaps because the PR campaigners brim over with indignation and fervour at the supposed justice of their cause, they tend to press PR as a panacea. Introduce it and — hey presto! — Britain's ills will vanish. Gone will be tiresome Party wrangles: So-called extremism will be vanquished. Economic crisis will be overcome at a stroke. Typical of the rhetoric used is in a Liberal pamphlet:

Proportional representation is likely to release a flood of incisive and radical intelligence into a government no longer enchained by the shibboleths of class and party doctrine. It would also generate some much needed hope for our political institutions.¹

There is a sense in which PR is peddled in an entirely escapist manner, as an illusory way out of the economic and political crisis which has been closing in on Britain. In truth precise electoral arrangements count for little in achieving economic success or political stability. For every PR "success" there is a PR "failure": post-war Germany and Italy are, respectively, testimony to that.

Provided an electoral system is *democratic*, its exact features are unlikely to be the dominant factor in determining wider social and economic forces. Far more relevant determinants are the distribution of wealth and power, the structure of finance and industry, and the level of investment.

Another extravagant claim for PR is that it will alter the balance of power in Britain. Yet there are no grounds at all for supposing that the ordinary citizen at an individual level or disadvantaged groups at a societal level will have their relationship to the sources of power altered one iota by PR. The balance of *party* power may change. But so long as

the basic capitalist system remains, political power will continue to be highly centralised.

Who wants PR?

Indeed the demand for PR is in part special pleading by those who have not been able to succeed under the existing system. The Liberals are a case in point — though at least they have been consistent through the Post-War years. Communist Party support is another instance. There is no clearer example of the opportunism behind PR than support from leading Social Democrats. None of the ‘Gang of 4’ were enamoured of PR until they thought about defecting. Then they suddenly discovered its abiding virtues. Roy Jenkins was the first when he floated his ‘Centre Party’ project during his 1979 Dimpleby lecture. David Owen and Bill Rodgers never expressed the slightest interest in PR until they launched the SDP in 1981; indeed both had opposed it over the years, notably during the 1972-4 period of Liberal ‘revival’ when it last featured as a major issue.

As recently as 24th November 1979, David Owen wrote to *The Times* in terms which make his later conversion to a PR enthusiast still more difficult to accept: “Proportional representation does not of itself guarantee political stability”, he wrote. “We should be wary before we give up our system of coalition within parties and replace it with the continental system of coalition across parties.”

Shirley Williams’ position has been even more enlightening. In 1970 she turned down flat a strong academic case that PR might benefit Northern Ireland by guaranteeing Catholics fair representation in Stormont: “What would Jeremy Thorpe make of it?”, she responded.²

She made no mention of PR in her book, *Politics is for People* (a virtual manifesto for the SDP) published early in 1981. The political journalist, Peter Kellner takes up the story:

I asked her why the book contained nothing about electoral reform. She replied that she did not mind one way or the other about proportional representation; in her view it was tosh to think that Britain’s social and economic performance had anything to do with the particular electoral system the country enjoyed. ‘But Roy, Bill and David were keen on PR, so I went along with them.’

Two months later, Mrs Williams posed with David Steel for the launch of *A Fresh Start for Britain*, the statement of common principles shared by the SDP and the Liberals. This stated that “the key” to social and economic progress “lies in electoral and constitutional reform. We are committed to obtaining proportional representation at the earliest opportunity, because it is a precondition of the new politics which Britain needs.” Mrs Williams had either changed her mind dramatically, or was now putting her name to a view she privately felt to be bunkum. A few weeks later, on the BBC TV

programme, The Editors, I argued that the Press had been soft on divisions within the SDP leadership and, in Mrs Williams' presence, cited the difference of views over electoral reform. She immediately cut in to deny that any such difference existed.

Afterwards, in the hospitality room, I invited Mrs Williams to elaborate on her denial, in the light of what she told me a few months earlier. Yes, she replied, she remained unconvinced by the claims made for PR, but she was not actually opposed to electoral reform. That was why she had given such a firm denial on air.

Happy with that reply, she smiled attractively and disappeared into the night.³

Of course everybody is entitled to change their views. And it is also quite legitimate to feel more strongly about certain Party policy points than others. Nonetheless, the SDP's enthusiastic conversion to the PR cause illustrates the first reason for adopting it: self-interest.

The second reason is a more ideological one. It breaks down into two secondary, though related, motives. PR is seen unashamedly as a means of stopping a socialist — or, to be specific, a left Labour — government from achieving office. It is also seen as a mechanism for securing a permanent centrist coalition to govern Britain. Note that in none of these arguments is there anything about 'fairness' or 'more democracy': such slogans are really only for popular consumption. This ideological motive is the *real politik* of PR.

Take for example the minority of Conservatives who back the campaign. Their motive, openly stated, springs from an anxiety about the election of Labour governments and for them PR is a device to put an end to that. They stand in the Disraeli/MacMillan tradition of 'wet' or pragmatic Toryism which believes that whatever Party holds office conservatism should rule. Significantly, their support for PR dates almost exactly from the leftward swing of the Labour Party since the early 1970s.

Senior members of Conservative Action for Electoral Reform, Sir Nigel Fisher MP and Tim Rathbone MP, have argued:

We believe that the Conservative Party would thrive if proportional representation was introduced, because we are the most loyal party, with the largest traditional following, the best organised and probably the best financed. Given PR, we could confidently expect to dominate a right of centre coalition for many years.⁴

In a joint comment on the 1981 Warrington by-election they made it plain that their objective was to stop socialism. Concerned at the poor showing of the Tory candidate and the relatively good result for the SDP, the two Tory MPs argued:

commitment to the introduction of more proportionate elections to the House

of Commons . . . would . . . protect them from the extremes of socialism . . . The potential to commit, measured by every single opinion poll recently, and the readiness to commit as shown by votes for the SDP in this by-election, has even greater importance for the Conservative Party than the SDP. Because, if we wish generally to preserve from future socialist reversal the radical and long overdue changes in our economy and our society which our Conservative Government has set itself to achieve, then it is imperative that our method of electing future governments must be changed to reflect more closely the essential good sense of the British electorate and the natural desire to conserve national unity and purpose which is in almost every one of us.⁵

In similar vein, worried about the failure of Mrs Thatcher's government and the election of a Labour Government, the house journal of moderate Conservatism, *The Times*, argued:

The obvious way to remove this danger is to change to a system of proportional representation. If Britain had any of the normal forms of proportional representation, there would be no danger of a Marxist government being formed because there is absolutely no danger of a Marxist majority. They cannot get to 50 per cent. We should therefore be safe from the most damaging political event that could at present happen to us.⁶

(Despite using the deliberately perjorative term 'Marxist' government, this extract in context was indisputably referring to a possible left Labour Government.)

The literature of Conservative Action for Electoral Reform is even more blunt about the attractions of PR, arguing in one of its leaflets:

The present electoral system could easily give power to a Socialist Party controlled by an extreme left-wing group . . . The Conservative Party will be taking an unjustified risk if we do not reform the Constitution . . . We have the power to extinguish the possibility of extreme left-wing government indefinitely . . ."⁷

Again for "extreme left-wing" read "Labour".

This same leaflet goes on to make the link to another issue central to the dominant momentum for PR:

The two-party system with each party in turn repealing the legislation of their opponents is bad for Britain and bad for Conservative interest. A free market economy cannot function without continuity of policy.

A sister leaflet from the Tory group entitled 'Industry Needs Electoral Reform' argues that the adoption of some form of PR "is essential if we want to create a more stable political environment in which industry can flourish". (The author, Viscount Caldecote is a top businessman and Chairman of Delta Metal Co.).

In other words, PR is linked inextricably to the stability of capitalism and to the market economy. It is a variation of the 'Great Britain Ltd'

theme where politics is subservient to the interests of capitalists and financiers. For such people PR is a euphemism for a strong and stable state, uncluttered by the messiness of democratic change, which allows them to get on with business as usual.

