



Policy Study No 130

THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF PR

The British idea of responsible government

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CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

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1.

Fair voting: the beckoning prospect

We are at the moment going through another cycle of demands for electoral reform. No doubt this has been prompted in part by the nearness of a general election, the outcome of which might be a so-called 'hung' Parliament in which no single party would have an overall majority. Such a situation, so some assert, would call for the kind of bargaining between parties that alone might lead to a deal on electoral reform. But there is probably a deeper influence at work, what we might call the belief in the inevitability of Europe. There is a feeling about, assiduously fed and stimulated by many who see themselves as enlightened opinion-formers and by numerous politicians and officials committed to what they believe to be the onward progressive movement of the European Community, that somehow or other we will one day have to slough off all our traditional political practices and become very much more like our continental neighbours. What our new European outfit looks like does not perhaps matter too much: the wardrobe is large and doubtless the Brussels Commission will be indulgent in allowing us to combine what we will, Dutch clogs with a German *Pickelhaube*, the Cockade of Liberty with a Garibaldian red shirt. But one thing we will have to put on whether it suits us or not, and that is the straitjacket of proportional representation. That would be the final confirmation of our European respectability.

Until recently electoral reform has been a cause espoused chiefly by the smaller, minority parties in Britain, though not by all of them.¹ Whatever arguments of principle might have influenced these advocates of a move to PR, self-interest has certainly played a part too. After all, electoral reform holds out the prospect of more seats for its principal protagonist, the Liberal Democrats, and perhaps a more or less permanent hold on power as an indispensable coalition partner. Up to now the Conservative and Labour parties have firmly upheld the present voting system, even though from time to time voices in favour of change have been heard within their ranks. Now, however, the Labour party seems to be edging uneasily towards a position more sympathetic to giving at least some consideration to the possibility of a

1. The two Unionist parties in Northern Ireland oppose electoral reform, partly no doubt because they are in a majority in the province. But for European parliamentary elections the method of the Single Transferable Vote is used and the Unionists have accepted that. They have two of the province's three seats in the European Parliament.

less permanent hold on power as an indispensable coalition partner. Up to now the Conservative and Labour parties have firmly upheld the present voting system, even though from time to time voices in favour of change have been heard within their ranks. Now, however, the Labour party seems to be edging uneasily towards a position more sympathetic to giving at least some consideration to the possibility of a 'fairer' voting system². As a result only the Conservative party remains unambiguously committed to maintaining the present rules and the political practices that go with them. From the point of view of the advocates of change the prospects of eventual success, though still distinctly speculative, seem to have brightened.

Any radical electoral reform would have to be based to a substantial degree on the principal of proportional representation. The key argument for a move in that direction has always been that it would result in greater fairness. Fairness is taken to mean that the parties participating in a parliamentary election receive an allocation of seats corresponding as closely as possible to the number of votes gained. There may, of course, be refinements. A proportional voting system may allow for the expression of preferences by voters, so that it is not just a question of finding out how many first choices the parties receive. Nevertheless, the basic principle remains clear and straightforward: parties receive more or less the number of seats to which they are entitled by virtue of the votes actually cast for them³.

There is another, subsidiary argument in favour of proportionality which has often been held to supplement the fairness argument. This is that by greatly diminishing the probability of large shifts in the numbers of seats held by parties competing under relative majority voting in single member constituencies, proportional voting renders abrupt changes in both the composition and policies of governments less likely. In other words, proportionality induces stability. There is

2. The clearest evidence of this is the inquiry (so far unfinished) of a committee set up by the Labour party under the chairmanship of Professor Raymond Plant to study 'fairer' voting. A large and learned report on the principles underlying various electoral rules was issued in the summer of 1991, but it did not contain recommendations. In January 1992, however, the Party more or less committed itself to PR for the Scottish Assembly which it wants to see established.

3. For a useful survey of methods of PR see E.Lakeman, *How Democracies Vote*, 4th edition 1974.

some evidence which seems to support this view of the matter. For example the experience of Britain for about a couple of decades after 1965 suggests that relative majority voting exacerbated the differences between parties, whilst on the other side of the coin the glacial rate of change in many countries of continental Europe which enjoy proportionality certainly keeps the same coalitions in power for long periods. But as with all inductive historical arguments it is easy to pick holes in them: the exceptions and the alternative explanations are too numerous for the arguments to be conclusive.

So much for the core of the case for electoral reform on the proportional principle. In public discussion in Britain, and particularly from the lips of politicians, the case against usually consists in one assertion: proportionality will produce weak coalition government. Disraeli's remark continues to echo down the ages: 'England does not love coalitions.' This has generally been enough for most politicians, especially if they belonged to the leading ranks of the two dominant parties. There is a profound mistrust of the kind of bargaining which coalition formation is correctly seen to entail, and there is a deeply rooted belief that coalitions of that kind -- quite different in nature from the wartime coalitions imposed by necessity in earlier British experience -- are inherently weak, unstable, and ineffectual. Obviously there is virtually no relevant British historical evidence for or against this hostile view of coalition government. Since the emergence of political parties in something like their modern form in 1868 we have not had that kind of coalition, though there were shadows of it in 1924 and again in 1977-78. So we have to look abroad, and there the evidence is both extensive and contradictory. Sometimes coalition government is highly stable, almost as if it were hewn out of the rock of ages and impervious to the ravages of time. But often it is volatile, unreliable and ineffective, apparently vindicating to the full John Bull's worst suspicions. What this means, of course, is that proportionality of itself does not necessarily result in unstable coalitions, but that in combination with other circumstances it may well make that outcome likely. There is, however, one feature of coalition government which, as far as one can see, is universal. This is that it involves bargaining and compromise about political office and policy amongst politicians after the voters have spoken. What I mean by this is that the voters do not

themselves in any direct way determine what bargains will be struck, by whom, and to whose advantage. The voters do not normally designate a coalition of a particular kind: by their votes and the application of the principle of proportionality they simply establish the basis on which politicians then engage in trading and, if they are sufficiently accommodating, reach agreements.

