

# Conservative Research Department

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*Chisholm*

KB/sgc

Director: ALAN HOWARTH

Mr Ian Gow, TD., MP  
House of Commons  
London SW1

16th March 1981

*Dear Ian,*

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION - MR P.E. HACKLEY

Thank you for your letter of 12th March 1981. As requested I enclose photo-copies of the material I sent to Mr Hackley. The Research Department is currently in process of reviewing the various anti-PR arguments in light of the possible emergence of a Social Democratic Party.

*Yours sincerely,*

*Kevin*

D. K. Britto

Enc.

1920s that they did have the chance of forming a minority government.

Mr. Wigram has told us that the electorate are not fools. They may be pig ignorant on 90 per cent of the major issues on which one consults them on the doorstep, but they have a certain shrewdness; and their shrewdness will lead them to conclude that if we in the Conservative Party are now talking at this late stage of the day about electoral reform and proportional representation, then perhaps we also like the Liberal Party of the 1920s have concluded that we cannot really hope to form again a majority government of this nation.

I am not saying that this is the intention of Mr. Wigram and any of his friends in CAER. I am saying that this may well be the conclusion drawn by the electorate from their activities at the present time.

Perhaps we do think we are going to fail. It is not a crime to discuss objectively whether or not the party has the possibility of forming the next majority government of this nation. Let us look at it entirely dispassionately.

Perhaps it is thought that we cannot govern because of the threat of trade union power, the situation almost of dual power in this country, when Parliament is confronted by the massed ranks of the Trade Union Congress under militant direction. Or perhaps it is thought we cannot work out a programme in which industry has a framework in which to function because all stability is discarded. Perhaps it is even thought, rude though the suggestion may be, that we have not quite got the personnel up to the standard to compose such a government. Let us answer these objections.

Are we going to answer them by going into some kind of a quadrille dance, with a Liberal caucus consisting of 15 or so disparate entities liable to fly apart in 15 different directions, despite even the fact that a Lancashire hot-pot is at this moment under construction in the Liberal Whips' Office? Are we going to coalesce with a group of Labour moderates, whose moderation is in fact attested to by the radicalism with which they attack the education field, the medical field and so many of the fields of the Labour Government? Our task is not to coalesce with such people—it is to eat them up, and we shall do so. We shall win the confidence of the majority of the people of this country if, as Sir Keith said yesterday, we draw the middle man back towards us by stating the contrapuntal programme to militant Socialists by putting forward a clear Conservative capitalist programme which will draw towards us the middle ground, and break the ratchet, and put us in power with a bigger majority than ever since 1931.

**MR. L. HAVARD-DAVIES (Brecon and Radnor):** I do not believe any one in this Conference will disagree with me when I say we, the Tories, do not govern the country on a weekly basis. Our policies are designed to see us through the present crisis and see the country on its way beyond the crisis.

I want to urge you to throw this Motion out, because in accepting this Motion the Conference would be accepting a motion that would tie the hands of the next Tory Government, and my concern deals with the procedures we will

adopt to elect Members of the coming Welsh Assembly. I do not want to enter into an argument about the merit or demerit of the Welsh Assembly this afternoon. I would agree possibly the British Isles is really made up of four differing nations, and it might well be that we want four assemblies. After all, it is said we have our distinct characteristics. It is said that a Scotsman is a man who will throw his bread on the water when the tide is coming in. Certainly, the Englishman is a self-made man who worships his own creator. I would say that the Irishman is a man who does not know what he wants but is prepared to die for it.

I would not argue against people that we, the Welsh, like to pray on our knees and sometimes on our English neighbours. Let there be no question that the setting up of a Welsh Assembly will be the first step along the road which must inevitably end up with complete self-government for Wales. There can be no question about that. What should concern this Conference is how that government will be composed.

It is a fact that more people live in the old county of Glamorgan than in the rest of Wales. It is a fact that the majority of those people vote Socialist, and in accepting this resolution it would mean that we would virtually be living in Wales under a Socialist Government for the foreseeable future. Is there anybody that would deny that not the least of our problems across the Irish Sea is that a majority lived for 50 years under a Tory Government? We in Wales would face the prospect of living for 50 years under the Socialist Government.

I know that it must appeal to the majority of you at this Conference, the prospect of an England that is forever Tory, but you can only bring that about at the expense of selling your colleagues, we the Welsh Tories, down the river. I will tell you this: if you accept this Motion, if you make it necessary for the Tory Government to modify our present system, then you will commit Wales to real conflict, to real anxiety.

#### MR. MAUDE'S SPEECH

**MR. ANGUS MAUDE, TD, MP (Joint Deputy Chairman of the Party Organisation):** I am and have been for some time rather more accustomed to addressing this Conference from down there. It feels a little strange to be up here, but we are all old friends, and I hope you will listen to me with the courtesy you used to show me when I was so far away it seems, and yet so near.

This debate that we have been listening to is really one of the most important we have had in this Conference, and I personally am delighted that the National Union officers in their wisdom saw fit to put the heading on this in the agenda, not of "Electoral Reform" but "Electoral Change". I think we should all be wise to think in future rather of changes in the electoral system than about electoral "reform", which is a half-emotional and slanted term.

We have all listened to Mr. Wigram and the other advocates of electoral change, and I do not think the advocates of change can claim that they have not had a good run for their

money over the last few months. They have had all the publicity. We have not had a chance to listen to the effective arguments of the other side, which have scarcely been put. Now there has been published just a couple of days ago by Mr. Wigram a mammoth book by distinguished academics. I congratulate Mr. Wigram on his genuine public spirit in arranging the publication of this book and leaving complete editorial freedom and freedom of writing to these gentlemen. I am bound to say the conclusions singularly fail to advance his own cause.

We have read this and we have listened, and of course we will go on listening to the advocates of electoral change. We have in the Conservative Research Department already done a great deal of very detailed homework on this, and a lot of careful statistical analysis of systems in other countries, and we shall continue to do this. I am bound to say at the moment nothing has convinced us there is not, as the promoters of this Motion say, in almost every system the risk of ineffective minority government.

The movers of this resolution and their supporters say, "But we have an ineffective minority government now." However, you do not make major constitutional changes to try to put right a particular political situation at one particular moment in time.