As six top businessmen — billed as ‘Leaders of Industry’ — argued in a special leaflet entitled ‘Why Industry needs Electoral Reform *Now*’:

We are convinced that a major factor . . . would be the reform of our electoral system by introducing a system of proportional representation for parliamentary and other elections.

The great disadvantage of the present electoral system from the industrial point of view is that it frequently produces drastic and exaggerated changes in policy at intervals which are far too short to enable industry to plan and operate efficiently. There is a basic mismatch between the long lead times necessary for investment and development in complex modern industry and the 180 degree reversals of policy which occur at relatively short intervals not only as between, but also within, successive administrations.

Too often these changes owe far more to political dogma than to careful assessment of the national welfare, and are often supported by a minority of the electorate only. Moreover these policy shifts are usually unrelated to technological and market factors which determine the success of industry in creating real wealth and the prosperity for the whole community.⁸

This is undiluted corporatism and indeed PR dovetails neatly into the vision of government by permanent centrism and coalitionism.

In 1981-2 the National Westminster Bank sponsored a series of sixth form conferences organised by the Hansard Society on Electoral Reform, with students taking part in mock elections using first-past-the-post and PR systems. (The Hansard Society itself published a major study in favour of PR). Financiers have been active in other ways on behalf of the PR lobby. For example in March 1981 a body calling itself the ‘City Committee for Electoral Reform’ organised a banquet in the Guildhall, presided over by Lord Carr, former Tory Cabinet Minister and now Chairman of Prudential Assurance.

The other side of industry’s advocacy of PR is as a device to control trade unions. Repeatedly in PR literature one finds reference to the need to overcome ‘devisive’ union power by means of PR. One of the most vocal advocates of PR, the *Guardian*’s Policy Editor and resident SDP columnist, Peter Jenkins, put the argument succinctly:⁹

Electoral reform would make it easier for governments to tackle the trade union problem with authority and continuity. Proportional representation at local government level would help to break the stranglehold which public employees are beginning to exercise over public services.

Whether or not PR would in reality possess such magical powers is dubious — but the point is that its supporters *believe* it would.

PR and Centrism

PR therefore fits nicely into the modern, technocratic politics epitomised by the SDP/Liberal Alliance. Back in December 1979 — after Roy Jenkins' Dimpleby Lecture, but well before the events which led to the Labour defections to the SDP — Sir James Goldsmith's *Now!* magazine gave the game away: "Abandoning the first-past-the-post voting system is central to any successful re-alignment of political forces", it pointed out, noting in the same sentence: "it is significant that a new Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, headed by Wrexham MP Tom Ellis, is now getting off the ground."¹⁰ This is the same Tom Ellis who, a year later, was plotting the formation of the SDP.

Although there are sincere and genuine Labour Party members who back PR (and their view will be examined later), the whole PR lobby is locked into a move to break the Labour Party and replace it with the Alliance. This explains in part why it has been supported by business circles. Organisations like Barclays Bank, for instance, have financed the National Committee for Electoral Reform.

Furthermore there is an interesting connection between the pro-EEC campaign and the PR campaign. After the 1975 Referendum over British membership of the EEC — around which operated well-financed lobbyists for a 'Yes' vote — many of the same personnel and resources switched straight into the PR movement. This was seen in the make-up of the various national PR groups, particularly the one attached to the Liberals. There was a great deal of money washing around the 'Yes' campaigns and it represented a logical extension of those campaigns to move onto PR. Another characteristic of those involved in the EEC/PR groups is strident and uncritical defence of NATO. So we can begin to see more clearly the underlying ideological impetus at work in the electoral reform movement.

The *Guardian's* Peter Jenkins again voiced the ultimate attraction of PR for centrists, when he argued:

One effect of a Bennite capture of the Labour Party would be a significant increase in support for proportional representation on both the right-wing of the Labour Party and the left-wing of the Conservative Party . . . important for the future would be the existence of a substantial group within the Labour Party, in effect a party within a party, which would be prepared to block the implementation of certain Bennite policies or, perhaps, even coalesce with centre-left elements capable of forming an acceptable majority or preventing the formation of an unacceptable one.¹¹

This was written well after the formation of the SDP, so he was talking of those in the Labour Party who had remained loyal members.

PR is thus crucial to a realignment of British politics, the first stage of which has been the launch of the SDP. And one of the arguments of its

protagonists is that the traditional Parties are in themselves coalitions of opinion. PR, they say, would enable such "submerged" coalitions to become "open", thus making elected representatives more able to express their own personal views and reflect varieties of opinion.¹² This is an argument to which no great exception could be taken, although it should be balanced against the advantages of relatively large Parties that arrive at a democratic consensus on policy which the electorate can then vote for, rather than waiting on deals done *after* the election (an issue to which we shall return).

What is Democratic Government?

But all of this assumes that PR is in some way intrinsically 'more democratic'. So it would be as well to examine more closely what the PR lobby means by 'democracy'.

To begin with it has on the whole a fairly traditionalist view of Parliamentary democracy in which the elected representative is elevated to a scale of which a modern Edmund Burke could approve. Once elected the representative becomes automatically the repository of the electorate's wishes. He/she is accountable only to the extent of needing to be re-elected and therefore needing to pay regard to public opinion. PR campaign leaders attack the notion of accountability as one which tends to make MPs into 'puppets'. Here they are cashing in on a gross caricature of the movement for greater accountability in the Labour Party. But in so doing they also deny the possibility of the local Party — having selected and campaigned for the electoral representative — to hold that person accountable.

Furthermore the idea that PR would in any way make for greater accountability of governments to the electorate assumes a view of the system of power in Britain which is naive in the extreme. Very little power lies with elected politicians. Rather it is concentrated in the Civil Service and other public bureaucracies; in big business; amongst technocrats, police leaders, the military and judicial elites; and it is in any case circumscribed by the power of the Common Market and of NATO. PR will not alter any of that. Indeed it acts as a positive diversion from the necessity of securing democratic control over those essentially extra-democratic agencies.

Far more important would be to establish genuinely open and participatory institutions through which people could really control their lives. Industrial democracy, tenants' control, neighbourhood self-management, democracy in education — all these offer the prospect of re-distributing power in a manner which could extend democracy in a real and radical way, giving the citizen a far greater say. PR offers no such possibility. It merely confines itself to a re-arrangement of political

labels on politicians occupying a system which would not be altered to any fundamental degree.

By diverting any reformist momentum it could in practice prevent the development of a more participatory democracy. One proponent of an explicitly elitist system of democracy unashamedly acknowledged this when he argued that proportional representation was a good thing because it invariably produced coalition governments which made it difficult for the electorate to “pin down who is responsible” for decisions.¹³ He was arguing against popular political participation and in favour of rule by elites democratically elected by periodic votes but which should not be subjected to pressure from below.

To emphasise the key point: PR *may* produce a parliament (but not necessarily a government) which is more representative of the spectrum of opinion in the country, but it does not produce a parliament or a government which is more *accountable* to the electorate. It is on this crucial democratic question of accountability that PR falls down.

Systems of PR

In any case — and overriding what may be construed as essentially socialist objections described above — when it comes to the practical implementation of PR, many of its alleged virtues are severely tarnished. To begin with PR is not one single system but has many different variants. It is different in almost every country where it operates. And each system has very serious drawbacks from a democratic point of view. First of all, only some systems retain the ‘single member’ feature which is regarded as crucial to enable an MP effectively to represent a constituency. But these ‘single member’ constituency systems do *not* give true proportionality of votes to MPs. Only ‘multi-member’, ‘additional member’ or ‘list’ systems can generate, in approximation, such proportionality.