The case for electoral reform has a certain high-minded appeal about it. The initial reactions of many to a proposal that seems to promise greater fairness tends to be one of sympathy. This in turn puts the defender of the status quo on the defensive: why stand in the way of progress? One of the most serious dangers in the argument about electoral reform is that all too easily it remains caught up in broad generalisations and over-optimistic estimates of its consequences. In particular it is often presented as just another piece of sensible modernisation of our political habits after which life can go on much as before. It seems to me that any such view of the matter is profoundly mistaken, and it finds support chiefly because what has been missing from the debate about electoral reform is a realistic appreciation of the profound changes in British political life that it would actually entail. It is not just a question of changing a few rules for elections and so making it likely that smaller parties will do better. What is at stake is a radical change in our political habits and institutions. Thoroughgoing electoral reform means a change of political system and values, nothing less.

In the following pages I try to set out some of the changes implied by electoral reform and the proportionality principle. Put more crudely, I aim to show what sort of price tag has to be attached to electoral reform. Some time ago I took a different view of the matter and had some sympathy for electoral reform, chiefly because I thought it would have stabilising effects⁴. Since then reflection on a wide range of experience outside Britain as well as on what has happened here has brought me to the conclusion that the proportionality principle embodies greater dangers for the health of democratic, representative

4. N. Johnson, 'Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform: Need we be afraid?' in S.E. Finer (ed.), *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform*, London 1975.

government than are currently recognised, so much so that its adoption in Britain would be profoundly misconceived. It would be totally at odds with the understanding and practices of responsible government which have evolved in the course of the historical experience of the British peoples. It would substitute for our particular domestic notion of democracy and responsible government something much nearer to an oligarchy of parties. *Vox populi*, no matter how misguided it may sometimes be, would give way entirely to the voices of parties. This in essence is the case I will try to present.

2. A change of political system: taking the risks out of politics

Though we live in a world in which democracy has become an almost universal political commitment, the number of countries with well-established and firmly based systems of democratic government remains small. In the oldest and most stable democratic societies -- Britain and the United States -- the method of voting still rests for the most part on the ancient principle that in an election the person chosen to be a representative is the one who receives the most votes. The underlying assumption is that voters are called upon to choose persons. It is a fact of history that this way of electing representatives evolved before the emergence of anything like modern political parties, and it is by no means accidental that relative majority voting survives mainly either in countries which established some elements of representative government before the rise of organised parties, or in countries like Canada, India or New Zealand which have been deeply influenced by the British example. In Britain the first rudiments of party organisation appeared in Parliament as a means of lining up support for or against Ministers. Gradually, in the wake of extension of the franchise in the nineteenth century, nationally organised parties took shape as the most effective means of mobilising support in the steadily growing electorate for national politicians and their policies. Outside the Anglo-American tradition representative and more or less democratic government emerged generally in parallel with or after the development of organised political parties, many of which had been formed precisely in order to press for political reform and a wider franchise. Under these conditions it is understandable that parties were keen to maintain their respective positions as political liberalisation went ahead. As a result relative majority voting was in the early years of this century often given up in favour of arrangements which benefited whatever parties were already established in political life. Sometimes this happened peacefully and as the result of considered arguments, as for the most part in Scandinavia, Holland or Switzerland, sometimes the transition was enforced by upheaval and breakdown as in Germany after 1918. But whatever the mode of transition, the outcome was generally the

same: the introduction of a proportional system of voting which ensured that parties could expect to gain approximately the number of seats to which they were entitled by virtue of the number of votes cast for them. Elections became a matter of choosing parties rather than individuals. An election was held to produce a mirror image of the distribution of party sympathies and commitments within a society: *who* was elected or *whether* a government was elected became matters of secondary consideration.

It is sometimes suggested, or more naively even assumed as an article of faith, that the old democracies which still stick to relative majority voting in single-member constituencies have somehow or other not caught up with the progressive march of events. They have not recognised that parties have become the distinguishing organisations of modern democracy, that without parties we would not even be able to operate a system of representative government. Why not, therefore, get rid of electoral rules which ante-date parties, which manifestly serve other purposes than those of electing party members to the representative assembly, and which above all are not 'fair'? It is a beguiling argument, and especially for those susceptible to the idea of European inevitability. Yet there are fallacies in it -- and it fails to take account of experience. To accept parties as necessary mechanisms by which popular choices are structured, and more broadly as the means by which representative government is made possible, does not of itself entail acceptance of the principle of proportionality in the choice of representatives and parties. Elections serve a variety of purposes: they enable voters to express preferences for parties, to choose individuals to represent them, to say what government they want to see in office, and to indicate what policies they are prepared to support. There is no compelling reason why the rules for elections should reflect just one purpose to the exclusion of others. But this is the effect of the principle of proportionality: it puts the 'fair' representation of parties before all else. In contrast, experience in Britain as in several other long-established democracies, shows that relative majority voting is effective in enabling elections to serve a wider range of purposes, and on the whole with some success. There is no progressive movement of history which, as parties grow and flourish, leads us on inevitably from simple majorities to proportionality.