Moreover, since clearly every system would be bound to produce a coalition, generally at the whim or will of the Liberal Party, what is being advocated is minority government—a situation in which the Conservative Party and probably the Labour Party could never hope to form another government unaided.

As to the question of a Speaker's Conference I do not want to spend any time on this at all because our position is plain. In the October 1974 General Election manifesto we committed ourselves to the setting up, if we were returned to power, of a Speaker's Conference. We understand that a Government Minister has given what amounts to a pledge that the present Government will set one up in this parliament. If this should just happen to be one of those pledges which the Labour Government should honour we would support it and take part in the Conference, so we need not argue about a Speaker's Conference. Indeed, I must say I think it impossible there should not within the next few years be a Speaker's Conference on electoral matters anyway, because there are so many matters besides changes in the voting system which need to be considered, and which we would want to consider and indeed to have changed.

Let me turn to some of the arguments for change which have been advanced. There is first the argument of fairness, particularly fairness to Liberals, with which Mr. Avery dealt. I have seen the ORC poll in which the question is asked, "Do you think the present system is fair?"—fair in the round and abstract and fair to the Liberals. Anybody who asks the kind of questions that were asked in that poll will get predictable answers. I suggest there would be a certain interest in putting the question another way round. I would like to ask whether it is self-evidently fair to make a major con-

stitutional change now with the deliberate intention of awarding 100 extra seats in the House of Commons to a party that has never since 1935 succeeded in getting more than 20 candidates first past the post in any general election. I am not sure that is self-evidently fair. It is said, "There are 6 million Liberals in the country represented by only 14 Members of Parliament." That is a question-begging assumption. First of all, are there 6 million Liberals in this country? I suggest there are certainly not; there never were before 1974. What there are are probably 2 million plus Liberals and 4 million or so people who were temporarily disenchanted with both major political parties. It can be argued that our job is not to change the constitution to deal with that temporary situation but to do something about restoring faith in at least one of the major political parties.

There is in the fairness argument the question of wasted votes, and I know it would be foolish to ignore the fact there are in this hall numbers of delegates who come from constituencies where their votes have never returned Conservative Members of Parliament and in some cases never will. But I regard it as an insult to say that their votes and their work are wasted. Every extra vote you win in those constituencies goes to swell the total of Conservative votes, which is impressive and effective abroad as well as at home. The work you do in those constituencies draws off the Labour and Liberal effort, workers and money from the marginal constituencies that they would otherwise, without your fight, hope to win.

Another argument we are told about is the national interest argument—that Britain is in thrall to a Left-wing minority and a change in the system will put this right: but would a change in the system necessarily change this? I shall discuss this a little more, but first I want to deal briefly with the third argument, that the voters' choice is frustrated and we do not get a fair reflection of the votes of the millions of people in this country.

Let us look at some of the other systems. What happens only too often abroad in systems of proportional representation is that the voters make their choice but this is not reflected in the government that is ultimately formed, because the choice is transferred from the hustings to wheeling and dealing in smoke-filled rooms between parties manoeuvring for jobs in a coalition cabinet. In that case political pacts and deals determine the government, not the choice of the voters.

I would like briefly to look at one or two of the foreign systems which have been held up to us from time to time as examples, and in dealing with the different systems I am bound to say I have been extraordinarily affected by the *inso-uciance*, if not light-mindedness, of some of the advocates of electoral change in dealing with systems they purport to recommend. It is not so long ago that a distinguished professor wrote to *The Times* to the effect that he had all his life been an advocate of one particular system of proportional representation and had come to the conclusion that this would not work and decided that a different system would be better. But he said that the really essential

thing was to get a commitment now to change the system and then decide what would be the particular system most likely to suit our needs. This is equivalent to saying that Parliament is not working awfully well and we must have a commitment to abolish it now and then decide what should take its place and govern the country. It seems to me to be an argument and attitude of quite extraordinary irresponsibility.

We are also told that the attitudes of voters have changed and therefore the system must adapt itself, but we are never told precisely to what system we must change. We cannot commit ourselves to a major constitutional change unless we know precisely to what we are being asked to change and have at least some guess as to what effect it would have on the future government of this country.

Just take a look at some of the systems. What the Liberals want is real proportional representation and they will be satisfied with very little else. One of the choices under proportional representation is that you treat the whole country as one constituency and you vote for a list of party candidates put out by the party machines and headquarters. Frankly, even in my role as Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party I am not prepared to go for any system which puts the choice of candidates more closely under the control of the central party machines in London. If you do not go for a complete list system it is certain you cannot get true proportionality, which in the abstract would be described as true fairness, with less than five-Member constituencies—constituencies so large as to be represented by at least five Members of Parliament.

Now, this would of course upset completely the traditional and existing relationship between Members of Parliament and their constituents. I know it is possible to exaggerate this. I know it is true that in any constituency at any time there will be up to half the people there who do not know the name of their Member of Parliament; but I will say without fear of contradiction that the Member of Parliament is the last resort for the citizen frustrated and bewildered by the complexities of modern life and the bureaucracy; the M.P. in his own constituency within reach is the last resort to whom he or she can go to sort out the pension problem, the planning problem, or whatever it may be. If now, at this time, you destroy that relationship you leave, I believe, the individual much more vulnerable both to the bureaucracy and to the over-large administrative units with which he is now confronted.

There is also the system of the alternative vote. I do not propose to say much about this—it is the system used in the Australian House of Representatives elections—because the last word on this was said by Sir Winston Churchill, who described it as "the worst of all possible plans, in which the decision is to be determined by the most worthless votes given to the most worthless candidates."

What I think most of the Conservative advocates of electoral change would like to see, the compromise on which they come down, is some kind of a mixed system as in Germany, the single transferable vote with a supplementary list: a proportion of the members

elected by the 'first past the post' system and the proportion topped up from a central party list. This gives us first and second class M.P.s at Westminster. You would have four hundred Members of Parliament representing rather larger constituencies than we do now and carrying the whole burden of the day-to-day constituency correspondence and surgeries and local events, and then two hundred happily carefree individuals swanning around at Westminster making political speeches and no doubt, because they are there more often, having a wholly disproportionate effect on the policies which the party decides. Remember also, that those 200 would have been chosen by the party machines themselves.