All these systems are quite complex, yet it is important to appreciate their basic characteristics in order to delve below the misleading rhetoric surrounding PR.

(1) Single Member Constituency Systems

(a) *The Alternative Vote*: this is used in the Australian Lower House. It was even recommended for use in Britain in 1910 by a Royal Commission and in a slightly different form by another Royal Commission in 1916-7. It also formed the basis of a Bill passed by the House of Commons in 1931 but defeated in the Lords. One member is elected in each constituency like the present ones. Each voter numbers the candidates in order of preference (e.g. 1st Labour, 2nd SDP, 3rd Tory). If any candidate achieves more than half the first preferences of voters on the

first count then he is elected. If not, the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated and the votes of his supporters are reallocated according to their second preference votes. This process is repeated with the bottom candidate falling out at each stage until the top candidate receives an overall majority.

This means that the candidate who gained the highest number of first preferences need not necessarily win. The candidate with the most breadth of support — or the least opposition — would win. One argument against the AV is that it produces 'lowest common denominator' MPs i.e. those to whom people take least exception, rather than MPs who can command a significant body of *positive* support. But the real objection is that it does not tend to produce truly proportional results, which is why PR purists dismiss it with disdain. Although the Alternative Vote is an 'electoral reform', it is not, strictly speaking, a system of PR, and it should not be referred to as such. It simply reduces the likelihood of tactical voting by no-hope minority party supporters, and, in a limited sense, makes the MP more representative.

(b) *Double-ballot system*: this is used in France. Candidates who get more than 50 per cent are elected after the first election. If nobody achieves this they have a 'run-off' in a second, separate election a week later, with candidates polling under 12½ per cent first time round being eliminated. But this system very rarely leads to proportionality and has other quirks; all it does achieve is that the successful candidate is elected on a majority rather than a minority vote. It is not favoured by British PR campaigners.

(2) List Systems

These rarely produce full proportionality and are supported by only some PR advocates. Basically, parties present lists of candidates in order of preference. Voters then vote for a party and MPs are selected from the party lists; the number of MPs so selected depends upon the proportion of votes cast for that particular party.

Different variations on this are operated for example in Holland, Belgium, Denmark and Sweden. But list systems are open to severe criticism (even from PR enthusiasts) because they completely break the link between the MP and his/her constituents; and place enormous power in the hands of the national or regional Party bureaucracy to determine the selection and order of preference of candidates, virtually shutting out local party influence.

(3) The German System

Germany is often cited as a compromise, since it both retains the single-member constituency and arrives at true proportionality by 'topping up'

from a regional list. Each elector has two votes. The first is for the 'constituency candidate' chosen on the same basis as the present UK system. The other vote is for the party. The seats are then allocated according to the total national party vote on a proportional basis, with as many seats as possible being filled by the winning candidate in the first vote for that particular constituency; the remaining seats are allocated to candidates from the regional lists.

Several objections have been voiced against the German system. First of all it suffers from the problem of the lists being susceptible to control by the Party bureaucracy or to patronage. Second, it would mean either doubling the size of the present British parliamentary constituencies or doubling the number of MPs to 1,270. There are both democratic and practical objections to this which at the very least make it hard for supporters of the German system to claim it is better than the existing British system. These points were stressed by the pro-PR report of the Hansard Society under the chairmanship of Lord Blake.¹⁴ It was especially concerned about the implications of having two types of MPs: those elected as now and those who need not have had any substantial support of electors in any area but could be appointed by the Party machine. The Hansard Committee instead opted for a further compromise option termed the 'Additional Member System'.

(4) Additional Member System

Under this, electors would vote as they do now, filling 75 per cent (or 480) of the seats in the House of Commons. The remaining 25 per cent (or 160) would be used to 'top up' like the German system to achieve greater proportionality, except that the seats would not go to Party appointees but to the most successful of the losing candidates in the constituency elections. Boundaries would obviously need adjusting. The Hansard Committee projected an October 1974 election result using this system as 245 Tory, 255 Labour, 105 Liberal. (It was actually 277 Tory, 319 Labour and 13 Liberal. Under 'true' proportionality it would have been 227 Tory, 249 Labour, 116 Liberal).

But the Hansard proposal is as messy as the other PR options. It still means a two-tier membership of those directly elected and those 'additional members', a problem compounded by the fact that some constituencies would have what amounted to two MPs, the 'additional' one of whom need only have polled above the specified 5 per cent qualifying base. It is also not fully proportional.

(5) STV in Multi-member Constituencies

A widely canvassed system of PR is the Single Transferrable Vote operating in 'multi-member' Constituencies. This is backed by the

Liberal Party, the Electoral Reform Society and is used in the Republic of Ireland. It would abandon the traditional single member constituency. Constituencies of four or five seats would be established (the greater the number of seats the greater the proportionality). Each voter would have the same number of votes as there were seats and would number the candidates in order of preference (the major parties would probably run as many candidates as there were seats in each constituency).

A 'quota' is calculated, being the fraction above the number of members returned for the seat divided into the votes cast (in a five-member seat this would be one-sixth of the votes cast). Any candidate who gets more than the quota is elected straight away, and any of his 'excess' votes (i.e. above the quota) are re-distributed according to second preferences; similarly, the votes of unsuccessful candidates are progressively redistributed until all seats are filled by candidates whose votes totalled up by this process pass the quota.

The Liberals, who are most enthusiastic about STV, argue that it enables voters not only to choose between parties in a 'fair' way but also to choose between particular *candidates* of Parties (e.g. to support left-wing Labour candidates as opposed to right-wing ones or pro-EEC as against anti-EEC).

But the fatal defect of this option is that it requires monster constituencies. On average, five-member seats would contain some 315,000 electors. This is bad enough in urban areas (in London for example the average five-member seat would be bigger than an existing borough). But it is ridiculous in rural areas where in, say, Northern Scotland, the seat would cover thousands of square miles of land and sea.

The Electoral Reform Society has attempted to overcome some of the worst anomalies by proposing a complex arrangement where seats would range from three members (in pre-dominantly rural areas) to eight members (in Leeds).¹⁵ But this does not overcome the central objections to large, amorphous constituencies in which it would be impossible for the voters to identify with their MPs and even more difficult for MPs to reflect the view of distinct communities. This was one of the major reasons why the Hansard Society rejected STV.

In July 1982 the Joint Liberal/SDP Commission on Constitutional Reform launched its proposals for 'community' PR. They advanced a system of STV in multi-member constituencies. However, unlike most theoreticians of STV, the Alliance suggests constituencies of non-uniform size. There would be 143 constituencies, some with as many as eight elected members, others with as few as one, two, or three. Most of the large multi-member constituencies would be in urban areas, the constituencies of smaller size being of a rural location.

Harold Frayman has pointed out some of the idiosyncrasies of the

Alliance's proposals.¹⁶ For example, three out of the four proposed single-member seats are, at present, held by members of the Alliance. Multi-member constituencies do not seem to be necessary when a majority can be won by the Alliance! They are only required when Alliance candidates cannot gain a majority of votes! Other, multi-member constituencies seem to be designed, specifically, to ensure that members of the Alliance would gain a foothold, by adding an MP in certain key areas.

Another specific defect of the proposed system of 'Community' PR is that it would not be even in its treatment of the main political parties. Given that most rural seats have four or less MPs it would be difficult for the Labour Party to gain representation in these areas with, say, 20 per cent of the vote. In contrast, the Conservatives or Liberals are very likely to gain seats in the urban areas (with large multi-member constituencies) with 20 per cent of the vote. This system of 'PR' would not introduce proportionality.

In an effort to introduce a 'fair' system of PR we find a plethora of problems, the ugly head of Alliance self-interest, and the dice loaded against the Labour Party.