I want to turn now to a more specific consideration of some of the likely consequences of the abandonment of relative majority voting and its replacement by some form of proportional representation. But here I shall not be concerned in the main with relatively familiar matters such as the benefits which might accrue to the Liberal Democrats from a proportional system of voting, or what it might mean for the prospects of a Labour or a Conservative majority, but rather with the impact which such a change would have on political values in Britain and the conditions under which political life is conducted and the business of government carried out. In other words, I want to ask: what differences in the political order which we presently have would be likely to result from a shift to proportional voting?

In presenting these arguments I am assuming that the form of proportional representation adopted is one which involves, at least in part,⁵ voting for party lists, and then distributing seats according to a suitable mathematical formula which ensures a fair distribution of seats in relation to the votes cast for the parties contesting the election. Of course, there are many variations in how list systems of voting can be put into effect and in the extent to which preferences are weighed and shared out amongst competing parties and candidates. There also numerous variations in relation to the size of the voting 'constituency', running from the whole nation of voters as in Israel to provincial units of varying size and population as in Germany. But what I have to say is not seriously affected by these possible variations. The only qualifications that it will be necessary to make at a later stage relate to what is in fact the rarest form of proportional representation, that according to the Single Transferable Vote method, and to the effects of qualifying thresholds intended to exclude from representation very small parties or groups. In both of these cases some of the normal effects of a PR system may be reduced or mitigated.

5. This qualification allows for mixed systems like that of Germany in which voting for lists is combined with voting in constituencies. The German system has been favoured by several advocates of electoral reform in Britain, notably in the report of the Hansard Society Commission on Electoral Reform, 1976.

The first thing to go under PR is competition and risk in political life. We tend very easily to forget how large a part competition and competitiveness have played in the development of our kind of democracy. But competitions are not real if there are prizes for all, as in *Alice in Wonderland*. There has to be the chance that some candidates will lose, and lose in a fairly dramatic way. This is what relative majority voting has provided for, even occasionally in the days of the unreformed Commons before 1832. As political parties took shape in Britain elections became both a national competition and a large number of separate constituency competitions in which parties and candidates vied with each other for the favour of the voters. Moreover, it is worth remembering that candidates had to seek the 'favour' of the voters, and in the way they conduct elections still do so. This is what the curious exercise of canvassing still symbolises: the need for the candidate or people acting on his behalf to go round asking for support and trying to find out who will support him.

The consolidation of a two party competition was assisted by the fact that the prize to be won was a large and important one: the right to form a government and to govern the country for five years (seven before 1910). It might be held, however, that for many individual Members of Parliament and candidates not much competition and risk was involved. Many parliamentary seats have always been regarded as 'safe', that is to say, as seats in which one particular party can nearly always count on gaining a majority of the votes. But the existence of reasonably secure seats is not really of much significance in relation to the general argument about the maintenance of competition and risk. In the country at large there has nearly always been a serious competition about which of the two principal parties should govern; the result has rarely been a foregone conclusion. This has meant that even Members with safe seats have usually behaved as if their position was not secure. Indeed, the tendency to behave as if one were exposed to a real risk of defeat even in so-called safe seats has grown much stronger in recent years, a reflection of the fact that anyway the number of

really 'safe' seats has been in decline,⁶ and that it is no longer acceptable to treat one's constituency as something like a fief. What all this means, of course, is that there is a significant proportion of candidates at any general election who really are exposed to serious risks: they may lose their seats and thus perhaps their career in politics, or they may fail to win what they might have hoped was a fairly good starting ticket for such a career.

The aspect of risk in politics has many dimensions. There are, for example, the material conditions of political life in Britain. Members of Parliament receive relatively modest financial rewards for their efforts, and even Ministers are far from lavishly paid. More important still, pension conditions for Members are austere, there is nothing substantial in the way of severance pay on loss of a seat, and apart from the chance of a seat in the House of Lords even ministerial office brings no special benefits on its loss or retirement from it. Moreover, Members who are defeated or leave Parliament voluntarily rarely have any right to reinstatement in whatever profession or employment they previously had. For these reasons alone most politicians in Britain perform on a high wire without a safety net. Many of them are lucky and survive quite well. But there are risks for all, and great risks for some: politics remains a dangerous game.

This is how the British have always liked their politics to be. There is almost a touch of brutality in their attitude towards those who try to climb the greasy pole and slip down before or after they have got to the top. But there is, of course, a sound instinct behind this tough and realistic view of the desirability of competition and risk. It is only in such conditions that those who are standing for election are likely to feel accountable to those who elect them. Competition and risk are key elements in the maintenance of democracy and responsible government. It is the fear of losing the support of the electorate, or at least of

6. There is some evidence to show that relatively fewer voters are now strongly committed to a political party. This necessarily reduces the number of 'safe' seats. Additionally, Members of Parliament have become more sensitive to demands from their constituencies and this in turn suggests that they cannot count on more or less automatic support. See for some comments J. Curtice & M. Steed, 'Proportionality and Exaggeration in the British Electoral System', in *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 5, (3), December 1986.

important parts of it, which compels those in office (and those seeking office too) to be responsive to public opinion. Yet it is also these very conditions which are from time to time favourable to decisive and courageous political leadership. For if the risks of losing support are the driving force behind responsiveness, so the prospect of gaining enhanced support is the prize which may sometimes be won by a politician who is ready to seize the opportunities of leadership.

