

# Proportional Representation Must Come Now

Cawstein, 9 Thenford Road, Middleton Cheney, Banbury, OX17 2NB. (Tel:07474 572588); cawstein@gmail.com

## Conclusion

The flip-flop of UK's 2-party politics is ridiculous, and the unfairness of our First-past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system is indefensible. Though Proportional Representation (PR) will frequently result in 'hung parliaments', we know it is not beyond the genius of the average European to negotiate workable and adequately stable coalitions. Indeed, by forcing our MPs to negotiate, instead of polarising the country into 2 camps, we might work our way towards compromises that gain the support of a sizeable majority of the whole country. Britain should now adopt a form of PR. PR by **Weighted Polling** offers a simple method that requires no changes to the voting procedure for electing MPs.

## We are not Fairly Represented in Parliament.

It will be well known to all who are the least bit interested in politics that the spread of opinion in the House of Commons does not reflect the spread of opinion in the country as a whole. Parliament does not represent us fairly. Some people think this is a serious defect of our old fashioned 'first past the post' (FPTP) voting system. Others think the present voting system is good **precisely because** it favours large parties. Some others don't think.

One consequence of disproportionate representation in the House of Commons is that there can be a discrepancy between 'the will of the people' determined in a referendum, and the result of a vote on the same issue in Parliament. We saw that situation in the 3 years of political turmoil following the Brexit referendum of June 2016. Any discrepancy between parliament and country raises the question as to which to follow. However, it is by no means obvious that the popular vote should trump Parliament; many of the issues to be decided are extremely complex. What we can say is that, if parliament fairly represented opinion in the country, there would be little case for holding referendums. We could elect MPs and charge them with untangling the complex issues.

Another consequence of the present disproportional system is that the moderate parties of the **centre** (e.g. the Liberals/LibDems) get squeezed out. Similarly, small **dispersed** parties like the Greens (a significant force in Germany) are very poorly represented in the House of Commons. Does this matter? We must have a serious look at the advantages and disadvantages of the present system before we seek to change it.

## Advantages and disadvantages of 'First Past the Post' (FPTP)

The FPTP voting system favours the existence of two large parties, and thus polarises the politics of the country. As each party exists primarily to gain power, they must aim to appeal to at least half the electorate. Each party must be distinct from the other, but not so extreme as to be unelectable. Each party, when in opposition, must appear to the electorate to be a potential 'government in waiting'. This near equality suits the seating arrangements and the chummy atmosphere of the House of Commons, but leaves little role for smaller (cross-bench) parties. Most general elections happen to deliver an incisive majority for one or other of the major parties;

enough to form a stable government able to drive through unpopular policies. But is this good or bad?

Take, for example, Thatcher's victory in 1979 (Table 1). The FPTP system gave Thatcher 359 seats, Labour 261 and Liberals 9. Thatcher's government was unstopable, even if unpopular. Proportional Representation (5th column labelled '=Seats') would have produced a 'hung parliament', on issues where Liberals supported Labour.

Table 1: Voting data General Election 1979 ([Wikipedia](#)).

Party	Seats	Votes	Votes/Seat	=Seats
Conservs.	339	13,697,923	40,407	279
Labour	269	11,532,218	42,871	235
Liberal	11	4,313,804	392,164	88
Other	16	1,677,417	104,839	34
Total	635	31,221,362		635
Turnout		76%		

Or take the recent extraordinary election of December 2019 (Table 2). The Conservatives won 365 seats and Lab+LibDem+SNP only 262 seats between them. The Tories won an incisive majority in Parliament, allowing them to enact any sort of Brexit they like. But, in the country, the Anti-Tory (Lab+LibDem+SNP) vote beat the Tory vote.