So, however you fiddle the figures, play around with boundaries or choose between PR systems, you still end up with shortcomings which we would argue are at least as serious, and in some respects more so, than those of the existing system. Scratch beneath the surface of PR euphoria and you find endless complexities and obstacles. It is little wonder that PR devotees — that is the supporters who fully understand it — are virtually a breed on their own. Strike up a conversation with one and before you know it you are whisked off into a different world of AVs and STVs, of quotas and preferences, of re-distributions and lists, which make the real PR animal distinctly less attractive than its glossy campaigners would care to admit.

PR and Centralised Party Bureaucracy

One of the main features of the existing electoral system in Britain is the attachment of the Member of Parliament to a geographical constituency of manageable size. On the average, an existing constituency has about 60,000 electors, and there are several constituencies in each large town and rural county.

As a result, there are important consequences for Party organisation. Functionally, the constituency party becomes an important body, and in the case of Labour, Liberal and Conservative parties (but not the SDP) it has the power to choose the local parliamentary candidate (subject to the ratification of the national party). This acts as an important counterweight to centralised party bureaucracy. The existence and

activity of the local party is encouraged. A prospective candidate must not only be satisfactory in the eyes of the national party, but he or she must also be in touch with the grassroots, the problems of a particular area, and the views of local party activists. Consequently, although there are strong centralising tendencies, and power is typically concentrated in the hands of the leader of the parliamentary party, local organisation survives and plays a crucial role in all three of the major post-war political parties.

In the case of a more radical and democratic party, such as the Labour Party, it is possible, within the existing electoral system, to arrange for mandatory re-selection of MPs and other measures to make the representative more accountable to those who worked for his or her election. The recent history of the Labour Party shows that such measures have a further feedback effect, strengthening local party organisation and encouraging political debate at the grassroots.

Whatever system of PR is adopted, the scope for local accountability is undermined, and more power is placed at the national centre of the political party involved. As explained above, the 'topping up' system of PR may preserve a large number of single-member constituencies. However, these constituencies will be larger than those at present, in order to make room for additional members in Parliament. The MPs that are elected through the topping up process will be chosen, as candidates, from a list determined on a national or regional basis. Their natural attachment will be to the party machine or the parliamentary hierarchy, not to the local party. An important link between the local community and party politics will be reduced in importance.

The system of PR that involves large, multi-member constituencies will have a similar effect. Under such a system in Britain a constituency would have on average about 315,000 electors. It would be impossible for the MP to develop a close and informed relationship with his or her constituents. Close contact with the constituency, the electorate, and the members of the local party would be difficult or impossible. As a consequence, the MP would become less accountable to both constituents and local party. Impediments of distance, time and organisation will grow up between the MP and the local community. The same would be true for local councillors, at the very time when Town Halls have been criticised for being remote from voters under the reorganised system of the early 1970s.

Although the existing system of constituency representation does not ensure that the seats allocated to parties in Parliament are in proportion to votes cast by the electorate, it does have an important advantage: it facilitates closer links between the MP and the local party and constituents, and encourages moves towards greater accountability. How is greater accountability to be valued in comparison with the absence of a

degree of proportionality in the electoral system? We repeat our view, expressed above, that proportionality between votes and seats is not the *sine qua non* of democracy, and moves towards a more democratic society must strengthen the mechanisms of accountability. Moves towards a more participatory and democratic society would be hindered, not helped, by PR.

PR and Coalition Government

In the first eight decades of the 20th century there have been 22 general elections. In no less than 16 of these the outcome has been an overall majority for a single party in terms of seats in Parliament. PR, in contrast, would make such overall parliamentary majorities extremely unlikely. We must note that in only three of the 22 elections has a single party obtained half or more of the total vote. Assume that the chosen system of PR had operated so as to award seats in direct proportion to votes obtained. In such circumstances there would have been minority or coalition governments on 19 out of 22 occasions.

What guarantee would there have been that PR would have ensured a reflection in the complexion of government of the movements in opinion over the last 80 years? The answer: little or none. Let us take the two most outstanding changes in party performance in the period: (1) *the rise of the Labour Party vote* (1.8 per cent in 1900, 7.1 per cent in 1910, 29.5 per cent in 1922, 37.1 per cent in 1929, 47.8 per cent in 1945, 47.9 per cent in 1966) and (2) *the fall in the Liberal vote* (49.0 per cent in 1906, 2.5 in 1951, with a post-Second World War rise to 19.3 per cent in February 1974). The existing 'first past the post' system has ensured that the larger shifts in party allegiance have been roughly reflected in the type of government that has come into power. In the case of Labour it did not enter government until the inter-war period, when there were two minority Labour governments. After the Second World War there were five Labour governments elected with an overall majority, and one further Labour minority government. In the case of the Liberals they achieved an overall majority in 1906. They participated in government, otherwise on a minority or coalition basis, continuously until 1922. They were part of coalition or national governments from 1931 to 1945. Since that date they have played no direct part in government but there was, of course, the Lib-Lab Pact of 1977-78. On the whole, therefore, movements in opinion since 1900 have been crudely reflected, albeit with shortcomings, in the pattern of government. What would have happened if PR had been in operation? It is very difficult to say. The character of politics, to some extent, would have changed. Furthermore, parallel shifts in government, in accord with the ebbs and flows of opinion, would not necessarily have occurred. As an illustrative example consider the following situation, assuming the same voting figures but some form

of *proportional* PR. The Conservatives get more than half the vote in 1900 and thus govern alone with an overall majority. In 1906 Liberal and Labour together get more than half the votes and they form a coalition government. This stays in power, after several elections with the same substantial result, until 1931. Then, until 1945, there is a period of one-party Conservative rule. In 1945, the Conservatives and Liberals, plus a few others, can form a coalition to exclude Labour entirely, despite Labour's massive 47.8 per cent vote in the election. The Conservatives and Liberals rule together, without additional support, from 1950 to the present day. In effect, Labour's access to government moves in a reverse direction to its popular vote. We do not suggest that this precise series of outcomes would, in fact, have occurred. What we are trying to show is that PR does not ensure a reflection in the character of *government* of the changing distribution of votes.

The important point is that under PR one does not vote for the government: one votes for the party. Under the existing system there is a much larger chance that these party-directed votes will have a corresponding outcome in the complexion of the government. This is because coalitions are less likely. Once coalitions become the rule rather than the exception then the ordinary voter has less power to determine the effective governmental outcome. In general, the voter does not vote for the *combination* of parties that will form the coalition, and hence the government. With three parties a single party can ally with one of two of the other parties (if no party has an overall majority). The voter does not express a preference as to which of the two other parties it is to be. The coalition is determined as the outcome of a political deal at the centre. There is no guarantee that these 'deals' will move in the direction of changes in popular opinion. It is quite possible for example, for a radical party to be *pushed* out of power as it *increases* its popular vote. This has actually happened under PR elsewhere. In such circumstances, how can it be claimed that PR is more democratic? Under PR the elector has *less* influence on the precise character of government.

Consider the following hypothetical, but not unrealistic example. After a general election the following seats are obtained according to PR:

Labour	190 seats	Liberal	90 seats
Social Democrat	80 seats	Conservative	240 seats

A coalition is formed between Labour, the Social Democrats and the Liberals. At the next general election Labour increases its vote and the result is as follows:

Labour	250 seats	Liberal	85 seats
Social Democrat	75 seats	Conservative	190 seats

There is no guarantee, however, that Labour will remain in power. Perhaps, because of a leftward shift in the Labour Party, the Social Democrats and Liberals would form a coalition with the Conservatives. Such contra-electoral shifts would be quite possible under PR (and indeed, in the case above, would be desired by many PR² enthusiasts).