The fact that there is in Britain competition and risk under the rules of relative majority voting accounts in large measure for the fairly rapid rate of turnover amongst officeholders and within the party élites generally. True, there have since 1945 been many examples of long careers in politics -- thirty years or more -- and we have just experienced the longest tenure of the office of Prime Minister since Lord Liverpool. But it should not be forgotten that though the period of apprenticeship in British political life is relatively long, once people get to the higher echelons they cannot then count on staying there indefinitely. Britain knows virtually nothing like the permanence of Italian politicians (Prime Minister Andreotti first became a minister in 1954), the extraordinary degree of stability prevailing for decades in both Swedish and Swiss politics, or the consolidation and immovability of the governing cadres in Germany (Foreign Minister Genscher in office now for 23 years). In all these cases (and in several more on the continent of Europe) proportional voting entrenches parties and diminishes risk both for the parties as organisations and for the individuals standing as their candidates. The proportions of the total vote gained by each of the parties will vary over time, with some gaining and some losing from one election to the next. But the changes are rarely dramatic, the better placed individual candidates are usually safe, and the outcome of most elections is the renewal or re-shaping of an existing coalition government.

Before I turn to other effects of British electoral practices it is worth making a brief reference to American experience. The election to the presidency is nearly always highly competitive as is the process within the parties by which candidates are selected. But in relation to Congress, which is elected by relative majority voting, the position looks at first sight as if it might be different. There is a very high

proportion of constituencies for the House of Representatives which can be regarded as safe (and much the same can be said of many states when electing their senators). It might be expected that under these conditions risk and competition would be largely excluded from the scene. However, this is far from the case. Over the years a variety of devices have been institutionalised in the United States, notably the system of primary elections, which help to build competition into a system which might otherwise lack its stimulus. Additionally, the loose structure of the two American parties and the absence of any effective national party organisations, mean that within the parties there is both competition for the candidacies and opportunities for newcomers to challenge incumbents. One of the consequences of these conditions is that, rather as in Britain, most politicians behave as if engaged in a competition fraught with the risk of defeat, even though they may know that there is little chance of this happening.

3.

Passing judgement: the basis of responsible government

A second crucial feature of relative majority voting, and especially as practised in Britain with fairly small single member constituencies, is that the voter can see his vote as a choice of person rather than just a mark of approval for a party. The rules, procedures and conventions under which elections are conducted encourage voters to believe that they are called upon to pass judgement on persons, both on their own local candidates and on the leaders presented by the competing parties.

It is, of course, true that there is plenty of evidence from election studies which indicates that in our era party weighs more heavily in the voters' choices than individual candidates alone.⁷ But the interpretation of such evidence is open to a lot of argument, and anyway it does not weaken the main point being made here. This is that relative majority voting in single member constituencies does more effectively than any other method underline the character of an election as an act of choosing and judging. The voters have to choose individuals and in some degree at least must pass judgement on them. But simultaneously they express their party preferences. This means that cumulatively the personalisation of an election is carried forward into the judgement passed on parties and, above all, on governments actual and potential. An election in Britain is about electing a government directly, and is not confined to the electing of party representatives who then have to decide what kind of government they are prepared to sustain.

The idea of an election as necessarily involving the choice of individuals and the passing of judgement on them stands in an intimate relationship with yet another feature of British political values and constitutional practice. This is the idea of responsible government. British constitutional development has been more strongly marked by this idea than perhaps by any other. Essentially it has meant govern-

7. See D. Butler & D. Stokes, *Political Change in Britain*, 1969, for an early account of political behaviour in which the relative unimportance of constituency factors is addressed.

ment by named Ministers responsible to the House of Commons. In the course of the twentieth century the factor of responsibility to the House of Commons has been supplemented by the idea of responsibility to the electorate, not so much the responsibility of individual Ministers as of the government as a whole. In a rather crude, but nevertheless very important sense, responsible government has come to be equated with the capacity of the electorate to turn a government out of office and to put a known alternative in its place. In turn it is a perception of this possibility which often serves to discipline governments, making them responsive in all sorts of ways to what they believe to be public opinion and demands.

One could discuss at length the effectiveness nowadays of responsible government conceived in this way. Certainly, many qualifications must be made where we talk about the responsibility of individual Ministers to the Commons and the extent to which they are exposed to a real threat of sanctions. What ministerial responsibility means in practice does not correspond to what we will find in many of the constitutional textbooks of fifty years ago, and anyway the whole structure and character of government activity and services have changed greatly during the past half-century. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the government of this country is still conducted in relation to nearly all important matters (and quite a lot of unimportant ones too) through the House of Commons. The government is in a real and continuing sense present in the Commons, seeking support there for what it is doing or not doing and, above all, defending its actions in the face of critical and often hostile argument. Even governments with large majorities and on that account tempted to display less than the usual responsiveness to both Parliament and public opinion cannot in the long run escape from this discipline. There can be no doubt that responsible parliamentary government in this form is a far more crucial part of day-to-day political reality in Britain than it is in most continental European democracies, a point which is underlined by the fact that only in Britain is the institution of an Opposition as an alternative government fully recognised as an element in the constitution.⁸ Simi-

8. In several European countries there is something like an informal notion of the Opposition and of its leader. But none provides formally for such a role.

larly, it is reasonably clear that parliamentary elections in this country are, far more than with most of our neighbours, a means of enforcing something like the collective responsibility of a government: judgement is passed and the rascals may be turned out.