Table 2: Voting December 2019 ([The Guardian](#))

Party	Seats	Votes	Votes/Seat	=Seats
Conservs.	365	13,966,565	38,265	284
Labour	203	10,295,607	50,717	209
Scot Nat	48	1,242,372	25,883	25
LibDem	11	3,696,423	336,038	75
Other	23	2,800,943	121,780	57
Total	650	32,001,910		650
Turnout		67%		

This cosy (but unfair) arrangement can occasionally go badly wrong, for example if the big parties are rather even, or if there are too many smaller parties. In that case, our parliamentary traditions are poorly suited to forming coalitions, and we flounder. In February 1974, neither Labour nor Conservative party seemed to appeal to the country, and there was a surge in support for the Liberals. However, that only won them 14 of the 635 seats then in the House, instead of the 123 MPs that would have been their fair proportion (see Table 3: =Seats). Labour won fewer votes than the Tories, but more seats, and Harold Wilson formed a Labour government.

Table 3: The election of Feb 1974 ([Wikipedia](#))

Party	Seats	Votes	Votes/Seat	=Seats
Conservs.	297	11,872,180	39,974	241

Labour	301	11,645,616	38,690	236
Liberal	14	6,059,519	432,823	123
Other	23	1,766,538	76,806	36
Total	635	31,343,853		635
Turnout		79%		

As 23 seats went to 'other parties' (such as Scottish Nationalists, Ulster Unionists, etc.) even a Lib+Lab coalition could not command a majority, and there followed 8 months of parliamentary stalemate, until an October election gave Wilson an incisive majority in the House.

This concept of an **incisive majority** cuts both ways. Govenors like incisive majorities, for it allows them to formulate a programme and get it passed into law with the minimum of trouble. But are incisive majorities good for the country? Or popular with the governed? Opposition MPs are meant to scrutinise legislation, but there is little point if passage is a foregone conclusion. Attendance in the house often dwindles to a laughable extent.

Thus, one of the disadvantages of our present system is that the winning party in the House can represent a **minority position** of the electorate as a whole. We saw in the Thatcher victory in 1979 that a policy of deliberate unemployment and 'anti-union' legislation successfully defeated the Unions. But we do not know if that was the democratic choice of the country. And the Brexit election of December 2019, will doubtless "get Brexit done" even though the anti-Tory parties have more votes.

There is a degree of **tyranny** in the assumption that a simple majority can ignore all minorities. A flagrant example of this is the notion in the Brexit camp that the 2016 referendum gave them the mandate to "get Brexit done" in spite of the fact that 48.5% of the electorate voted to remain in the European Union. Yet it is worse than that. In most cases we are governed, not by a slim majority but by a **minority**. The present Conservative government respresents 43.6% of votes cast. But turnout was only 67%, so it could be argued that they have the explicit consent of only 29% of the electorate (Table 2). Tony Blair's landslide of 2001 gave him a majority of 167 seats, but the support of only 24.16% of the electorate; and in 2001 with the support of 21.57% of the electorate. The German constitution instructs that minorities shall be fairly represented in the Bundestag, so that they can at least be heard, even when they are over-ruled. Why not in the UK also?

So, another disadvantage is the matter of '**falling turnouts**'. If your personal vote makes no difference, why bother to vote? Maybe you support Labour in a Tory constituency. Your vote is virtually thrown away, whether your candidate scored 10% or 90% of the Tory vote. Constituencies currently see all the votes of 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th parties discarded; well over 50% of votes up and down the country are counting for nothing. So-called "safe seats" also discourage voting, both for the routinely unsuccessful candidates, and the 'un-needed' surplus votes of the successful candidates.

### **Advantages of 'Proportional Representation' (PR)**

A truly proportional system meets all those objections to FPTP. (1) It meets the need for **fairness**. (2) No votes are disregarded. (3) Though the majority can still tyrannise the minority, minorities can at least be heard. (4) It might mitigate the ridiculous flip-flop nature of our politics, dominated by two main parties.

## Some disadvantages of PR.

PR has many opponents.

First, it is clear that PR will strengthen smaller parties and weaken the two 'main' parties; but is that good or bad? It is a disadvantage if you think that 2 parties offers enough choice; and this probably explains 80% of the opposition to PR. But the Green Party (e.g.) does have a valid position, not sufficiently represented by the 2 'main' parties.