Abandoning the Manifesto

Under the present electoral system, which frequently results in majority governments, the party manifesto at least symbolises the intentions of the major parties on the event of them forming the government. People know what they are voting for. Under PR, with the likelihood of a coalition government of one sort or another, it is obvious to everyone that the manifesto is unlikely to represent the programme of the coalition government even if the party concerned is a part of that government. It will be recognised that a party will have to abandon or alter sections of its manifesto so as to compromise with other parties and form a coalition. The manifesto would become more like a set of trading tokens, to be 'cashed' in exchange for political power, and less like promises and policies which the government has some determination to enact. There will be a temptation to add certain policies to the manifesto in the certain knowledge that the other parties will find them unacceptable, so as to have more 'tokens' to trade for power after the election. As a result, a cynical attitude to party promises and manifestoes is encouraged even more than it is today. Whilst governments, under the existing system, frequently abandon their promises, the difference under PR would be that such an abandonment would be the accepted norm.

In the event of disquiet within the political parties at the grassroots, in response to the habitual abandonment of the manifesto, the leaders of the political parties will be able to argue, quite effectively, that coalitions are a fact of political life and a party which is not prepared to shift on policy in the process of forming a coalition will rarely if ever, achieve office. In frustration and disillusionment political activists could resort to more extreme methods. We would argue that although there are many reasons for the emergence of the Baader-Meinhoff gang in West Germany and the Red Brigades in Italy, the post-war history of centre-leaning coalitions with degrees of PR, is partially to blame. Without much prospect of real political change, with governments of the grey centre, and with the routine betrayal of party policy, distasteful and anti-democratic extremism is encouraged.

Thus is it possible for the introduction of PR to start a vicious circle of centralism and authoritarianism within the state. As we have seen, one effect of PR is to remove some power from the party grassroots and place it in the centre. The manifesto is downgraded and political deals at

the centre become all-important.

One of the positive features of our existing electoral system is that it generates a greater probability of real change in society. In addition, a large section of the population accept that this possibility of change exists. A qualitative change will occur in the body politic when people perceive that they have no real power to alter the complexion of the (centre) government under PR.

PR and Stable Government

Advocates of PR recognise that a greater degree of change is possible under the present system, but use that fact as an argument for PR. Stability, in their eyes, is not a vice but a virtue. Several points should be made in response to this.

First, although the probability of real change is greater under the existing system, this does not mean that the history of government in Britain is a succession of lurches from Right to Left and Left to Right. Even under the existing system there are strong forces encouraging a party or government to trim its policies towards the centre of the political spectrum. As we all know, in order to gain a majority in Parliament, even under the existing system, a party has to gain a large slice of the centre of floating vote. In addition there is the power of the media, the civil service and the establishment to bend government towards their interests. Consequently the last three decades have seen a succession of right-wing and 'moderate' Labour governments, and 'moderate' Conservative governments committed to some form of consensus. This period has been described, appropriately, as 'Butskellism' after the leading Conservative Rab Butler and the former leader of the Labour Party Hugh Gaitskell. But an advocate of PR may respond that the existing electoral system gave rise to the 'extreme' monetarist policies of Margaret Thatcher, and a coalition would have checked her Friedmanite excesses. This argument is implausible because monetarism was *first* introduced by Denis Healey as Chancellor under a *Labour* government, in the mid-1970s when it was all the rage. There is no guarantee that a Labour-Liberal-Conservative coalition, with Healey at the Labour helm, would have abandoned a monetarist-inspired economic policy. First there was Butskellism now there is Howleyism. (It may be argued, with some credibility, that such a coalition would do a U-turn, earlier than the Thatcher government. However, although there are obvious benefits, the U-turn would come about at the *initiative* of the centre: there is less likelihood that the *electorate* will be able to evaluate such policies *for itself* by casting a vote in an election. An important feature of a true democracy is that people are able to learn from their political mistakes, and change their vote accordingly).

Second, there is no guarantee that PR will provide stable government. Political fluctuations are not determined by the electoral system alone. Other factors, such as economic crises, international pressures, and class struggle are more crucial.

Although PR and stable government sometimes go together, as in West Germany since the War; sometimes they do not, as in Italy today and in Germany before Hitler grabbed power. If Britain continues along its present path, with widening class divisions, urban riots, and a rapidly deteriorating economy then no electoral system will guarantee social or political stability.

Third, if stability is all-important then the answer is not necessarily to change the electoral system but to reduce the number of opportunities that the electorate may have to change the government. To that end the most obvious 'reform' would be to increase the maximum term of office from five to say ten (or even more) years. Alternatively, we could abolish the House of Commons and keep the House of Lords! By contrast, a true democrat would advocate the basic right of the people to turn out a government they no longer favour. Such 'instability' is an essential feature of democracy. What the advocates of 'stability' and PR are really saying is that they do not trust the electorate to make that decision. Politics is not 'for people' after all!

A Government that represents the majority?

A major claim made by PR is that it ensures that a government has the support of at least 50 per cent of the electorate, either by one party gaining half or more of the votes, or by a coalition of two or more parties. Under the present system, of course, it is possible for a party to gain an overall majority in Parliament with 40 per cent of the vote, or even less.

A number of points must be made in relation to this claim. First, although a PR-elected government may 'represent' over half the electorate, it is very likely that support will move away from the coalition after a few months in power, thus, according to opinion poll evidence, the claim would no longer be justified. In Britain there is no comprehensive opinion poll evidence from before the Second World War so it is difficult to give evidence of public reaction against inter-war coalition governments. Let us consider some cases of public reaction against majority governments under the existing electoral system. The 1945 Labour government, elected with 48 per cent of the vote, frequently had opinion polls indicating public support as low as about 38 per cent. The 1955 Conservative government, elected with just under 50 per cent of the vote, reached a low of 34 per cent in the opinion polls in 1958. These two examples show that even when a government is elected with

almost half of the vote, it is quite likely that it will lose a quarter, or even a third, of its support after a short term in office.

More recently, with an increasingly volatile electorate, the flaking off of support has been even more dramatic. The 1966 Labour government, elected with 48 per cent of the vote, had a level of support as low as 26 per cent in 1968. The present Conservative government, elected with 44 per cent of the vote, periodically performed very badly in the opinion polls, with support often below 30 per cent and as low as 23 per cent in 1981.

Supporters of PR cannot convince us that governments elected with the support of 50 per cent or more of the electorate will retain such a level of support throughout their term of office. If the opinion poll figures are anything to go by, and in the context of the economic decline and social decay which has given rise to a more volatile electorate, a government elected by PR could easily rate as low as 30 per cent in the opinion polls after a couple of years.

For these reasons it is more appropriate to look not at the electoral system, but at the maximum term of office of a government. We would suggest a reduction in this maximum term from five years to three. From the time of the Levellers in the 1640s to the Chartists in the 1840s, the Left in Britain has campaigned for annual or biennial parliaments. An annual parliament was actually one of the demands on The Charter. Today, to suggest even a triennial parliament goes against the grain. It is often argued that the five-year term is too short, because the effects of government (economic) policy do not work through for several years, and the electorate is not able to sample and judge the long-term benefits. In our view this is an apologia for authoritarianism and austerity. There are few fiscal and monetary measures that cannot be realistically assessed within three years. We agree that the problems of the British economy are deep-seated and require long-term remedies. But that is not to suggest that the benefits of an alternative policy, in terms of lower unemployment for example, will not be evident within a short space of time. The argument for seven or ten year parliaments is often allied to the rather Calvinist belief that economic suffering and pain are necessary to purge society of its excesses and ills, before a recovery is possible. In our view, there is no sound argument in economic theory that gives support to this belief. A slump is not a solid basis for recovery. The slump does not purge — it debilitates. Any effective policy for long-term economic recovery must produce positive and expansionist results within three years. If it does not, then there are good reasons for the electorate to reject it. If 'a week is a long time in politics', three years, in economics, is long enough.