Now, the fact is that experience abroad, as the authors in Mr. Wigram's book mostly conclude, is inconclusive in general and the results of the systems if they were transferred over here are unpredictable. Despite what Mr. Bradley said during the debate, a coalition is the most likely result of any system to which we could now change, and the examples of political stability which used to be held out to us have had the shine worn off them a little of late. We were always told that Holland was a shining example of political stability under a complete list system; and so it was, until 1965, after which it totally failed to adjust to and cope with major social changes in Holland, culminating at the end of 1972 in a period of six months between the holding of a general election and the decision which enabled the Government to take office at The Hague. It was six months before they could even choose a government after the election. Do we really think that the United Kingdom in present circumstances could stand that sort of delay, of political wheeling and dealing without a government? The same has happened in Denmark; it was stable until 1973 and after that—chaos. Sweden, a shining example, has had 40 years of Socialist government and now has the kind of society which might conform to Mr. Roy Jenkins's description of "the civilised society" but is perhaps not one that anyone in this hall would wish to recommend or pass on to his children.

Why do we want electoral change? Is it not a logical fallacy that because Germany has a different system that is why things in Germany seem to work better than they do here at the moment? Is it because of proportional representation or is it perhaps because the German people have a different attitude towards work, towards industrial investment, and have non-politically motivated trade unions. Finally, let me ask what are the real reasons, conscious or sub-conscious, which motivate people to demand changes in the electoral system, changes in the Constitution? Is it perhaps as David Robertson suggested, that what they are really looking for is an easy option? They want something which will make the difficulties vanish: change the rules and the problems will change with them. There will be no need to say or do unpopular things, no need to soldier on through temporary unemployment and wage restraint, to cut government expenditure, to reform the social services. Would changing the electoral system make this easier?

Is not the only answer to find the men and women who have the courage and resolution to do this under whatever system and then to go through with it?

Or do perhaps these people just lack confidence in the ability of our own Party to win? Is it that they think the Conservative Party cannot win an election and could not govern effectively if it did? Now, if you do not believe that the Tory Party, under new leadership, coming to the next election with practical policies to save the country and with the courage and resolution to carry them through; if you do not believe that the Tory Party can win and can govern, then in God's name what are we all doing here now in this hall at this Conference? Why are you all sweating away in your constituencies raising money, holding meetings, selecting candidates, if you do not think we can win and we can govern?

Because if it were true that the Tory Party cannot win and could not govern then the situation of our country would be tragic indeed. I believe that only the Conservatives, untrammelled and unhindered by the compromises of the Left Centre, have the ability and the resolution to halt the slide of our economy and restore the citizens' faith in Parliament and in the future of British society. As far as I can see no change in the electoral system will make it more likely that we should win or that we could govern, and most systems would make it less likely.

I ask you, then, to carry this Motion because it is your confidence and your resolution which are in question today. We on this platform are utterly convinced that with your support we can prevail. So listen to the siren voices; by all means listen to them, but then let us sail on unswervingly to the victory we deserve and can win.

*The Motion was put to the Conference and carried by a very substantial majority.*

## HOMES AND LAND

**MR. T. BALDRY (Brighton, Kemp Town)**  
moved:

**"This Conference condemns the Government's present housing record as shameful; and demands that the dogmatic and costly policies of municipalisation and the Community Land Bill be dropped immediately, and that the resources so saved should be redirected and spent on generating the building of new units of accommodation, encouraging people to buy their own homes and constructively assisting in areas of urban deprivation."**

No issue shows more simply and clearly the Government's inability to deal with reality and their determination to put doctrinaire desires of socialism before the good of the community than does the question of housing, that simple task of trying to ensure that everyone has a decent home. Throughout Britain there is a continuing need for new houses and new homes. At this moment there are considered to be one million houses that are unfit for human habitation, and yet what do we find? We find that last year was the worst year for housing since

the early 1950s, and that this year is going to be only marginally better; that every day this year four more building firms are forced into liquidation or bankruptcy; that there are 150,000 building workers in the dole queue and more men are joining that queue daily; and that there are nearly 500 million bricks stockpiled which is enough to build 50,000 homes.

The facts are simple. The need for homes is there. The men who want to build them are there. The bricks are there. Yet we find bankruptcy, redundancy and stagnation. Of course no one is pretending that in a period of economic recession such as we are at present suffering, that the building industry would be totally spared. What one is hoping and what one could expect is that the Government would make some small effort to try to ensure a reasonable flow of work for builders and not to make their task any more difficult. There seems to be a conspiracy to do just that, to make the task of the builders more difficult. Mrs. Castle introduces her levy on the self-employed; Mr. Healey introduces the Capital Transfer Tax; Mr. Foot introduces the Employment Protection Bill; and Mr. Crosland introduces the Community Land Bill.

With house builders being squeezed in so many directions by socialism, the wonder is not that so few homes are being built but that builders have confidence to build any homes at all. Indeed, the housing record of this Government is shameful: shameful in their figures; shameful because they have made no attempt to provide a relatively stable situation for house builders; and shameful because they are using those scarce resources they do have to pursue costly and doctrinaire policies such as municipalisation and the Community Land Bill.

This year and last local authorities have spent £3 million on municipalisation. That is the taking of thousands of existing and new houses as the property of the State. To what end? How many homes has municipalisation created? Ten thousand? No. One thousand? No. One hundred? No. The simple answer is that municipalisation has not created one new unit of accommodation that was not already there. Labour controlled local authorities have been spending millions of pounds of ratepayers' money on municipalisation projects, throwing it away as if it were confetti at a wedding, to no positive end, except that it is another step forward in their ambition to see that everybody has the State as their landlord. Our money, taxpayers' money, ratepayers' money is being spent not to build new houses, but to satisfy Socialist dogma. It is that self-same lust for socialism that is behind the Community Land Bill.