This British view of responsible government has been shaped both by the dynamic of the relative majority voting system and by the two-party configuration which, for most of the past century and longer, that has favoured. It has meant that the exercise of powers has been, and still is seen predominantly in terms of identifiable individuals -- Ministers -- being entrusted with them and then using them subject to the checks imposed both by representative institutions and by the people. This is very different from the more abstract view of the conferment and exercise of powers which has generally prevailed in most continental European states, usually presented as a doctrine of the state. Equally, it is different from the conditions of multi-party coalition government. Here an emphasis on the individual responsibility of ministerial officeholders as well as on the collective responsibility of the whole government is simply incompatible with the basic assumptions on which coalitions are put together. If we simplify the matter substantially, it can be said that the British practice of responsible government insists on pinning actions to officeholders and on seeing the whole pattern of governmental activity in personalised terms. This happens in response to the underlying conviction that only in this way can the abuse of powers be prevented and officeholders kept alive to their dependence on those who put them in a temporary position of trust.

These arguments do not at all deny that there are other approaches to the control of powers and to the challenge of securing responsive and responsible government. Responsible government as carried out in Britain reflects the interplay of various facets of experience -- our institutional procedures, the ambitions and interests of parties, our ideas about what is involved in an election, and our readiness to acknowledge the ultimate supremacy of the popular will. In contrast it is possible to put more faith in the legal definition of powers, in the control of their exercise through modes of judicial review and decision, in the capacity of competing institutions to check (and frustrate) each other, in the protective effects of appeals to basic rights, in the use of refer-

endum provisions and so on. Similarly, it may be that in some circumstances the division of powers amongst politicians in complex coalition arrangements does, by making for weak government, establish a kind of protection against the abuse of powers. Yet none of these possibilities provides a really serious argument in favour of disrupting or abandoning the British view of how best to maintain responsible government. Each society has to live and develop its political practices out of its existing stock of experience: the scope for borrowing other people's gadgets successfully is far more limited than is often believed.⁹

It will be asserted by some that opinion polls have recently shown that a majority of voters now seem to favour electoral reform. But it is very doubtful whether such polls have much significance. In the abstract the idea of change often seems to be attractive; it is when the cost of what is proposed becomes apparent that the response changes. It would come as a severe shock to most people in Britain, were electoral reform embodying the principle of proportionality to be foisted on to them, to discover that their customary notions of responsible government and of popular control over the choice of a government, had become unworkable or simply inapplicable. It is this glimpse of the profound and probably irrevocable consequences of PR in terms of changing the whole political system, which never seems to enter into the opinion polls purporting to show that many people would be happy to accept a change in voting methods.

So far I have been concerned mainly with examining some of the connections between the relative majority voting method used in Britain and certain crucial characteristics of the country's constitutional structure and associated political values. There are some further general effects of the voting system which are worth attention. Quite clearly it works in favour of a simplification of choices. The electorate realises that the risk of wasting a vote is high, and this serves as a check on the impulse to vote for smaller parties which are widely seen

9. The difficulty of transplanting institutions and social practices is evidently overlooked by those who regularly point out that this or that is better done 'in Europe'. Even if such assertions were true, that would not make borrowing other people's methods any easier.

to have no chance of gaining substantial representation and, therefore, influence on the formation of a government. The strength and distribution of this check is not, however, uniform. There are parts of the United Kingdom where certain sympathies and loyalties are far stronger than they are overall: the sympathy for nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales is one obvious example of this, and there is some evidence over time that support for the former Liberal party and for its successor, the Liberal Democratic party, has been similarly skewed in particular parts of the country. But so long as most of the country retains a fairly high degree of cultural and social homogeneity, so this simplifying impact of relative majority voting is likely to persist. It reinforces the historical bias in favour of two parties and, therefore, of two clear alternatives competing for the right to govern the country.

What is more, there is also evidence that for most of the time the presence of two dominant parties has two further beneficial effects. On the one hand the main parties have generally (though not always, as we experienced in the 1970s and on into the 1980s) been forced to moderate their policies and appeals in order to gain support in the middle. Put differently, the dynamic of the system has usually worked against extremism and sectarianism. On the other hand, for reasons already alluded to the system offers certain incentives in the appropriate circumstances to radical policies and to the carrying through of changes by which the point of consensus, the rallying point in the centre round which moderate opinion can gather, is eventually re-defined and shifted. This has happened at least three times this century -- after the Liberal victory of 1906, after the Labour victory of 1945, and most recently after the Conservative victory of 1979. The benefits of a mode of politics which allows and, indeed, helps to facilitate such large- scale adaptations to new demands and challenges in the society should not be underestimated.