There is thus a strong case for a shorter, rather than a longer, parliamentary term. This would ensure that a government which had lost

support could be quickly removed and replaced by another. It would then be more likely, than it would be under PR with seven-year parliaments, that elected governments would have the support of at least 40 per cent of the electorate.

The important point about shortening the parliamentary term is that it makes the government more frequently *accountable* to the electorate. As we have stressed throughout this work, the key issue in an electoral and political system is not *proportionality* but *accountability*. PR is a smokescreen thrown up just as the mechanisms of accountability are being developed. We would support additional measures — such as open government, all-party mandatory reselection of MPs, decentralisation of government — to make government more accountable. The danger is that we implement the pseudo-democracy of PR instead of tackling these substantial issues.

It is interesting that advocates of PR avoid suggesting or discussing an alternative reform which would be no less effective in making MPs and governments more 'representative' of the majority. This would be to retain the existing constituency system but introduce the Alternative Vote. It would reduce tactical voting and make no vote a wasted vote. Furthermore, the elected MP could then claim to be elected by at least 50 per cent of the electors in the constituency, and a government could claim the initial support of the majority. Why not advocate this simple and effective reform? The answer is that many advocates of PR have hidden intentions. They do not fear governments that do not 'represent the majority'. What they fear is governments of the Left.

The Politics of PR

It is quite obvious that the introduction of PR would make the election of a majority Labour government extremely unlikely. It is no secret that both authors of this work are Labour supporters. However, at no stage have we put forward the argument that PR should be opposed because it would reduce Labour's chances of forming a majority government. We argue against PR on *democratic* grounds. True democracy, in our view, must be of a participatory nature and must include effective mechanisms of accountability. Hence, although we have tried to separate our support for Labour from our opposition to PR, we strongly reject the view that electoral or constitutional systems are politically neutral. Our opposition to PR is based on our political support for an effective, radical, and participatory democracy.

We would suggest, in addition, that much support for PR is based on an alternative, less radical, political and ideological foundation. In the first place, as we have pointed out above, many people support PR

simply because it would make it difficult to form a government of the Left. However, in many cases the ideology is more sophisticated. Support for PR is tied up with a corporatist style of politics where government would claim to stand above class interest and implement policies 'in the interests of the nation'. According to this view, put forward by leading members of both the Liberals and the SDP, both Labour and Conservative are 'class' parties and thus cannot represent the interests of the people as a whole. The Liberals and SDP would claim to 'stand above' class divisions. In practice this means promoting corporatist deals between the trade unions, big business and the state.

One big problem with the Liberal-SDP view is that it regards social classes as mere 'pressure groups' within society and ignores the relationship between class power and the fundamental social structure. Such a presumption is necessary to articulate the politics of 'partnership' and 'harmony' between social classes. In reality, however, one social class continues to dominate social and economic life, whatever the electoral situation, and this dominance is expressed through and within the structures and practices of the entire social system. It is beyond the scope of this work to substantiate this proposition, but it is important to note the huge concentration of wealth, and therefore power, in our society. For example, 96 per cent of all company stocks and shares are owned by no more than 5 per cent of the population.¹⁷ This means that ultimate control of the bulk of industry rests in the hands of a tiny minority. To talk of 'partnership' between social classes in such circumstances is to talk of the means by which the top 5 per cent can remain dominant and legitimate and reinforce their power over the remaining 95 per cent.

Socialist politics, whether this is effectively expressed through the vehicle of the Labour Party or not, is essentially about *re-structuring* the socio-economic system so as to remove this dominance of a small minority class. Socialism is not simply about public ownership, or even more power to working people, it is also about *extending democracy* throughout the economy and society so that ordinary people have much more say and control over the things that affect their day-to-day lives. Class 'partnership' is, at most, an extremely diluted version of this; it means extending the base of consent for the *existing* system whilst maintaining an undemocratic concentration of power in the hands of the minority.

We do not take a naïve and misinformed view that, at present, there exists majority support for such democratic socialist policies. All the indications are to the contrary and the Left has to face the fact. However, this does not give advocates of PR the pretext for selling PR as something which it is not. It does *not* extend democracy, either in terms of elected political institutions, or in terms of a wider democracy in the

economy and society as a whole.

The shift of opinion towards PR amongst sections of the establishment and big business in this country is not based on a desire for greater democracy. The shift has occurred, on the whole, after the early 1970s. It is no coincidence that the same period marks (1) the shift of the Labour Party to the Left by the adoption of radical policies in 1972, 1973 and after, and the triumphs of the movement for Labour Party democracy, (2) the election of Margaret Thatcher to the leadership of the Conservative Party in 1975, marking a departure from the 'Butskellite' politics of consensus and a victory for the strident ideology of the New Right, (3) the general breakdown of consensus politics, which was based on a common acceptance, by both Labour and the Tories, of Keynesian methods of economic management and an expanding welfare state to ensure full employment and economic growth. Thus, since the mid-1970s, it has been evident to perceptive sections of the establishment and big business that neither of the two major parties could ensure either social stability or continuous economic expansion on a capitalist basis. A polarisation was taking place in British politics which was rapidly undermining the 'moderate' and consensus-based politics of both Labour and the Tories. It became necessary to back consensus by other means. The answer, in part, is proportional representation. This 'conversion' to PR does not result from political principle or a thorough-going allegiance to democracy. It results from a desire to preserve the existing socio-economic system through a manipulated consent for centre politics, when the traditional two-party political system failed to continue to provide the necessary consensus.

In contrast, we see the growth of the Left of the Labour Party and the increase of trade union power since the late 1960s as a positive development, despite their threat to the existing consensus. It is a positive feature of the existing electoral system that it, unlike PR, can be sensitive to these real changes. The post-war consensus had positive features, such as a welfare state and full employment, but it was based on the continuing dominance of big business and the preservation of elitism and privilege in our society. It is necessary to work for a new radical consensus based on quite different assumptions. Basically, the new consensus should be founded on a real and extensive participation in the exercise of political and economic power, instead of a false and manipulated consent to the exercise of power by a tiny minority. In the present context, PR is about the latter type of consensus, not the former.

Socialist Arguments for PR

Recently, a number of different left-wing supporters of PR have become

more vocal. The Communist Party has for some years advocated PR, though it would doubtless be uncharitable to suggest that this could possibly have been for reasons of self-interest. In the last few years some left-wing theorists (e.g. Robin Blackburn) have come out in support. Tariq Ali has done the same and there are a number of others from the far left now in the Labour Party who have seen virtues in PR. Apparently unaware of the dominant ideological (and reactionary) momentum behind PR which we described earlier, many of these socialists appear to believe that any more left-wing party which might emerge from the crisis affecting Labour in the early 1980s could be marginalised without PR. They see the possibility of a mass socialist party but one with a narrower electoral base than the 'old' Labour Party traditionally enjoyed.

Much of this left-wing support for PR seems to be based on the idea that the existing electoral system produces political parties which 'trim' towards the centre, to gain the less committed voters. Furthermore, PR would reduce this 'trimming': parties would be able to stand for election on their own programme and not be obliterated electorally if they do not obtain as much as 30 or 40 per cent of the vote. Socialist advocates of PR seem to envisage a scenario in which a genuine left-wing party manages to gain a foothold under PR with, say, 10 or 20 per cent of the vote, and then is able to expand and capture a majority.

One of the problems with this argument is that although PR *may* produce a polarisation in manifesto terms, it does *not*, on the whole, produce a polarisation of views and actions in the parties which form, or have a chance of forming, a coalition. As we have contended above, PR makes the manifesto expendable. Once a left-wing socialist party had gained a respectable share of the vote, and thereby a corresponding proportion of seats in Parliament, it would be under pressure to 'trim' like any other party.