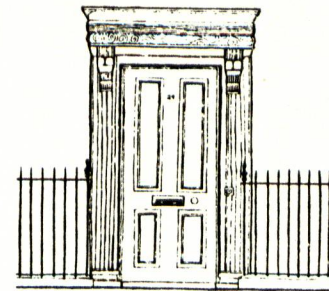
The stated purpose of the Community Land Bill is to return to the community the profits arising from the community's efforts over land, and no one would doubt that profits made from land should be fairly taxed. Let there be no mistake, that end could be achieved in a far less costly and cumbersome method, by a simple extension of present taxes. The real motive behind the Community Land Bill is to nationalise every acre of development land in this country. And if the State owns the land,

# POLITICS TODAY

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## Electoral Change

David Nicholson



OLD QUEEN STREET PAPER

Conservative Research Department

### The Author

David Nicholson held an Open Exhibition in Modern History at Christ Church, Oxford, and graduated with first class honours in 1965. He served for two years in what is now the Department of Employment, and did research at the London School of Economics into the Protectionist Lobby in the Conservative Party in the 1920s. He joined the Conservative Research Department in January 1972 and is now Head of its Political Section. He is also joint editor of the diaries and letters of the late L. S. Amery, which will be published shortly.

Mr Nicholson wishes to acknowledge the advice and assistance of a number of his colleagues in the preparation of this Paper, in particular Mr James Douglas, O.B.E., and Mr Keith Britto.

*The views put forward in this Paper are those of the author alone and do not constitute an official Party statement. It is hoped that they will stimulate wider understanding and discussion on this subject.*

## INTRODUCTION

There is growing evidence of a widespread questioning in those countries which are still governed by parliamentary democracy of the workings of their particular political systems. Factors such as the world-wide inflation of the early 1970s, the recession resulting partly from the drastic increase in the price of fuel in 1974-5, the growth of separatist "nationalist" movements and the use by various political groups of "direct action" or even terrorist methods of protest may all have contributed to this increased dissatisfaction. Parliamentary democracy does not seem in recent decades to have commended itself to most of the newly independent nations in Africa and Asia, nor to the older "third world" countries in Latin America.

For long, there existed confidence that Britain, with the oldest parliamentary democracy, enjoyed for that reason advantages denied to other countries, especially on the Continent, which only adopted parliamentary constitutions over the past 150 years. As G. M. Trevelyan wrote: "In the sphere of pure politics Britain is famous as the mother of Parliaments. In answer to the instincts and temperament of her people, she evolved in the course of centuries a system which reconciled three things that other nations have often found incompatible—executive efficiency, popular control and personal freedom."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "A Shortened History of England", Penguin Books (1959), p. 13.

There has however recently been increased criticism of aspects of the British political system.

*First, it is argued that the system has become overloaded.* In the nineteenth century the primary responsibilities of government were the administration of law, the preservation of order, foreign policy and defence, now carries the burden of responsibility in almost every sphere of national life. Over the past twelve years, in particular, people have looked increasingly to Government to resolve their problems and provide for their needs. Dissatisfaction with the results has led to dissatisfaction with the system. It has become more difficult for Parliament to control centres of power outside the Government, in particular the trade unions.

*Secondly, as a result, the authority of successive British Governments has been questioned.* Trade union pressures caused a Labour government to drop proposed legislation on "In Place of Strife" in 1969, and trade union resistance to the Conservative Government's Industrial Relations Act deprived that legislation of much of its effect, while the National Union of Mineworkers was victorious in conflicts with the Government over two pay claims in 1972 and 1974. Local authorities have also defied the authority of central government, and, in the case of the Clay Cross councillors, were encouraged by the Government's political opponents, and later indemnified by them.

*Thirdly, it is argued that the British "two-party" system is showing decreasing effectiveness.* This system is characterised by successive governments being drawn from one or other of the two main parties, and usually possessing overall majorities in the House of Commons. Its critics point to the fact that in successive elections since the War the percentage of the electorate voting for the Conservative and Labour parties has been steadily declining. For eight months in 1974, Britain had its first minority government since 1931, and the present Labour Government has an overall majority in the Commons of only one.

*Fourthly, it is also said that the "two-party" system has displayed what is sometimes called a "centrifugal tendency",* by which the election programmes, legislation and general attitudes of the two main parties become increasingly doctrinaire, militant and polarised and increasingly alienated from the majority of "moderate" voters.

That these criticisms are now made should not come as a surprise, for few western countries have experienced such relative economic failure and decline in international prestige since 1945 as Britain. However, others have argued that these failures may be linked with the very nature of the British system.

## THE BRITISH ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Britain's constitutional development is unique. Our parliamentary democracy is not based on a written constitution, often produced quite recently, as in the case of France, Germany, Italy and Japan. The British

"constitution", consisting of Monarchy, House of Lords and elected House of Commons, is the oldest in the world, evolving gradually since the early Middle Ages. While the powers of these three parts and the franchise have changed over the centuries, there has never been a comprehensive "re-write" of the system, and much of it long antedates the development of political parties.

Thus, whereas the electoral systems of most other countries are designed to reflect quite closely the respective electoral support given to their various political parties, that has never been the main objective in Britain. Contested elections for seats in the Commons are recorded as early as the 16th Century, and the results were determined in the simplest possible way, with the person (or more often persons) with most votes being awarded the victory. The system thus grew up while contests were between individuals, and even when the Party system developed in the 17th Century it remained almost unquestioned, with one or two significant exceptions, until the start of the 20th Century.

With the rise of the Labour Party challenging the electoral support of the two older parties, there was for a time extensive support for electoral change, following the report of a Speaker's Conference in 1916, which recommended proportional representation. A majority of Liberal and Labour MPs and a minority of Conservative MPs supported electoral change in principle, but their disagreements over which particular system to support ensured that no effective action was taken in the years after 1916. In 1924 the Conservatives obtained a large majority in the House of Commons and became more strongly opposed to change.

After the election of the second Labour Government in 1929, dependent, like the first one in 1924, on Liberal support, a Bill to establish the alternative vote was introduced. This followed a pact between the Liberals and the Labour Government, by which, according to the memoirs of Philip Snowden (then Chancellor of the Exchequer),<sup>1</sup> the Liberals agreed to keep Labour in power for two years. This bill passed the Commons but was lost with the fall of the Labour Government in August 1931.

This was the last occasion on which the Labour Party supported electoral change. In 1945 when, for the first time, Labour came to power with a working majority, they were disinclined to change the electoral system which had given them such a sweeping victory. Although a Speaker's Conference on voting reform was set up by the Labour Government of 1964, the only MP to support electoral change was Mr Eric Lubbock (now Lord Avebury), the sole Liberal representative.

