

Briefing Note

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WHY ELECTORAL CHANGE? THE CASE FOR P.R. EXAMINED

Much of the current support for a change in the electoral system is based on inadequate awareness of the implications, in the view of a Conservative Political Centre pamphlet, "Why Electoral Change" published on 21st January 1982 (price £2 plus 20p postage and packing). The authors are Sir Angus Maude, Conservative MP for Stratford-upon-Avon and former Paymaster General, and Mr. John Szemerey, a political journalist and former Conservative councillor.

They argue that to alter our traditional electoral system would be a major and probably irreversible constitutional change. So it is not enough to assert that a new system may be better, but it must be shown conclusively that it would be better and could not in any circumstances make things worse.

The authors say: "The belief that changing institutions can solve all problems is a comforting illusion designed to avoid the need to face the hard facts of life realistically". How tough would a coalition of the Centre be? How effective would it be, for example, in achieving the last-
ing defeat of inflation?

The Main Disadvantage: Ineffective Government. The objects of any democratic process, say the authors, are to elect a government and to elect parliamentary representatives of the people. "The election of a government is clearly essential, while PR, however desirable, is not. It would seem to follow that the ideal of proportionality must not be pursued to an extent which precludes the election of an effective government". One great advantage of the present system is that it almost invariably enables a government to be formed and set to work immediately after an election.

The most serious disadvantage of PR, however, is that it is not conducive to creating a working government. It nearly always produces coalitions with small majorities, where vacillating minority parties or independents hold the balance of power. Months are sometimes lost after elections as the plethora of small parties wheel and deal, compromising policies and principles as they try to reach a parliamentary bargain to hold the coalition together. International examples are used to demonstrate how PR systems have produced unstable governments. For example, from 1946-1981 Belgium had 28 governments. In Italy - a country which, the authors note, is never mentioned as an example of PR ensuring economic success - over a similar period, there have been 41 governments. Most of these governments have been coalitions with an average term of office of just under one year. In the Netherlands (also with PR) the forming of governments over the last ten years has usually taken some six months while the parties try to hammer out a coalition bargain.

Additional Disadvantages of PR. PR systems also place real power in the hands of Party bosses who could decide which candidates should go on to a party list and their position on that list. Voters would have only a marginal voice in deciding the exact balance between the various parties. A further disadvantage is that the list system would mean electors would not have 'their MP' to whom they could go with their problems. An MP would be forced to owe his entire allegiance and seat in Parliament to the Party bosses and not to his constituency. "List MPs are prisoners of the system", claim the authors. Under this method Sir Winston Churchill would

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almost certainly not even have been a member of the House of Commons in 1940.

The list system also rules out any by-elections as MPs are replaced automatically from the list without any form of electoral consultation. "How lucky for Mr. Roy Jenkins and the Social Democrats that Britain has direct representation and not PR", claim the authors.

The Advantages of our Present System. The authors list the following:

Firstly, it produces generally effective governments with adequate working majorities whereas other systems can produce unstable coalitions. Secondly, it enables close contact between the individual and his constituency MP, whereas a PR system could break that contact by requiring multi-member constituencies. Thirdly, it enables voters to pass judgement on the performance of the government during their term of office, since the death or retirement of an MP results in a by-election rather than the automatic substitution of an unknown from the party list.

Abuses of PR. PR systems are open to various abuses, particularly by the party bosses. The automatic replacement of MPs through the party list is one example. "They sometimes put big names at the top of their list to attract votes and the big names resign without even bothering to take up their seats - to be replaced by a little known candidate half way down their party list". This was done by both the French Socialists and Giscardian Parties, where, in the European Parliamentary elections in 1979, M. Mitterrand headed his party list and resigned on a pretext without taking up his seat.

The PR system has made it easy for MPs to resign or retire, without letting down their constituents as they have no constituents. There is no risk of the party losing the seat as the next candidate on the Party list is automatically appointed to the place. In the European Parliament this has meant that in the 2½ years since they were directly elected 67 MEPs have been replaced - over 16% of all European Members and equivalent to 104 MPs at Westminster - without a single by-election.

The authors contend that if PR with national or regional lists was used in the UK, it would be a small committee of perhaps a dozen or 20 party stalwarts in each of the main parties who would effectively decide about 80% (500) of the MPs to be elected. The voters would have only a marginal influence.

Fairness? Part of the attraction for a change in the electoral system lies in the appeal to 'fairness'. "It could no doubt equally be argued that there would be nothing very fair about making a major change in the constitution to enable a party to hold a permanent balance of power in Government when it has never in 45 years succeeded in getting more than 14 candidates first-past-the-post in any General Election".

The authors consider the mixed system, such as in Germany, where half the MPs are elected by PR and the others by direct first-past-the-post voting. There, the tiny Liberal (Free Democrat) Party has held the balance of power since 1969 without having won a single seat in its own right. Another objection to this system is that it creates "first" and "second class" MPs.

Onus of Proof. The authors conclude: "One is left with the feeling that, although all these electoral systems have some good points, on balance they are no better than direct representation and most are considerably worse". Our present system has produced governments with a comfortable parliamentary majority in 12 of the 17 general elections over a period of 60 years. It is necessary, they believe, before the need for change is accepted, that the "reformers" should produce a precisely detailed system designed not only to provide for the UK's special regional and other problems, but to eliminate all risk of the corruption, gerrymandering and political instability of other systems.