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Arguments against proportional representation

by Andrew M. Colman

The promoters of Proportional Representation (PR) have packaged their product and sold it to the British public so effectively that it has become the market leader without the inconvenience of any proper debate about its merits and demerits. The Labour Party is reviewing its policy on electoral systems but has already virtually committed itself to the implementation of PR for elections to its proposed Scottish assembly. Labour's review may well be influenced by the results of recent opinion polls. A MORI poll (reported in *The Independent*, 25 April 1991) showed a three-to-one-split in favour of PR for elections to the House of Commons among Labour voters, with Conservative voters evenly divided on the issue. An NOP poll (reported in *The Independent*, 24 May 1991) showed almost identical percentages of voters in favour of PR and the present first-past-the-post system. A poll by the Electoral Reform Society (reported in *The Independent*, 11 May 1991) suggested that if Labour decides to back PR there could be significant electoral swings to Labour in the South and the Midlands and one in five Liberal Democrat supporters may vote tactically for Labour in the next general election.

The smaller parties are already firmly committed to PR. Centre party activists have always been its most vociferous advocates, and it is an open secret that the National Front and the British National Party believe it would greatly increase their chances of gaining representation in Parliament, which is what neo-Fascist parties elsewhere in Europe have already achieved under PR.

Why is PR so popular? One reason may be that its proponents routinely call it electoral "reform", which tends to pre-empt the debate about whether it would really be an improvement. Paddy Ashdown and his followers have recently gone a step further by starting to call it "fair votes", which is a cruder but probably even more effective propaganda trick. But most ordinary voters are not even sure exactly what it is.

What is proportional representation?

PR is supposed to be a fairer system for electing MPs than the present first-past-the-post system, which has produced many seemingly inequitable outcomes. In the 1983 general election, to cite a notorious example, the Liberal/SDP Alliance received 25.4 per cent of the votes cast, only slightly fewer than the Labour Party which received 27.6 per cent, but won only 23 seats in the House of Commons compared to the Labour Party's 209. That election illustrated rather dramatically what often happens under the first-past-the-post system: the winning party is usually over-represented in Westminster in relation to the votes cast, and smaller parties without regionally concentrated support are usually under-represented.

Various systems of PR have been devised to ensure that the proportions of seats won by the various parties reflect the proportions of votes cast by the electors. The system that is most likely to be adopted if PR is introduced in Britain is the single transferable vote (STV), which is already used in the Republic of Ireland and several commonwealth countries. STV is a nineteenth century British invention which was strongly supported by the influential philosopher John Stuart Mill in the 1860s and has been the method of choice for most

proponents of PR in Britain and other English-speaking countries ever since. Many trade unions and other non-government organizations in the United Kingdom already use STV for internal elections.

The single transferable voting system

For electing MPs to the House of Commons, STV would require multi-member constituencies. The existing 650 constituencies would probably be amalgamated into about 150 larger constituencies, each of which would return several MPs – probably between two and seven in most cases. In a three-member constituency with ten candidates standing for election, for example, the ballot paper would list the ten candidates' names and would invite voters to write the number 1 opposite their first choice and the numbers 2, 3, and so on opposite the other names in order of preference.

The method of counting votes is rather complicated. The clever part is the very first step of working out the electoral quota, which is simply the minimum number of votes that a candidate needs to be certain of winning one of the seats in a given constituency. In a three-member constituency, a candidate who received one-quarter of the votes would be almost certain to win one of the seats, because however the remaining votes were split they could not give three other candidates more votes than one-quarter each. But it would be mathematically possible for three other candidates to receive *exactly* one-quarter of the votes each, which would produce a four-way tie. To be certain of election in a three-member constituency, a candidate needs one-quarter of the votes *plus one*; it is mathematically impossible for three other candidates to beat that. In a three-member constituency, the electoral quota is therefore one-quarter of the votes plus one.

Suppose 100,000 votes were cast in a three-member constituency. The electoral quota would be one-quarter of 100,000 plus 1, which is 25,001. By the same logic, the electoral quota in a four-member constituency is one-fifth of the votes plus one; in a five-member constituency it is one-sixth of the votes plus one, and so on. In general, if v votes are cast in an m -member constituency, the electoral quota is $v/(m + 1) + 1$.

Once the electoral quota has been calculated, the first count is carried out to see whether any of the candidates has reached it. If the electoral quota is 25,001, as in the example, then any candidate who has 25,001 or more first-preference votes on the first count is immediately declared elected. Next, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes is eliminated, and that candidate's votes are transferred to the other candidates' according to the second preferences shown on the ballot papers. The second count then takes place, and any candidate who reaches 25,001 votes is declared elected. Once again, the candidate with the smallest total number of votes is eliminated and the votes transferred to the remaining candidates according to second or third preferences and the next count proceeds. The process continues until three candidates are elected. That is the gist of the STV electoral system.

What is wrong with STV?