Another effect of the competition generated by a voting system with such powerful simplifying pressures built into it is so omnipresent that it is often overlooked. This is the way in which it generates and sustains debate, thus reinforcing the high regard paid to public argument and the conviction that decisions can be regarded as legitimate only when they have been preceded by a 'debate'. In fact, it may well

be that after democracy 'debate' is the most frequently cited word in the British political vocabulary. Of course, there is an element of expediency and ritual at work here. Politicians publish their plans and sometimes talk about debate only as a means of dampening opposition to what they are more or less determined to do anyway. Alternatively, the need for debate is evoked only in order to prevaricate and avoid doing anything at all. But notwithstanding all the ways in which debate may be made to serve diverse political ends, there can be no doubt about the widespread general approval of public debate which still exists, about its deep roots in the British political tradition, and about the extent to which it is still widely practised. Nor is debate in any way confined to the political sphere narrowly defined, even though it is the procedures of Parliament which have exerted a powerful influence on the manner in which debate is conducted. We find the addiction to public argument and the confrontation of persons and arguments in radio and television, in the press local and national, in universities and many other institutions of higher education and research, in the annual conferences of an almost infinite range of organisations pursuing many and varied interests and purposes, in the bars of public houses and in the committees of gentlemen's clubs. And after all, why should this be surprising in the country which has pioneered parliamentary government? Parliamentary government is basically a form of government under which action is determined and legitimised by previous talk and debate, it is government by talking. A Parliament is not in the first place a legislature or a law-making body, it is instead a talking-shop. No wonder that where such a belief is strong, the practice of debate is pervasive. But such a practice is not independent of the structural features of political life and organisation: it thrives in some institutional settings and not in others. Again, a glance at most of our continental neighbours will confirm the relatively lower rating which most of them give to public debate. Often the taking of decisions may be a long and laborious business, involving hard bargaining amongst interested parties, with concessions made on all sides. Sometimes it may simply be impossible to take a decision at all because the required majority cannot be sewn together. But what is so often absent is what we in Britain call 'debate' -- some kind of discussion in public addressed to those who must ultimately pass judgement on those taking the decisions.

4.

PR and party oligarchy: some lessons from Europe

I want to conclude these reflections on what electoral reform in favour of PR might mean for the British political system by looking at what the evidence from some of our neighbours indicates may be inescapable consequences of applying the principle of proportionality. Following on from that some brief comments will be made about various modifications to the PR principle which have tended to mitigate some of its more harmful effects.

The general tendency of proportional systems is to encourage the trend towards an oligarchy of parties. What this means in practice is that a cartel of parties is usually established. Newcomers can occasionally break into the ring, but once inside the temptation to claim and maintain the benefits of the system is as a rule irresistible. In such oligarchical conditions parties usually succumb to predictable human weaknesses: they build up privileges for themselves, they become introverted, believing that all matters are best handled by some kind of cosy bargain which keeps all the participating parties happy, and above all they gradually lose any sense of a separation between their interests and a wider and distinctive 'public interest'. In the worst cases they identify the public domain with themselves: *l'état, c'est nous*. Under such conditions it also becomes virtually impossible to preserve any notion of politically neutral public service. Politicians and bureaucrats, appointed officials and elected officeholders merge into a single body of beneficiaries of the system. Outside is the public whose privilege it is simply to fix from time to time the weights to be attached to the participants in the circle of beneficiaries. Some members of the public will, it is true, themselves get certain benefits as the price of the support they have given to this or that party. But in essentials politics becomes a closed business, a matter of deals and negotiations best carried on out of the range of prying public eyes.

These symptoms of party oligarchy are clearly visible in many

continental European countries. Though many of the institutional conditions vary (or have varied) they can be detected in Sweden and Italy, in Germany and Austria, in Belgium and Switzerland. They existed in France of the Fourth Republic, and despite changes are not absent from the Fifth Republic. Common to all these examples, except that of the Fifth Republic in France,¹⁰ is a system of proportional representation. In all instances it has tended to consolidate parties and to work in favour of a more or less closed system for the expression of political choice.

Hardly any European country better illustrates some of the manifestations of party oligarchy than Germany. So it is worth looking more closely at some of the effects of PR in the evolution of that country's party system. After the establishment of the Federal Republic in 1949 the number of effectively competing political parties was quickly reduced from about ten to three (or four if we take account of the fact that the Christian Democratic Union has a distinctive and separate Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union). By the end of the 1950s political life was dominated by two large parties and one small one, and this condition persisted at national level until 1982 when the Greens (an ecological party) gained seats in the Bundestag. After unification in 1990 the palette of successful parties was little altered. The Greens lost out in the Western part of the country, but under transitional voting provisions gained some representatives in the East. A successor party to the former Socialist Unity party also secured seats from the Eastern part of the country. But in essentials the configuration of two major parties and one small party in the middle survived.

We have to ask first how the Germans got through so successfully to a relatively simple pattern of parties. Then we need to look at the ways in which it expresses vividly the results of proportionality. And finally we need to consider some of the consequences with regard to

10. Electoral law in France has since 1958 provided for two ballots in elections to the National Assembly. Candidates gaining an absolute majority on the first ballot are elected, for those who do not there is a second ballot at which a relative majority suffices. In 1985 President Mitterrand opted for a return to PR, a step then reversed in favour of the two-ballot system by the Chirac Government in 1986. It appears that Mitterrand still hankers after restoration of PR, despite the fact that it would boost the chances of M. Le Pen's National Front.