Another point made by socialist advocates of PR is that it is something of a fraud to attempt to construct socialism with less than 50 per cent of the vote and more than 50 per cent of the seats in Parliament. After all, socialism, for practical as well as moral reasons, should require the support of at least 50 per cent of the population. The point is well taken. But does that mean that we should insist on PR? Other measures, such as referendums on key political and economic reforms, would ensure that the socialist government did not go ahead without majority support. It is possible to extend democracy, and bring in appropriate safeguards in this context, without introducing PR. Moreover it is a rather crude model of political change which assumes a role of permanent opposition until the magic 50 per cent is passed; building a true socialist majority may include periods of radical government with less than half the electors' support.

In November 1979 the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform was

launched, its composition reflecting the way PR has gained some limited support across the left-right divide. Its chairman was Tom Ellis MP (soon to be a defector to the SDP) and one of its sponsors was (and still is) Arthur Scargill.

In fact PR had attracted support earlier in the history of the Labour movement. In the immediate pre-war period the Party "showed a great deal of interest in PR and, had it not been for the obdurate opposition of Ramsay MacDonald who argued PR was a myth and would make the House of Commons less representative, the Party might well have adopted it as one of their manifesto commitments"¹⁸ In January 1913 Philip Snowden wrote a pamphlet entitled *PR from a Labour Standpoint* in which he stressed the electoral advantages to Labour at that point of adopting PR. For similarly self-interested reasons, many Labour MPs argued for it in the 1920s. In February 1923, a Bill introduced to achieve PR for local elections won the support of 74 Labour MPs, with only 11 voting against (amongst those voting for were Clement Attlee, Sydney Webb and Manny Shinwell). But in 1926 Labour's annual conference passed by a large majority a motion condemning PR (though leaving open the question of the Alternative Vote), thus reversing a pro-PR decision of 1918. And when a Bill was introduced in favour of the Alternative Vote in 1931 it was carried in the House of Commons by 295 (of whom 253 were Labour) to 230 (227 of whom were Tories). It eventually fell after becoming snarled up in the Lords.

So present support for PR in Labour's ranks is not new. But the arguments now have a distinctly modern flavour. The Labour Study Group on Electoral Reform (formed in 1976) published a pamphlet arguing that PR is a way of stopping Labour being pushed into permanent opposition.¹⁹ One of the leaflets of the Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform (which absorbed the Study Group) uses an argument to be found elsewhere on the Left by supporters of PR, namely that Labour has not convinced the country in favour of socialism. Referring to the Labour governments of 1964 to 1979, it says there is no point in trying to "introduce radical, progressive reforms" when "a democratic majority in the country did not understand and support us."²⁰ The same leaflet says that PR would stop Labour Parties in solid opposition areas "dying on their feet" and would give fair representation to Labour in the EEC Parliament. Another Labour PR supporter claims that the single transferrable vote system would allow Labour voters to determine which sort of candidates they supported, thereby taking the debilitating divisions of recent years out of the Party.²¹ But the Hansard Society disputes that this would happen in practice, pointing out that under Ireland's STV system "there is no conscious attempt to produce a slate of candidates across the political spectrum within a party and the emphasis is upon the personal/local links of the candidate."²²

Women and PR

With growing demands from the women's movement for equality and for positive discrimination to break the male stranglehold on Parliament and the party system, some women have suggested PR may assist with this objective. Like many other arguments for PR it has an initial plausibility about it. The principle of proportionality could clearly be harnessed on behalf of women and *women* voters, just as it is on behalf of *party* voters.

But on closer inspection, the argument is seriously flawed and is indeed a diversion from the main campaign for equality. In multi-member constituencies, the area party would be subject to exactly the same political forces as prevent women from being selected now in single member seats. (Unless of course the women's movement would be arguing for a minimum number of candidates chosen to be women; but that would be a departure from the demand for positive discrimination on the *short list* which is now gaining increasing support in the Labour Party. The demand for, as it were, an allocation of candidates to women would be quite different and would be unlikely to gain the same support, for good reasons.)

Alternatively, if a list system was adopted, the Party concerned could allocate half the places on the list to women. That could be an attractive demand for women to make, though one suffering from the same problem as identified above. It would also be wrong to press for a list system solely on the grounds that it may assist the selection of women candidates when the whole idea of the Party list is entirely wrong for the reasons we described earlier.

Indeed we can see no convincing reasons suggesting that women would in practice benefit from PR which are strong enough to warrant ignoring the many other democratic and political arguments against it. If they were strong enough, that might require re-assessment.

It has been pointed out that Scandinavian countries with PR have more women MPs. But is the existence of PR the main reason for this? Increased representation for women would not have come about if there was not a strong women's liberation movement in those countries. Indeed, it could be argued that if they had our electoral system then there would still be more women in Parliament, as a result of the strength of that movement. In contrast, Italy has PR, but the movement is weaker, hence less women get elected.

The representation of women in Parliament will not be improved without a massive change in social consciousness. It would be naive to assume that PR can 'do the job' without such fundamental change, or that if it were introduced it would bring the rewards which feminists are fighting for. It would surely be preferable to press ahead with the

growing movement for women's rights in the Labour Party, including demands for constitutional changes to secure equality, and to re-orientate the whole political practice of Parties so that the many important lessons of the women's movements are absorbed. Far better, for example, to change socialist organisation in the direction suggested by *Beyond the Fragments*²³ than to go for a short-cut like PR which ultimately stands for many of the things the women's movement has rightly opposed.

In Conclusion

In 1981, in a speech to the Constitutional Reform banquet, Roy Jenkins argued for PR in the following terms. It would involve:

a move to a fairer system which would allow a clearer representation of the popular will, accompanied by greater stability of national direction and policy. In this demand we are on the side of the people against the increasingly fossilised party oligarchies . . . (PR) is an essential step to the regeneration of Britain.²⁴

Each part of this argument is open to doubt. It is *not* clear that PR is 'fair', in view of the possibility of contra-electoral shifts in government. For similar reasons PR does *not* 'allow a clearer representation of the popular will'. In fact the existing system is much more sensitive to shifts in opinion amongst the electorate. But that, of course, means 'instability', and democracy should not permit an electorate which changes its mind to express this dramatically in terms of the character of government — this, it seems, is Jenkins' view. However, it is not clear that PR will be any more 'stable' than the existing system, even if 'stability' was a virtue. As to the claim that PR is 'on the side of the people against the increasingly fossilised party oligarchies' we find that the opposite is the case. PR will *extend* the power of the party oligarchies in their capacity to dominate the selection of candidates, and to negotiate coalition behind the backs of the people. An important, albeit limited, element of popular power, the access of a voter to a constituency-based MP and the role of the local political parties in selecting their parliamentary candidate, will be limited or abolished by PR.

PR, although it appears attractive at first sight, is not, in essence, an extension or improvement to real participatory democracy. An examination of the most vocal supporters of this system, and the history of the campaign for its introduction, seems to indicate some ulterior motives on behalf of a large section of its supporters. The connection of PR to the real movements and developments within British society suggests that it does not carry weight simply or mainly as a moral ideal. If it *is* a moral argument then, in our view, there is a convincing case for the morality of the existing electoral system. This does not mean that

democratic and social reform is unnecessary: it suggests that the arguments for and against PR should be placed in the context of the movements for and against radical change in Britain at the present time. Far from being a necessary element in this process of change, PR is both a diversion and an obstacle to the real and fundamental democratic and social reforms that are urgently required.