<sup>1</sup> *An Autobiography*, by Philip, Viscount Snowden. Ivor Nicholson and Watson, London (1934), Vol. II, pp. 884-88.

## PRESENT POSITION OF THE PARTIES

The present Government's approach to the subject was indicated by Mr Roy Jenkins, the Home Secretary, who told the Commons on 30th June 1975:

"The Prime Minister hopes shortly to institute consultations between the Leaders of the Parties about reconvening a Speaker's Conference. One of the matters for consideration will be whether such a Conference should examine the question of electoral reform" (*Hansard*, WA, Cols. 338-9).

The Conference has not yet been reconvened.

### Conservative

At the 1975 Conservative Party Conference, Mr Angus Maude, Joint Deputy Chairman of the Party, said that if the present Government set up a Speaker's Conference on the subject of electoral change, "we would support it and take part in the Conference". Mr Maude expressed scepticism as to the hopes vested in electoral change, and urged the Conference to support a Motion opposing changes that would make either voting more complicated or minority government more likely. The support given to this Motion by the Conference, and other evidence of opinion in the Party, show that the vast majority of the Party's active supporters oppose such a drastic and permanent change, that would effectively prevent the Party from ever again being able to form a government otherwise than in coalition with other parties.

However, a small group of Conservative peers, MPs, and other supporters and constituency workers, including certain prominent figures in industry and finance, support electoral change. Many of these subscribe to a group called Conservative Action for Electoral Reform, which was set up shortly after the General Election of February 1974. The result of this election was the immediate cause of the renewal of interest in electoral change: it gave the Conservatives four *fewer* seats than Labour in Parliament, with 226,000 *more* votes, and it enabled Labour, despite its most Left Wing programme since the War, to take office (though with 17 seats short of an overall majority in Parliament) with the support of only 37 per cent of the total vote. In October, Labour obtained a slender overall majority with only 39 per cent of the total vote. Some Conservatives would thus seem to support electoral change above all because, they argue, it would normally give the Labour Party only a minority of seats in Parliament and would enable the Conservatives to govern through a "grand coalition of the centre" with the Liberals, and possibly with some of the Social Democrats in the Labour Party. There are three other reasons why some Conservatives, in particular, support electoral change.

They argue that:

(a) It would enable the Government to be elected with broader electoral support than in recent years, which would enable it to deal more easily with militant trade unions.



(b) Such a "coalition of the centre" would avoid the lack of continuity in Government policies, especially economic and industrial policy, which has acted as a deterrent to investment and growth in Britain.

#### Labour

The Labour Party has kept a low profile on the subject, and there are only two recent Ministerial statements which can be traced. One is that of **Mr Fred Mulley**, Secretary of State for Education and Science, and Chairman of the 1975 Labour Party Conference, who, referring to the British system, told the Conference delegates: "I shall need a lot of persuasion before I would want to change it" (Blackpool, 29th September 1975).

The second statement was a reply to a House of Lords debate on Proportional Representation on 23rd April 1975 by **Lord Harris of Greenwich**, Minister of State at the Home Office. He indicated that "there would be some significant difficulties" in the operation of a proportional representation system, and listed the increased size of constituencies, the probable breaking of the single-member/constituency link, and the difficulty of choosing between several alternatives suggested. Since such a system would almost certainly require a coalition, "the electorate could not know at the time of the election what programme or policies such a coalition might follow", and if such a government lost the confidence of the country, "there might be difficulties at a subsequent general election for the electorate to express their views effectively by means of their votes" (*Hansard*, House of Lords, 23rd April 1975, Cols. 943-5).

#### The Minority Parties

The Liberals, with 13 MPs at present, are the only minority party in Parliament with more than 10 MPs to support electoral change. Their October 1974 manifesto showed them favouring "the single transferable vote in multi-member constituencies." The Scottish Nationalists and Ulster Unionists, with 21 MPs at present, are not in favour of change. Plaid Cymru, with 3 MPs, supports electoral change, but has given no indication of which system it favours, apart from expressing a desire to retain single-member constituencies.

#### ADVANTAGES OF THE PRESENT ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Our present system consists of 635 single-member constituencies, in each of which the candidate who receives the greatest number of votes cast is elected. It is generally known as the "plurality" or "first past the post" system. Those who believe that this system should not be changed would argue that its advantages are as follows:

(1) By magnifying the representation in the Commons of the parties with the greater number of votes, the British system normally gives the winning party an overall majority there. It thus usually avoids the need

for coalition or for minority government and helps to prevent the fragmentation of political parties which would lead to instability. Since 1924, the only minority governments have been the Labour Governments of 1929-31 and of March-October 1974, and most governments have had overall majorities of over 12.

(2) It gives the electorate the power to choose the government directly, instead of the choice being determined by horse-trading between the parties in the House after the elections, in which Manifesto commitments would be distorted or even dropped.

(3) Although Parliament is not designed to act as a precise mirror image of opinion, the British system normally ensures that small shifts of opinion result in relatively larger shifts of seats. A party will lose seats if it alienates a relatively small number of supporters or potential supporters.

(4) Under a two party system, both main parties have to seek to attract votes from the other party and uncommitted voters. It is thus in their interest to strive to adopt and maintain moderate rather than more militant or doctrinaire policies. In a multi-party system, which would be almost inevitable under proportional representation, each party would be more likely to seek to emphasise its distinctive features and its differences from other parties, as happened for example under the French Fourth Republic.

(5) The present system is widely known and accepted by the British public and seems simple compared to other systems.

(6) The principle of the single-member constituency is now fairly deeply established, although prior to the twentieth century two member seats were common. Even with two-member seats there was more identification with the individual member than would be the case with, say, five member seats. At a time when more and more people are finding the administration of central and local government and the social services remote and complicated, the constituency MP, with his more detailed knowledge of local conditions and local officials, can still act as a link between the individual citizen and the public authorities.