Unlike the German system of PR, STV offers no guarantee of proportional representation in Parliament as a whole – a rather significant shortcoming that is generally glossed over by its promoters. What it is designed to achieve is something more modest, namely rough proportionality in each individual constituency. But STV can produce alarmingly unfair results even at the constituency level.

Consider a two-member constituency with three candidates standing – one Conservative, one Labour, and one Liberal Democrat. It is possible to make some reasonable assumptions

about the voters' preferences. Let us assume that the Labour voters consider the Liberal Democrat second best and the Conservative worst; the Conservative voters consider Liberal Democrat second best and Labour worst; and the Liberal Democrat voters are split, with four-fifths preferring Labour to Conservative and one-fifth Conservative to Labour. Suppose that 10,000 voters turn out and mark their ballot papers as follows:

First preference	Lab	Con	L/D	L/D
Second preference	L/D	L/D	Lab	Con
Third preference	Con	Lab	Con	Lab
No. of voters	4,000	3,500	2,000	500

The electoral quota is $10,000/(2 + 1) + 1$, which works out as 3,334. On the very first ballot, therefore, the Labour and Conservative candidates, who both have more votes than that, are elected. The Liberal Democrat, with a total of 2,500 votes, falls by the wayside, since there are only two seats to be filled, and that is the end of the matter.

But is the outcome fair? Hardly, since a clear majority of the voters preferred the Liberal Democrat to each of the other candidates. The preference rankings in the table show that 65 per cent of the voters – all except those whose first preference was Conservative – preferred the Liberal Democrat to the Conservative candidate. Similarly, 60 per cent preferred the Liberal Democrat to the Labour candidate. Although a clear majority of the voters preferred the Liberal Democrat to each of the other candidates, the Liberal Democrat was not elected. What makes things worse is that the Conservative candidate, who *was* elected, was the most unpopular in two senses: first, a majority of voters (60 per cent) considered this candidate the worst of the three, and second, a clear majority of the voters preferred both the Labour and the Liberal Democrat to the Conservative candidate (60 per cent and 65 per cent respectively). And all of this happened under the electoral system that Paddy Ashdown considers to be synonymous with “fair votes”.

It is clear that STV can produce manifestly undemocratic results at the constituency level, but its consequences are even more worrying when viewed in a broader perspective. What would be the likely effect of STV in a general election? Nobody knows for sure, partly because a change in the electoral system would have an unpredictable effect on voting patterns. But it is possible to make some educated guesses. In the last general election in 1987, for example, the Conservatives attracted 42 per cent of the votes, Labour 31 per cent, and the Liberal/SDP Alliance 23 per cent. If the electorate had expressed the same preferences under STV, and if strict proportionality had been achieved in Westminster, then the Conservatives would have won 273 seats, Labour 202, and the Liberal/SDP Alliance 150. No party would have had an overall majority, for which 326 votes are needed. The consequence would have been a political impasse until either the Conservatives or Labour managed to form a government by doing a deal with the Liberal/SDP Alliance. Failing that, Parliament may have had to be dissolved and a new election called.

The same thing would have happened in other recent general elections. The party with the largest electoral support, whether Conservative or Labour, would have been unable to enact any legislation without the blessing of the much smaller centre party. Under the present system, the Liberal Democrats are unlikely to hold the balance of power in a hung Parliament unless the two main parties finish almost neck and neck, but under PR it could happen regularly. That prospect of a moderating and stabilizing centre party appeals to many people,

especially those with short memories and little interest in foreign politics, but the reality is less pleasant. In most recent elections, STV would probably have meant that the centre party, with only a small percentage of the popular vote, would have wielded enough power to hold Conservative and Labour governments to ransom.

This is exactly what happens in Israel, where under a form of PR extremist parties with only a handful of elected representatives in the Knesset regularly threaten to bring down the government unless their often deeply unpopular policies are implemented. The effects are hardly more encouraging in the Republic of Ireland. In the 1989 general election, held under STV, the Fianna Fail party won the largest number of seats but failed to achieve an overall majority. The party was forced to negotiate a coalition with the Progressive Democrats, who held just six seats in the Dail but demanded and secured in return for their support two full cabinet posts, which was out of all proportion with their electoral popularity.

Government coalitions held together by political protection rackets are notoriously weak and unstable. They tend to produce political paralysis and upheaval rather than fairness and tranquillity. There were no fewer than five general elections in the Republic of Ireland during the 1980s. In Italy, which uses a slightly different system of PR, coalition governments come and go with bewildering rapidity and seldom last long enough to implement any of their manifesto promises. In Britain itself, the government coalitions that have occasionally been necessary even without PR have generally been short-lived and catastrophic. The 1923 coalition culminated in the general strike, the 1929–31 one in the great depression, and the 1977–79 one in the winter of discontent.

Whether STV would be an improvement is at least debatable – though seldom debated. It could produce manifestly unfair results even at the constituency level and would be likely to result in weak and unstable government based on opportunistic pacts and cynical horse-trading.