oligarchy. The German electoral system, which involves electing half of the membership of the Bundestag by relative majority in single member constituencies, and the remaining half from party lists in the Länder, has sometimes been described as 'personalised proportional representation'. This is because the constituency element in the system gives the appearance of bringing the choice of individuals into play in order to correct the impersonal and party-bound nature of voting for lists of candidates. But much of this is an illusion. It is the votes cast for party lists (the second vote) which determine the overall distribution of seats. Moreover, as constituencies are relatively large a high proportion of them tends to be safe for one party or the other, and anyway the vast majority of constituency candidates are insured against defeat by having a favourable position on their respective party lists. This arrangement greatly reduces the risks for individual candidates as well as calling into question the reality of the choice offered to voters on the constituency tickets. However, whilst electoral law is based on proportionality, it also contains a condition requiring a party to gain at least 5% of the total vote in order to qualify for representation at all. In other words there is an obstacle in the rules to the survival of very small parties and to the easy entry of new ones. Splinter groups are discriminated against. The overall result of these conditions was that the two main parties were greatly strengthened, but at the same time the adherence to the proportional principle meant that the small party in the middle -- the Free Democrats -- became an indispensable element in the formation of governments. Only once (in 1957) did the Christian Democrats have something like an absolute majority, though even then they chose not to govern alone. For the rest a coalition has always been necessary, and for most of the past forty years or so this has depended on the willingness of the party in the middle to form a coalition with one or the other of the main parties. As for the electorate, it has never directly brought about a switch from one ruling majority to another, though on one occasion (in 1969) the outcome of an election did prompt a subsequent change of coalition. But as a rule this has always depended on when and whether the Free Democrats would change alliances.¹¹ A classical instance of this was provided by

11. A similar position has usually prevailed in the Länder, in some of which new parties such as the Greens and the 'Alternatives' have recently come into the game of coalition building.

the fall of the Social Democratic Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, in 1982 and his replacement by Helmut Kohl heading a new government of Christian and Free Democrats.

What needs to be stressed about this general outcome of the German party development is, however, not so much the immense leverage given to the Free Democrats, despite their support never exceeding approximately 11% of the national vote, as the manner in which it has reinforced and consolidated the practices of coalition and the politics of bargaining. Since even the main parties are not internally homogeneous or always united, the habits of coalition politics extend far beyond the relationships between them and the smaller, but indispensable partner in the middle. The whole spectrum of German party life is pervaded by the ethos of coalition-making and by the trading of benefits between parties. In addition the determination of policies by governments is subject to exactly the same imperatives: each item has to be hammered out in lengthy negotiations so that all the parties to the final bargain can claim that the conclusion embodies at least some of the points dear to them.

One of the most obvious, and perhaps the most worrying consequence of the entrenchment of party government in Germany is the way in which the established parties have rendered their own position almost impregnable through the provision of the most generous system of public financing of parties and their activities to be found in the Western world. It is not necessary to go into details here on what is in many ways a very complicated matter. But in essence what has happened is that since about 1960 the German parties have paid to themselves from public funds appreciable contributions to their campaigning expenses, to the costs of their organisations both in legislative bodies and in the country at large, and to the costs incurred by a number of party-affiliated 'foundations' supposedly engaged in 'political education'. In addition, there are the sums paid out to meet the salaries, working expenses, and supporting services guaranteed to the elected representatives themselves. This highly elaborate structure for the public funding of party organisation and activity is not confined to the Federal or national level: it now extends to all the Länder or states, some of which even out-do the Federal authorities in their generous

support for the parties.

Over the years this support system has become ever more lavish. It has recently been estimated that if all sources of support are included (tax reliefs also), then the German parties are today receiving over a four year period from one election to another something like DM 4,173milliards.¹² This is equivalent to about £350million per year, an enormous sum by British standards, and indeed substantial even by the standards of other countries which are more generous in subsidising parties than is Britain. It is not difficult to imagine the scale and depth of the vested interests now embodied in such a structure of material support voted by law to parties: patronage extends far and wide, legislative bodies hardly hesitate to raise the level of the benefits enjoyed according to their own ideas of what they would like to have, and the boundaries between political activity and public service have virtually disappeared.

Moreover, this is not all as far as the effects of the system are concerned. The political class has become almost completely professionalised in the sense that its members proceed from parties, make their careers in and through parties, and depend for their livelihood more or less completely on party connections and the funds allowed to parties. Political life is fed and maintained by people who are in a very literal sense the products of parties, and usually of nothing else. In contrast, British parties as a rule absorb their active and ambitious members far less fully, nor do they have anything like the resources and opportunities to offer the kind of safe career chances available in Germany. The aspiring British politician must in some degree remain an entrepreneur, an opportunist willing and able to strike out on his own, and to engage in shaping his career according to his own judgement of what it is best for him to do. Not surprisingly these different conditions result in a different style and quality of political leadership. Even those British politicians who are temperamentally averse to risk-taking are usually forced to take at least some initiatives in order to show that they have

12. These estimates are taken from H.H. von Arnim, *Die Partei, der Abgeordnete und das Geld*, Mainz 1991. This is the most recent survey of the public funding of German parties. Whilst the author is somewhat partisan in his approach, the evidence he provides is reliable.

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Recognising the nature of the choice

The conditions which have emerged in Germany illustrate only too vividly what tendencies are likely to be encouraged by proportional voting. In summarising them it has not been my intention to criticise what has happened in Germany, but simply to point to some of the lessons of experience. Austria and Switzerland, Italy and Sweden would, *mutatis mutandis*, have served just as well as means of illustrating similar trends. Proportional representation emerged and became attractive once political parties had become firmly established. It was adopted in many countries of Europe precisely as a way of giving roughly fair treatment to the claims of all significant parties. It was not intended primarily to serve the ends of representative government or to enhance responsibility in government or even to further the ideals of political democracy. It was applied to satisfy the demands of conflicting parties and expressed the belief that support for a party takes precedence over the wider claims of citizenship. In considering the plea for proportional representation we need to be fully aware of these aspects of the underlying justification for it.