(7) It normally ensures the exclusion from Parliament of small extremist parties, who might, under a proportional system, be able to obtain a foothold there by obtaining a small percentage of votes in a number of seats. For example, on the strength of the votes actually polled, both the Communists in 1945 and the National Front in October 1974 might have obtained three seats each. Their totals might have been higher still, as they would have had an incentive to field more candidates, and as voters would not have been deterred from voting for them by the argument that they were "wasting" their votes. In Italy, by comparison, the neo-Fascist MSI in 1972 had 56 seats in the Assembly. In Germany, the neo-Nazi

NPD was obtaining between 7 and 10 per cent of the vote in State elections in 1966-8, but economic recovery helped to reduce its strength to 4.3 per cent in the 1969 general election. With an additional 0.7 per cent—thus breaking the “barrier” (see p. 129)—they would have secured up to 24 seats.

### SOME ALTERNATIVES TO THE PRESENT SYSTEM

The main alternatives advocated by the supporters of electoral change are described below, and their comparative advantages and disadvantages are examined:

#### 1. Single Transferable Vote System in Multi-Member Constituencies

This system, which is used in the Irish Republic, is the one favoured by the Liberal Party, according to their October 1974 Manifesto. The country would be divided into constituencies each of which would return several members. The second preferences given to all candidates who receive more than the quota of votes required to elect them are taken into account, as well as the second preferences of those who voted for candidates coming bottom of the poll.

The principal advantages claimed for the system are:

- (a) It can allocate seats to each party very nearly in proportion to their votes.<sup>1</sup>
- (b) It requires only one ballot (as opposed to other systems of proportional representation).
- (c) Existing arrangements for the selection of candidates could be applied with much bigger constituencies.

The main alleged disadvantages are:

- (a) It would most probably lead to a fragmented multi-party system. The fact that this has not yet happened in Ireland is more a result of Irish history than of the working of the system.
- (b) The principle of the single-member constituency would be lost, since to achieve nearly proportional representation, at least four- or five-member constituencies would be required. Without enlarging the size of the House of Commons this would mean contemplating constituencies containing a quarter of a million voters.
- (c) It encourages competition between candidates of the same party by

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<sup>1</sup> However, in Ireland, it has generally given the largest parties higher proportions of seats than their shares of the votes, and has penalised the smaller groups (see “Disproportionality in a Proportional Representation System: The Irish Experience” by Michael Gallagher, *Political Studies*, December 1975.) In 1969, for example, the Irish Labour Party, with 17 per cent of the vote, obtained only 12.5 per cent of the seats, while Fianna Fail, Mr Jack Lynch’s party, obtained 52.1 per cent of the seats with only 45.7 per cent of the votes.

making it as important to do well against one another as against candidates of other parties. (Some people argue this as an advantage, but it may well exacerbate tensions inside *all* parties, and thus increase political instability.)

#### 2. The West German Hybrid of Single Member Constituencies and a List System.

Under this system (which is understood to have considerable support in the Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government and among the members of Conservative Action for Electoral Reform), the country would be divided into single-member constituencies (slightly larger than under our present system) and there would also be party lists for the main regions of the country (see Alternative 4: List systems, on p. 130). Each voter would have two votes: one for the candidate in his constituency who is elected on the “first past the post” system, and one for the party list for the region in which the constituency lies.

The members elected for single-member constituencies, however, account for only half the members of the West German Bundestag. The number of seats which each party has won by this method is deducted from the total to which it is entitled and the remainder is filled from the party lists. In addition, the West German system has a “barrier clause” to prevent the proliferation of small (often extremist) parties which had taken place under the Weimar Republic. At present, the barrier clause eliminates from the allocation of seats at Länder level those parties failing to gain at least 5 per cent of the vote in the whole country, or at least three single-member constituencies.

The advantages claimed for this system are:

- (a) It achieves almost complete proportional representation.
- (b) It would partially preserve the principle of single member/constituency relationship.
- (c) A candidate who, like certain “moderate” MPs in the British Labour Party, is “sacked” by his constituency party from a single-member seat, would be able to remain in Parliament by nomination to the party’s central or regional list of candidates. (If this system were adopted in Britain, however, it is likely that selection of Labour candidates for party lists would be by Transport House, which notably refused to interfere with the “sacking” of Mr Eddie Griffiths by his constituency party in Sheffield, Brightside in September 1974, or with that of Mr Prentice in Newham North-East.)

The alleged disadvantages are:

- (a) It could lead to a fragmentation of parties, although this has not yet happened in Germany.
- (b) It creates two classes of MP. Some people have argued that the

member returned by the constituency enjoys greater status in German politics than one elected from a party list.

(c) It gives extra power to the central machines of the parties in relation to the candidates appearing on the list.

(d) The same extremist parties which might be specifically excluded by a barrier clause might use unconstitutional methods in reaction to what they might allege was constitution-rigging.

### 3. The Alternative Vote System

This has some supporters in Britain, as it requires single-member constituencies which could be the same as the present ones. A candidate is elected if he obtains an overall majority (50 per cent or more) of the votes cast in that constituency. Otherwise the candidate(s) coming bottom of the poll is eliminated and his votes reallocated amongst the remaining candidates according to the voters' second preferences until one candidate receives an overall majority.

The principal advantage put forward for this system is that it involves rather fewer changes than most of the other systems.

The main alleged disadvantage is that it would not achieve proportionality and might produce quite as "unfair" or "arbitrary" results as the present system. This is what happened in Australia in the December 1975 election, where the Liberal/Country Party coalition obtained 72 per cent of the seats with only 53 per cent of the vote.

It might be noted that the Liberals are unlikely to gain many extra seats from such a system and, presumably for this reason, although they are the only party pressing for electoral change, they are opposed to it.

### 4. List Systems

List systems can theoretically be applied to a whole country, and this would give the closest approximation to true proportionality. In practice, lists are more often applied to broad regions, each of which returns a large number of members (perhaps ten or more) from party lists. The lists of candidates are prepared by the parties and voters can either vote for a complete list or for individual candidates. Various formulae are used which enable candidates to be returned in almost precise mathematical proportion to the votes cast for each party. List systems are used widely on the Continent (in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland), with the detailed structure varying from country to country.

The main advantage claimed is that candidates would be returned in almost precise mathematical proportion to the votes cast for each party.

The alleged disadvantages are:

(a) The almost total disappearance of the important relationship between a member and his constituency.