It has been argued that PR gives undue negotiating power to centre parties. Harold Wilson voiced this objection; he could see a Liberal/Labour coalition turning the next year into a Liberal/Conservative coalition with the Liberals continuously in government. The prominent Tory MP Andrea Leadsom objected similarly, writing to constituents in 2017:

*“Under PR, 10% of the votes are designed to produce 10% of the seats, but not necessarily 10% of the negotiating power in the House of Commons. Indeed, a party with 10% of the seats may be in a position to wield disproportionate negotiating power.”*

However, this is a relatively simple error. Suppose the House of Commons contained 300 Tories, 280 Labour, 40 SNP members. Suppose, on a Tory motion, SNP and Labour MPs vote against, and the motion is defeated. The power that defeated the motion does not reside in the SNP portion of the opposition, it resides in all 320 opposers. The motion is only defeated when there are more MPs against the motion than for; each MP counting for one vote. We cannot fault that.

Andrea Leadsom seemed worried that centre parties in a proportional parliament have more **power** than extreme parties. But that also is a mistake. It is true that, by siding now with this main party and now with the other, LibDems might **appear frequently to win**. But no one can seriously advocate disenfranchising the moderate middle merely to give the extremes a chance to govern. It is a lunatic suggestion. Yet that is exactly what FPTP does. The bell-shaped curve of the 'Normal Distribution' shows us that in most respects and on most issues the majority **are** in the middle. And on any rational system they will win; not individually of course, but collectively, by virtue of their number.

It could be argued that a fair system, giving equal weight to each elector, will so favour the majority that it will **get stuck** in the middle. It will not be possible to break the mould, exit the European Union, nationalise the railways, break the unions. That argument has some weight. But there are clear arguments against oscillating back and forth from left to right; out, then in, then out. (1) It is unsettling. (2) It wastes enormous resources of time, energy and money. We are surely the only country in Europe that nationalised its railways, denationalised them and then proposes to renationalises them again? The only country that eschewed the European Common market, then sought entry, then sought out again? (3) Our successive incisive governments are making of us a laughing stock.

## It seem unlikely that we shall change our voting system soon.

The LibDems in coalition (in 2010) forced a referendum on changing the voting system to an **Alternative Vote** procedure; not a truly proportional one but one thought to be a 'half-way-house' towards true PR. The idea of change was defeated, and it is unlikely that there will be a new opportunity to introduce changes in the foreseeable future.

## **But we can have PR without changing our voting system.**

There are a number of different PR systems in operation in different countries, all of them more complex than our existing **FPTP in Single-Member Constituencies**. This simplicity is rightly seen, *per se*, as an advantage. So also the connection between the MP and a specific region; each voter can identify his Member of Parliament. This local connection is very nearly a complete anachronism, as it is now as easy, and clearly more productive, to contact an MP who shares your views, than a local MP who is hostile.

There is, however, a system that retains the simplicity and the local connection of the present system but renders a fully proportional representation in the House. It is tentatively called **PR by Weighted Polling**.

Look again at Table 2. It can be seen from the 4th column that each conservative member represents 38,265 votes; but each LibDem Member represents 336,038 votes; over 8 times as many. It is only necessary that, when the House of Commons divides for a vote, the party affiliations of the Members in each lobby are noted and multiplied by the appropriate numbers in the 4th column.

To apply this correction, we do not need an Act of Parliament. All we need is the [published voting behavior of each MP](#), and the above table (officially verified).

## **Advantages and Disadvantages of 'PR by Weighted Polling'**

(1) It is simple. (2) No modification of our familiar voting arrangements is necessary. (3) It retains the archaic geographical link between MPs and their constituents. (4) It is **fully proportional**; each vote in the country counts equally; none are thrown away. Middle parties and minority interest are fully represented.

On the other hand, the power structure in Parliament will be dramatically changed. There will have to be coalitions. Parties will have to get used to doing deals, and learn a whole new etiquette (how to negotiate, when to stick with an agreement, when to break.) These are things that France, Germany, Holland, Scandinavia have been doing for decades.

This whole argument depends on party loyalty. The 11 LibDem members in the House will not be compelled to vote on party lines, but they will be expected to do so, at least when 'whipped'. This may seem somewhat vague, but the expectation that various members of a party will represent the policies of that party is inherent in most forms of PR, such as the 'second vote from party list' system in Germany. And indeed in our present parliament.

This suggested scheme for **proportional representation by weighted polling** should be seriously considered, by politicians and academics.