Notes

1. Nicholas Clarke, *The Story of the Great Vote Robbery* (Liberal Group for Electoral Reform, 1975), p.17.
2. *New Statesman*, 3rd April 1981.
3. *New Statesman*, 9th October 1981.
4. *Guardian*, 21st January 1982.
5. *The Times*, 22nd July 1981.
6. *The Times*, 23rd November 1979.
7. 'Constitutional Reform Now' (Conservative Action for Electoral Reform).
8. Viscount Caldecote (Chairman, Delta Metal Ltd); Lord Carr (Chairman, Prudential Assurance); Sir Alex Jarratt (Chairman, Reed International); Joseph Rank (Chairman, Rank Hovis McDougall); Sir Leslie Smith (Chairman, BOC International), Sir Graham Wilkins (Chairman, Beecham Group Ltd.); 'Why Industry Needs Electoral Reform Now' (National Committee for Electoral Reform).
9. *Guardian*, 24th June, 1981.
10. *Now!*, 21st December 1979.
11. *Guardian*, 9th September 1981.
12. For example, see Joe Rogaly, *Parliament for the People* (Temple Smith 1979), pp.3-4.
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14. Report of the Hansard Society, *Commission on Electoral Reform* (June 1976).
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Appendix

Electoral claims out of all proportion

Jack Straw (March 1981)

The policy platform of the Social Democrats is less than clear. But on one thing they and their partners, the Liberals, are agreed: on the need for proportional representation. They are not clear what kind of PR they want — as between, for example, the widely different German and Irish systems; but they are clear that they want it. “Electoral reform”, Roy Jenkins told the Oxford Union on March 9, should be “a priority” of a Social Democratic Party — and it was the *only* specific priority mentioned in his speech.

PR has, of course, been in Liberal manifestoes for some time — though not always. It was only when the party was seriously in decline — at the 1922 election — that it was first mentioned in a Liberal manifesto.

But while the issue of PR is a hardy perennial, the arguments advanced in its favour have changed, and have greatly expanded. At that 1922 election the calculation of party advantage — the real motive for its advancement now as then — was scarcely concealed from the electorate. A “*readjustment* of our electoral system by the introduction of proportional representation” (my emphasis) was the revealing language that was used in the Liberal’s manifesto.

Now, however, much, much more is claimed of PR. According to Roy Jenkins, it lies at the heart of the Social Democrats’ whole economic and social programme. Speaking to a ‘Constitutional Reform’ banquet at the Guildhall on 17 March 1981, he told his audience that it was not surprising that the last 25 years “over which the traditional arguments for the old electoral system have been progressively crushed, have coincided with Britain’s relative improverishment”. He then went on to claim that PR would give Britain “more effective and consistent government, and greater stability of national direction and policy”. It was, he said, “an essential step to the regeneration of Britain”.

These are substantial claims to make for any policy, let alone one which will act so indirectly upon our economic and social system as a change in voting systems. They are claims which should not go unexamined in the light of the history of those European states which have had PR — not least because Roy Jenkins, and the Liberals, have always prayed the European experience in their support.

If PR did give 'more effective and consistent government', as Roy Jenkins suggests, then we would expect to find this reflected in the history and experience of those European countries with PR. But this is simply not the case.

Italy has used PR — the 'Imperiali' system — since 1946. The Christian Democrats have dominated the government there for a similar period. In that sense, but no other, the Italian system might just be described as producing 'consistent' government: but with 40 governments in 34 years, no one — not even Roy Jenkins — could credibly describe Italian government as 'effective'.

The experience of France is even more illuminating. Under the Fourth Republic, from 1945 to 1958, France used various systems of proportional representation.

Far from this producing 'consistent and effective' government or 'stability of national direction and policy', France had in this period 25 governments and 15 prime ministers (during the same period in Britain there were only four). Only two prime ministers, Henri Queille and Guy Mollet, lasted for more than a year. France abandoned PR with the advent of the Fifth Republic — and has since 1958 used the two-ballot system in single member constituencies. It has been this period, with no PR, that has been characterised by 'consistent and effective' government.

The French experience under the Fourth Republic — and the Irish experience of today — contradicts another myth of PR supporters — that PR is intrinsically fairer and less open to manipulation than the first-past-the-post 'relative majority' system used in Britain and the United States. In fact, the choice of PR system — and the number of seats in multi-member constituencies — can crucially affect the outcome of elections. For example, in 1951, the French system was altered to give government parties an advantage over their Communist and Gaullist opponents: and, to achieve this, one system (the method of the 'largest remainder') was used in the Seine and Seine-et-Oise departements, since this favoured smaller parties and the Communists were in a majority in many parts of these departements. Another system, the 'd'Hondt rule', which favours the largest parties was used elsewhere.

In Ireland, the PR system is based upon three-, four- or five-member constituencies. But the size of constituency can directly affect the outcome, for in a five-member one a candidate needs only 16.6 per cent of the vote cast, plus 1, to be elected, while in a three-member seat he needs at least 25 per cent (25 per cent, plus 1 vote). Yet the Irish system is one of the two (the other being the German) which Roy Jenkins says he favours. "There is not a great deal to choose between the two", he says, though he "somewhat inclines to the German system."

Then, lastly, there is the experience of Germany. The Germans have

enjoyed relatively stable governments for 25 years, and governments which, because of the pivotal role of the Free Democrats in both CDU and SPD coalitions, have tended to look to the centre. But how far this moderation has been due simply to the election system used, and how far to the positive reaction of the German people against the extremism of the pre-war days, and the horror of Nazism, is open to question. I suspect that the latter has been a much more powerful influence than the former.

And it is the experience of pre-war Germany which is most damning of all to Roy Jenkins's analysis that PR leads to 'national stability' and 'effective and consistent' government. For Hitler and the Nazi Party rose to power in the Weimar Republic under PR. Throughout its 14-year history the Weimar Republic used a perfectly respectable national list system of proportional representation. It was a system very similar to that used in the Netherlands today: and, within its mixed system, voting for a national list continues to determine the balance of the parties in West Germany's Bundestag. Yet the period from 1919 to 1933 was one of the most appalling and unstable in Germany's peace-time history: with hyper-inflation, mass unemployment, economic collapse, and the rise of extremism on both left and right. Indeed, all the things which Roy Jenkins extravagantly implies could be prevented by PR happened, at this period, under PR.

Some have even gone so far as to say that PR assisted the rise of the Nazi Party by enabling it to win seats in the Reichstag while it still only represented a small minority of electors. As it happens, I do not share that view — and I do not need to. For the crucial point in this discussion, is not whether PR helped Hitler and the extremism he represented, but whether it acted to stop him. Manifestly it did not. What the Weimar Republic, and the different, and apparently contradictory post-war experiences of France, Germany and Italy, show us is that PR has never, and will never, prevent either instability in government, or the rise of parties of the extremes if the objective circumstances for these exist.

Britain's own post-war experience may serve to underline this point. Roy Jenkins criticises the move from the centre in the British policies. What he fails to acknowledge is that the desertion of the so-called 'centre ground' by both major parties arose from the experience, from 1950 to 1970, when both parties held, or were competing for, the centre ground, and when 'Butskellism' reigned supreme. Though in retrospect this period may now appear as something of a golden age, with some growth and full employment, it was in this period that Britain's relative decline set in, with a complacent 'you've never had it so good' era in the 50s, and an over-cautious if less confident stop-go approach in the 60s.

Given the highly favourable world conditions — of steady growth in world trade, and stable exchange rates — this should have been the

period when Britain's foundations for its future prosperity and survival were laid. But they were not. And those who espoused such centrist policies at the time — including Roy Jenkins — ought now to show a little more humility and self-criticism about the causes of today's discontents. If the centrist policies Roy Jenkins espoused had worked, there would today be no Margaret Thatcher and no Arthur Scargill. It was the failure of Roy Jenkins and his allies which has begat both — and not the electoral system.

If the new Social Democrat Party thinks that PR will work to their advantage they are fully entitled to campaign for its support. But it would be more honest of them not to dress up their case — which at root is one of party advantage — with spurious European allusions, ill-supported historical assertions, and, worst of all, extravagant claims that PR can be yet another wonder-cure for the British economy leading to “the regeneration of Britain”.

Jack Straw is Labour MP for Blackburn.

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