(b) Selection of candidates would have to be by the party machine.

(c) It could lead to the proliferation of political parties, often extremist. There are 14 parties represented in the present Dutch Parliament.

(d) Considerable periods have elapsed between elections taking place under list systems and governments taking office. For example, the nine elections in the Netherlands since the war have all produced delays of at least six weeks. The most recent elections of March 1971 and November 1972 produced delays of 3 and 5½ months respectively.

(e) In the Italian case, no less than 33 different governments have held office in the post-war period. This is largely a result of the failure of the electoral system to give any one party a working majority in the Assembly.

(f) Preference voting in list systems, by which voters can distinguish between different candidates for the same party, appears to be very democratic. In reality, it encourages factions within the major parties. In Italy, in particular, separate interest groups, called "correnti" have been the gainers and "correntocrazia" has steadily reduced the cohesion and effectiveness of the Italian Christian Democrats.

### COMMENT ON ARGUMENTS FOR ELECTORAL CHANGE

(1) *It would provide a "moderate coalition of the centre", with more authority than single party governments pursuing extreme or doctrinaire policies and elected on relatively small minority votes.*

(a) Electoral change is extremely unlikely to be introduced in the present Parliament. Assuming no change before the next election, the merits or otherwise of electoral change are unrelated to the purpose of preventing the re-election of a Labour Government. Electoral change could, if accepted, only operate for the election after next, in, say, 1982. It might thus simply ensure that in 1982 a Conservative Government, which had been governing successfully without the need for coalition partners in the interim, would have to modify its later programme as a result of "horse trading" with minor parties which would hold the balance in Parliament. If Labour is returned at the *next* election, it is doubtful whether a coalition of other parties, coming to power in, say, 1982, would be prepared or able to remove or reverse the likely further increase in nationalisation and taxation, or reduce the growth of public expenditure as a proportion of national income.

(b) Our electoral system seems, in practice, to have prevented the election in the past of extreme or doctrinaire governments. Under our system, small switches of votes produce proportionately greater switches in seats, and thus our parties have sought to obtain wider consent for their proposals, going beyond that of regular supporters. Both Conservative and Labour governments this century have usually sought this wider consent, though many would argue that the present Government is an exception.

(c) Electoral change will, almost certainly, make a coalition between two

or more parties necessary. Such coalitions are liable to involve instability in government, and there may be delays before arrangements between the potential partners can be finalised. One of the coalition parties may be tempted to withdraw support when faced by a downturn in the economy, the need for unpopular measures, or the fruits of government mistakes.

(d) One prominent statement of the case for electoral change makes it clear that it presupposes the splitting of not only the Labour Party, but also the Conservative Party. "The specific realignment which should now be sought", declared *The Times* on 8th July 1975, "should consist of the democrats and reformers of all parties, that is, the democratic wing of the Labour Party, the whole of the Liberal Party and the Peellites [*sic*] in the Conservative Party." Apart from the desirability or otherwise of splitting the Conservative Party, such an arrangement would inevitably strengthen the oppositions on the extremes of politics, especially in adverse economic circumstances. It was the present British system which denied much chance of electoral gain to both the Mosleyites and the Communists during the National Government of the thirties.

(2) *The present electoral system is unfair to Liberal supporters by under-representing them in Parliament.*

(a) This argument presupposes that the object of elections is not to choose a government but to secure a "fair" or proportional representation in the legislature of the main strands of political opinion. Where, as in the USA and France, the executive is not dependent on constant support from the legislature and can survive despite a hostile legislature, there may be a case for ensuring that the latter is a precise mirror image of public opinion. But where, as in Britain, the survival of the executive depends directly on support from the legislature, regard must be had to the need for efficiency and good government. Whether unstable multi-party support for a coalition would ensure good government may be doubted. Whether periodical elections under proportional representation, with candidates selected by party machines or small caucuses of activists, would "fairly" reflect all the trends of public opinion must also be doubted.

(b) Our system—surely not unreasonably—penalises failure to win votes. As the total Liberal vote approaches 25 per cent of the total vote in Britain, so the Liberals approach "take-off point" for winning large numbers of seats. As Liberal support sinks back towards 12 per cent, so they risk losing their existing seats.

(c) It would not be particularly fair for the Liberals, like the FDP in Germany, with a small minority of the vote, to be able to choose which of the main parties should govern. Evidence from the past and from their more recent behaviour suggests that in a situation where a coalition was inevitable the Liberals might be more likely to align with Labour rather than with the Conservatives—despite the wishes of many Liberal supporters. Thus they helped to place, and then keep, Labour governments in power in 1924 and 1929. In 1965 Mr. **Jo Grimond**, then Liberal Leader, said, "I have long campaigned for a realignment of parties on the Left.

This would involve a large Liberal or Radical or Social Democratic Party . . ." (BBC, 23rd June 1965). More recently, **Mr Jeremy Thorpe** said, "The Liberal Party stands on the side of radical reform (and) the redistribution of wealth" (*Liberal News*, 17th September 1974). Since October 1974 the Liberals have voted with the Labour Government on a large number of issues, including education, press freedom, pay beds in the National Health Service, defence, and rent subsidies.

(d) It would not be particularly fair or sensible to make a major constitutional change, simply to award a large number of seats to a party that has never, since 1935, succeeded in getting more than 14 candidates first past the post in any general election. In the forty years since 1935 the Liberal vote never exceeded 10 per cent until the two elections of 1974. Much of the dramatic increase that year resulted from a temporary disenchantment with the other two major parties. They obtained over 700,000 fewer votes in October than in February, with 112 more candidates. Since then by-elections in Woolwich West, Coventry North-West, Carshalton and Wirral have seen their total vote falling from 32,377 in October 1974 to 17,888. In three of these by-elections the Liberal candidates lost their deposits.

(3) *A different electoral system would avoid lack of continuity in Government policy.*

(a) Electoral change, leading to coalition governments, would not necessarily prevent reversals of policy, either as: (i) the coalition government changed its policies, perhaps as one or other partner became more powerful, or in response to changing economic or external circumstances; or (ii) the coalition broke up and was replaced by one of a different political hue.

(b) Reversals of economic policy have, in the last two decades, often taken place *within* the life span of a Government: for example, the deflation of 1961-2, that of 1966, and the introduction of incomes policies in November 1972 and July 1975.