There are, of course, what might be called ameliorative possibilities. Perhaps the clearest example is the widespread use of referendum and popular initiative in Switzerland, the general effect of which is certainly to impose on parties and politicians a keener awareness of the sovereign people and its concerns than is to be found in neighbouring countries such as Germany or Austria. The occasional use of the referendum in Italy, and especially in the very recent vote in favour of some kind of electoral reform *away* from the form of PR now applied, has also served to mitigate slightly the rigours of a highly oligarchical and more or less closed network of party interests. More instructive still perhaps is the contrast between the Fourth and Fifth Republics in France. The former embodied a parliamentary regime and was strongly influenced by the proportionality principle. This encouraged numerous and often quarrelsome parties which frequently refused to cooperate with each other in government, and thus by their actions

brought about political immobility. In the Fifth Republic not only has proportionality been abandoned most of the time in favour of the traditional French two ballot system, but since 1962 the President has been elected by popular vote. Thus, though it might be held that French parties are in some respects still narrowly based and introverted organisations, institutional mechanisms have been brought into play which reinforce the need to gain popular majorities and work against the consolidation of purely party dominated oligarchies.

Finally, it is necessary to look briefly at the method of Single Transferable Vote and at threshold provisions. STV is a method of electing representatives in multi-member constituencies which seems both to guarantee something near to proportionality, i.e. fairness as between parties in the seats gained in relation to votes cast for them, and at the same time to free the voter from the constraints of party by allowing him to make a genuine choice amongst candidates on offer. A practical difficulty here is that there is hardly any experience of this system outside Ireland (and to a limited extent Australia), and in both these cases there are present strong elements of a two-party configuration. Thus STV has not on the whole worked in favour of the consolidation of a multi-party pattern simply because there was in the electorate little inclination to distribute votes in ways that might have had that effect. Indeed, so long as STV is applied in relatively small multi-member constituencies, it is open to question whether it really could have that effect even if some of the voters wanted it to work out that way. This is because in such small voting units -- say with only five or six representatives -- any two larger parties are almost certain to come away with the bulk of the seats: smaller parties may get considerable support, but not enough to secure a share of the seats available in each constituency. Moreover, the fact that second and lower preferences are re-distributed is likely to some extent to work to the advantage of the larger parties in the competition. Only if the method of STV were applied in very large constituencies, or even to a whole nation as one voting unit, might it then have the kind of rigorous proportional effects which would tend to consolidate the position of all parties, large and small, in the manner so noticeable under list systems of voting. But then, to apply STV on this scale would destroy much of its point as a means of encouraging voters to choose persons rather than parties,

quite apart from rendering it largely unworkable for the ordinary voter called upon to reach decisions on totally unmanageable lists of candidates. Yet despite these qualifications it is probably the case that a change in electoral law in Britain in favour of STV would entail less radical changes in existing political habits and expectations as well as in our constitutional understandings than would a move towards continental European models of proportional representation.

Another check on what, in some conditions, has been the fragmenting effect of a PR voting system is the introduction of thresholds, that is to say a requirement that a party must gain a prescribed minimum proportion of the total vote cast (or some portion thereof) in order to gain any representatives at all. Both Germany and Sweden have applied such measures and certainly the effect has been to make it more difficult for very small parties, usually of an extremist persuasion, to gain a foothold in the system. Israel, with its very pure form of PR, exemplifies the difficulties that can occur in the absence of such thresholds: tiny parties gain the power of blackmail over governments. Essentially threshold devices are for those who have taken the plunge into PR: they do not alter the general effects of the system, but they may mitigate its excesses.

Much more could be written about the possible and likely effects of a shift to proportional representation. But hopefully enough has been said to show that far more is at stake in the issue of electoral reform than giving smaller parties a fairer chance or, from the opposite perspective, avoiding the instability of coalition governments. Indeed, the danger is not that coalition governments would be unstable, as politicians often fear, rather that they might be eternal. The British method of choosing representatives, like the American which resembles it so much, has existed in intimate association with the institutions the country has evolved and with the values underlying its practices of representative and responsible government. If the system of choosing representatives were to be changed radically, then there are bound to be far-reaching and unpredictable consequences for the manner in which we conduct political life and maintain the government of the country. To listen to many of the protagonists of change, for example

the leaders of the Liberal Democrats,¹ is to gain the impression that they believe that electoral reforms could be carried through with little direct impact on the familiar patterns of political life. Life would go on as before, but more politicians and from more parties, would have a voice in what was to be done and, even more miraculously, more voters would feel that they had had some impact on outcomes. But this is a naive view of the matter which pays scant attention to the experience of PR in many countries. The way in which representatives are chosen is itself crucial in establishing the conditions under which the political institutions of a society operate. In the end it determines to a large extent what values are expressed in and through these institutions. Proportionality points inevitably to the closed politics of a share-out. Relative majority voting certainly has its weaknesses. But it has one great merit. It tends to induce a sense of responsibility in those who gain office: for it warns them that what they have gained, they can also assuredly lose.

1. Mr Paddy Ashdown, Leader of the Liberal Democrats, was late in 1991 reported as saying that there was really nothing he wanted to do more than to go on representing Yeovil. Yet the electoral reforms his party advocates would necessarily extinguish all prospect of his continuing to do that!

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