(c) Changeovers from one party to another provide opportunities for necessary reforms to be made. There was little protest at the changes made by the Conservative Government of 1951, even though it was elected with fewer votes than Labour.

(d) People will *expect* the next Conservative Government to reverse, or substantially amend, a number of Labour measures; for example, in the field of controls, public expenditure, taxation and nationalisation.

(4) *Electoral change would produce a more "broadly based" government which the militants in the unions would find more difficult to defy.*

(a) Recent evidence suggests that union militants would not be deterred from "defending" what they considered to be their legitimate interests, or legitimate pay claims, by the overwhelming opposition of public opinion.

Opinion polls taken in September-October 1970 showed that 70 per cent of those surveyed thought that "laws were needed to control the power of the unions", and only 20 per cent thought they were not needed. Similarly, in July-August 1973, 70 per cent thought that Government control of wages was necessary. Yet the miners successfully challenged the Government's pay policy and Mr Scanlon repeatedly challenged the Industrial Relations Act and the Industrial Relations Court.

(b) The power of the union militants is already being challenged (e.g. in the AUEW), as a result of increased participation by moderates and disillusionment with the fruits of past militancy as perceived in record inflation and record unemployment.

(c) A government composed of representatives of two or more parties might prove dilatory in taking necessary action, and militants might be encouraged to step up their pressures in the hope of exploiting potential divisions in the Government.

(d) Historical evidence suggests that coalitions do not necessarily deter industrial militancy. Apart from the General Strike of 1926, the two most notable periods of industrial militancy this century were during 1919-21 (under a Conservative-Liberal coalition) and in 1911-13 (under a Liberal government normally supported by Labour). Both saw more working days lost in strikes than in 1972-74.<sup>1</sup>

(e) Trade unionists might feel that electoral change, designed to deprive the Labour Party of power to govern alone (especially if it is clearly designed to put a Conservative-Liberal coalition in power), was an attempt to "cheat" them and this might increase militancy.

(5). *Every country with Proportional Representation of some kind has had a success story.*

(a) How far success or failure in economic policy, political stability, or foreign policy, is related to a country's electoral system is difficult to determine. The Weimar Republic in Germany had a PR system, and this helped the rise of Hitler's Nazi Party. Germany's economic success and political stability since the war have been due less to her proportional representation than to the total discredit of Left and Right extremists following total defeat and the Russian occupation of East Germany, and a new attitude to work on the part of employers, unions and employees respectively, which still appears to be strong. Since 1958, France has had relative political stability under an electoral system which has generally given the ruling Gaullist Party and its allies more seats than could be justified by the number of votes polled. France's success story must be also largely attributed to factors other than the electoral system.

<sup>1</sup> Over 147 million working days lost in 1919-21 inclusive, and nearly 61 million working days lost in 1911-13 inclusive, compared to nearly 46 million lost in 1972-74 inclusive. (Sources: *A History of British Trade Unionism*, by H. Pelling, published by Macmillan, London, 1963, pp. 268-9, and *Department of Employment Gazette*.)

(b) In the post war period, most European countries benefited from factors denied to Britain. The original six members of the EEC benefited from that larger market after 1957. France and Italy started their climb to prosperity in the early 1950s from a historically lower level than Britain. Germany, Italy and the Scandinavian countries were not obliged to devote large sums to overseas defence which Britain (and France) had to spend as a result of their global interests.

(c) Different people give different reasons to explain Britain's growing problems over the past ten years. Some people blame the way British trade unions have used their power; some blame mistakes by Government and especially the failure of post-war governments to halt the rise in public expenditure as a proportion of national income. Others blame an allegedly poor level of expertise in management and the Civil Service. It would be difficult to claim that these result from Britain's electoral system.

(d) On the other hand, Italy has suffered from grievous political instability, especially characterised by maladministration and strikes. Her PR electoral system has ensured a rapid turnover of governments, has helped to prevent the emergence of one strong Social Democratic party to challenge the Communists, and has encouraged the neo-Fascists.

(e) On the other hand Canada, the USA and New Zealand, with electoral systems like the British one, have experienced stability and success.

(f) Israel, Ireland and Germany are among the countries which have recently seen pressure to change from a PR electoral system to one more similar to the British system. Six out of seven members of a Committee on Electoral Reform, established by the Federal German Ministry of the Interior, for example, endorsed the plurality (i.e. British) system.<sup>1</sup>

### SOME CONCLUSIONS

The alterations proposed in the British electoral system by those arguing for electoral change would be so substantial as to amount to a transformation of the British constitution, affecting both the structure of the party political system and our methods of carrying on government. Such a transformation would be lasting, as it is obviously not possible constantly to change the electoral system in response to the changeable predilections of "informed" opinion.

The advocates of electoral change therefore need to have won their case convincingly, and to have answered the questions and problems that have been mentioned above. There is no indication that they have yet satisfied these requirements. In particular, they have not sufficiently answered the argument that coalition government, which electoral change would make inevitable, would be weaker and more unstable than recent British governments, and might see the strengthening rather than the weakening of the

<sup>1</sup> "Zur Neugestaltung des Bundestagswahlrechts" ("For the Revision of Federal Electoral Law"), Bonn, 1968.

extremists of Left and Right. Nor are the advocates of change agreed on what electoral system they would like to see introduced, and it was this inability to agree that largely doomed electoral change in the period 1909-31. Nor does any particular example of a foreign electoral system seem free from significant disadvantages, and the argument that foreign countries owe their success to their different electoral systems appears, as yet, unconvincing.

This is not to conclude that consideration does not need to be given to the workings of the British constitution in general, including our electoral system. Particular problems which invite consideration are the working of Parliament, Parliament's control of the executive, select committees, the role of the Upper House, the case for a Bill of Rights, the case for fixed Parliaments, and—implicit in many of the arguments used by the advocates of electoral change—the representativeness of parliamentary candidates and the machinery for candidate selection. In addition, there are the differences in the size and distribution of constituencies over the whole country, which at present are disadvantageous to the Conservatives.

Some measures along these lines might do much to improve the working of the British constitution while avoiding the problems and sweeping changes implied by the introduction of a new electoral system.

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